



ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com



Academic engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students from the perspectives of school counselors. The population of the study consisted of all school counselors in the Al Kharj educational district in Saudi Arabia; the sample included 70 counselors. The study's research design was a correlational descriptive one, and selected research instruments were the Academic Engagement Scale and the Academic Competence Scale. The study obtained several findings, most importantly the following: "levels of academic engagement among secondary school students" were rated as moderate from the perspectives of school counselors; academic competence was rated as moderate from the perspectives of school counselors; and there is a positive correlation between levels of academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students. Findings of the study indicate that academic engagement is an important catalyst for academic competence in secondary school students. Therefore, promoting academic engagement should be taken into careful consideration by educational administrators. Designing school counseling programs in secondary schools across Saudi Arabia, with a focus on promoting and enhancing academic engagement among students; training teachers and school counselors in Al Kharj on applying evidence-based methods for fostering academic engagement among school students; and organizing specialized activities in teachers' professional development programs focusing on approaches and methods for improving students' levels of academic competence.

Keywords: Academic competence, Academic engagement, School counselors, Secondary school students.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i1.4504

Funding: This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (Grant number: PSAU 2025 /R/1446)

History: Received: 18 December 2024/Revised: 22 January 2025/Accepted: 27 January 2025/Published: 5 February 2025

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Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Transparency: The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia has granted approval for this study (Ref. No. SCBR-134/2025).

Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Academic engagement is a crucial requirement for success in secondary school. This is attributable to its connection to healthy academic adjustment and its important role in preventing risk behaviors. Academic engagement is characterized by vigor (energy and persistence), dedication (enthusiasm and pride), and absorption (concentration) [1].

Also related to academic achievement and prevention of behavioral problems is academic competence. Academic competence is important for promoting a student's ability to cope and grow academically, as it encompasses a range of resources that reduce social and behavioral problems and maximize positive educational outcomes. Academic competence is suggested to consist of academic enablers and academic skills [2].

From the preceding brief discussion, it can be stated that the connection of both academic engagement and academic competence to positive academic and other outcomes may indicate that the two variables are related. However, recent literature has largely neglected the investigation of the direct relationship between the two variables. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate academic engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Academic engagement is an important requirement for achieving academic success, as a student must be actively involved in academic tasks in order to achieve optimal performance. Another requirement for academic achievement is academic competence, as knowledge and skills are key to the performance of academic tasks. Due to the connection of academic engagement and academic competence to achievement, it would be logical to assume that academic engagement is linked to academic competence. However, this topic hasn't been extensively investigated in recent literature.

Some recent studies investigated topics that are related or similar to that of the relationship between academic engagement and academic competence. One study that examined the effects of academic engagement is the study of Hayam-Jonas [3] which investigated the relationship between academic engagement and academic achievement in secondary school students in New Zealand, and the study's findings indicate a positive relationship between the two variables. However, this finding contradicts those obtained by the study of Abid and Akhtar [4] investigated the relationship between academic engagement and academic achievement among secondary school students in Pakistan; the study's findings show that the two variables are negatively correlated. Thus, it can be stated that research findings on the relationship between academic engagement and academic achievement, thus academic competence, are inconclusive.

Recent literature also investigated factors that may influence academic competence. The study of Ruga [5] examined the correlation between social skills and academic competence among secondary school students in the Philippines. Findings show that the two variables are positively correlated. Olusegun, et al. [6] investigated the impact of self-efficacy on academic competence among secondary school students in Nigeria, with findings indicating the existence of a positive impact. Although findings of the two aforementioned studies indicate that certain personal qualities are linked to academic competence, they are not conclusive in showing whether academic engagement is linked to academic competence.

The preceding discussion highlights the research gap that the present study aims to address. There is a significant dearth of research on the direct relationship between academic engagement and academic competence. This research gap is more evident in Arab contexts, in which the relationship has not been investigated as of the time of writing this research paper, to the best of the researcher's knowledge. Therefore, the present study aims to address this research gap by investigating academic engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the levels of academic engagement among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors?
- What is the degree of academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors?
- Is there a statistically significant correlation at the significance level of (0.05) between levels of academic engagement and degree of academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors?

1.4. Research Objectives

- Unveiling the levels of academic engagement among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.
- Investigating the degree of academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.
- Unveiling the existence of a statistically significant correlation at the significance level of (0.05) between levels of academic engagement and degree of academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study's significance emanates from the importance of its main topic, which concerns the relationship between academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students. The theoretical and practical aspects of the significance of the present study are outlined below:

1.5.1. Theoretical

- This study aims to present a valuable contribution in measuring the levels of academic engagement among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.
- The findings may draw professionals' attention to the importance of designing training courses and workshops aiming to promote academic competence among secondary school students.
- The researcher hopes to contribute to addressing the research gap on the relationship between academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students, especially in Arab contexts, about which relevant literature is almost non-existent, to the best of the researcher's knowledge.

1.5.2. Practical

- Findings may be of value in building a deeper and clearer understanding of how academic competence can influence academic engagement, especially among secondary school students.
- Recommendations presented by the study may guide educators on potential solutions for improving the levels of academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students.

1.6. Definition of Terms

1.6.1. Academic Engagement

One definition of academic engagement is that it is the degree to which a student is actively involved and connected in the educational process in order to learn and attain optimal outcomes [7].

Academic engagement can also be defined as a state of mind related to academic life and which is defined by three main dimensions, which include vigor (feeling resilient and energetic), dedication (pride and enthusiasm), and absorption (concentration on academic work) [8].

Another definition of academic engagement is that it is the quantity and quality of behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and psychological responses to study experiences [9].

1.6.2. Academic Competence

Academic competence is defined as a complex construct that consists of the behaviors, attitudes, and skills that a student needs to achieve academic success [10].

Academic competence can also be defined as a cluster of both cognitive and non-cognitive related dispositions, knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable students to perform educational activities at school [6].

Another definition of academic competence is that it is scholastic performance, marked by indicators such as achievement grades, behavior in class, and attendance rates [11].

1.6.3. School Counselor

A school counselor is a certified and trained education professional who focuses on improving students' success opportunities in the emotional/social, academic, and career aspects of development through counseling services, programming, and cooperation with school boards, school staff, parents, and the community [12].

A school counselor can also be defined as a registered individual with professional training who works in a school context with the aim of mitigating barriers to students' learning and individual/group development [13].

Another definition of a school counselor is that they are a professional assigned school time and duties related to the following aspects: assessing students' abilities, providing students with assistance in social and personal development, counseling with students and their parents, and cooperating with the school staff in planning and organizing programs for guiding students [14].

1.7. Structure of the Study

The structure of the present study is as follows:

1. Introduction: Topics of this section include background, statement of the problem, research questions, research objectives, significance of the study, and definition of terms.
2. Literature Review: Types of academic engagement, importance of academic engagement, dimensions of academic engagement, factors that influence academic engagement, importance of academic competence, dimensions of academic competence, factors that influence academic competence, and the potential relationship between academic engagement and academic competence.
3. Methodology: Topics of discussion in this section include research approach, target population and sample, and research instrument.
4. Results and Discussion: This section discusses Research Questions 1 and 2 as well as the study's main hypothesis.
5. Conclusion: This section includes a summary of findings as well as discussion of research and practical implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Types of Academic Engagement

Academic engagement takes various forms, which can be either active or passive [15].

1. Active engagement: the degree of students' focus on tasks and active participation during classes.
2. Passive engagement: cognitive attention to stimuli that are relevant to instruction.

Active and passive forms of academic engagement are manifested in a variety of behaviors in the classroom. Examples of active engagement include reading aloud, writing, seeking to participate in answering classroom questions, or any other task requiring the student to accomplish a certain objective. On the other hand, examples of passive engagement include careful listening to the teacher's instruction and silent reading of assignment requirements and details [16].

This brief discussion highlights the differences between the two main types of academic engagement. It can be stated that the relationship between the two types is complementary. It is important that a student uses both types of academic engagement in their daily classroom learning activities interactions. The ability to be cognitively present in classroom as a careful listener is of equal importance to being actively engaging in learning activities and practical tasks. Being an engaging learner make a significant difference in student's learning outcomes.

2.2. Importance of Academic Engagement

The importance of academic engagement stems from its significant role in promoting healthy cognitive, social, and emotional development in students. Academic engagement is commonly used as an indicator for measuring the efficiency and quality of education systems as well as the degree of students' success in their educational lives [17].

Academic engagement is key to attaining positive and desired educational outcomes. High levels of academic engagement are associated with outcomes such as higher levels of academic achievement, improved mental and physical health, enhanced school adjustment skills, and mitigation of school dropout risks. On the other hand, low levels of academic achievement are associated with negative school outcomes, such as elevated risks of school dropout, academic failure, criminal behavior, drug abuse, and having emotional problems, such as depression and anxiety [18].

The preceding discussion highlights crucial role of academic engagement in achieving success in the educational process. Academic engagement is a measure of the extent to which a student is an actively engaging learner. The sense of enthusiasm and internal drive for learning are not less important than the cognitive ability to acquire and memorize knowledge. Therefore, academic engagement should be prioritized in educational goals by educators and administrators.

2.3. Dimensions of Academic Engagement

Academic engagement is a multidimensional concept. Its main dimensions include behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. Each of these dimensions is briefly discussed below.

2.3.1. Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement can be defined from multiple perspectives, which include the following [19].

1. It involves forms of positive conduct, such as adherence to school norms and rules as well as avoidance of engagement in forms of disruptive behavior.
2. Active participation in learning activities, which is manifested in behaviors such as concentration during classes, asking questions, and participating in discussions.
3. Participation in activities that are linked to the school, such as sports activities.

2.3.2. Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is a student's investment of cognitive resources in learning, which is manifested in behaviors such as thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the needed effort for learning challenging tasks, self-regulation, seeking of challenge, and use of appropriate learning strategies. Certain behaviors are considered indicators of a student's cognitive engagement, with examples of such behaviors including flexibility in problem-solving situations, persistence in dealing with challenging learning tasks, and seeking clarifications through asking questions [19].

2.3.3. Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement is often referred to by a variety of other terms, such as affective engagement, psychological engagement, and motivational engagement. In essence, emotional engagement is the sum of the emotions, both positive and negative, that a student has towards elements of the school life, such as academic activities, peers, teachers, and school in general. Several manifestations are considered indicators of emotional engagement, and examples of these indicators include the presence of, or lack thereof, feelings of happiness, sadness, anxiety, and boredom [19].

This discussion highlights the complexity of academic engagement as a phenomenon. It is not limited to the mere ability to absorb new knowledge, as it is manifested in behaviors and responses that makes a learner active. Thus, it can be stated that academic engagement is not a trait but rather a behavior. Therefore, educators should pay attention to the potential for improving the quality of learning experiences by focusing on implementing ways to foster students' academic engagement.

2.4. Factors That Influence Academic Engagement

Developing academic engagement necessitates understanding the factors that influence it, which include a range of internal and external factors. Below is a brief discussion of some of these factors.

2.4.1. Internal Factors

A key internal factor that significantly influences academic engagement is internal motivation. Internal motivation creates the drive to achieve goals and complete tasks. Students with stronger internal motivation are more likely to maintain a continuous pattern of engagement in learning activities. Moreover, students with stronger internal motivation are often more attentive and active in participation in educational activities [20].

Another key internal factor that plays a role in fostering academic engagement is self-esteem. This relationship can be explained from the perspective of the expectancy-value theory. According to the theory, people with a strong sense of self-esteem have high standards for achievement and only view themselves as "good enough" if those standards are met, thereby resulting in a stronger drive for academic achievement [18].

2.4.2. External Factors

Peer-related factors significantly influence the development of academic engagement. These factors stem from students' interaction with each other in the classroom. For example, having the opportunities to learn together, encourage, interact, and discuss as well as having a sense of mutual respect towards others are associated with feeling safe due to the conviction that peers are understanding and caring [20].

Teachers can also have significant on students' levels of academic engagement. This is especially so if teachers maintain the provision of support to students. Supportive treatment from teachers encourages students to acquire more knowledge. When students perceive their teacher as caring, they will become happy and find learning activities enjoyable. Teachers can also do a variety of activities that can foster student's desire to be more engaged in learning, with examples of such activities including praising students' work, forming student groups for performing learning tasks, and providing students with freedom in approaching learning. Moreover, if a teacher maintains a friendship relationship with students, students would naturally become more motivated to be committed in their learning [20].

The preceding discussion highlights the importance of viewing academic engagement from a holistic perspective. It may be incorrectly believed that academic engagement is essentially internal, since behavioral engagement in any activity requires the presence of personal drive. Understanding the nature and impact of internal and external factors on academic engagement is important for tailoring educational interventions and activities to students' needs and skills.

2.5. Importance of Academic Competence

Academic competence consists of several competencies that drive a student's cognitive functioning, and these competencies are linked to general educational, methodological, and logical cognitive abilities. The acquisition of academic competence involves acquiring the creative skills needed for productive functioning, methods of responding to non-traditional situations, knowledge from the surrounding environments, and heuristic methods for dealing with problems [21].

Given its critical role in shaping and influencing students' academic trajectories, it can be stated that academic competence is of crucial importance for shaping students' success in their future adult lives. Students with low levels of academic competence often have lower levels of engagement, motivation, and academic progress. On the other hand, having high levels of academic competence is associated with higher levels of skills in these aspects [22].

This discussion shows that academic competence is an essential requirement for students' academic success. The development of academic competence is not only linked to the acquisition of learning skills, but also to the development of mental and emotional abilities that allow student to cope with the challenging demands of educational life. Thus, plans and strategies aiming to improve educational outcomes should prioritize the development of students' academic competence.

2.6. Dimensions of Academic Competence

Academic competence is a complex and multidimensional construct. The main dimensions of this construct are outlined below [21].

2.6.1. Motivational Dimension

- Social competence: Eagerness for acquiring new knowledge and willingness for engaging in self-regulated learning.
- Reflexive-evaluation competence: The ability to assess the outcome of one's own work in learning situations; the ability to adopt self-evaluation strategy pertaining to different educational subjects; and avoidance of conflicts in learning situations.

2.6.2. Cognitive Dimension

- Innovative competence: Suggesting new ideas for improving the effectiveness of the learning process.
- Informational competence: The ability to deal with information; and ability to draw new inferences based on the available information.

2.6.3. Activity Dimension

- Technological competence: The ability to use technology in learning processes.
- Methodological competence: Skills of logical thinking and the ability to apply newly obtained information in practical learning activities.

2.6.4. Creative Dimension

- Research competence: Research skills and the ability to use information from various fields in learning situations.
- Management competence: The ability to set learning goals; self-development; and time planning skills.

2.7. Factors That Influence Academic Competence

From the perspective of the self-determination theory, students can develop their academic competence by exposure to academic difficulties and challenges as well as experiences of failure. In fact, academic failure is viewed as a valuable informational source, as students' perceptions of their own academic competence are based on the outcomes of the process of encountering then dealing with academic failures. On the other hand, students who do not perceive lessons to be learned from academic failures are less likely to adopt a personal sense of academic competence [23].

Some family related factors can also influence academic competence. According to the study of [Hernández, et al. \[24\]](#) family income is positively associated with the improvement of students' academic competence. The study suggests that even small improvements in the family's economic status can lead to improvement in a student's educational opportunities and future prospects. Moreover, findings of the study show that parents' educational levels are positively associated with children's levels of academic competence.

The preceding discussion shows that academic competence is influenced by a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Indeed, academic competence is strongly influenced by a student's psychological well-being, which can also influence how they approach learning processes and tasks. However, it is important to take into careful consideration that the student's psychological and emotional characteristics may also be influenced by factors found in the student's surrounding environment, especially the family. Thus, it can be stated that academic competence is not a purely innate skill, but an ability that can be nurtured and developed with the availability of needed resources.

2.8. Potential Relationship between Academic Engagement and Academic Competence

According to the study of [Assefa, et al. \[25\]](#) academic engagement is linked to certain aspects of academic competence, which are as follows:

1. Deeper learning: Students with a high level of engagement are more likely to achieve a deeper level of learning of the material. The explanation for this outcome is that students with strong academic engagement are likely to have the drive to learn, concentrate, and engage in critical thinking about the educational content.
 2. Better retention: Students who actively engaged in learning are more likely to be capable of memorizing what they are learning. This is largely attributable to the assumption that engaged students are more likely to adopt an active approach of processing obtained information and linking among learned concepts.
 3. Greater motivation: Engaged students are more likely to develop the motivation to learn and acquire new knowledge.
- As a result, these students are likely to view learning as an interesting activity.

Academic competence may also influence academic engagement. In specific, self-perceptions of academic competence influence student's behaviors, which may manifest in the form of strong engagement in learning activities. Students with more positive self-perceptions have higher expectations of what they can achieve in their studies, thus they become more motivated to engage more actively in learning. On the other hand, students who have lower expectations of their own academic competence are likely to have behaviors characterized by poor engagement, with examples of such behaviors including lack of interest and attention and poor task [26].

The preceding discussion shows that there is a potential relationship between academic engagement and academic competence. Indeed, the relationship may be bidirectional, as an engaged student would often find learning exciting and interesting and have strong positive perceptions of their own skills, capabilities, and prospects. This would make a student more willing to engage actively in learning activities. As a result of a growing sense of achievement associated with improved academic competence, a student would be expected to have a stronger desire to be more actively engaging in learning. With increased engagement, further development of academic engagement is expected to occur again. This continuance of this bidirectional relationship depends on the consistency of a student's efforts. Therefore, educators should direct careful attention to designing and implementing educational practices that can help students maintain consistent improvement in both academic engagement and academic competence.

3. Previous Studies

The relationship between academic engagement and academic competence is a growing research area. This is evident in the consistently growing number of relevant studies. Below is a presentation of a number of studies on that topic.

The study of [Abid and Akhtar \[4\]](#) investigated the relationship between academic engagement and achievement among secondary school students. The population of the study consisted of 10th grade students in 20 secondary schools located in Lahore, Pakistan; the sample included (800) students. The study adopted a descriptive research methodology, and data collection instruments included the Academic Engagement Scale and examination of results of final exams of the 9th grade. Findings obtained by the study include the following: sample members exhibited (high) levels of academic engagement; differences were found in levels of academic engagement, based on gender, as females had higher levels of academic engagement; father's educational qualification was found to be positively linked to higher academic engagement; mother's educational qualification was found to be positively associated with higher academic engagement; and academic engagement was found to have an significant negative correlation with academic achievement.

Another study that examined the relationship between academic engagement and achievement is that by [Hayam-Jonas \[3\]](#). The study investigated this relationship with the focus on the context of three secondary schools located in urban

locations in New Zealand; the sample included (1,617) students. The study adopted a quantitative research methodology, and data was collected via questionnaire and examination of academic achievement records. The study obtained several findings, most importantly the following: academic engagement was found to have a positive correlation with academic achievement; and gender had an insignificant confounding effect on the relationship between academic engagement and academic performance.

The study by [Sabbaghi, et al. \[27\]](#) investigated a different topic regarding academic engagement. It aimed to investigate the predictability of academic engagement based on achievement emotions, perception competence, and academic optimism. The population of the study consisted of male 11th grade students in Kermanshah region, Iran; the size of the sample was (1,476) students. The study's research design was both descriptive and correlational. The study obtained several findings, most importantly the following: academic engagement was found to be associated with achievement emotions, perception competence, and academic optimism.

Some studies investigated factors that influence academic competence. [Ruga \[5\]](#) examined the correlation between social skills and academic competence among secondary school students. The population of the study consisted of high school students attending the Cabuyao Institute of Technology in the Philippines; the final study included (236) students. The study adopted a quantitative research approach, and data were collected via questionnaire. The study's findings show that sample members exhibited "moderate to acceptable" levels of academic competence and "high" levels of social skills; and social skills were found to have statistically positive correlation with academic competence.

Another study that explored the impacts of certain factors on academic competence is the study by [Olusegun, et al. \[6\]](#). This study investigated the impact of self-efficacy on academic competence among secondary school students. The population of the study consisted of secondary school students from 12 schools located in three Local Government Areas of Osun State, Nigeria; the sample was numbered at (600) students. The study's research design was descriptive, and research instruments included Academic Competence Evaluation Scale and General Self-Efficacy Scale. Findings of the study show that levels of academic competence were at (low), (moderate), and (high) levels at each of the Local Government Areas under study; and self-efficacy was found to be positively correlated with academic competence.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Approach

In order to achieve the study's objectives, the researcher adopted the correlational descriptive approach. It is an approach of structured scientific analysis and interpretation for describing a certain phenomenon or problem and portraying it quantitatively by collecting, categorizing, analyzing, and carefully studying data and information.

4.2. Target Population and Final Sample

4.2.1. Overview

The target population was school counselors in Al Kharj educational district in Saudi Arabia. The sample included (70) individuals representing the population.

4.2.2. Attributes of the Sample

Frequencies and percentages for the sample were calculated as regards the variables of (Years of experience - gender).

Table 1.

Distribution based on the gender variable.

| No. | Gender | Frequencies | Percentages |
|-------|--------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | Male | 57 | 81.4% |
| 2 | Female | 13 | 18.6% |
| Total | | 70 | 100% |

[Table 1](#) shows that males represent (81.4%) of the sample, while the rest are female.

Table 2.

Distribution based on the years of experience variable.

| No. | Years of experience | Frequencies | Percentages |
|-------|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | Less than 3 years | 24 | 34.3% |
| 2 | From 3 to less than 5 years | 36 | 51.4% |
| 3 | 10 years or more | 10 | 14.3% |
| Total | | 70 | 100% |

According to [Table 2](#), (34.3%) of the sample members have an experience of less than 3 years, (51.4%) have an experience ranging between 5 and less than 10 years, and (14.3%) have an experience of 5 years or more.

4.3. Research Instrument

After reviewing literature relevant to the present study's topic, the researcher developed two scales, which are the Academic Engagement Scale and Academic Competence Scale, with the aim of investigating the levels of academic

engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.

4.3.1. Description of the Research Instruments

The researcher used the Academic Engagement Scale and Academic Competence Scale as research instruments.

- Part I: It includes basic data on sample members (Gender – years of experience).
- Part II: It includes measures. In their final forms, the scales include (31) statements, distributed as follows:
- Academic Engagement Scale: It includes (21) statements distributed on three main dimensions, as follows:
- Engagement in major: Includes (7) statements.
- Engagement in school community: Includes (7) statements.
- Engagement in school habits: Includes (7) statements.
- Academic Competence Scale: Includes (10) statements.

A five-point likert scale (very high – high – moderate – low – very low) to investigate the levels of academic engagement and its relation to academic competence among secondary school students, from the perspectives of school counselors.

4.3.2. Research Instrument's Validity

Based on sample members' responses, internal consistency was assessed, and that is by calculating use Pearson's correlation coefficient between the score of each statement and the total score of the axis to which the statement belongs in the scale, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3.

Pearson's correlation coefficient between the scores of each statement and the total score of the axis to which the statement belongs.

| First: Academic engagement scale | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Statement no. | Correlation coefficient | Statement no. | Correlation coefficient | Statement no. | Correlation coefficient |
| 1 | 0.856** | 8 | 0.668** | 15 | 0.863** |
| 2 | 0.760** | 9 | 0.765** | 16 | 0.740** |
| 3 | 0.864** | 10 | 0.696** | 17 | 0.796** |
| 4 | 0.757** | 11 | 0.786** | 18 | 0.737** |
| 5 | 0.855** | 12 | 0.664** | 19 | 0.789** |
| 6 | 0.906** | 13 | 0.675** | 20 | 0.761** |
| 7 | 0.708** | 14 | 0.642** | 21 | 0.690** |
| Second: Academic competence scale | | | | | |
| Statement no. | Correlation coefficient | Statement No. | Correlation coefficient | Statement No. | Correlation coefficient |
| 1 | 0.867** | 5 | 0.833** | 9 | 0.864** |
| 2 | 0.808** | 6 | 0.902** | 10 | 0.812** |
| 3 | 0.878** | 7 | 0.790** | | |
| 4 | 0.809** | 8 | 0.815** | | |

Note: ** statistically significant at the significance level of (0.01).

Table 3 shows that Pearson's coefficients of correlation between statements and the total score of axes are statistically significant. Values were high, as in axes of Academic Engagement Scale they ranged between 0.642** and 0.906** and in the axes of the Academic Competence Scale they ranged between 0.790** and 0.902**. Thus, statements of the two axes are characterized by high internal consistency.

Table 4.

Scales' Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients.

| No. | Statements | No. of statements | Cronbach's alpha coefficient |
|-----|---------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Academic engagement scale | 21 | 0.952 |
| 2 | Academic competence scale | 10 | 0.961 |

4.3.3. Reliability of the Research Instruments

Table 4 shows that the values of the reliability coefficient for two scales were high, as they at (0.952) for the Academic Engagement Scale and (0.961) for the Academic Competence Scale. These values indicate that the two scales are reliable and can be used to obtain reliable findings.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Discussion of the First Question: What are the Levels of Academic Engagement Among Secondary School Students, From the Perspectives of School Counselors?

In order to answer this question, the mean and standard deviation for each dimension of the second axis, then list them in a descending order based on the mean, as outlined in the following [Table 5](#).

Table 5.
Levels of academic engagement among secondary school students.

| No. | Axis | Mean | Standard deviation | Axis' ranking | Level of responsiveness |
|---|--|------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | First dimension: Engagement in major | 3.05 | 1.020 | 2 | Moderate |
| 2 | Second dimension: Engagement in school community | 2.96 | 0.993 | 3 | Moderate |
| 3 | Third dimension: Engagement in school habits | 3.82 | 0.591 | 1 | High |
| Total score for the academic engagement scale | | 3.28 | 0.675 | --- | Moderate |

[Table 5](#) shows that "levels of academic engagement among secondary school students" was rated (moderate), from the perspectives of school counselors. The overall mean for the Academic Engagement Scale is (3.28), with a standard deviation of (0.675), while the standard deviations for the Scale's dimensions ranged between 0.591 and 1.020.

The researcher believes that the moderate levels of academic engagement among secondary school students, from the perspectives of student counselors, may be attributable to students' poor ability to comprehend the academic courses and their assignments appropriately. It is also perhaps due to the poor relationship between teachers and students, which prevents the formation of positive social relationships at school as required. This finding contradicts that obtained by the studies of [Abid and Akhtar \[4\]](#); [Hayam-Jonas \[3\]](#) and [Sabbaghi, et al. \[27\]](#) which all indicate that secondary school students, by nature, have high levels of academic engagement.

5.2. Discussion of the Second Question: What is the Degree of Academic Competence Among Secondary School Students, From the Perspectives of School Counselors?

In order to answer this question, the mean and standard deviation for each dimension of the second axis, then list them in a descending order based on the mean, as outlined in the following [Table 6](#).

[Table 7](#) shows that academic competence was rated (moderate) from the perspectives of school counselors. The overall mean was valued at (2.99), with a standards deviation of (.980). The values of standard deviations for the scale's statements ranged between 1.144 and 1.266.

The researcher believes that the (moderate) degree of academic competence, from the perspectives of student counselors, may be attributable to the existence of many obstacles that students encounter in overcoming any academic problem and to their inability to provide possible solutions to problems. Another possible reason is students' poor ability to deal effectively with unexpected questions or academic tasks. This finding stands in contradiction to that obtained by [Ruga \[5\]](#) which indicates that high school students in the context of another developing country, the Philippines, have high levels of academic competence. However, the study by [Olusegun, et al. \[6\]](#) highlights different and inconclusive findings; this study, which was conducted in Nigeria, indicates that levels of academic competence vary, from low to high, by geographical area, even within the same state. This difference and inconclusiveness of findings highlight the need for further research on levels of academic competence among secondary school students.

Table 6.

Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of the sample's Responses on the academic competence scale.

| Statement | | Level of responsiveness | | | | | | Mean | Standard deviation | Statement ranking | Level of responsiveness |
|--|---|-------------------------|----------|------|----------|------|-----------|------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| | | | Very low | Low | Moderate | High | Very high | | | | |
| 2 | I can achieve the grades I plan for | f | 5 | 15 | 18 | 23 | 9 | 3.23 | 1.144 | 1 | Moderate |
| | | % | 7.1 | 21.4 | 25.7 | 32.9 | 12.9 | | | | |
| 4 | I can write on my own, with high efficiency, any report requested from me in academic courses | f | 9 | 7 | 22 | 26 | 6 | 3.19 | 1.146 | 2 | Moderate |
| | | % | 12.9 | 10.0 | 31.4 | 37.1 | 8.6 | | | | |
| 10 | I can go to great lengths to try to understand any important subject | f | 11 | 10 | 19 | 22 | 8 | 3.09 | 1.248 | 3 | Moderate |
| | | % | 15.7 | 14.3 | 27.1 | 31.4 | 11.4 | | | | |
| 1 | I can always solve difficult study problems if I put in enough effort | f | 7 | 14 | 24 | 17 | 8 | 3.07 | 1.146 | 4 | Moderate |
| | | % | 10.0 | 20.0 | 34.3 | 24.3 | 11.4 | | | | |
| 9 | I find myself hustling to the last moment to succeed or excel if I fail or get an unsatisfactory grade in a subject | f | 11 | 5 | 30 | 16 | 8 | 3.07 | 1.183 | 5 | Moderate |
| | | % | 15.7 | 7.1 | 42.9 | 22.9 | 11.4 | | | | |
| 7 | When I face a study problem, I can find several possible solutions to it | f | 12 | 10 | 22 | 19 | 7 | 2.99 | 1.234 | 6 | Moderate |
| | | % | 17.1 | 14.3 | 31.4 | 27.1 | 10.0 | | | | |
| 6 | I believe that my performance will be outstanding in all subjects | f | 10 | 14 | 24 | 13 | 9 | 2.96 | 1.221 | 7 | Moderate |
| | | % | 14.3 | 20.0 | 34.3 | 18.6 | 12.9 | | | | |
| 3 | I am confident that I can deal effectively with unexpected questions or assignments | f | 11 | 17 | 23 | 12 | 7 | 2.81 | 1.195 | 8 | Moderate |
| | | % | 15.7 | 24.3 | 32.9 | 17.1 | 10.0 | | | | |
| 5 | I can remain calm while facing study problems because I can rely on my own abilities | f | 14 | 15 | 17 | 18 | 6 | 2.81 | 1.266 | 9 | Moderate |
| | | % | 20.0 | 21.4 | 24.3 | 25.7 | 8.6 | | | | |
| 8 | I believe that getting an unsatisfactory grade in a subject increases my efforts and does not diminish them | f | 13 | 21 | 16 | 13 | 7 | 2.71 | 1.253 | 10 | Moderate |
| | | % | 18.6 | 30.0 | 22.9 | 18.6 | 10.0 | | | | |
| Overall mean for the academic competence scale | | | | | | | | 2.99 | 0.980 | --- | Moderate |

5.3. Discussion of the Main Hypothesis: A Correlation that is Statistically Significant at the Level (0.05) Level Exists between Levels of Academic Engagement and Academic Competence Among Secondary School Students

In order to answer this question, Pearson's coefficients of correlation between the two scales were calculated. The findings are outlined in [Table 7](#).

Table 7.

Pearson's coefficients of correlation between academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students.

| Dimensions of the academic engagement scale | Total score for the academic competence scale | |
|--|---|--------------------------|
| | Correlation coefficient | Statistical significance |
| First dimension: Engagement in major | 0.907** | 0.000 |
| Second dimension: Engagement in school community | 0.924** | 0.000 |
| Third dimension: Engagement in school habits | 0.310** | 0.000 |
| Total score for the academic engagement scale | 0.948** | 0.000 |

[Table 7](#) shows that there is a positive correlation between levels of academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students. The correlation coefficient is valued at (0.948**), indicating that the higher the levels of students' academic engagement, the higher the levels of their academic competence.

The researcher believes that this result may be attributable to the importance of academic engagement, whether engagement in major, the school community, or study habits, as it allows students to increase their abilities to achieve positive interaction with their peers and teachers, and to participate in more classroom activities that may help them in improving their achievement levels significantly, thereby increasing their academic competence appropriately. This finding is in line with the conclusion of the studies of [Hayam-Jonas \[3\]](#) and [Abid and Akhtar \[4\]](#) which both indicate that academic engagement is positively correlated with academic achievement (Related to academic competence).

6. Conclusions

The analyses in this study show that levels of academic engagement are low and of academic competence are moderate, from the perspectives of school counselors in Al Kharj educational district in Saudi Arabia. The study also shows that there is a positive correlation between academic engagement and academic competence. These findings are generally in line with those obtained by most relevant research studies, as most studies show that the two variables are positively correlated. However, the context of the study, namely secondary schools in Al-Kharj, differs from those investigated by other studies by low levels of academic engagement and academic competence among students. This significant difference raises questions on the factors or causes responsible for the relatively poor levels of academic engagement and academic competence among secondary school students in Al-Kharj. However, it is important to note that the present study's findings cannot be generalized to the rest of Saudi schools due to various limitations of the study, including the small sample size, specific focus on a the very narrow geographical scope of Al-Kharj area, use of only quantitative research methods, and investigation of perceptions of school counselors only. It is recommended that future studies targeting the Saudi context address these limitations in order to arrive at more generalizable findings.

In the light of these general conclusions, the study presents a number of research suggestions and practical recommendations:

6.1. Research Suggestions

- Conducting similar studies focusing on other regions across Saudi Arabia.
- Carrying out studies that adopt qualitative research designs in order to form deeper understandings of the mechanisms by which academic engagement leads to improved levels of academic competence.
- Taking into consideration the perceptions of other groups, such as students themselves, teachers, and parents, in future investigations of the relationship between academic engagement and academic competence.

6.2. Practical Recommendations

- Designing school counseling programs in secondary schools across Saudi Arabia, with focus on promoting and enhancing academic engagement among students.
- Training teachers and school counselors in Al-Kharj to apply evidence-based methods for fostering academic engagement among school students.
- Organizing specialized activities in teachers' professional development programs focusing on approaches and methods for improving students' levels of academic competence.

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