

Chinese Teachers' Perceptions on Perceived Teacher Support and Student Engagement

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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 several effective strategies that participants use to enhance perceived teacher support and suggest ways to boost 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

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1.0 Introduction

Vocational education is crucial for cultivating the technical talent needed for China's socio-economic development. The 2019 "National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform," issued by the State Council, emphasized advancing vocational education towards high-quality development. With an increasing focus on improving the quality of higher vocational education, student engagement has emerged as a key indicator of educational quality (Zhu et al., 2020). Various factors in the educational environment influence student engagement, with teachers playing a central role through the support they provide. Despite growing governmental support, societal biases favoring academic over practical skills persist, undermining the status of vocational institutions. These biases, along with the pressures of the university entrance examination system (Huang, 2022), impact student admissions and challenge educators' efforts. As a result, many students exhibit low engagement, leading to poor academic performance and hindering the improvement of talent training quality in vocational colleges (Yu, 2019).

In response to these challenges, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to investigate perceived teacher support, which is categorized into autonomy support, emotional support, and competence support within this framework (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The positive influence of perceived teacher support on student engagement has been widely recognized (Guo et al., 2023; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). Student engagement, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, is generally considered to have a significant influence on academic achievement (Abid & Akhtar, 2020; Tadesse & Edo, 2021). Therefore, exploring strategies to enhance

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student engagement is crucial for promoting academic success. This study aims to investigate the strategies teachers use to enhance students' perceived teacher support and to examine their recommendations for improving student engagement in the context of higher vocational education.

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). 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)," aiming to advance vocational education through high-quality and modernized development. This initiative emphasizes the adoption of a learner-centered approach in curriculum instruction, making it crucial to leverage the role of teachers in enhancing student learning and overall educational quality. Although the positive impact of perceived teacher support on student engagement is well-documented, there is limited research focusing on the perspectives of faculty from higher vocational colleges, especially using qualitative methods.

To address this gap, this study was undertaken for several key reasons. First, it employs a qualitative survey targeting higher vocational college teachers, offering a more balanced understanding by addressing the limitations of previous research. Second, understanding teachers' views on enhancing perceived teacher support and student engagement is vital for improving 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 a higher vocational college to enhance students' perceived teacher support.

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

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews previous research on teachers' perceptions of the two core variables: perceived teacher support and student engagement.

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

According to Self-Determination Theory, individuals possess three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In line with this framework, the present study categorizes perceived teacher support into three distinct dimensions: autonomy support, emotional support, and competence support. During the interviews, participants were specifically guided to frame their responses within these three dimensions, ensuring a focused and comprehensive exploration of each aspect of perceived teacher support.

Existing research has extensively explored how teachers enhance students' perceived support in various educational contexts. Lobo (2023) found that university teachers improved emotional support by actively listening and providing timely assistance. Cheon et al. (2020) demonstrated that structured classroom practices by physical education teachers in South Korea enhanced students' autonomy and competence, leading to increased engagement and academic performance. Similarly, Koçak et al. (2022) reported that offering choices and encouraging student input helped Turkish science teachers foster autonomy, resulting in a more positive learning experience. Sha et al. (2020) also highlighted that encouragement, feedback, and providing choices significantly improved cognitive engagement in blended learning environments.

Building on these findings, this study aims to identify strategies used by teachers in a higher vocational college, a context often overlooked in previous research. Although the positive effects of teacher support are well established, most studies focus on primary, secondary, or general higher education. This underscores the need to explore how teachers in Chinese higher vocational colleges enhance students' perceived teacher support, forming the basis for Research Objective 1 (RO1).

2.2 Teachers' Perceptions on Enhancing Student Engagement

Student engagement has gained significant attention for its vital role in students' academic development. Bond et al. (2020) define it as the energy and effort students put into their learning, encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Enhancing student engagement is key to improving the academic environment and supporting students' professional growth (Peters et al., 2019).

Existing research has proposed strategies for enhancing student engagement from various perspectives. For example, Heilporn et al. (2021) found through interviews with 20 teachers that clarifying course structures, maintaining pacing, implementing active learning, and building trust-based relationships can promote student engagement in blended learning. Similarly, Harris et al. (2022) explored strategies among Australian distance education teachers, revealing that they emphasize behavioral engagement by building relationships, using technology, and providing personalized instruction. Karabchuk and Roshchina (2023) highlighted the role of the

academic environment in fostering engagement, suggesting that universities adopt positive teaching practices to enhance it. Additionally, Chan et al. (2022) showed that strong school-family partnerships, with active parental involvement, significantly boost students' engagement in learning.

While these studies provide valuable insights into student engagement across various educational levels and contexts, there remains a gap in research specifically addressing how teachers in Chinese higher vocational colleges perceive and enhance student engagement. This gap underscores the need for a more context-specific investigation, forming the basis for Research Objective 2 (RO2) of this study.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of Chinese higher vocational college teachers on perceived teacher support and student engagement. Interviews were conducted online through Tencent Meeting. Questions were carefully designed, reviewed by an expert and a potential interviewee for clarity, and conducted in Chinese, with each session lasting 30 to 40 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were recorded, transcribed, translated into English, and verified by the participants for accuracy.

A purposive sampling method was used to select four teachers from different courses at a public higher vocational college in Zhengzhou, China. The selection ensured diversity in educational backgrounds, teaching experience, and gender, aiming to capture a range of perspectives on perceived teacher support and student engagement. A shared characteristic among participants was their extensive experience in student management, providing a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics of higher vocational students. The demographic details of the participants are shown 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

While the sample size is small, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth. The selected institution, a public higher vocational college in Henan, serves students primarily from rural and suburban backgrounds, focusing on local economic needs for skilled labor. This context shapes the relevance of the study's findings, making them particularly applicable to similar colleges with comparable student demographics and economic goals. The diversity of participants' backgrounds enabled an in-depth exploration of teacher strategies, achieving data saturation as no new themes or insights emerged after the fourth interview.

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 strategies to enhance students' perceived teacher support, participants provided detailed explanations based on their teaching experiences and real-life scenarios. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory, this study categorizes perceived teacher support into three dimensions, which informed their responses.

4.1.1 Strategies to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Autonomy Support

The interviewees unanimously stressed the importance of fostering students' autonomous learning in both theoretical and practical sessions by offering choices and encouraging independent decision-making. For instance, interviewee T2 noted:

"When I use vivid case studies to introduce my courses, students show strong enthusiasm and actively participate in discussions, often generating unique insights that inspire my teaching."

Participant T4 provided a similar example:

"I integrate theory with practice by encouraging students to join competitions and practical activities in their fields. For example, in organizing campus exhibitions, they take on key roles, fostering collaboration, autonomy, and management skills."

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 T3 stated:

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

These strategies illustrate how teachers enhance students' perceived autonomy support by providing choices, encouraging independent thinking, and fostering open dialogue, which promotes student engagement and ownership of their learning.

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 T1 noted:

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

These strategies show how teachers enhance students' perceived emotional support by offering care, building trust, and understanding their needs, which helps boost students' confidence and emotional well-being.

4.1.3 Strategies to Enhance Students' Perceived Teacher Competence Support

Respondents consistently reported using strategies to enhance students' perceived competence support, including setting clear expectations, providing timely feedback and recognition, and offering varied 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 T1 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.”

These strategies highlight how teachers enhance students' perceived competence support by providing timely feedback, clear expectations, and opportunities for independent work, thereby boosting students' confidence and engagement.

4.2 Teachers' Suggestions on Enhancing Student Engagement

When asked about strategies to enhance student engagement, respondents offered insights from the perspectives of teachers, schools, and families, considering the unique characteristics of Chinese higher vocational education.

4.2.1 Social Perspective

Interviewees highlighted that, despite the significant role of vocational education in national economic development, societal prejudice against vocational students persists in China, reinforcing feelings of inferiority. To mitigate these challenges, government policies should further support vocational education, and enterprises should collaborate with colleges to offer more employment opportunities. Such initiatives would foster a more equitable social environment and enhance students' motivation to learn. For instance, respondent T4, when discussing the impact of social bias, noted:

“Social bias against vocational education makes students feel undervalued, which lowers their confidence and motivation. They often doubt the worth of their education, leading to reduced engagement and effort in their studies.”

Respondent T2 highlighted:

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

Respondent T3 added:

“The government should develop policies tailored to vocational education that support students' career development and effectively motivate them to engage more in their studies.”

4.2.2 School Perspective

From the school perspective, interviewees highlighted that optimizing teaching strategies, guiding career planning, fostering positive teacher-student relationships, and enriching campus activities can significantly enhance student motivation and engagement. Interviewee T2 emphasized the importance of using student clubs to organize major-related activities, stating:

“The college should leverage student clubs to enrich students' extracurricular time while reinforcing their professional knowledge.”

Interviewee T3 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 T4 stressed the importance of aligning teaching strategies with students' interests:

“Teachers need to understand students' characteristics and needs. Many vocational students are more interested in practical work, so teaching strategies should be adjusted accordingly to foster deeper engagement.”

Furthermore, Interviewee T4 added:

“Teachers should trust their students, encourage independent task completion, and listen to their ideas. This approach helps teachers better understand and effectively motivate students to engage in learning.”

4.2.3 Family Perspective

Interviewees stressed that family support is essential for enhancing student engagement. They suggested parents actively focus on academic performance and career development, while strong communication with schools and both material and emotional support can significantly boost students' motivation. For example, interviewee T1 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 T2 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 T3 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.”

The social, school, and family perspectives are closely interconnected in enhancing student engagement. Societal prejudice against vocational education not only undermines students' confidence but also influences the strategies teachers use, such as fostering autonomy and emotional support. Simultaneously, families affected by these societal views may become less involved in their children's academic and career development. Teachers play a key role in bridging this gap, promoting family involvement and addressing social stigma through stronger school-family collaboration.

5.0 Discussion

Teachers use strategies such as optimizing teaching methods and enriching extracurricular activities to offer students more opportunities for choice and decision-making. By actively listening to students, they enhance perceptions of autonomy support, aligning with previous research (Huéscar Hernández et al., 2020; Koçak et al., 2022). Additionally, they strengthen emotional support by showing respect, care, and trust, consistent with earlier findings (Lobo, 2023). To improve competence support, teachers set clear expectations, provide constructive feedback, and offer timely assistance, reflecting the findings of Cheon et al. (2020).

Teachers also suggested ways to enhance student engagement from societal, school, and family perspectives. At the societal level, they emphasized the need for policy support and increased employment opportunities to aid vocational students' career development. At the school level, they recommended optimizing curriculum, fostering teacher-student relationships, and offering career guidance, consistent with prior studies (Sha et al., 2020; Thornberg et al., 2022). At the family level, they stressed the importance of parental involvement in supporting students' academic and career pursuits, highlighting its role in enhancing student engagement.

These findings have broader implications for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in Chinese vocational education. Policymakers should consider targeted policies to address societal biases and create a more supportive environment, including better access to internships and job opportunities. Additionally, educators can apply these strategies to enhance teacher support and student engagement. Emphasizing family involvement highlights the need for stronger school-family partnerships. Such efforts can foster a more engaging learning environment, motivating students and better preparing them for their careers.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This qualitative study explored teachers' perceptions of perceived teacher support and student engagement through interviews at a public higher vocational college. Teachers drew on their extensive experience to implement strategies for enhancing perceived teacher support, such as promoting student autonomy, maintaining communication through multiple channels, and offering targeted support. They also provided insights on improving student engagement, emphasizing the importance of tailoring approaches to the specific context of higher vocational education. Their recommendations included supportive policies, optimized teaching methods, stronger home-school communication, and closer school-business collaboration—measures that can support students' academic growth, increase motivation, and enhance engagement.

This study has certain limitations. The sample was limited to teachers from a single vocational college, and data were gathered exclusively through interviews, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. The insights are particularly applicable to vocational colleges serving rural or suburban students and focusing on local economic needs for skilled labor. While these findings offer valuable insights for similar institutions, they may not fully reflect the broader context of vocational education in China. Future research should include a geographically diverse sample from multiple colleges across different regions, integrate classroom observations, and incorporate student perspectives to strengthen the robustness and applicability of the results.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

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

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