

Chinese Teachers' Perceptions on Perceived Teacher Support and Student Engagement

Zhan Shu ^{1*}, Kannamah Mottan¹, Haowei Chen ¹, Yao Pang ²

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology and Music, SEGi University, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

² Faculty of Educational Sciences, Zhengzhou Normal University, Zhengzhou, China

shuzhan1013@163.com, kannamahmottan@segi.edu.my, chw19881126@gmail.com, 1527204434@qq.com

Tel: 0137694061

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of teachers regarding methods to enhance students' perceived teacher support and engagement at a higher vocational college in Zhengzhou, China. The participants consisted of four instructors, each specializing in different subjects. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal various effective strategies used by the participants to increase perceived teacher support and provide suggestions for boosting student engagement. These strategies offer valuable insights for improving both perceived teacher support and student engagement in the context of Chinese higher vocational education. The study also suggests directions for future research.

Keywords: Perceived Teacher Support; Student Engagement; Higher Vocational College Teachers

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER and cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

DOI:

1.0 Introduction

In 2019, the State Council issued the "National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform," steering Chinese vocational education towards a path of high-level and high-quality development. The importance of vocational education in cultivating skilled technical talent and driving socio-economic progress has become increasingly evident. In the context of improving quality and efficiency in higher vocational education, scholars have focused extensively on the quality of educational institutions. Student engagement is recognized as a key indicator of the quality of higher vocational education (Zhu et al., 2020). Various factors within the educational environment collectively influence student engagement, with teachers playing a crucial role in this process through the support they provide to students.

In recent years, the status of higher vocational education within the Chinese educational system has gradually garnered recognition from both government and society, emphasizing its role in cultivating professional and technical talents. Despite this, societal recognition of higher vocational education remains subdued, influenced by traditional beliefs that favor academic credentials over practical skills (Huang, 2022). This prevalent social bias, coupled with the entrenched university entrance examination system, not only impairs the quality of student admissions to vocational institutions but also challenges the teaching efforts of vocational educators. Consequently,

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER and cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.

DOI:

many students exhibit inadequate academic performance due to insufficient engagement, which directly constrains the enhancement of talent training quality in higher vocational colleges (Yu, 2019).

1.1 Problem Statement

Previous studies have underscored the significance of student engagement and its influencing factors. Despite variations in subjects and contexts, the positive influence of perceived teacher support on student engagement is consistently affirmed (Bru et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023; Tas et al., 2019). This relationship suggests that higher levels of perceived teacher support correlate with increased student engagement. However, research specifically addressing student engagement within higher vocational colleges remains sparse (Cai & Wang, 2021). A 2020 national survey conducted by an authoritative body revealed that student engagement in Chinese higher vocational colleges was merely 61%. This survey highlighted critical challenges, including students' lack of initiative and ineffective learning strategies, which impede the advancement of high-quality higher vocational education.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education introduced the "Action Plan for Quality Improvement and Excellence in Vocational Education (2020-2023)," which aims to advance vocational education through high-quality and modernized development. This initiative underscores the importance of adopting a learner-centered approach in curriculum instruction. Moreover, the beneficial influence of perceived teacher support on student engagement is well-documented. Nevertheless, limited research has focused on faculty from higher vocational colleges, particularly regarding their insights into these variables, as explored through qualitative methodologies.

To bridge the existing research gap, this study was initiated for several key reasons. First, it employs a qualitative survey targeting higher vocational college teachers as respondents to address the limitations of prior studies, which predominantly concentrated on student perspectives, thereby offering a more holistic understanding. Second, investigating teachers' views on enhancing perceived teacher support and student engagement is essential for advancing the quality of higher vocational education.

1.2 Objective of the Study

In this study, we examine teachers' perceptions, focusing specifically on strategies to enhance perceived teacher support and student engagement in Chinese higher vocational colleges. The research objectives are as follows:

RO1: To investigate strategies used by teachers in higher vocational colleges to enhance students' perceived teacher support.

RO2: To explore teacher recommendations on improving student engagement in higher vocational colleges.

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews previous research on teachers' perceptions of the two core variables under investigation.

2.1 Strategies Employed by Teachers to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Support

According to Self-Determination Theory, individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Consequently, this study categorizes perceived teacher support into three dimensions: perceived autonomy support, perceived emotional support, and perceived competence support. During the interviews, the researcher guided respondents to focus their responses on these three dimensions.

In a study on higher education physical education, Lobo (2023) found that university teachers enhanced emotional support for students by actively listening to their opinions and providing timely assistance. Cheon et al. (2020) conducted research with physical education teachers and primary and secondary students in South Korea to develop and evaluate an intervention. The study revealed that when teachers increased autonomy support and classroom structure, it positively influenced students' sense of autonomy and competence, which, in turn, improved their classroom engagement and academic performance. Koçak et al. (2022) examined science classrooms in Turkish secondary schools and found that science teachers enhanced students' perceived autonomy support by offering choices, listening to students' ideas about tasks, and encouraging questions. This perceived autonomy support was associated with a more positive learning experience. Similarly, Sha et al. (2020) observed the influence of teacher support behaviors on student engagement in a blended learning environment. Interventions such as offering encouragement, providing choices, and delivering positive feedback significantly improved students' cognitive engagement.

In summary, previous research has explored how teachers in various educational contexts provide different types of support to students and extensively documented the positive influence of perceived teacher support on student engagement. However, there is a notable lack of research on strategies teachers can use to enhance students' perceived teacher support, particularly in qualitative studies focused on teachers. This study seeks to address this gap.

2.2 Teachers' Perceptions on Enhancing Student Engagement

In recent years, "student engagement" has garnered increasing attention from scholars, educators, and policymakers. Student engagement is defined as the energy and effort students invest in their learning community, which can be observed through behavioral, cognitive, and emotional indicators (Bond et al., 2020). Enhancing student engagement is crucial for improving the quality of the academic environment and fostering students' learning and professional development (Peters et al., 2019). Therefore, exploring experiences and strategies for enhancing student engagement is of significant practical importance.

Existing research has proposed strategies and recommendations for enhancing student engagement from various perspectives. For example, Heilporn et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 teachers across undergraduate and graduate courses to investigate strategies for promoting student engagement in blended learning environments. The findings suggest that teachers can improve student engagement by clarifying course structures, maintaining appropriate pacing, implementing active learning activities, and establishing trust-based relationships. Similarly, Harris et al. (2022) explored Australian distance education teachers' understanding of and strategies for supporting student engagement through focus group interviews. The study revealed that teachers predominantly focus on behavioral engagement, which they support by building relationships, utilizing technological tools, and providing personalized instruction. Furthermore, Karabchuk and Roshchina (2023) found that the academic environment significantly influences student engagement, suggesting that universities should enhance their academic environments by adopting positive teaching practices. Additionally, Chan et al. (2022) demonstrated that strong school-family partnerships, with active parental involvement in school activities, significantly contribute to students' active engagement in their learning.

In summary, previous studies have explored methods to enhance student engagement from various perspectives, including those of teachers, schools, and families. However, there is still a gap in the research regarding teachers' perceptions of how to enhance student engagement from their own perspective.

3.0 Methodology

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of Chinese higher vocational college teachers on perceived teacher support and student engagement. The interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting. In alignment with the research objectives, the interview questions were carefully designed by the researcher and reviewed by both an expert and a potential interviewee to ensure clarity and comprehension. All interviews were conducted in Chinese, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. To ensure the reliability of the data, the transcriptions were shared with the participants for verification. A purposive sampling method was employed to select four teachers from various disciplines at a public higher vocational college in Zhengzhou, China. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

No.	Gender	Age	Educational Background	Teaching Experience (year)
Teacher 1	Female	53	Educational Psychology	16
Teacher 2	Female	34	Human Geography	6
Teacher 3	Male	33	Business English	7
Teacher 4	Female	35	Exhibition Planning	7

In this study, the participants included one male teacher and three female teachers, all of whom held master's degrees and served as professional subject instructors. To enhance the generalizability and reliability of the findings, these four teachers were selected from diverse educational backgrounds, each bringing several years of college-level teaching experience, which contributed valuable practical insights to the research.

4.0 Findings

This section presents the research findings derived from the thematic analysis, addressing the study's objectives.

4.1 Strategies Employed by Teachers to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Support

When asked about the behaviors and strategies they use to enhance students' perceived teacher support, all participants provided detailed explanations that drew from their teaching experiences and real-life scenarios. This study, grounded in Self-Determination Theory, conceptualizes perceived teacher support in three dimensions, which guided the responses.

4.1.1 Strategies to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Autonomy Support

The interviewees unanimously emphasized the importance of fostering students' autonomous learning abilities during both theoretical and practical teaching sessions. They strive to create opportunities for students to exercise autonomy by providing them with choices and encouraging independent decision-making. For instance, interviewee T2 noted:

"When I employ vivid case studies as an introduction at the start of my courses, students exhibit a marked enthusiasm for participation. They engage actively in discussions on the topics, often sparking intellectual exchanges that lead to unique insights. These insights not only surprise me but also inspire new ideas in my teaching practice."

Participant T4 provided a similar example:

"In line with the pedagogical approach that integrates theory with practice, I frequently encourage students to participate in competitions and practical activities pertinent to their disciplines. For example, in organizing campus exhibitions, students are grouped by roles essential to the event's needs, promoting collaborative skills, autonomy, and expertise in exhibition management."

Moreover, the interviewees reported that to enhance students' perceived teacher autonomy support, they actively listen to students' suggestions and encourage them to voice differing viewpoints. Interviewee T1 stated:

"In class, I often have the students put away their phones and freely express their confusions and thoughts. This approach is very popular with the students."

Interviewee T3 also illustrated this point:

"When students express objections to the course content, I patiently listen to their perspectives and acknowledge their act of autonomous thinking."

4.1.2 Strategies to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Emotional Support

The interviewees emphasized that enhancing students' perceived emotional support from teachers requires a deep understanding of student characteristics, offering them respect and care, treating all students equitably, and building trusting relationships. For example, interviewee T2 observed:

"Most higher vocational students are generally outgoing and enthusiastic about practical activities. However, they often lack confidence in learning."

Interviewee T3 provided an example, stating:

"I would like to attend my students' birthday parties to make them feel my care."

Additionally, respondent S1 noted:

"When providing psychological counseling to students, I am very careful to protect their privacy and strive to understand their concerns and thoughts."

4.1.3 Strategies to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Competence Support

The respondents consistently reported employing various strategies to enhance students' perceived competence support from teachers. These strategies include setting clear learning expectations, providing timely feedback and recognition, and offering diverse forms of assistance. For example, respondent T2 stated:

"I usually offer immediate feedback on students' classroom performance by offering small rewards and additional points. This recognition and encouragement can motivate students to engage more actively in classroom learning."

In a similar vein, respondent T4 noted:

"We require students in their second year to independently plan and organize a campus exhibition event."

Additionally, interviewee S1 shared a personal experience:

"I once provided psychological counseling to a student with a mental illness. Through multiple targeted counseling sessions and interventions, I successfully helped him overcome depression."

4.2 Teachers' Suggestions on Enhancing Student Engagement

When asked about strategies to enhance student engagement, respondents provided suggestions not only from the perspectives of teachers and schools but also offered valuable insights from social, school and family contexts, taking into account the unique characteristics of Chinese higher vocational education.

4.2.1 Social Perspective

Interviewees highlighted that despite the crucial role of higher vocational education in national economic development, societal prejudice and discrimination against vocational students persist in China. This negative perception exacerbates feelings of inferiority among these students. Therefore, it is essential to fully acknowledge the unique characteristics of higher vocational education and the distinct attributes of its students. Additionally, government policies should be designed to promote the development of vocational education, while enterprises must enhance collaboration with colleges to offer more internships and employment opportunities for vocational students. These initiatives would help create a more equitable social environment, boost students' academic and professional confidence, and increase their motivation to learn. For instance, respondent S1 stated:

"The general public often believes that vocational college students attend these institutions reluctantly due to low scores on the college entrance examination. This stereotype needs to be eliminated."

Similarly, respondent S2 remarked:

"Companies should recognize the characteristics and strengths of higher vocational college students and provide them with more internship and employment opportunities."

Respondent S3 added:

"The government should formulate more favorable policies tailored to the characteristics of vocational education, providing policy support for the career development of students. This would also effectively motivate students to be more engaged in their studies."

4.2.2 School Perspective

From the school perspective, the interviewees emphasized that student motivation and enthusiasm can be significantly enhanced by optimizing teaching strategies, guiding career planning, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, and enriching campus activities. These measures collectively contribute to increased student engagement. For example, interviewee S2 highlighted the importance of leveraging student clubs to organize activities related to their majors, stating:

“The college should leverage student clubs to organize more activities related to their majors, enriching students' extracurricular time while also reinforcing their professional knowledge.”

Interviewee S3 underscored the need for early career guidance:

“I believe that teachers should start guiding students from their first year to understand their major and future career direction, helping them establish career goals.”

Interviewee S4 emphasized the importance of aligning teaching strategies with students' interests:

“Teachers need to fully understand the characteristics and needs of students. For example, many vocational students have a stronger interest in practical operations. Teachers should adjust their teaching strategies based on students' interests to attract them to engage more deeply in learning.”

Furthermore, interviewee S4 added:

“I believe that teachers must fully trust their students, encourage them to independently complete tasks, and be willing to listen to their ideas. This approach helps teachers better understand their students, thereby effectively motivating them to engage in learning.”

4.2.3 Family Perspective

The interviewees emphasized that family support and involvement are vital for enhancing student engagement. They suggested that parents should actively participate in their children's college experiences, particularly by focusing on academic performance and career development. By fostering strong communication and collaboration with schools, and offering both material and emotional support, parents can significantly boost their children's motivation to learn. For example, interviewee S1 noted:

“Parents should not only provide financial support but also assist their children in academic and career planning, taking into account their interests and strengths. This approach can lead to more effective student engagement in their studies.”

Interviewee S2 observed:

“In China, many parents pay little attention to their children's academic progress once they enter college and lack understanding of their children's future career paths. As a result, they are unable to provide valuable guidance. I believe that families need to strengthen their collaboration with schools to jointly promote students' academic and career development.”

Interviewee S3 highlighted:

“Some parents are unsure about how to guide their children in choosing a career. I believe they need to enhance communication with schools, better understand employment policies, and pay close attention to their children's interests, as this is crucial.”

5.0 Discussion

The interview findings indicate that the majority of teachers acknowledge the critical importance of perceived teacher support and student engagement in fostering students' academic and career development. Additionally, the teachers proposed strategies to enhance students' perceived teacher support and offered valuable suggestions for improving student engagement from various perspectives.

Teachers employ various strategies, including optimizing teaching methods and enriching extracurricular activities, to provide students with greater opportunities for autonomous choice and decision-making. By prioritizing active listening to students' perspectives, they effectively enhance students' perception of teacher autonomy support, consistent with previous research (Huéscar Hernández et al., 2020; Koçak et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers strengthen students' perceived emotional support by demonstrating respect, care, and trust, which corroborates earlier findings (Lobo, 2023). To improve perceived competence support, teachers set clear learning expectations, deliver constructive feedback, and offer timely assistance, which aligns with the findings of Cheon et al. (2020).

Through the interviews, teachers offered constructive suggestions for enhancing student engagement, focusing primarily on societal, school, and family perspectives. At the societal level, they emphasized the importance of policy support and increased employment opportunities to aid vocational students' career development. At the school level, teachers recommended optimizing curriculum and instruction, strengthening teacher-student relationships, and providing career planning guidance, which align with previous research findings (Sha et al., 2020; Thornberg et al., 2022). At the family level, the suggestions centered on the need for parents to actively support and be attentive to their children's academic and career pursuits, which has been identified as a crucial factor in fostering student engagement in prior studies.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This qualitative study investigated faculty perceptions of perceived teacher support and student engagement through interviews with faculty members at a higher vocational college. The findings highlight that most teachers recognize the importance of these variables

for students. Their extensive teaching experience has provided them with a deep understanding of how to enhance both perceived teacher support and student engagement.

The results reveal that teachers employ various strategies to bolster perceived teacher support, such as providing opportunities for autonomy, engaging with students through multiple channels, and offering assistance. Additionally, teachers recommend exploring strategies to enhance student engagement from social, school, and family perspectives. They emphasize the need to tailor these approaches to the specific characteristics of higher vocational education and its students by implementing supportive policies, optimizing teaching methods, strengthening home-school communication, and promoting school-business collaboration. Such measures can foster students' academic development, stimulate their learning motivation, and boost their confidence, thereby increasing their overall engagement. However, this study has two primary limitations. First, participants were drawn from only one college. Second, data were collected exclusively through teacher interviews. Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating classroom observation data, and exploring higher vocational college students' perspectives on perceived teacher support and engagement.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology, and Music at SEGi University for their support.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of teachers in higher vocational education in China regarding strategies to enhance students' perceived teacher support and overall engagement.

References

- Bond, M., Buntins, K., Bedenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., & Kerres, M. (2020). Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: A systematic evidence map. *International journal of educational technology in higher education*, 17, 1-30.
- Bru, E., Virtanen, T., Kjetilstad, V., & Niemiec, C. P. (2021). Gender differences in the strength of association between perceived support from teachers and student engagement. *Scandinavian journal of educational research*, 65(1), 153-168.
- Cai, M., & Wang, Y. (2021). Opening the "Black Box": A Qualitative Research on the Influence Mechanism of Students' Learning Engagement in Higher Vocational Colleges —A Case Study of the National "Double-high Plan" College. *Vocational and Technical Education*, 42(17), 74-80.
- Chan, M., Manzon, M., Hong, H., & Khong, L. Y. (2022). Multidimensional profiles of parent involvement: Antecedents and impact on student engagement. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(2), 447-464.
- Cheon, S. H., Reeve, J., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2020). When teachers learn how to provide classroom structure in an autonomy-supportive way: Benefits to teachers and their students. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 90, 1-12.
- Guo, Q., Samsudin, S., Yang, X., Gao, J., Ramlan, M. A., Abdullah, B., & Farizan, N. H. (2023). Relationship between Perceived Teacher Support and Student Engagement in Physical Education: A Systematic Review. *Sustainability*, 15(7), 6039-6057.
- Harris, L., Dargusch, J., Ames, K., & Bloomfield, C. (2022). Catering for 'very different kids': distance education teachers' understandings of and strategies for student engagement. *International journal of inclusive education*, 26(8), 848-864.
- Heilporn, G., Lakhali, S., & Bélisle, M. (2021). An examination of teachers' strategies to foster student engagement in blended learning in higher education. *International journal of educational technology in higher education*, 18(1), 1-25.
- Huang, P. (2022). *Research on the Value Orientation of Higher Vocational Education* [Doctoral Thesis, Sichuan Normal University].
- Huéscaer Hernández, E., Moreno-Murcia, J. A., Cid, L., Monteiro, D., & Rodrigues, F. (2020). Passion or perseverance? The effect of perceived autonomy support and grit on academic performance in college students. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(6), 2143-2156.
- Karabchuk, T., & Roshchina, Y. (2023). Predictors of student engagement: the role of universities' or importance of students' background? *European Journal of Higher Education*, 13(3), 327-346.
- Koçak, G., Tas, Y., & Yerdelen, S. (2022). Students' Basic Psychological Needs in Learning Science: The Role of Teacher Autonomy Support and Classmate Support. *Excellence in Education Journal*, 11(2), 1-29.
- Lobo, J. (2023). Teacher Emotional Support and School Engagement: The case of Physical Education Teachers and Students in a Prominent Local College. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, 98(1), 57-66.
- Peters, H., Zdravkovic, M., João Costa, M., Celenza, A., Ghias, K., Klamen, D., Mossop, L., Rieder, M., Devi Nadarajah, V., & Wangsaturaka, D. (2019). Twelve tips for enhancing student engagement. *Medical teacher*, 41(6), 632-637.

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 61*, 1-32.
- Sha, J., Kan, Z., & Li, W. (2020). An Empirical Research on the Improvement of College Students' School Engagement by Teachers' Support Strategies in Blended Learning Environment. *China Educational Technology(08)*, 127-133.
- Tas, Y., Subaşı, M., & Yerdelen, S. (2019). The role of motivation between perceived teacher support and student engagement in science class. *Educational Studies, 45(5)*, 582-592.
- Thornberg, R., Forsberg, C., Hammar Chiriac, E., & Bjereld, Y. (2022). Teacher–student relationship quality and student engagement: A sequential explanatory mixed-methods study. *Research Papers in Education, 37(6)*, 840-859.
- Yu, Z. (2019). Research on Relationship between Teachers' Support and Students' Learning Engagement in Higher Vocational Colleges ——Based on Analysis of Mediating Effect of Academic Self-efficacy. *Vocational and Technical Education, 40(17)*, 65-70.
- Zhu, S., Liu, F., Han, B., Zhang, X., & Gu, J. (2020). A Survey on the Current Situation of Students' Learning Engagement in Higher Vocational Colleges in the View of High-quality Development ——Based on the Empirical CCSS Data of W Vocational College. *Vocational and Technical Education, 41(34)*, 24-29.