



A Holistic Exploration of Intersecting Barriers and Supports Affecting Educational Resilience Among Cambodian High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the multifaceted challenges and supports influencing Cambodian high school students' educational experiences, focusing on the interconnected effects of family environment, emotional and psychological well-being, peer dynamics, school institutional factors, economic hardship, and personal coping strategies. By conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 38 university students who recently completed high school and two high school teachers, the research uncovers how domestic instability, trauma, peer pressure, inadequate school resources, and poverty collectively hinder academic engagement and emotional resilience. Despite these obstacles, many students demonstrate remarkable perseverance through self-motivation, goal-setting, and reliance on supportive social networks. The study further highlights the critical role of teacher professionalism, ethical collaboration, and systemic improvements in fostering safe, inclusive, and motivating learning environments. Drawing on grounded theory analysis, the findings propose a holistic model that explains how barriers and protective factors interact to shape student outcomes and offers actionable insights for educators, counselors, and policymakers to develop integrated interventions that promote long-term educational success in Cambodia's secondary school.

Keywords: Educational resilience, Student engagement, Academic persistence, Family environment, Emotional well-being, Institutional challenges, Peer relationships, Economic hardship

1. Introduction

Cambodia's education system has made significant strides in expanding access to secondary education; however, many high school students continue to face complex and overlapping challenges that hinder their academic success and emotional well-being. While prior research has explored specific issues such as risky behaviors, mental health concerns, and academic difficulties, these studies often examine such factors in isolation. In reality, students' learning experiences are shaped by a web of interconnected influences—including family dynamics, peer relationships, emotional health, institutional practices, and economic conditions. These intertwined factors remain insufficiently addressed in the current literature, especially in relation to how they collectively affect student engagement, resilience, and learning outcomes. This study responds to that gap by offering a holistic investigation into the barriers and supports that shape Cambodian students' educational journeys, while also emphasizing the critical role of personal and institutional responses in promoting student success.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite existing studies on Cambodian high school students' risk behaviors, mental health, and academic challenges, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how multiple factors converge to impact student learning and resilience. Previous research often focuses on individual issues—such as risky behaviors, mental health symptoms, or academic performance—in isolation. However, students' lived experiences reveal that family environment, emotional well-being, peer dynamics, institutional challenges, and economic hardship are deeply interconnected, collectively shaping students' educational engagement and outcomes. This complexity is not sufficiently addressed in current literature, leaving a critical gap in understanding the full scope of barriers and supports affecting student success.

Furthermore, many studies highlight risk factors or protective elements but do not fully explore how students themselves navigate these challenges through personal coping strategies and social support networks. The resilience demonstrated by many students, despite overwhelming obstacles, remains underexplored in relation to the broader systemic and environmental conditions they face. Understanding these interactions is vital for designing interventions that are responsive to students' realities rather than narrowly targeting isolated issues. Without this integrated perspective, efforts to improve student engagement and achievement risk falling short.

In addition to the student-centered factors, the role of educators and school institutions in mitigating or exacerbating these challenges is insufficiently examined. Findings indicate that teachers face heavy workloads, lack of training, weak leadership, and sometimes corruption, all of which undermine their capacity to support students effectively. While some educators demonstrate professionalism and collaborative spirit, systemic weaknesses hinder

consistent implementation of supportive practices. The gap between research and practice calls for more focused investigation into how teacher professionalism and cooperation can be strengthened to create safe, motivating, and inclusive learning environments.

Finally, economic and logistical barriers remain a persistent and overwhelming challenge for many students, yet current research provides limited insight into how these pressures interact with emotional and institutional factors to influence attendance, motivation, and academic performance. The burden of poverty, work responsibilities, and difficult commutes often forces students to choose between education and survival, affecting both access and engagement. A deeper exploration of these overlapping issues, combined with an emphasis on building stronger educational systems through ethical collaboration among teachers, is essential to developing holistic strategies that support sustainable improvements in Cambodian high school education.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to highlight the foundational role of the family and home environment in shaping student learning and development. Positive home environments—characterized by emotional support, structure, and prioritization of education—can enhance students' academic engagement and emotional resilience. In contrast, households marked by violence, neglect, and instability often hinder students' concentration, motivation, and school attendance. Understanding these dual influences is essential to designing holistic interventions that address both academic and emotional needs at their roots.

Equally important is the identification of emotional and psychological barriers that disrupt student learning. Many students face trauma, anxiety, and low self-esteem stemming from unstable home environments and community violence. These issues, when unaddressed, result in disengagement from learning and poor academic performance. This research seeks to underscore the urgency of creating emotionally supportive environments within schools and homes that foster student well-being, while also examining the critical role of peer relationships—both harmful and supportive—in influencing student outcomes.

The study also explores institutional and systemic challenges that limit student support in under-resourced educational settings. Teachers facing heavy workloads, lack of training, and weak leadership structures often struggle to meet students' complex needs. Moreover, curriculum gaps, bullying, and insufficient support from NGOs exacerbate the situation. By identifying these barriers, the study seeks to propose actionable strategies, including better teacher preparation, relevant curricula, and targeted assistance programs, to improve both teaching practices and student experiences.

Finally, the study examines the resilience demonstrated by students amid economic hardship, logistical challenges, and social pressures. It highlights how personal coping strategies—such as goal-setting, time management, and help-seeking behavior—enable students to persist academically. Additionally, the research emphasizes the importance of social support networks and professional collaboration among educators in creating safe, motivating, and empowering learning environments. Strengthening these systems can build a more equitable and effective education system that better supports all learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Risk Behaviors and Their Influences

Risky behaviors among Cambodian high school students are a growing concern. A study by Siyan Yi and colleagues (2010) examined risky sexual behavior among adolescents aged 14 to 20 and found that 12.7% had been sexually active in the past three months. Of those, 34.6% had multiple sexual partners, and 52.6% had not used condoms. Substance use, depression, peer delinquency, family violence, and community violence were the most significant risk factors. Protective factors such as family support, regular family meals, and school attachment helped lower these risks. Notably, male students were more influenced by peer delinquency, substance use, and higher family income, while female students were more affected by community violence and low family support. These findings point to the need for gender-sensitive prevention strategies.

Similarly, research by Yat Yen et al. (2018) found that underweight and overweight students were more prone to engage in substance use, exhibit violent behavior, and experience depression. Underweight students had the shortest sleep duration, while overweight students were more likely to experience loneliness and suicide attempts. This shows that physical health, particularly body weight, is closely linked to emotional and behavioral challenges. Promoting regular physical activity, a healthy diet, and mental well-being is essential in preventing these issues.

In another study, Yen et al. (2019) focused on junior high school students and reported that those who used alcohol (15.4%), drugs (3.05%), or were sexually active (12.45%)—mostly males aged 14–15 in grade 7—were at high risk of multiple unsafe behaviors, including bullying, fights, unintentional injuries, and suicide attempts. Drug use emerged as the strongest contributing factor. These findings highlight the urgency of developing national policies, school-level interventions, and awareness campaigns to address substance abuse and reproductive health, especially for younger students.

2.2 Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

Mental health among Cambodian adolescents is significantly affected by exposure to violence, poor lifestyle habits, and emotional challenges. Yi et al. (2013) found that 27.9% of boys and 21.5% of girls had experienced violence within their families, while 18.0% of boys and 5.8% of girls had been exposed to community violence. These experiences were strongly associated with symptoms of depression in both boys and girls, with community violence having a particularly strong effect on girls. The study highlights the need for targeted violence-prevention efforts that consider gender differences.

Em et al. (2025) explored how lifestyle behaviors such as diet and physical activity influence student mental health. Their study of 1,528 students found that better mental health was associated with regular physical activity, healthy eating habits, and having a more educated mother. The findings emphasized the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles and family support as part of school-based mental health initiatives.

Gnim Channarith and Be Borey (2022) studied 1,591 students across four provinces and found that students with higher self-esteem tended to report higher levels of life satisfaction. Interestingly, there were no significant differences between boys and girls in terms of self-esteem or life satisfaction. However, students in different grade levels reported varying levels of satisfaction, suggesting that academic stage may influence emotional well-being. The study reinforces the value of fostering positive self-image and resilience among students.

2.3 Academic Development and the Role of Teacher Support

Improving academic outcomes is a crucial aspect of supporting high school students in Cambodia. Bunhe Harth and colleagues (2023) developed and validated a learning assessment tool designed to measure two key domains: "Learning to Know" and "Learning to Do." This tool included both process and outcome indicators and was administered to 1,619 students across various schools. The results confirmed the tool's reliability and ability to classify students into four learning levels: low, medium, relatively high, and high. By using this framework, educators can more effectively monitor individual learning progress and design targeted interventions that meet students' specific academic needs.

In addition to assessment tools, teacher involvement plays a vital role in student development. According to Sovanna Huot and colleagues (2004), teachers who foster strong, supportive relationships with students create a safe learning environment that enhances student confidence, reduces stress, and encourages active engagement in learning. Beyond academics, teachers help students build essential life skills such as communication, goal-setting, and self-awareness. These contributions are especially important during the high school years, a period of significant personal and academic transition. Together, effective assessment methods and committed teacher support form a foundation for improving student learning and overall development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to understand the lived experiences of high school students, focusing on the academic, social, and emotional challenges they encountered. By capturing students' perspectives, emotions, and social contexts, the research aimed to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of these challenges.

The primary objective was to identify the supports and strategies that enabled students to persist and succeed despite various barriers. Through this process, a grounded theory was developed to explain how students navigated and overcame obstacles to achieve educational success.

The resulting theory offers valuable insights for educators, counselors, and policymakers by revealing the dynamics of student resilience and motivation. These findings are intended to inform the development of targeted support programs, school policies, and community interventions aimed at reducing barriers and strengthening factors that promote long-term student success.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The study population comprised university students who had recently completed high school. This group was considered appropriate because their recent experiences allowed for meaningful reflection on the challenges faced and the supports that facilitated their academic persistence.

To enrich the data and provide additional perspectives, two male high school teachers were also included as participants. In total, 38 university students participated in the study, 16 of whom were male. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experience with high school challenges and could contribute meaningfully to the research objectives.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The two high school teachers participated in face-to-face interviews and were asked: "What do you think are the challenges high school students face?" and "What do you think are the solutions?" These interviews captured professional insights into student difficulties and potential interventions.

Additionally, 22 first-year university students were interviewed individually. They were asked: "What were your challenges in high school?" and "What helped you overcome those challenges and reach university?" These questions prompted personal reflections on past experiences and sources of support.

Four focus group discussions were also conducted with third-year university students, each group consisting of four participants. They were asked: "What do you think are the social challenges high school students face?" and "What do you think can help those students deal with those challenges?" All interviews and focus group sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accuracy during analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

The recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed using the Turboscribe transcription tool. Once transcription was complete, data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology.

The analysis began with open coding, in which transcripts were examined line by line to identify key concepts and recurring ideas. These initial codes closely reflected participants' language and meanings. In the axial coding phase, related codes were grouped into broader themes by identifying connections and patterns across the data.

Finally, selective coding was applied to integrate and refine these themes into core categories that represented central processes within the data. From these categories, a grounded theory was constructed to explain how students experienced and overcame high school challenges on their path to higher education.

4. Presentation of the results

4.1 The Foundational Role of Family and Home Environment in Student Learning

The family and home environment serve as foundational influences in a student's educational journey, shaping not only their access to learning but also their emotional and psychological readiness to engage with school. According to Teacher 1, domestic violence creates a hostile and fearful atmosphere that interferes with a student's ability to concentrate and feel safe: *"When a child witnesses violence at home, they come to school afraid. They can't focus because they're thinking about what's happening back at home"* (Teacher 1). Parental neglect or a lack of emotional support also diminishes motivation, leaving students feeling isolated in their academic efforts. As noted, *"Some parents don't even ask their kids how school was. When there's no support or encouragement from home, students start to give up"* (Teacher 1). In some cases, parents prioritize household labor over education, preventing children from attending school consistently or focusing during class: *"There are families who keep their children at home to work or sell instead of sending them to school. Education isn't a priority for them"* (Teacher 1). Emotional distress from family instability further adds to the burden students carry: *"Instability at home creates anxiety and emotional stress. Students carry that with them into the classroom"* (Teacher 1). Moreover, fear stemming from unsafe home environments continues to affect learners beyond school hours: *"Some kids are afraid to go home, and that fear doesn't just disappear during the day. It affects their mood and learning"* (Teacher 1). These challenges highlight the central role of the family and home setting in either supporting or impeding a child's educational success.

Poverty emerged as a recurring theme, affecting students' access to basic educational materials and resources. Teachers noted that many families struggle to afford school supplies, uniforms, or even shoes, which can result in absenteeism or feelings of shame among students. As Teacher 2 explained, *"Some students don't come to school because they don't have a uniform or even slippers. They're embarrassed, so they stay home."* Financial hardship also limits access to transportation and medical needs, directly impacting students' attendance and well-being. *"Even getting to school is hard. If the family has no money for fare, the child doesn't attend. Some also lack basic medicine when they're sick,"* Teacher 2 added. These material shortages are compounded by the emotional toll of family instability. While one student in FGD3 shared, *"When there are problems at home, I can't focus in school. My mind keeps going back to those problems."* These insights reveal how poverty and family dysfunction combine to hinder student learning both materially and emotionally.

Despite these hardships, the family can also act as a source of support and resilience. Focus group discussions highlighted that some parents provide consistent emotional and financial support, establishing routines, offering encouragement, and serving as moral role models. One participant shared, *"My parents always remind me to study and support me with what I need for school"* (FGD1). Others emphasized the importance of structure at home, saying, *"Our parents set rules and make sure we sleep early so we can focus in class"* (FGD2). The emotional stability provided by supportive families was also noted: *"Even when things are hard, my family helps me stay strong and not give up"* (FGD3). In terms of values, one student reflected, *"I want to be like my parents because they work hard and don't give up easily"* (FGD2). When families prioritize education and communicate clear expectations, students benefit from a more stable and motivating environment. This dual role of the family—as both a potential barrier and a key support system—underscores its central influence on student learning outcomes.

4.2 Emotional and Psychological Barriers Affecting Student Learning

Emotional and psychological barriers significantly undermine students' ability to learn and succeed academically. According to Teacher 1, *"students endure emotional trauma from witnessing violence which deeply affects their mental well-being."* This trauma is often normalized by students themselves because *"many students normalize harmful experiences due to lack of understanding of healthy emotional responses,"* leading them to internalize these harmful experiences rather than seek help. Additionally, *"rising adult suicide rates in the community have an indirect but profound impact on students' emotional health,"* increasing feelings of fear and anxiety related to domestic instability. Teacher 1 further notes that *"student fear and anxiety stem from unstable and unsafe domestic environments,"* which can create persistent emotional distress and disrupt concentration in school.

Focus group discussions reinforce these concerns, highlighting that mental health struggles and emotional instability are common among students (FGD3). Many participants noted that *"reduced motivation due to social and emotional stress"* makes it difficult for them to engage fully in learning activities (FGD1, FGD3, FGD4). This stress frequently manifests as *"loss of focus and concentration in class"*, which directly impedes academic performance

(FGD1, FGD3). Furthermore, *“bullying as a learning barrier”* and *“loss of confidence due to bullying or social comparison”* were cited as significant obstacles that erode students’ self-esteem and make them less willing to participate or strive in school environments (FGD1, FGD4). Lastly, the *“less interest in learning due to lack of emotional support”* both at home and at school contributes to a growing sense of disconnection, leaving students feeling unsupported in their educational journey (FGD1, FGD4).

4.3 Peer Dynamics and Their Impact on Learning

Peer pressure and behavioral influence significantly affect students’ academic engagement, often normalizing harmful behaviors that disrupt learning. Teacher 1 directly stated, *“Peer pressure contributes to academic decline,”* and further emphasized that *“Drug abuse among students affects discipline and performance,”* pointing to how peer dynamics can undermine classroom focus and discipline. Students echoed these concerns in focus group discussions, with one noting, *“Negative peer group influence—like skipping class, drugs, and gangs—makes it hard to stay focused on school”* (FGD1, FGD2, FGD4). This student perspective illustrates how peer-driven behavior can lead to disengagement from school responsibilities. Beyond peer interactions, the broader environment also plays a role in reinforcing these patterns. As highlighted in FGD2, students acknowledged that *“Exposure to violence and drug use in the community”* compounds the effects of peer pressure, creating additional barriers to concentration and academic success.

In addition to behavioral pressures, students are also heavily influenced by social trends related to fashion, technology, and lifestyle expectations. Teacher 1 noted that these trends *“often clash with school rules and contribute to disciplinary issues”*. Students shared how constant exposure to curated images on social media fosters social comparison, dissatisfaction, and a sense of inadequacy. One participant remarked, *“Social comparison on social media causes dissatisfaction”* (FGD4), highlighting how digital platforms amplify the pressure to conform. This emotional strain diverts attention from academic goals and reinforces feelings of exclusion. Cyberbullying and in-person bullying were also frequently mentioned, with students reporting that being targeted for their appearance or possessions reduced their classroom participation and self-esteem. As students put it, *“Reduced motivation due to social and emotional stress”* (FGD1, FGD3, FGD4) illustrates how these experiences contribute to disengagement and diminished academic performance.

Despite these challenges, many students also recognized the positive aspects of peer relationships, particularly the emotional and motivational support provided by friends. These relationships often serve as buffers against academic stress, offering encouragement during exams or difficult periods. As one participant shared, *“Friends are the ones who really understand you and encourage you when you feel down”* (FGD1). Beyond emotional support, peers also collaborate academically by studying together, sharing advice, and helping each other make better decisions. For instance, one student said, *“If someone is about to do something wrong, a friend can give advice and stop them”* (FGD1). These constructive peer dynamics act as protective factors, fostering resilience and sustaining academic engagement in the face of social pressures and adversity.

4.4 Institutional and School-Related Challenges to Student Support

A variety of institutional and school-related factors significantly impact the level of support students receive in their educational journey. One key issue is the lack of trained or well-supported teachers, which undermines the quality of instruction and student engagement: *“Some teachers are just thrown into the job without proper training or ongoing development”* (Teacher 1). Even when teachers are present, many are overwhelmed with responsibilities, often juggling multiple roles without adequate support or resources: *“Teachers are doing too much—teaching, disciplining, managing everything with little help. It’s exhausting”* (Teacher 1). These challenges are compounded by weak or ineffective school leadership: *“When school leaders aren’t strong, everything suffers. Teachers don’t grow, and students fall behind”* (Teacher 1). In some cases, institutional corruption further impedes student support: *“Resources meant for students often disappear or are not used properly because of corruption”* (Teacher 1).

Another pressing concern is the limited involvement of NGOs and community organizations: *“NGOs could do more to help, but their support is either missing or not coordinated well with schools”* (Teacher 1). In areas where families and schools lack resources, this absence is felt more deeply. Despite systemic constraints, some teachers go beyond their academic duties to act as guides, mentors, and protectors: *“Some teachers really care. They check on students, talk to them, and give advice—not just teach”* (FGD1, FGD3, FGD4). These teachers help create safe and respectful learning environments: *“Our teacher made the classroom feel like a second home where we could be ourselves”* (FGD4). They also recognize student struggles and intervene: *“When our teacher saw one of us struggling, she called them aside and gave extra support”* (FGD1).

However, not all students experience such positive environments. Some feel unsafe or uncomfortable at school: *“I don’t feel safe at school. There’s bullying, and no one does anything”* (FGD1). This discomfort is often rooted in neglect or institutional apathy. In addition, *“gaps in learning from primary school still affect how we perform now”* (FGD3), showing a lack of continuity in curriculum and remediation. To support students meaningfully, schools must adjust their curriculum: *“The subjects need to connect to our lives—we don’t see the point of memorizing things we’ll never use”* (FGD3).

Lastly, participants emphasized the critical role of government action. *“Drugs and gangs are taking over our neighborhoods. The government must act”* (FGD2). *“We’re stuck in poverty, and nothing changes unless leaders fix inequality”* (FGD2). *“Corruption blocks everything—schools, jobs, fairness”* (FGD2). Targeted programs also hold promise: *“There should be support for poor students, like free school materials or better teaching”* (FGD3). Such measures, if effectively implemented, can significantly improve the educational landscape for disadvantaged students.

4.5 Student Personal Factors and Coping Strategies for resilience

Despite systemic and structural challenges, many students demonstrate remarkable resilience through personal coping strategies and intrinsic motivation. One of the most significant factors is students’ ability to engage in self-reflection, goal-setting, and self-awareness, which enables them to take ownership

of their educational journey. As noted in focus groups, *“students helping themselves through self-awareness and goal-setting”* (FGD3, FGD4) illustrates how internal initiative plays a role in academic perseverance. This proactive mindset is often reinforced by both self-motivation and encouragement from external sources. One student explained, *“I try to motivate myself, but also when my teachers or parents encourage me, it helps”* (S18). Another student shared that their determination stems from *“internal motivation and family support”* (S3), showing how familial backing contributes to resilience. Peer encouragement also plays a critical role: *“My friends motivate me to keep going”* (S4), and inspirational content, such as *“motivational quotes,”* further reinforces a positive mindset (S4). In addition, *“parental expectations as motivation”* (S4) and a *“motivation to pass the exam”* (S5) highlight how family hopes and academic goals align to drive student persistence.

Many students cope with academic pressure through persistent effort and determination, maintaining consistent study routines and refusing to give up despite difficulties. As one student shared, *“I keep practicing and trying even when it’s hard”* (S7), while another reported using *“extra lessons”* to push through challenges (S8). A third added, *“Even though I have obstacles, I’m determined to succeed”* (S10). This steady mindset helps students cultivate personal discipline and long-term success. Yet the journey is not without challenges. Stress and time management issues were common: one student noted *“stress and time management issues”* from juggling school and home responsibilities (S3), while another said, *“I often feel stressed from studying”* (S12). In response, students employ creative strategies to manage their time. *“I study at night,”* one explained, and *“wake up early to revise”* (S1), making use of quiet hours. Others rely on stricter structures: *“I created a strict personal time management schedule”* to balance schoolwork and rest (S12), demonstrating how resilience also involves adapting practical habits.

Beyond time management, students also undergo behavioral transformations and adopt more effective study routines to improve their learning outcomes. Some students reflected on past disengagement and the improvements they’ve made, such as, *“I used to sleep in class, but I changed my behavior and now I study harder”* (S17), or *“My behavior changed, and now I’m more serious about exams”* (S21). Helping others also fosters self-motivation. As one student put it, *“Helping my friends understand the lesson makes me want to try harder myself”* (S18). These interpersonal actions build a network of encouragement. Family and peers offer vital emotional and motivational support, as captured by the statement: *“My family and friends encourage me a lot”* (S2). For some, emotional motivation stems from a sense of duty: *“I want to make my parents proud”* (S16). Social bonds further support student well-being, as one explained: *“Playing sports and studying with my friends makes me feel happier and more motivated”* (S16).

These personal strategies and sources of support illustrate the resilience students develop in the face of adversity. Drawing strength from both internal willpower and relational support systems, they adapt, persist, and even thrive. As these examples show, resilience is not only about enduring challenges—it’s about transforming them through determination, relationships, and meaningful goals.

4.6 Social Support Networks for Sustained Engagement

The presence of strong social support networks plays a pivotal role in sustaining student engagement and motivation. One of the most consistent sources of this support comes from peer relationships. Many students emphasized that studying with friends and sharing meals created a sense of belonging and reduced academic stress. As Student 1 shared, *“I often study with my friends. We also eat together. It makes learning less stressful.”* Friendships were repeatedly described as emotional anchors that helped students feel less alone. Student 4 explained, *“We talk every day and eat together—my friends help me not feel alone,”* while another reflected, *“My best friend is like my second family. She supports me emotionally”* (S22). For many students, meaningful peer connections were a daily source of motivation. As one student put it, *“If I didn’t have friends, I wouldn’t come to school every day”* (S2).

In addition to peer relationships, teacher support emerged as another key pillar of student well-being. Many students described teachers who not only provided academic assistance but also emotional encouragement during difficult periods. Student 15 recalled, *“My teacher is very kind. She explains things to me when I don’t understand and encourages me.”* Another added, *“My teacher helped me a lot when I was confused with the lessons. I felt like she really cared”* (S9). Beyond teaching, teachers were often seen as mentors and protectors. As shared in one focus group, *“Teachers guide and protect us. They’re like second parents”* (FGD1). These positive teacher-student relationships fostered a classroom atmosphere of trust, motivation, and emotional safety. Student 20 captured this feeling simply: *“I like my teachers. They make the class feel like a safe place.”*

Daily interactions with classmates also contributed to students’ happiness and motivation. Students found joy in shared experiences, from helping each other with homework to making one another laugh. *“I’m happy when I’m with my classmates. They make me laugh and help with homework,”* said Student 5. Shared study sessions and even small moments like eating snacks together were described as building a sense of community. Student 14 noted, *“We always study together. It makes it easier to understand the lessons,”* while others (S6, S14) emphasized how these moments helped reduce stress, especially during exams. School events and trips also played a role in strengthening social bonds. One student shared, *“I really enjoyed our school trip. It helped me bond with classmates”* (S3), illustrating how extracurricular activities increased emotional investment in school life.

Supportive academic spaces, such as the school library, were also important in maintaining motivation and focus. Student 11 stated, *“The library is my favorite place. It’s quiet and helps me concentrate.”* For many students, the library served not just as a study space but as a sanctuary where they could self-regulate and find calm—an often-overlooked yet vital component of the school support system.

Beyond school walls, family support—both emotional and financial—formed the foundation of resilience for many students. *“My parents support me emotionally and financially. Without them, I couldn’t continue school,”* shared a participant in FGD3. Others highlighted the role of parental guidance in staying focused. One student noted, *“Even though we are not rich, my mom always encourages me and sets rules so I stay focused”* (FGD2). This structure and encouragement from home provided a sense of stability. Friends, too, often filled similar emotional roles. As one student said, *“My friends*

help me when I'm down. They remind me why I'm working hard" (FGD4), showing how emotional support outside formal structures helped buffer against stress.

Altogether, these layered networks of support—from peers, teachers, classmates, family members, and school resources—form a protective framework that enhances student engagement. Their combined impact creates a holistic educational environment where students feel seen, supported, and empowered to persevere. As one student powerfully summarized in a focus group: *"Without my friends and family, I would have dropped out. They're the reason I keep going"* (FGD1).

4.7 Economic Hardship and Logistical Barriers to Education

Economic hardship remains a major barrier to students' access to education. Across several focus groups (FGD2, FGD3, FGD4), students shared that financial stress—particularly the inability to afford school supplies or pay required fees—disrupted their academic participation. One group stated plainly, *"Some students don't come to school because they don't have money for notebooks or uniforms"* (FGD2), while another emphasized that *"Without money for school fees, we miss classes or just stop going"* (FGD3). These financial constraints often led to feelings of embarrassment or exclusion. As one student described, *"It's hard to focus when you feel ashamed that you have nothing"* (FGD4). This sense of being left out made it difficult to engage fully in school activities. Over time, the ongoing stress and lack of resources led to a noticeable decline in motivation and academic performance, as students felt ill-equipped to succeed. *"Because of money problems, some students stop caring about school—they feel like they can't catch up"* (FGD3).

In many cases, financial need went beyond school supplies, pushing students into the workforce. Participants in FGD1 highlighted how some students had to work to support their families, either after school or in place of attending school altogether. One student shared, *"I had to stop school to help my family. We needed money, so I looked for work"* (FGD1). This struggle to balance economic responsibilities with education placed students under significant pressure. Another added, *"It's hard to study when you come home tired from work. Sometimes I skip school because of it"* (FGD1). For some, dropping out became the only option when family survival depended on their income: *"If no one works, we don't eat. So I had to choose work over school"* (FGD1). The need to earn a living at a young age left little time or energy for academic pursuits and often led to early disengagement from the school system.

Geographic and logistical challenges further compounded these economic difficulties. Students living in rural areas reported that transportation access was unreliable or altogether unavailable. As one student from FGD4 noted, *"Some students don't come to school because there's no vehicle, and the distance is too far"* (FGD4). Similarly, a participant in FGD2 explained, *"We don't have buses in the village, so we have to walk. It's hard during rainy season"* (FGD2). Those who did attend often had to walk long distances. Student 1 shared, *"My home is far from the school, so I have to wake up early and walk a long way every day"* (S1). Student 19 echoed this, saying, *"I always feel tired because the walk to school is long. It makes me sleepy in class"* (S19). The daily commute was exhausting and time-consuming, sometimes resulting in tardiness or absences. Additionally, Student 9 spoke of the disruption caused by relocating from the countryside to the city: *"When I moved from the countryside to the city, everything felt new and hard to adjust to. The lessons, the people—it was all different"* (S9). These logistical barriers added to students' physical and emotional burdens, impacting both attendance and engagement.

Ultimately, the combination of financial hardship and logistical barriers created conditions that were difficult for many students to overcome. Some dropped out of school entirely to support their families. As one participant from FGD1 shared, *"Some of my friends left school because they needed to work. Their family depended on them for food and money"* (FGD1). Others continued to attend under stressful and discouraging circumstances. One student explained, *"Even if I wanted to study, I couldn't focus because I was worried about how we would pay for things at home"* (FGD1). These stories reveal how deeply economic and logistical challenges shape students' educational experiences—not just in terms of access, but also in their ability to thrive once they are in school. A participant summarized this burden by saying, *"It's not that we don't want to learn, it's that life outside school is already too heavy"* (FGD1).

4.8 Building Stronger Educational Systems Through Professionalism and Collaboration

Improving education requires more than individual effort; it calls for collective professionalism and ethical collaboration among educators. According to one teacher, meaningful change happens when *"educators collaborate and act with integrity"* (Teacher 1). This includes honest communication, sharing strategies, and supporting one another to address students' diverse and complex needs. Collaboration is especially important in under-resourced environments, where pooling expertise and coordinating support can make a tangible difference in students' lives. In many contexts, *"teachers [are] overwhelmed with responsibilities"* (Teacher 1), which makes cooperation not only beneficial but essential to prevent burnout and ensure no student is overlooked. Moreover, the presence of *"weak or ineffective school leadership"* and *"institutional corruption [that] blocks student support systems"* (Teacher 1) further underlines the need for strong, unified action among committed educators to uphold integrity and student-centered values.

Professionalism in teaching is also critical to student success. As Teacher 1 emphasized, *"Professionalism among teachers is critical to supporting students."* This professionalism is reflected in consistent attendance, respectful interactions, accountability, and a genuine commitment to students' well-being and learning outcomes. Students often look to teachers as steady figures amidst instability—many experience *"domestic violence," "emotional trauma,"* or *"family poverty [that] limits access to education"* (Teacher 1, Teacher 2). In such environments, students benefit from teachers who *"create safe, respectful learning environments"* (FGD4) and act as *"guides, mentors, and protectors"* (FGD1, FGD3, FGD4). When teachers model integrity and

discipline, they not only earn students' trust but also help restore their motivation and confidence. Together, professional conduct and cooperative action form a foundation for systemic improvements that benefit both learners and educators.

5. Implication

5.1 *Theory of Multifaceted Influences on Student Educational Success*

Student educational success is determined by a complex and dynamic interplay of barriers and supports across multiple domains—including family and home environment, emotional and psychological wellbeing, peer and social relationships, institutional factors, personal resilience, economic conditions, and professional educational practices. These domains interact continuously, influencing students' motivation, access, engagement, and achievement.

5.1.1 *From Survival to Success: The Impact of Family Context on Learning*

The family serves as the foundational context for shaping students' educational engagement. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the family exists within the child's immediate microsystem and has a profound influence on their development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A nurturing home environment fosters emotional stability, motivation, and support for learning, while adverse conditions such as domestic violence, neglect, and child labor can severely disrupt a student's ability to focus and persist in school. As Bronfenbrenner emphasized, "Development is a joint function of the person and of the environment," underscoring the critical role of the family in educational outcomes. Similarly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs posits that a child's basic needs—such as safety, food, and emotional security—must be met before they can reach higher-order goals like learning and achievement (Maslow, 1943). Students living in poverty or experiencing family dysfunction often remain preoccupied with survival, leaving little capacity for academic focus.

Emotional bonds within the home further influence a student's social and academic development. Attachment Theory highlights how early relationships with caregivers form the basis for emotional regulation, trust, and resilience (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1989). Children raised in stable, loving environments tend to exhibit stronger concentration and emotional control, whereas those exposed to instability or neglect may struggle with classroom behavior, motivation, and interpersonal relationships. Family Systems Theory further explains that the family functions as an interconnected unit, where stress or disruption in one area (e.g., financial hardship or conflict) can impact all members. In such cases, students may assume adult responsibilities, like working to support the household, or suffer emotional overload, both of which interfere with school participation and performance (Bowen, 1978).

Beyond emotional and psychological dimensions, families also transmit cultural and social resources that shape educational access and outcomes. Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory argues that families pass on knowledge, language, and behaviors that are valued by the school system (Bourdieu, 1986). Supportive families can prepare children with the tools for academic success, whereas economically disadvantaged households may lack the time, exposure, or resources to do so—further entrenching educational inequality. Despite these challenges, Resilience Theory offers a hopeful view: students can thrive when at least one supportive adult consistently provides emotional and instrumental support (Masten, 2001). This protective factor, often rooted in the family, strengthens students' capacity to cope with adversity and persist in their educational journey.

5.1.2 *Emotional and Psychological Wellbeing as Mediators*

Students' emotional and psychological wellbeing play a critical mediating role in their educational success. Mental health challenges such as trauma, anxiety, and stress—often rooted in family or social environments—undermine key aspects of learning by impairing concentration, motivation, and self-confidence. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) illustrates that unless students' basic psychological needs—such as safety, belonging, and esteem—are met, they cannot fully engage in higher-order cognitive tasks like learning. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) highlights how disruptions in a child's immediate environment, especially within the home or school, can negatively impact emotional stability and, consequently, educational outcomes. Emotional distress, therefore, functions as a barrier to learning and must be addressed through targeted support strategies.

The significance of emotional wellbeing is further supported by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which asserts that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for intrinsic motivation and personal growth. When students face emotional challenges, these needs are compromised, reducing engagement and academic performance. Toxic Stress Theory (Shonkoff et al., 2012) adds that chronic exposure to adversity can alter brain development and hinder emotional regulation, both of which are vital for learning. In response to these realities, the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework (CASEL, 2020) promotes the development of emotional resilience and self-management skills in students. SEL-based interventions enhance students' capacity to cope with emotional difficulties and foster a school climate that supports academic achievement. Together, these theories underscore the need to integrate emotional and mental health support into educational systems to promote student success.

5.1.3 *Dual Role of Peer and Social Influences*

Peers play a dual role in students' academic and emotional development, acting as both risk and protective factors. Negative peer pressure, bullying, and social distractions can lead to disengagement, low academic performance, and emotional distress. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) supports this by asserting that students model behaviors observed in their peers—whether those behaviors are constructive, like studying and persistence, or destructive, like skipping class or cheating. Likewise, Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979) explains how peer group norms shape individual behavior; students often conform to group expectations to gain acceptance, even when those norms conflict with academic success. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

Systems Theory (1979) further reinforces this perspective by highlighting how peer relationships within the microsystem significantly influence individual development, serving either as sources of support or stress.

On the other hand, positive peer interactions foster resilience and academic growth. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, particularly how collaborative peer engagement within the Zone of Proximal Development enhances cognitive development and problem-solving abilities. Positive friendships and peer support systems can boost motivation, self-esteem, and academic achievement by creating environments where students feel understood and encouraged. Masten's Resilience Theory (2001) identifies these supportive peer relationships as protective factors that help buffer against adversity and promote consistent academic engagement. These theories collectively illustrate that while negative peer dynamics can hinder learning, positive peer influence is a powerful asset that contributes to both emotional wellbeing and academic success.

5.1.4 Institutional Environment and School Support Systems

The institutional environment and support systems within schools play a critical role in shaping the educational experiences of students, particularly those who are vulnerable. The quality of school leadership, teacher preparation, and the degree of community engagement are essential components of a safe and nurturing learning environment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a useful framework to understand this complexity. School leadership and teacher practices belong to the microsystem where students have direct contact, while community involvement operates within the mesosystem. Larger systemic issues, such as corruption and weak educational policies, fall under the exosystem and macrosystem. These layers interact to influence student outcomes, demonstrating that institutional shortcomings can disrupt a child's developmental context.

From a systems perspective, schools are not isolated entities but part of a broader educational ecosystem. Systems Theory, as applied by scholars like Fullan and Senge, emphasizes the interdependence of school components with external institutions such as government bodies and communities. When leadership is weak or feedback mechanisms are broken due to corruption or resource constraints, the school system's functionality deteriorates. New Institutionalism further deepens this understanding by focusing on how institutional rules, norms, and structures shape school behavior. According to Scott (2004), inefficiencies and misaligned institutional norms can hinder policy implementation, training quality, and the equitable distribution of resources, ultimately undermining support for students who need it most.

Additional theoretical perspectives reinforce this concern. School Effectiveness and School Improvement Theory (Teddle & Reynolds, 2000) identifies leadership, teacher capacity, and community partnerships as key to student success—factors that are often compromised by institutional failings. Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) highlights the importance of trust and cooperation in school-community relations, both of which are undermined by systemic corruption. Critical pedagogy, as articulated by Freire (1970) and Apple (2004), critiques how schools can reflect and reproduce broader social inequalities. Without institutional reform and conscious leadership, education may continue to marginalize the very students it aims to uplift. Together, these theories underline the need for cohesive, transparent, and well-resourced systems to create inclusive and effective learning environments.

5.1.5 Student Agency and Coping Strategies Foster Resilience

Even when students face serious challenges, many are able to stay strong by staying motivated, setting goals, managing their time well, and asking others for help. These actions show their ability to take charge of their own learning and life. According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), students are more motivated and resilient when they feel in control, capable, and connected to others. These feelings help them keep going even when things get tough.

Resilience Theory also explains that students can adapt and bounce back from difficulties, especially when they have support from caring people and safe environments (Masten, 2001). Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) adds that students learn to believe in themselves (self-efficacy), which helps them set goals and keep working toward them. Finally, Learner Agency Theory says that when students feel they have the power to make choices and take action in their learning, they are more likely to stay engaged and handle problems well (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Together, these theories show that resilience depends not only on what students do themselves, but also on the support they receive from the people and systems around them.

5.1.6 Critical Importance of Social Support Networks

Students are more likely to stay engaged in school when they have strong support from family, friends, and teachers. These support networks provide emotional comfort, help with schoolwork, and encouragement to keep going, especially during difficult times. According to Social Capital Theory, the relationships and trust built within families, schools, and communities help students succeed by giving them access to guidance, shared values, and practical help (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986).

In addition, Ecological Systems Theory explains that students are shaped by the different environments they are part of—like their home, school, and peer groups—which all affect how they grow and learn (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Attachment Theory also shows that when children have strong, secure relationships with caring adults, they feel more emotionally stable and confident, which helps them do better in school (Bowlby, 1988). Together, these theories show that social support is not just helpful—it is essential. It helps students feel that they belong, believe in themselves, and stay committed to their education.

Ensuring student success in today's complex educational landscape requires more than isolated efforts or one-size-fits-all solutions. Students face a wide range of challenges that extend beyond the classroom, including emotional strain, economic hardship, family instability, and institutional shortcomings. These factors often intersect, compounding the barriers to learning and academic achievement. To respond effectively, interventions must be

comprehensive and coordinated, addressing mental health, socioeconomic conditions, school culture, and teacher capacity. A holistic approach that integrates support across home, school, and policy levels is essential for fostering meaningful and sustained academic success.

- **Holistic Approaches to Student Success:** Improving student success requires a holistic approach that simultaneously addresses multiple dimensions of a learner's environment. Challenges such as family instability, emotional distress, peer pressure, and inadequate institutional support often intersect, creating a complex web of barriers that no single intervention can fully resolve. Therefore, effective interventions must consider the whole student by integrating efforts across home, school, and community contexts. A comprehensive strategy ensures that support systems reinforce one another, creating a stable foundation for long-term academic growth.
- **Mental Health and Peer Support in Schools:** One critical area for intervention is student mental health. Schools should prioritize the development of mental health programs that offer counseling, emotional literacy education, and crisis response services. In addition, peer support initiatives can play a transformative role by fostering a sense of belonging and shared understanding among students. These programs help reduce the stigma around mental health, empower students to support one another, and create safer, more connected school environments that mitigate psychological barriers to learning.
- **Addressing Economic Barriers Through Policy:** Economic hardship remains a major obstacle to student success, and policies aimed at poverty reduction are essential for leveling the playing field. Access to basic needs—such as food, transportation, technology, and learning materials—can significantly affect students' ability to focus and perform in school. National and local education policies must prioritize funding for low-income communities and remove systemic obstacles that limit students' opportunities to thrive. Without such foundational support, even the best school-based programs will have limited impact.
- **Enhancing Teacher Capacity and School Culture:** Teachers play a central role in shaping student outcomes, and their ongoing development is crucial to effective intervention. Professional training should go beyond subject knowledge to include mentorship skills, emotional intelligence, and collaborative practices. A culture of professionalism and teamwork among educators enhances the overall school climate, making it more responsive to student needs. When teachers are equipped to guide, support, and inspire, they become key agents in helping students navigate challenges and achieve lasting academic success.

Proposed Survey Questionnaire for Future Quantitative Study

Student Survey Questionnaire

Purpose: To understand the barriers and supports that affect your learning and school success.

Instructions: Please answer the questions honestly. Your answers will be kept private. Circle or tick the answer that best represents your experience.

Section A: Background Information

1. Age: _____
2. Grade Level: _____
3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say
4. Do you live with your parents or guardians? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. How far is your home from school? _____ minutes/hours

Section B: Family and Home Environment

6. My family supports my education.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
7. I have a quiet and safe place to study at home.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
8. My parents or guardians help me with school needs (fees, supplies, encouragement).
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
9. In the past year, I missed school because of family problems.
☐ Never ☐ Once or twice ☐ Often ☐ Very Often

Section C: Emotional and Psychological Well-being

10. I often feel anxious, sad, or stressed.
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
11. I find it hard to concentrate because of emotional stress.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

12. I have someone I trust to talk to when I feel down.
☐ Yes ☐ No

Section D: Peer and Social Influence

13. My friends encourage me to do well in school.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
14. I have experienced bullying (online or in school).
☐ Yes ☐ No
→ If yes, how often? _____
15. Peer pressure makes it hard for me to focus on school.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section E: School Environment and Support

16. My teachers treat me with respect and fairness.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
17. I feel safe at school.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
18. Teachers and school staff listen when I have problems.
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
19. The school provides support for students who are struggling.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section F: Personal Motivation and Coping Strategies

20. I set personal goals for my learning.
☐ Yes ☐ No
21. I manage my time well when it comes to studying.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree
22. I try my best in school, even when things are difficult.
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
23. I get encouragement from my family or friends to keep studying.
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never

Section G: Economic and Logistical Challenges

24. I have missed school due to transportation problems.
☐ Yes ☐ No
25. I have missed school because I had to work or help at home.
☐ Yes ☐ No
26. My family struggles to afford school-related costs (uniform, books, fees).
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section H: Social Support Networks

27. I study with my friends or classmates regularly.
☐ Yes ☐ No
28. My teachers help me when I don't understand something.
☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never
29. My classmates make school enjoyable.
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section I: Open-Ended Questions

30. What helps you most in doing well at school?
-

31. What makes school hard or challenging for you?

32. What would you like your school or teachers to do to better support students?

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