

Child At-Risk Behaviors and Academic Engagement of Selected Junior High Schools: Basis for Project Cares

Child At- Risk Engagement Support Program

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the extent of child at-risk behaviors and the level of academic engagement among junior high school learners in selected public secondary schools in San Pedro, Laguna, and examined the relationship between the two constructs as basis for Project CARES (Child At-Risk Engagement Support Program). A quantitative comparative-correlational design was employed involving 555 respondents: 22 school administrators, 10 school counselors, 137 teachers, 193 parents/guardians, and 193 junior high school students from five public secondary schools. A researcher-made, expert-validated questionnaire measured environmental and family-related, social and behavioral, academic, emotional and psychological, and physical risk behaviors, together with study habits and time management, motivation, learning environment, health and well-being, teaching quality, and encountered challenges. Percentage,

weighted mean, one-way analysis of variance, and Pearson product-moment correlation were used. Child at-risk behavior was Moderately At-Risk overall ($M = 3.39$), with social and behavioral risk highest ($M = 3.44$), followed by emotional and psychological and physical risk behaviors (both $M = 3.43$), academic risk ($M = 3.41$), and environmental and family-related risk ($M = 3.25$). No significant differences were reported among the five respondent groups across the risk domains. Academic engagement was Engaged overall ($M = 3.79$), led by teaching quality ($M = 4.01$) and learning environment ($M = 3.95$). The thesis reported very strong and statistically significant relationships between child at-risk behaviors and all five academic-engagement dimensions ($r = .99$, $p < .05$). The most evident learner challenges were difficulty understanding lessons, school-related stress or anxiety, stress-related illness, time-management difficulties, and declining academic performance. Project CARES was subsequently developed and was rated Highly Acceptable overall ($M = 4.43$). The findings support coordinated school, family, guidance, health, and instructional interventions for learners experiencing multidimensional risk.

Keywords: *child at-risk behavior, academic engagement, junior high school, school counseling, learner support, Project CARES*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental period in which family conditions, peer relationships, school experiences, emotional well-being, health, and academic demands can interact to shape learners' behavior and participation in school. When these conditions become adverse, learners may display social, behavioral, academic, emotional, psychological, or physical risk patterns that interfere with attendance, task completion, motivation, relationships, and overall educational adjustment. The source thesis therefore approached child at-risk behavior as a multidimensional concern rather than as a single disciplinary problem.

An ecological perspective is useful because risk and protection are distributed across the learner's immediate and wider environments. El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) explain how family, school, peer, and broader contextual systems influence learners' sense of belonging and development. Philippine evidence also shows that parental psychological control and family obligation can shape adolescent adjustment (Dizon & Alampay, 2024), while school responsiveness to child-protection concerns affects how behavioral risks are recognized and addressed (Bayuca, 2020).

Academic engagement is similarly multidimensional. It involves not only attendance but also motivation, study practices, participation, persistence, perceived learning support, health, and interaction with teachers and classmates. Means and Neisler (2023) emphasize the importance of linking engagement theory with measurable indicators. Studies in different educational contexts have connected motivation, self-efficacy, learning environment, and teaching quality with stronger engagement and performance (Aba et al., 2025; Bizimana, 2025; Huang, 2024).

The local context of selected public junior high schools in San Pedro, Laguna makes this relationship especially important. The thesis identified behavioral concerns, emotional stress, academic difficulties, absenteeism, limited motivation, and uneven support across home and school environments. Although prior studies separately address adolescent risk and school engagement, fewer local studies integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives from administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and learners while simultaneously examining risk domains and academic engagement.

Accordingly, the study assessed child at-risk behaviors across five domains, examined whether the five respondent groups differed in their assessments, determined the level of academic engagement across five dimensions, tested the relationship between risk behaviors and academic engagement, identified the challenges encountered by learners, and used the findings to develop and assess the acceptability of Project CARES. The study was guided by an ecological systems perspective and a multidimensional educational-engagement framework.

Literature Review

Child At-Risk Behavior in Ecological Contexts

Child at-risk behavior can emerge from the interaction of family, school, peer, and community conditions. The ecological interpretation used in the thesis is consistent with El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022), who describe development as embedded in interrelated systems rather than isolated individual traits. Family functioning is particularly important: Dizon and Alampay (2024) found that parental psychological control was associated with adolescent adjustment, illustrating how family expectations and relational patterns may intensify vulnerability.

School and peer conditions can likewise increase or reduce risk. Bayuca (2020) identified variation in school responsiveness to child-protection concerns, while Çitak and Yazici (2022) emphasized that risky behaviors among high school students require structured school-counseling responses. Dy et al. (2024) further highlighted the importance of parental involvement to student engagement, reinforcing the need for coordinated home-school action.

The source thesis therefore examined environmental and family-related, social and behavioral, academic, emotional and psychological, and physical risks together. This organization reflects the view that difficulties such as peer pressure, bullying, weak academic self-management, emotional distress, unsafe practices, and family stress can coexist and reinforce one another.

Academic Engagement as a Multidimensional Construct

Academic engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning. The thesis operationalized engagement through study habits and time management, motivation, learning environment, health and well-being, and teaching quality. Means and Neisler (2023) support the importance of connecting theoretical engagement constructs with observable and measurable learning experiences.

Study habits and self-management provide the behavioral structure needed to sustain school participation. Dimal and Salva (2025) link study habits with academic performance, while van Berk and Dignath (2025) identify poor self-regulated learning as a risk factor for academic underachievement. Panday and Napil (2024) likewise connect reading habits, study skills, and student engagement, reinforcing the thesis's inclusion of time management and study behavior as an engagement dimension.

Motivation is another key component. Aba et al. (2025) reported that motivation and self-efficacy predict student engagement, while Fuertes et al. (2023) linked student engagement, academic motivation, and performance. These findings support the view that learners who see value in schoolwork, persist through difficulty, and respond positively to feedback are more likely to remain academically engaged.

Learning Environment, Teaching Quality, and School Support

The learning environment influences whether learners feel safe, supported, respected, and willing to participate. Bizimana (2025) found that perceived classroom support contributes to engagement, while Mohamad (2024) connected learning environment with academic engagement among junior high school students. Kassab et al. (2024) similarly emphasized the impact of educational environment on engagement and academic performance.

Teacher-student relationships and instructional quality are equally important. Amerstorfer and Freiin von Münster-Kistner (2021) showed that student-teacher relationships are closely connected with academic engagement in student-centered learning contexts. Thornberg et al. (2022) also reported links between teacher-student relationship quality and engagement, while Huang (2024) identified engagement as an important mechanism connecting teaching quality and performance.

For this reason, teaching quality in the thesis included clarity of instruction, varied methods, constructive feedback, fairness, concern for learner progress, real-life examples, and assessment guidance. Orcullo and Elesio (2024) likewise found that teaching quality and democratic classroom practices predict engagement, supporting the inclusion of instructional practices as part of the engagement construct.

Health, Well-Being, and Learner Risk

Physical and psychological well-being affect learners' ability to concentrate, participate, and persist in school. Luo et al. (2023) found that health-risk behaviors were associated with perceived academic performance among middle and high school students. Such findings support the thesis's attention to nutrition, sleep, exercise, stress management, hygiene, and help-seeking as factors related to academic engagement.

Physical risk can also arise from unsafe activity, limited health practices, and exposure to behaviors that increase the likelihood of injury. Pengpid et al. (2025) reported serious unintentional injury among school-aged adolescents in the Philippines and identified associated behavioral factors. These findings reinforce the need for preventive health education and school-community coordination.

Psychological risk is intertwined with academic pressure, relationships, and self-regulation. The thesis therefore treated emotional and psychological support as a core element of learner engagement rather than a separate welfare concern. A supportive school response can help prevent emotional distress from developing into sustained disengagement.

Integrated School-Based Intervention and Program Acceptability

Because risk operates across multiple domains, school intervention is more likely to be effective when counseling, academic support, health promotion, behavior support, family involvement, and teaching improvement are coordinated. Cervancia et al. (2021) found gaps in child-protection compliance across basic-education institutions, underscoring the importance of consistent implementation rather than policy awareness alone.

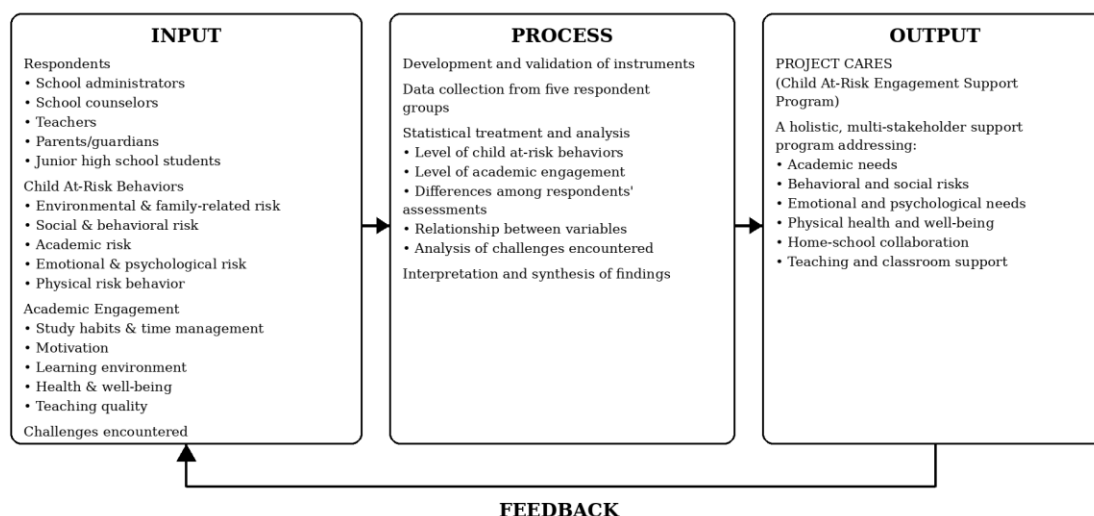
The source thesis developed Project CARES as a multi-stakeholder response involving school leaders, guidance personnel, teachers, parents, students, and community support. Its activities include academic coaching,

study-skills development, mental-health support, anti-bullying and positive-behavior initiatives, health promotion, learner-friendly classroom practices, and teacher capacity building.

Program acceptability is relevant because even well-designed interventions require stakeholder confidence and practical feasibility. Reyes and Oreste (2017) emphasize clarity, relevance, and usability in the acceptability of developed educational materials. In the present study, these principles were reflected in the evaluation of Project CARES in terms of relevance, expected effectiveness, feasibility, flexibility, and clarity.

Figure 1. *Research Paradigm of the Study*

Research Paradigm of the Study



METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a quantitative comparative-correlational research design. The descriptive and comparative components were used to determine the extent of child at-risk behaviors and the level of academic engagement and to compare assessments across respondent groups. The correlational component examined the relationship between child at-risk behaviors and academic engagement without manipulating any variable.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in five public secondary schools in San Pedro City, Laguna: Cuyab Integrated National High School, Adelina 1 National High School, Pacita Complex National High School, Sampaguita National High School, and San Pedro Relocation Center National High School. Data were gathered during School Year 2025-2026.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study involved 555 respondents drawn from an identified population of 850 stakeholders. Slovin's formula was used in determining the sample size, after which purposive sampling was used to select respondents directly involved in learners' academic, behavioral, and psychosocial development. The final sample consisted of 22 school administrators, 10 school counselors, 137 teachers, 193 parents/guardians, and 193 junior high school students.

Table 1. *Distribution of Respondents*

Respondent Group	Sample	Percentage
School administrators	22	3.96
School counselors	10	1.80
Teachers	137	24.68
Parents/guardians	193	34.77
Students	193	34.77
Total	555	100.00

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-made survey questionnaire anchored on the study's ecological and engagement frameworks and informed by literature on adolescent risk and student engagement. The instrument had four parts: respondent profile; child at-risk behavior across environmental and family-related, social and behavioral, academic, emotional and psychological, and physical risk dimensions; academic engagement across health and well-being, learning environment, motivation, study habits and time management, and teaching quality; and problems or challenges encountered.

Items were rated using five-point response scales. Before final administration, the instrument underwent content validation by subject-matter experts, including school administrators, guidance counselors, and research experts. Validators reviewed clarity, relevance, language, and consistency with the objectives and theoretical framework, and their recommendations were incorporated. The source manuscript does not report a Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was first obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of San Pedro City. After approval, the validated questionnaires were administered to the identified respondent groups. Completed questionnaires were collected, sorted, tallied, and subjected to statistical analysis, after which the results were presented in tabular and narrative form.

Data Analysis

Frequency and percentage summarized respondent distributions. Weighted mean described child at-risk behavior, academic engagement, encountered challenges, and program acceptability. One-way analysis of variance was used to test differences among the five respondent groups in their assessments of child at-risk behaviors. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test the relationship between child at-risk behaviors and academic engagement. Statistical decisions were evaluated at the .05 level of significance.

Ethical Consideration

The research proceeded after formal institutional permission. The source manuscript indicates that ethical adherence was considered during instrument and methodology review and that the study involved school stakeholders through authorized survey administration. The final manuscript reports responses only in aggregate and does not disclose personally identifying respondent information. No separate research-ethics protocol number is reported in the source thesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Extent of Child At-Risk Behaviors

Child at-risk behavior was rated Moderately At-Risk overall, with a grand mean of 3.39. Social and behavioral risk was the highest domain ($M = 3.44$), followed by emotional and psychological risk and physical risk behavior (both $M = 3.43$), academic risk ($M = 3.41$), and environmental and family-related risk ($M = 3.25$). School administrators, counselors, and teachers generally gave higher risk ratings than parents and students, but the overall pattern consistently identified social, emotional, physical, and academic concerns as priority areas.

Table 2. *Summary of Child At-Risk Behavior*

Risk Domain	Administrators	Counselors	Teachers	Parents	Students	Composite
Environmental & family-related	3.55	3.59	3.70	2.95	2.47	3.25
Social & behavioral	3.70	3.65	3.72	3.13	3.01	3.44
Academic	3.73	3.76	3.70	3.17	2.71	3.41
Emotional & psychological	3.82	3.69	3.64	3.18	2.81	3.43
Physical	3.72	3.70	3.76	3.24	2.74	3.43
Grand mean	3.70	3.68	3.70	3.13	2.75	3.39

The highest social and behavioral risk reflects concerns involving peer pressure, bullying, rule-breaking, class skipping, anger regulation, and harmful peer influence. This is consistent with Çitak and Yazici (2022), who emphasize structured counseling responses to risky behavior, and with Bayuca (2020), who highlights the importance of consistent school responsiveness to child-protection concerns. The family and environmental domain was lower overall but still reflected financial stress, family conflict, emotional support, and neighborhood conditions, consistent with the family-adjustment findings of Dizon and Alampay (2024).

Differences in Stakeholder Assessments

The thesis reported no statistically significant differences among school administrators, school counselors, teachers, parents, and students across the five child at-risk domains. All reported F-values were below the critical value of 2.58 at the .05 level, resulting in failure to reject the null hypothesis for each domain.

Table 3. *Comparative Assessment of Child At-Risk Behavior*

Risk Domain	F-value	Critical Value	Decision
Environmental & family-related	.24730	2.58	Not significant
Social & behavioral	.10691	2.58	Not significant
Academic	.17730	2.58	Not significant
Emotional & psychological	.14617	2.58	Not significant
Physical	.16139	2.58	Not significant

The lack of statistically significant group differences suggests a shared recognition of learner risk across major stakeholders. This consensus is practically important because ecological interventions depend on coordinated action among home, school, guidance, and peer systems. Dy et al. (2024) similarly underscore the value of parental involvement in engagement, while Cervancia et al. (2021) point to the need for consistent institutional implementation of learner-protection measures.

Level of Academic Engagement

Academic engagement was rated Engaged overall ($M = 3.79$). Teaching quality was the highest-rated dimension ($M = 4.01$), followed by learning environment ($M = 3.95$), motivation ($M = 3.76$), health and well-being ($M = 3.72$), and study habits and time management ($M = 3.52$). The pattern indicates that learners were generally supported by instruction and school context, while study habits and time management remained the weakest engagement area.

Table 4. *Summary of Academic Engagement*

Dimension	Administrators	Counselors	Teachers	Parents	Students	Composite
Study habits & time management	3.61	3.54	3.64	3.57	3.25	3.52
Motivation	3.79	3.94	3.77	3.78	3.52	3.76
Learning environment	4.30	4.24	3.93	3.83	3.45	3.95
Health & well-being	3.60	3.92	3.76	3.81	3.51	3.72
Teaching quality	4.46	4.18	4.11	3.78	3.51	4.01
Grand mean	3.95	3.96	3.84	3.75	3.45	3.79

The relatively strong learning-environment and teaching-quality ratings align with studies showing that supportive classrooms and teacher-student relationships strengthen participation and persistence (Bizimana, 2025; Thornberg et al., 2022). Huang (2024) and Orcullo and Elesio (2024) likewise connect instructional quality with engagement. By contrast, the lower study-habits rating supports the need for structured self-management support, consistent with Dimal and Salva (2025), Panday and Napil (2024), and van Berk and Dignath (2025).

Relationship Between Child At-Risk Behaviors and Academic Engagement

The source thesis reported a very strong and statistically significant relationship between child at-risk behaviors and each academic-engagement dimension. Study habits and time management, motivation, learning environment, health and well-being, and teaching quality each had a reported r -value of .99. The reported t -values ranged from 4.24086 to 4.24186 and exceeded the thesis's critical value of 1.734 at $df = 18$ and the .05 level, leading to rejection of the null hypothesis.

Table 5. *Reported Correlation Between Child At-Risk Behaviors and Academic Engagement*

Academic-Engagement Dimension	r	t -value	Interpretation	Decision
Study habits & time management	.99	4.24172	Very strong	Significant
Motivation	.99	4.24186	Very strong	Significant
Learning environment	.99	4.24097	Very strong	Significant
Health & well-being	.99	4.24086	Very strong	Significant
Teaching quality	.99	4.24127	Very strong	Significant

Within the study's correlational design, the findings indicate that changes in reported risk conditions were closely associated with changes in engagement indicators; they do not establish causation. The pattern is compatible with the ecological interpretation that learner functioning reflects interactions among family, school, peer, health, and psychological contexts (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). It also supports engagement research linking motivation, instructional environment, and well-being with participation and performance (Aba et al., 2025; Kassab et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2023).

Challenges Encountered by Learners

The challenges encountered by learners were generally assessed as Evident by school administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers, while parents and students gave lower overall ratings. The highest composite concern was difficulty understanding lessons or lectures ($M = 3.77$), followed by school-related stress or anxiety ($M = 3.62$), frequent illness or stress-related symptoms ($M = 3.61$), difficulty managing time and deadlines ($M = 3.55$), and poor academic performance or declining grades ($M = 3.53$).

Table 6. Highest-Ranked Challenges Encountered

Challenge	Composite Mean	Interpretation
Difficulty understanding lessons or lectures	3.77	Evident
Stress or anxiety related to school	3.62	Evident
Frequent illness or stress-related symptoms	3.61	Evident
Time management and meeting deadlines	3.55	Evident
Poor academic performance or declining grades	3.53	Evident

These challenges reinforce the interconnected nature of academic, emotional, and health needs. Fuertes et al. (2023) emphasize the relationship among motivation, engagement, and performance, while Luo et al. (2023) show how health-risk behaviors relate to academic functioning. The result also supports the need for school support that simultaneously addresses learning difficulty, time management, stress, well-being, and instructional access.

Project CARES and Its Acceptability

Project CARES (Child At-Risk Engagement Support Program) was developed from the identified risk and engagement needs. The program is holistic and multi-stakeholder and organizes activities around mental and emotional support, positive behavior and anti-bullying, academic coaching and study skills, home-school collaboration, health and wellness, learner-friendly classrooms, and teacher instructional support.

Table 7. Core Areas of Project CARES

CARES Area	Primary Need Addressed	Representative Activities
CARES for Mind	Emotional and psychological risk	Counseling, peer support, mental-health and self-esteem activities, stress management
CARES for Behavior	Social and behavioral risk	Anti-bullying initiatives, positive behavior support, restorative and values-based activities
CARES for Learning	Academic risk and study habits	Academic coaching, tutorials, study-habits and time-management training, motivation support
CARES for Environment	Family and school support	Parent education, conferences, safe-school activities, community and home-school linkages
CARES for Health	Physical risk and well-being	Health campaigns, fitness and wellness activities, hygiene and substance-abuse prevention
CARES for Teaching	Teaching quality and classroom engagement	Teacher capacity building, feedback training, learner-centered and classroom-climate enhancement

The proposed program was rated Highly Acceptable overall ($M = 4.43$). Its expected capacity to improve academic performance, behavior, and well-being received the highest rating ($M = 4.66$), followed by relevance to identified needs ($M = 4.56$), flexibility ($M = 4.38$), clarity of objectives and procedures ($M = 4.32$), and feasibility ($M = 4.23$). This pattern is consistent with Reyes and Oreste (2017), who emphasize relevance, clarity, and practicality in the acceptability of educational interventions.

Table 8. Acceptability of Project CARES

Indicator	Composite Mean	Interpretation
Can improve students' academic performance, behavior, and well-being	4.66	Highly Acceptable
Relevant to the identified needs of students at risk	4.56	Highly Acceptable
Flexible and adaptable to different learner needs	4.38	Highly Acceptable
Objectives, activities, and procedures are clear	4.32	Highly Acceptable
Feasible and practical to implement in school	4.23	Highly Acceptable

Indicator	Composite Mean	Interpretation
Overall	4.43	Highly Acceptable

CONCLUSION

The study established that child at-risk behavior was present at a moderate overall level across the selected junior high schools, with social and behavioral, emotional and psychological, physical, and academic concerns emerging more strongly than environmental and family-related risk. The five stakeholder groups did not differ significantly in their overall assessments, indicating broad agreement that the identified risks require coordinated attention.

Learners were academically engaged overall, particularly in relation to teaching quality and learning environment, but study habits and time management remained comparatively weaker. The thesis reported very strong significant associations between child at-risk behaviors and all academic-engagement dimensions. Together with the documented challenges in lesson understanding, school-related stress, health symptoms, time management, and academic performance, these findings support a comprehensive intervention rather than isolated disciplinary or academic responses.

Project CARES provides the study's practical contribution by integrating academic coaching, counseling and mental-health support, behavior and anti-bullying initiatives, health promotion, home-school collaboration, learner-friendly environments, and teacher capacity building. Its Highly Acceptable evaluation indicates strong stakeholder support for implementation, monitoring, and continuing refinement within the participating school context.

Recommendation

School administrators should strengthen coordinated monitoring among teachers, parents, and guidance personnel so that emerging academic, behavioral, emotional, social, and physical risk indicators are identified early and addressed consistently.

Schools should consider implementing Project CARES through a phased, school-based plan that combines mentoring, counseling, academic coaching, anti-bullying and positive-behavior activities, health and wellness initiatives, and parent-school collaboration.

Teachers should continue using learner-centered instruction, clear explanations, constructive feedback, positive behavior-management strategies, and structured support for learners who struggle with lessons, deadlines, motivation, or classroom participation.

Parents and guardians should maintain regular communication with schools, monitor changes in behavior and academic performance, provide supportive study conditions at home, and participate in guidance and family-support activities when needed.

Guidance counselors and school health personnel should prioritize accessible preventive and responsive services for stress, anxiety, self-esteem, peer difficulties, and health-related concerns and should maintain referral pathways for learners requiring more specialized support.

Future researchers may replicate the study in other divisions, examine the unusually strong reported relationships using learner-level data and additional statistical controls, and evaluate Project CARES after implementation through longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or mixed-methods designs.

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