

# Mental Well-Being of High School Students with Learning Challenges

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## Abstract:

This mixed-methods study investigated the mental well-being of learning-challenged high school students in a private Christian school with an explanatory sequential design. Identifying the rise in mental health disorders in learning difficulty adolescents, the study set out to investigate the types of learning difficulties and levels of mental well-being among different demographic and psychosocial variables including age, sex, birth order, academic support utilization, and participation in extracurricular activities, parental involvement, and monthly family income. The quantitative stage entailed giving the Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Inventory (LDDI) and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) to 17 identified students. Findings indicated that reading was the most prevalent learning difficulty, and the majority of students exhibited average levels of mental well-being. Lower scores for well-being were observed in those groups with high parental involvement and academic support utilization. The qualitative component, via focused group discussions, complemented the findings through offers of understanding the students' emotional experience and coping strategies. The research emphasizes the imperative for comprehensive school-based programs addressing learning and mental health concerns, laying the groundwork for the formulation of focused counseling interventions.

**Keywords:** mental well-being, learning difficulties, LDDI, WEMWBS, explanatory sequential design, academic support, parental involvement, adolescent mental health, Bacolod City

## Introduction:

Schools are among the most vital environments for promoting mental health, as they play a central role in shaping students' cognitive, emotional, and social development (Wiedermann, et al, 2023). A positive school setting supports healthy development, reduces psychosocial risks, and improves students' overall mental well-being (Jessiman, et al, 2022). In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward the educational and psychological needs of learners, positioning mental health as a priority concern in school systems, particularly for adolescents with learning difficulties (Karathanasi, 2023).

Mental health problems among adolescents have become one of the leading causes of disability worldwide (Cavioni, 2020), underscoring the importance of early, school-based mental health support (Blinkoff, et al, 2023). Chronic stress has been identified as a major barrier to effective learning; however, students who are able to regulate their emotions and employ adaptive coping strategies tend to show improved concentration, motivation, and academic engagement (Córdova, et al, 2023). Despite this, many adolescents experience persistent stressors such as academic workload, evaluation pressure, family conflict, and financial difficulties. These stressors contribute to symptoms of anxiety and depression, which in turn negatively affect school performance and overall well-being (Deng, et al, 2022; Bøe, et al, 2021).

Within the Philippine context, academic challenges remain a significant concern. Numerous Filipino students continue to struggle with comprehension, vocabulary, and problem-solving skills (Idulog, et al, 2023; Tomas, et al, 2021), while many express frustration with reading in both English and Filipino (Fernandez & Arriola, 2022). Difficulties in mastering basic mathematical concepts among older students have also been widely documented (Igarashi & Suryadarma, 2023). These academic difficulties persist across age groups (Cadiz-Gabejan & Quirino, 2021), indicating the need for sustained and developmentally appropriate interventions rather than short-term or isolated responses.

For students with learning challenges, persistent academic struggles can significantly undermine self-image, self-efficacy, and perceived competence (Caqueo-Urizar, et al, 2021). Without adequate institutional support, these students often resort to passive or solitary coping strategies, which may further exacerbate emotional distress. In contrast, students with higher levels of well-being are more likely to adopt adaptive coping mechanisms, including seeking peer support and engaging in collaborative problem-solving (Meijer, 2024). These findings highlight the critical role of schools in providing targeted mental health and psychosocial interventions, especially for learners with identified learning challenges.

Christian schools, while emphasizing academic excellence and moral formation, are likewise committed to the holistic development of learners, which includes emotional and mental wellness. As such, they are expected to design and implement programs that address students' mental health needs in alignment with their institutional mission. However, despite the acknowledged relationship between learning difficulties and mental health, many school-based programs remain generalized and fail to address the specific needs of students with learning challenges. This gap is evident even within Christian educational institutions that explicitly espouse holistic formation.

In the local school context of this study, anecdotal records compiled by the researcher in their role as guidance designate indicate recurring mental health concerns among students with learning difficulties. Despite the documentation of these concerns, no structured or specialized program currently exists to address their unique psychosocial needs. This situation reveals a critical gap in the school's support system and underscores the need for evidence-based interventions tailored to this vulnerable group.

In response to this gap, this study seeks to explore the mental well-being of high school students with learning challenges. Specifically, it examines mental well-being in relation to selected demographic and contextual variables, including age, sex, birth order, academic support utilization, extracurricular involvement, parental engagement, and family monthly income. By generating empirical data on these dimensions, the study aims to provide a foundation for the development of a counseling and integrative support program designed for students with learning challenges, as well as to inform the professional development and competencies of guidance advocates within the school setting.

## **Review of Related Literature**

Research on the mental well-being of students with learning challenges has increasingly drawn on ecological and strengths-based perspectives to explain how individual, familial, school, and societal factors interact to shape developmental outcomes. One of the most influential perspectives in this area is Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which conceptualizes human development as occurring within nested environmental systems that influence the individual over time (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

At the most immediate level, the microsystem includes settings such as the family and school, where direct interactions occur and exert a strong influence on students' academic and emotional development (Guy-Evans, 2024). Studies have shown that schools function as critical microsystems by shaping learning experiences through instructional practices, teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, and organizational climate (Panopoulos & Korea, 2020). For students with learning challenges, supportive school environments are associated with better academic engagement and emotional adjustment.

The mesosystem refers to the interrelationships among microsystems, particularly the connections between home and school. Empirical research has consistently highlighted the importance of teacher-parent collaboration in supporting students with learning difficulties, as aligned communication and shared expectations contribute to improved academic performance and psychological well-being. Beyond direct interactions, the exosystem includes contextual factors that indirectly influence students, such as school policies, administrative decisions, and parental employment conditions. These factors can affect access to learning resources, guidance services, and mental health support, thereby shaping students' educational experiences even when they are not actively involved in these systems (Mulisa, 2019).

At the broader societal level, the macrosystem encompasses cultural beliefs, social norms, and attitudes toward disability and learning challenges (Guy-Evans, 2024). Societal perceptions of learning difficulties have been shown to influence school practices and students' self-concept, either reinforcing stigma or promoting inclusion. Cultural

attitudes toward mental health and disability therefore play a crucial role in determining how students with learning challenges are supported. The chronosystem highlights the role of time and life transitions in development, including changes in educational policies, family circumstances, and developmental stages (Mulisa, 2019). Longitudinal perspectives suggest that learning difficulties and mental well-being are not static, but evolve in response to accumulated experiences and shifting environmental conditions.

In parallel with ecological perspectives, Positive Psychology has gained prominence in educational research by shifting attention from deficits to strengths, resilience, and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Pant & Rastogi, 2024). Rather than focusing solely on academic limitations, Positive Psychology emphasizes the development of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Kovich, et al, 2022).

Studies grounded in Positive Psychology have demonstrated that flourishing is closely associated with self-esteem, optimism, resilience, and social capital, all of which are protective factors for students with learning challenges (Nur'aini & Mulyana, 2024). Students who exhibit higher levels of these attributes are better able to cope with academic stressors and maintain psychological well-being despite learning difficulties.

Empirical evidence also supports the effectiveness of Positive Psychology interventions for learners with learning disabilities. Upadhyay (2020) found that interventions focusing on emotional well-being, gratitude, mindfulness, and positive attributional styles led to significant improvements in psychological functioning among children with learning disabilities. These findings suggest that strengths-based approaches can mitigate emotional distress and promote adaptive coping.

Research further emphasizes the importance of integrated support systems for students with learning difficulties. Children with learning disabilities require strong family environmental support and coordinated, systematic interventions to address their developmental challenges effectively. Family-focused strategies, when aligned with school-based initiatives, contribute to improved emotional and academic outcomes (Akoto, et al, 2022).

Overall, existing literature indicates that both environmental contexts and individual psychological resources are critical in understanding the mental well-being of students with learning challenges. Ecological perspectives highlight the influence of family, school, policy, and culture, while Positive Psychology underscores the role of resilience, strengths, and positive emotional functioning. Together, these bodies of research provide an empirical foundation for examining the mental well-being of high school students with learning challenges and underscore the need for context-sensitive and strengths-based approaches in educational settings.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods research design, specifically an explanatory sequential design, wherein quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted first, followed by a qualitative phase intended to explain and enrich the quantitative results (Toyon, 2021). In this design, priority is given to the quantitative phase, while the qualitative component provides deeper interpretation, clarification, and contextual understanding of numerical findings.

For the quantitative phase, a descriptive research design was utilized. Descriptive research focuses on identifying and outlining characteristics of a population or sample as they naturally occur (Coe et al., 2017, as cited in Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). It aims to describe attributes, conditions, or phenomena without manipulation (Thomas et al., 2023) and is appropriate for addressing descriptive research questions (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). This design was suitable for identifying the types of learning challenges experienced by high school students and determining their most prominent forms overall and across grouping variables, including age, sex, birth order, academic support utilization, parental engagement, extracurricular involvement, and family monthly income. It was likewise used to describe students' levels of mental well-being across the same variables.

The qualitative phase was conducted to explain, expand, and contextualize the quantitative results and to clarify patterns or outliers not fully accounted for by numerical data. In line with the explanatory sequential approach, qualitative data were intentionally used to explain quantitative findings (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023). A

phenomenological research design was employed to explore students' lived experiences and meanings related to learning challenges and mental well-being, emphasizing reflective engagement with the phenomenon under study (Oranga & Matere, 2023).

The study was conducted in a private Christian school during School Year 2023–2024. All assessments were administered by the school researcher, except for the Learning Disability Diagnostic Inventory (LDDI), which was administered by a licensed psychometrician to ensure standardized administration and interpretation.

The quantitative phase involved 17 high school students from Grades 7 to 12, identified through teacher anecdotal records and initial LDDI screening as having potential learning challenges. These students underwent formal LDDI assessment to determine specific learning challenge profiles and completed the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) to assess mental well-being. The same 17 students participated in the qualitative phase. Based on WEMWBS results, participants were grouped into those with very low to below-average mental well-being and those with average to above-average mental well-being. These groupings guided the conduct of focused group discussions (FGDs) to examine similarities and differences in lived experiences related to learning challenges and mental well-being.

Two standardized instruments were used in the quantitative phase. The LDDI is a norm-referenced tool designed to identify intrinsic processing disorders and learning disabilities among students aged 8 to 17. It consists of six scales—Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Mathematics, and Reasoning—aligned with criteria from the U.S. Office of Education and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities. Raw scores were converted to stanine scores (mean = 5, SD = 1.96) and percentile ranks using normative data. Stanine scores in the lower range (1–3) and percentile ranks below the 25th percentile were interpreted as indicative of possible learning challenges. Administration and scoring followed standardized manual procedures.

The WEMWBS consists of 14 positively worded items rated on a five-point Likert scale, yielding total scores from 14 to 70. Scores were classified as very low (14–40), below average (41–44), average (45–59), and above average (60–70). The scale assesses both emotional and functional aspects of mental well-being and is widely used in national and international research (Tennant, et al, 2007).

Qualitative data were collected through FGDs guided by a structured interview protocol covering informed consent, general well-being, learning challenges, contextual factors (age, sex, family, school, and socioeconomic conditions), in-depth mental well-being questions, and a closing statement. Discussions were audio-recorded, supported by field notes, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking.

The validity and reliability of the instruments were well established. The LDDI demonstrated strong internal consistency (coefficients > 0.90), stability, and inter-scorer reliability (0.80s–0.90s), with extensive evidence supporting its content, criterion, and construct validity (Hammill & Bryant, 1998). The WEMWBS likewise showed strong psychometric properties, including a unidimensional factor structure, high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.89–0.91$ ), test–retest reliability (0.83), and confirmed construct validity (Tennant et al., 2007; Lim, 2024). Its validity for Filipino populations has also been established (Aruta & Bulisig, 2022).

Trustworthiness in the qualitative phase was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement and authentic representation of participant perspectives (Cope, 2014; Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016; Enworo, 2023; Kakar et al., 2023). Transferability was supported through rich contextual descriptions, dependability through peer debriefing and process documentation (Kakar et al., 2023), and confirmability through reflexivity and grounding findings in participant data (Kortsjens & Moser, 2017).

Data collection followed a structured procedure. After securing institutional approval, informed consent and assent were obtained from students, parents or guardians, and teachers. Teacher anecdotal records were collected, followed by LDDI administration and WEMWBS completion. FGDs were conducted afterward, grouped by mental well-being classification, with sessions emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and honesty. Qualitative data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method (Meyers-Ellett et al., 2024). Quantitative data were

analyzed using frequencies and percentages for learning challenges and means and standard deviations for mental well-being levels.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Informed consent and assent were obtained, confidentiality was ensured, participation was voluntary, and special care was taken to protect participants as a vulnerable group. The study adhered to the principle of *do no harm*, provided support or referrals when distress was observed, and maintained cultural and contextual sensitivity to uphold ethical integrity in mixed methods research.

## Results

This encompasses the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the gathered data results from the Learning Disability Diagnostic Inventory and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scales (WEMWBS).

### *Learning Challenges*

The first problem examined the types of learning challenges experienced by high school students and identified the most dominant challenges overall and across age, sex, birth order, academic support utilization, extracurricular involvement, parental engagement, and family monthly income.

Across the sample, reading emerged as the most prevalent learning challenge, reported by 13 students (76%). Mathematics difficulties followed at 9 students (53%), while reasoning challenges were reported by 8 students (47%). Speaking difficulties were identified by 6 students (35%), and listening and writing difficulties were each reported by 5 students (29%). Overall, difficulties in reading, mathematics, and reasoning were more widespread than challenges in listening, speaking, and writing, with reading standing out as the dominant concern. Patterns across age groups showed minimal variation in reading difficulties, reported by 75% of younger students and 78% of older students. Mathematics challenges were more common among younger students (63%) than older students (44%), while reasoning difficulties were equally reported across age groups. Listening difficulties appeared slightly more often among younger students, whereas speaking and writing difficulties were more frequently reported by older students.

Sex-based differences revealed a broader distribution of learning challenges among male students. Among males, reading difficulties were most prevalent (79%), followed by reasoning (57%) and mathematics (50%). Speaking, listening, and writing difficulties were also reported. Female students reported fewer learning challenges overall, with reading remaining the most common (67%), followed by writing and mathematics (33% each), while no listening, speaking, or reasoning difficulties were reported. Across birth order categories, reading difficulties remained consistently high. All only children and youngest children reported reading difficulties, along with the majority of oldest and middle children. Mathematics challenges appeared across all birth orders, while reasoning difficulties were most frequent among middle and oldest children. Writing difficulties were observed primarily among oldest and youngest children, while listening difficulties were reported at comparable levels across all birth order groups.

Analysis by academic support utilization showed that reading difficulties persisted regardless of support use, though they were more frequent among students who did not utilize academic support. Students who accessed academic support more often reported reasoning and writing difficulties, while mathematics challenges were similarly distributed across both groups. Extracurricular involvement showed limited differences. Reading difficulties remained prevalent among both involved and uninvolved students, though uninvolved students reported higher rates of writing and reasoning difficulties.

Parental engagement was associated with variation in the *type* of learning challenges rather than their absence. Students with less engaged parents reported higher rates of reading difficulties, while those with engaged parents reported greater challenges in reasoning, writing, and mathematics. Family income analysis indicated a clear gradient in reading difficulties, increasing as income decreased. All low-income students and the majority of lower-middle-income students reported reading challenges. Middle-income students, however, exhibited a wider range of learning difficulties, particularly in listening, mathematics, and reasoning.

### *Level of Mental Well-Being*

The second problem examined the mental well-being of students with learning challenges overall and across the same demographic and contextual variables.

Cross-tabulation of learning profiles and WEMWBS categories showed that students with Very Low mental well-being reported multiple and overlapping learning difficulties, including profiles spanning all six domains. Those classified under Below Average mental well-being also exhibited overlapping difficulties, commonly involving reading combined with writing, mathematics, or speaking. Students with Average mental well-being demonstrated more varied combinations, ranging from single-domain difficulties to multiple overlapping challenges. In contrast, students classified under Above Average mental well-being reported more limited learning difficulty profiles.

Mean mental well-being scores showed minimal differences across age and sex. Younger students recorded a mean score of 48.88 (SD = 7.717), while older students recorded a mean of 45.22 (SD = 11.692), both interpreted as Average. Male students had a mean score of 47.36 (SD = 10.667), and female students recorded a mean of 45.00 (SD = 6.083), also within the Average range. Clearer differences emerged across birth order. Oldest children recorded the lowest mean score (M = 34.33, SD = 8.505), interpreted as Very Low. Middle, youngest, and only children all fell within the Average range, with only children recording the highest mean score.

Students who utilized academic support recorded a lower mean mental well-being score (M = 42.83, SD = 11.974), interpreted as Below Average, compared to those who did not utilize support (M = 49.18, SD = 8.238), interpreted as Average. Extracurricular involvement showed no substantial difference, as both involved and uninvolved students fell within the Average range. Parental engagement revealed an inverse pattern: students with engaged parents recorded a Below Average mean score, while those with less engaged parents remained within the Average range. Family income analysis showed that students from middle-income families recorded Below Average mental well-being, while lower-middle and low-income groups remained within the Average range.

### *Qualitative Results*

Five central themes emerged from the focused group discussions with students identified as having learning challenges and varying levels of mental well-being. These themes reflect the students' lived experiences of stress, coping, development, gender expectations, and family roles.

#### **Theme 1. Stressors and Emotional Triggers**

Participants described stress as cumulative and rooted in both school and home environments. Academic demands—projects, lessons, reporting, and assessments—were frequently identified as immediate stressors, particularly when compounded by family conflict and financial strain. Financial difficulties were associated with household tension, tuition anxiety, and persistent worry. Learning challenges, especially reading and writing difficulties, contributed to embarrassment, lowered self-confidence, withdrawal, and class avoidance.

#### **Theme 2. Coping Strategies and Emotional Regulation**

Coping was described as situational and fluctuating. Participants reported both passive strategies (sleep, withdrawal) and active strategies (socializing, seeking support). School-based supports such as tutorials, make-up classes, repeated instruction, and peer tutoring were highly valued, particularly in small-group settings. However, participants also described cognitive overload that limited the effectiveness of available support. Extracurricular activities, especially sports, served as emotional outlets for some, while others were hindered by shyness or fear of embarrassment.

#### **Theme 3. Development and Age-Based Differences**

Younger adolescents often minimized stress or failed to recognize it, while older students described stress as persistent and unavoidable. Participants noted that growing older brought increased responsibilities and a greater need for emotional regulation.

#### **Theme 4. Gendered Expectations and Mental Health Expression**

Gender norms strongly shaped emotional expression. Male participants described pressure to remain stoic and avoid vulnerability, while female participants were expected to express emotions openly but were criticized for being “too emotional.” Gendered expectations also extended to role responsibilities, with males pressured toward strength and females toward household competence.

### Theme 5. Family Roles, Birth Order, and Responsibility

Birth order significantly influenced stress experiences. Eldest siblings reported heavy responsibility and achievement pressure. Middle children described emotional distance and independence. Youngest children expressed fatigue from constant comparison, while only children reported loneliness alongside perceptions of reduced stress. Parental involvement emerged as complex, viewed as both supportive and, at times, emotionally overwhelming.

### Discussion and Analysis

The overall distribution of learning challenges indicates that reading is the most dominant concern in the sample, followed by mathematics and reasoning. This pattern is consistent with evidence that Filipino learners continue to struggle with comprehension and vocabulary despite ongoing literacy initiatives (Idulog et al., 2023). It also resonates with findings that many learners report frustration in reading in both English and Filipino, highlighting the need for sustained, school-based literacy support with stakeholder involvement (Tomas et al., 2021). Taken together, the dominance of reading difficulties suggests that literacy remains a foundational barrier with spillover effects on higher-order academic tasks reliant on comprehension and language processing.

Reading challenges were comparably high in both younger and older students, suggesting persistence across age groups rather than natural resolution through grade progression. This supports the view that learning problems may remain stable across cohorts when not addressed through sustained interventions (Cadiz-Gabejan & Quirino, 2021). Mathematics difficulty also appeared in both age groups, aligning with concerns that older students may still struggle with foundational mathematics content at levels below expected grade competence (Igarashi & Suryadarma, 2023). The relatively higher rates of speaking and writing difficulties among older students may reflect growing output-based demands as students advance, where written production, oral reporting, and academic discourse become more frequent expectations.

Well-being results by age placed both groups in the average range, yet older students showed lower means and greater variability. This pattern can be interpreted alongside literature noting that older students with SLDs may experience heightened stress as academic and social demands intensify (Stein et al., 2024), and that emotional and behavioral challenges can vary developmentally, making age-responsive supports important (Aro et al., 2021). Broader evidence that adolescents experienced greater mental health deterioration during systemic disruption (e.g., the pandemic) compared to younger children further supports the possibility that age-linked variability reflects overlapping pressures beyond learning challenges alone (Kauhanen et al., 2023).

Male students reported more learning challenges across domains than female students. This aligns with findings that male learners may show higher incidence rates of specific learning difficulties in inclusive contexts, especially in reading, writing, and mathematics (Syamsi & Dharma, 2023), and parallels reports of more pronounced mathematics difficulties among male students in some settings (Abdulsahib, 2021). However, sex-related patterns are not always linear and can shift with developmental timing, including variation in verbal intelligence and verbal comprehension correlations across childhood and early adolescence (Rzhanova et al., 2023). In this study, reading remained the most common concern across sexes, suggesting a shared core literacy barrier despite differences in breadth of reported difficulties.

For mental well-being, both male and female groups fell in the average range, though interpretation should remain cautious given the small female subgroup. Still, the similarity suggests that sex differences in learning challenge profiles do not necessarily translate into sharply different well-being classifications in this sample. Related literature indicates that gender-linked differences in cognitive flexibility among learners with disabilities may influence emotion regulation capacities (Khasawneh & Saleem, 2021), while other work suggests females may show strengths in some interpersonal or attitudinal dimensions yet experience different well-being dynamics overall (Lu et al., 2021). These perspectives support the interpretation that comparable mean well-being scores can mask different stress pathways across groups.

Birth order findings showed reading difficulties across categories, but the most striking result was mental well-being: oldest children fell in the very low category, whereas middle, youngest, and only children fell in the average category,

with only children showing the highest mean. This aligns with evidence that firstborn/oldest children may experience higher anxiety and depression in some contexts (Franklin et al., 2024) and supports the view that birth order can shape exposure to expectations as family roles evolve (Bjrkregren and Svaleryd, 2023). Family relational dynamics are also critical: adverse parent–child interactions can influence well-being and may be more salient for eldest children when responsibility burdens are heavier (Kalaitzaki et al., 2020). Higher well-being among youngest children partially aligns with findings that last-born children may show higher resilience (Fukuya et al., 2021), although only children can exhibit unique emotional patterns and are not uniformly advantaged (Fukuya et al., 2021). Priyanshu and Pandey (2025) reinforce that family environment mediates birth order effects, supporting interpretation of birth order as a marker for role pressures and relational dynamics rather than a direct causal mechanism.

A notable quantitative pattern is that students who utilized academic support displayed lower mental well-being on average than those who did not. This should not be read as academic support harming well-being; rather, it may indicate that students referred to or seeking support have more severe or multi-domain difficulties, carrying a heavier stress load. Still, literature acknowledges that intensified tutoring can be associated with depressive emotions when it contributes to fatigue or reduced rest (Fan et al., 2025), and that achievement-oriented interventions may increase stress if implemented without attention to learner experience and balance (Brown et al., 2023). Tutoring can raise confidence and performance but may lose effectiveness when overly intense (Zheng et al., 2020), while other findings highlight potential emotional benefits such as improved motivation and appreciation for learning (Belleza et al., 2024). Taken together, academic supports must be calibrated to academic need and psychological load so that they strengthen coping rather than amplify strain.

Learning challenge distributions by support utilization further suggest that those accessing support present with notable reading and reasoning difficulties, consistent with the view that academic support can improve adjustment by strengthening psychological resources such as psychological capital (Hazan-Liran & Walter, 2023). It also aligns with arguments that structured interventions—peer tutoring, collaborative learning, guided supervision—can strengthen engagement and motivation (Dumitru et al., 2024), particularly for students facing cognitively demanding challenges.

Extracurricular involvement produced similar average well-being levels for involved and uninvolved students, but learning patterns differed: uninvolved students showed higher rates of reasoning and writing difficulties. Literature suggests enriched curricula and extracurricular participation can benefit learners with learning disorders (Hegedűs & Sebestyén, 2024), though benefits may be moderated by access and family background. Extracurricular programs may enhance engagement (Khasawneh, 2021), while participation is shaped by parental beliefs and perceived need (Fritzler & Wild, 2023). Evidence further indicates extracurricular participation can buffer stress and support well-being (Hossan et al., 2021; Mukest et al., 2022), and that certain activity types (sports, interest clubs) may yield stronger psychosocial outcomes (Knifsend & Juvonen, 2023). The current pattern therefore suggests extracurricular activities may function as a protective factor, but effects depend on quality, fit, accessibility, and consistent participation rather than involvement alone.

An apparent contradiction appears in parental engagement findings: students categorized under “not engaged” parents showed higher mean well-being than those under “engaged.” This differs from evidence linking parental involvement with better adolescent mental health and reduced risk behaviors (Baig et al., 2021) and from findings of a weak but significant positive correlation between parental involvement and mental well-being (De Quiros, 2025). A plausible explanation is that engagement here may be reactive—parents become “more engaged” when distress or academic difficulty is already elevated. Another interpretation is that what matters is not frequency but the quality and the student’s perception of involvement; perceived involvement shapes self-esteem and peer relationships (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). Barriers such as stigma, limited communication channels, and parental educational constraints can complicate engagement effects (Oranga et al., 2022). School–family collaboration also carries broader developmental implications, aligning with the role of teacher–parent collaboration in student formation (Ariani et al., 2022). These perspectives suggest “engagement” may operate differently depending on context: supportive, autonomy-enhancing involvement may protect well-being, while controlling or stress-reactive involvement may not.

Learning patterns by parental engagement further showed that engaged groups had higher rates of reasoning and writing difficulties. This may reflect better identification of higher-order needs when parents are attentive, or more complex academic profiles among students whose families are already mobilized around support. Overall, the findings

point toward partnership-based engagement that strengthens communication, reduces stigma, and supports emotional needs.

Income patterns showed reading difficulty increasing as income decreases, reaching universality in the low-income group. This aligns with evidence linking socioeconomic disadvantage to higher risk for learning and behavioral problems and reduced academic outcomes (Español-Martín et al., 2023), and with work suggesting fewer socioeconomic resources limit access to experiences and materials that build foundational literacy (Romeo et al., 2022). It also fits research indicating income and parental education indirectly shape achievement through pathways such as prior knowledge and learning opportunities (Amalina & Vidákovich, 2023). However, mental well-being showed middle-income students with lower mean well-being than lower-middle and low-income groups, suggesting well-being may be shaped by resilience, peer support, school culture, and family relational patterns beyond material resources alone. Literature notes that resilience can mediate learning burnout and well-being (Wu et al., 2022), while income effects can operate through psychosocial mechanisms such as communication, aspirations, and peer influences (Wen et al., 2020). Thus, financial status may predict learning difficulty more strongly than subjective well-being in a small school-based sample where protective relational factors may buffer distress.

Cross-tabulation patterns suggest that students in lower well-being categories more often presented with multiple overlapping learning challenges, while those in higher well-being categories tended to show less complex profiles. This supports the view that learning challenges and psychological well-being are closely linked when difficulties accumulate or remain unaddressed (Lombardi et al. 2021). It also aligns with evidence that academic struggle can undermine perceived competence and self-image (Caqueo-Úrizar, et al, 2021), and that chronic stress interferes with motivation and concentration unless students have effective coping strategies (Córdova, et al, 2023). At the same time, the presence of students with complex profiles within the average well-being category suggests protective buffers, consistent with findings that higher well-being is associated with healthier coping such as seeking peer support (Meijer, 2024).

Overall, the quantitative findings reinforce the need for interventions that address learning challenges and mental well-being together rather than treating them as separate domains. The persistence of reading and mathematics difficulties across groupings, and the link between multi-domain profiles and lower well-being, suggest that support programs must be sustained, multi-layered, and sensitive to developmental stage and family context. Supports should also be responsive to how students experience academic assistance, extracurricular opportunities, parental engagement, and socioeconomic constraints. In line with broader literature, coordinated systems of support—family-informed, school-embedded, and psychologically attuned—are critical for learners with learning disabilities (Akoto, et al, 2022), particularly when the goal is to strengthen both academic functioning and emotional stability.

The qualitative phase deepened these patterns by showing how learning challenges intersect with daily stress, emotion regulation, developmental stage, gendered expectations, and family roles. Students framed mental well-being as fluctuating rather than fixed, dependent on accumulated school demands, home conditions, and the availability—or limits—of support systems. This helps explain why contextual variables (parental engagement, support utilization, income) did not always follow a simple “more support = higher well-being” pattern.

Students described stress as layered, with academic pressures and home stressors amplifying each other. This aligns with evidence that chronic stress can undermine learning performance, yet emotion management and coping can protect concentration and motivation (Cordova et al., 2023). Their accounts paired school demands with family conflict, financial strain, and instability, reflecting findings that stress often stems from both educational and non-educational factors, including financial problems and domestic conflict (Deng et al., 2022). Financial pressure was linked to tuition anxiety, family conflict, and persistent tension, consistent with evidence that adolescents experiencing financial difficulties report more mental health problems (Bøe et al., 2021).

Crucially, students connected stress to belongingness and self-evaluation. Reading comprehension difficulty, confusion in following instructions, and struggles in written expression were described as producing embarrassment, shame, avoidance, and withdrawal—supporting the view that learning difficulty can harm self-image and perceived competence (Caqueo-Úrizar et al., 2021). The emotional burden was not only the difficulty itself, but also the social meaning attached to it: fear of judgment, falling behind, and not belonging.

Coping narratives reflected adaptive and maladaptive patterns, often shifting depending on emotional intensity and overload. Sleeping, isolating to cry, seeking friends, and using distraction echoed evidence that problem-focused coping relates to better mental health, while lower well-being is associated with more passive or solitary coping strategies (Meijer, 2024). Students’ descriptions of responses ranging from withdrawal to expressive release also align with findings that emotion intensity shapes regulation strategy selection (Kozubal et al., 2023). Rather than one “best” coping style, the data suggest a coping repertoire shaped by perceived safety, access to support, and the pressures of school and home.

Institutional supports were framed as meaningful when they reduce shame and increase clarity—tutorials, make-up classes, repeated instruction, and peer tutoring were described as especially helpful. This aligns with arguments that schools promote youth well-being when academic and health supports are integrated into everyday practice (Pulimeno et al., 2020). Students emphasized relational support from teachers and peers, consistent with evidence that teacher and peer support fosters engagement among learners with learning difficulties (Martinot et al., 2022). However, they also described cognitive overload—moments when support exists but cannot be fully used because the mind is crowded by worry—suggesting that psychological load can limit even well-designed support mechanisms.

Extracurricular participation emerged as a potential buffer, with sports and clubs described as stress-relieving, consistent with evidence that physical activity supports self-evaluation and mental health (Zhu et al., 2024). Yet students reported barriers such as shyness and fear of embarrassment, indicating that the protective value of extracurricular activities depends on psychological safety and guided access, not simply availability.

Developmental differences were evident: younger adolescents often minimized stress or did not recognize it, while older adolescents described stress as persistent and tied to responsibility. This aligns with evidence that stress appraisal and coping differ by age (Anderson et al., 2023), suggesting that “stress awareness” itself is a developmental transition that shapes why older students may show greater variability in well-being even within similar average ranges.

Gendered expectations shaped emotional expression and help-seeking. Boys described pressure to suppress emotion and fear ridicule, while girls described both greater permission to express emotion and criticism for being “too emotional.” This supports evidence that adherence to gender norms influences distress patterns, with masculinity-linked traits associated with lower reported distress among men (Mommersteeg et al., 2023). These dynamics matter because they can shape disclosure, counseling participation, and willingness to seek support.

Family role expectations were among the most salient influences. Eldest children described heavy responsibility and achievement pressure; middle children described being overlooked and becoming self-reliant; youngest children described fatigue from comparisons; and only children described isolation. These accounts reflect the idea that birth order can shape well-being patterns (Fukuya et al., 2021), but more strongly suggest that responsibility distribution and family role pressures shape emotional burden. Parental involvement was similarly complex: while “super involvement” could feel supportive, it could also feel autonomy-restricting, supporting the view that involvement benefits must be balanced to avoid negative consequences (Rong, 2024).

In synthesis, the qualitative results suggest that learning challenges become psychologically harmful when they trigger chronic shame, exclusion feelings, and relentless comparison—especially under family conflict or financial strain. Well-being is supported when students experience relational safety, accessible academic scaffolding, and coping outlets that reduce overload. These insights reinforce the implication that interventions must be integrative: strengthening literacy and mathematics supports while building emotion regulation skills, peer support structures, and family–school partnerships that reduce stigma and respect student autonomy.

Joint Display of Results

| Research Question and Variable    | Quantitative Findings | Qualitative Themes | Integrated Interpretation |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| RQ1: Types of Learning Challenges |                       |                    |                           |

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                            |                                                                                          |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Overall                     | Reading was most dominant at 76%, followed by Mathematics at 53%, reasoning at 47%, speaking at 35%, and listening and writing at 29%, respectively.                                                                        | Reading comprehension, instruction following, writing difficulty, shame, and academic disengagement.                       | Reading is the core challenge affecting both educational and emotional domains.          |
| Age                         | Reading difficulties were common across age groups. Older students have more problems with speaking and writing, while younger students have more issues with Mathematics and reasoning.                                    | Younger students see stress as minor; older students show mature reflection and internalization.                           | Age influences academic strain perception; older students carry deeper emotional burdens |
| Sex                         | Reading was the most common challenge among sex groups. For male it was followed by difficulties in reasoning, Mathematics, speaking, listening, and writing. While for females, it is followed by mathematics and writing. | Males hide emotions; females more expressive but stigmatized.                                                              | Coping strategies differ by gender; males may be emotionally under-supported.            |
| Birth Order                 | Reading was the most common challenge across all birth order groups, with only children and youngest children showing higher rates compared to oldest and middle children.                                                  | The oldest carry more responsibility; the youngest feel compared to others; and the middle children often feel overlooked. | Family roles tied to learning and stress responses; eldest at higher emotional risk.     |
| Academic Support            | Both groups, utilizing and not utilizing academic support, showed difficulty in reading, but none utilization group scored higher than the other group.                                                                     | Peer and tutorial support can be helpful but may add stress.                                                               | Support helps academically, but emotional toll exists if not holistic.                   |
| Extracurricular Involvement | Both involved and uninvolved group most common learning challenge was reading, with uninvolved group scored higher than the involved group.                                                                                 | School clubs and sports help reduce stress, but some students avoid it due to shame.                                       | Activities help well-being but don't lessen learning challenges without integration.     |
| Parental Engagement         | Most common learning challenge for not engage group was reading, while for engage group it was reasoning.                                                                                                                   | Some value involvement, others feel pressured or misunderstood.                                                            | Quality of engagement affects outcomes more than presence.                               |
| Family Income               | Both low income and lower middle group had a majority of students having reading as their most challenging area, while for middle                                                                                           | Poverty linked to stress, anxiety, educational limits.                                                                     | Socioeconomic gaps deepen academic and psychological challenges.                         |

group, listening, mathematics, and reasoning all tied as the most challenging for them.

## RQ2: Level of Mental Well-being

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                     |                                                                         |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Overall                     | “Average” WEMWBS scores across students.                                                                                                                                       | Fluctuating emotional states; moments of isolation or shame.                                        | Despite average scores, many students experience quiet distress.        |
| Age                         | Younger students (M = 48.88) and older students (M = 45.22), both fall within the Average level.                                                                               | Older students tend to be more self-aware and stressed; while younger students are less reflective. | Age correlates with increased emotional complexity and pressure.        |
| Sex                         | Males (M = 47.36) and Females (M = 45.00), both fall in Average level.                                                                                                         | Males hide emotions; females face pressure to share or cope publicly.                               | Gender norms affect how students report or mask emotional states.       |
| Birth Order                 | Oldest children reported the lowest mean score (M = 34.33) and fall in the Very Low level, while other birth order group fall within the Average.                              | The oldest children bear heavy family expectations such as paying back and setting good example.    | Firstborn students experience emotional overload due to responsibility. |
| Academic Support            | With academic support group fall in the Below Average level (M = 42.83), while without academic support group had a higher mean score (M = 49.18) and fall within the Average. | Academic support helps but can cause stress or stigma.                                              | Interventions must be supportive academically and emotionally.          |
| Extracurricular Involvement | Both groups fall within the Average level.                                                                                                                                     | Activities ease stress, but access and confidence vary.                                             | Engagement improves mental health; shy students may be excluded.        |
| Parental Engagement         | Students with parental engagement showed Below Average well-being (M = 44.00), while those not engaged had an Average well-being score (M = 49.56).                            | Some feel restricted or judged despite parental involvement.                                        | Support must be perceived as empathetic and empowering.                 |

|               |                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                          |                                                                   |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Family Income | Students from low-income families reported the highest well-being ( $M = 52.33$ , upper Average), while middle-income students had the lowest ( $M = 41.60$ , Below Average). | Low-income students develop resilience despite hardship. | Well-being may be buffered by community support and grit factors. |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|

Note: RQ=Research Question; M=Mean; WEMWBS=Warnick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale

## Conclusion

Based on the data gathered, presented, and analyzed, several conclusions were drawn regarding the learning challenges and mental well-being of high school students with learning challenges in a private Christian school.

First, reading emerged as the most persistent and dominant learning barrier among the respondents. Regardless of sex, extracurricular involvement, birth order, parental engagement, or family income, reading difficulties were consistently present. This indicates that reading challenges cut across demographic and contextual differences and remain a foundational academic concern at the high school level. While other learning challenges—such as writing, reasoning, listening, and mathematics—were also identified, these tended to surface more strongly within specific subgroups. For instance, students from middle-income families showed a wider range of learning difficulties, while those with engaged parents exhibited challenges particularly in reasoning alongside reading. These patterns suggest that learning difficulties are not uniform but are shaped by contextual and familial factors.

Second, in terms of mental well-being, the majority of students with learning challenges fell within the *average range* as measured by the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. This indicates that, despite experiencing academic difficulties, most students function at a level comparable to their peers and are generally “doing okay.” However, important variations were observed. Students who were the eldest in their families exhibited very low mental well-being, highlighting the emotional burden associated with heightened responsibility and family expectations. Additionally, students who utilized academic support services and those with highly engaged parents tended to report below-average mental well-being, suggesting that increased intervention or involvement may coincide with greater stress, pressure, or heightened awareness of academic difficulties.

Third, the findings underscore that support mechanisms alone do not automatically translate to improved mental well-being. Academic support utilization and parental engagement, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently contribute to emotional strain if they are perceived as controlling, excessive, or stigmatizing. This indicates the importance of balancing academic assistance with sensitivity to students’ emotional states, autonomy, and capacity to cope.

The study concludes that learning challenges—particularly reading difficulties—remain a critical academic concern, and their emotional impact is shaped by family dynamics, support systems, and socioeconomic context. While many students demonstrate resilience and maintain average mental well-being, specific groups are more vulnerable and require targeted attention. These findings highlight the necessity of integrated interventions that simultaneously address academic skills, emotional regulation, family-school collaboration, and contextual stressors. A holistic, student-centered approach—consistent with the mission of Christian education—can better support both the academic success and mental well-being of learners with learning challenges.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to address both the learning challenges and the mental well-being of high school students with learning difficulties:

First, future research is strongly recommended to involve a larger and more diverse sample of students. The present study was limited by a small sample size, which may affect the generalizability and conclusiveness of the results. Expanding the sample across different grade levels, schools, or contexts would allow for more robust statistical analysis and richer qualitative insights. Future studies are also encouraged to continue using formal and standardized

assessment tools, such as the Learning Disabilities Diagnostic Inventory, to ensure accurate identification of learning challenges and to better capture individual differences among learners.

Second, given that reading emerged as the most dominant learning challenge and was closely linked to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and emotional distress, it is recommended that Guidance Services develop and institutionalize a regular, school-based intervention program specifically designed for students with learning challenges. Such a program should not focus solely on academic remediation but must also prioritize students' mental well-being. Providing structured spaces for emotional expression, validation, and peer connection can help reduce stigma, enhance self-esteem, and promote psychological safety among students who struggle academically.

Third, the findings highlight the critical role of parents and teachers in shaping students' emotional experiences. While involvement is essential, excessive pressure or misaligned expectations may inadvertently contribute to stress and lower mental well-being. Thus, schools are encouraged to conduct seminars, trainings, and workshops for parents and teachers that focus on understanding learning challenges, recognizing emotional distress, and responding with empathy and supportive strategies. These capacity-building activities should equip adults with practical tools to balance guidance with autonomy, reinforce positive coping, and foster emotionally nurturing learning environments at home and in school.

Fourth, considering the need for a more systematic and integrative approach, it is recommended that schools strengthen guidance and support services by combining academic intervention with mental health support. Such initiatives should include early identification of reading difficulties, targeted literacy assistance paired with coping and self-regulation skill development, and the integration of mental health practices into regular academic routines. Emphasis should also be placed on collaboration among students, parents, teachers, and guidance personnel, as well as on continuous monitoring of students' academic progress and mental well-being. Delivering these components in a structured and recurring manner can promote consistency, sustainability, and responsiveness to students' evolving needs.

Lastly, schools are encouraged to consider economic sensitivity in policy and program implementation. Although many students from low-income backgrounds demonstrated resilience, financial strain remains a significant stressor. Flexible payment schemes, subsidies, or targeted assistance for tuition and learning resources may help reduce anxiety and ensure equitable access to both academic and counseling services.

Overall, the study recommends a holistic, student-centered, and compassionate approach—one that integrates academic support, emotional care, family engagement, and socioeconomic awareness. Such an approach is essential to supporting the academic success and mental well-being of high school students with learning challenges and is aligned with the mission of schools committed to holistic development.

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