



Research Article

THE IMPACT OF A FRIENDLY EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT ON STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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ABSTRACT

A friendly education environment is considered a key factor influencing student engagement. This study examines the impact of a friendly education environment on student engagement in secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City. This article used a correlational research design with a structured survey to investigate how a friendly environment correlates with engagement through linear regression. A total of 599 students and 142 teachers from seven secondary schools participated in the study. The findings indicate that student engagement is significantly influenced by three key factors: (1) student sociability, (2) teacher support, and (3) the school's emphasis on learning and equity. Based on these results, school administrators are encouraged to implement initiatives that strengthen peer relationships, enhance teacher capacity in student support, and promote an equitable learning environment.

Keywords: Child-friendly school; school climate; student engagement; secondary education

1. Introduction

The education environment encompasses both material and psychological conditions that influence the education, learning, and development of students (Vietnamese Government, 2017). In this context, the psychological environment refers to the network of interactions among teachers, students, schools, families, and communities (Dang, 2019). Research has linked the education environment to various student outcomes, including behavioral, academic, health, and social-emotional development (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

Studies on school violence indicate that the percentage of students experiencing peer violence ranges from 33% in Vietnam to 58% in Cambodia (Bhatla et al., 2015). In Vietnam,

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bullying rates among secondary school students are 8.4% for physical bullying, 31.2% for social bullying, 11.9% for verbal bullying, and 2.7% for sexual bullying (Dao, 2014).

Psychological research highlights that middle school students often experience a phase characterized as an "age of rebellion," a "crisis period," and a time of heightened self-esteem. During this stage, students aspire to be treated as adults, place great importance on communication, and highly value friendships and appearance. Due to their increased sensitivity, inappropriate influences from educators can lead to misguided perceptions and deviant behaviors in the school environment. Additionally, studies suggest that middle school is a critical period when students are most likely to disengage from school and abandon lifelong learning habits (Parsons & Taylor, 2011).

With rapid advancements in science and technology and the increasing demands of modern society, students face various external and internal pressures that challenge their long-term education journey. To address this, schools have implemented policies aimed at enhancing student retention and fostering stronger connections between students and their learning environment. One widely adopted strategy is the promotion of a friendly education environment, which has been shown to positively influence student learning outcomes, increase motivation and passion for learning, and strengthen relationships among school members. Given its significance, this study examines the impact of a friendly education environment on student engagement in secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City.

2. Research contents

2.1. Concepts

2.1.1. Friendly education environment

The concept of a friendly education environment has been defined in various ways. One of the most frequently cited definitions is found in UNICEF's Child-Friendly School (CFS) Framework, which describes a friendly education environment as one that is safe, clean, healthy, caring, and culturally enriching. This framework ensures the fulfillment of children's rights and their protection from violence, discrimination, and other forms of mistreatment (Fitriani et al., 2020). Additionally, Njue (2013) emphasizes that a friendly education environment should operate in the best interests of children. Wright et al. (2009) further define it as an environment that promotes diversity, fosters inclusivity, and eliminates discrimination among all members of the school community.

Godfrey et al. (2012) identified three key components of a friendly education environment: an emotionally supportive climate, a challenging and student-centered learning environment, and a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate. The emotionally supportive climate reflects the extent to which students feel heard, cared for, and supported by teachers and other school staff. The challenging, student-centered learning environment pertains to how strongly students perceive that teachers and school staff foster academic success, actively engage students in the learning process, and make learning experiences stimulating

and meaningful. Finally, the safe, inclusive, and respectful climate measures students' perceptions of both physical and emotional safety in school, as well as the extent to which they feel the school fosters inclusivity and respects all members of the community.

2.1.2. Student engagement

Student engagement in school has been widely studied across various countries. However, a significant challenge remains in conceptualizing and defining this construct. Shernoff et al. (2003) describe student engagement as active participation in school-related tasks, including both classroom activities and extracurricular involvement. Similarly, Skinner et al. (2012) define student engagement as the extent to which students participate in school activities, with its impact reflected in their academic performance over time.

Wang et al. (2019) define student engagement as students' purposeful involvement and effort in learning activities and peer interactions at school, encompassing both observable and unobservable aspects. Based on this definition, Wang et al., (2019) developed a framework consisting of four components to assess student engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, and social engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to students' proactive participation in both academic and extracurricular activities, as well as their demonstration of positive conduct. Emotional engagement captures students' affective responses, including their enjoyment of and emotional attachment to school activities. Cognitive engagement reflects students' willingness to apply deep learning strategies, invest effort in producing high-quality work, and engage with complex ideas. Social engagement involves students' capacity to work collaboratively, engage in peer-to-peer learning, and foster positive relationships with peers and educators. It underscores the social context of school life.

In this study, only two aspects of student engagement were examined: emotional engagement and social engagement.

2.2. Theoretical framework of the research

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of this research:

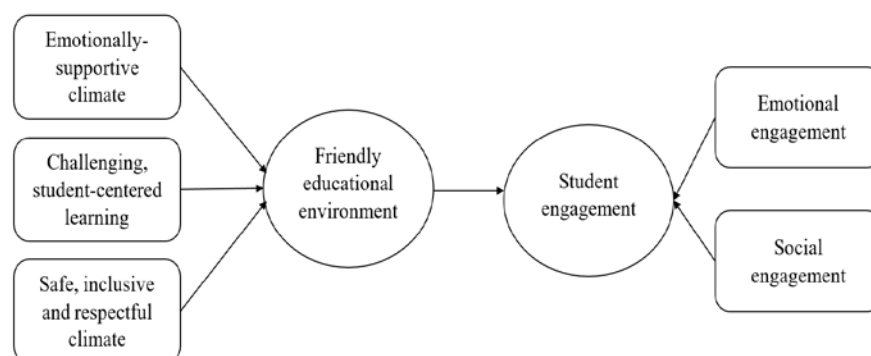


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of the study

2.3. Methods and participants

2.3.1. Research design

This article presents quantitative findings from a mixed-method study. The survey used the Environmental Friendly Survey developed by Godfrey et al. (2012), which assesses three key aspects of the environment: (1) an emotionally supportive climate, (2) a challenging, student-centered learning environment, and (3) a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate. These components were combined with the student engagement scale developed by Wang et al. (2019), which focuses on emotional engagement and social engagement.

The survey was administered to two groups: teachers and students. The questionnaire was adapted to suit each group, with minor wording modifications to align with the context while maintaining the same meaning. The student survey consisted of 42 questions using a five-point Likert scale, measuring students' perceptions of their education environment and their level of engagement. Similarly, the teacher questionnaire comprised 42 questions, assessing teachers' perceptions of students' engagement and their beliefs about the school environment. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The structure of the questionnaires includes two parts. Part 1 asks participants about an emotionally supportive climate (10 items), a challenging student-centered learning environment (7), a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate (15), emotional engagement (4), and social engagement (4). Part 2 includes questions about demographic details—students: gender, class, and grade; teachers: gender, subject taught, and role.

2.3.2. Participants

The research was conducted in seven secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City. The survey period was from 01 December 2023 to 15 December 2023.

Table 1 shows the number of teachers and students participating in the survey by gender.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants by gender

	Male Frequency (%)	Female Frequency (%)	Missing Frequency (%)
Teachers (n=142)	20 (14.1%)	79 (55.6%)	43 (30.3%)
Students (n=599)	242 (40.4%)	290 (48.4%)	67 (11.2%)

Overall, there was a significant difference in the proportion of male and female teachers participating in the survey, with 59 more female teachers than male teachers, accounting for a 41.5% difference. Additionally, 43 survey responses (30.3%) did not specify gender. In contrast, the gender distribution among student participants was more balanced. Specifically, 242 male students (40.4%) and 290 female students (48.4%)

completed the survey, representing an 8% difference. However, 67 student responses did not include gender information.

Table 2 presents the statistical distribution of teachers by subject group and students by academic results.

Table 2. Demographic information of teachers by subject group and of students by academic ranks

		Frequency (%)	Missing Frequency (%)
Teachers	Math/Physics/Chemistry/Biology	42 (29.6%)	
	Foreign Language/Literature/History/Geography/Economics & Law	40 (28.2%)	44 (31%)
	Other	16 (11.3%)	
Students	Good	252 (42.1%)	
	Fair	180 (30.1%)	55 (9.2%)
	Average	86 (14.4%)	
	Weak	26 (4.3%)	

Table 2 indicates that the proportion of teachers teaching natural sciences (Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology) and those teaching social sciences (Foreign Languages, Literature, History, Geography, Economics, and Law) was relatively balanced. However, the number of teachers from other disciplines (such as Music, Art, and Physical Education) was significantly lower, accounting for only 11.3% of respondents.

Regarding students' academic performance, the percentage of students classified as having good and fair academic performance showed a moderate difference of 12% (72 students). However, there was a significant disparity between students with good or fair academic performance and those classified as average or weak. Specifically, among 544 students who provided academic performance data, 86 students (14.4%) were classified as average, while only 26 students (4.3%) were classified as weak.

2.4. Results and discussion

2.4.1. Results

Cronbach's Alpha results confirmed the reliability of all scales, with coefficients exceeding 0.82 (>0.7 thresholds; Hair et al., 2019), indicating strong internal consistency and suitability for factor analysis.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) – Friendly Education Environment

The initial framework included three dimensions: an emotionally supportive climate, a challenging student-centered learning environment, and a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate, with 34 items. After iterative EFA, removing variables with inadequate factor loadings, three revised factors emerged (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's of the Friendly Education Environment

KMO index		0.806
Bartlett test	Approximate Chi-Square value	2328.939
	df	45
	Sig.	.000

Table 4 shows the results of the rotated matrix analysis of the friendly education environment.

Table 4. The rotated matrix analysis

Variable encoding	Factors		
	SSE	TSE	LFEE
Item31	.945		
Item32	.666		
Item30	.645		
Item26	.606		
Item2		.773	
Item3		.669	
Item4		.621	
Item33			.838
Item34			.680
Item17			.541
Total variance extracted		53.5%	

The KMO (0.806) and Bartlett's test ($p < 0.001$) confirmed the data's suitability for EFA, with 53.5% of variance explained, exceeding the 50% threshold (Pallant, 2001).

The EFA results show that the friendly education environment scale was re-grouped into three new dimensions. The Safe, Inclusive, and Respectful Climate (SIRC) factor was divided into two distinct components. Student Social Environment (SSE) comprised of Item 26, Item 30, Item 31, and Item 32, this factor represents a harmonious student environment, reflecting interactions within the student population. Learning-Focused and Equitable Environment (LFEE) was formed by Item 33 and Item 34, which converged with Item 17,

this factor characterizes an environment that prioritizes learning and promotes equality among students. The Emotionally Supportive Climate (ESC) factor retained Item 2, Item 3, and Item 4, which were specific to the teacher population. These variables represent teacher support and are denoted as TSE (Teacher Supportive Environment).

2.4.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) – Student Engagement

The two dimensions—emotional engagement (EE) and social engagement (SE)—with eight items retained their original structure (Tables 5 and 6). The KMO (0.880) and Bartlett's test ($p < 0.001$) validated the analysis, with a 60.621% variance explained.

Table 5. KMO and Bartlett's Test of Student Engagement

KMO Index		.880
Bartlett's Test	Approx. Chi-Square Value	3043.089
	df	28
	Sig.	.000

Table 6. Rotated Factor Matrix Analysis of Student Engagement

Variable Encoding	Factors	
	H1	H2
Item36	.933	
Item35	.841	
Item37	.734	
Item38	.642	
Item40		.802
Item39		.723
Item42		.701
Item41		.652
Total variance extracted		60.621%

Table 7. Impact of Friendly Education Environment on Student Engagement by Students

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	p	β	VIF
SSE	Student engagement	0.000	0.291	1.146
TSE		0.003	0.102	1.265
LFEE		0.000	0.446	1.376

$F = 155.73$, Sig. = 0.000, $R^2 = 0.44$

Note: p = Sig. value of the test; β = Standardized regression coefficient; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

The model was significant ($F = 155.73$, $p < 0.001$), with LFEE ($\beta = 0.446$) showing the strongest impact, followed by SSE ($\beta = 0.291$) and TSE ($\beta = 0.102$). The R^2 of 0.44 indicates that 44% of the variance in engagement is explained. VIF values (<2) confirm no multicollinearity.

Table 8. Impact of Friendly Education Environment on Student Engagement by Teachers

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	p	β	VIF
SSE	Student engagement	0.000	0.665	1.043
TSE		0.225	0.069	1.385
LFEE		0.000	0.329	1.416

$F = 97.338$, Sig. = 0.000; $R^2 = 0.679$

Note: p = Sig. value of the test; β = Standardized regression coefficient; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

The model was significant ($F = 97.338$, $p < 0.001$), with SSE ($\beta = 0.665$) exerting the greatest influence, followed by LFEE ($\beta = 0.329$); TSE ($p = 0.225$) was not significant. The R^2 of 0.679 suggests 67.9% of variance explained, with VIF values (<2) indicating no multicollinearity.

2.4.3. Discussion

EFA revealed a restructured friendly education environment, with a safe, inclusive, and respectful climate splitting into a student social environment and a learning-focused and equitable environment, while teacher support emerged from the emotionally supportive climate. These shifts reflect local context. Student social environment captures peer harmony, and a learning-focused and equitable environment aligns with Vietnam's emphasis on learning and equity rooted in Confucian and socialist values (Gjicali et al., 2020).

From the student perspectives, a learning-focused and equitable environment had the strongest positive impact on engagement ($\beta = 0.446$), suggesting that a focus on learning and fairness drives attachment. Student social environment ($\beta = 0.291$) and teacher support ($\beta = 0.102$) followed, aligning with studies emphasizing peer relationships (Luo et al., 2022) and teacher support (Thornberg et al., 2018). Research by Luo et al. (2022) highlights that positive peer relationships foster stability, fairness, and mutual respect among students. Similarly, Bear (2020) emphasizes that a harmonious peer environment is characterized by care, friendliness, and mutual respect.

Conversely, the results by teachers prioritized student social environment ($\beta = 0.665$) over the learning-focused and equitable environment ($\beta = 0.329$), with teacher support insignificant, indicating teachers view peer dynamics as the primary engagement driver. The teacher support environment comprises three items (Items 2, 3, and 4) and reflects the support, opportunities, and assistance teachers provide to students. Bear (2020) notes that teacher-student relationships are strengthened through attentiveness, respect, and

responsiveness to students' needs. Likewise, Thornberg et al. (2018) highlight that teacher support fosters a positive learning environment, enhancing student engagement.

The results of this study align with Vietnam's cultural and educational ideology, which has been deeply influenced by Confucian values that emphasize academic achievement. Additionally, as a socialist nation that prioritizes equality and child rights, these elements naturally emerge in the school environment. The conceptualization of the learning-focused and equitable environment reflects these socio-cultural characteristics. These differing perspectives highlight the need for balanced strategies targeting both peer and institutional factors.

3. Conclusion

Drawing on responses from 599 students and 142 teachers across seven secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City, this study identified three key components of a friendly education environment—student sociability, teacher support, and a learning-focused, equitable school climate—via EFA. Linear regression analysis further identified three key factors influencing student engagement: student sociability, teacher support, and the school's focus on learning and equity. The results confirmed their positive influence on student engagement, with students emphasizing the school's focus on learning and equity, and teachers highlighting peer relationships. These findings offer valuable guidance for school leaders to enhance engagement through improved peer interactions, teacher training, and equitable policies, ultimately boosting academic outcomes.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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**TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA MÔI TRƯỜNG GIÁO DỤC THÂN THIỆN ĐẾN MỨC ĐỘ GẮN KẾT
CỦA HỌC SINH Ở CÁC TRƯỜNG TRUNG HỌC CƠ SỞ
TẠI THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH**

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TÓM TẮT

Môi trường thân thiện được xem là một trong những yếu tố tác động đến mức độ gắn kết của học sinh. Bài báo này trình bày các tác động của môi trường giáo dục thân thiện đến mức độ gắn kết của học sinh tại các trường trung học cơ sở trên địa bàn Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh. Để tìm hiểu tác động, bài báo sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu định lượng tương quan, kiểm định các thang đo môi trường thân thiện, mức độ gắn kết và tương quan cũng như mô hình hồi quy tuyến tính. Có 599 học sinh và 142 giáo viên tại 7 trường trung học cơ sở trên địa bàn Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh đã tham gia trả lời phiếu hỏi. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra mức độ gắn kết của học sinh chịu tác động bởi các yếu tố: (1) sự hòa đồng của học sinh; (2) sự hỗ trợ của giáo viên; (3) sự chú trọng học tập và công bằng của nhà trường. Từ cơ sở kết quả khảo sát, ban giám hiệu các trường trung học cơ sở cần đẩy mạnh tổ chức các hoạt động nâng cao chất lượng mối quan hệ bạn bè của học sinh, tăng cường các biện pháp giáo dục tư tưởng cho giáo viên trong việc hỗ trợ học sinh và luôn thể hiện thái độ cư xử bình đẳng trong nhà trường.

Từ khóa: môi trường giáo dục thân thiện; trường học thân thiện với trẻ em; sự gắn kết của học sinh; học sinh trung học