

The Impact of Social Support on the Learning Participation of College Students in Poor Areas: A Case Study of Liangshan, Sichuan Province

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of social support on the learning participation of college students in poor areas, focusing on Liangshan, Sichuan Province. Utilizing a structured questionnaire based on the Likert scale, data were collected to assess the roles of family, teacher, and peer support in shaping students' academic engagement. The primary finding of this research is that all three forms of social support contribute positively to students' learning participation, with teacher support exerting the most significant influence. Students in Liangshan perceive their teachers as vital sources of academic guidance and emotional encouragement, which translates into higher engagement and motivation in the classroom. Family support, especially emotional and motivational in nature, also correlates with active student participation, although structural limitations like parents' educational level may restrict their ability to provide academic help. Peer support is beneficial as well, particularly in fostering collaborative learning environments, though it tends to be more variable across individuals and contexts. Based on these insights, the study proposes practical recommendations: enhancing teacher training to include emotional mentoring, encouraging greater parental involvement through community programs, and fostering peer-support mechanisms within schools. While the study provides valuable evidence, it acknowledges limitations including its reliance on self-reported data and regional focus. Future research should incorporate mixed methods and broader geographic samples to deepen understanding and generalize findings. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the critical role of social support in promoting inclusive educational development and improving student outcomes in disadvantaged regions.

Keywords: Social Support, Learning Participation, College Students, Liangshan

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of educational inequality in economically underdeveloped regions has garnered increasing attention from scholars, policymakers, and educators alike (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). Among these regions, the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, China, stands out due to its distinctive socio-

cultural background and persistent poverty. Despite the nationwide expansion of higher education in China, college students from impoverished areas like Liangshan continue to encounter multiple challenges that hinder their effective learning participation (Guan & Abbas, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). These include a lack of access to educational resources, inadequate familial support, cultural and language barriers, and limited exposure to urban educational environments. Understanding the dynamics of these barriers is critical to addressing the broader issue of educational equity and development.

Social support has been widely recognized in educational psychology as a significant external factor influencing students' academic motivation, engagement, and overall performance (Chen et al., 2023; Tao et al., 2022; Zhang & Qian, 2024). It encompasses various forms of emotional, informational, and instrumental assistance that individuals receive from their social networks, particularly family members, teachers, and peers. For students in disadvantaged regions, the presence or absence of social support can significantly shape their academic journey (Bi et al., 2021; Li & Li, 2024; Martinot et al., 2022). However, while the impact of social support on student performance has been examined extensively in urban and developed contexts, its specific influence on college students in poor, rural areas remain underexplored. Given Liangshan's unique socio-economic and cultural context, it presents a compelling case for in-depth investigation.

Students in Liangshan often come from ethnic minority backgrounds and face challenges that are distinct from those encountered in more affluent regions. Parental support may be constrained due to economic necessity, with many parents engaged in migrant labor far from home (Gu, 2022; Islam & Hoque, 2022; Rose-Clarke et al., 2022). Teachers in such regions may also be undertrained or overwhelmed, while peer networks may lack the academic focus found in more competitive educational environments. In such a context, the value of social support becomes even more pronounced. Yet, empirical studies focusing on how specific types of social support—family, teacher, and peer—affect learning participation among these students are limited. The absence of targeted, context-sensitive research restricts our understanding and hinders the development of effective educational policies tailored to local needs.

This study is motivated by the need to address this research gap and to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of educational challenges in poor regions. It aims to investigate the relationship between social support and learning participation among college students in Liangshan. Specifically, the research seeks to conceptualize and measure the key constructs of social support and learning participation, analyze how different types of social support influence students' academic engagement, identify which types of support exert the most significant effects, and offer practical recommendations for enhancing student participation through targeted interventions.

The contribution of this research is as follows: (1) The study shifts the focus from commonly researched urban populations to a marginalized rural area, thereby expanding the geographical and cultural scope of current educational research; (2) By employing a multidimensional framework of social support, the research provides a more nuanced analysis of how various forms of assistance impact students' academic behavior; (3) The findings from Liangshan can inform the development of regionally adapted educational

strategies and interventions, helping to promote educational equity. Lastly, the study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical discussions on social support and the practical realities faced by students in underprivileged regions.

In essence, this research underscores the importance of context-specific analysis in educational research. By situating the study in Liangshan, it acknowledges the unique interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and educational factors that influence student behavior. The results are expected to have significant implications not only for academic theory but also for educational practice and policy-making. Ultimately, the study aims to support the broader goal of achieving equitable and inclusive education by identifying effective pathways to support learning participation among college students in poor areas.

Literature Review

Student Participation

Student participation refers to the extent to which learners engage actively in their academic and school-related activities (Ginting, 2021; Tshering et al., 2024; Wong & Liem, 2022). It is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components (Derakhshan & Yin, 2024; Kassab et al., 2023). Behavioral participation involves observable actions such as attending classes, submitting assignments on time, asking questions, and participating in classroom discussions (Moskovich & HersHKovitz, 2024; Sartika & Nirbita, 2023). Emotional participation includes students' affective experiences in the learning environment—such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging. Cognitive participation reflects the level of mental effort and strategic learning behavior students exhibit, such as applying critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

A substantial body of research has established a strong connection between student participation and academic achievement. Active engagement contributes to improved learning outcomes, better classroom experiences, and stronger psychological resilience (Guo et al., 2025; Masten et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). In impoverished areas, however, student participation can be limited by structural constraints, such as poor infrastructure, teacher shortages, or lack of learning materials. Furthermore, socio-cultural elements, such as low parental educational attainment or the prioritization of labor over schooling, may further impede active engagement (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2023; Rasheed et al., 2021). In rural and ethnically diverse regions like Liangshan, the challenge is even greater, as language barriers and cultural differences may also discourage student involvement. Recognizing the critical importance of participation for academic success, especially in marginalized regions, this study seeks to explore the conditions that either foster or inhibit student engagement.

Social Support

Social support, in the educational context, refers to the emotional, informational, and practical resources provided by others that contribute to a student's academic development (He et al., 2023; Permatasari et al., 2021). It plays a vital role in fostering psychological well-being, enhancing self-confidence, and promoting positive learning behaviors (Baria & Gomez, 2022). This study considers social support as a multidimensional construct composed of three main dimensions: family support, teacher support, and peer support.

Family support encompasses parents' or guardians' involvement in students' education, including encouragement, guidance, provision of educational materials, and financial support (Ayikoru, 2024; Nwoti et al., 2024). In impoverished regions such as Liangshan, however, family support may be compromised due to parents' limited education, economic pressures, or physical absence due to migrant work. Despite these challenges, even limited expressions of care or encouragement can significantly motivate students and contribute to their engagement. Teacher support refers to the emotional and instructional assistance provided by educators, such as showing empathy, respecting students' views, and offering academic feedback (Aldrup et al., 2022; Ampofo et al., 2025; ROMANOVSKA & NOVAK, 2024). Teachers often serve as role models, especially in under-resourced areas where alternative sources of guidance may be scarce. Research suggests that supportive teacher-student relationships enhance students' motivation and persistence, foster classroom belonging, and buffer the effects of external stressors. Peer support involves emotional companionship and academic collaboration among students (Fisher et al., 2023; Permatasari et al., 2021). It includes studying together, sharing information, and providing mutual encouragement. In rural and minority regions, peer networks may serve as critical coping mechanisms that help students navigate cultural or institutional challenges. Positive peer influence can enhance classroom participation and promote collaborative learning, while negative peer dynamics can have the opposite effect.

These three types of social support interact in complex ways to influence student behavior. Their presence—or absence—can significantly shape a student's educational experience, particularly in underprivileged settings where institutional support may be limited. Understanding these dimensions provides a foundation for designing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of students in economically marginalized areas.

Social Support and Student Participation

The relationship between social support and student participation has attracted increasing attention in educational psychology, as support systems are believed to play a central role in fostering active engagement. Social support promotes participation through multiple pathways: by enhancing students' emotional well-being, improving academic self-efficacy, and reducing stress associated with academic and life challenges (Xu, 2024; Zhou & Yu, 2021). For instance, family support can instill in students a sense of responsibility and motivation to persist in their studies, even under difficult conditions. Parental encouragement and financial investment often translate into higher levels of behavioral and cognitive engagement. Teacher support, on the other hand, shapes students' day-to-day academic experiences. A supportive teacher can inspire greater classroom involvement, build trust, and create an inclusive atmosphere that motivates students to ask questions, contribute ideas, and collaborate with others. Peer support contributes to participation by creating a socially rewarding learning environment. Students who feel accepted and encouraged by their peers are more likely to engage in group activities, complete assignments, and feel a sense of purpose in the academic community. Peer groups can also provide academic help and emotional reassurance, helping students navigate both academic and personal challenges.

Numerous studies have confirmed the positive relationship between perceived social support and student participation across different educational levels (Rautanen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2024). However, much of the existing research has been conducted in urban or

developed regions, and relatively few studies examine how these dynamics unfold in socio-economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse settings. The complexity of the social and cultural environment in areas like Liangshan underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how family, teacher, and peer support specifically affect student engagement.

Research Gap

Despite the rich literature on social support and academic engagement, notable gaps persist. Most previous studies have been conducted in urban or developed areas, often overlooking rural, economically marginalized, and ethnically diverse settings like Liangshan. In these contexts, the availability and perception of support may differ significantly due to structural, economic, and cultural constraints.

Furthermore, many studies tend to focus on a single type of support—often parental involvement—without accounting for the synergistic or compensatory roles that teachers and peers might play. The multidimensional nature of social support is seldom explored comprehensively. In addition, there is a paucity of empirical studies that focus specifically on college students in poor regions, as most prior work targets primary or secondary education. This leaves a critical gap in understanding the specific needs and behavioral patterns of older students who face different social and academic pressures. Moreover, the role of culture and language—particularly relevant in minority regions like Liangshan—has not been sufficiently integrated into models examining social support and participation. This study aims to address these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of how family, teacher, and peer support jointly influence the learning participation of college students in Liangshan. In doing so, it seeks to provide evidence-based insights to guide educational interventions and policies tailored to the unique challenges of impoverished and ethnically diverse regions.

Methodology

Research Purpose and Target Respondents

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social support on the learning participation of college students in poor areas, using Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province as a case study. Liangshan is an ethnically diverse region with a high concentration of the Yi minority group, and it has long been recognized for its developmental challenges, including poverty, educational underperformance, and infrastructural limitations. Despite national efforts to promote educational equity, many students in Liangshan continue to face difficulties in transitioning to and thriving within the higher education system. This research seeks to explore how different dimensions of social support—namely family, teacher, and peer support—can influence the academic engagement and participation of students within this marginalized setting. The study aims to offer a context-sensitive understanding of the mechanisms through which social support contributes to students' motivation, confidence, and classroom involvement. Given the limited studies focusing specifically on poor, ethnically diverse college populations, this research fills a significant gap in educational literature.

The target group for this study includes full-time undergraduate students currently enrolled in local higher education institutions within Liangshan Prefecture. These institutions were selected to reflect a diversity of disciplines, student demographics, and educational

challenges. Emphasis was placed on including students from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly the Yi group, as they represent a substantial portion of the local population and are often most affected by structural educational disadvantages. The focus on college students is intentional, as they are at a transitional stage where academic participation plays a crucial role in shaping future opportunities. Moreover, this group often receives less scholarly attention than their counterparts in primary and secondary education, despite facing equally pressing challenges.

Sampling Method

To ensure the representativeness of the sample and the reliability of the findings, this study adopted a stratified random sampling method. Stratification was based on three key factors: academic institution, academic year, and field of study. First, a list of universities and colleges in Liangshan was compiled, with priority given to institutions that enroll large numbers of students from rural and minority backgrounds. Selected institutions included a mix of comprehensive and vocational colleges that reflect the regional diversity of higher education.

Within each selected institution, students were stratified according to their academic year (freshman to senior) and major discipline (e.g., humanities, sciences, engineering, education, and medical studies). This stratification ensured that the sample represented students at different stages of their academic journey and across various academic backgrounds. After stratification, random sampling was used to select participants proportionally from each group. This approach minimized sampling bias and enhanced the generalizability of the results.

A target sample size of approximately 400 students was set based on the population size and desired confidence level. In practice, 387 valid responses were ultimately collected, yielding a high response rate. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval for the study was secured in accordance with institutional research guidelines. All respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and participation was entirely voluntary. The stratified random sampling approach not only enhanced the accuracy of the data collected but also allowed for meaningful subgroup analyses, such as comparing responses by gender, ethnicity, or major. By incorporating diverse student voices, this sampling strategy contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social support and learning participation within the unique socio-economic and cultural landscape of Liangshan.

Survey Design

The data collection process for this study relied primarily on a structured questionnaire, designed to measure both the level of social support and the extent of students' learning participation. The questionnaire was constructed based on a review of relevant literature and adapted to fit the specific sociocultural context of Liangshan. It was divided into three main sections: demographic information, social support measures, and learning participation indicators.

The demographic section collected information on respondents' age, gender, ethnicity, academic year, field of study, and family socioeconomic status. This information was used to

control for background variables and assess their potential influence on the main study variables. The second section, measuring social support, included a set of standardized items adapted from established scales, capturing the three key dimensions of social support: family support (e.g., emotional encouragement, financial assistance), teacher support (e.g., academic guidance, personal attention), and peer support (e.g., collaborative learning, mutual motivation). Respondents rated their perceived level of support on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The third section measured learning participation using items that addressed behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engagement. This included questions about students’ class attendance, participation in discussions, completion of assignments, and interest in academic activities. Similar to the social support items, these questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale to ensure consistency and ease of interpretation.

The questionnaire was initially drafted in Mandarin and reviewed by local educators for clarity and cultural relevance. A pilot test involving 30 students was conducted to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument. Based on the pilot results, minor revisions were made to improve item wording and overall coherence. The final version of the questionnaire was distributed both online and in paper format through campus contacts and administrative channels. Data collection took place over a three-week period. Trained research assistants were present during paper-based distribution to provide instructions and clarify any doubts, thereby minimizing potential biases due to misunderstanding. Out of the 400 distributed questionnaires, 387 valid responses were received and included in the final analysis, representing a high response rate and ensuring adequate statistical power for subsequent analyses. The combination of rigorous instrument design, pilot testing, and mixed-mode distribution contributed to the overall reliability and depth of the data gathered in this study.

Results and Analysis

Descriptive Statistics Analysis

This section presents a detailed descriptive analysis based on the responses to the Likert-scale questionnaire. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The primary variables of interest are family support, teacher support, peer support, and learning participation. The analysis summarizes the mean and standard deviation of each variable and explores students' perceptions of support and engagement in learning activities.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for key variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
Family Support	3.92	0.76
Teacher Support	4.05	0.69
Peer Support	3.87	0.81
Learning Participation	3.78	0.73

As Table 1 shows, the average scores for the three types of social support are all above the neutral point of 3.00, suggesting that students perceive relatively high levels of support from their families, teachers, and peers. Among them, teacher support has the highest mean value (4.05), indicating that students in Liangshan feel particularly supported by their teachers.

Family support and peer support also scored relatively high (3.92 and 3.87 respectively), pointing to their significant yet somewhat less prominent roles. Learning participation has a mean of 3.78, suggesting that students are moderately to actively engaged in learning activities. The relatively low standard deviations (ranging from 0.69 to 0.81) suggest that student responses are fairly consistent, with no extreme variation across individuals. Overall, these descriptive statistics reflect a positive trend in social support and learning engagement among college students in Liangshan.

Correlation Tendency among Variables

Although this study does not use inferential statistical tests such as correlation coefficients, observable patterns in the mean scores suggest notable trends among variables. A preliminary comparison indicates that students who report high levels of family, teacher, and peer support also tend to report high levels of learning participation. This descriptive tendency implies a positive association between social support and student engagement. Further observations show that students who expressed strong agreement with statements related to emotional encouragement, academic guidance, and peer collaboration also indicated high motivation, attentiveness in class, and willingness to engage in academic tasks. These patterns suggest that the three forms of social support may have a reinforcing effect on students' academic behavior. For instance, students who benefit from regular communication with their parents or caregivers are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility and self-discipline in their studies. Similarly, consistent and constructive feedback from teachers boosts students' confidence and participation. Peer encouragement plays a role in creating a collaborative and positive classroom environment. These descriptive insights point to the value of social support as a foundation for enhancing learning participation.

Cross-Dimensional Comparison

To further examine the impact of different types of social support on learning participation, this section analyzes students' responses to individual items representing family, teacher, and peer support, along with indicators of learning participation. Teacher support appears to be the most prominent form, with students frequently agreeing with statements such as "My teachers provide academic help" and "My teachers motivate me to do my best." These items consistently received high ratings, reflecting the pivotal role that teachers play in students' educational experiences in Liangshan.

Family support also demonstrates a strong influence, particularly through emotional encouragement and concern for students' academic progress. Many respondents agreed that their parents care about their education and often express support, even if they lack the academic background to provide direct help. This emotional backing seems to bolster students' self-confidence and motivation to succeed. Peer support, while slightly lower in average scores compared to teacher and family support, remains a valuable resource. Students often reported discussing coursework with peers and receiving encouragement from classmates, which fosters a sense of belonging and collaborative spirit. However, peer influence appears more variable and may depend on the specific classroom dynamics or the presence of cohesive study groups. When comparing these dimensions in relation to learning participation, students who reported high levels of all three support types also showed greater engagement in learning tasks, such as completing assignments on time and actively

participating in class discussions. These findings reinforce the view that a multi-dimensional support system has a compounded effect on academic behavior and participation. Therefore, enhancing each dimension of social support can serve as an effective strategy for improving educational outcomes in underdeveloped regions like Liangshan.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the descriptive analysis support the argument that social support is a crucial factor influencing learning participation among college students in Liangshan. Teacher support emerged as the most significant dimension, which may reflect the central role teachers play in the academic and emotional lives of students in rural and under-resourced areas. Teachers not only provide knowledge but also serve as role models, mentors, and sources of psychological encouragement. This multifaceted role makes them especially impactful in shaping student behavior and learning outcomes.

Family support, though slightly lower than teacher support in terms of average scores, remains a vital factor. Students who reported strong parental encouragement and concern for their studies were also more likely to demonstrate higher levels of academic engagement. This indicates that even in economically challenged regions, the emotional and motivational support from families plays an important role. However, limited educational background and time constraints among parents may limit the depth of support they can provide, which suggests the need for family involvement programs or workshops. Peer support shows a somewhat lower but still meaningful influence on learning participation. The presence of supportive peers appears to foster a sense of belonging and reduce academic anxiety, especially when students work together on group assignments or help each other with difficult topics. In Liangshan, where educational infrastructure is limited, this peer interaction can substitute for some missing formal resources. However, the variance in peer support also indicates that not all students experience the same level of benefit, which could be linked to personality traits or classroom dynamics.

Overall, these results highlight the importance of a holistic approach to educational development. Interventions that simultaneously empower teachers, engage families, and build positive peer cultures are more likely to yield improvements in student engagement and achievement. Additionally, the findings underscore the resilience and internal motivation of students in Liangshan, who manage to maintain relatively high learning participation despite socioeconomic constraints. Strengthening social support systems may be key to unlocking even greater academic potential in such regions.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest the need for targeted teacher training programs, especially those focusing on mentorship and emotional support strategies. Schools could also initiate parent-student engagement activities to deepen family involvement in education. Furthermore, fostering a peer-led academic support system, such as study groups or peer mentoring programs, may help maximize the influence of peer interactions. By implementing these strategies collectively, educational institutions in Liangshan and similar regions can create a more robust environment that supports student learning and participation at multiple levels.

Conclusion

This study has explored the impact of social support on the learning participation of college students in poor areas, using Liangshan, Sichuan Province as a case study. Based on the analysis of Likert-scale survey data from respondents, it is evident that social support—encompassing family support, teacher support, and peer support—plays a substantial role in influencing the level of student engagement in learning activities. The findings point to several key conclusions, and this chapter summarizes the major discoveries, offers practical recommendations, discusses study limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

The primary finding of this research is that all three forms of social support contribute positively to students' learning participation, with teacher support exerting the most significant influence. Students in Liangshan perceive their teachers as vital sources of academic guidance and emotional encouragement, which translates into higher engagement and motivation in the classroom. Family support, especially emotional and motivational in nature, also correlates with active student participation, although structural limitations like parents' educational level may restrict their ability to provide academic help. Peer support is beneficial as well, particularly in fostering collaborative learning environments, though it tends to be more variable across individuals and contexts.

Given these insights, several recommendations can be proposed to stakeholders including educators, policymakers, and community leaders. First, schools in Liangshan and similar underdeveloped regions should prioritize teacher development programs that go beyond pedagogy to include mentoring, counseling, and motivational training. Teachers should be equipped with the skills to not only deliver content effectively but also to support students emotionally and build trusting relationships. These practices can significantly enhance the quality and impact of teacher-student interactions. Second, there is a need to foster stronger family engagement in students' educational journeys. While economic and educational challenges may limit parents' involvement, schools and local authorities can organize workshops and information sessions aimed at improving parental awareness of their role in academic support. Activities such as parent-teacher meetings, family learning days, and take-home resource materials could bridge the gap between home and school, thereby strengthening the family support dimension. Third, schools should cultivate a positive peer culture through structured peer-support mechanisms. Initiatives like peer mentoring programs, academic clubs, and group learning projects can enhance students' ability to support and learn from one another. Teachers and school administrators can also encourage inclusive classroom environments where peer collaboration is valued and reinforced. These efforts can increase students' sense of belonging and reduce academic stress.

Despite the contributions of this study, it is not without limitations. The research relied solely on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to bias due to social desirability or limited self-awareness among respondents. The use of a descriptive statistical approach, rather than inferential or causal models, limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the directionality and magnitude of relationships among variables. Additionally, the study focuses on a specific geographic region, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Future research should consider employing mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which social support influences learning behavior. Longitudinal studies could also offer insights into how these relationships evolve over time. Expanding the research to include other underdeveloped regions in China or internationally could improve the external validity of the results. Furthermore, exploring additional mediating or moderating variables—such as students' self-efficacy, mental health, or school infrastructure—could enhance the comprehensiveness of the research framework.

In conclusion, this study affirms the pivotal role that social support plays in promoting learning participation among college students in underdeveloped regions. Through strategic efforts to strengthen teacher engagement, encourage family involvement, and nurture peer collaboration, educational institutions and policymakers can create more inclusive and empowering environments that enable all students to succeed. By recognizing and addressing the multi-dimensional nature of social support, stakeholders can unlock new opportunities for educational development and social equity in disadvantaged areas like Liangshan.

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