

Influence of Family and School Environment on Academic Achievement of Higher Vocational College Students in Yunnan Province, China

Li Dong Li

City Graduate School, City University Malaysia Kunming Metallurgy College

Email: lindabaobei@163.com

Dr. Wong Siew Ping

City Graduate School, City University Malaysia

Email: wong.siewping@city.edu.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i8/26321>

Published Date: 23 August 2025

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of family factors and school environment on the academic achievement of higher vocational college students in Yunnan Province, China. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional, and survey-based design. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was used to select 400 students from public higher vocational colleges, ensuring representation across gender, grade levels, and urban-rural origins. Three culturally adapted and validated instruments were employed: the Academic Achievement Questionnaire, Family Factors Questionnaire, and School Environment Questionnaire, covering dimensions such as study habits, classroom engagement, learning motivation, self-efficacy, parental expectations, family resources, communication, involvement, relationship satisfaction, academic support, facilities, and safety. Regression analyses revealed that family factors accounted for 81–94% of the variance in achievement dimensions, with parental expectations strongly influencing study habits and motivation, family resources shaping classroom engagement, and parental involvement significantly predicting self-efficacy. School environment factors explained 75–94% of the variance, with teacher-student relationships and academic support emerging as critical predictors. Notably, gender differences favored female students, while no significant differences were observed across grade levels, suggesting limited progression in capability development. The findings underscore the differentiated pathways through which family and institutional factors shape student outcomes, calling for targeted interventions rather than one-size-fits-all strategies. This study contributes empirical evidence for developing culturally responsive, integrated educational policies and practices to enhance vocational student achievement in ethnically diverse and economically varied contexts like Yunnan Province.

Keywords: Family Factors, School Environment, Academic Achievement, Vocational Education, Yunnan Provin

Introduction

In China, especially in the Yunnan Province, higher vocational education is exposed to a set of interconnected challenges that have a profound effect on the academic performance of the students. These issues are related to a combination of institutional issues, student backgrounds, instructional approaches and most importantly family background effects that form a complex learning environment that necessitates special action plans.

The first reason is the admission system of the higher vocational colleges which usually have lower requirements than the conventional undergraduate universities. As Ma et al. (2025) explain, vocational colleges admit students with low admission scores, which implies that the learners attending such colleges have varied learning capabilities, learning attitude and educational backgrounds in comparison to learners in academic universities. This preparation disparity is frequently augmented by family variables, as students whose families have low educational capital enroll in vocational programs without the necessary academic base or family support structures to enable their success (Wang et al., 2023). The low admission criteria result in incoming freshmen with varying academic skills, learning needs, and learning capabilities, which are quite difficult to handle by teachers and curriculum designers, especially when family educational expectations and support systems are highly variable across the socioeconomic terrain of Yunnan (Wolniak et al., 2023).

One of the trends that become quite obvious as students go through their vocational education and training programs is rather disturbing. The analysis reveals that there is a significant decline in classroom contribution and learning engagement between the first year and third year of study with Qi & Yang (2024) reporting a tremendous decline of 47 percent in active participation in the classroom. This gradual withdrawal is a serious threat to the quality of learning and development of the student, particularly in cases where it is accompanied by family-related causes, including parents who do not have an adequate understanding of the worth of vocational education or are unable to support a student throughout the entire program (Liaqat et al., 2025). The downward trend of engagement indicates that there is a shortage of curriculum content, teaching methods or institutional structures which can help the students remain engaged in the entire schooling process and this is usually aggravated by families that are unable to offer the students with proper education or emotional support when they are going through a hard academic period.

Adding to these issues of engagement, vocational students are showing more and more what Abed & Shackelford (2023) has described as poor learning motivation, ambiguous learning objectives, and low self-achievement expectations. These motivational and goal-setting deficiencies are significantly influenced by family expectations and aspirations, where Wei and Ni (2023) found that many parents of vocational students in Yunnan have limited understanding of vocational education pathways and struggle to communicate meaningful educational expectations to their children. As students progress through their programs, many exhibit diminishing academic aspirations and increasingly instrumentalist approaches to education that prioritize minimum requirement fulfillment over comprehensive skill development or knowledge acquisition, patterns that are often reinforced by families who

themselves lack clarity about vocational education outcomes and career prospects (Kim & Kwon, 2025).

Family socioeconomic background emerges as a critical mediating factor in these academic challenges. Xin (2024) documented that families of vocational students in Yunnan typically have lower economic status compared to families in more developed regions, creating resource limitations that directly impact students' ability to access educational materials, technology, and supplementary learning opportunities. Additionally, parental education levels among vocational student families are generally lower, with approximately 70% coming from rural areas where higher education participation rates remain below 5% (Vatou et al., 2024). This educational disadvantage implies that a high number of students are first-generation college students whose parents cannot assist them in terms of academic guidance, navigating institutional systems, and offering informed career advising (Belizaire et al., 2023).

The combined impact of these problems is reflected in the poor academic performance results that can jeopardize the future of individual students and the overall workforce development goals. Inadequate academic achievement directly impacts graduate employability, professional preparedness, and career advancement potential, outcomes that are particularly devastating for students from disadvantaged family backgrounds who view vocational education as their primary pathway to socioeconomic mobility (Gu, 2023). At the individual level, poor academic outcomes contribute to what Xie et al. (2023) describes as a "sub-health state" of graduate employment mentality, characterized by confusion about future work directions, disorganized thought patterns, and behavior inconsistent with career planning objectives. For students whose families have put a lot of time and effort into their vocational education and have high expectations, these poor results add to family stress and intergenerational conflict that exacerbates educational problems. The research aim to answer the following questions:

- What is the influence of family factors and school environment on academic achievement of higher vocational college students in Yunnan Province, China?

Literature Review

Academic achievement represents a foundational concept in educational research and practice, yet its definition has undergone significant evolution reflecting broader shifts in educational philosophy, measurement approaches, and outcome expectations. Historically, academic achievement was defined mainly in terms of the amount of knowledge that a student has acquired and their ability to reproduce this knowledge in tests and examinations that are based on the curriculum content and standards (Ma et al., 2025). This relatively narrow conception focused more on the cognitive aspect of learning while giving little regard to skills, attitudes or practical competencies.

The shift toward more comprehensive views occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, due to the constructivism, competency-based education, and the change in the definition of what is expected from education. According to Wang et al. (2023), the contemporary academic achievement has been described as "the knowledge, skills, and moral standards that the learner is supposed to acquire at the end of a course," a definition that embraces a broader perspective of learning outcomes. This change was a transition from the

instructor-focused definitions to the student-focused definitions, as pointed out by McNeill and Wei (2025) that the current achievement frameworks define what students will do and not what instructors will do.

Current theories of achievement also define achievement as a process that happens in cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains throughout learning processes. Jabeen et al. (2023) proffer academic gains as ‘the practical skills, knowledge, perspectives, and attitude that a learner acquires in formal, informal and non-formal learning environments for personal, academic, and career advancement.’ This broad view includes specific technical skills, personal and professional attributes, values, and self-regulation abilities that support continuous learning in complexity, going beyond acquisition of contents as measured by academic performance (Wolniak et al., 2023).

Current definitions of achievement differentiate between related but different concepts of achievement, performance, and competence. These two terms are usually used synonymously in everyday conversation but refer to different aspects of learning that have significant implications in assessment and practice of education. In achievement, one is able to meet predetermined learning outcomes or learning goals, while performance relates to the demonstration of what has been learnt in specific situations (Li et al., 2025). Competence, on the other hand, refers to more generic ability profiles combining knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow for appropriate functioning in various contexts. According to Hanif (2020), achievement refers to mastery of ideas, skills, strategies, language proficiency, creativity, and attitudes denoting student progress on various cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains, which makes it clear why achievement has been conceptualized comprehensively in the current society.

The concept of family factors encompasses a complex array of influences that shape children’s developmental and educational trajectories. Multiple theoretical perspectives have emerged to define these family influences, each highlighting different aspects of how family environments affect educational outcomes. Cohen et al. (2020) define family factors as the various socioeconomic, emotional, communicative, and aspirational attributes within the home environment that significantly influence developmental and academic trajectories in children and adolescents. Kenneally (2021) approaches the definition from a developmental perspective, describing family factors as multi-layered socialization processes ranging from parenting styles and adult-child dynamics to expectation setting, through which children inherit lasting cognitive schemas, behavioral patterns, and psychosocial capacities shaping competency development.

Core dimensions of family factors in educational contexts typically include several key components that research has consistently identified as significant. According to Belizaire et al. (2023), the key factors include family resources, parents’ expectations, communication, and their participation in decision making as the main factors that may influence education. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2020) also pointed out the differences between structural family characteristics and process characteristics when considering education effects. Kivimäki et al. (2020) note that these dimensions are not separate entities exerting their influence independently but rather form complex patterns of family impact on learning processes and achievements.

The meaning of the family factors in the educational context has changed significantly during the past decades, which may be attributed to the changing perceptions of development and learning. Early studies paid more attention to more or less structural and stable factors like family size, parents' education level, and family's economic status as the key determinants of education. According to Li et al. (2025), there has been a trend of shifting to more process-based aspects that describe the quality of family interactions, the details of parental engagement, and the characteristics of home learning environments. Mollborn et al. (2021) explain that, in the current studies, the focus is made on the fact that children are also involved in the processes in the family and do not just receive influence from the family. Lloyd and Schachner (2021) also note that modern conceptualizations also take culture into account more than before because similar family processes may have different meanings and impact in different cultures.

There are integrated models of family influence to capture the complex and dynamic process of these factors. Hernandez et al. (2021) argue that structural factors, resources, stress, and cultural capital in families define childhood experiences, chances, and support systems that relate to socioemotional development and mobility in the future. Qi and Yang (2024) constructed a family process model that showed how the family relationships and processes through which structural characteristics impact children's well-being and achievement. According to Van den Eynde and Mortelmans (2020), family enrichment is a model that seeks to understand how positive family functioning enhances competency in various domains such as academic, social-emotional, and cognitive among others. The conceptual framework for study is shown below:

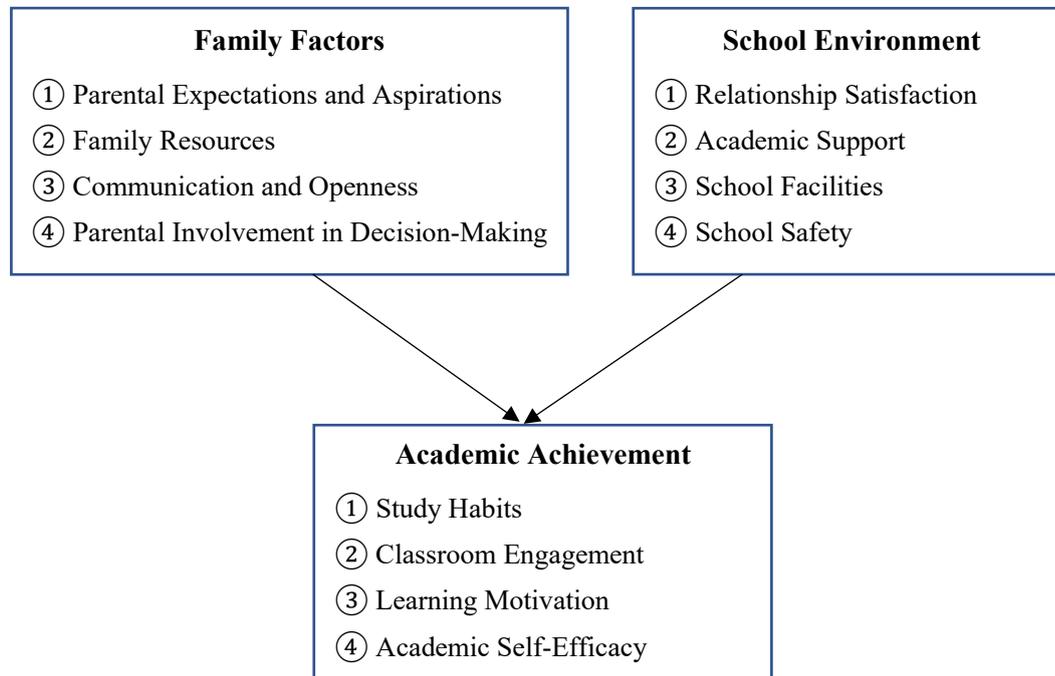


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

The methodology outlines a quantitative, cross-sectional, and survey-based approach to examine the influence of family and school factors on academic achievement among higher vocational college students in Yunnan Province, China. The choice of design is justified by its

suitability for measuring relationships and group differences using structured questionnaires, enabling large-scale data collection and robust statistical analysis with SPSS. Alternative designs such as longitudinal, mixed methods, and case studies were considered but deemed less feasible. The design is closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, ensuring theoretical coherence in measuring microsystem-level factors like family expectations, school support, and safety.

Yunnan Province was selected as the research site due to its unique geographical, demographic, and educational context. The province's mountainous terrain, ethnic diversity, uneven regional development, and linguistic variety present challenges and opportunities for vocational education. It has 50 higher vocational colleges with varying resources and histories, serving both urban and rural populations. This context allowed for examination of how family and institutional factors interact with environmental conditions. The study leveraged collaborations with provincial education authorities to gain institutional access and ensure culturally sensitive, representative data collection.

The target population comprised 559,500 students in public higher vocational colleges, with representation across genders, ethnic groups, urban-rural origins, and academic years. A multi-stage stratified random sampling method was applied: selecting public colleges, randomly choosing institutions, stratifying by grade level, and then systematically sampling students. A final valid sample of 400 students was achieved, exceeding the minimum required for statistical power. While representative, the sample excluded private colleges and did not proportionally stratify ethnic groups, which limits certain generalizations.

Three main instruments were developed and adapted for the Chinese vocational context: an Academic Achievement Questionnaire (20 items across study habits, classroom engagement, learning motivation, and academic self-efficacy), a Family Factors Questionnaire (40 items across parental expectations, family resources, communication, and decision-making involvement), and a School Environment Questionnaire (covering relationship satisfaction, academic support, facilities, and safety). Each was adapted from validated scales, translated, and culturally modified through expert review and back-translation. Scoring used five-point Likert scales, and pilot testing confirmed reliability and validity. This structured instrumentation allowed multidimensional measurement of constructs and supported the study's analytical objectives.

Results

RQ4: What is the influence of family factors and school environment on academic achievement of higher vocational college students in Yunnan Province, China?

Regression models demonstrated exceptionally strong fit to the data, explaining substantial proportions of variance in their respective academic achievement dimensions. The model for Study Habits yielded $R^2 = .928$, indicating that family factors collectively explained 92.8% of the variance in study behaviors. The model for Classroom Engagement showed $R^2 = .900$, explaining 90.0% of the variance in engagement. The model for Learning Motivation demonstrated the strongest fit with $R^2 = .944$, explaining 94.4% of the variance in motivation. The model for Academic Self-Efficacy yielded $R^2 = .811$, explaining 81.1% of the variance in confidence in academic abilities.

Table 1

Model Fit Assessment

Model	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	df1	df2	Sig. Change	F
Study Habits	.928	.927	.251	1668.312	4	395	.001	
Classroom Engagement	.900	.899	.344	1234.567	4	395	.001	
Learning Motivation	.944	.943	.251	1668.312	4	395	.001	
Academic Self-Efficacy	.811	.810	.286	424.968	4	395	.001	

All models achieved statistical significance at $p < .001$, with F-values ranging from 424.968 for Academic Self-Efficacy to 1668.312 for Learning Motivation. The adjusted R² values were nearly identical to the R² values for all models, differing by only .001, indicating minimal shrinkage due to the number of predictors relative to sample size and confirming the robustness of the explained variance estimates. Standard errors of the estimate were relatively small, ranging from .251 for Learning Motivation to .344 for Classroom Engagement, indicating good precision in the predictions.

The unique contributions of individual family factors varied considerably across academic achievement dimensions, revealing differentiated patterns of influence. Parental Expectations demonstrated the strongest unique contribution to Study Habits (partial $r = .807$) and Learning Motivation (partial $r = .862$), indicating that parental aspirations explain substantial unique variance in these dimensions even when controlling for other family factors. For Classroom Engagement, Family Resources showed the dominant unique contribution (partial $r = .813$), suggesting that material and social resources are particularly critical for facilitating active participation in learning activities. For Academic Self-Efficacy, Parental Involvement demonstrated the strongest unique contribution (partial $r = .672$), indicating that collaborative decision-making is especially important for building confidence in academic abilities.

Communication and Openness showed modest but significant unique contributions across all achievement dimensions, with partial correlations ranging from .109 for Classroom Engagement to .251 for Study Habits. These consistent but moderate unique effects indicate that the open family dialogue has incremental utility over and above other facets of the family; however, they are not as strong as other family factors.

Regression analyses confirmed the substantial predictive power of both family factors and school environment on academic achievement, with family factors explaining 81-94% of variance and school environment explaining 75-94% of variance across achievement dimensions. These findings largely support the research hypotheses regarding gender differences, relationships between variables, and predictive influences, while contradicting the hypothesis about grade-level differences. The results establish a foundation for deeper interpretation of how family and institutional forces shape educational outcomes in Yunnan's vocational education context, which will be explored in the following chapter.

Conclusion

The study established that there were significant differences in study habits, classroom participation, learning motivation and academic self-efficacy between females and males. These differences indicate that current structures of vocational education may be more in tune with female learning, making males the disadvantaged gender that needs to be addressed. Contrary to developmental expectations, no differences in academic achievement were observed across the grades, and thus, the study raises pertinent questions about whether vocational programs are adequately promoting progressive capability development throughout students' education.

The inter-connectedness of the family factors, school environment and academic achievement as established in this study demonstrate that education is not a single factor affair. Of all the predictor variables, parental expectations and teacher-student relations were found to have significant relationship with study habits and motivation to learn whereas family resources and academic support were found to have significant relationship with classroom participation. Such differentiated patterns indicate that there are different routes through which influence should be exerted that would help improve education rather than adopting a homogenized approach. Some of the findings that go against the grain of conventional wisdom include negative relationships between school facilities and some of the achievement dimensions, and these findings should be seen as calling for culturally sensitive approaches to vocational education development.

The importance of this study is based on the fact that it covers several influence systems in Yunnan education context which has ethnic diversity, economic development and changing vocational education system. These findings offer empirical support for strengthening vocational education by focusing on the effectiveness of family support and the role of institution that addresses their impact on students' performance.

With the development of economy and education in Yunnan Province, vocational colleges are at the crossroad between traditional education and new demands of workforce. This paper has presented that improving academic achievement will require a comprehensive approach that focuses on the family, gender, developmental progression and relationships between students and schools in Yunnan's ethnically diverse context. In this way, the integrated approaches can be used as a means to achieve the purpose of the vocational education as the path to individual and regional opportunity within this special province.

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