

# The "Dual Umbrella" in Adversity: Exploring the Impact of Family SES on Internalizing and Externalizing Problems in Vocational College Students and Its Compensatory Mechanisms

Zhihao Wang<sup>1</sup>, Meijie Zhu<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Zibo Polytechnic University, Shandong, China

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Business, Hongkong ChuHai College, HongKong 999077, China

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of building a skills-based society, the mental health of vocational college students has garnered significant attention. Family socioeconomic status (SES) is a crucial risk factor influencing internalizing and externalizing problems in adolescents. From the perspective of developmental psychopathology, this paper explores the pathways through which family SES affects the psychological adaptation of vocational college students, with a key focus on the potential compensatory roles of parent-child communication and teacher-student relationships as a "dual umbrella." The article analyzes the challenges posed by low-SES environments through "stress-process" and "resource-investment" mechanisms, elaborates on the protective value of family and school support systems, and ultimately discusses how these two protective factors can exert key compensatory effects by buffering stress and compensating for resources in high-risk contexts. The aim is to provide a theoretical reference for vocational colleges to construct a collaborative home-school mental health support system.

**Keywords:** Vocational College Students; Family Socioeconomic Status (SES); Internalizing and Externalizing Problems; Parent-Child Communication; Compensatory Effect

## 1. Macro-Risk: the Profound Impact of Family Socioeconomic Status

Family socioeconomic status is a composite indicator that determines a family's position in the social structure and the resources it can mobilize, [1] profoundly shaping the growth environment of adolescents.

## 1.1 The Dual Mechanisms of Family SES

Academia typically operationalizes family SES into three core indicators: parents' educational attainment, occupational prestige, and family income. [2] Its impact mechanisms are mainly explained by two classic theoretical models: one is the "family stress model," which emphasizes that economic pressure faced by low-SES families can translate into parents' psychological distress, thereby damaging the quality of parenting behaviors and ultimately leading to more internalizing and externalizing problems in children. The other is the "family investment model," which focuses on resource input, arguing that high-SES families can provide their children with richer material and non-material resources, thus directly promoting their cognitive and socio-emotional development. In short, the negative impact of a low-SES environment on adolescent development is twofold: it both increases the "stressors" in the growth environment and reduces the "nutrients" that promote development.

## 1.2 The Specificity of SES Impact on Vocational College Students

Although the above mechanisms are universal, they may exhibit specificity within the vocational college student population. First, the experience of the "vocational-general education shunt" may act as an amplifier, solidifying some students' negative perceptions of their own abilities and social class. When this perception is combined with a low-SES background, it is more likely to lead to a sense of "learned helplessness." Second, the developmental tasks of vocational students are more directly linked to the professional world, and they are more sensitive to perceptions of social mobility. For vocational students from low-SES families, if they perceive the channels for upward mobility

to be narrow, this lack of "social mobility belief" can severely weaken their academic persistence, thereby triggering internalizing and externalizing problems. [3] Finally, the proportion of low-SES students in vocational colleges may be relatively higher, and negative influences within the peer environment (such as low expectations for academic achievement) may be more easily transmitted among peers, exacerbating the negative effects.

### **1.3 From a Static Correlation to a Dynamic Developmental Perspective**

Traditional research has mostly revealed a static correlation between low SES and high levels of internalizing and externalizing problems. However, the essence of development is change. Adopting a dynamic perspective, we can ask more profound questions: Does SES primarily affect the "starting point" of problem behaviors, or does it affect the "rate of change"? An "initial effect" means that low-SES students enter college with more accumulated disadvantages; whereas a "cumulative effect" means that even with similar starting points, their pace of improvement during college is slower. Distinguishing between these two effects is crucial for educational intervention. the former requires early screening, while the latter suggests the need for continuous support. Therefore, exploring the impact of SES on the "developmental trajectory" of internalizing and externalizing problems in vocational college students is key to understanding the mechanism of this risk factor.

## **2. Micro-Protection: the Core Role of Family and School Support Systems**

In the face of macro-structural risks, the family and school systems that interact directly with individuals can provide crucial protection. Parent-child communication and teacher-student relationships together constitute the social support network that underpins the mental health development of vocational college students.

### **2.1 Parent-Child Communication: the Emotional Safety Net within the Family**

Upon entering college, the family remains the most important "emotional harbor" for students. High-quality parent-child communication is the lifeline for maintaining family support functions, with its core lying in openness, supportiveness, and low conflict. An open communication

atmosphere allows students to freely share successes and confusions; supportive communication means parents can provide emotional understanding and constructive advice; a low-conflict communication pattern makes the family a place for solving problems rather than creating them. This high-quality communication can directly enhance students' self-esteem, sense of belonging, and coping efficacy, thereby effectively preventing and alleviating internalizing and externalizing problems.

### **2.2 Teacher-Student Relationship: the "Significant Other" in the School Setting**

For vocational college students, teachers are the most influential "significant others" in the school setting. A positive, supportive teacher-student relationship has multifaceted protective effects. From the perspective of attachment theory, a warm and trustworthy teacher can become a "secure base" for students at school, providing psychological security for their exploration. From the perspective of social capital, teachers can connect students with valuable resources, such as industry information and internship opportunities, which is particularly important for pragmatically oriented vocational students. More importantly, when a student feels a teacher's genuine care, fair treatment, and positive expectations, their sense of self-worth and academic engagement will increase significantly, which is crucial for resisting feelings of frustration.

### **2.3 The Adaptive Value of Support Systems for Vocational Student Development**

These two support systems, parent-child communication and teacher-student relationships, have unique adaptive value for the specific developmental tasks of vocational college students. the vocational college stage is a critical period for students to transition from "student" to "quasi-professional. " Open parent-child communication allows students to receive emotional support when discussing their future, alleviating the anxiety of career decision-making. A supportive teacher-student relationship, on the other hand, can provide more professional industry guidance. When these two systems can work in synergy—parents encouraging at home, teachers guiding at school—a solid, all-encompassing network supporting student development is formed. [4] This network not only helps students better complete their academic

and vocational preparations but also provides a dual psychological buffer when they encounter difficulties, preventing general adjustment issues from evolving into serious internalizing and externalizing problems.

### **3. Integrated Pathways: An Analysis of the Compensatory Effect within the Risk and Resilience Framework**

The core of the risk-resilience framework lies in revealing the dynamic interaction between risk and protective factors, wherein the compensatory effect is a key mechanism for explaining "why some children in adversity still develop well."

#### **3.1 The Theoretical Connotation of the Compensatory Effect**

The compensatory effect (or stress-buffering effect) refers to the phenomenon where the protective role of a protective factor is significantly greater under high-risk conditions than under low-risk conditions. This is like an umbrella, whose value is more evident in a downpour than on a sunny day. In our research framework, identifying the compensatory effect involves examining whether the impact of parent-child communication or teacher-student relationships on internalizing and externalizing problems differs according to the level of family SES. If the data show that for vocational students from low-SES families, high-quality parent-child communication or teacher-student relationships can reduce their internalizing and externalizing problems to a greater extent, then we have found evidence for the existence of a compensatory effect. This means these protective factors have a special value of "providing timely help" for disadvantaged students.

#### **3.2 Compensation of Parent-Child Communication for "Family Stress"**

How does parent-child communication specifically compensate for the negative impacts of low SES? It can directly act on multiple links of the "family stress model." First, when a family faces economic pressure and parents are emotionally distressed, open communication allows children to better understand their parents' difficulties, rather than simply attributing their parents' harshness or neglect to themselves, which is in itself a "detoxifier" for stress. Second, high-quality parent-child

communication can provide a stable space for emotional expression, helping students to self-regulate rather than suppressing negative emotions internally (internalizing) or venting them externally (externalizing). Finally, through communication, students may also become contributors to family resilience, and this sense of participation can effectively combat the feeling of powerlessness brought on by adversity.

#### **3.3 Compensation of Teacher-Student Relationship for "Family Investment"**

The teacher-student relationship is more focused on compensating for the resource deficits described by the "family investment model." For low-SES families, their ability to "invest" in human and cultural capital is relatively limited. At this point, an excellent teacher acts as an "external investor." In terms of cognitive and informational resources, teachers can provide professional knowledge and industry perspectives that the family cannot offer. In terms of emotional and role model resources, a teacher's care and encouragement can provide an alternative positive adult figure for students who have not received sufficient emotional attention at home. In terms of opportunities and network resources, teachers can use their own networks to recommend internships or further education opportunities, helping students overcome the opportunity barriers formed by insufficient family social capital. [5] Therefore, a high-quality teacher-student relationship is essentially a precise "educational investment" made for disadvantaged students within the school system, and its compensatory value is immense.

### **4. Conclusion**

This paper systematically explores the impact of family SES on the internalizing and externalizing problems of vocational college students and demonstrates the compensatory role of parent-child communication and teacher-student relationships as a "dual umbrella." The main conclusions are as follows: First, family SES, as a macro-risk factor, affects the mental health of vocational students through the dual mechanisms of "stress" and "investment." Second, parent-child communication and teacher-student relationships are the two core protective factors supporting the development of vocational students. Third, and the central argument of this paper, is that beyond "adding flowers to the brocade" for high-SES families,

these two protective factors are more likely to play a "sending charcoal in snowy weather" (providing timely help) compensatory role in the adverse conditions of low-SES families.

Based on the above analysis, the practical implication for vocational colleges is that promoting students' mental health requires the construction of a systematic, collaborative home-school support system. On the one hand, schools should become "enablers" of positive teacher-student relationships. Through professional training and institutional incentives, teachers should be empowered and willing to establish supportive relationships with students, ensuring that every student in need can find a trustworthy "significant other" on campus. On the other hand, schools should act as a "bridge" connecting families. By actively conveying scientific communication concepts to parents through parent-teacher meetings, online workshops, and other means, schools can help them provide high-quality emotional support for their children. By strengthening teacher-student relationships and empowering parent-child communication, a solid, collaborative home-school education network can be built. Only then can we truly provide a safety net for the healthy growth of all vocational students, making vocational education an effective pathway for promoting social equity and realizing individual value.

## References

- [1] He Y, Hu J, Shen Y, et al. Family Socioeconomic Status and Psychological Capital among Chinese Children: Roles of Parental Burnout and Family Function [J]. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 2025, (prepublish):1-10.
- [2] Chen W, Sun Y, He Y, et al. How do family socioeconomic status and parental conflict contribute to undergraduates' engagement in learning? A comparative study from China [J]. *Current Psychology*, 2025, (prepublish):1-14.
- [3] Zhang F, Huang S. Associations among social mobility beliefs, academic coping strategies and academic persistence in adolescents with lower family socioeconomic status [J]. *Social Psychology of Education*, 2025, 28(1):20.
- [4] Zhang, L. the Effect of Parent-Child Relationship on the Risky Behaviors of Higher Vocational Students: A Moderated Mediation Model. *China Journal of Special Education*, 2020, (07), 90-96.
- [5] Cui, H. L. How family background affects adolescents' career preparation: the mediating role of social and emotional skills. *Educational Development Research*, 2025, 45(08), 76-84.