



# A Comparison of In-class Student Engagement and School Environment between Refugee and Host Community Students

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## ABSTRACT

As wars and persecutions persist in many parts of the world, education and integration programmes for refugees have received more attention in recent years. This research attempts to illuminate differences between the host community and refugee students through students' eyes in the Kurdistan region of Iraq- Sulaymaniyah city. Our main research aims were to have a quantitative understanding of the differences and associations between the elements of in-class student engagement (preparations for classes, active listening and participation) and school environment (social environment: student-teacher relationship, student-student relationship and physical environment). The sample consisted of 193 grade 8 and 9 students in Sulaymaniyah province (104 host community students and 89 Syrian refugee students). The comparative analysis was made based on the available data and study statistics. The statistical analysis showed that there were significant statistical differences between the two groups of students regarding preparation for classes and class participation, while there was not a significant difference between them regarding active listening in class. Significant differences related to social and environment satisfaction were also revealed. Through correlation tests, associations were found between in-class student engagement and social environment elements.

**Keywords:** *Host Community, Refugee, Class Engagement, Teacher-Student Relation, School Environment*

## Introduction

International human rights guarantee the right to education for all in article 26, "everyone has the right to education". Different educational and international organizations have universally acknowledged it, including UNICEF, OECD and World Bank (Cerna, 2019; World Bank & UNHCR, 2021). The right to education includes different groups in different contexts, including women, refugees, migrants and indigenous people in armed conflict situations or possible vulnerable situations. This recognized right has led to being confirmed in national constitutions as well (UNESCO, 2013). Literacy and numeracy abilities have been frequently highlighted as the most important component in minimizing

poverty and enhancing active participation in their communities economic, political, and cultural life (OECD, 1996). The point of providing the basic right of education is that the foundation for a child's path to a bright future is laid in their early years of education. Education is a key to unlocking the future generation's potential of change-makers, but educational objectives cannot be reached without considering the quality of education. Thus, basic education quality includes the support of families for children, providing facilities and sources of learning, good health for participation and learning and a healthy environment (UNICEF, 2000). The definition of quality of education relies on the political, economic, and social contexts because the strength of education systems and provision of facilities and sources are directly linked to the above components. Research has revealed that psychosocial stimulation to children, well-nutrition, and physical activities positively influence cognition, particularly in early elementary and middle school pupils. It helps to retain intelligence for a more extended period as the child gets older (WHO, 2006).

Student's academic performance and behaviour are both influenced by their physical surroundings. Physically safe and well-maintained classrooms encourage children to study, improve their grades, and demonstrate appropriate behaviour. This paper attempts to quantitatively reveal the differences between host community students and refugees regarding the in-class student engagement school environment. Then, it examines associations between students' in-class engagement (preparation for classes, active listening, attention, class preparation), school environment (social environment: student-teacher relationship and student-student relationship), and the physical environment of schools. The research questions and hypothesis of the study are the following:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** Are there differences between host community students and Syrian refugee students regarding in-class engagements? **H1:** There are significant differences between student groups and in-class engagements.

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Are there differences between host community students and Syrian refugee students regarding school environments? **H2:** There are significant differences between student groups regarding the school environment.

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** Are there any associations between in-class engagement and the school environment? **H3:** The school environment is not correlated to in-class student engagement.

### **Physical school environment**

A school's physical environment comprises buildings, furniture, technology, instructional materials, labs, libraries, and playgrounds. The term physical environment refers to the site, structures, furnishings, infrastructure, room, and tools needed for efficient teaching and learning (Ene-Obong et al., 2012). These facilities must be safe, hygienic, and favourable to all students' and staff's health and well-being. Internal climate, illumination, sound, architecture, interior decorating, furnishings, and other indoor facilities are additional factors to consider while designing your school's physical environment. A high-quality, safe physical environment positively influences students' views and motivations about their learning capacity, academic achievement, and prosocial behaviour. Heating, lighting, and acoustics are just a few examples of the fundamentals of the physical environment that can be considered while designing a school. Many reviews of the effects of the physical school environment on learning have found that these fundamental physical features have the most significant

influence. It is vital to note that all of these elements are important because they improve the classroom setting (Woolner et al., 2018).

Classroom furniture, walls, ceiling, chalkboard, fittings, decorations, and everything else that makes teaching and learning possible in a given space make up what is known as the physical learning environment. Children benefit significantly from being in an environment that challenges them intellectually and physically. The school's environment, the teachers' dispositions, and the students' personalities are all crucial elements in determining the efficacy of the learning process (Land & Jonassen, 2012; Stronge, 2018). The classroom environment, the school, and the community also impact students' performance. The classroom setting has a significant impact on students' ability to acquire a variety of learning outcomes. Students are more encouraged to learn when the classroom has pleasant elements to their bodies, minds, and eyes (Goodlad, 1984).

Asiyai (2011) asserts that a safe and stimulating classroom setting is crucial to students' academic and personal growth. She insisted that such setting is ideal for improving cognitive, emotional, and motor skills. Youth and children everywhere have a right to a school climate that is free from fear and fosters growth and development. The classroom should be a place where everyone feels welcome, where students can take pride in their achievements, where differences are celebrated, and where people of all backgrounds may develop mutually beneficial connections. Nworgu (2006) argues that excellent health necessitates the provision of sewage and efficient garbage disposal, as well as good lighting and ventilation, especially in packed classrooms. Fraser (2012) highlights the fact that children are more likely to interact with one another and acquire abilities such as language and social behaviour when the classroom is effectively organised and provides a supportive climate for them to do so. Inappropriate classroom layout might restrict students' movement and provoke behavioural problems among students. In addition, according to Gueldner et al. (1997), the happiness, belonging, identity, and success of a student can all be impacted by the school's atmosphere. Davis-Langston (2012) found that their school's atmosphere most affected children's learning and academic performance.

Consequently, the physical and social components of a particular environment can either facilitate or impede learning and study. A high-quality physical environment that is well-maintained and safe promotes positive attitudes and motives regarding students' ability to study, academic achievement, and prosocial behaviour.

### **Social school environment**

From infancy to maturity, nurturing and responsive connections with loving adults lay the groundwork for normal growth and academic achievement. Social interactions and emotions impact learning. Positive emotions like interest and excitement and positive relationships like trust in the teacher help open up the mind to learning (Linda & Harvey, 2018). The ability of children to regulate their feelings is another factor that plays a role in the educational process. For instance, developing self-control, self-regulation, and attentional focus lays the basis for learning and the capacity to persevere through challenging tasks and follow interests for an extended period. Effective learning and lifelong behaviours are all influenced by students' interpersonal skills, which also include their capacity for cooperative interaction with peers and adults, resolving disagreements, and teamwork. These skills

can be learnt because they depend on feeling compassion, being aware of your own feelings and the feelings of others, and being able to communicate and deal with problems. Effective learning also depends on how motivated students are and on their "metacognitive skills," or their ability to keep track of and evaluate what they are learning and how well they understand it.

Children who don't feel they're being labelled have a better chance of making progress (for instance, by revising their work). Students who are well-liked by their teachers and classmates are more invested in their education and more willing to make an attempt. When children do not feel safe or supported, they cannot learn as effectively as when they are not afraid or upset. As a result, adolescents need a nurturing environment and well-honed skills to manage the pressures and tensions they'll face in school and afterwards. Therefore, schools should create a safe and nurturing atmosphere where students can learn and grow academically and emotionally. Students' ability to develop socially, emotionally, and academically is profoundly influenced by the quality of the school's environment, sometimes called "school climate" (Linda & Harvey, 2018). A school's atmosphere can be perceived in its physical setting, felt in the classroom, and observed in the relationships between students.

Compassionate and supporting student-teacher relations and other child-adult bonds are related with better academic performance and commitment, enhanced social competence, and a readiness to accept difficulties (Osher, 2018). Building relationships with adults, especially those who are sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds, can have a positive effect on students' academic and personal growth (Hammond, 2016). These connections aid in developing the emotional, social, behavioural, and cognitive skills that are the basis of learning. Teachers must get to know their students well to design effective learning opportunities.

When there is mutual respect and trust between a teacher and their students, there is less anxiety and more drive for learning to occur (Felner et al., 2018). According to research, children get benefit from easily accessible interactions with classmates and other adults (teachers) to the extent that the relationships remain sensitive and suited to their emotional needs, reliable, trustworthy, and cognitively stimulating (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). To achieve this goal, schools should create an intentional community where all students feel accepted and protected, and where students' daily interactions reflect the school's established values. Further, a culturally sensitive curriculum emphasising the importance of students' diverse experiences and contributions to the community is enhanced by a school climate that encourages students to take the initiative and assume leadership roles.

Developmentally focused education institutions regard classroom management as something that should be done with students rather than to them. Management of a classroom goes beyond the traditional notions of assigning seats, praising good behaviour, and punishing bad. Instead of focusing on a compliance routine that emphasises the recognition and punishment of misbehaviour, effective classrooms are organised around increasing student responsibility (Cangelosi, 2013). Students can take on roles as responsible and contributing members of the community by helping develop rules and norms for the classroom (often in the form of a posted classroom constitution) and by taking on specific tasks like managing the classroom library, leading classroom activities, or planning special events.

According to Wanders et al. (2020), when students have a good relationship with their teacher, they improve their social and emotional skills. This makes them more likely to learn more in school. For students to do well, they need to get along with each other well. When students feel good about themselves, they are more likely to learn and get better grades. Plus, when students have favourable contacts with teachers, they have less behavioural difficulties. Similar to the effects of teacher-student relationships, Zandvliet et al. (2020) insists that the effects of student-student relationships are pervasive, influencing all other areas of school atmosphere, including in-class activities.

### **Refugee education**

Before World War II, several organizations (like Save the Children) responded to emergencies by establishing schools for children. However, educational opportunities expanded significantly during and after World War II. At that time, the concept of providing education to displaced people began to take shape. The rise of the world's refugee population can be traced back to the political instability of the Cold War era. World War I and World War II inspired the belief that education is a force and obligation, which was articulated in the UNESCO Constitution of 1945. Since then, the primary factors influencing refugee education have been international tools, institutional interactions, and evolving perspectives on the goals of education (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

The foundations of refugee education provision are expressed in Article 22 of the Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951, which states, "shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education... [and] treatment as favourable as possible... with respect to education other than elementary education" (UNHCR, 2010). The realisation of the right to education has relied, even amongst the signatories to the Convention, on the rules, policies, and practices in effect at various historical and national times.

People who flee across international borders due to well-founded persecution fears are called refugees (UNHCR, 2010). UNHCR is the official organisation that provides refugees with economic, political, and social aid. It's a global programme that helps displaced people with food, shelter, water, and education. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is coordinating the education efforts of countries that are providing sanctuary to refugees. UNHCR (2014) reports that the vast majority of refugees (86%) live in neighbouring countries to their country of origin. As a result, nearly 1.5 million Afghan migrants are in Pakistan, while another 1 million are in Iran. Similarly, 2.7 million Syrian refugees live in Turkey, while 1 million live in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2016).

Most of these countries had preexisting weak educational, political, and economic institutions. In contrast, less than one percent of the world's refugees currently reside in countries with a high per capita gross national income. Countries like the United States, Canada, and Germany are good examples. The United States received the most refugees, with 267,000 from Syria and Canada also received 149,000 refugees. Some European countries also fell under this category. Countries like Germany, which welcomed 217,000 refugees, and Greece, which received 7,300, are only two examples (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2015).

For two reasons, the government and refugees in nations with remote resettlement receive different education than those in neighbouring host countries: first, the number of refugees is

comparatively small; and second, residence and citizenship permanence are assumed. So, if a refugee in the United States or Canada is resettled or given asylum status, for example, they have a path to citizenship that most of these people around the world don't have (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Because the number of refugees in some European countries has grown recently, they don't fit into the categories of neighbouring host and distant resettlement. Countries like Germany and Greece are perfect examples of this type of country. In 2015, Germany revealed that it had received 467 649 formal applications for asylum, although a considerable number had also continued to go unregistered. The number of refugees that arrived in Greece by sea alone in the same year was approximately 1 million (Germany Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2016; UNHCR, 2016). Due to the ongoing nature of the issue, more help programmes, particularly educational ones, are always required in the host countries.

### Current educational situation in Kurdistan region and refugee camps

Iraq's ongoing conflicts have negatively influenced various sectors, including education. However, the Islamic State (IS) threats ended, the turmoil and tensions as the result of conflicts still have remained. According to UNICEF (2018), one in every four Iraqi children lives in poverty. The Kurdistan region is located in the north of the country, and it became a safe shelter for internally displaced people and refugees from Syria during the IS war. As the Syrian crisis continues, more than four million Syrians are displaced from their homes. The majority of them are living in neighboring countries and Europe.

In the Kurdish education system, education is mandatory from grade one to nine. The K-12 education system is structured on two levels, basic schools (from grade one to nine) and high schools (from grade 10 to 12) (Vernez et al., 2016). The Syrian refugee students are taught within the same system under the supervision of the ministry of education of the Kurdistan region. According to UNHCR (2021), proper education has been provided for refugee children. With a valid Iraqi residency permit, they would be eligible for applying to the Ministry of Education and free enrolment in public schools at the primary and secondary levels.

*Table 1.* Location and size of the refugee camps and neighbouring districts

Camp	Camp population	Host community districts	District population	Governorate
Domiz	49,045	Sumel	162,058	Duhok
Akre	1,442	Duhok	323,400	
Qushtapa	6,285	Dashti Hewler	203,072	Erbil
Arbat	5,878	Sharazur	58,536	Sulaymaniyah
		Darbandikhan	43,297	

Source: (Singh et al., 2015).

### Methodology

Participants were 193 students in the Sulaymaniyah province - Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There were 104 (53.9%) host community students and 89 (46.1%) Syrian refugee students. The mean age range of the participants was 15.05, studying at public schools in the eighth and ninth grades. The data was collected through a questionnaire in seven basic public schools. Questions on the respondent's demographics (such as age, gender, educational background, and number of years in school) were

included in the background questionnaire. The surveys of the 5-point Likert type were created by the authors and tested for both external and internal validity.

In addition to receiving formal approvals from their parents, the participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they might withdraw at any time. The obtained data's anonymity and confidentiality were both known to all participants. Statistical Software for the Social Sciences was used to analyse the survey data (SPSS). The version of SPSS 22.0 for Windows was adopted to compute mean scores, frequency rates, standard deviations, and statistical percentages for variables including age, student group and gender. Then, an independent *t*-test and Pearson correlation were conducted to investigate and follow the research questions.

## Results

The results are presented according to each of the research questions. The differences between the two groups of respondents were calculated and reported based on the SPSS outputs. Table 2 presents the frequency of host community and refugee students.

Table 2. The number of participants

	Frequency	Percent
Host community students	104	53.9
Refugee students	89	46.1
Total	193	100.0

**Research Question 1:** Is there a difference between the student groups (host community students and Syrian refugee students) regarding in-class student engagement?

H1: There are significant differences between student groups regarding in-class student engagement.

The first objective of this study was to determine the differences between the student groups categorised according to their place of residence and in-class student engagement. An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to achieve this objective between in-class student engagement indicators (preparation for class, active listening, and class participation) and student groups (host community and refugee students). The test found that there were statistically significant differences between student groups and two elements of in-class student engagement: preparation for class and class participation. For the class preparation, the test showed significant differences between the host students ( $M = 2.68, SD = 1.30$ ) and refugee students ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.31$ ). This difference  $-.63$ , 95% CI  $[-1.00, -.25]$  was statistically significant,  $t(191) = 3.31, p = .001$ . Considering active listening in class, there was not a significant difference between host students ( $M = 2.26, SD = 1.27$ ) and refugees ( $M = 2.58, SD = 1.22$ );  $t(191) = -1.74, p = .08$ . The test also indicated that there were significant differences between the student groups concerning class participation. Host students ( $M = 2.54, SD = 1.33$ ) and refugees ( $M = 3.10, SD = 1.27$ );  $t(191) = -2.93, p = .004$ . This means that we have enough statistical evidence to support the alternative claim (H1). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent sample t-test for students in-class engagement

In-class engagement items	Student group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean difference	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
preparation	Host	104	2.6827	1.30171	-.63191	-3.351	191	.001
	Refugee	89	3.3146	1.31076				
listening	Host	104	2.2692	1.27889	-.31504	-1.741	191	.08
	Refugee	89	2.5843	1.22297				
participation	Host	104	2.5481	1.33569	-.55305	-2.932	191	.004
	Refugee	89	3.1011	1.27069				

*p* < .05

**Research question 2:** Are there differences between student groups regarding school environment (social and physical environments)?

H2: There is a significant difference between the student groups regarding school social and physical environments.

The social and physical environments of schools for the host and refugee student groups were compared using an independent *t*-test. There were three items—two social and one physical. The two social environment items were (the student-student relationship and student-teacher relationship), and the physical item was (the school's physical environment). According to the test, there were statistically significant differences between the two school environment components. There were statistically significant differences regarding the student-teacher relationship between the host students ( $M = 1.85, SD = .84$ ) and refugee students ( $M = 2.16, SD = 1.06$ ),  $t(191) = -2.27, p = .02$ . Considering the physical environment of schools, There was a significant difference between host students ( $M = 2.75, SD = 1.37$ ) and refugees ( $M = 2.15, SD = 1.09$ );  $t(191) = 3.26, p = .001$ . No significant differences were found between the student groups regarding student-student relationships. This suggests that we have sufficient statistical evidence to support the alternative claim (H2). The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent sample t-test for students' school environment components

School environment items	Student group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean difference	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Student-student relationship	Host	104	1.711	.692	.0486	.445	191	.65
	Refugee	89	1.662	.824				
Teacher-student relationship	Host	104	1.855	.840	-.312	-2.274	191	.02
	Refugee	89	2.168	1.068				
School physical environment	Host	104	2.750	1.377	.592	3.268	191	.001
	Refugee	89	2.157	1.096				

*p* < .05

**Research question 3:** Are there any associations between in-class student engagement and school environment elements?

H3: There are associations between in-class student engagement and the school environment.

To answer the third question of the study, a Pearson correlation coefficient test was conducted. It was hypothesized that there are relationships between the elements of in-class student engagement and the school environment. The results indicated that there is a low positive correlation between being prepared for class and class participation,  $r(193) = .356, p = .001$ . Also, a low positive correlation between preparation for class and active listening was found,  $r(193) = .18, p = .01$ . In addition to that, a low positive correlation between preparation and student-teacher relationship was found,  $r(193) = .23, p = .001$ . No significant correlations were found between other items. The null hypothesis was not supported by sufficient statistical evidence. Results of the Pearson correlation coefficient are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Pearson correlation coefficient for in-class engagement and school environment components (N=193)

	1	2	3	4	5
1- preparation	--				
2- listening	.232**	--			
3- participation	.344**	.235**	--		
4- Student-student	.074	-.034	.017	--	
5- Student-teacher	.182*	.039	.081	-.100	--
6- environment	-.123	.112	-.091	-.040	-.139
	.089	.121	.209	.584	.054

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

## Discussion and conclusion

When students' in-class engagement was examined, it was noticed that the level of engagement of student groups was different. Three elements of in-class engagement were investigated: preparation for class, active listening and participation in class. The independent sample *t*-test showed that the host community and refugee students were engaged in their classes at different levels. They differed significantly in two in-class student engagement elements, prepared for class and class participation.

Preparation for the class is a type of self-regulated behaviour influenced by various contextual and personal factors such as attitudes, behaviours, planning, preparation guidance, and pressure. The literature shows that the preparation of students before entering class is required to have a better academic performance. Students need foundational knowledge of the material to be covered to understand fully, apply, and construct the presented knowledge (Aalbers et al., 2013).

It is an evidence-based conclusion that student participation in the classroom increases motivation, helps learning, improves communication, and fosters higher-order thinking skills. In their research, Aziz et al. (2018) pointed out that internal and external factors were influencing students' classroom participation similarly, although to varying degrees. Internal aspects include motivation and self-esteem, whereas external determinants include teachers, parents, peers, and curriculum.

Gunuc's (2014) research also discovered that students who had high levels of engagement in their studies performed better academically than those who demonstrated low levels of engagement.

This study classified school environments into two categories, social and physical. The social environment consisted of two elements, the student-student relationship and the student-teacher relationship. To determine whether there are school environment satisfaction differences between the two student groups, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. The test results indicated that the relationship between host and refugee students with their teachers was significantly different. In contrast, their differences regarding their relationship with their classmates were not significantly different.

The degree to which students feel they belong in their school community is a good indicator of their future health and happiness. Improving the quality of social relationships in schools, particularly between students and teachers, may positively affect adult health in the long run (Kim, 2021). The results also found that the student groups were significantly different regarding their satisfaction with the physical environment of schools. The environmental aspect of schools can affect the spatial perception and behaviour of the child (Turel & Gur, 2019).

The Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted to find the associations between in-class engagement and school environment components. We found a low positive association between preparation for class and the other two in-class activities, active listening and class participation. Considering the correlation between in-class activities and school environment, only a low positive correlation between preparation for class and the student-teacher relationship was found.

In the American multicultural context, Crosnoe et al. (2004) concluded that better social bonding in school was associated with higher academic achievement, including student-teacher relationships. Relationships between students and teachers significantly impact students' academic and emotional development. Research also indicates that student-teacher connections are critical throughout students' academic lives, from early childhood to adolescence (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

In conclusion, this study, as a quantitative one, revealed some different aspects of in-class student engagement and school environment, but future research is needed to explore more aspects.

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