

Face-Sensitive Relational Support and Classroom Re-Engagement among Chinese Secondary Vocational Students

Xin Chen, Runhua Li*

College of Applied Science and Technology, Beijing Union University, Beijing, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: This study, based on the EmpowerVET theory, examines how interpersonal support influences the re-engagement of middle school vocational education students in class. Existing European studies on vocational education have shown that teacher support, peer relationships, school resources, and practical learning have protective effects on problem students; however, the situation in China is different - the stratified admission system, the social prejudice against vocational education, and the face culture are all shaping students' classroom participation patterns. How these factors affect the above-mentioned causal pathways still lacks sufficient local empirical evidence. Based on a questionnaire survey of students majoring in e-commerce, online marketing, and new energy vehicles at a secondary vocational school in Beijing, the study used a 20-item scale to measure low classroom participation, face risk, teacher support, peer climate, successful practical-training experience, and willingness to re-engage. Reliability testing, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, difference analysis, and hierarchical regression were used to analyze the data. The findings indicate that face risk was positively associated with low participation and negatively associated with willingness to re-engage. Teacher support, peer climate, and successful practical-training experience, by contrast, positively predicted re-engagement after grade, gender, and major were controlled. The study interprets looking down as a possible self-protective response to interactional risk, rather than as a simple sign of disengagement. Looking up, accordingly, reflects renewed participation under safer relational conditions. The article proposes face-sensitive relational support as a contextual extension of European VET re-engagement theory.

Keywords: Secondary Vocational Education; Student Engagement; Relational Support; Face Risk; EmpowerVET

1. Introduction

In secondary vocational classrooms, teachers often read whether students look down or look up as an immediate sign of classroom order. Looking down is commonly associated with mobile phone use, distraction, non-cooperation, or weak motivation, whereas looking up is taken to imply attention, response, and participation. For students who have experienced examination-based tracking, academic setbacks, and negative evaluation, however, silence, avoidance, and low visibility cannot be reduced to disciplinary problems. These behaviors may also function as self-protective responses to interactional risk in public evaluative settings. Research on secondary vocational students' self-identity and educational circumstances likewise indicates that classroom behavior is shaped by tracking experiences, social evaluation, and identity construction [1-3].

Student engagement is closely linked to academic achievement, educational persistence, and school adjustment. It is commonly conceptualized through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, a framework that remains useful for interpreting classroom learning processes [4]. From this perspective, looking up is not merely a physical shift from the desk to the blackboard, nor can it be captured by a single act of answering a question. It also involves students' sense of classroom safety, their willingness to engage with learning tasks, and their belief that their own expression has value. Recent studies on vocational education have further demonstrated that the re-engagement of at-risk students in learning is rarely the result of a sudden change in their personal learning attitude, but rather depends on whether the school can establish supportive

interpersonal connections, provide guarantee resources, and create achievable practical learning opportunities [5,6].

The EmpowerVET research project continues this research vein, focusing on young people in the European vocational education system who face social exclusion, the risk of dropout, or encounter difficulties in the transition stage of further education and career development. The research of this project shows that teacher support, peer relationships, school resources and practical vocational learning opportunities are the core elements that promote students to re-enter classroom learning [7]. This theoretical perspective is suitable for China's secondary vocational education research because it no longer focuses on "why students are unwilling to study hard", but instead explores what kind of interpersonal environment can make students willing to try learning again.

The institutional and cultural environment in which Chinese vocational school students are situated differs significantly from the European vocational education system. The stratified admission system based on vocational and general education, the barriers of academic levels, and the long-standing stigmatization of vocational education have continuously influenced students' self-perception and classroom behavior [8]. Although the "Education Law of the People's Republic of China" clearly stipulates that vocational education and general education have equal importance, vocational school students still face various evaluation pressures in their daily lives: The outside world often considers them as a group that failed to enter general high schools and choosing to attend vocational schools is merely because there is no other option. Under the influence of the face culture, behaviors such as raising hands in class, answering questions, seeking help, and presenting in front of the class all place students in the judgment of their peers and the comparison of their abilities [9-11]. Once they anticipate making mistakes, attracting ridicule from others, or being labeled as "underachievers" again, lowering their heads and avoiding is the realistic coping method for them to reduce self-exposure and avoid embarrassment.

Based on the above research background, this paper raises three research questions: First, how do vocational school students view the behaviors of avoiding the classroom and actively

participating? Second, how will teacher support, the atmosphere of the class, and practical learning opportunities affect students' willingness to re-engage in the classroom? Third, in the specific context of vocational education in China, the issues of face risks and identity evaluation will how reshape the mechanism of interpersonal support emphasized by the theory of vocational education empowerment?

2. EmpowerVET and the Re-Engagement of At-Risk Students

2.1 At-Risk Students and Social Inclusion in EmpowerVET

The EmpowerVET project explores how vocational education can assist at-risk youth, especially those facing issues such as dropping out of school, social exclusion, or employment transition difficulties. This research framework no longer simply attributes the problems of at-risk students to insufficient learning motivation or lack of skills, but shifts the research perspective to the various interpersonal networks in which the students are situated. Family, school, peers, internship positions, and social institutions jointly form the environment for the growth and development of young people. This view is in line with the theory of social capital, which emphasizes the value of interpersonal resources and supporting networks. An individual's behavioral choice is not only affected by his own ability, but also depends on the various interpersonal resources he can mobilize [12,13]. It can be seen that vocational education is not only a place to teach professional skills, but also a space to reshape the sense of social integration. If vocational colleges and universities can build stable and trusting interpersonal relationships for students, provide convenient and accessible practical learning opportunities, and guide students to set up career development ideals, young students in vulnerable situations can return to the right track of learning and career development. This theoretical perspective abandons the one-sided judgment of "students themselves are not diligent enough", reinterprets the phenomenon of sluggish participation in the classroom, and at the same time promotes the academic community to deeply explore the interpersonal environment, institutional pressure, identity evaluation and other deep triggers.

2.2 Relational Support, Protective Resources, and Re-Engagement

Research on EmpowerVET places special emphasis on the protective effect of interpersonal support. The expectations continuously given by teachers, the acceptance of peers, the help resources available to the school, and the successful experience gained in professional practice can help students regain their self-confidence and re-invest in learning. From this perspective, re-investment in learning is rarely a one-time behavioral change, but gradually formed in continuous interpersonal interaction, and is built together with a sense of security, self-efficacy and expectations for future development. Whether secondary vocational students are willing to take the initiative to raise their hands to answer, ask for help or show professional skills depends not only on their own interest in learning, but also on whether they think that teachers are trustworthy, whether they can get along with their peers without pressure, and whether they understand that mistakes are allowed. Therefore, classroom participation should not be regarded as an isolated personal choice, but should be understood as a comprehensive experience rooted in interpersonal networks. When this theoretical perspective is applied to the research on secondary vocational school classrooms in China, a new issue emerges: What kind of interpersonal support do students perceive recognition, assistance, and protection, or comparison, criticism, and the embarrassment of once again exposing their own shortcomings?

2.3 Academic Tracking, Stigma, and Face Risk in the Chinese Context

The classroom participation behavior of vocational school students in China is greatly influenced by the dual factors of the general-education-vocational education separation system and the social image of vocational education. Although the national policies have repeatedly emphasized the significant importance of vocational education, the general public still generally views ordinary education as a more prestigious and more recognized path for further education. Therefore, vocational school students are easily labeled as having failed in their studies and being barred from the mainstream path of further education. Such identity judgments permeate classroom interactions and influence students' risk

assessments of behaviors such as raising hands to answer questions, seeking help, and presenting their achievements. Face risk is also a factor that cannot be ignored. Face is related to one's reputation and self-esteem, and profoundly influences people's behavior choices in public settings. Making a wrong answer, failing in practical demonstrations, or asking for help may all lead to comments and evaluations from peers. Bowing one's head and remaining silent becomes a coping strategy for students to avoid embarrassment. Therefore, when studying the issue of learning engagement in vocational school classrooms in China, it is necessary to take into account the three dimensions of interpersonal support, identity pressure, and face risk simultaneously.

3. Research Design

This study adopts the questionnaire survey method to investigate the current situation of classroom participation and interpersonal support of students in vocational colleges and universities. This study has two core research goals: first, to sort out the practical characteristics of students' low participation in the classroom, various risks faced, teacher support, peer atmosphere, successful practical training experience and willingness to return to school; second, to analyze the correlation between the above-mentioned interpersonal support elements and students' willingness to return to the classroom to participate.

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

This survey was conducted at a secondary vocational school in Beijing, with the respondents being the freshmen and sophomores of the school. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, and 186 were returned. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires due to short filling time, obvious patterns in responses, and significant absence of core questions, 178 valid questionnaires were obtained, with a valid response rate of 95.7%. Among the valid samples, there were 92 freshmen and 86 sophomores, and the majors covered e-commerce, online marketing, and new energy vehicle technology. This sample covers different grades and professional categories, enabling the overall distribution characteristics of middle school students' classroom participation, perception of interpersonal support, and experience of face-risk to be reflected.

The questionnaire was divided into three main parts. The first part collected basic information of the respondents, including gender, grade, major, and daily classroom participation performance. The second part was the formal scale, consisting of 20 items, using a five-point Likert scoring method, with a score range from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The third part set an open-ended question to collect the characteristics of the classroom environment that could motivate students to actively participate in class. The formal scale was divided into six dimensions: low classroom participation (questions 5-8), face-risk (questions 9-12), teacher support (questions 13-16), peer atmosphere (questions 17-19), successful

training experience (questions 20-22), and willingness to re-engage in class (questions 23-24). The questionnaire design did not simply ask students whether they were actively participating in class, but transformed the abstract concept of "student classroom engagement" into observable indicators that could be quantified in real classroom scenarios. Additionally, to avoid labeling students with negative labels, all questions were expressed based on classroom scenarios and interpersonal interaction feelings, without using words like "inattentive" or "not studying hard" that carry judgmental connotations. The characteristics of the valid questionnaire sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Valid Questionnaire Sample

Item	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male / female	94 / 84	52.8% / 47.2%
Grade	First year / second year	92 / 86	51.7% / 48.3%
Major	E-commerce / online marketing / new energy vehicles	61 / 58 / 59	34.3% / 32.6% / 33.1%
Total	Valid sample	178	100.0%

3.2 Questionnaire Design and Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were examined through reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, difference analysis, and hierarchical regression. Frequency statistics were first calculated for grade, gender, and major. Cronbach's alpha was then used to assess the internal consistency of the 20 formal items and each subscale, while means, standard deviations, and agreement rates were calculated for each dimension. Pearson correlation analysis examined the linear relationships among face risk, teacher support, peer climate, successful practical-training experience, and willingness to re-engage. One-way analysis of variance compared key variables across students with different classroom participation statuses. Finally, willingness to re-engage was used as the dependent variable in a hierarchical regression. Gender, grade, and major were entered as control variables, followed by face risk, teacher support, peer climate, and successful practical-training experience, in order to test the independent explanatory power of relational-support factors. The questionnaire as a whole has good internal consistency. The Cronbach's α coefficient of the total scale is 0.87, and the α coefficients of each subscale range from 0.78 to 0.86, which conforms to the general standards for social science research.

The whole process of questionnaire distribution

strictly follows ethical norms. All students voluntarily participate in this study with informed consent, and all relevant information of the school and students is anonymized. This study pays special attention to avoid strengthening all kinds of negative labels, especially stereotyped negative labels related to academic failure, vocational education status and family background. The original intention of this study is to explore various support mechanisms, rather than reprinting all kinds of negative labels that should be studied and analyzed. There are certain limitations of this study: the research sample is only taken from a secondary vocational school in Beijing, and the research conclusion cannot be extended to all secondary vocational students. Future research can expand the sample size and include vocational colleges and universities in different regions and different types of schools; at the same time, it can be combined with classroom observation, open interviews and tracking research to further examine the interpretation framework proposed by this study. Another limitation is the common method deviation. All the core variables of this study were collected through the same self-assessment questionnaire, and a single measurement tool may overestimate the correlation coefficient and regression coefficient between variables [14]. This study has adopted a number of procedural control means to reduce the risk of deviation: the questionnaire is filled

in anonymously, and the top of the volume clearly informs the respondents that there is no standard answer to the question. All questions are designed based on real classroom scenarios and will not induce the respondents to deliberately show a positive self-image. The above methods can only alleviate and cannot completely eliminate the common method deviation. Therefore, the follow-up research should combine questionnaire data with classroom observation, teacher evaluation or other external objective indicators to cross-verify the self-assessment results. 4. Findings: From "Looking Down" to "Looking Up"

4. Results

4.1 Looking Down: Not Unwilling to Learn, but Afraid to Be Seen

The questionnaire results indicate that students' understanding of looking down cannot be equated with unwillingness to learn. In the valid sample, 68.5% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they worried classmates would laugh if they answered incorrectly, and 64.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes looked

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Results for Each Dimension

Dimension	Items	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Low classroom participation	4	3.63	0.78	0.80
Face risk	4	3.89	0.81	0.84
Teacher support	4	3.81	0.77	0.86
Peer climate	3	3.76	0.84	0.82
Successful practical-training experience	3	3.94	0.79	0.83
Willingness to re-engage	2	3.72	0.82	0.78

In addition, 59.0% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they were unwilling to expose what they did not know in front of the whole class, and 57.3% worried that poor classroom performance would make others view them as less capable. The research results indicate that the act of looking down and remaining silent, as well as avoiding eye contact, is not merely a matter of attentional issues. It is more likely that students adopt this self-protection strategy to reduce their own attention and avoid being confirmed as a "loser" again. This interpretation aligns with the discussions in studies related to face culture regarding public social interaction, maintaining reputation, and avoiding embarrassment. If educators merely attribute the act of looking down to students' laziness or disciplinary issues, they will overlook the defensive choices made by students in the context of classroom evaluation, thereby making

down to avoid being called on by the teacher. By contrast, the proportion choosing only because I do not want to learn at all was relatively low. Low participation in secondary vocational classrooms therefore involves not only insufficient learning engagement, but also emotional safety and face risk. Within the tripartite engagement framework, such low participation appears first as insufficient behavioral engagement, yet it also contains emotional insecurity and cognitive self-doubt. The face-risk dimension recorded a relatively high mean score ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.81$), with the highest item scores for worrying about peer evaluation after a wrong answer and worrying about being publicly negated by the teacher. The mean score for low classroom participation was 3.63 ($SD = 0.78$), indicating that looking down, silence, and avoidance of answering were common in the sample. The mean for willingness to re-engage was 3.72 ($SD = 0.82$), suggesting that most students had not rejected participation altogether and could still re-engage under specific support conditions. The descriptive statistics and reliability results for each dimension are presented in Table 2.

subsequent assistance measures ineffective.

4.2 Teacher Support: From Managing Students to Reducing Classroom Participation Risks

The way teachers handle students' low participation behavior in class will directly affect whether students are willing to return to classroom learning. The data from this survey shows that 72.4% of the students agree or fully agree that compared to public criticism, private reminders can better motivate them to actively improve their classroom performance; 69.1% of the students agree or fully agree that if the teacher is willing to give them a chance to try first and continue to guide them after they make mistakes, they will be more willing to raise their hands to answer questions.

By contrast, the item public criticism from the teacher makes me less willing to look up

afterwards reached a mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.76). These results indicate that teacher support is not defined simply by whether teachers intervene. Its effect depends on whether the mode of intervention expands or reduces students' face risk. EmpowerVET research on teacher support and school capacity similarly suggests that teachers influence at-risk students not only through knowledge transmission, but also through stable expectations, accessibility, and non-humiliating interaction.

The item distribution further shows that students were more receptive to low-humiliation forms of teacher support, including reduced question difficulty, preliminary prompts, private reminders after class, and recognition of partially completed work. Public comparison, immediate negation, and explanations of student behavior through achievement labels were more likely to intensify face risk. The same reminder may

therefore carry different meanings depending on whether it is delivered publicly in front of the class or privately after class.

Correlation analysis showed that teacher support was significantly and positively correlated with willingness to re-engage ($r = 0.56, p < 0.001$). Peer climate was also positively correlated with willingness to re-engage ($r = 0.48, p < 0.001$), as was successful practical-training experience ($r = 0.52, p < 0.001$). Face risk, by contrast, was significantly and negatively correlated with willingness to re-engage ($r = -0.41, p < 0.001$). The above correlations indicate that whether teacher support can be effective depends not only on whether the teacher provides assistance, but also on whether the students perceive this assistance as safe, trustworthy, and preserving their dignity. The results of the correlation analysis of each core variable are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis of the Main Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1 Face risk	1				
2 Teacher support	-0.32***	1			
3 Peer climate	-0.29***	0.45***	1		
4 Successful practical-training experience	-0.21**	0.42***	0.39***	1	
5 Willingness to re-engage	-0.41***	0.56***	0.48***	0.52***	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The setting, tone, and visibility of support shape how students interpret teachers' intentions. A Correcting mistakes in public can make students feel embarrassed or put them in a position of comparing themselves with others; while a gradual and systematic guidance, even when pointing out the same problem, will be regarded by students as an acceptable learning opportunity. Thus, it can be seen that whether the teacher's support can take effect does not only depend on whether assistance is provided, but also on whether the assistance method can prevent students from getting into embarrassment. At this level, the interpersonal support perspective in the EmpowerVET theory has a more specific connotation in the classroom scenarios of secondary vocational education in China. Only when students perceive that the teacher's support is safe, trustworthy, and can preserve their dignity, can this support be transformed into the motivation for students to re-engage in classroom learning. Students do not need excessive protection; instead, they long for new opportunities to try. In a classroom environment where making mistakes does not lead to public embarrassment, they are willing to

be there.

4.3 Peer Climate: Shaping Whether Students Are Willing to Speak Publicly

Peer relationship also affects students' willingness to participate in the classroom. According to this survey, 66.9% of the students agreed or completely agreed. The ridicule and ridicule of their classmates would reduce their willingness to take the initiative to raise their hands to answer questions; 62.4% of the students said that if the group members could give tips in time, they would be more willing to show their learning achievements on stage. From the perspective of social capital theory, peer relations can not only become a supporting resource to help students grow and develop, but also evolve into a trigger that brings psychological pressure and causes interpersonal exclusion, and its impact is often very subtle. A joke or a burst of laughter between classmates may not be malicious, but it will still affect whether students are willing to take the initiative to speak next time.

The mean value of the peer atmosphere dimension was 3.76, with a standard deviation of 0.84. Items such as "When classmates in the

group offer suggestions, I am more willing to present on the stage" and "The encouragement from peers makes me more willing to attempt classroom questions" have a more significant correlation with students' willingness to re-engage in the class. The results of one-way ANOVA also show that students with different levels of classroom participation have significant differences in terms of face risk perception and interpersonal support perception. Students who were often silent reported significantly higher face-risk scores than students with stable participation, while reporting significantly lower teacher support, peer climate, and successful practical-training experience. Public expression therefore depends not only on individual courage, but also on whether classroom interaction permits mistakes and mutual help.

For students with high face risk, peer evaluation was especially salient. Even when teachers were relatively gentle, students might continue to look down, remain silent, or transfer tasks to more active classmates if the class included jeering, joking forms of negation, or private evaluation. Such behavior may appear to indicate a lack of initiative. From an interactional-risk perspective, however, it reflects students' anticipation of the social consequences of public expression.

These findings identify peer climate as an important condition for classroom participation. Students do not simply judge whether peer relationships are good or bad. They are more concerned with whether peer responses will magnify their mistakes. A slight laugh or jeer may be read as public confirmation of insufficient ability, whereas prompts from group members and shared task division may frame expression as part of a collective outcome rather than as the isolated exposure of individual ability. Peer relations can therefore become relational protective resources, but they can also generate pressure and withdrawal. When organizing classroom interaction, teachers need to attend not only to individual willingness, but also to the interactional order of the class.

4.4 Successful Practical Training: from Academic Failure to Skill Confidence

Compared with ordinary classroom instruction, practical-training courses and skills tasks offer some students new experiences of success. In the survey, 71.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed that completing a product in practical training made them feel capable, and 67.4%

agreed or strongly agreed that achieving results in practical training made them more willing to explain their methods to classmates. This finding is consistent with VET research on practical learning and vocational identity formation. Practical settings provide not only skills training, but also opportunities for at-risk youth to rebuild a sense of competence and future possibility.

Successful practical-training experience had a mean score of 3.94 (SD = 0.79), higher than ordinary classroom participation. For some secondary vocational students, skills tasks provide evidence of competence that differs from cultural-course grades. Through concrete products, operational processes, and group tasks, students gain experiences of recognition. In these moments of having made something, they may begin to see themselves as more than the outcome of cultural-course achievement.

Further analysis showed that students with higher successful practical-training experience also scored higher on items such as after achieving results in practical training, I am more willing to explain my methods to classmates and successful practical-training experience makes me more confident in learning. Practical outcomes can reduce the abstractness and uncertainty of public expression by grounding students' speech in visible products and actual operations. When students first produce a visible outcome and then explain it, the face risk involved in classroom participation is correspondingly reduced.

Practical-training outcomes thus provide visible evidence of competence, allowing expression to depend less on abstract academic evaluation. When students can first make something and then speak about it, classroom presentation carries lower face risk. This process also demonstrates that, compared to regular cultural courses, vocational education can offer a distinctive support model. The research results are consistent with the relevant research conclusions on practical learning and professional identity construction in the field of vocational education. For secondary vocational students, the harvest of practical learning is not only to master professional skills, but also to provide students with an opportunity to restructure their self-identity. In the practical training scene, students temporarily got rid of the inherent label of "academic failure" and regained their sense of competency and recognition from others. This kind of positive

experience can improve students' willingness to show themselves and actively express themselves in the classroom. It can be seen that the value of practical training and teaching lies not only in teaching professional skills, but also in reshaping students' judgment and cognition of their own abilities.

4.5 The Explanatory Role of Relational Support in Willingness to Re-Engage

To explore the explanatory power of each variable on students' willingness to re-engage in the classroom, this study conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with classroom re-engagement willingness as the dependent variable. The first layer of regression included gender, grade, and major as control variables. The explanatory power of this layer was relatively low ($R^2 = 0.06$). The second layer regression incorporates four types of variables: face risk, teacher support, peer atmosphere, and positive experience during practical training. The explanatory power of the model increased substantially ($R^2 = 0.48$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Teacher support, peer atmosphere and the successful experience of practical training can positively predict students' willingness to re-engage in the classroom, while the risk of losing face has a negative predictive effect on it. The variance inflation factors of all variables are all lower than 2.10, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity problem in the model. The above results show that whether students can actively re-participate in the classroom is the result of the joint effect of various interpersonal environmental conditions, and is not determined by a single factor.

The research results further indicate that interpersonal support does not merely counterbalance the risk of face loss; instead, it alleviates the psychological pressure caused by public evaluation, provides students with opportunities to try, enhances their sense of competence, and gradually transforms into the psychological foundation that supports students' re-engagement in the classroom. When teacher support, a good peer atmosphere, and successful practical training experiences are all present simultaneously, students are more likely to consider classroom participation as an acceptable, achievable behavior that can receive recognition from others. Thus, it can be seen that classroom re-engagement is a process that gradually transforms through interpersonal

interaction. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Willingness to Re-Engage

Variable	Model 1 beta	Model 2 beta
Gender	0.05	0.03
Grade	0.12	0.07
Major	0.09	0.05
Face risk		-0.19**
Teacher support		0.31***
Peer climate		0.24**
Successful practical-training experience		0.28***
R^2	0.06	0.48
ΔR^2	0.06	0.42***

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Values are standardized regression coefficients.

5. Discussion: How the Chinese Context Revises the EmpowerVET Perspective on Relational Support

The results of the questionnaire survey directly confirmed the core viewpoint of the EmpowerVET theory regarding interpersonal support. The EmpowerVET theory posits that teacher support, peer relationships, school resources, and vocational practice opportunities are important conditions for enabling disadvantaged students to re-engage in learning. The present findings suggest that this perspective can also illuminate the classroom experiences of Chinese secondary vocational students. Students move from looking down to looking up not because they suddenly become self-disciplined, but because the classroom begins to offer participation conditions with lower risk, higher recognition, and more attainable success. The practical focus therefore shifts from requiring students to change to improving the conditions under which participation becomes possible.

At the same time, the Chinese secondary vocational context revises this perspective in three respects. First, relational support does not take effect automatically; its effect depends on whether students perceive support as safe, trustworthy, and face-saving. Second, peer relationships and successful practical training must be understood within identity narratives. Peer relations may serve as emotional resources, but they may also amplify face risk. Practical-training success, likewise, is not only a matter of skills acquisition, but also a process of identity

repair that helps students temporarily move away from the narrative of academic failure. Third, support must be felt by students before it can be transformed into willingness to participate. This judgement resonates with Chinese vocational education research on secondary vocational students' identity construction, value reproduction, and narratives of academic success.

Figure 1 summarizes these revisions. Rather than

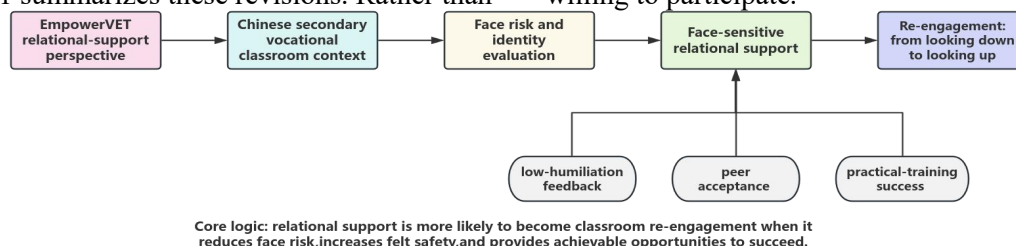


Figure 1. Mechanism of Face-Sensitive Relational Support

The study uses face-sensitive relational support to name this proposed revision. Face-sensitive does not mean that teachers should avoid evaluation altogether, nor does it imply that students should be treated as fragile. It means that support for re-engagement should consider whether students feel humiliated, compared, or labelled again as failures. Relational support is more likely to be accepted and transformed into classroom participation when it reduces face risk, strengthens safety, and provides achievable opportunities for successful participation. The concept links discussions of dignity, reputation, and public interaction in face research with the relational-support mechanism in VET research, while emphasizing that support must be understood within specific cultural contexts.

The theoretical contribution of this study is therefore not the construction of a grand new framework. Its contribution lies in showing, through classroom experiences in secondary vocational education, that relational-support mechanisms developed in European VET research require contextual revision through face risk and identity evaluation in China. The practical implication is equally clear. Promoting re-engagement among secondary vocational students cannot rely only on disciplinary management or motivational mobilization. It requires relational conditions that allow students to look up through low-humiliation feedback, supportive peer norms, and opportunities for practical success.

6. Conclusion

Using looking down and looking up as its

proposing a complex model, the figure highlights the central argument of this study: when the relational-support mechanism developed in EmpowerVET enters Chinese secondary vocational classrooms, it must be revised through face risk and identity evaluation. Without this contextual revision, support may remain at the level of teacher intention and fail to become a condition under which students are willing to participate.

empirical entry point, this study analyzed classroom re-engagement among Chinese secondary vocational students through the EmpowerVET perspective on relational support. The questionnaire data indicate that the behavior of students lowering their heads and remaining silent cannot simply be attributed to laziness or disciplinary issues. This behavior is actually a self-protection mechanism formed by students due to the risks of losing face and the pressure of self-identity. In contrast, actively raising their heads and participating in the class is not just an external behavioral manifestation brought about by classroom management; rather, it is a process of re-engagement in the classroom that gradually forms based on teacher recognition, peer acceptance, and the sense of achievement from practical training. This transformation process is often subtle but directly determines whether students are willing to engage in classroom interaction again. Future research should not attempt to prove that all vocational school students have the same classroom experience. A more valuable direction would be to conduct large-scale questionnaire surveys to compare the differences among students of different grades, majors, and types of institutions; at the same time, combined with open-ended responses, classroom observations, etc., to interpret the interpersonal interaction process behind the data. At the educational practice level, to promote vocational school students to actively participate in the classroom, merely requiring students to answer actively is not enough. The key is to build a classroom interpersonal environment with low psychological risks, allowing for trial

and error, and providing positive affirmation. Only by converting the policy-level emphasis on the value of vocational education into real and perceptible recognition, support, and opportunities for success for students in the classroom can active participation in the classroom become a continuous learning investment behavior. The core problem faced by educational practice is to make students believe that when they present themselves in the classroom, they do not have to endure embarrassment and shame.

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