



Application of positive psychology in education to enhance community engagement among ethnic minority students: a study at Son La College

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Abstract:

This study analyzes the role of the application of positive psychology in education in enhancing community engagement among ethnic minority students at Son La College. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a survey of 194 ethnic minority students with interviews involving 17 participants. The findings indicate that the educational environment at the institution was generally perceived positively, particularly in terms of friendliness, respect, and relationships with peers and lecturers. However, limitations were identified in the provision of emotional support and in the capacity to transform positive psychological resources into behaviors associated with community participation. The students' individual psychological resources were found to be at a moderately positive level, whereas community engagement was more strongly reflected in the sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships than in collective participatory behaviors. The study demonstrates that positive psychology can only be effectively implemented when it is developed as a strategy aligned with the cultural characteristics, psychological attributes, and contextual conditions of learners.

Keywords: positive psychology; community engagement; ethnic minority students; college education; Son La College

1. Introduction

In the context of educational reform oriented toward the development of learners' competencies and personal qualities, educational institutions are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to foster students' adaptive capacity, mental well-being, collaborative skills, and social responsibility. Accordingly, the effectiveness of an educational environment should not be assessed solely through academic outcomes, but also through the extent to which learners experience connectedness, a sense of belonging, and meaningful participation in collective life. From the perspective of positive psychology, education should prioritize the enhancement of learners' positive psychological resources rather than focusing exclusively on difficulties or deficiencies [1], [2].

Among learner groups characterized by high levels of specificity, ethnic minority students constitute a population requiring particular attention from both educational and socio-cultural perspectives. Upon entering college or university environments, many students are required to adapt to new academic demands, unfamiliar communication patterns, and social norms that differ substantially from those of their previous living contexts. This process directly influences their perceptions of personal position within the collective, their level of participation in shared activities, and their capacity to establish sustainable social relationships. In the absence of a sense of recognition and connectedness, students are more likely to become socially withdrawn, reduce interpersonal interaction, and limit their involvement in community activities.

From an educational perspective, community engagement not only reflects social integration but also contributes to the enhancement of learning experiences and the promotion of students' holistic development [3]. Meanwhile, positive psychology provides an appropriate theoretical and practical approach for supporting learners in strengthening their internal psychological resources and expanding their capacity for social connectedness [2], [4]. However, in educational practice, the application of these principles to student support has not received equal attention, particularly in institutions with large proportions of ethnic minority students. Existing support needs are often addressed primarily

in terms of academic assistance, policy implementation, or material conditions, whereas the role of positive psychological resources in fostering community engagement has not been adequately explored. This issue represents a significant research gap that warrants further investigation.

Son La College represents a typical context for examining this issue due to its mountainous setting, ethnic diversity, and relatively high proportion of ethnic minority students. Therefore, investigating the application of positive psychology in education to enhance community engagement among ethnic minority students at the institution is significant not only in theoretical terms but also in its practical implications for the development of educational solutions suited to local characteristics and conditions.

2. Literature Review

Positive psychology emerged as a significant paradigm shift in modern psychology, emphasizing the identification and enhancement of individuals' positive resources rather than focusing solely on deficits or psychological disorders [1]. This approach holds particular relevance for education, as educational processes are expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to foster life skills, adaptive capacity, and learners' social development. Consequently, the concept of "positive education" has been developed as an orientation integrating academic achievement with students' wellbeing [5].

Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build" theory suggests that positive emotions not only generate favorable psychological states but also contribute to the expansion of cognition, the enhancement of proactivity, and the accumulation of social resources [2]. This is especially important within educational environments, where positive experiences may encourage learners to participate more actively in collective activities, strengthen self-confidence, and establish supportive relationships. Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies have primarily concentrated on the effects of positive psychology on individual wellbeing, learning motivation, or adaptive capacity, whereas its influence on community engagement has not yet been comprehensively clarified [4], [6], [7].

Within educational research, community engagement is commonly approached through the concept of "sense of belonging," referring to the perception of being accepted, valued, and positioned meaningfully within the learning community [3]. This concept represents not merely a subjective psychological state but also an indicator of the quality of relationships between learners and the educational environment. Accordingly, belonging functions as an important mediating factor between individual experiences and students' social participation. Review studies have demonstrated that a sense of belonging is closely associated with mental wellbeing, learning motivation, levels of participation, and the quality of university experiences [8]. However, recent studies have also indicated that belonging constitutes a multidimensional construct strongly influenced by cultural context, ethnicity, and social position [9], [10]. This implies that community engagement cannot be understood simply through the level of superficial participation in activities; rather, it should be viewed as the outcome of a process through which students are recognized, listened to, and positioned as valuable members of the collective.

For ethnic minority students, challenges in higher education are associated not only with academic requirements but also with cultural adaptation and the ability to develop a sense of belonging within the learning environment. Studies on Indigenous youth and minority groups have shown that their wellbeing is closely linked to the extent to which their identities are respected, appropriate support is provided, and participation in learning communities can occur without requiring the abandonment of their cultural identities [11]. In addition, community-based learning models, such as service learning, have demonstrated that when students participate in activities with social significance, they tend to strengthen their sense of attachment to both the institution and the broader community [12]. This suggests that community engagement is shaped not only through psychological support or school relationships but also through educational experiences that enable learners to recognize their own roles and values within collective life.

Based on the published literature, three major research gaps can be identified. First, studies on positive psychology in education have mainly focused on wellbeing and individual development, whereas the relationship between positive psychology and community engagement has not been sufficiently explored [4], [6], [7]. Second, although research on belonging in higher education is extensive, it has not yet been deeply integrated with the theoretical framework of positive psychology [8], [9], [10]. Third, studies concerning ethnic minority students within specific educational contexts in Viet Nam, particularly in mountainous regions, remain relatively limited [11].

Therefore, the study on the application of positive psychology in education to enhance community engagement among ethnic minority students at Son La College is significant in two respects: it contributes to addressing the academic gap between positive individual development and community engagement, while simultaneously providing a practical foundation for the design of educational solutions appropriate to local contexts and conditions.

3. Case and Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach in which qualitative methods played the dominant role, while quantitative methods served a supplementary function. Such an approach was considered appropriate for clarifying the effects of the application of positive psychology in education on the community engagement of ethnic minority students at Son La College. The quantitative sample consisted of 194 ethnic minority students, whereas the qualitative sample included 17 participants comprising students, lecturers, and several relevant staff members. Quantitative data were collected through a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews.

The quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics, including percentages, mean values, and standard deviations. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were analyzed thematically in order to clarify students' experiences, interpretations, and contextual factors influencing their community engagement. The integration of these two data sources contributed to enhancing both the reliability and the depth of the research findings.

The research framework was constructed based on three principal components: the application of positive psychology in education, individual psychological resources, and community engagement. The study assumed that the application of positive psychology contributes to strengthening students' individual psychological resources, thereby promoting their community engagement. Accordingly, the article focused on addressing three primary research questions: how the elements of positive psychology are manifested within the educational environment; how these elements influence individual psychological resources; and how such resources are transformed into community engagement within the institutional context.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Educational Environment at Son La College

The survey findings indicate that ethnic minority students generally expressed relatively positive evaluations of the learning environment at the institution. The indicators reflecting the learning climate and the quality of interpersonal relationships all achieved moderately positive mean scores or above. In particular, the item "the learning environment is friendly and positive" obtained a Mean score of 3.63, while "feeling respected and listened to within the learning environment" reached a Mean score of 3.52. Meanwhile, "having positive relationships with peers and lecturers" recorded the highest value across the entire scale, with a Mean score of 3.68. These findings suggest that the institution has established a relatively favorable interactive foundation for ethnic minority students throughout their learning and integration processes.

Table 1. Survey results for the variable group "positive educational environment"

Code	Survey Items	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	SD
A1	I perceive the learning environment at the institution as friendly and positive	4.1	10.3	21.6	45.4	18.6	3.63	0.96
A2	Lecturers frequently and encourage	5.7	12.3	24.2	40.7	17.1	3.49	1.02

	acknowledge students' strengths								
A3	I receive emotional support when encountering academic difficulties	8.8	18.5	25.8	33.0	13.9	3.21	1.08	
A4	Institutional activities help me feel happy and motivated to study	6.7	14.4	28.9	35.1	14.9	3.29	1.01	
A5	I feel respected and listened to within the learning environment	4.8	11.7	23.2	41.6	18.7	3.52	0.98	

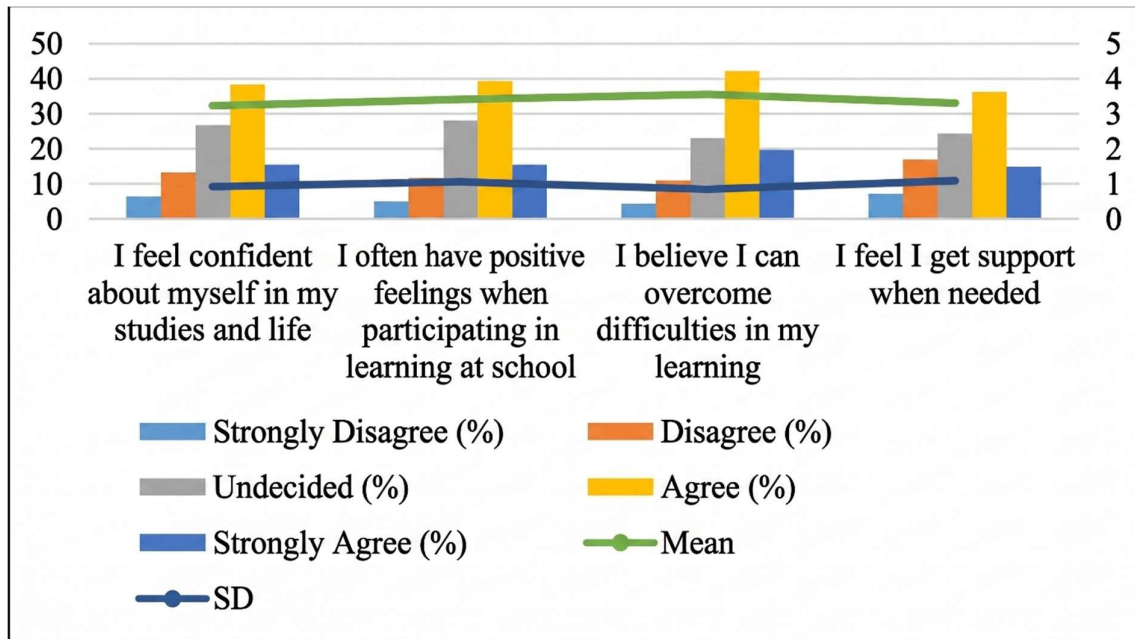
Source: Compiled by the author from research findings, 2026.

The above findings indicate that the educational environment at Son La College was generally evaluated positively by students, particularly in terms of a friendly learning atmosphere, respectful interactions, and the efforts made by lecturers and the institution to motivate learners. Nevertheless, students' perceptions regarding emotional support during periods of difficulty were not entirely consistent. This result suggests that, despite the institution's positive interventions, a certain gap remains between the support activities provided and the capacity of ethnic minority students to receive, recognize, or proactively seek such support. This also constitutes an important basis for explaining why, although a positive educational environment has been relatively well established, the transformation of this environment into sustainable community engagement among students still requires additional time and solutions more appropriately aligned with learners' psychological and cultural characteristics.

4.1.2. Individual Psychological Resources of Ethnic Minority Students

The variable group reflecting individual psychological resources indicates that students possessed a relatively positive psychological foundation, although it was not yet firmly established. Specifically, the item "confidence in oneself in learning and daily life" achieved a Mean score of 3.37; "frequently experiencing positive emotions while participating in learning activities at the institution" obtained a Mean score of 3.41; "believing in one's ability to overcome academic difficulties" reached a Mean score of 3.54; and "feeling supported when necessary" recorded a Mean score of 3.28. These indicators suggest that students were not in a completely passive state; however, their positive psychological resources remained only at a moderately positive level and were not yet sufficiently strong to generate stable proactivity in learning and social participation.

Figure 1. Level of Individual Psychological Resources among Students



Source: Compiled by the author from survey findings, 2026.

The results presented in Figure 2 indicate that the individual psychological resources of ethnic minority students at Son La College were generally at a moderately positive level, with mean scores ranging approximately from 3.3 to 3.5. Indicators relating to positive emotions and confidence in overcoming difficulties tended to achieve relatively higher scores, whereas perceptions of receiving support when needed remained comparatively lower. The distribution of responses demonstrates that agreement responses predominated; however, a proportion of students still lacked self-confidence or did not clearly perceive the availability of support. These findings suggest that, despite the existence of a relatively positive psychological foundation, additional forms of appropriate support are required in order to strengthen students' internal resources and promote more active participation.

4.1.3. Level of Community Engagement Capacity

Whereas the variables concerning the educational environment and psychological resources reflect foundational conditions, the variables relating to community engagement most clearly reveal the central issue of the study. The survey findings indicate that indicators associated with social relationships and perceptions of recognition generally reached relatively positive levels. Specifically, "having positive relationships with peers and lecturers" achieved a Mean score of 3.68; "feeling accepted and respected within the collective" obtained a Mean score of 3.47; and "being willing to participate in community-oriented activities" reached a Mean score of 3.51. However, the indicator "frequently participating in collective activities at the institution" recorded a Mean score of only 3.08, representing the lowest value across the entire questionnaire. Moreover, 31.4% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

The discrepancy between C2 and the remaining indicators suggests that community engagement among ethnic minority students currently exists in the form of an imbalance between perception and behavior. In other words, students may maintain relatively positive relationships with peers and lecturers and may demonstrate goodwill toward participation, yet these conditions are insufficient to translate into regular, proactive, and sustained involvement in the institution's community life. This constitutes a highly significant finding, as it indicates that community engagement cannot be evaluated solely through a sense of belonging or the quality of interpersonal relationships, but must also be examined at the behavioral level of actual participation.

Table 2. Survey Results for the Variable Group "Community Engagement"

Code	Survey Items	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Mean	SD

C1	I feel that I am part of the institutional community	6.3	13.8	25.3	39.1	15.5	3.39	1.01
C2	I frequently participate in collective activities at the institution	10.2	21.2	23.7	31.4	13.5	3.08	1.12
C3	I have positive relationships with peers and lecturers	3.8	9.6	20.6	46.2	19.8	3.68	0.91
C4	I feel accepted and respected within the collective	5.1	11.9	24.7	40.8	17.5	3.47	0.99
C5	I am willing to participate in community-oriented activities	5.4	13.2	21.7	41.6	18.1	3.51	0.97

Source: Compiled by the author from survey findings, 2026.

The findings indicate that community engagement among ethnic minority students at Son La College has not yet been fully developed as an integrated structure. Rather, it appears to be stronger at the level of attitudes and interpersonal relationships than at the level of collective participatory behavior.

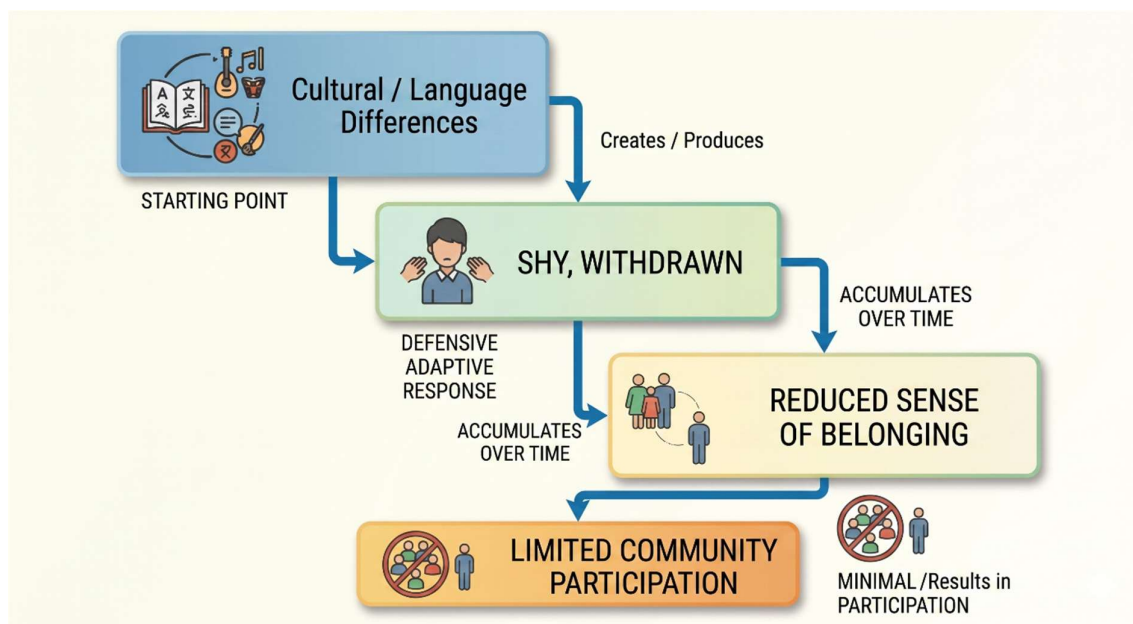
4.1.4. Barriers to Community Engagement

The qualitative data provide the necessary depth for interpreting the quantitative findings. Among the 17 interview participants, 12 respondents indicated that ethnic minority students were often shy, less proactive in communication during the initial stages, and tended to rely on pre-existing acquaintance groups. Eleven respondents emphasized that differences in culture, language, and learning methods constituted significant barriers throughout the adaptation process. Simultaneously, 9 out of 17 respondents suggested that some students did not genuinely feel that they “belonged” to the collective, while 10 out of 17 respondents observed considerable disparities in levels of participation in community activities among different student groups.

These findings indicate that limitations in community engagement do not originate solely from individual characteristics, but are associated with a complex process of social adaptation. Within this context, initial feelings of shyness should not be interpreted as inherent manifestations of passivity; rather, they should be understood as understandable responses of learners entering an environment characterized by substantial differences in communication patterns, cultural norms, and behavioral expectations. In the absence of sufficient supportive mechanisms, such initial hesitation can easily develop into prolonged social distance.

Notably, 13 out of 17 respondents agreed that when students were encouraged, recognized, and positively supported, they tended to become more open and participate more actively. This finding holds substantial explanatory significance, as it demonstrates that the issue does not lie in students’ unwillingness to participate; instead, many students have not yet been placed within conditions sufficiently favorable for them to feel secure, acknowledged, and confident enough to engage actively.

Figure 2. Major Barriers to Community Engagement among Ethnic Minority Students



Source: Analyzed and synthesized by the author, 2026.

The diagram presented in Figure 2 clarifies the mediating mechanism between contextual factors (cultural differences) and the final outcome (levels of community participation). Rather than viewing low participation as an isolated phenomenon, the diagram demonstrates that it constitutes the result of a cumulative chain of psycho-social influences. Accordingly, there is a need to shift the analytical approach from an emphasis on “individual deficits” toward a focus on “systemic conditions.” The findings indicate that students do not participate less because of a lack of intrinsic motivation, but rather because they have not yet overcome initial psychological barriers and have not been placed within conditions sufficiently conducive to fostering a sense of belonging.

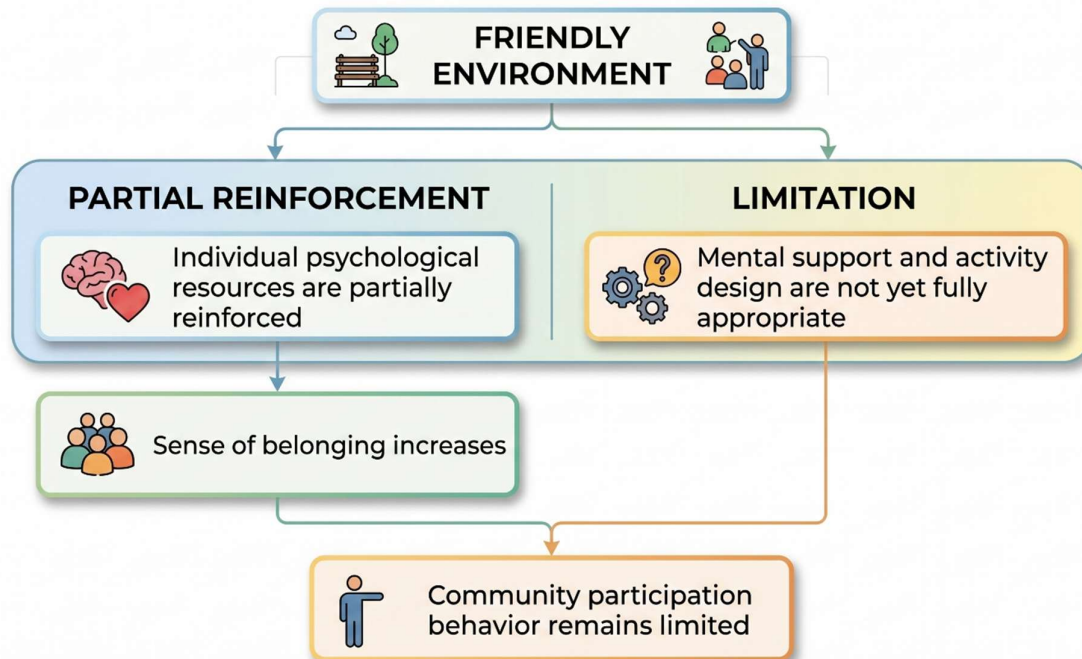
This interpretation is consistent with the logic of positive psychology, which emphasizes the role of the environment in activating individual resources. However, if interventions are directed solely at the “output stage” (for example, increasing activities or encouraging participation), their effectiveness may remain limited. By contrast, if interventions are implemented earlier within the process—such as supporting cultural adaptation, strengthening initial interactions, and reinforcing feelings of safety and recognition—the potential for improving community engagement is likely to become more sustainable.

4.2. Discussion

Through the comparison of quantitative and qualitative data, it becomes evident that the current bottleneck does not stem from a lack of institutional activities or the absence of a friendly learning environment. On the contrary, the overall environment was evaluated relatively positively, while basic social relationships were not perceived negatively. The core issue lies in the fact that these favorable elements have not yet been integrated into a sufficiently strong support system capable of generating and sustaining substantive community engagement. In other words, the institution appears to have established the necessary conditions for community engagement, but has not yet fully developed the sufficient conditions.

The necessary conditions are reflected in the existence of a friendly learning atmosphere, relatively positive social relationships, and the presence of collective activities. By contrast, the sufficient conditions depend upon the institution’s capacity to encourage individual strengths, provide timely emotional support, design activities aligned with the cultural and psychological characteristics of ethnic minority students, and enable students to participate as valued members of the collective. In the absence of these sufficient conditions, students may remain physically “present” within the educational environment without genuinely “belonging” to the community itself.

Figure 3. Interpretive Framework of the Research Findings



Source: Analyzed and synthesized by the author, 2026.

The research findings confirm that the application of positive psychology in education has clear practical significance for enhancing community engagement among ethnic minority students; however, its effectiveness does not operate through an automatic mechanism. A positive environment, friendly interpersonal relationships, and favorable emotional experiences merely establish an initial foundation. For community engagement to be genuinely developed, positive psychological resources must be strengthened through more in-depth forms of support and transformed into meaningful community-based experiences.

These findings are consistent with the perspective of positive psychology in demonstrating that individual resources and the educational environment do not exist independently, but rather interact reciprocally throughout the formation of social behavior. At the same time, the study contributes an important insight to research on community engagement: although a sense of belonging and interpersonal relationships are necessary, they remain insufficient. In the absence of mechanisms capable of moving students from a state of merely “being accepted” to one of “participating meaningfully,” community engagement is likely to remain superficial or symbolic in nature.

Within the context of Son La College, the findings indicate that ethnic minority students should not be viewed as a group lacking willingness to participate; rather, they constitute a group requiring greater support during the transitional process from individual adaptation to community integration. Therefore, the value of applying positive psychology extends beyond the creation of positive emotions in learning contexts. More fundamentally, it lies in the capacity to design an educational environment capable of recognizing differences, nurturing individual strengths, and expanding opportunities for meaningful participation among learners.

5. Conclusion

This study clarifies the role of the application of positive psychology in education in fostering community engagement among ethnic minority students at Son La College. The findings demonstrate that community engagement does not emerge automatically from a favorable learning environment; rather, it depends on the extent to which positive psychological resources are nurtured and transformed into substantive forms of social participation.

Overall, students expressed relatively positive evaluations of the learning environment and interpersonal relationships within the institution. Nevertheless, emotional support remained uneven, indicating that the existing positive environment is currently stronger in terms of its general climate than in its capacity to provide individualized support when students encounter difficulties. At the same time, students’ individual psychological resources were found to be

only moderately positive. Although students demonstrated certain positive emotions and levels of self-confidence, these resources were not sufficiently stable to be transformed into sustained forms of community participation.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the discrepancy between perceptions of engagement and actual participatory behavior. While relationships with peers and lecturers, as well as perceptions of acceptance, achieved relatively positive levels, the actual level of participation in collective activities was considerably lower. This indicates that students tend to be more “connected” than genuinely “engaged.”

Accordingly, the study confirms that the principal bottleneck does not lie in the absence of a friendly environment or a lack of institutional activities, but rather in the absence of effective mechanisms capable of transforming a “positive environment” into “substantive community engagement.” Although limited to the context of a single educational institution, the study demonstrates that the application of positive psychology in education, when implemented systematically and in alignment with contextual conditions, may constitute a feasible approach for strengthening community engagement among ethnic minority students.

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