Educational Pressure and Well-Being Among College Students: A Mediation Role of Inclusive Culture

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ABSTRACT

Educational stress remains a concern for student psychological well-being in higher education. This study examined whether inclusive culture mediates the association between educational pressure and college students' well-being. Using a non-experimental, quantitative mediation design, data were collected from 169 students selected through stratified random sampling. Results indicated that inclusive culture significantly accounted for the relationship between educational pressure and well-being, with the direct association becoming non-significant when inclusivity was considered. Interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory, the findings highlight the importance of institutional context in shaping students' responses to academic demands. Strengthening inclusive practices may support student well-being and sustainable academic success.

INTRODUCTION

College students today are increasingly vulnerable to academic stress, which significantly impacts their psychological well-being and overall life satisfaction. Educational stress, encompassing pressures from coursework, exams, and future career uncertainties, has been found to predict symptoms of depression, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among students (Liu et al., 2023). However, institutional and cultural factors and incredibly inclusive campus environments may buffer these effects. Inclusive culture, defined as the shared values, practices, and policies that promote belonging and respect for diversity, has been shown to enhance the psychological resilience of marginalized student groups (Schwartz et al., 2022). Inclusive educational spaces have been associated with increased psychological safety, more outstanding social support, and enhanced student well-being (Soria & Stebleton, 2013). It fosters positive self-identity, social connectedness, and a sense of safety, key protective factors against stress-related outcomes. Previous studies suggest that inclusive practices not only improve daily well-being but also mediate the impact of cultural and academic stress on student mental health (Roy & Sahai, 2024). Therefore, exploring the mediating role of inclusive culture in the link between educational stress and student well-being offers critical insights for developing supportive educational environments.

Inclusive culture has emerged as a key element in enhancing student well-being and buffering the adverse effects of educational stress across various countries. In Uzbekistan, Shakhnoza (2024) emphasized that inclusive educational institutions foster supportive environments where all individuals feel valued, which helps reduce student isolation and promotes well-being. Similarly, in Russia, Leonova (2022) found that forming an inclusive culture through structured values and staff training in universities contributes significantly to lowering stress and enhancing emotional support for students. In Kazakhstan, research by Guschina and Torpakova (2024) showed that an inclusive university environment positively influences students' psychological well-being, especially for those with disabilities, by promoting shared participation and mutual respect.

The Philippines faces similar challenges, where inclusive culture in higher education remains in the process of development, with institutions still grappling with how to implement inclusive practices effectively. A recent study by Chitiyo et al. (2024) revealed that while many Filipino teachers support the idea of inclusive education, a lack of training significantly affects their ability to implement inclusive approaches, impacting students' well-being and sense of belonging. Similarly, Sacdalan (2013) found that although students and faculty in technical

institutions like Mapúa University express generally positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, the lack of infrastructural support and institutional resources limits the success of inclusive culture in fostering student wellness. Raguindin (2020) also highlighted that while inclusive concepts are embedded in the Philippine kindergarten curriculum, actual implementation relies heavily on teachers' strategies and school-wide reinforcement, which vary significantly across institutions. These findings emphasize that while the groundwork for inclusive culture exists, its uneven application across higher education settings in the Philippines limits its potential as a protective factor against educational stress.

The consequences of unchecked educational stress on college students' mental health are profound, with studies linking it to increased anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement. An inclusive culture within higher education institutions has been shown to mitigate these adverse outcomes by fostering belonging, visibility, and psychological safety, particularly among marginalized student groups (Vaccaro et al., 2023). However, institutions often fall short in cultivating these environments, leaving students vulnerable to the harmful effects of exclusionary practices and cultural invisibility (Roy & Sahai, 2024). Despite growing awareness of inclusivity's benefits, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how inclusive campus cultures function as mediating mechanisms in the relationship between academic stress and student well-being. While existing literature acknowledges the role of inclusive policies, few studies explore how the perceived inclusivity of campus life directly influences psychological outcomes in stressed students (Denisova et al., 2023). This limits institutional ability to design effective interventions that harness cultural inclusivity as a protective factor. Given the rising mental health crisis among students globally, addressing this gap is urgent. Educational institutions must move beyond policy to cultivate inclusive cultures that are experienced as authentic and supportive. Doing so not only enhances individual well-being but also contributes to equitable educational outcomes and long-term academic success (Gonzalez-Martinez, 2020).

METHODS

This study employed a non-experimental quantitative research design using a descriptive-correlational and mediation approach to examine the mediating role of inclusive culture in the relationship between educational stress and college students' well-being. A total of 169 college students from City College of Davao were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring broad representation across academic programs. The sample size aligns with established guidelines for mediation analysis in structural modeling and is considered sufficient for reliable results (Field, 2013). Data collection was conducted at a local college in Region XI, Philippines, chosen for its diverse student population and the academic pressures students were facing.

To assess the variables in this study, three adapted questionnaires were used, each grounded in validated theoretical frameworks and demonstrating strong internal reliability. The Educational Pressure questionnaire, adapted from Sun et al. (2011), included five indicators: pressure from study, worry about grades, despondency, self-expectation, and workload (Cronbach's α = .887). The Well-Being questionnaire, based on Hascher and Hagenauer (2020) and Siriparp et al. (2012), covered positive attitudes towards school, physical complaints in school, positive academic self-concept, worries in school, and social problems in school (Cronbach's α = .923). The Inclusive Culture questionnaire, adapted from Booth and Ainscow (2002) and supported by Rafique and Hameed (2021) and Stratan (2024), measured the general perception of inclusivity, interpersonal interactions, institutional policies and practices, curriculum and learning environment, and personal development (Cronbach's α = .933). These indicators provided a comprehensive and context-sensitive assessment of the constructs being studied.

Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the data, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was applied to evaluate the relationships between variables. Mediation analysis was used to determine the mediating effect of inclusive culture on the relationship between educational pressure and well-being, following the framework of Baron and Kenny (1986). Ethical clearance was secured before data collection, and all participants provided informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and the results were presented with transparency and academic integrity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Educational Pressure, Well-being, and Inclusive Culture

The results presented in Table 1 provide a comprehensive overview of the descriptive levels for the three main variables in the study: educational pressure, well-being, and inclusive culture. The overall level of educational pressure experienced by the respondents is low, with a mean of 2.20 and a standard deviation of 0.486. This indicates that, on average, students reported experiencing minimal academic stress.

When examining the specific indicators, all components also fall within the "low" descriptive level. Pressure from study shares the same mean as the overall mean of educational pressure (2.20, SD = 0.613), suggesting students generally feel manageable demands in their academic workload. Worry about grades recorded a slightly lower mean of 2.13 (SD = 0.712), indicating relatively low concern regarding academic performance outcomes. Despondency had the highest mean among the indicators at 2.38 (SD = 0.594), though still within the low range, reflecting that students are not frequently overwhelmed or discouraged by academic challenges. Self-expectation yielded the lowest mean (2.09, SD = 0.600), implying that students do not place excessive personal pressure on themselves to succeed. Lastly, workload had a mean of 2.21 (SD = 0.858), still within the low range, suggesting that students perceive their academic tasks as generally manageable. These findings suggest that the student population under study experiences low educational pressure across all dimensions.

Table 1. Descriptive Levels

	Mean	Descriptive Level
Educational Pressure	**2.20**	**Low**
Pressure from the Study	2.20	Low
Worry about Grades	2.13	Low
Despondency	2.38	Low
Self-Expectation	2.09	Low
Workload	2.21	Low
Well-being	**2.69**	**Moderate**
Positive Attitudes Towards School	2.50	Low
Physical Complaints in School	2.79	Moderate
Positive Academic Self-Concept	2.84	Moderate
Worries in School	2.25	Low
Social Problems in School	3.06	Moderate
Inclusive Culture	**2.73**	**Moderate**
General Perception of Inclusivity	2.79	Moderate
Interpersonal Interactions	2.88	Moderate
Institutional Policies and Practices	2.40	Low
Curriculum and Learning Environment	2.54	Low
Personal Development	3.05	Moderate

Moreover, the overall level of student well-being is moderate, with a mean of 2.69 and a standard deviation of 0.477. This suggests that students generally maintain a fair sense of well-being in their school environment. Among the specific indicators, positive attitudes towards school (M = 2.50, SD = 0.494) and worries in school (M = 2.25, SD = 0.607) fall within the low descriptive level, indicating that students may feel less enthusiastic

about school and still experience some school-related concerns. In contrast, physical complaints in school (M = 2.79, SD = 0.942), positive academic self-concept (M = 2.84, SD = 0.677), and social problems in school (M = 3.06, SD = 0.941) are rated at the moderate level, showing that while students feel somewhat confident in their academic abilities and face manageable levels of physical and social challenges, these areas still require attention. The data suggests that while students' well-being is generally stable, there are specific areas, particularly attitudes toward school and worry, that could benefit from targeted support and interventions.

Furthermore, the overall level of inclusive culture as perceived by students is moderate, with a mean of 2.73 and a standard deviation of 0.542. This indicates a generally favorable, though not optimal, perception of inclusivity within the academic environment. Among the sub-indicators, both the general perception of inclusivity (M = 2.79, SD = 0.942) and interpersonal interactions (M = 2.88, SD = 0.751) are rated as moderate, suggesting that students feel moderately accepted and experience reasonably positive social interactions. Personal development scores the highest with a moderate mean of 3.05 (SD = 0.997), reflecting a favorable perception of growth and self-improvement opportunities provided by the institution. However, two indicators, institutional policies and practices (M = 2.40, SD = 0.508) and curriculum and learning environment (M = 2.54, SD = 0.750), fall under the low descriptive level, pointing to areas where systemic and academic structures may lack inclusivity or fail to meet the needs of diverse learners. These results suggest that while students experience a generally inclusive environment in terms of relationships and personal development, institutional reforms and curriculum adjustments may be needed to enhance overall inclusivity.

The results indicate that students experience low educational pressure. In contrast, well-being and inclusive culture are at a moderate level. These indicate that, while stress levels are low, improvements in school support systems could enhance student well-being and inclusivity. These results suggest a learning environment where students feel relatively at ease academically but still experience moderate levels of personal and social challenges. Several studies support this pattern. For instance, fostering inclusive values like equal access and personal growth enhances students' capacity for self-realization and contributes positively to their well-being and institutional culture (Budegay, 2022). Similarly, inclusive environments encourage academic and social engagement, particularly when diversity is embraced through institutional structures (Amka, 2017). Moreover, inclusive cultures help minority students thrive, reinforcing positive interpersonal interactions and institutional belonging (Gonzalez-Martinez, 2020). In addition, when inclusive policies and environments are in place, students are more likely to engage meaningfully and experience positive well-being outcomes (Leonova, 2022). Lastly, inclusive engagement strategies foster institutional transformation, enhancing both emotional and academic success (Whitelaw, 2016).

However, some research challenges these positive findings. Russell (2020) critiques many college environments for maintaining institutional structures that alienate students of color, leading to increased academic pressure and lower well-being despite superficial diversity initiatives. Similarly, Amka (2018) found that inclusive policies often fall short at the implementation level, especially for students with disabilities, who continue to face physical and social barriers despite formal inclusive mandates. Additionally, Bing et al. (2020) argue that many institutions confuse diversity with true inclusion, and without deliberate action, underrepresented students may feel isolated, limiting both their participation and sense of well-being.

Relationship Between Educational Pressure, Well-being, and Inclusive Culture

Table 2. Relationship Between Variables

Well-being					
		r	p-value	Decision on H_o	Interpretation
Educational Pressure		.579	.000	Reject	Significant
Inclusive Culture		.976	.000	Reject	Significant
Inclusive Culture					

	r	p-value	Decision on H_o	Interpretation
Educational Pressure	.608	.000	Reject	Significant

Table 2 indicates statistically significant associations among educational pressure, inclusive culture, and student well-being. Educational pressure shows a moderate positive correlation with well-being (r = .579, p = .000). This direction is atypical relative to much of the literature, where academic stress is more often linked to poorer outcomes. Sun et al. (2012) documented associations between academic stress and adverse emotional outcomes (e.g., depression and suicidal ideation). Similarly, Arslan (2015) reported negative relationships between educational stress and life satisfaction/emotional well-being, and Hascher and Hagenauer (2020) emphasized that school-related stress can impair emotional engagement and contribute to disengagement. These studies suggest that the positive association observed here should be interpreted cautiously and not assumed to generalize across contexts.

A plausible explanation is that, in this sample, educational pressure may reflect manageable, goal-directed demands rather than overwhelming distress—consistent with eustress framing and adaptive coping. O'Sullivan (2011) found eustress to be positively associated with self-efficacy and life satisfaction, and Ohochukwu (2014) discussed how coping resources (e.g., time management, self-discipline) can support adjustment under pressure. Relatedly, Morinaj and Hascher (2022) reported that students with stronger academic self-concepts may appraise pressure more positively, and Bernal et al. (2024) observed that well-being can remain higher under pressure when institutional support and self-regulation are strong. Ardi et al. (2022) likewise suggested that study pressure, when appropriately managed, can coincide with adaptive learning strategies and personal growth. Still, these interpretations remain context-specific and do not overturn the broader evidence base indicating that excessive educational pressure is often harmful (Sun et al., 2012; Arslan, 2015; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2020).

Inclusive culture shows an extremely strong positive correlation with well-being (r = .976, p = .000). While this aligns with research highlighting the benefits of inclusive environments (Budegay, 2022; Denisova et al., 2019; Taddei et al., 2024), the magnitude is unusually high for psychosocial constructs and raises methodological considerations. Specifically, such a correlation may reflect construct overlap, shared method variance, or multicollinearity rather than a purely substantive relationship. This is important because Clavijo-Castillo et al. (2024) caution that inclusive rhetoric may not translate into effective institutional policy, potentially limiting impact, while García-Vita and Barreto (2019) note that inclusion initiatives sometimes fail to address the specific needs of diverse groups—suggesting that inclusion–well-being links can be more contingent and uneven than a near-perfect association implies. Given this, the correlation should be discussed as potentially inflated and interpreted conservatively.

Finally, educational pressure is strongly correlated with inclusive culture (r = .608, p = .000). One interpretation is that in settings where inclusion is more salient, academic standards and structured support may also be more visible, resulting in students simultaneously reporting higher inclusivity and higher demands (Budegay, 2022; Leonova, 2022; Guschina & Torpakova, 2024). However, contradictory perspectives warn that pressure can increase when inclusive commitments are not matched by responsive policy and psychological supports (Clavijo-Castillo et al., 2024; Yakubova, 2020). Accordingly, this association should be framed as an empirical pattern requiring further validation rather than evidence that inclusive environments "cause" higher pressure.

Table 3. Regression Weights (Total Effect)

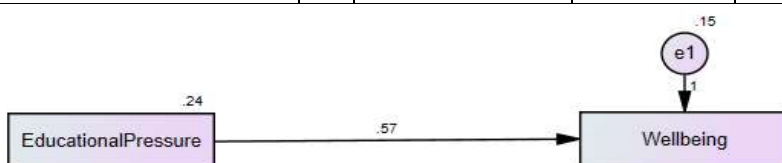|			Estimate	S.E.	P	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
Educational Pressure	→	Well-Being	.567	.062	.000	Reject	Significant

Figure 1. Path Diagram for Educational Pressure on Well-Being Among College Students

Regression results in Table 3 and Figure 1 show a statistically significant positive association between educational pressure and well-being (Estimate = 0.567, SE = 0.062, p = .000), consistent with the bivariate result. However, this should be presented as a context-specific association rather than a causal effect. In many settings, pressure functions as distress and predicts poorer well-being (Sun et al., 2012; Arslan, 2015; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2020). The present finding may reflect conditions under which demands are experienced as structured and manageable (O'Sullivan, 2011), supported by self-concept and school supports (Morinaj & Hascher, 2022; Bernal et al., 2024), or aligned with adaptive strategies (Ardi et al., 2022; Ohochukwu, 2020). Yet, without longitudinal design, experimental manipulation, or strong causal identification, the language of "positive effect" should be softened to "positive relationship/association.".

Table 4. Mediating Effect

Step			Estimate	Std. Error	p-value	Decision on Ho	Interpretation
Education Pressure	→	Inclusive Culture	.678	.068	.000	Reject	Significant
Inclusive Culture	→	Well-being	.871	.019	.000	Reject	Significant
Education Pressure	→	Well-being	-.024	.021	.257	Accept	Not Significant

Table 4 presents the results of a mediation analysis examining whether inclusive culture mediates the relationship between educational pressure and student well-being. shows that educational pressure significantly predicts inclusive culture (Estimate = 0.678, SE = 0.068, p = .000), and inclusive culture significantly predicts student well-being (Estimate = 0.871, SE = 0.019, p = .000). When inclusive culture is included in the model, the direct association between educational pressure and well-being becomes non-significant (Estimate = −0.024, SE = 0.021, p = .257). The path model (Figure 1) reflects a strong indirect pathway from educational pressure to well-being through inclusive culture (β = .68; β = .87), with a negligible direct path (β = −.02), indicating a pattern consistent with full mediation.

Inclusive culture emerges as the central factor associated with student well-being, consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of equity, belonging, and supportive institutional practices in fostering psychosocial adjustment (Budegay, 2022; Denisova et al., 2019; Taddei et al., 2024). At the same time, the exceptionally high correlation between inclusive culture and well-being warrants caution, as it may indicate construct overlap, multicollinearity, or common-method bias. This concern aligns with critical perspectives noting that inclusive policies do not always translate into meaningful support for all students (García-Vita & Barreto, 2019; Clavijo-Castillo et al., 2024) and that inclusion without adequate psychological support may even intensify pressure for some groups (Yakubova, 2020)
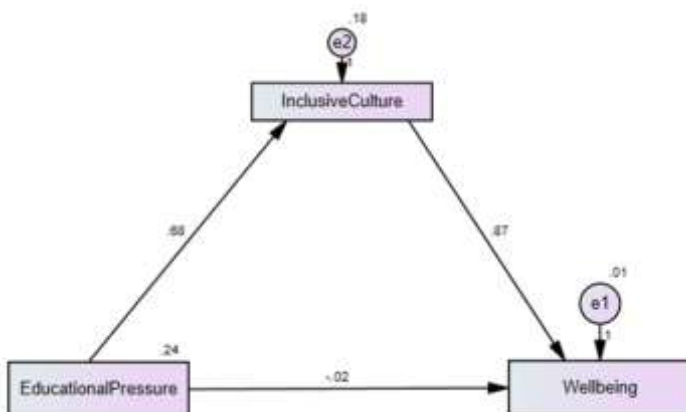

Figure 1. Path Analysis Showing the Variables of the Study

This finding can be meaningfully interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that individual development and well-being are shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems ranging from immediate microsystems (e.g., classrooms, peer groups) to broader

macrosystems (e.g., institutional culture and societal values). In this context, inclusive culture functions as a mesosystemic buffer, shaping the way students experience and respond to educational pressures within their learning environments. When students perceive their academic surroundings as inclusive and marked by equitable policies, meaningful relationships, and cultural responsiveness, they are more likely to interpret academic demands as manageable challenges rather than harmful stressors.

This theoretical lens supports the observed mediating role of inclusive culture, highlighting how the broader institutional environment significantly moderates the impact of stressors on individual outcomes. Institutions that foster inclusive environments through supportive interactions, equitable policies, and culturally responsive practices can enhance students' capacity to cope with academic demands and maintain emotional well-being. This is supported by Kinetova and Kuanyshkyzy (2024), who found that a positive, inclusive university culture helps mitigate the psychological burden of educational stress, improving overall well-being.

Similarly, Kuo et al. (2018) demonstrated that cultural coping behaviors rooted in students' environmental and social contexts mediate the relationship between academic stress and psychosocial well-being, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and culturally attuned environments. In line with this, Nawaz et al. (2024) found that inclusive school cultures not only improve mental health but also indirectly enhance academic performance, underscoring the dual benefits of psychological support and educational achievement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that inclusive culture is a key mediating condition in the association between educational pressure and student well-being. Educational pressure is positively associated with well-being only in contexts where students perceive their academic environment as inclusive and supportive. Inclusive culture, characterized by equitable practices, supportive relationships, and respect for diversity, appears to shape how academic demands are interpreted, enabling students to view pressure as manageable rather than distressing. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the findings suggest that student well-being is influenced by broader institutional systems that frame individual experiences of academic pressure. These results should be interpreted as context-specific associations rather than causal effects. Nevertheless, they highlight the importance of strengthening inclusive institutional cultures to support student well-being, resilience, and sustained academic engagement in higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Social-Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and aligned with Sustainable Development Goals SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), higher education institutions are encouraged to strengthen inclusive cultures as protective systems that support student well-being. Institutions should institutionalize inclusive policies, culturally responsive curricula, and equitable support services that foster psychological safety and belonging. Recommended initiatives include inclusive mentorship programs, peer support networks, and faculty development focused on equity-centered pedagogy and mental health awareness. Universities should also establish structured feedback mechanisms that elevate diverse student voices in shaping academic policies and pressure-management strategies. Strengthening these systems may help students experience academic demands as manageable challenges, promoting resilience, well-being, and sustainable student success in higher education.

Funding Statement

Ethical Compliance

All research procedures involving human respondents were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the appropriate institutional and/or national research bodies, specifically following the guidelines of the

DOST-PHREB and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 to ensure the confidentiality, safety, and overall well-being of the respondents.

Data Access Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to privacy and confidentiality restrictions.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with a financial interest in the subject matter or materials presented in this manuscript.

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