

Exploring the relationship between psychological well-being and student engagement among first-year law students

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Abstract

Law students experience higher levels of psychological distress than their peers in other disciplines, particularly during the first year of legal education. This study examined the relationship between psychological well-being (PWB) and student engagement (SE) among first-year law students in the Philippines, using Ryff's multidimensional model of well-being and Maroco's conceptualization of engagement. A descriptive–correlational design was employed, with data collected from 39 students at a private urban university through an online survey. PWB was measured using the Psychological Well-Being Scale, while SE was assessed with the University Student Engagement Inventory. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations revealed moderate to high levels of PWB and SE, with the highest scores in personal growth and cognitive engagement. Overall PWB was positively associated with overall SE ($r = .586, p < .001$), with environmental mastery and self-acceptance emerging as the strongest predictors across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains, while autonomy showed no significant associations. These findings suggest that adaptive functioning and positive self-regard are central to sustaining law students' engagement, whereas the structured nature of legal education may constrain autonomy. The study recommends embedding autonomy-supportive practices in the curriculum, implementing stress management and resilience programs, and strengthening peer mentoring and counseling systems. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed method approaches with larger and more representative samples to capture the evolving dynamics of well-being and engagement in legal education.

Keywords: psychological well-being, student engagement, legal education, law students

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1. Introduction

Law students consistently report higher levels of psychological distress compared to both the general population and students from other professional disciplines (Skead & Rogers, 2015). Large-scale surveys confirm elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and stress among law students, with stigma around help-seeking remaining a persistent barrier (Bender, Jaffe, & Organ, 2022). The first year of law school is often described as the initiation stage of graduate student experience, marked by substantial adjustments and heightened stress (Soonpa, 2004). In response to these challenges, law schools worldwide have begun implementing mental health programs (Levin, 2025) and calling for reforms in the legal curriculum to better support first-year students (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2013).

Two constructs consistently identified as key contributors to positive educational outcomes in higher education are psychological well-being and student engagement (Sarzhanova & Nurgabdeshev, 2025; Datu & King, 2018). Psychological well-being refers to optimal functioning and the experience of positive emotions and is most understood through Ryff's (2014) multidimensional model, which encompasses six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Huppert, 2009; Morales-Rodríguez, Espigares-López, Brown, & Pérez-Mármol, 2020). Student engagement, meanwhile, is defined as the motivation and active involvement of students in their studies and academic tasks. It is composed of three dimensions: behavioral engagement, referring to conduct and participation in academic activities; emotional engagement, reflecting relationships and affective responses to school tasks; and cognitive engagement, which captures the willingness to invest effort and develop mastery of challenging material (Maroco, Maroco, Campos, & Fredricks, 2016).

Exploring these constructs within professional education, particularly legal training, is important given the uniquely demanding and competitive nature of the discipline. Law students frequently encounter academic and psychological pressures. Empirical evidence indicates that while first-year law students often enter law school with average to above-average levels of well-being (Field et al., 2013), their psychological health tends to decline sharply over the course of their studies. This deterioration is typically accompanied by a marked decrease in intrinsic motivation and personal values (Sheldon & Krieger, 2004, Sheldon & Krieger, 2007). Existing literature primarily attributes this decline in first-year well-being to comparatively heavier workloads, a systemic lack of formative feedback relative to other disciplines, the acute anxiety induced by the Socratic method, and hyper-competition among peers (Skead & Rogers, 2015).

To mitigate these stressors, research on student engagement suggests that first-year law students benefit significantly from peer collaboration, consistent class attendance, and rigorous academic investment, often devoting 10 to 20 hours per week to targeted class preparation (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012). Beyond individual student behaviors, institutional interventions play a pivotal role in fostering student persistence and academic success. Specifically, the integration of sustainable academic and social support systems, clear institutional expectations, regular feedback mechanisms, and active learning opportunities are central to promoting persistence and student success during the first year of law school (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012; Sheldon & Krieger, 2007).

Research in higher education consistently highlights the reciprocal relationship between psychological well-being and student engagement. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, studies suggest that learning environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness promote both well-being and engagement, leading to positive educational outcomes (Reeve, 2012). On the other hand, Kahu's conceptual framework of student engagement posits that student success emerges when learners are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally engaged in their

studies. Picton, Kahu & Nelson (2018) posit that student engagement develops within the educational interface, where students' personal characteristics interact with institutional factors such as teaching practices, curriculum, and support services. This interaction is mediated by four key psychosocial constructs: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being. Within this framework, psychological well-being functions as both an antecedent and an outcome of engagement, contributing to positive academic experiences.

This relationship is supported by a growing body of empirical evidence. Students with higher levels of emotional and psychological well-being are more likely to engage meaningfully in academic activities (Antaramian, 2014; Moses, Bradley, & O'Callaghan, 2016). Conversely, student engagement has been shown to mediate the effects of academic self-concept and teacher support on psychological well-being (Zhang, 2024). In the Philippine context, Datu and King (2018) found that subjective well-being enhanced student engagement through increased motivation, positive affect, and resilience, while engagement, in turn, predicted higher levels of well-being. Research further links behavioral engagement to positive peer relationships (Capella, Kim, Neal, & Jackson, 2013) and cognitive engagement to personal growth (Yu, Li, & Wang, 2018), purpose in life (Limas de Chagas & Muñoz-Garcia, 2023; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2024), positive relations with others (Joo, Lim & Kim, 2017), self-acceptance (Craig, You, & Oh, 2025), and autonomy (Joo et al., 2017). Collectively, international and Philippine studies suggest that psychological well-being and student engagement are mutually reinforcing, promoting persistence, participation, and academic achievement. In contrast, stressors such as excessive workload, financial strain, stigma, and basic-needs insecurity can undermine student engagement (Bender et al., 2022; Campoamor-Olegario, Camitan, & Guinto, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on mental health in legal education, there remains a lack of empirically grounded studies on law students in the Philippines, particularly those in their first year. While existing studies have established the independent roles of psychological well-being and engagement, little is known about how their dimensions interact in this unique academic context. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how first-year law students can better manage stress, avoid burnout, and reduce risks of psychological distress. The present study aims to explore the relationship between psychological well-being and student engagement among first-year law students. Guided by Ryff's model of psychological well-being and Maroco's conceptualization of student engagement, this study specifically seeks to: (1) assess the psychological well-being and student engagement of first-year law students, and (2) examine the interaction between these two constructs. Focusing on the first year: a critical period of adjustment in legal education, this study underscores the importance of fostering engagement and well-being as key factors in academic success and personal development. Findings may inform the design of targeted interventions and institutional supports to enhance student mental health, reduce attrition, and promote healthier learning environments in Philippine law schools (Tan, Yatco, Carrera, Salvador, & Bautista, 2022; Visser & Wyk, 2021).

2. Method

Research Design - This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to examine the relationship between psychological well-being and student engagement among first-year law students. The design was appropriate for the study as it enabled both the description of students' levels of psychological well-being and engagement and the exploration of the degree of association between these two constructs and their respective dimensions.

Participants - All first-year law students at a private, urban university in the Philippines were invited to participate in the study. Recruitment was conducted via email invitations containing a link to a secure online survey. The digital form included an informed consent statement, demographic questions, and self-report instruments measuring psychological well-being and student engagement. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old and provide voluntary informed consent. Responses from individuals who did not fully complete the survey instruments were excluded from analysis. Following the application of these inclusion and exclusion criteria, the final sample consisted of 39 respondents.

Measures

Psychological Well-Being Scale - Psychological well-being was assessed using the 42-item Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) developed by Ryff (1989). The instrument measures six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Respondents rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores mean higher levels of psychological well-being. (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The reliability study conducted on the sample for this study indicated good internal consistency, with full-scale Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.792$ and McDonald's $\omega = 0.911$

Table 1 shows the definitions of the six dimensions of psychological well-being and the implications of high and low self-ratings.

Table 1
Definitions of Theory-Guided Dimensions of Well-Being

Self-Acceptance

High scorer: Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.

Low scorer: Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.

Positive relations with others

High scorer: Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.

Low scorer: Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others.

Autonomy

High scorer: Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.

Low scorer: Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.

Environmental mastery

High scorer: Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.

Low scorer: Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.

Purpose in life

High scorer: Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.

Low scorer: Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see the purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning.

Personal growth

High scorer: Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has a sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior overtime; is changing in ways that reflect more self- knowledge and effectiveness.

Low scorer: Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion overtime; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors.

Note: From "The structure of psychological well-being revisited" by C.D. Ryff & C.L.M. Keyes, 1995, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), p.727 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>)

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for psychological well-being (PWB) and student engagement (SE). Among the PWB dimensions, the highest mean score was observed in Personal Growth ($M = 36.36$, $SD = 6.39$), followed by Positive Relations ($M = 34.80$, $SD = 7.27$), Autonomy ($M = 32.54$, $SD = 5.52$), Purpose in Life ($M = 31.08$, $SD = 6.73$), Self-Acceptance ($M = 29.62$, $SD = 5.63$), and Environmental Mastery ($M = 27.90$, $SD = 6.86$). The overall mean score for PWB was 192.28 ($SD = 29.55$), with a range of 141 to 261. For SE, the highest mean

was found in Cognitive Engagement ($M = 20.39$, $SD = 3.57$), followed by Behavioral Engagement ($M = 19.80$, $SD = 3.11$) and Emotional Engagement ($M = 16.97$, $SD = 2.97$). The overall SE mean score was 57.15 ($SD = 8.20$), with a range of 38 to 75. These findings suggest that first-year law students generally report moderate to high levels of both psychological well-being and student engagement.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Psychological Well-Being Scale and University Student Engagement Inventory

	Total (A)	Total (EM)	Total (PG)	Total (PR)	Total (PIL)	Total (SA)	Total (BE)	Total (EE)	Total (CE)	Overall PWB	Overall SE
Mean	32.53	27.90	36.36	34.80	31.08	29.62	19.80	16.97	20.39	192.28	57.15
Median	31	27	35	35	30	29	20	16	21	186	59
Minimum	22	13	26	18	15	21	14	10	10	141	38
Maximum	43	43	48	48	45	46	25	25	25	261	75
SD	5.52	6.86	6.39	7.27	6.73	5.63	3.11	2.97	3.57	29.55	8.20
Shapiro- Wilk W	0.95	0.97	0.94	0.98	0.99	0.95	0.94	0.97	0.92	0.97	0.96
Shapiro- Wilk p	0.097	0.497	0.043	0.716	0.875	0.096	0.037	0.369	0.007	0.361	0.23

Student Engagement - Student engagement was measured using the University Student Engagement Inventory (USEI) developed by Maroco and colleagues (2016). The USEI assesses three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Datu & King, 2018). It is composed of 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Always. Likewise, the reliability results of USEI indicated high internal consistency, with full-scale Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.845$ and McDonald's $\omega = 0.914$.

Data Gathering - Data were collected through an online survey administered via a secure form. The survey link was distributed through email. The online form included the informed consent section, demographic items, and the standardized instruments. The estimated time to complete the survey was 15–20 minutes. Participation was entirely voluntary; it was not a requirement in any of their enrolled courses, respondents did not receive any kind of incentive, and students who declined to participate did not face any form of penalty. Completed responses were exported into a spreadsheet, anonymized by removing personally identifiable information, and stored in a password-protected online drive accessible only to the investigators.

Data Analyses - Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions) were computed to summarize the levels of psychological well-being and student engagement. To examine the relationships between psychological well-being and student engagement, simple linear regression analyses were conducted. These models tested the direct associations between the overall scores and the dimensions of the two constructs. Data analysis was facilitated using statistical software.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the study variables. For psychological well-being, the table reports the overall score from the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB) as well as its six dimensions: autonomy (A), environmental mastery (EM), personal growth (PG), positive relations with others (PR), purpose in life (PIL), and self-acceptance (SA). For student engagement, the table provides the overall score from the University Student Engagement Inventory (SE) along with its three components: behavioral engagement (BE), emotional engagement (EE), and cognitive engagement (CE). These values summarize the central tendencies and variability of the respondents' scores, offering an initial overview of their psychological well-being and engagement levels. Normality testing using the Shapiro–Wilk statistic indicated that both PWB ($W = 0.969$, $p = .361$) and SE ($W = 0.963$, $p = .229$) did not significantly deviate from normality. This confirms that the assumptions for parametric testing were met, supporting the use of Pearson correlation for further analysis. The distribution of scores suggests that participants' experiences of well-being and engagement were balanced across the sample population.

The pattern of results is consistent with trends reported in American and Australian law schools, where first-year students typically enter legal education with average to above-average levels of well-being (Field et al., 2013). The relatively high score in Personal Growth suggests that Filipino law students perceive themselves as open to

new experiences, motivated toward self-improvement, and striving to realize their full potential. By contrast, Environmental Mastery received the lowest mean score, reflecting some difficulties in managing daily affairs and challenges in adapting to or shaping demanding contexts for personal advantage.

In terms of engagement, Filipino first-year law students reported moderate to high ratings on the USEI full scale and across its three dimensions. While direct quantitative comparisons with international studies are limited, the findings resonate with qualitative observations by Armstrong and Sanson (2012), who noted that first-year law students generally demonstrate social adjustment, strong class attendance, and a willingness to devote significant time and effort to academic preparation. Taken together, the present findings reinforce the view that well-being and engagement are important and interrelated aspects of student adjustment during the critical first year of legal education.

With all these considered, the descriptive results highlight a student profile marked by openness to growth and motivation to engage in academic tasks, tempered by challenges in managing external demands. These patterns underscore the relevance of examining how psychological well-being relates to student engagement in this context. The subsequent correlation analyses therefore aim to determine the extent to which dimensions of well-being can be associated with levels of engagement among first-year law students.

Table 3
Correlation Matrix for Psychological Well-Being Scale and University Student Engagement Inventory

	Total (A)	Total (EM)	Total (PG)	Total (PR)	Total (PIL)	Total (SA)	Total (BE)	Total (EE)	Total (CE)	Overall SE	Overall PWB
Total (A)	—										
Total (EM)	0.148	—									
Total (PG)	0.349*	0.458**	—								
Total (PR)	0.447**	0.567***	0.690***	—							
Total (PIL)	0.419**	0.563***	0.637***	0.526***	—						
Total (SA)	0.188	0.729***	0.532***	0.686***	0.533***	—					
Total (BE)	0.185	0.660***	0.341*	0.507***	0.376*	0.639***	—				
Total (EE)	0.071	0.382*	0.138	0.214	0.171	0.341*	0.602***	—			
Total (CE)	0.120	0.607***	0.400*	0.477**	0.496**	0.569***	0.643***	0.502**	—		
Overall SE	0.148	0.653***	0.353*	0.478**	0.420**	0.613***	0.877***	0.809***	0.861***	—	
Overall PWB	0.538***	0.766***	0.804***	0.861***	0.806***	0.800***	0.594***	0.289	0.588***	0.586***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The analysis examined the relationships between the subscales of psychological well-being (PWB) and student engagement (SE). Overall, PWB was found to be positively correlated with overall engagement ($r = .586$, $p < .001$), suggesting that students with higher levels of well-being tended to demonstrate stronger academic engagement. However, no significant correlation was observed between overall PWB and emotional engagement. This means that how the respondents feel about their studies does not necessarily translate to their well-being. This highlights potential differences in how well-being influences specific forms of engagement. At the subscale level, several dimensions of PWB were significantly associated with overall engagement. Environmental Mastery ($r = .653$, $p < .001$) and Self-Acceptance ($r = .613$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest correlates, while Positive Relations ($r = .478$, $p = .01$) and Purpose in Life ($r = .420$, $p = .01$) showed moderate associations. Personal Growth displayed a weak but significant correlation ($r = .341$, $p = .05$). Autonomy was the only PWB dimension that did not significantly relate to any of the SE dimensions.

With regards to specific types of Student Engagement, Behavioral Engagement was strongly associated with Environmental Mastery ($r = .660$, $p = .001$), Self-Acceptance ($r = .639$, $p = .001$), and Positive Relations ($r = .507$, $p = .001$). This suggests that students who feel capable of managing academic demands, who maintain a positive self-concept, and who experience supportive relationships are more likely to participate actively in classes,

collaborate with peers, and dedicate effort to academic tasks. These findings are consistent with previous literature having been observed among school-aged children (Capella et al., 2013) and first-year law students (Armstrong & Sanson, 2012; Field et al., 2013). The weaker but significant links with Purpose in Life and Personal Growth indicate that while meaning making and openness to self-development contribute, they may play secondary roles compared to environmental and relational factors.

Although overall psychological well-being did not significantly predict emotional engagement, weak but significant associations were observed for Environmental Mastery ($r = .382, p = .01$) and Self-Acceptance ($r = .341, p = .01$). These findings suggest that students' emotional connection to their studies may be influenced less by their overall sense of well-being and more by their ability to effectively manage academic and personal demands while maintaining a positive sense of self. In other words, feeling capable and self-assured may be particularly important for fostering positive emotional experiences within the law school environment.

Notably, purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, and positive relations with others were not significantly associated with emotional engagement. This suggests that respondents' sense of meaning and purpose, independence, aspirations for personal development, and quality of interpersonal relationships may not necessarily shape how they feel about their studies. One possible explanation is the culture of "thinking like a lawyer" identified by Graffin (2024), in which analytical reasoning is highly valued, often at the expense of opportunities for emotional expression, autonomy, alignment with personal values, and human connection. This perspective, in turn, may help explain why law students frequently report elevated levels of psychological distress and greater stigma toward help-seeking (Bender et al., 2022; Skead & Rogers, 2015). Taken together, these findings suggest that students may remain cognitively and behaviorally invested in their studies while experiencing a weaker affective connection to the learning process.

Cognitive engagement showed strong correlations with Environmental Mastery ($r = .607, p = .001$) and Self-Acceptance ($r = .569, p = .001$), and moderate associations with Purpose in Life ($r = .496, p = .01$) and Positive Relations ($r = .477, p = .01$). A weak but significant relationship was established with Personal Growth ($r = .400, p = .05$). These results highlight that students who manage their environment effectively and hold a positive self-view are also more likely to sustain effortful processing, invest in mastering complex material, and find deeper meaning in their studies. This is consistent with broader research linking cognitive engagement to well-being indicators such as self-acceptance (Craig et al., 2025), purpose in life (Limas de Chagas & Muñoz-Garcia, 2023; Yuhymenko-Lescroart, 2024), positive relations with others (Joo et al., 2017) and personal growth (Yu et al., 2018).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Taken together, these findings underscore Environmental Mastery and Self-Acceptance as the most consistent predictors of engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. This suggests that students who feel capable of managing academic and personal demands and who maintain a positive self-concept are more likely to sustain meaningful engagement in their studies. Conversely, the absence of associations with Autonomy may reflect the structured and prescriptive nature of legal education, where opportunities for self-determined learning may be limited during the first year. This may inadvertently limit student agency, an issue previously highlighted in calls for curricular reform (Field et al., 2013).

Another important finding of the study was the absence of significant relationships between emotional engagement and the psychological well-being dimensions of purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, and positive relations with others. This suggests that while law students may remain academically engaged, their emotional connection to their studies may not necessarily be accompanied by a stronger sense of meaning, independence, personal development, or interpersonal connectedness or vice-versa. The results align with earlier research showing that law students enter legal education with relatively high well-being but experience gradual declines as they adjust to its competitive and stressful environment (Field et al., 2013; Sheldon & Krieger, 2004;

Sheldon & Krieger, 2007). The relatively strong associations between PWB dimensions and SE reinforce broad evidence that psychological health enhances academic engagement (Antaramian, 2014; Moses et al., 2016). Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Reeve, 2012), the findings illustrate how fulfillment of competence-related needs such as Environmental Mastery and Self-Acceptance may underpin sustained behavioral and cognitive engagement.

The Philippine context further nuances these findings: local studies have shown reciprocity between well-being and engagement in adolescents and undergraduates (Datu & King, 2018), this study demonstrates similar trends among first-year law students: a population underrepresented in research despite their vulnerability to distress (Skead & Rogers, 2015; Bender et al., 2022). The strong role of Environmental Mastery and Self-Acceptance indicates that interventions which strengthen students' coping strategies, resilience, and self-acceptance may be particularly beneficial for law students navigating their early transition into legal education.

Based on the findings, law schools are encouraged to strengthen both curricular and support-based interventions to enhance first-year students' engagement and psychological well-being. Incorporating autonomy-supportive practices, such as collaborative learning activities and student-driven case analyses, may help counterbalance the prescriptive nature of legal education and promote deeper engagement. Interventions should likewise focus on developing coping skills, stress management strategies, resilience, and self-acceptance, given their role in sustaining academic involvement. Beyond academic rigor, law schools should foster learning environments that promote belonging, meaningful feedback, reflection, and stronger connections within the learning community. Such efforts may strengthen students' affective engagement and support their holistic development as future legal professionals. Outside the classrooms, mentoring programs, peer-support initiatives, and accessible counseling services should be promoted to facilitate students' transition into law school. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs with larger, more representative samples across institutions to better understand the evolving relationship between psychological well-being and student engagement and to identify unique, contextual and possibly moderating factors that influence student success.

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