



The Learning Environment as a Predictor of Learner Safety and Engagement in DepEd Bohol Division Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

A holistic educational experience depends on more than instructional content: it depends on whether learners perceive their school as physically and psychologically safe and as a place that invites their active participation. This study assessed the quality levels of the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement in secondary schools of the Department of Education (DepEd) Bohol Division for school year 2023–2024, and examined whether the learning environment predicts learner safety and engagement. A mixed-methods design combined a researcher-made survey (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) with a structured interview guide, both administered through Google Forms, to a purposive sample of one learner from grades 9–12 in the largest secondary school of each of the division's 58 districts (51 of 58 invited learners responded, an 87.9% response rate). Quantitative results showed high quality levels for the learning environment (composite mean = 2.61), learner safety (2.59), and learner engagement (2.49), all on a 3-point scale, with a grand mean of 2.56 ("High"). Pearson correlation analysis found a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between the learning environment and learner safety ($r = .497$, $p < .001$) and a statistically significant strong positive relationship between the learning environment and learner engagement ($r = .650$, $p < .001$), leading to rejection of both null hypotheses. Thematic analysis of interview responses identified three themes explaining how the learning environment supports learner safety (social connectedness, autonomy and empowerment, and emotional regulation) and five themes explaining how it supports learner engagement (engagement enhancement, participation and cooperation, support for learning and focus, interaction and expression, and motivation). Findings affirm that a well-structured, supportive learning environment is significantly associated with both learner safety and engagement, and a proposed action program, Project ELESS (Enhancing Learner Engagement and Safety in Schools), is offered based on these findings.

Keywords: learning environment, learner safety, learner engagement, school climate, DepEd Bohol, mixed methods

1. Introduction

Contemporary education increasingly recognizes that academic achievement cannot be separated from the conditions in which it occurs. A growing body of research on school climate treats the physical, social, and psychological qualities of a school as inputs to learning in their own right, not merely as background conditions (Thapa et al., 2013). The Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers formalizes this recognition domestically: Domain 2 explicitly holds teachers and schools responsible for providing learning environments that are safe, secure, fair, and supportive of learner responsibility and achievement (DepEd–Teacher Education Council, 2017). Two constructs sit close to the learning environment in this literature—learner safety and learner engagement—yet, as this study's review of the literature found, they are more often treated as downstream outcomes of a good environment than examined together as an interconnected system.

This gap is not merely theoretical for DepEd Bohol Division. Historical data from the Division Education Development Plan (DEDP) 2028 indicate a decline in promotion rates alongside a rise in school-leaver rates

over the past five years, a pattern for which no formal internal study has yet identified a cause. It is plausible—though, absent such a study, not established—that declining learner safety and engagement, shaped by overall school climate, contribute to this trend. This study does not test that causal claim directly; rather, it addresses a necessary precursor to testing it: establishing, with defensible data, what the current quality levels of the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement actually are in the division's secondary schools, and whether the learning environment statistically predicts the other two.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical perspectives frame this study. Deming's (1986) Quality Management Theory, developed originally for organizational and industrial quality improvement, is applied here through its customer-centric orientation: understanding and meeting the needs of the people a system serves, adapting practices based on their feedback, and pursuing continuous improvement. Applied to a school, this orientation treats learners as the primary stakeholders whose needs—for functional physical spaces, responsive teaching methods, and effective safety protocols—define what a “quality” learning environment means in practice. This framing guided the study's approach to assessing quality levels of the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement as learners themselves perceive them, rather than by an externally imposed standard.

The second perspective, General Systems Theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968), treats the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement not as independent variables but as interconnected components of a single educational system, in which change in one component propagates to affect the others through feedback loops. This framing guided the study's second and third research questions: rather than asking only whether the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement are each independently high or low, it asks how the learning environment influences the other two, treating the school as a system whose parts interact rather than a set of disconnected measures.

Beyond these two frameworks, the study is grounded in relevant Philippine legal instruments: Republic Act No. 11313 (the Safe Spaces Act), which addresses gender-based harassment and violence in public spaces including schools, and Republic Act No. 7610, which provides special protection for children against abuse, exploitation, and discrimination. Both laws establish the legal basis for treating learner safety as an institutional obligation rather than a matter of individual school discretion, situating the study's assessment of learner safety within an existing framework of educational governance and child protection.

Related Literature

Empirical support for treating the learning environment as consequential for both safety and engagement is well established, though it spans several distinct literatures rather than a single integrated one. On engagement specifically, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) influential review distinguishes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement and argues that engagement functions as a meta-construct capable of explaining how contextual features of a classroom translate into learning. Klem and Connell (2004) found that learners who perceived their teachers as supportive reported substantially higher engagement and, in turn, better attendance and achievement—directly linking a relational feature of the learning environment to engagement outcomes. Thapa et al.'s (2013) review of school climate research similarly concludes that climate—encompassing safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment—is consistently associated with both engagement and broader developmental outcomes, while noting that safety is often measured as one dimension of climate rather than as a construct in its own right.

This last point bears directly on the gap this study addresses. Much of the existing literature positions safety as a sub-dimension of a broader climate or environment construct (as in Thapa et al., 2013) rather than as a dynamic state that varies among learners within the same environment. Fewer studies examine how learners themselves narrate the relationship between environmental conditions and their own sense of safety, and

fewer still pair that qualitative account with quantitative measurement of the same constructs. The present study responds to this by treating the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement as three measurable constructs in their own right, and by using both survey and interview data to characterize their interrelationship.

On the developmental and motivational side, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) offers an established account of why autonomy-supportive, competence-affirming, and relationally warm environments increase engagement: they satisfy basic psychological needs that intrinsic motivation depends on. Related work by Reeve (2006) on autonomy-supportive teaching, Zimmerman (2000) on self-regulated learning, and Bandura (1997) on self-efficacy converge on a similar point—that engagement is not simply elicited by content but cultivated through environmental conditions that support learners' sense of agency and competence. On the safety side, Espelage and Swearer's (2003) review of bullying and victimization research establishes that a lack of social safety measurably disrupts learners' engagement and well-being, while Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development—itsself a foreshadowing of the systems-theoretic framing used in this study—situates the immediate classroom environment within nested layers of relationships and institutions that jointly shape a learner's developmental trajectory. Wentzel (1998) and Eccles and Roeser (2009) extend this relational emphasis specifically to the role of teachers and peers in shaping adolescents' motivation and sense of belonging within the school as a developmental context.

Statement of the Problem

This study assessed the quality levels of the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement, and examined the relationship between the learning environment and both learner safety and learner engagement, in DepEd Bohol Division secondary schools for school year 2023–2024. Specifically, it sought to answer:

1. What is the quality level of schools in terms of (a) learning environment, (b) learner safety, and (c) learner engagement?
2. Do significant relationships exist between the quality level of the learning environment and the quality levels of (a) learner safety and (b) learner engagement?
3. How do learners perceive the influence of the learning environment on learner safety and learner engagement?
4. What action program can be proposed based on the findings of this study?

Two null hypotheses were tested corresponding to research question 2: Ho1, there is no significant relationship between the quality level of the learning environment and the quality level of learner safety; and Ho2, there is no significant relationship between the quality level of the learning environment and the quality level of learner engagement.

2. Methods

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design, integrating a quantitative descriptive-correlational component with a qualitative descriptive component in a single data-collection phase, consistent with Dawadi et al.'s (2021) characterization of mixed-methods research as valuable for triangulating findings across methods and strengthening the credibility of conclusions that neither method could support as strongly alone. The quantitative component addressed research questions 1 and 2 (quality levels and their statistical relationship); the qualitative component addressed research question 3 (learners' own account of how the learning environment shapes their safety and engagement).



Research Environment

The study was conducted within DepEd Bohol Division, which comprises three congressional districts and 58 administrative districts across the province of Bohol in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines. Bohol secondary schools were selected in part because the division currently lacks a contextualized learner-safety policy, making the study's findings directly relevant to future policy development.

Research Participants

Using purposive sampling, one learner from grades 9 through 12 was selected from the largest secondary school in each of the division's 58 districts, yielding an initial sample of 58. Fifty-one of the 58 invited learners completed the survey and interview instrument, a response rate of 87.9%; all reported quantitative results are based on this achieved sample of 51. Grade 9–12 learners were selected on the premise that their level of cognitive development, educational experience, and expressive capability made them well positioned to reflect meaningfully on their school's learning environment, safety, and engagement conditions. As a purposive, single-respondent-per-district sample, this design prioritizes breadth of representation across the division's districts over depth within any one school, a trade-off discussed further in the Limitations section.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a two-part, researcher-developed instrument administered through Google Forms: a 25-item survey questionnaire (a 3-point Likert scale, ranging from Needs Improvement/Low to High, across three sections—learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement) and a structured interview guide with open-ended questions probing how the learning environment was perceived to influence safety and engagement. Both instruments were reviewed by graduate faculty for content validity and piloted with a small sample of learners prior to full administration; the survey achieved a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .92, indicating high internal consistency.

Research Procedures

Following approval from the Schools Division Superintendent and informed consent from participating schools, the survey and interview guide were distributed to the selected learners via Google Forms. Parental consent was obtained for all participants given their minor status, and the questionnaire did not collect participant names, preserving confidentiality. Completed responses were tallied for quantitative analysis, while interview responses were coded thematically.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were summarized using weighted means, interpreted against a three-tier descriptor scale (High, 2.34–3.00; Moderate, 1.67–2.33; Needs Improvement, 1.00–1.66) for the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement composite scores. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to test the two null hypotheses concerning the relationship between the learning environment and learner safety and engagement, with $\alpha = .05$ as the significance threshold. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with participant responses, generation of initial codes, collation of codes into clustered themes, review of those themes against the full data set, definition and naming of emergent themes, and production of the final analytic narrative linking themes to the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

The study was reviewed and approved by Holy Name University's Ethics Review Board following the required proposal hearing. Each learner participant was invited voluntarily through their school head, and parental consent was obtained in addition to learner assent. No participant names were collected, no incentives were provided, and participants who withdrew were not replaced. No known risks to participants were identified.

3. Results

Quality Level of the Learning Environment

Table 1 presents learners' perceived quality of the learning environment across fifteen indicators spanning physical space, teaching methods, and safety protocols.

Table 1

Quality Level of Schools in Terms of Learning Environment

Indicator (selected)	Mean	Descriptor
Teachers frequently promote teamwork and collaboration among learners to enhance safety	2.92	High
Teachers consistently integrate real-world examples into lessons	2.82	High
Learners are actively encouraged to participate in class discussions	2.78	High
The school addresses and manages conflicts or safety issues within the learning environment	2.75	High
Physical spaces effectively promote a positive, focused learning environment	2.67	High
Learning materials and activities are relevant and engaging	2.67	High
The variety of teaching methods caters to different learning needs	2.65	High
School safety protocols ensure physical well-being	2.63	High
Communication about emergency procedures is effective and clear	2.61	High
Teachers create personalized learning experiences	2.61	High
Schools effectively address psychological and emotional concerns	2.55	High
Classrooms and learning spaces are clean and organized	2.49	High
Physical spaces are inclusive and accessible for diverse needs	2.41	High
Physical infrastructures and facilities are well maintained	2.33	Moderate
Classrooms are well-equipped with necessary educational resources	2.22	Moderate
Composite Mean	2.61	High

The highest-rated item—teachers promoting teamwork and collaboration among learners to enhance safety ($M = 2.92$)—points to collaborative pedagogy as a perceived strength of the surveyed schools' learning environments; this is consistent with the general literature linking cooperative and relationally supportive classroom practices to positive climate outcomes (Wentzel, 1998). The lowest-rated item, classroom resource adequacy ($M = 2.22$, “Moderate”), identifies a concrete area for improvement: even where teaching practice and safety protocols are rated highly, the physical adequacy of instructional materials lags behind. The composite mean of 2.61 (“High”) indicates that, overall, learners in the sampled schools perceive their physical, pedagogical, and safety-related learning conditions as strong, with resource provisioning as the clearest area for targeted investment.

Quality Level of Learner Safety

Table 2 presents learners' perceived safety, emphasizing emotional and psychological well-being.

Table 2

Quality Level of Schools in Terms of Learner Safety

Indicator	Mean	Descriptor
School culture consistently nurtures positive emotions and inclusivity	2.75	High
Learners' emotional distress signals are discerned and met with tailored responses	2.65	High
Emotional and psychological well-being is frequently communicated with parents	2.67	High
The emotional atmosphere within classrooms reflects positivity and support	2.63	High
Learners frequently experience emotional and psychological well-being supported by constructive feedback	2.61	High
Learners express feelings of inclusion and respect from peers	2.59	High
Learners often express feelings of security and comfort	2.57	High
Learners exhibit positive emotional states and understanding with peers	2.57	High
Learners have access to resources and support services affecting well-being	2.53	High
Conflicts among learners are infrequent	2.31	Moderate
Composite Mean	2.59	High

The highest-rated item, a school culture that nurtures positive emotions and inclusivity ($M = 2.75$), suggests that whole-school culture, more than any single safety protocol, is what learners most strongly associate with feeling safe—a pattern consistent with Thapa et al.'s (2013) conclusion that relational and cultural

dimensions of school climate carry particular weight in learners' safety perceptions. The lowest-rated item, infrequency of conflict among learners ($M = 2.31$, "Moderate"), indicates that peer conflict remains a comparatively persistent feature of the school experience even where overall safety is rated highly, a pattern consistent with Espelage and Swearer's (2003) observation that peer-level conflict and victimization often persist independently of broader school-culture strengths and require targeted, rather than purely cultural, intervention.

Quality Level of Learner Engagement

Table 3 presents learners' perceived engagement.

Table 3

Quality Level of Schools in Terms of Learner Engagement

Indicator	Mean	Descriptor
Learners actively participate in class discussions and activities	2.57	High
Learners collaborate and work together during group activities	2.63	High
Learners willingly share thoughts and ideas with peers	2.65	High
Learners express genuine interest in connecting content to real-world scenarios	2.61	High
Learners take responsibility for their own learning	2.59	High
Learner engagement positively impacts the overall learning environment	2.57	High
Learners show curiosity and ask questions to deepen understanding	2.47	High
Learners take initiative to explore additional resources	2.33	Moderate
Learners display focus and attentiveness during lessons	2.22	Moderate
Learners demonstrate enthusiasm and interest in learning tasks	2.26	Moderate
Composite Mean	2.49	High

Consistent with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional account of engagement, the highest-rated items here cluster around behavioral and social indicators—participation, collaboration, and willingness to share ideas—while the lowest-rated items cluster around what Fredricks and colleagues classify as cognitive and emotional engagement: sustained attention, initiative beyond required tasks, and enthusiasm. This pattern suggests that the surveyed schools are comparatively more successful at eliciting observable participation than at cultivating the less visible, more internally driven forms of engagement, a distinction with direct implications for the kinds of interventions likely to move the composite score further.

Overall Quality Levels

Table 4 summarizes the three indicators together.

Table 4

Overall Quality Levels of Schools

Indicator	Composite Mean	Descriptor
Learning Environment	2.61	High
Learner Safety	2.59	High
Learner Engagement	2.49	High
Grand Mean	2.56	High

All three indicators fall within the "High" range, with the Learning Environment scoring highest and Learner Engagement scoring lowest—a pattern that, read alongside the item-level findings above, suggests engagement (particularly its cognitive and affective dimensions) as the area with the most room for targeted improvement relative to the other two constructs.

Relationship Between the Learning Environment and Learner Safety and Engagement

Table 5 presents the results of Pearson correlation analysis testing the two null hypotheses.

Table 5

Relationship Between the Learning Environment and Learner Safety and Engagement

Relationship	r	Strength/Direction	p	Decision
Learning Environment ($M = 2.61$) and Learner Safety ($M = 2.59$)	.497	Moderate, positive	< .001	Reject H_01



Learning Environment (M = 2.61) and Learner Engagement (M = 2.49) .650 Strong, positive < .001 Reject Ho2

Both null hypotheses were rejected. The learning environment showed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation with learner safety ($r = .497$, $p < .001$) and a statistically significant, strong positive correlation with learner engagement ($r = .650$, $p < .001$). The stronger relationship with engagement than with safety is notable: it suggests that, in this sample, variation in the quality of the learning environment tracks more closely with how actively learners participate than with how safe they feel—plausibly because safety, as the qualitative findings below suggest, depends on relational and cultural factors (peer relationships, school culture) that are only partly captured by the environmental indicators measured in the survey.

Learners' Perceptions of How the Learning Environment Influences Safety

Thematic analysis of interview responses identified three themes (Table 6).

Table 6

Perceived Influence of the Learning Environment on Learner Safety

Clustered Themes	Emergent Theme
Cultivates trust; cultivates belongingness; prevents bullying; prevents harassment; nurtures positive relationships	Social Connectedness
Creates supportive learning spaces	Autonomy and Empowerment
Mitigates anxiety; fosters positivity	Emotional Regulation

Social Connectedness. Learners described trust, a sense of belonging, and freedom from bullying and harassment as central to feeling safe, consistent with Espelage and Swearer's (2003) and Wentzel's (1998) findings that peer relationships and freedom from victimization are foundational, rather than incidental, to learners' sense of safety and to their broader engagement in school life.

Autonomy and Empowerment. Learners linked their sense of safety to having a voice—the ability to raise concerns and influence decisions about their own learning and environment. This resonates with Self-Determination Theory's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) account of autonomy as a basic psychological need: an environment that supports learner agency appears to support not only motivation, as the theory predicts, but also learners' sense of security, since agency includes the ability to act on and address safety concerns rather than simply endure them.

Emotional Regulation. Learners associated safety with an environment that helped them manage anxiety and sustain a positive emotional state, a pattern consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) view that a learner's immediate environment (the classroom, the peer group) shapes emotional and psychological development through sustained, proximal interaction rather than through isolated events.

Learners' Perceptions of How the Learning Environment Influences Engagement

Five themes emerged describing the learning environment's influence on engagement (Table 7).

Table 7

Perceived Influence of the Learning Environment on Learner Engagement

Clustered Themes	Emergent Theme
Fosters positive engagement; promotes active engagement; enhances engagement	Engagement Enhancement
Encourages participation; fosters cooperation	Participation and Cooperation
Encourages learning; supports learning; promotes focus	Support for Learning and Focus
Boosts interaction; promotes value, expression, talent, and potential	Interaction and Expression
Motivates learners; engages learners; enhances interest	Motivation

Engagement Enhancement. Learners described an overall positive classroom atmosphere as the precondition for active, meaningful participation, consistent with Self-Determination Theory's (Deci & Ryan, 1985) claim that autonomy, competence, and relatedness jointly drive intrinsic engagement, and with Zimmerman's (2000) account of self-regulated learning as dependent on a supportive instructional context.

Participation and Cooperation. Learners emphasized peer interaction and cooperative learning as central to engagement, echoing Eccles and Roeser's (2009) finding that peer relationships significantly shape adolescents' motivation and social development within the school context, and Wentzel's (1998) finding that supportive peer and teacher relationships are directly tied to classroom engagement.

Support for Learning and Focus. Learners linked engagement to an environment that minimized distraction and actively supported learning, a pattern consistent with Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analytic finding that supportive, well-structured learning environments are associated with improved engagement and academic performance through social-emotional learning mechanisms.

Interaction and Expression. Learners valued opportunities to express ideas, talents, and perspectives, consistent with Brackett and Rivers's (2011) argument that emotional intelligence and its expression are integral, not peripheral, to positive classroom relationships and engagement.

Motivation. Finally, learners described sustained engagement as dependent on ongoing motivational support, consistent with Reeve's (2006) findings on the role of autonomy-supportive teaching in sustaining learner motivation and Bandura's (1997) account of self-efficacy as a driver of sustained engagement and effort.

4. Discussion

Read together, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a consistent picture: the learning environment in these DepEd Bohol Division secondary schools is perceived as high-quality overall, and that quality is statistically and substantively linked to both learner safety and learner engagement—more strongly to engagement ($r = .650$) than to safety ($r = .497$). The qualitative findings help explain why the relationship with safety is comparatively weaker: learners' accounts of safety centered on social and relational factors (trust, belonging, freedom from bullying) that are shaped by peer culture and school climate as much as by the environmental features the survey measured directly (physical space, teaching methods, safety protocols). This is consistent with Thapa et al.'s (2013) broader finding that school climate is a multidimensional construct in which safety is more strongly predicted by relational and cultural dimensions than by structural or physical ones.

The engagement findings similarly align with established theory. The Self-Determination Theory account (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that autonomy, competence, and relatedness jointly drive intrinsic motivation maps closely onto the qualitative themes of Autonomy and Empowerment, Support for Learning and Focus, and Motivation—suggesting that, in this sample, the learning environment's effect on engagement operates substantially through its capacity to meet these basic psychological needs, rather than through any single structural feature in isolation.

At the same time, the item-level quantitative findings sound a note of caution against over-generalizing the “High” overall descriptor. The lowest-rated items—classroom resource adequacy (learning environment), infrequency of peer conflict (safety), and sustained attention and initiative (engagement)—each point to a distinct, targeted area of concern that a single composite score obscures. This is consistent with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) argument that engagement's behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions should be examined separately rather than collapsed into a single index, since interventions effective for one dimension (for example, structured participation activities that raise behavioral engagement) may do little to address another (such as sustained curiosity or initiative).

It is also worth returning to the study's Systems Theory framing (von Bertalanffy, 1968) in light of these results. The moderate-to-strong, statistically significant correlations observed here are consistent with a systems view in which the learning environment functions as one interconnected component whose quality propagates, via feedback, into both the safety and engagement subsystems—but the differing strength of that relationship for safety versus engagement suggests the propagation is not uniform across subsystems, and

that safety in particular may depend on additional inputs (peer culture, individual relationships) not fully captured by this study's environmental measures.

5. Conclusion

This study found that the learning environment, learner safety, and learner engagement are all perceived as high quality in DepEd Bohol Division's secondary schools, and that the learning environment is significantly and positively associated with both learner safety and learner engagement—more strongly with engagement than with safety. These findings support Deming's (1986) customer-centric framing of quality as defined by the perceptions and needs of those a system serves, and are consistent with a systems-theoretic view (von Bertalanffy, 1968) of the learning environment, safety, and engagement as interconnected rather than independent features of the school. At the same time, item-level findings—lagging resource adequacy, persistent peer conflict, and comparatively low sustained attention and initiative—identify specific, addressable gaps that a single “High” composite descriptor would otherwise obscure. Project ELESS offers one structured starting point for addressing these gaps, but the study's correlational design and single-respondent-per-district sampling mean its findings should inform, rather than substitute for, the contextualized, causally-oriented research DepEd Bohol Division still needs to fully understand its documented promotion-rate and school-leaver trends.

6. Implications

For DepEd Bohol Division, these findings support prioritizing classroom resource adequacy as a concrete, addressable weak point within an otherwise strong learning environment, and support developing a division-level learner safety policy—currently absent—that explicitly addresses peer conflict, since that item scored lowest within an otherwise high safety composite. For school leaders and teachers, the findings suggest that engagement gains are more likely to come from interventions targeting sustained attention, curiosity, and learner initiative—the specific engagement sub-dimensions rated lowest—than from further reinforcing already-strong participation and collaboration practices. For future researchers, the gap this study identified—that learner safety is typically treated as a sub-dimension of climate rather than examined as a dynamic, learner-level state—remains only partially addressed here and merits further, more targeted investigation, ideally through designs that can also test causal rather than correlational relationships.

7. Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the purposive sampling strategy selected a single learner per district from the largest school in that district, prioritizing breadth of representation across the division's 58 districts over depth of representation within any one school; the perspectives of learners in smaller schools, and of multiple learners within the same school, are not captured, and findings should be read as representative of the division's largest schools specifically rather than of all its secondary schools. Second, the correlational design establishes statistically significant association, not causation: it cannot determine whether an improved learning environment causes greater safety and engagement, whether more engaged and secure learners simply perceive their environment more favorably, or whether some third factor drives both. Third, a small cluster of citations appearing in an earlier draft of this article's discussion of individual survey findings could not be independently verified and has accordingly been removed; the discussion presented here is grounded in a narrower, though independently verifiable, evidence base than that earlier draft intended. Fourth, the study's cross-sectional design, limited to a single school year, cannot capture whether the observed decline in promotion rates and rise in school-leaver rates documented in the Division Education Development Plan predate, follow, or are unrelated to the quality levels measured here; establishing that connection was outside this study's scope and remains an open question for future research.

8. Recommendations

Based on these findings, DepEd Bohol Division should prioritize classroom resource investment as a targeted intervention within an already-strong learning environment, and should develop the contextualized learner safety policy this study's setting rationale identified as currently absent, with explicit attention to peer conflict resolution given its comparatively low safety rating. Schools should design engagement interventions that specifically target sustained attention, curiosity, and learner initiative rather than participation alone, since these were the engagement sub-dimensions with the most room for improvement. Future researchers should extend this study with designs capable of testing causal relationships, with multi-respondent sampling within individual schools to capture within-school variation, and with a direct empirical test of whether the learning-environment, safety, and engagement quality levels measured here relate to the division's documented promotion-rate and school-leaver trends. Finally, schools are encouraged to adopt and adapt the Project ELESS action program proposed below as a starting structure for addressing the specific gaps this study identified.

9. Proposed Action Program: Project ELESS (Enhancing Learner Engagement and Safety in Schools)

Building on these findings, this study proposes Project ELESS, organized around three objectives: to increase learner engagement—particularly its cognitive and affective dimensions—through active and collaborative learning strategies; to maintain and enhance learner safety by prioritizing mental health, emotional well-being, and peer-conflict-resolution initiatives; and to regularly assess and improve the learning environment based on structured feedback from learners, teachers, and parents. Implementation is organized into three phases: an initial phase (months 1–3) focused on teacher training in active and collaborative learning strategies; an implementation phase (months 4–6) introducing new learning strategies alongside mental-health and well-being initiatives, including access to counseling services and structured peer-conflict-resolution protocols; and an ongoing monitoring phase (months 7–12) combining an initial and a comprehensive assessment of the learning environment, using classroom observation, teacher reports, and learner feedback to track progress against the specific, targeted indicators—resource adequacy, peer conflict, and sustained attention and initiative—that this study's item-level findings identified as priority areas.

10. Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by Holy Name University's Ethics Review Board following the required proposal hearing. Each learner participant was invited voluntarily through their school head; because participants were minors, parental consent was obtained in addition to learner assent. No participant names were collected, no incentives were provided, and no participant who withdrew was replaced. No known risks to participants were identified.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



Author Contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing: Peggy Marie B. Santillan. Supervision: Asuncion P. Pabalan.

Data Availability

The survey and interview responses generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to the confidentiality commitments made to participants and their parents during informed consent and assent, but de-identified excerpts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy restrictions.

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