

The Impact of the School's Ethical Climate on Academic Engagement with an Emphasis on the Mediating Role of Achievement Emotions in Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to determine the impact of the school ethical climate on academic engagement, emphasizing the mediating role of achievement emotions in students. This research was conducted using a descriptive correlational research method. Based on the Krejcie-Morgan table, a sample size of 379 students (198 from 11th grade and 181 from 12th grade) was selected. The research tools included the Victor and Cullen Ethical Climate Questionnaire (1988), the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire by Pekrun et al. (2005), and the Academic Engagement Questionnaire by Reeve and Tseng (2011). Data analysis involved Pearson correlation coefficient and path analysis tests. The findings indicated that the school ethical climate had a direct positive effect on academic engagement and positive achievement emotions and a direct negative effect on negative achievement emotions. Additionally, positive achievement emotions had a direct positive effect on students' academic engagement, while negative achievement emotions had a direct negative effect. The results also highlighted that achievement emotions play a mediating and indirect role in the influence of the school ethical climate on students' academic engagement.

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Introduction

One of the key concerns in a quality-driven education system is the academic engagement of students, which serves as a significant predictor of their academic success. Understanding the extent to which students devote their time and interest to academic activities and how they engage with learning various subjects is critical ([Zhang et al., 2019](#)). Academic engagement reflects the gradual process of a student's disconnection from school and highlights the importance of addressing it to ensure student retention and sustained engagement (Amiri et al., 2019). ([Amiri et al., 2019](#))

According to Marks (2000), academic engagement refers to students' involvement in educational activities and encompasses the psychological processes of attention, interest, and effort invested in learning ([Sadeghi & Biranvand, 2016](#)). Engagement signifies students' perception of having mental flexibility and energy during study (vigor), their eagerness to invest effort in academic tasks (absorption), and their resilience in overcoming challenges with a positive attitude toward learning (dedication) ([Larson et al., 2019](#)). Russell, Ainley, and Frydenberg (2005) describe engagement as "energy in action," indicating the dynamic connection between an individual and an activity. In this context, academic engagement signifies active involvement in a task or activity.

O'Dea's Wilms (2001) defines engagement as the degree to which students participate in educational and non-educational activities, guided by educational goals ([Afrouz et al., 2019](#)). Newman, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) characterize engagement as students' involvement in academic tasks and as the psychological investment and effort made to learn, understand, or acquire knowledge and skills they aim to develop. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) conceptualize academic engagement as comprising three components: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional (motivational).

In recent decades, enhancing students' engagement with academic tasks has become a critical variable for predicting their academic performance, drawing significant attention from researchers ([Pirani et al., 2018](#)). To acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, students must actively engage in educational activities. The more a learner engages with academic tasks, the greater the likelihood of academic success and the reduction in dropout rates. Lack of engagement and disinterest in academic matters are primary causes of academic failure and declining student achievement. Conversely, increased engagement in academic tasks directly contributes to improved academic outcomes ([Boasaghi et al., 2015](#)).

Additionally, Schlechter (1994) posits that students are engaged when they are deeply absorbed in their work, persist through challenges, and derive immense enjoyment from their tasks, despite obstacles ([Fakharian et al., 2019](#)).

One of the key variables influencing students' academic engagement is the school ethical climate, a concept introduced by Victor and Cullen (1988). They defined it as the "shared perception of what constitutes appropriate behavior and how ethical issues should be managed within an organization" ([Zhang et al., 2019](#)). Kaiser and Schulte (2007) further elaborated on the school ethical climate by emphasizing the evaluation of teacher-student interactions and relationships to understand school activities with ethical content or aspects of the learning environment that foster ethical behavior ([Thapa et al., 2012](#)).

The school ethical climate is examined through five ethical principles: respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and honesty. It also encompasses three dimensions: teacher-student interactions, student-teacher relationships, and the learning environment, as well as student-student interactions ([Abdolvahabi & Rahimi, 2024](#)). This climate often fosters positive social emotions among teachers and students, providing greater support and motivation for academic progress (Hosseini, 2023).

The school ethical climate reflects the ethical and social values of the school, creating an environment conducive to socialization that fosters learning, growth, and individual and social adaptation. According to social learning theory, the ethical context within the school supports and promotes ethical behavior and facilitates its development ([Birch & Chiang, 2014](#)).

In this regard, Ibrahim and Al-Zatari (2020) argue that relationships based on care, trust, respect, influence, openness, and collaboration can enhance students' progress, identity development, school belonging, and teachers' accountability. Similarly, [Ahmadi et al. \(2018\)](#) noted that any improvement in the school ethical climate could lead to a stronger sense of school belonging and better academic performance.

[King-Sears and Strugillous \(2020\)](#) emphasize that the supportive collaboration of teachers to maximize students' educational experiences and the positive relationships between teachers and students significantly influence students' sense of school belonging and self-efficacy. Wong et al. (2019) also note that teacher-student relationships can significantly predict changes in students' sense of school belonging.

The school ethical climate not only fosters cognitive knowledge and skills but also influences the achievement emotions experienced by students. Achievement emotions refer to those emotions directly related to achievement activities or their outcomes. These emotions can be categorized based on their valence (pleasant or unpleasant) and their activation level (active or passive). For instance, joy and pride are positive emotions, while shame, anxiety, despair, and sadness are negative emotions ([Al Hamad, 2021](#)). Positive activating emotions, such as hope, pride, and joy, facilitate cognitive flexibility aligned with goals and required tasks. For example, enjoyment and interest are associated with students' attention, focus, participation, and perseverance in learning activities, which positively correlates with academic achievement ([Mueller et al., 2020](#)). Conversely, negative emotions (e.g., boredom, burnout, and anxiety) reduce cognitive resources and negatively impact school performance and academic progress ([Camacho Morales et al., 2019](#)).

Achievement emotions are particularly tied to the emotions arising in educational settings and influence classroom interactions, such as teacher-student engagement. [Pekrun \(2006\)](#) argues that emotions play a fundamental role in shaping individual behavior. Emotions can be defined as a set of reactive patterns that include experiential, behavioral, and physiological components. From a neurobiological and evolutionary perspective, emotions are behaviors automatically activated in specific contexts, enabling individuals to confront and respond to events and challenges. In an educational context, emotions can range from feelings associated with academic success or failure to the acceptance or rejection by peers ([Al Hamad, 2021](#)).

The control-value theory of achievement emotions provides a theoretical framework for understanding these emotions in educational contexts. According to this theory, individuals prefer to adopt cognitive appraisal patterns rather than perceiving academic challenges as threatening. This appraisal fosters positive achievement emotions over negative ones. Furthermore, the theory offers a cohesive conceptual framework for analyzing emotions within educational environments ([Jafat Thajil, 2021](#)).

Today, educational systems worldwide bear the responsibility of developing schools in economic, social, emotional, and personal domains for students. Achieving these educational objectives requires substantial efforts to enhance overall quality and educational conditions. Aligning education with psychological knowledge and skills is critical to fostering academic engagement and positive achievement emotions, ultimately nurturing skilled and well-adjusted adolescents and young adults.

Encouraging the growth of academic engagement and positive achievement emotions in students not only contributes to their success but also reflects the broader goals of educational systems. This study seeks to expand the existing literature on school ethical climate, academic engagement, achievement emotions, and the factors influencing them. Given the scarcity of research exploring these interconnected variables, this investigation aims to fill a significant gap in understanding.

The findings of this research can provide actionable insights into addressing challenges related to the school ethical climate, academic engagement, and achievement emotions. Furthermore, the results are expected to assist educational organizations, teachers, and learning environments in fostering better relationships with students and improving educational outcomes.

Thus, the primary objective of the present study is to examine the impact of the school ethical climate on academic engagement, with an emphasis on the mediating role of achievement emotions in students.

Method

Sample and Sampling Method

The research design for this study was descriptive-correlational in nature and applied in purpose. The statistical population included all female 11th and 12th-grade students in Zahedan during the 1404-1403 academic year, totaling 29,588 individuals. Based on the Krejcie-Morgan table, the statistical sample consisted of 379 students, selected through stratified random sampling based on their academic grade. Of the sample, 198 students were from the 11th grade, and 181 students were from the 12th grade

Tools Used

Ethical Climate Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Victor and Cullen (1988) to evaluate the existing ethical climate.

It consists of 26 items and six dimensions (caring, rules and regulations, standards, instrumental, efficiency-oriented, and independence). The responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree(1)" to "strongly agree (5)." In a study by Ghoitasi (2013), the face validity of this questionnaire was confirmed by two professors from the Management Department at Payame Noor University. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which ranges from 0 (no stability) to 1 (perfect stability). Higher values closer to 1 indicate greater reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for this questionnaire was reported as 0.72 overall, and for its dimensions as follows: caring (0.70), rules and regulations (0.59), standards (0.66), instrumental (0.74), efficiency-oriented (0.79), and independence (0.69).

Results

The descriptive findings related to the mean and standard deviation of the study variables are presented in Table 1. Academic engagement had a mean and standard deviation of 77.55 and 11.91, respectively. The school ethical climate variable showed a mean and standard deviation of 87.51 and 21.22, respectively. Positive achievement emotions reported a mean and standard deviation of 31.59 and 8.18, respectively, while negative achievement emotions had a mean and standard deviation of 87.34 and 18.29, respectively

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Academic Engagement, School Ethical Climate, and Achievement Emotions

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Variance	Skewness	Kurtosis
Academic Engagement	379	77.55	11.91	45	97	142.04	-1.124	0.313
School Ethical Climate	379	87.51	21.22	46	128	450.31	-0.601	-0.878
Positive Emotions	379	31.59	8.18	18	49	66.99	-0.253	-1.231
Negative Emotions	379	87.34	18.29	58	120	334.53	0.536	-1.117

The indicators for the normality of the variables in Table 1 show that the skewness values for academic engagement, school ethical climate, positive achievement emotions, and negative achievement emotions were -1.124, -0.601, -0.253, and 0.536, respectively. Additionally, the kurtosis values for academic engagement, school ethical climate, positive achievement emotions, and negative achievement emotions were 0.313, -0.878, -1.231, and -1.117, respectively, all of which fall within the ± 2 range, indicating that all research variables are normally distributed.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient Matrix Between Research Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
School Ethical Climate	1			
Academic Engagement	0.805	1		
Positive Emotions	0.780	0.676	1	
Negative Emotions	-0.860	-0.780	-0.781	1

N=379,0.01

The results in Table 2 indicate that the correlation coefficient between the school ethical climate and academic engagement, positive emotions, and negative emotions of achievement are 0.805, 0.780, and -0.860, respectively. Additionally, the correlation coefficients between positive and negative emotions of achievement and academic engagement are 0.676 and -0.780, respectively. These relationships are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level ($P < 0.01$).

Given that the aim of the present study was to determine the effect of the school ethical climate on academic engagement, with an emphasis on the mediating role of achievement emotions among students, path analysis was used to examine the research questions. The required calculations were performed using AMOS 24 software, and the research model in the standardized estimation state for the path analysis of variables is illustrated in Figure 1.

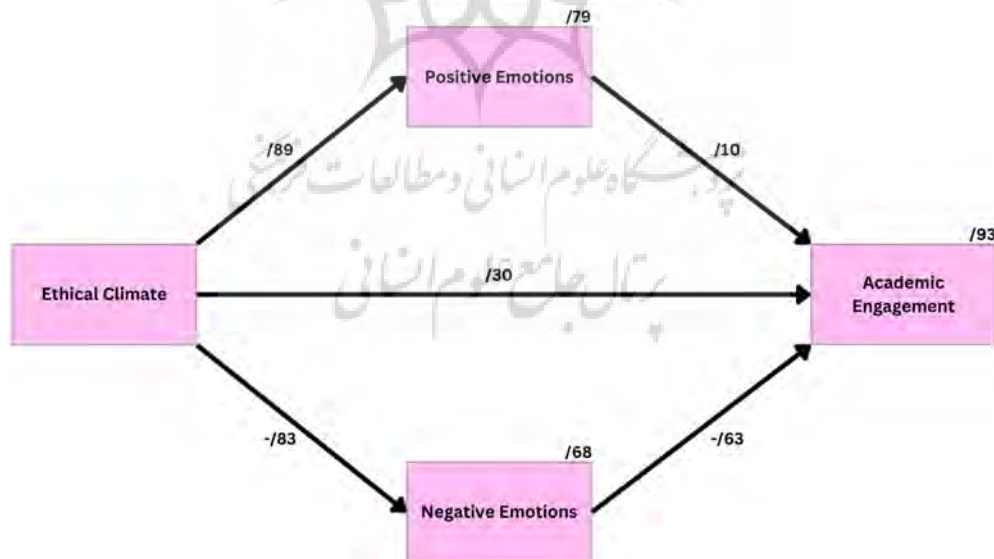
Figure 1: Path coefficients of the research model in the standardized state

Table 3: Fit indices of the school's ethical climate on academic engagement based on achievement emotions

Fit Indices	X ² /df	GFI	NFI	CFI	IFI	TLI	RFI	RMSEA
Obtained Value	3.867	0.96	0.96	0.95	0.97	0.95	0.93	0.072
Criterion Standard	< 5	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	> 0.9	< 0.08

Based on Table 3, the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (X^2/df), which equals 3.867 and is less than 5, indicates an acceptable fit. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) all exceed 0.90. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is 0.072, which is less than 0.08. These results demonstrate that all fit indices are within the acceptable range.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the effect of the school's ethical climate on academic engagement, emphasizing the mediating role of achievement emotions among students in the 2023-2024 academic year in Zahedan. The first research question revealed that the school's ethical climate has a significant and direct positive effect on students' academic engagement. This finding aligns with [Heidariani et al.'s \(2022\)](#) research, which demonstrated that the school's ethical climate significantly influences academic engagement and behaviors that facilitate a health-oriented academic lifestyle among students. [Akarsu and Turhan \(2022\)](#) also found that the school's ethical climate is a significant predictor of academic engagement and school participation.

Schulte et al. (2002) describe the school's ethical climate as an atmosphere where moral values such as justice, empathy, cooperation, respect for individual differences, openness to others' opinions, responsibility, adherence to rules, and acceptance of criticism govern student relationships and the educational environment ([Ahmadi et al., 2018](#)). The ethical climate is assessed through the evaluation of teacher-student interactions across five moral principles: respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and honesty. It emphasizes three components: teacher-student relationships, student interactions with the learning environment, and peer relationships among students ([Emamgholivand et al., 2019](#)).

The school's ethical climate reflects students' feelings derived from their daily experiences at school, significantly influencing their holistic growth and development ([Habibnejad Soufi, 2020](#)). It plays a critical role in improving students' academic performance and engagement in educational activities ([Bolagh, 2021](#)). It is important to note that academic engagement is not limited to tasks fostering higher-order cognitive skills such as problem-solving, synthesis, and evaluation; even tasks that develop lower-order cognitive skills like knowledge and comprehension can engage students ([Heidariani et al., 2022](#)).

Considering the findings of this study and previous research, it can be concluded that the school's ethical climate is a key determinant of students' interaction and engagement with the school. Therefore, enhancing the ethical climate can significantly improve the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement of students, contributing to a more positive educational environment.

The findings of the second research question revealed that the school's ethical climate has a significant and direct positive effect on students' positive achievement emotions. Additionally, the school's ethical climate has a significant and direct negative effect on students' negative achievement emotions. These results align with the findings of [Ahmadi et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Parsaei et al. \(2018\)](#). [Ahmadi et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that the ethical climate has a direct and positive relationship with the sense of belonging to the school.

Furthermore, the components of the ethical climate indirectly and positively influence academic achievement through a sense of belonging to the school. [Parsaei et al. \(2018\)](#) found that the school climate,

academic values, and meta-emotions have a direct impact on motivation. They also showed that the school climate and academic values indirectly affect motivation through meta-emotions.

A supportive and encouraging school climate, along with positive academic values and an appropriate meta-emotional perspective that encompasses acceptance of both positive and negative emotions, can enhance students' achievement motivation. The school's ethical climate is an influential factor in shaping individuals' experiences within the school environment. It can be argued that the ethical climate reflects members' perceptions of the positive and negative impacts of the school environment on them. Students with a favorable perception of the school's ethical climate face academic tasks with greater confidence, adapt to school challenges, and, over time, show increased enthusiasm and interest, paving the way for academic improvement and success ([Shirzadi & Sheikh-Islami, 2021](#)).

On the other hand, achievement emotions are emotions tied to progress, directly linked to academic activities and outcomes, playing a crucial role in shaping individual behavior ([Fallahi, 2022](#)). These activities and outcomes may involve both positive and negative dimensions; for instance, the joy of learning represents a positive form of these emotions, while fatigue from classroom instruction is a negative form. Students use achievement emotions to confront and respond to school events and challenges ([Jafat Thajil, 2021](#)).

In light of the findings of this study and related research, it can be concluded that the school's ethical climate is a critical factor in education and related domains. Developing appropriate tools to assess this variable and highlighting its vital role in various educational contexts is essential. Any improvement in the school's ethical climate can lead to a reduction in negative achievement emotions and an increase in positive achievement emotions among students.

The findings of the third research question revealed that positive achievement emotions have a significant and direct positive effect on students' academic engagement. Conversely, negative achievement emotions have a significant and direct negative effect on students' academic engagement. These results are consistent with the findings of [Vakili et al. \(2018\)](#), [Mohammadi Siyah Kamari and Amiri \(2017\)](#), [Tan et al. \(2021\)](#), [King and Datu \(2018\)](#), [Unal et al. \(2014\)](#), and [Glaser-Zikada et al \(2013\)](#).

[Vakili et al. \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that academic engagement mediates the relationship between academic emotions and achievement, where changes in academic emotions and engagement can predict progress. Negative deactivating emotions, such as boredom, are detrimental to motivation, leading to superficial information processing and a lack of academic engagement. Thus, given the significant role of positive emotions, educational environments should aim to cultivate positive emotions among students. [Mohammadi Siyah Kamari and Amiri \(2017\)](#) found that academic engagement and positive academic emotions can predict self-regulated learning among middle school students.

[Tan et al. \(2021\)](#) showed that students using active learning materials performed better in terms of achievement emotions and experienced higher cognitive load compared to those using neutral learning materials. [Unal et al. \(2014\)](#) found that academic emotions, as part of positive psychology interventions (e.g., gratitude practices and acts of kindness), significantly increased positive emotions and academic engagement while having no effect on reducing negative emotions.

Academic environments are filled with achievement emotions that typically focus on feelings related to outcomes and success, such as the joy of learning, hope, pride, anxiety, anger, shame, hopelessness, and fatigue. Achievement emotions may be outcome-oriented or activity-oriented, occurring in various educational contexts, such as classroom attendance, studying, and examinations ([Ahmadi et al., 2018](#)).

Over the past two decades, academic engagement has drawn the attention of researchers and education specialists, as many studies have shown that it predicts a wide range of developmental and educational outcomes. For example, academic engagement affects students' adaptation to school ([Vakili et al., 2018](#)). Students lacking academic engagement are reluctant to participate in class activities and group work, derive no joy from the classroom environment, and have low success rates in education and learning. Such students are at risk of academic decline and may discontinue their education. Students with low academic

engagement lack a sense of belonging to the educational environment, leading to frequent absences and school avoidance ([Afrouz et al., 2019](#)).

Based on the findings of this study and related research, it can be concluded that achievement emotions, due to their impact on motivation, learning, and success, influence students' states and emotions, cognitive processes (e.g., attention, memory, retrieval, social judgment, decision-making, problem-solving, and creative thinking), and ultimately enhance academic engagement.

The findings of the fourth research question revealed that the school's ethical climate indirectly and significantly affects academic engagement through positive achievement emotions in students. Additionally, the school's ethical climate indirectly and significantly impacts academic engagement through negative achievement emotions. These findings align with the research conducted by [Heidariani et al \(2022\)](#), [Shirzadi and Sheikh-Islami \(2021\)](#), [Emamgholivand et al \(2019\)](#), [Vakili et al \(2018\)](#), [Ahmadi et al \(2018\)](#), [Parsaei et al \(2018\)](#), [King and Datu \(2018\)](#), [Unal et al \(2014\)](#), and [Glaser-Zikada et al. \(2013\)](#).

[Heidariani et al \(2022\)](#) concluded that the school's ethical climate indirectly and significantly influences health-oriented academic lifestyle behaviors through academic engagement. [Vakili et al \(2018\)](#) demonstrated that academic engagement mediates the relationship between academic emotions and academic achievement. [Unal et al \(2014\)](#) found that academic emotions act as mediators in enhancing positive emotions and academic engagement.

[Ahmadi et al \(2018\)](#) showed that the school's ethical climate indirectly and positively relates to academic achievement through a sense of belonging to the school. Parsaei et al. (2018) concluded that the school climate and academic values indirectly influence motivation through meta-emotions.

In summary, these findings highlight the significant role of the school's ethical climate in fostering academic engagement, primarily mediated through the students' achievement emotions. This underscores the importance of cultivating a positive ethical climate in schools to enhance emotional and cognitive engagement among students.

In conclusion, based on the findings of this study and previous research, it can be explained that when the school's ethical climate prevails, the feelings and attitudes towards the school are reflected by the students. These sentiments can influence the level of academic engagement as well as students' emotions, attitudes, and behaviors, ultimately leading to achievement emotions, typically aimed at enhancing positive emotions and reducing negative ones.

The statistical population of this study included all female 11th and 12th-grade students in Zahedan during the 2023-2024 academic year. Therefore, generalizing the results to other populations should be done cautiously and under the condition of similar socio-cultural, age, and gender circumstances. Furthermore, due to the use of questionnaires, the study is subject to all the limitations associated with this method.

Based on the findings, it is recommended to organize workshops for teachers and school administrators to explain factors influencing achievement emotions and academic engagement while focusing on variables affecting engagement. Assisting students in defining proper orientations can familiarize them with appropriate ethical behaviors in schools. Teachers and educators should provide conditions that nurture achievement emotions among students by teaching ethical skills, thereby creating more opportunities for academic engagement and a more suitable learning environment.

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