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Examining Peer Support and Community Service Experiential Learning on Social Abilities among Undergraduates in Shandong, China

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of peer support constructs and Community Service as Experiential Learning (CSEL) on social abilities among undergraduate students. A quantitative cross-sectional survey approach has been used in this research to collect primary data. 950 undergraduate students from 10 universities across the Shandong Province, China were surveyed using a questionnaire. A stratified random sampling approach was adopted to ensure that there were a sufficient number of participants from each of the universities that were involved in the research, as well as participants from a variety of disciplines, genders and ethnic groups. A Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with bootstrapping were employed to examine relationships between variables for two peer support constructs that had significantly and positively affected social abilities. Cultural Tools and Language ($\beta = 0.092$, $p = 0.004$) emerged as the strongest significant peer support predictor, followed by Positive Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.061$, $p = 0.049$). However, Cooperative Tasks and Guidance ($\beta = 0.059$, $p = 0.069$), Cognitive Apprenticeship ($\beta = 0.029$, $p = 0.362$), and Identification and Belonging ($\beta = 0.031$, $p = 0.318$) did not demonstrate significant direct effects on Social Abilities. In addition to that, Community Service as Experiential Learning had strong positive and significant direct effect on Social Abilities ($\beta = 0.520$, $t = 22.110$, $p < 0.001$), which was the largest effect within the proposed structural model. This finding indicated that through communication with others, shared cultural understanding and constructive peer comparison, Community Service as Experiential Learning experience greatly contributed to the students' social development. Thus, experiential learning through community service experiences should be provided to the students while they are learning to improve their communication, teamwork, interpersonal relationship, social awareness and social competences in general in supportive peer-learning environment in universities.

Keywords: Peer Support, Community Service, Experiential Learning, Social Abilities, Higher Education

Introduction

While students study in a university, it is important for them to acquire social skills or social abilities to communicate, cooperate with others, form and maintain interpersonal relationship with others in order to achieve academic goals and to also interact with people in communities related to university where they study and to be prepared to get employment after graduation (Martin, 2025; Bandura, 1977). Some of the opportunities for students to acquire social skills or abilities in university include interaction with other students in same class, interactions with people outside university and in communities where university is located through a number of activities, programs, services, and courses conducted by university, with or without involvement of staff and students of university, through communications, teamwork, and through processes of learning by doing or experiential learning (Yu, 2024; Goldberg & Atkins, 2020; Parmar et al., 2025).

Other research has found that experiential learning and peer support can promote students' social and personal development. By engaging in peer support, students can communicate with others, cooperate with others, develop a sense of belonging, and participate in society. Furthermore, community service learning can promote students' interpersonal skills, social responsibility, and civic consciousness by experiencing real life situations (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Pong & Leung, 2023). In addition, cooperative learning and positive peer relationships have been found to facilitate students' social skills and their ability to participate in group work (Gao et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2024). It is, however, mainly lacking in research on the various peer support constructs and their specific effects on undergraduate students' Social Abilities. In the Chinese higher education setting, this study specifically focuses on the effects of the peer support constructs of Cooperative Tasks and Guidance, Cultural Tools and Language, Cognitive Apprenticeship, Identification and Belonging, and Positive Social Comparison on students' Social Abilities. Therefore, this study investigates the direct effects of the five first-order peer support constructs on Social Abilities and examines the direct effect of Community Service as Experiential Learning on Social Abilities among undergraduate students in Shandong, China. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions and tests six hypotheses to determine the relative contributions of peer support and experiential learning to the development of students' social abilities.

Literature Review

There have been many studies on the importance of peer support and experiential learning for the social skills and overall development of students. A number of studies have shown the positive effects of peer support on student engagement, communication, collaboration and social connections in higher education. Interventions that include peer support have been found to improve students' social participation and their interpersonal engagement (Qing & Abdul Wahid, 2025; Chen et al., 2024). Studies conducted in the Chinese context have found that positive peer relationships are important for the academic and personal development of students (Guo et al., 2024). Cooperative learning has been found to improve the social skills of university students and enhance their ability to take part in collaborative activities (Ma et al., 2024). In addition, a study on peer relationships among university students in China found that these relationships had a positive impact on the well-being and social behavior of students (Feng and Zhang, 2022).

Research studies focusing on Service-Learning (SL) and Experiential Learning (EL) experiences and how these contribute to social development of learners. A seminal work in this area is a study by Bringle and Hatcher (1995), who noted that service-learning integrated community service with academic learning for the purposes of promoting students' interpersonal and civic competencies. Later, Pong and Leung (2023) identified that through community-service learning, students not only acquired skills to cope with changing circumstances of the society, but also understood ethics of social responsibility and voluntarily put them into practice. In addition to these findings, Ho et al. (2025), Choi et al. (2026), and Barili and Byram (2021) reported that service-learning experiences helped enhance learners' communication, collaboration, and sense of belongingness, as well as civic engagement. In conclusion, it can be seen that not only peer support, but also community service-based experiential learning plays significant role in enhancing social abilities of university students.

The theoretical perspectives of the current study were based on the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory (Collins, 1989). These perspectives described how peer support functions in higher education settings in helping students acquire various skills, such as social skills, communication, teamwork, cooperation, and other useful interpersonal skills through learning from their peers. The perspectives of these learning theories also explained how Cooperative Tasks and Guidance, Positive Social Comparison, Identification and Belonging contributed to the development of students' Social Abilities. Community Service as Experiential Learning was based on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984). This learning approach explained how students learned various skills through their experiences. The approach also emphasized the importance of reflection, application, and the process of learning in everyday life situations. Finally, Communities of Practice Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) described how undergraduate students who participated in community service projects developed a sense of belonging in their communities of practice, and subsequently, their social competencies.

Finally, in order to examine Community Service as Experiential Learning, the Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) will be applied. This theory asserts that learning is an ongoing process whereby experiences are transformed into knowledge through processes of reflection, conceptualization and application. Hence, in the community service activities in which participants are involved, students can develop social skills such as communication, collaboration, understanding of others' perspectives and social awareness through real-life interactions. This, in turn, can lead to a sense of belonging and the development of social competence on the part of students as they become part of a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, a comprehensive account of the ways in which Peer Support and Experiential Learning can facilitate the development of social abilities in undergraduate students can be provided through the aforementioned theories.

Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional survey research design is used to examine the effects of peer support constructs include Cooperative Tasks and Guidance; Cultural Tools and Language; Cognitive Apprenticeship; Identification and Belonging; and Positive Social Comparison and of Community Service as Experiential Learning on students' Social Abilities. 10 Universities in

Shandong Province, China, were used as the settings to conduct the study, with samples of students from ten universities, from a variety of disciplines included Humanities, Sciences and Engineering, major fields of study, genders and ethnic groups. 950 valid questionnaires were collected and used for data analysis. A quantitative survey approach is appropriate for the purposes of this study because such an approach allows relationships between variables to be examined and hypotheses to be tested within the context of the larger population with the findings from the study being generalizable to members of the population who were not studied. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 was used for data analysis. The assessment of the structural model involves examining the direct effects of the peer support constructs on the Social Abilities construct by means of bootstrapping. The results for each of the possible effects are reported in terms of the path coefficients (β), the corresponding t-values, p-values, the coefficient of determination (R^2) for each endogenous construct, and the effect size for each significant path (f^2).

Finding and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings related to Research Questions 1, 2 and research Hypothesis. The results of the PLS-SEM analysis are reported to examine the direct effects of the first-order peer support constructs and Community Service as Experiential Learning on Social Abilities.

Finding for Research Questions 1: Direct Effects of the First-Order Peer Support Constructs on Social Abilities

Table 1
Summary of Direct Effects of the First-Order Peer Support Constructs on Social Abilities

Peer Support Construct	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision	Ranking
Cultural Tools and Language (CTL)	0.092	2.880	0.004	Supported	1
Positive Social Comparison (PSC)	0.061	1.967	0.049	Supported	2
Cooperative Tasks and Guidance (CTG)	0.059	1.820	0.069	Not Supported	3
Identification and Belonging (IB)	0.031	0.998	0.318	Not Supported	4
Cognitive Apprenticeship (CA)	0.029	0.912	0.362	Not Supported	5

Table 1 describes the results for testing indirect effects for all five first-order peer support variables. Among the five first-order peer support variables, five indirect effects were significant. Only two of the five first-order peer support variables for Social Abilities (SA) were found to have significant direct effects. These two peer support variables were from the Dimension of Social Interaction. The strongest significant positive effect on SA was Cultural Tools and Language (CTL) with a β coefficient of .092 (p = .004). A significant positive effect on SA was also found for Positive Social Comparison (PSC) with a β coefficient of .061 (p = .049). Hence, H2 and H5 were supported while H1, H3, and H4 were not supported.

Among the five first-order peer support constructs, only Cultural Tools and Language and Positive Social Comparison had a significant influence on Social Abilities. Cultural Tools and Language (CTL) was found to be the strongest predictor of Social Abilities, followed by Positive Social Comparison (PSC). These results support the Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which asserts that using language and engaging in meaningful communication, as well as making use of cultural tools and interacting within a particular culture, are important to an individual's development of knowledge and Social Abilities. Such results also support and extend previous studies by, for example, Chen et al. (2024) who reported that the peer support interventions resulted in improved social participation and interpersonal interaction, as well as results by Feng and Zhang (2022) that reported positive peer relationships were associated with students' social behavior and well-being. The results also confirm expectations based on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that individuals learn new behaviors and acquire new knowledge and/or behaviors by observing others and then comparing themselves with those learning others. The result also supports findings presented by Parmar et al. (2025), who stated that student's social interactions and social connectedness promoted their communication and collaboration.

However, it should be noted that the non-significant results for CTG, IB, and CA may indicate that these first-order peer support constructs have indirect effects on Social Abilities (SA). In other words, Cooperative Tasks and Guidance, Identification and Belonging, and Cognitive Apprenticeship may influence other variables include community service participation, student engagement, experiential learning that in turn affect SA. The findings of this study are consistent with those of several previous studies which have reported that cooperative learning, peer relationships, and a sense of belonging are important for the development of undergraduate students. Thus, CTG, IB, and CA may influence SA indirectly via the aforementioned mediators. Consistent with the findings of this study, previous studies have reported that communication-based interactions are more influential than other types of peer support for enhancing the social abilities of undergraduate students in Shandong, China.

Finding for Research Questions 2: Direct Effect of Community Service as Experiential Learning on Social Abilities

Table 2
Direct Effect of Community Service as Experiential Learning on Social Abilities

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H6: Community Service as Experiential Learning has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	CSEL → SA	0.520	22.110	0.000	Supported

Table 2 addressed Research Question 2 in line with H6, results demonstrated that CSEL had a strong, positive, and significant effect on students' Social Abilities ($\beta = 0.520$, $t = 22.110$, $p < .001$). This finding constituted the strongest relationship within the proposed structural model. In summary, while actively participating in community service within a framework of

experiential learning, students acquire Social Abilities. While completing community service projects, students improve their Social Abilities by interacting with people and with the community and by resolving problems in real life situations in order to achieve project goals. In so doing, students acquire a wide array of skills such as communication, teamwork, interpersonal, social awareness, and problem solving skills, respectively.

Research Question 2 examined the impact that Community Service as Experiential Learning (CSEL) has on the Social Abilities (SA) of undergraduate students in Shandong, China. Results reveal that CSEL has a strong positive influence on the SA of undergraduate students with the findings of $\beta = 0.520$, $t = 22.110$, $p < .001$. The results confirm that among all of the relationships for the students in this study, the most salient was that which existed between the CSEL variable and the SA variable, results which are extremely close to the expected norm of 0.5 or higher found in previous studies related to Experiential Learning Theory. The ability that students in this study apparently developed best through involvement in Community Service were those related to development of their communication skills, ability to work in a team to complete tasks or goals, interpersonal relationships that they develop, the level of emotional tolerance or empathy that students display to help them cope with a multitude of situations or circumstances, the social awareness that they develop enabling them to address many of life's social problems or issues, and their collective problem solving ability or skills in completing real-world tasks in collaborative or team environments.

These findings are in line with the studies which looked into service-learning and experiential education. The concept of service-learning was defined by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) as a form of experiential education that integrates community service with academic learning, thus fostering students' interpersonal and civic competencies. A number of subsequent studies investigated the specific effects of community-service learning on students. For instance, Pong and Leung (2023) found that community-service learning significantly enhanced students' adaptability, ethics, and social responsibility. Moreover, Ho and his co-authors (2025) reported that, through service-learning, students strengthened their sense of belonging to and social integration within their communities. Choi and his co-authors (2026) examined the impact of service-learning on students' development of collaboration, communication, and real-world problem-solving skills. Other studies focused on the effects of community-based experiential learning on students' civic engagement and interpersonal development. For example, Barili and Byram (2021) found that Experiential Community-Based Learning promoted students' civic engagement and interpersonal development. Overall, the present study's findings support the notion that Community Service as Experiential Learning is the key factor which affects students' Social Abilities and promotes their social development.

Table 3
Summary of Hypotheses Testing Results for Peer Support and Community Service Experiential Learning on Social Abilities

Hypothesis	Statement	Path	Decision
H1	Cooperative Tasks and Guidance has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	CTG → SA	Not Supported
H2	Cultural Tools and Language has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	CTL → SA	Supported
H3	Cognitive Apprenticeship has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	CA → SA	Not Supported
H4	Identification and Belonging has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	IB → SA	Not Supported
H5	Positive Social Comparison has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	PSC → SA	Supported
H6	Community Service as Experiential Learning has a significant positive effect on Social Abilities.	CSEL → SA	Supported

Table 3 report the six research hypotheses tested, three hypotheses (H2, H5 and H6) were supported whereas three hypotheses (H1, H3 and H4) were not supported by the data. Among the three supported hypotheses, Community Service as Experiential Learning (CSEL) was the strongest predictor of Social Abilities followed by, Cultural Tools and Language (CTL) and Positive Social Comparison (PSC).

Findings for the three sets of variables include CTG, CA and CSM, CAT and CBS, and CAS and CBP support earlier theoretical works and empirical research studies in this regard. CTG supports the central tenet of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It emphasizes how language, tools, or signs created by previous human generations as well as the means for using these shape subsequent human behavior, especially when individuals solve problems in social contexts, to which they are attending, within which the solutions may or may not have been used by earlier generations. It further explains the social interaction that facilitates learning or change. Consistent with earlier research studies in various cultural settings (Chen et al., 2024; Feng and Zhang, 2022; Guo et al., 2024), findings for the three CTG variables showed positive and significant effects of CSM, CAT, and CBS on SA among undergraduate students in Shandong, China. On the basis of these findings, participation in and use of Cultural Tools and Language as Experiential Learning constitute an important dimension or domain of school experience that shapes and develops various social abilities among undergraduate students in the study region. As anticipated, PSC supported both Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Earlier studies (Parmar et al., 2025) have provided empirical support to these tenets as they found peer interaction and social connectedness helped to improve students' communication and collaboration skills at school. Therefore, for the study participants in Shandong, China, positive Social Comparison or Positive Social Learning at school comprise another dimension or domain of learning or development that helps to shape social abilities (SA) in undergraduate students.

In particular, findings from this study strongly supports Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) and Service-Learning Theory (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). That CSEL exerts the strongest effect on SA of all the independent variables under investigation supports also Pong

and Leung (2023), Ho et al. (2025), Choi et al. (2026) and Barili and Byram (2021) who in their respective studies elsewhere were able to assert and/or confirm that as students participate in various forms of community service they would gain various skills including inter-personal, teamwork, and others including those that would enhance students' capacity for empathy and social awareness. It must also be stressed that, even though CTG, CA and IB failed to attain levels of significance in the prediction of SA, they are likely to affect SA indirectly via their effect on the students' opportunity to experience CSEL or become engaged in learning. Findings of this study generally pointed to community service experiences, communication, and positive social interactions as key for the enhancement of Social Abilities among undergraduate students studying in the Chinese province of Shandong.

Conclusion

This study tested the effects of several peer support constructs and Community Service as Experiential Learning (CSEL) on Social Abilities of undergraduate students from Shandong, China. Results showed that only three of the six peer support constructs were significantly and positively related to Social Abilities. These three peer support constructs were (a) the Cultural Tools and Language that students use to communicate with each other, (b) Positive Social Comparison, or learning from and being motivated by constructive comparisons with other students, and (c) Cooperative Tasks and Guidance and Cognitive Apprenticeship and Identification and Belonging were not. However, CSEL was the strongest predictor of Social Abilities. Results also showed that participation in community service activities gives students opportunities to (a) develop their communication skills, (b) work as a team to help others, (c) develop their ability to have empathy with others, (d) develop their ability to be socially aware, and (c) solve problems as a team to help others. In conclusion, both of the studied mechanisms of promoting Social Abilities, i.e., peer support and experiential learning, are important. Implications for higher education for promoting students' Social Abilities through their peer learning environments and through community-based experiential learning are also discussed.

Implication and Suggestion

Implications for Higher Education. Our study suggests several key implications for Higher Education institutions in Asia and worldwide. A number of factors, namely Cultural Tools and Language, Positive Social Comparison, and Community Service as Experiential Learning, are crucial to fostering students' Social Abilities in higher education and fostering effective learning within university settings. We thus recommend that students should be provided with a suitable academic environment to practice their various communication skills, to engage in constructive interaction with their peers, and to give and receive feedback. This can be achieved by integrating Community Service, which is crucial to students' acquisition of skills through Experiential Learning, into university academic programs, and by enabling students to work together in teams to interact with the local community and to help other individuals and groups in order to cultivate various social skills, namely teamwork, interpersonal communication, empathy, and social awareness. Furthermore, we can implement the Social Learning Theory, the Sociocultural Theory, and the Experiential Learning Theory which we adopted in the present study for fostering students' social abilities in university settings. In particular, as was described above, by strengthening the support which students provide for one another in their learning and also, and more importantly, by making effective use of Experiential Learning, we can cultivate students' Social Abilities which are

crucial to fostering their employability as well as to fostering their capacity to effectively function in various types of social contexts.

The findings of this study provide strong basis for universities to strengthen their peer-learning initiatives and programs of community service that foster students' acquisition of Social Abilities. In order to foster students' Social Abilities through peer-learning, universities can make good use of a variety of structured programs and activities that foster students' communication skills and provide them with opportunities for engaging in learning processes with their peers. Moreover, the acquisition of Social Abilities through peer-learning is expected to be furthered when students engage in processes of reflective learning and constructive peer feedback, and make good use of Positive Social Comparison. In order to foster students' Social Abilities through community service, the study found that community service programs should be expanded to include more programs and activities that provide students with opportunities to participate in problem solving in real life settings, and to be involved in community service. For future research, it is recommended to include variables such as students' leadership skills, students' motivation, the level of support provided by the university, and university-community partnerships. A longitudinal study as well as a mixed-methods study would be appropriate to investigate the effects of programs of peer-learning and community service in fostering students' Social Abilities over time.

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