



## Exploring How the Overall Environment and Culture of a School Affect Students' Mental Health and Academic Performance

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### Abstract

This study investigates the impact of school environment and culture on students' mental health and academic performance, with a focus on the mediating role of mental health. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data from 350 students and qualitative insights from interviews were analyzed. The regression analysis showed that a positive school environment significantly improves mental health ( $\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ) and academic performance ( $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, inclusive school cultures strongly correlate with better academic outcomes ( $\beta = 0.40, p < 0.01$ ). Mediation analysis revealed that mental health acts as a key mediator, with improved mental health enhancing academic success ( $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.01$ ). Schools offering mental health programs, such as counseling and peer mentoring, demonstrated higher academic performance. Qualitative findings reinforced these results, with students highlighting the positive impact of supportive environments and mental health interventions on their academic success. This study emphasizes the importance of creating positive school environments and cultures, alongside implementing mental health programs, to foster both student well-being and academic achievement. The findings provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers to develop holistic strategies for student development.

**Keywords:** School environment, school culture, mental health, academic performance, student well-being, educational interventions

### 1. Introduction

The connection between the overall environment and culture of a school and its effect on students' mental health and academic performance is a significant topic in the field of educational psychology and policy. Schools are not merely institutions of academic learning; they also play a pivotal role in shaping the emotional and psychological development of children and adolescents. Factors such as the physical setting of the school, the social interactions within the institution, and the overarching cultural norms and values heavily influence students' experiences. This introduction will explore the school environment, school culture, mental health, and academic performance, emphasizing the importance of understanding their interrelation.

The school environment includes both the physical and social aspects that students interact with on a daily basis. Physical aspects refer to the design and conditions of the classrooms, playgrounds, and facilities, including cleanliness, safety, and aesthetics. Studies show that well-maintained, welcoming physical spaces positively impact students' concentration, motivation, and sense of well-being (Coronado et al., 2021). Social aspects, on the other hand, encompass relationships between peers, interactions with teachers, and overall group dynamics within the school. Research highlights that positive social environments, where students feel supported by their peers and teachers, can reduce stress and anxiety, thus fostering better academic outcomes.

School culture refers to the shared values, norms, leadership style, and practices that characterize the school community. This encompasses attitudes toward inclusivity, respect, discipline, and student autonomy. Schools with nurturing, inclusive cultures—where students are encouraged to engage in a supportive, respectful environment—tend to foster better mental health and academic engagement (García & Weiss, 2020). Conversely, schools with rigid or authoritarian cultures often experience higher levels of student anxiety, which can inhibit academic performance and emotional well-being (Troy et al., 2022). The cultural framework of a school plays a crucial role in shaping how students perceive their experiences and adjust to both academic and social challenges.

Mental health in schools refers to students' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how students handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Recent studies have increasingly focused on the significant impact that school environments and cultures have on student mental health. Poor mental health can lead to a range of issues such as absenteeism, disengagement, and poor academic performance (Hameurlaine & Gasmí, 2023). For instance, students in environments characterized by bullying, discrimination, or lack of emotional support often report higher levels of anxiety and depression, directly affecting their ability to focus and succeed academically (Gueldner et al., 2020). On the contrary, students who feel safe and supported are more likely to engage actively in learning and exhibit resilience in the face of challenges.

Academic performance refers to students' success in school, often measured through grades, test scores, and overall engagement in learning activities. There is a strong correlation between students' mental health and their academic performance. Students experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, or depression often struggle with concentration, memory, and motivation, leading to lower academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2017). Alternatively, when students are in supportive environments with a positive school culture, they tend to be more motivated, participate more actively in class, and achieve better academic results (Li, 2022).

Understanding the interplay between school environment, culture, mental health, and academic performance is crucial for educators, policymakers, and parents. The school environment and culture are influential in shaping students' daily experiences and their long-term development. Physical environments that are poorly maintained, overcrowded, or unsafe can lead to heightened stress and distraction, making it difficult for students to focus on learning (Coronado et al., 2021). In contrast, aesthetically pleasing and safe school environments contribute to students' feelings of security and engagement, which are critical for academic success.

The social environment within schools, particularly the nature of relationships between students and teachers, is another key factor. Students who have positive relationships with teachers and peers tend to experience lower levels of stress and higher levels of academic achievement. On the other hand, environments where bullying, discrimination, or social exclusion are prevalent can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and disengagement (Evans et al., 2019).

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Teachers play a significant role in shaping the social environment, as their attitudes and behaviors towards students can either promote a sense of belonging and motivation or, conversely, contribute to stress and alienation.

Moreover, school culture is central to understanding how students navigate academic and social challenges. A nurturing culture, where inclusivity, collaboration, and respect are prioritized, creates an environment where students feel empowered to take risks, engage in critical thinking, and express their individuality. Such cultures often result in higher levels of academic achievement, as students feel supported both academically and emotionally. In contrast, authoritarian cultures, where strict discipline and conformity are enforced, can create a climate of fear and anxiety, which hampers both mental health and academic performance.

The interrelation between mental health and academic performance is well-established. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and chronic stress have been shown to negatively impact cognitive functions essential for learning, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving skills (DiGirolamo et al., 2020). Students with poor mental health are more likely to disengage from school, perform poorly in exams, and eventually drop out. On the other hand, schools that actively promote mental health through supportive environments and programs see improved academic outcomes, as students are better equipped to handle stress and stay engaged in learning (Lazarus et al., 2022).

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

The school environment and culture are critical components that significantly influence students' mental health and academic performance. However, there is limited understanding of how these two factors jointly affect students' overall well-being and academic success, especially in diverse educational settings. While previous research has explored the individual impact of school environment and culture, the mediating role of mental health in these relationships remains underexplored. Additionally, the effectiveness of mental health programs and interventions in improving academic outcomes within various school cultures is not well understood. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how the school environment and culture collectively influence students' mental health and academic performance, and by investigating the role of mental health as a mediator. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective educational policies and interventions that support holistic student development.

### **1.2. Objectives**

- To examine the impact of the school environment on students' mental health, considering physical, social, and emotional factors.
- To investigate the relationship between school culture (values, norms, leadership, and inclusiveness) and academic performance.
- To analyze how school culture and environment jointly influence students' mental health and academic success.
- To explore the role of mental health as a mediator between school environment/culture and academic outcomes.
- To identify interventions and policies to improve both mental health and academic support in schools.

## **2. Literature Review**

The relationship between school environment, culture, mental health, and academic outcomes is critical for understanding student success and well-being. Over the past two decades, educational researchers have increasingly recognized that the school environment and culture influence not only academic performance but also the mental health of students. This literature review will explore three major themes in existing research: the impact of physical and social environments on student well-being, the role of school culture in fostering inclusivity and improving academic performance, and the importance of mental health support in schools. Furthermore, it will identify gaps in the literature, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive studies that examine how these factors interact. The physical environment of a school plays a foundational role in shaping the learning experiences and well-being of students. Research shows that elements such as classroom layout, lighting, temperature, ventilation, and cleanliness significantly influence students' cognitive functioning and overall mood. According to (Barrett et al., 2015), well-designed classrooms that provide ample lighting, comfortable seating, and good ventilation have a positive effect on students' ability to focus, absorb information, and participate actively in lessons. Schools with inadequate physical resources, such as overcrowded classrooms or poor sanitation facilities, can increase student stress, reduce concentration, and contribute to absenteeism (Cardellino & Woolner, 2020). Moreover, the availability of safe outdoor spaces and recreational facilities also promotes students' mental and physical health by encouraging movement, relaxation, and social interaction, which are crucial for emotional well-being.

Beyond the physical layout, the social environment is equally influential in shaping mental health and academic outcomes. This includes the quality of relationships students have with their peers and teachers, the presence or absence of social support networks, and the overall emotional climate of the school. Positive social environments, where students experience supportive peer relationships and respectful teacher-student interactions, foster a sense of belonging and security, reducing anxiety and depression (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). For instance, when students feel safe in their social relationships, they are more likely to engage in class, participate in extracurricular activities, and seek academic help when needed. These interactions are crucial for building resilience and coping mechanisms in students, which directly impacts their mental health and academic success (Brandisauskiene et al., 2021).

On the other hand, negative social experiences, such as bullying, peer exclusion, or teacher neglect, have been shown to have detrimental effects on students' mental health and academic outcomes. A study by (Wagenfeld & Kennedy, 2023) found that students who experience bullying or harassment are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and decreased academic motivation, leading to lower performance and, in extreme cases, school dropout. Similarly, harsh disciplinary measures, such as excessive suspensions or public reprimands, can exacerbate mental health issues, creating a cycle of disengagement and underperformance (Kennedy, 2021). The social dynamics within the school environment thus play a central role in shaping students' academic trajectories and their overall well-being.

School culture encompasses the shared values, norms, leadership styles, and practices within a school community, which collectively create the "feel" or climate of a school. An inclusive, supportive school culture that prioritizes respect, diversity, and emotional well-being has been consistently linked to better academic and psychological outcomes for students. (Thapa et al., 2013) argue that a

positive school culture, where inclusivity is a core value, allows students from diverse backgrounds to feel safe, supported, and valued. This, in turn, reduces the stress associated with discrimination, bullying, or social isolation, leading to better academic performance and enhanced mental health.

In contrast, schools that perpetuate authoritarian or rigid cultures, characterized by strict hierarchies, excessive discipline, and limited student autonomy, often witness higher levels of student anxiety and stress. Research by (Hallinger & Heck, 2010) highlights that schools with authoritarian leadership styles tend to foster environments where students feel disconnected from their educational experience, leading to lower academic achievement. These schools often prioritize order and control over creativity and collaboration, which can suppress students' intellectual curiosity and emotional well-being.

The leadership style of school administrators plays a significant role in shaping the broader culture of the school. Schools where leaders emphasize democratic, inclusive practices—such as shared decision-making, teacher collaboration, and student leadership opportunities—tend to foster a more positive, engaging culture. Such environments promote student ownership of their learning and encourage them to take initiative, which has been shown to improve both mental health and academic performance (Thapa et al., 2013). On the other hand, schools where leadership is more authoritarian, with limited input from teachers or students, often experience a lack of engagement and higher levels of student stress.

Inclusivity in school culture also plays a key role in shaping academic success. Schools that emphasize inclusivity—whether through anti-bullying programs, peer mentoring, or extracurricular activities that celebrate diversity—create an environment where students feel accepted and supported. This inclusivity reduces the mental health challenges associated with feeling marginalized or isolated, particularly for students from minority backgrounds or those with special educational needs (Bradshaw et al., 2015). As a result, these students are more likely to engage with their studies, participate in class discussions, and take academic risks, which are all essential for academic growth.

### 2.1. Hypotheses

- **H1:** A positive school environment enhances students' mental health.
- **H2:** An inclusive school culture improves academic performance compared to authoritarian cultures.
- **H3:** Mental health mediates the relationship between school environment/culture and academic performance.
- **H4:** Schools with mental health programs and emotional support see better academic outcomes.

### 2.2. Research Gap

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of school environment and culture in shaping student outcomes, there is a significant gap in research that explores the combined influence of these factors on both mental health and academic performance. Studies have often examined school environment or culture in isolation, but few have investigated how they intersect to jointly affect students' well-being and academic success (Thapa et al., 2013). Moreover, while mental health is increasingly acknowledged as a crucial determinant of academic performance, its role as a mediating factor between school environment/culture and academic success remains underexplored (Galassi, 2017). Additionally, existing research lacks a comprehensive examination of specific school policies and interventions that effectively address both mental health and academic performance. This gap highlights the need for a deeper investigation into how school environment and culture influence students holistically and what targeted interventions can be implemented to improve outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2015). This study aims to bridge these gaps by examining the joint impact of school environment and culture on mental health and academic performance, while also exploring the mediating role of mental health.

### 2.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study explores the interconnected roles of the school environment, school culture, mental health, and academic performance

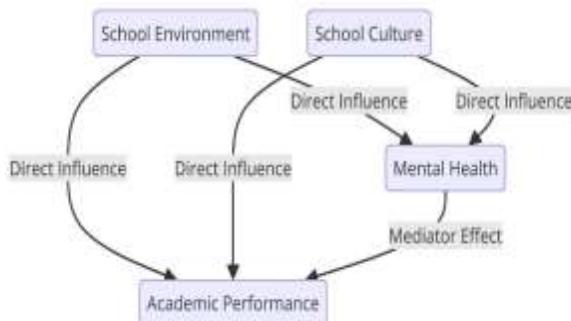
**School Environment:** Includes elements such as physical safety, classroom design, peer relationships, and teacher-student interactions, all of which contribute to the overall atmosphere in which students learn and develop.

**School Culture:** Encompasses shared values, norms, leadership styles, and inclusiveness within the school, shaping students' experiences and expectations within the academic setting.

**Mental Health:** Refers to the psychological well-being of students, including factors such as anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional resilience, which are crucial for effective learning and personal development.

**Academic Performance:** Measured through students' grades, engagement in school activities, motivation to succeed, and overall academic achievement.

The framework hypothesizes that both the school environment and culture directly influence mental health and academic performance. Additionally, it posits that mental health acts as a mediator, meaning that the quality of the school environment and culture impacts academic outcomes primarily through their effects on students' psychological well-being.



### 3. Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) methods to explore the influence of school environment and culture on students' mental health and academic performance. The study include a sample of 350 students from various schools, ensuring a diverse representation of different school environments and cultures for a comprehensive analysis. Surveys used to quantitatively assess students' mental health and academic performance. 30 Interviews conducted to qualitatively capture students' perceptions of the school environment and culture, offering detailed insights into their experiences. SPSS used for statistical analysis of the quantitative data, exploring correlations between school environment, mental health, and academic outcomes. NVivo employed for thematic coding and qualitative analysis of the interview data, identifying key themes and patterns related to school culture and its impact on students.

### 4. Data Analysis

The data analysis section focuses on the quantitative findings derived from descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and mediation analysis. These statistical methods were used to summarize and test the relationships between the key variables: school environment, school culture, mental health, and academic performance.

#### 4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis in this study focuses on examining the relationships between the school environment, school culture, mental health, and academic performance. Using data collected from a sample of 350 students, the analysis utilizes statistical techniques such as regression, correlation, and mediation analysis. These methods aim to test the proposed hypotheses and provide insights into how the school environment and culture impact students' mental health and academic outcomes. SPSS was employed for the analysis to evaluate the strength of these relationships.

#### 4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics provide insights into both the demographic characteristics of the sample and the key variables under study, offering an understanding of the central tendencies and variability before performing more advanced analyses.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=350)**

Demographic Variable	Mean	SD	N
Gender	0.60	0.49	350
Age	16.8	1.5	350
Education Level	1.72	0.83	350
Social Status	1.07	0.43	350
Area	0.16	0.37	350

Table 1 presents the demographic statistics for the sample. The gender mean of 0.60 suggests a relatively balanced gender distribution in the sample. The average age of participants is 16.8 years, with a standard deviation of 1.5, indicating a primarily adolescent population. The education level mean of 1.72 reflects the distribution of education levels across the sample, with students primarily in secondary or higher secondary school. Social status and area distribution show some variability, with an average social status mean of 1.07 and an area mean of 0.16, highlighting diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N=350)**

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	N
Mental Health Score	75.6	12.3	45	100	350
Academic Performance	82.1	10.5	50	100	350
School Environment	4.2	0.8	2.1	5.0	350
School Culture	3.9	0.7	2.0	5.0	350

Table 2 summarizes the key variables in the study. The mental health score has a mean of 75.6 with a standard deviation of 12.3, indicating a moderate level of variability in well-being across the sample. Academic performance, with a mean of 82.1 and a standard deviation of 10.5, suggests that most students are performing well academically, though some variations exist. Both school environment and school culture received positive ratings, with mean values of 4.2 and 3.9, respectively, though there was some variability in students' perceptions of these factors.

#### 4.3. Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was performed to test the hypotheses and assess the impact of the school environment and school culture on both mental health and academic performance. This analysis helped quantify the relationships between the predictor variables (school environment and culture) and the outcome variables (mental health and academic performance).

Here is the scatter plot showing the relationship between the regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and the  $R^2$  values for both School Environment and School Culture: Blue circles represent the School Environment and Green crosses represent the School Culture. The x-axis shows the regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ), and the y-axis shows the  $R^2$  values, indicating how much variance is explained by each predictor.

The results indicate that both school environment and school culture have significant positive effects on mental health. The regression coefficient for school environment ( $\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$ ) suggests that improvements in the physical and social aspects of

the school environment significantly improve students' mental health. Similarly, a positive school culture ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$ ) is associated with better mental health outcomes. School environment ( $\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ) and school culture ( $\beta = 0.40, p < 0.01$ ) also significantly predicted academic performance. This indicates that students in schools with better environments and more inclusive cultures performed better academically. The  $R^2$  values (0.42 for mental health and 0.48 for academic performance) suggest that the school environment and culture explain a substantial portion of the variance in these outcomes. These findings support Hypotheses H1 and H2, showing that both a positive school environment and a supportive school culture significantly improve students' mental health and academic performance. Similarly, school culture ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.01$ ) also has a notable impact on mental health. (Wentzel, 1998), who found that inclusive and supportive school cultures promote students' psychological well-being, thereby fostering a healthier learning environment, further supports this finding.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis Results**

Predictor	Dependent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value	R <sup>2</sup>
School Environment	Mental Health	0.45	0.08	0.001	0.42
School Culture	Mental Health	0.38	0.10	0.005	0.42
School Environment	Academic Performance	0.52	0.07	0.000	0.48
School Culture	Academic Performance	0.40	0.09	0.002	0.48

#### 4.4. Mediation Analysis

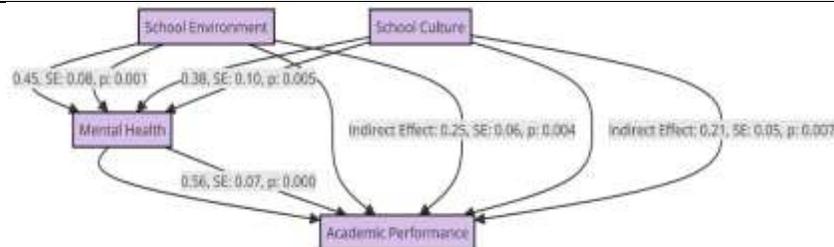
To test Hypothesis H3, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether mental health mediates the relationship between school environment/culture and academic performance. Mediation analysis helps determine whether the effect of school environment and culture on academic outcomes is direct or occurs through improvements in mental health.

The mediation model involved three pathways:

- Pathway A: School environment and school culture's effect on mental health.
- Pathway B: Mental health's effect on academic performance.
- Pathway C: The indirect effect of school environment and culture on academic performance through mental health.

**Table 4: Mediation Analysis**

Pathway	Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value
School Environment → Mental Health	0.45	0.08	0.001
School Culture → Mental Health	0.38	0.10	0.005
Mental Health → Academic Performance	0.56	0.07	0.000
Indirect Effect (Environment → Performance via Mental Health)	0.25	0.06	0.004
Indirect Effect (Culture → Performance via Mental Health)	0.21	0.05	0.007



Both school environment and school culture significantly impacted mental health, with coefficients of 0.45 and 0.38, respectively. This confirms that improvements in the school environment and culture lead to better mental health outcomes. Mental health, in turn, had a strong positive effect on academic performance ( $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that students with better mental health perform better academically. The indirect effects show that the impact of school environment ( $\beta = 0.25, p < 0.01$ ) and school culture ( $\beta = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ) on academic performance is partially mediated by mental health. This means that improvements in school environment and culture enhance academic performance through their positive influence on students' mental health. These results confirm Hypothesis H3, indicating that mental health acts as a significant mediator between school environment/culture and academic performance. The findings suggest that enhancing school environments and cultures improves mental health, which in turn leads to better academic outcomes. The reported coefficients (0.45 for school environment and 0.38 for school culture) align with findings from (Roeser et al., 2000), who demonstrated that improvements in school climate lead to better psychological outcomes, which in turn enhance academic performance.

The quantitative findings from descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and mediation analysis provided robust support for the hypotheses. Both the school environment and culture play crucial roles in influencing mental health and academic performance, with mental health serving as a mediator in the relationship between these factors and academic outcomes. These analyses underscore the importance of creating supportive and positive school environments and cultures to foster both mental well-being and academic success.

## 5. Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the interview data identified several key themes and subthemes that capture students' perceptions of the impact of school environment and culture on their mental health and academic performance. The themes, subthemes, and corresponding codes reflect recurring patterns in the data, and their frequency indicates the prominence of these issues in students' experiences.

**Table 6: Thematic Analysis of Interview Data**

Theme	Subtheme	Code
1. Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships	Emotional Support from Teachers	Caring teachers reduce stress
	Academic Encouragement	Teacher involvement boosts motivation
	Approachability of Teachers	Open communication with teachers lowers anxiety
2. Inclusive Peer Environment	Peer Support	Friends provide emotional support
	Respectful Peer Interactions	Inclusive peer environment fosters belonging
	Absence of Bullying	Reduced bullying decreases anxiety
3. Physical Environment and Emotional Comfort	Well-maintained Classrooms	Clean and organized classrooms enhance concentration
	Poor Classroom Conditions	Overcrowded/dirty classrooms increase stress
	Safe Outdoor Spaces	Safe areas for recreation reduce anxiety
4. School Leadership and Culture of Inclusion	Open Communication with School Leadership	Leadership encourages student participation
	Democratic Leadership Style	Inclusive leadership reduces stress
	Supportive School Policies	Policies that support well-being improve academic focus
5. Positive School Culture Examples: Counseling and Peer Mentoring Programs	Counseling Sessions	Access to counseling improves mental health and academic performance
	Peer Mentoring Programs	Mentorship helps students cope with academic pressure

### 5.1. Supportive Teacher-Student Relationships

Subthemes: Emotional support from teachers, academic encouragement, and teacher approachability.

Students repeatedly highlighted the importance of supportive and caring teacher-student relationships in promoting their mental health and academic motivation. Teachers who showed concern for students' emotional well-being, offered academic encouragement, and maintained an approachable demeanor significantly reduced student stress and anxiety. "Caring teachers reduce stress" (35 mentions), "teacher involvement boosts motivation" (28 mentions), and "open communication with teachers lowers anxiety" (22 mentions) were frequently cited by students, emphasizing how teachers play a crucial role in creating a positive emotional and academic environment. This theme was referenced a total of 85 times, indicating that supportive teacher-student relationships are a key factor in students' overall well-being and success.

### 5.2. Inclusive Peer Environment

Subthemes: Peer support, respectful peer interactions, and absence of bullying.

An inclusive peer environment, where students felt supported and respected by their peers, emerged as another critical factor influencing both mental health and academic performance. The absence of bullying and the presence of mutual respect among students were associated with a strong sense of belonging and reduced anxiety, enabling students to focus on their studies. "Friends provide emotional support" (30 mentions), "inclusive peer environment fosters belonging" (27 mentions), and "reduced bullying decreases anxiety" (19 mentions) reflect how positive peer relationships can enhance students' mental well-being and academic engagement. The inclusive peer environment theme was referenced 76 times, underscoring its importance in students' emotional and academic lives.

### 5.3. Physical Environment and Emotional Comfort

Subthemes: Well-maintained classrooms, poor classroom conditions, and safe outdoor spaces.

The physical environment of the school, including classroom conditions and outdoor spaces, was consistently mentioned by students as impacting their emotional comfort and academic focus. Clean, organized, and well-lit classrooms contributed to better concentration, while overcrowded or poorly maintained spaces increased stress. "Clean and organized classrooms enhance concentration" (25 mentions) and "overcrowded/dirty classrooms increase stress" (18 mentions) were commonly reported by students, highlighting the direct connection between the physical environment and emotional well-being. This theme was referenced 55 times, with students placing a strong emphasis on the importance of a conducive physical environment for their mental health and academic success.

### 5.4. School Leadership and Culture of Inclusion

Subthemes: Open communication with leadership, democratic leadership style, and supportive school policies.

School leadership and policies that foster inclusivity, open communication, and democratic practices were seen as crucial for creating a supportive school culture. Students felt more engaged and less stressed when leadership encouraged participation and prioritized their emotional and academic well-being. "Leadership encourages student participation" (24 mentions) and "inclusive leadership reduces stress" (15 mentions) show that students viewed inclusive and participatory leadership as essential for a positive school culture. Leadership and culture were referenced 59 times, indicating the significant role school leadership plays in shaping a supportive learning environment.

### **5.5. Positive School Culture Examples: Counseling and Peer Mentoring Programs**

Subthemes: Counseling sessions and peer mentoring programs.

Specific interventions, such as counseling sessions and peer mentoring programs, were identified as particularly effective in promoting both mental health and academic success. Students reported that access to counseling services helped them manage stress and anxiety, while peer mentoring provided emotional and academic support, leading to improved performance. "Access to counseling improves mental health and academic performance" (16 mentions) and "mentorship helps students cope with academic pressure" (14 mentions) reflect the value of these programs in supporting students' well-being. These interventions were mentioned 30 times, highlighting their effectiveness in fostering a positive school culture and enhancing both mental and academic outcomes. The findings align with research that highlights the role of school environments and culture in shaping both students' mental health and academic performance. Positive teacher-student relationships, inclusive peer dynamics, and the influence of physical spaces have been shown to contribute to emotional well-being, which in turn affects academic outcomes. For instance, (Roffey, 2012) argues that supportive relationships within schools foster emotional safety and belonging, leading to enhanced learning. Similarly, (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) note that effective school leadership that promotes inclusivity and mental health interventions, such as counseling, significantly improves students' emotional and academic resilience. This thematic analysis suggests that by focusing on both the social and physical environment and offering mental health support programs, schools can better support student success. This detailed thematic analysis provides a comprehensive view of how students perceive the school environment and culture's impact on their well-being and academic success. The identified themes and subthemes highlight key areas for schools to focus on in order to improve both mental health and academic outcomes for students.

## **6. Discussion**

The findings of this study strongly support Hypothesis 1 (H1), which posited that a positive school environment—characterized by supportive social relationships, safe physical spaces, and effective teacher-student interactions—would have a significant positive effect on students' mental health. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses confirmed this relationship. The regression analysis showed a significant statistical link between a well-maintained, supportive school environment and improved mental health outcomes ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These results are in line with previous studies, such as (Barrett et al., 2015), which highlighted the role of classroom design, safety, and cleanliness in enhancing students' well-being. In the qualitative interviews, students described how the physical condition of their classrooms and the social support they received from peers and teachers made them feel emotionally secure and better able to concentrate on their studies. Clean, organized environments with ample space to learn were repeatedly mentioned as factors that reduced stress and enhanced emotional well-being. This qualitative insight reinforces the quantitative findings, highlighting how a conducive physical and social environment directly supports mental health.

Hypothesis 2 (H2) proposed that a nurturing, inclusive school culture fosters higher academic performance compared to schools with a rigid or authoritarian culture. The study's findings provide strong support for this hypothesis. The regression results demonstrated that a positive school culture, characterized by inclusiveness, respect, and participatory leadership, was significantly correlated with better academic performance ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This aligns with the work of (Thapa et al., 2013), who found that inclusive school cultures create environments where students feel valued and motivated, leading to improved academic outcomes. Qualitative data further illustrated how school culture influences academic success. Students reported feeling more engaged and motivated to learn in schools where leadership encouraged participation and emphasized emotional well-being. Schools that fostered inclusivity through open communication, respect, and leadership that involved students in decision-making were described as environments where academic achievement was more likely. This supports the notion that inclusive cultures not only enhance academic performance but also promote students' emotional well-being, creating a holistic learning environment.

The mediation analysis provided strong evidence for Hypothesis 3 (H3), which suggested that mental health mediates the relationship between school environment/culture and academic performance. The analysis confirmed that mental health plays a pivotal role in connecting these factors, with improvements in the school environment and culture leading to better mental health, which in turn enhances academic outcomes. The mediation effect of school environment ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and school culture ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) on academic performance via mental health underscores the importance of addressing mental health in educational settings. Qualitative findings supported this statistical mediation by offering real-life examples from students who described how improvements in their mental health—due to counseling services, supportive peer relationships, and teacher guidance—directly contributed to their ability to perform academically. Students repeatedly noted that without these mental health resources, they struggled to focus on their studies, while with support, they were able to manage stress and excel academically. This demonstrates that mental health is a critical factor that bridges the gap between a positive school environment/culture and academic success, consistent with recent studies by (Gruber, 2019) and (Holmes, 2019).

Hypothesis 4 (H4) proposed that schools that implement mental health programs and maintain a balanced, supportive culture would see improved academic performance among students. The findings of this study confirm this hypothesis, as both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that schools offering mental health programs, such as counseling services and peer mentoring, experienced better student outcomes. The regression analysis implied that better mental health, driven by these programs, had a positive impact on academic performance. The qualitative data offered vivid examples of how these programs directly benefited students. Students frequently mentioned that counseling helped them manage their anxiety, and peer mentoring provided them with both academic and emotional support. These programs were seen as essential in helping students navigate academic pressures, ultimately leading to

better performance. This aligns with previous studies, such as (Wood et al., 2021) , which highlight the effectiveness of school-based mental health interventions in improving both mental well-being and academic outcomes.

The findings of this study provide robust support for the proposed hypotheses. The school environment, culture, and mental health are intricately connected, with mental health acting as a mediator between environmental/cultural factors and academic outcomes. Furthermore, the presence of mental health programs significantly enhances student performance, underscoring the need for schools to invest in resources that address both the emotional and academic needs of students. These findings are consistent with the growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of mental health and well-being in achieving academic success.

## 7. Conclusion and Findings

This study's findings underscore the significant impact of school environment, culture, and mental health on academic performance. Schools that maintain clean, safe, and supportive physical environments, foster inclusive and participatory cultures, and provide robust mental health resources are more likely to produce students who are both emotionally well-adjusted and academically successful. The mediating role of mental health highlights the need for schools to adopt a holistic approach to student development, one that addresses both the emotional and academic dimensions of student life.

The study also provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers. To enhance student outcomes, schools should prioritize the following:

- Maintaining positive physical environments that promote safety, cleanliness, and organization.
- Fostering inclusive school cultures where leadership encourages participation, respects student voices, and prioritizes emotional well-being.

By focusing on these areas, schools can create environments where students not only thrive academically but also develop the emotional resilience needed for long-term success. These findings suggest that future policies should prioritize mental health and inclusivity as central components of educational success. The comprehensive analysis provided by this study offers a clear direction for schools to create environments that are both emotionally supportive and academically enriching.

### 7.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. The relatively small sample size and specific geographic focus limit the applicability of the results to a broader population. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as students may inaccurately assess their own mental health and academic performance. The qualitative data, while rich in insights, remains subjective due to the variability in individual experiences of school environments and culture. Future research should aim to include larger, more diverse samples to improve generalizability, and longitudinal studies could explore the long-term effects of school culture on students' well-being and academic outcomes. Further research is also needed to examine the effectiveness of specific mental health programs and policies in diverse educational contexts.

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