

June 05, 2025

DOI: 10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6

Volume 2

Number 6

JCSIS

JOURNAL OF CURRENT SOCIAL ISSUES STUDIES

ISSN (P): 3078-5316

ISSN (E): 3078-5324



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Journal of Current Social Issues Studies (JCSIS)

Volume 2 Issue 6 , 2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Study on the Professional Development Path of High School English Teachers in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

Dandan Sun 327

Research on the Practice of Ideological and Political Education in Holiday Universities A Case Study of Jingdezhen Vocational University of Art

Siyue Zheng, Xiaoqing Zeng 331

Exploring the Relationship between Social Environment, Teaching Ability, and Academic Achievement among Preschool Education Major Students in Chinese Colleges: A Conceptual Framework

Min He, Yasmin Binti Hussain336

The Path of Codification: A Case Study on the Institutional Construction of Incorporating Wild Plant Protection Systems into the Code

Chang Xu 342

Human Resource Management Practices in Zhengzhou's Manufacturing SMEs: A Literature Review on Employee Motivation, Retention, and Well-Being

Siyuan Liu, Mohd Dan Jantan 346

A Study on the Professional Development Path of High School English Teachers in the Era of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The application of artificial intelligence (AI) in teaching has profoundly impacted high school English education. While AI transforms teaching models, it also presents significant challenges for high school English teachers. Therefore, this paper explores the professional development paths for high school English teachers in the AI era from three dimensions: the personal domain, the domain of practice, and the external domain.

Keywords : Artificial intelligence; High school English; Teacher professional development

Suggested citation : Sun, D. (2025). A Study on the Professional Development Path of High School English Teachers in the Era of Artificial Intelligence. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 2(6), 327–330. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6.295>

Introduction

Modern information technology, marked by AI, is revolutionizing human production, lifestyles, and learning methods. In recent years, China has vigorously promoted the deep integration of AI and education, developing and optimizing AI platforms for education, encouraging teachers and students to master AI technologies, and enhancing digital literacy to foster personalized lifelong learning. Policy support and the rapid rise of educational AI highlight its pivotal role in education (Xu and Gu, 2025). The deep integration of AI and education is not only an inevitable trend but also a driving force for innovation in the field.

However, AI-driven educational reforms pose unprecedented challenges for English teachers. In English teaching, AI functionalities such as translation, speech recognition, and automated grading have significantly advanced learning support, contextual creation, and teaching evaluation (Li, 2021). This challenges the traditional role of English teachers, leading to professional identity crises. Current issues in teacher professional development include weak AI literacy and outdated teaching concepts (Lin, 2023). Thus, exploring effective professional development paths for English teachers in the AI era is urgent.

Characteristics of High School English Teaching in the AI Era

The development of AI has changed the teaching mode of high school English, giving rise to a new teaching mode that integrates integration, openness, interactivity and sharing (Li, 2021).

Sharing of Teaching Resources

With the help of the smart education platform, the preparation of pre-class teaching resources has evolved from the past independent work of individuals or teaching and research rooms to the collaborative efforts of inter-school master teacher teams (Cui and Zhou, 2022). Various high-quality courseware and video courses have condensed the wisdom of teachers, greatly enhancing teaching efficiency and quality, and to a certain extent, promoting educational equity among regions. Teachers can also improve their own teaching abilities by learning from and drawing on the courseware resources of other famous and outstanding teachers, taking the essence. With the help of the network cloud platform, students can instantly obtain the necessary courseware for previewing before class, reviewing after class and filling in knowledge gaps, thereby improving their learning efficiency.

Transformation of Teaching Environments

The traditional high school English classroom mainly focuses on vocabulary and grammar teaching, while oral English and listening teaching are relatively weakened. Even if some teachers attach importance to the teaching of this section, due to the limitations of the teaching environment and teaching resources, the interaction objects of students can only be peers and teachers, lacking real English communication situations (Xu and Gu, 2025), and the teaching effect is not ideal. However, in the era of AI, the generation of virtual environments can effectively create real contexts or scenarios for students, and there are numerous English oral practice software related to virtual characters emerging in the market. Its advantages are particularly

significant, such as real scenario simulation, standard English pronunciation, and correct English usage, which can improve students' oral English and listening skills, and at the same time increase the fun of English learning.

Advancement of Teaching Evaluation

Teaching evaluation and feedback are the core methods for testing teaching outcomes (Li, 2021). Traditional evaluation methods, relying primarily on teacher observations and standardized test scores, fail to provide accurate, equitable, or multidimensional insights into student learning. In contrast, AI-powered assessment systems demonstrate distinct advantages. Many intelligent assessment tools can not only grade quickly but also accurately reflect the distribution of students' grades, deeply analyze the points where each student lost marks, and display the ups and downs of their academic performance through charts. Moreover, widely-used AI-powered writing evaluation systems such as RealSkill, have significantly enhanced both the efficiency and accuracy of teachers' grading processes (Li, 2023), and can provide timely feedback on aspects such as vocabulary usage, grammatical errors, and sentence structure.

Challenges Faced by High School English Teachers in the AI Era

The application of AI in high school English teaching has promoted the leapfrog development of English teaching (Li, 2021). However, this torrent of technological innovation has also brought unprecedented challenges to the high school English teaching force

Pressure to Upgrade Professional Skills

The profound integration of AI and education has expanded the responsibilities of high school English teachers beyond language instruction to include mastery of intelligent teaching platforms and data analysis software (Chen, 2024). However, China's current high school teaching workforce demonstrates distinct characteristics: the proportion of mid-career teachers continues to grow steadily, while the influx of new teachers shows a gradual decline (Liu and Hui, 2021). Consequently, for most traditionally-trained educators, embracing modern pedagogical approaches and acquiring proficiency in intelligent teaching tools presents a significant professional challenge.

Concerns about Technological Replacement

In the era of artificial intelligence, an increasing number of intelligent teaching tools have demonstrated their advantages over traditional manual teaching in basic teaching (Chen, 2024). For instance, in English vocabulary teaching, English grammar teaching, and even English writing correction, AI has shown its high accuracy and efficiency. It is gradually weakening, replacing and even surpassing the traditional roles of teachers in aspects such as knowledge transmission, assessment and learning guidance (Zhang, 2020). This has compelled high school English teachers to re-examine their career development paths, triggering a series of issues regarding career security.

Identity Crisis

Teacher identity is the answer to "who I am" and "who I want to be", reflecting teachers' cognition and understanding of their professional roles, and also including others' views of teachers (Beijaard et al., 2004). The impact of AI on basic education has directly triggered the identity crisis of teachers (Xu and Gu, 2025). AI not only fully permeates every link of teaching, but can even undertake some teaching tasks, directly challenging the original dominant position and irreplaceability of teachers in teaching. Consequently, some English teachers experience an identity crisis due to their inadequate professional competencies or insufficient technological proficiency. On the other hand, as AI has deeply integrated into the teaching process, the traditional interaction between teachers and students has gradually evolved into a tripartite interaction of "teacher - student - AI" (Xu and Gu, 2025). Therefore, this will to some extent reduce the direct communication and interaction between teachers and students, triggering an identity crisis at the level of emotional communication.

Professional Development Paths for High School English Teachers in the AI Era

The deep integration of AI and English teaching is an inevitable trend. Therefore, in the new era, high school English teachers should follow the trend and seek a path suitable for their own professional development.

According to the *Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth* proposed by Clarke (2002), teachers' professional development is subject to the circular interaction of four fields. First is the external domain, that is, external triggering factors, such as school or social support, etc. Secondly, there is the personal domain, namely the professional knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of the teacher as an individual. The practical field covers all teaching and practical activities. Finally, the result domain refers to the significant results achieved. The four fields interact in a cycle and jointly contribute to the professional development of teachers. Therefore, this article will explore the professional development path of high school English teachers from three aspects: the external domain, the personal domain and the practical domain.

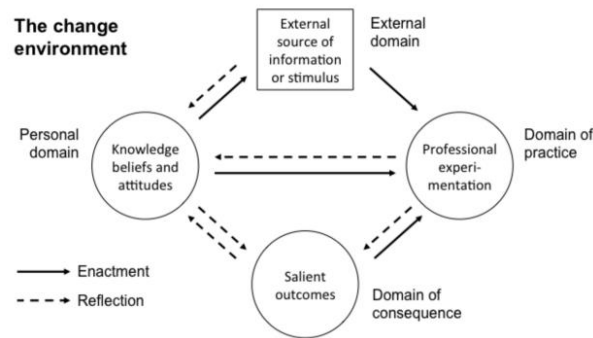


Figure 1. The Interconnected Model of Teacher Professional Growth (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

Personal Domain: Enhancing Competencies

The core elements of the internal development of English teachers lie in the improvement of professional knowledge and quality (Li, 2021). In the face of the changes of The Times and the continuous reform of the college entrance examination, adhering to old ways and not striving for progress is not feasible. On the contrary, high school English teachers should constantly expand their professional knowledge, learn new grammar and pragmatic expressions, increase their professional knowledge reserves, and at the same time, they need to explore advanced teaching methods and models, and skillfully utilize various online resource platforms, such as MOOCs and high-quality course platforms. Learn various teaching models to enrich one's professional knowledge.

Secondly, enhance the application capabilities of artificial intelligence technology. With the popularization of intelligent teaching platforms and tools, high school English teachers should actively accept and learn how to use various intelligent teaching tools and combine such technologies with their own classroom teaching practices. In listening and speaking teaching, various virtual platforms can be used to create real contexts for students, enabling them to use English as if they were on the spot. In reading teaching, modern multimedia software such as Seewo whiteboard can be used, and appropriate game sections can be added. Through the way of solving problems in groups, students' sense of interaction and participation in the classroom can be increased, and the teaching efficiency can be improved. In writing teaching, automatic correction software can be used as an auxiliary tool to correct students' grammar mistakes one by one, give comprehensive evaluations and timely feedback, so as to improve the efficiency and accuracy of correction. In daily tests, English teachers can also use software with score analysis functions such as Doorway Easy Test to understand students' points of loss and weak points in knowledge, grasp the ups and downs of each student's scores, and adjust teaching methods accordingly to truly achieve teaching based on individual aptitude.

Domain of Practice: Reflection and Adaptation

Teacher development is fundamentally a cognitive evolution process grounded in practice, propelled through self-reflection and continuous validation (Li, 2021). Therefore, in the face of AI-driven educational transformation, English teachers must engage in ongoing self-reflection. For instance, is the AI-designed teaching segment logically structured? With AI as the foundation, only through persistent reflection can teachers identify shortcomings in their teaching practices, refine their methodologies, and fully leverage AI's potential in English instruction.

External Domain: Institutional Support

Clarke's teacher professional development model places particular emphasis on the external domain, specifically highlighting institutional support from schools as indispensable for teacher growth (Yao, 2020). Therefore, schools should refine teacher training systems by conducting targeted needs assessments (e.g., surveys or polls) to identify English teachers' specific requirements, ensuring customized professional development programs. Additionally, schools should provide adequate hardware and software facilities, and engage professional IT technicians to deliver both online and offline training on the use of intelligent teaching platforms, thereby enhancing teachers' technological application capabilities.

Conclusion

The application of AI in high school English teaching has profoundly transformed instructional models and significantly enhanced teaching efficiency. In this new era, it has become particularly crucial to explore professional development pathways tailored to individual needs. High school English teachers should comprehensively upgrade their competencies, including both professional expertise and technological application skills, while actively engaging in teaching practice with continuous self-reflection and improvement. Simultaneously, educational institutions must provide robust external support systems. Only through such concerted efforts can educators maintain their competitive edge amidst the surging tide of AI advancement.

Acknowledgment

All contributions of the third parties can be acknowledged in this section.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Research on the Practice of Ideological and Political Education in Holiday Universities A Case Study of Jingdezhen Vocational University of Art

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Abstract

This article takes the summer ideological and political education practice of the School of Economics and Law at Jingdezhen Vocational University of Art as the research object, and explores the mode innovation and optimization path of ideological and political education practice in universities during holidays. Through in-depth analysis of the "Rural Revitalization" themed practical activities carried out by the school in Xixiang Village, Tonggu County, Jiangxi Province, a practical education mechanism centered on party building guidance, professional empowerment, red soul casting, and cultural integration has been summarized. This effectively integrates ideological and political education into various scenarios such as industry research, red education, and folk customs inheritance, promoting the dual improvement of students' ideological and political literacy and practical abilities. Research has found that current ideological and political practices during holidays generally face problems such as prominent formalism, homogeneous content, insufficient resource coordination, and a single evaluation system. In response to this, this article proposes optimization strategies such as strengthening school local linkage, deepening demand orientation, and improving long-term mechanisms, emphasizing the precise docking of social needs through the "demand list+service menu", and promoting the transformation of ideological and political education from "task oriented" to "education oriented". The case shows that the practical model rooted in reality and responding to the propositions of the times can stimulate students' ideological resonance and conscious action, providing replicable experience references for the construction of a "big ideological and political" education pattern in universities in the new era.

Keywords : Ideological and political education; Practical education mechanism; School local linkage

Suggested citation : Zheng, S., & Zeng, X. (2025). Research on the Practice of Ideological and Political Education in Holiday Universities A Case Study of Jingdezhen Vocational University of Art. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 2(6), 331–335. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6.297>

Background

Social practice for college students serves as a crucial platform for enhancing ideological and political education in universities and fostering practical talent development. Universities fully utilize the summer vacation to organize students to engage in social practice activities such as "going to the countryside" and "returning to hometown". However, the key challenge in ideological and political work in universities lies in how to make ideological and political courses more engaging, allowing students to appreciate the charm of ideological and political education through hands-on experiences and solidify their ideals and beliefs through practical application.

Each university has its own unique approach to ideological and political education during the holidays. This article analyzes the summer ideological and political practice activity carried out by the School of Finance, Economics, and Law of Jingdezhen Vocational University in Xixiang Village, Tonggu County, Yichun City, titled "Remembering the Entrustment, Strengthening the Country, I Am Here. Walking Through Jiangxi and Poyang, Grateful and Advancing." It provides a reference for other universities to carry out ideological and political education activities during the holidays.

Based on its professional characteristics, the college takes "rural revitalization" as the main theme and "party building leadership, research improvement, cultural soul-building, and service co-construction" as the main route. Through investigation and research, red tourism, promoting the use of Putonghua and supporting education, theoretical propaganda, and other methods, the college integrates ideological and political education into the entire process of summer social practice, allowing young students to travel around the countryside, see and understand firsthand, measure the path of rural revitalization with their feet, appreciate the changes brought about by rural revitalization, and guide and help them "receive education, develop talents, and make contributions" in the "big ideological and political course" combined with reality.

Analysis on the practice of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities during holidays

As an important part of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities, the practice of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities during holidays aims to deepen students' ideological cognition through social practice, voluntary service, red education and other activities, but there are still some universal problems in the actual promotion process, as shown below:

The tendency of formalization is prominent and the effectiveness of education is insufficient

(1) obvious task orientation. Some practical activities are aimed at "completing tasks", and students participate passively, such as simply clocking in red scenic spots and writing template practice reports, lacking deep-seated ideological interaction and value guidance.

(2) pay more attention to process than connotation. The activity design focuses on the integrity of the process (such as taking photos and summarizing materials), and ignores the emotional experience and ideological sublimation of students in practice, which leads to the phenomenon of "going through the motions".

Lagging content innovation and lack of attraction

(1) serious homogenization. The forms of activities are limited to traditional visits, research, teaching support, etc., and lack the combination with the hot spots of the times (such as rural revitalization, science and technology serving the country), which is difficult to stimulate students' interest.

(2) divorced from students' needs. Failed to design differentiated programs according to the cognitive characteristics of students of different grades and majors. For example, students of science and engineering may need to combine the practice of science and technology ethics, but the actual activity content tends to be the same.

Weak resource integration and coordination mechanism

(1) insufficient internal and external linkage. The cooperation between universities and social institutions (such as communities, enterprises and red bases) is mostly short-term projects, lacking a stable practice platform and resource support, leading to fragmentation of activities.

(2) the absence of cross departmental collaboration. The coordination among ideological and political teachers, academic and work departments and professional teachers is insufficient, and the practice content has not been deeply integrated with professional education and career planning, forming a joint force of education.

Single evaluation system and lack of feedback mechanism

(1) focus on quantitative assessment. Excessive reliance on hard indicators such as the number of words in the practice report and the length of participation, while ignoring the implicit growth of students' values and social responsibility.

(2) lack of continuous tracking. After the end of the practice, there is a lack of summary and reflection and achievement transformation, and the dynamic changes of students' thoughts are not included in the follow-up education design.

Imbalance between coverage and depth of participation

(1) "elitism" tendency. Key projects are concentrated on a few student backbones, and ordinary students have limited opportunities to participate, or they can only cope with the assessment through "seal practice", which leads to the reduction of the coverage of Ideological and political education.

(2) insufficient in-depth participation. Part of the practice stays in shallow experience (for example, short-term teaching support only completes the teaching task), lacks systematic reflection on social problems, and is difficult to realize the internalization of values.

Lack of guidance and guarantee mechanism

(1) insufficient teachers. Ideological and political teachers' holiday guidance mainly relies on online, which is lack of pertinence; Professional teachers' participation is low, and it is difficult to improve the practical professionalism in combination with the characteristics of the discipline.

(2) security risks. The safety plan practiced in remote areas is not perfect, and the ability to respond to emergencies is weak, which may restrict the activities.

The link between theory and Practice

(1) it is difficult to transfer classroom knowledge. It is difficult for students to transform ideological and Political Theory (such as Marxist Methodology) into the ability to analyze social practical problems, and practice and theory show "two skins".

(2) weakening of value identification. Some students are confused because of their exposure to negative social phenomena (such as grass-roots governance difficulties) in practice. If they lack timely guidance, their original cognition may be shaken.

A case study on the practice optimization of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities during holidays

Adhere to the guidance of Party building, establish and improve the mechanism and system

The college set up a leading group for summer social practice activities, with the Secretary of the general Party branch as the group leader, the secretaries of each branch as the Deputy group leaders, and the main principals of the office, the students' department, the academic affairs department and the leading counselors as the group members. The leading group meeting was held, the activity plan was formulated in detail, and two teams were established, covering 19 project plans. The practice activities were carried out in groups and batches according to the theme of the activities.

The research on the "one village, one product" base will boost the revitalization of rural industries

Students incarnate as "rural experience officers", shoot micro documentaries and tell the story of rural industry development, effectively enhancing students' ability to integrate theory with practice.

Inherit the red gene and give full play to the red culture to cultivate people

General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed that "we should adhere to the unity of political, ideological and artistic nature, give good guidance, focus on the theme, speak with historical facts, strive to create high-quality exhibition, enhance the expression, communication and influence, and vividly spread the red culture." the students went to Daijia Laowu, Xixiang Village, the former site of the garrison of the third regiment of the seventh division of the 16th Red Army, the revolutionary martyrs' cemetery, the former site of the CPC Tonggu County Committee, the former residence of Chen Yiqun and other places to visit the red footprints. Students are divided into groups in advance, and integrate major historical events and important historical figures according to red resources. Through "immersive" role play, they can reproduce a revolutionary story on the scene every time they go to a key place, pursue the origin of the revolution, cherish the models of predecessors, review the course of struggle, and have a deeper understanding of why the Communist Party of China can, why Marxism can, and why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good.

Deeply cultivate folk culture and enable the integrated development of culture and tourism

General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed that "the cultural industry and the tourism industry are inseparable. We should adhere to the principle of building tourism with culture and highlighting culture with tourism, promote the integrated development of culture and tourism, and let people feel the beauty of culture and cultivate the beauty of the soul while appreciating the beauty of nature." during the "Red Sun Festival" on the sixth day of June in the bronze drum lunar calendar, students helped revitalize the countryside with the power of youth, and presented a cultural feast with ethnic customs for the local villagers through carefully arranged artistic programs such as songs, dances and dramas. At the same time, students made great efforts in "integration", deeply explored the traditional customs of the Red Sun Festival, innovatively designed the characteristic cultural and tourism route of "folk experience+ecological tourism", and incarnated the "Cultural Guide (NPC)" in the activity area to guide tourists' Deep Participation in the whole process and feel the charm of Chinese excellent traditional culture in the form of interactive games, story telling and other interesting forms.

Innovate the rural classroom and create a "propaganda+" mode

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "we must adhere to integrity and innovation". Students are not limited to venues and forms, go deep into school classrooms, fields and farmyards, and carry out extensive theoretical propaganda activities such as "fire safety and drowning prevention knowledge", "popularization action", "Law Popularization" and "changing customs and customs" through "propaganda+activities", "propaganda+Classroom", "propaganda+volunteer service" and scenario simulation, interactive question and answer, and case sharing, so as to spread the concept of civilization into the fertile soil of the countryside, so that safety knowledge can take root in the hearts of the masses, and draw a new picture of civilization, harmony, peace and happiness in the countryside.

Condolences to the people in need, and services show warmth and responsibility

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "we must uphold the people first." students actively carried out household visits and consolation activities, sent rice, oil and other consolation items to the five guarantee families, had in-depth conversations with people in need, asked about their living conditions, listened to their voices, and conveyed the care and warmth of the society with practical actions.

Analysis on the effect of education mode

Students' Ideological and political literacy has been significantly improved

The activity adheres to the concept of "small incision" and "big ideological and political", which enables students to have a deeper understanding and understanding of the history of the party and the development of the country, and enhances patriotism and social responsibility.

Students' practical ability is trained

Students actively participate in various practical activities and improve their hands-on ability, communication ability and teamwork ability. For example, by participating in folk cultural activities and tourism promotion design, students not only understand the actual situation of rural industry development, but also learn how to use the knowledge they have learned to solve practical problems.

Students' awareness of social service has been cultivated.

95% of the participating students were able to actively respond to the call of the college's social practice activities during the semester. They went to the community on weekends and holidays, and the school regularly carried out various volunteer service activities, such as household surveys, small classes on weekends, and children's safe survival training, which significantly enhanced their awareness of serving the society.

Analysis of the practice results of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities during holidays

Improve the quality of the team

To build a high-level social practice team, we must adhere to the "two wheel drive" of teacher guidance and student training. On the one hand, we should establish and improve the teacher training mechanism, systematically improve the professional ability of teachers to plan, organize and guide social practice through special workshops, experience sharing meetings and other forms, and ensure the high quality of practical activities. On the other hand, it is necessary to improve the student echelon construction system, give full play to the role of "mentoring", realize the inheritance of practical experience and skills, and continue to cultivate the backbone team of students with high political literacy and strong practical ability through the ways of old students leading new students and excellent team demonstration.

Precise design activities

To achieve in-depth research and supply and demand matching, the college team should fully communicate with the practice in advance, fully grasp the local actual situation and development needs through field visits, demand research and other methods, and establish a two-way docking mechanism of "demand list+service menu", with the specific needs put forward by the practice unit "order", and the college team can customize the activity plan accordingly, so as to ensure that the practice activities not only meet the students' training objectives, but also effectively solve the practical problems in practice, so as to realize the complementary advantages and win-win cooperation between the college and the locality.

Enhance the effectiveness of publicity

It is necessary to carefully refine the highlights of the activities, transform the typical practices into the experience mode that can be popularized, actively connect with the provincial and municipal mainstream media, establish a normalized communication mechanism, and centrally display the college's characteristic practice cases on the media platform; We should improve the college's official website and official wechat official account, strive to build a comprehensive and multi-level publicity matrix, maximize the communication effect, and continuously improve the college's external popularity and social influence.

Conclusions

Taking the summer ideological and political practice of the school of economics and law of Jingdezhen Art Vocational University as an example, this paper systematically discusses the mode innovation, problem challenges and optimization path of the practice of Ideological and political education in Colleges and universities during the holidays. The ideological and political education is embedded in specific scenes such as rural revitalization, industrial research and folk custom inheritance through multiple practice paths such as party building guidance, professional empowerment, red casting soul and cultural integration, so that students can feel the charm of theory while walking, cultivate the feelings of home and country in practice, effectively solve the problem of disconnection between theory and practice in traditional ideological and political education, and provide fresh samples for ideological and political education in Colleges and universities in the new era.

The current holiday ideological and political practice still faces some common problems, such as the tendency of formalization, the lack of resource coordination, and the single evaluation mechanism. In this regard, it is necessary to further strengthen the school local linkage, deepen the content innovation, improve the evaluation system, and promote the ideological and political practice from "task oriented" to "education oriented", and from "short-term activities" to "long-term mechanism". In addition, we should pay attention to the close combination of students' individual growth and social needs, and achieve the dual goals of win-win between school and local areas and value transmission through the precise docking of "demand list+service menu".

Only by taking root in the realistic soil and responding to the proposition of the times, can ideological and political education stimulate students' ideological resonance and action consciousness. In the future, we can expand the practice field in combination with regional characteristics, explore the cross professional and cross regional collaborative education mode, and strengthen the long-term tracking and achievement transformation research, so as to provide a more universal and sustainable solution for the construction of the "big ideological and political" education pattern.

Acknowledgment

All contributions of the third parties can be acknowledged in this section.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Exploring the Relationship between Social Environment, Teaching Ability, and Academic Achievement among Preschool Education Major Students in Chinese Colleges: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

This article proposes a conceptual framework integrating social environment and teacher teaching ability as key determinants of academic achievement among preschool education students in Chinese colleges. Drawing from Ecological Systems Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Teaching Effectiveness Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory, the framework highlights how companionship, encouragement, social cohesion, and role models influence learning outcomes both directly and through the mediating role of instructional quality. Teacher teaching ability is defined across five dimensions: subject matter knowledge, instructional planning, assessment, learning environment, and communication. The framework offers a foundation for empirical validation and actionable guidance for educational policy, institutional improvement, and teacher development—particularly in under-resourced regions. This model advances a holistic understanding of academic success and supports equity-driven reforms in early childhood teacher education.

Keywords : Academic achievement, social environment, teacher teaching ability, preschool education, conceptual framework, China, early childhood education

Suggested citation : He, M., & Hussain, Y. B. (2025). Exploring the Relationship between Social Environment, Teaching Ability, and Academic Achievement among Preschool Education Major Students in Chinese Colleges: A Conceptual Framework. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 2(6), 336–341. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6.312>

Introduction

Academic achievement is widely recognized as a critical indicator of educational quality, student development, and long-term socioeconomic mobility (Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2014). In the context of teacher education, especially within early childhood education (ECE) programs, student achievement serves a dual role: it reflects not only the learners' academic performance but also their preparedness to become competent educators for future generations. However, students in preschool education majors—particularly those in under-resourced or regional Chinese colleges—face multiple challenges that may impede their academic success. These include limited institutional support, uneven teaching quality, and underdeveloped peer or community support systems (Fang & Zhang, 2020; Liu et al., 2021).

Globally, research has emphasized that academic outcomes are not determined by individual ability alone but are deeply embedded in the learners' social context (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). The social environment, encompassing interpersonal relationships, institutional climate, peer support, and community cohesion, plays a significant role in shaping students' motivation, engagement, and academic persistence. Studies have demonstrated that students who perceive their environment as supportive—whether through emotional encouragement, social belonging, or role modeling—tend to perform better academically (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Kim & Lee, 2016).

Equally critical is the quality of teaching, particularly the instructional capacity of educators to facilitate deep learning, adapt to student needs, and foster inclusive classroom environments. Teaching ability has been consistently identified as one of the strongest school-level predictors of academic achievement (Hattie, 2009; Stronge, 2018). Effective teachers influence not only students' comprehension of academic content but also their self-efficacy, learning behaviors, and emotional engagement (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, 2020). For preschool education students, who are themselves in training to become future teachers, the modeling of effective instructional practices is both a learning tool and a professional template.

Despite the individual importance of social environment and teaching ability, their interconnected impact on academic achievement—especially through mediation mechanisms—remains underexplored in many developing or transitional

education contexts. In China, while numerous reforms have targeted curriculum modernization and teacher professionalization, substantial disparities still exist across urban and rural institutions (Zhou & Brown, 2015). Students in regional colleges often operate within environments that are socially fragmented and pedagogically inconsistent, which may suppress academic potential unless buffered by high-quality instruction (Chen & Sun, 2021).

This article aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates social environment and teacher teaching ability as interrelated determinants of academic achievement among preschool education students in Chinese colleges. By drawing on Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997), Teaching Effectiveness Theory (Stronge, 2018), and Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this framework seeks to map the theoretical pathways that connect environmental context and instructional quality to student outcomes. The model not only clarifies how these variables interact but also provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy interventions in early childhood teacher education.

Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the multifaceted nature of academic achievement requires a theoretical lens that encompasses both individual and environmental determinants. This study integrates four well-established theories—Ecological Systems Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Teaching Effectiveness Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory—to explain how social environment and teaching ability jointly influence learning outcomes among preschool education students in Chinese colleges.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005), conceptualizes human development as the result of dynamic interactions between individuals and their surrounding environmental systems. These include the microsystem (immediate relationships such as peers and teachers), mesosystem (interactions between home and school), exosystem (influences from external environments like parents' workplaces), and macrosystem (cultural values, policies, and ideologies).

In the context of higher education, the microsystem and mesosystem are particularly relevant. Students' perceptions of companionship, encouragement, neighborhood social cohesion, and role models are situated within these systems. A nurturing microsystem has been linked to stronger academic engagement and persistence (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In Chinese colleges, especially those in less-developed regions, ecological deficits such as fragmented social support or poor peer climate may weaken students' academic resilience (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, ecological theory provides a foundation for understanding how diverse aspects of the social environment interactively shape academic experiences.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), introduced by Bandura (1986, 1997), emphasizes the triadic reciprocal relationship between personal factors, environment, and behavior. Within this model, academic achievement is influenced by self-efficacy, observational learning, and social persuasion—all of which are deeply affected by students' interactions with peers, teachers, and their broader learning context.

For preschool education students, the development of academic self-efficacy is critically shaped by exposure to supportive social models and teacher feedback (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). A positive social environment not only strengthens motivational beliefs but also supports the internalization of adaptive learning behaviors. Moreover, high-quality teaching acts as a mechanism of vicarious learning, through which students acquire the confidence and competence needed for professional success. SCT thus validates the importance of social environment and teaching ability as interdependent influences on academic growth.

Teaching Effectiveness Theory

Teaching Effectiveness Theory posits that instructional quality is a primary determinant of student academic performance. Hattie's (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses highlighted that teacher-related variables—especially feedback, instructional clarity, and classroom interaction—have some of the strongest effect sizes on academic outcomes.

Effective teaching involves more than delivering content; it includes fostering a positive learning climate, tailoring strategies to student needs, and encouraging reflective thinking (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For pre-service teachers, high-quality teaching serves not only as a source of learning but also as a model of what they are expected to replicate in their future classrooms (Stronge, 2018). In China's vocational colleges, however, variations in teaching ability—especially in rural regions—remain a barrier to student achievement (Chen & Sun, 2021). This theory supports the inclusion of teaching ability as a mediating factor that transmits the influence of environmental conditions into measurable academic outcomes.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist Learning Theory, with foundations in the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, conceptualizes learning as an active, contextual, and socially embedded process. According to this theory, knowledge is not passively received but actively constructed through meaningful interaction with the learning environment (Fosnot & Perry, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978).

In the classroom, constructivist approaches emphasize learner-centered instruction, peer collaboration, and teacher scaffolding. Teachers are seen as facilitators who support students' knowledge construction by designing interactive tasks, giving timely feedback, and encouraging critical reflection (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). When embedded within a supportive

social environment, these instructional strategies significantly enhance academic achievement (Jonassen, 1999). For preschool education students, constructivist teaching not only promotes personal academic success but also serves as professional modeling for their future teaching practice.

Core Constructs and Dimensions

A comprehensive understanding of academic achievement among preschool education students requires the articulation of its influencing factors in a theoretically grounded manner. This conceptual framework focuses on three central constructs: social environment, teacher teaching ability, and academic achievement. Each of these variables is multidimensional, shaped by overlapping theoretical traditions and empirical findings, especially within the context of under-resourced higher education environments in China.

Social Environment

The social environment is defined as the network of interpersonal and institutional relationships that shape students' educational experiences, including emotional support, peer interaction, and community engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In teacher education contexts, especially those in non-elite or rural regions, students' perceptions of their social surroundings are crucial in influencing academic engagement and persistence. This study operationalizes social environment through four interrelated subdimensions: companionship, encouragement, neighborhood social cohesion, and role models. Companionship reflects the emotional and academic support derived from peer relationships, which enhances a sense of belonging and promotes collaborative learning (Kim & Lee, 2016). Encouragement pertains to motivational support provided by teachers, peers, and families, which has been shown to reinforce students' self-efficacy and academic effort (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Neighborhood social cohesion captures the degree of solidarity and trust within the school or surrounding community, facilitating emotional security and institutional trust (Zhou & Brown, 2015). Lastly, role models represent individuals who embody academic or professional excellence, guiding student aspirations through observational learning, as emphasized in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997).

Teacher Teaching Ability

The second key construct, teacher teaching ability, is conceptualized as the instructional competence of educators, encompassing both technical skills and relational capacities. Teaching quality has long been recognized as one of the strongest school-level predictors of student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Stronge, 2018). Drawing on Teaching Effectiveness Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory, this study defines teacher teaching ability across five dimensions: subject matter knowledge, instructional planning and strategies, assessment, learning environment, and effective communication. Subject matter knowledge refers to the teacher's command over academic content, while instructional planning emphasizes the ability to organize and present information coherently. Assessment includes both formative and summative evaluation skills, which are critical for tracking and enhancing student learning. The learning environment reflects the extent to which a teacher creates an inclusive, motivating, and emotionally safe classroom. Finally, effective communication relates to the teacher's ability to convey ideas, provide feedback, and engage in responsive dialogue. Each of these dimensions plays a crucial role in shaping not only cognitive development but also student motivation, particularly in vocational colleges where students often lack strong academic foundations (Chen & Sun, 2021).

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement, the outcome variable in this model, is interpreted as a multidimensional construct that includes both objective and subjective indicators of success. Beyond test scores, academic achievement also entails students' perceived mastery of course content, their ability to manage academic demands, and their social adaptation to the college environment (Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2014; Váchová & Novotny, 2020). This framework identifies three core subdimensions: study performance, handling of study demands, and social adaptation. Study performance refers to self-perceived academic accomplishment, while handling study demands reflects time management, stress regulation, and persistence. Social adaptation assesses the student's ability to integrate into the academic community and maintain meaningful relationships. For preschool education students, these dimensions are particularly salient, as they also shape the professional dispositions required in early childhood teaching roles (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Taken together, these three constructs and their subdimensions form the theoretical backbone of the proposed conceptual framework. The model assumes that a supportive social environment enhances academic achievement directly and indirectly through the mediating influence of teacher teaching ability. The integration of psychological and pedagogical constructs reflects a holistic view of student development and provides a basis for future empirical testing and policy design.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

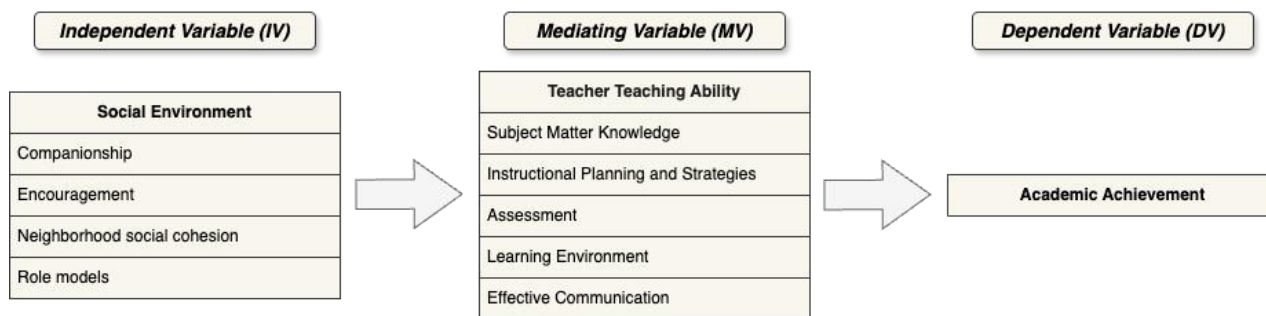


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Building upon the theoretical foundations and the multidimensional constructs previously discussed, this section presents the proposed conceptual framework designed to explain the mechanisms through which social environment and teacher teaching ability influence academic achievement among preschool education students in Chinese colleges. The framework is both theoretically informed and empirically testable, integrating contextual, instructional, and outcome variables into a cohesive model of academic development.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework proposes a mediated pathway in which the social environment directly affects teacher teaching ability, which in turn influences students' academic achievement. Additionally, the model acknowledges the possibility of a direct effect of social environment on academic achievement. However, the primary assumption guiding this model is that teacher teaching ability functions as a critical mediating mechanism, transforming environmental inputs into educational outcomes through instructional processes and student-teacher interactions.

The first domain, social environment, is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising four subcomponents: companionship, encouragement, neighborhood social cohesion, and role models. These dimensions represent the interpersonal and institutional climate within which students operate. Positive peer relationships and emotional encouragement foster psychological security and motivation, while social cohesion and exposure to inspiring role models reinforce academic norms and aspirational thinking (Allen et al., 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2016).

The second domain, teacher teaching ability, mediates the relationship between social context and academic achievement. It encompasses five core subdimensions: subject matter knowledge, instructional planning and strategies, assessment, learning environment, and effective communication. These components reflect the teacher's ability to not only transmit knowledge but also foster a student-centered, reflective, and inclusive learning experience. Research consistently highlights that high-quality teaching can mitigate the adverse effects of a weak social environment and enhance student achievement even in under-resourced settings (Hattie, 2009; Stronge, 2018; Chen & Sun, 2021).

Finally, the framework situates academic achievement as the outcome variable, characterized by study performance, ability to manage academic demands, and social adaptation. These outcomes are not solely influenced by cognitive input but are shaped by the interplay between perceived environmental support and the instructional quality received by students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Váchová & Novotny, 2020).

This conceptual model is grounded in four interrelated theories: Ecological Systems Theory, which explains the multilayered influence of the environment; Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes modeling, feedback, and self-efficacy; Teaching Effectiveness Theory, which highlights pedagogical quality as a direct determinant of outcomes; and Constructivist Learning Theory, which positions learning as socially and instructionally mediated. Together, these perspectives justify the theoretical assumptions and directional paths embedded in the model.

Importantly, the framework is designed to guide empirical testing through quantitative methods, such as structural equation modeling (SEM), enabling researchers to evaluate both direct and indirect effects, examine the strength of mediating pathways, and compare differential contributions of each subdimension. This provides a robust foundation for future studies aiming to improve academic success among pre-service teachers and inform evidence-based interventions in Chinese teacher education.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The conceptual framework presented in this article offers a theoretically grounded model that advances the understanding of academic achievement in teacher education, particularly within the context of under-resourced Chinese colleges. By integrating social environment and teacher teaching ability as interdependent determinants, the framework not only addresses existing gaps in educational theory but also generates practical insights for policy makers, teacher educators, and institutional leaders.

Implications for Future Research

First, this model provides a robust foundation for empirical testing using advanced statistical techniques such as structural equation modeling (SEM), mediation analysis, or multi-group comparisons. Researchers may investigate the relative strength of direct and indirect paths, evaluate the mediating role of teacher teaching ability, and examine whether these relationships vary by student demographic factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, or urban-rural background. Additionally, this

framework supports cross-cultural comparisons, encouraging researchers in other countries to replicate the model and explore contextual similarities and differences in how environmental and instructional factors shape academic success.

Second, future studies can extend this model longitudinally. The cross-sectional nature of many existing studies, including much of the Chinese teacher education literature, limits causal inferences. A longitudinal application of this framework can clarify how changes in perceived social support or teaching quality over time impact academic achievement. This is particularly useful for teacher education programs that span several years and involve developmental progression in student competencies.

Third, this model opens opportunities for scale development and validation. Each of the constructs—social environment, teacher teaching ability, and academic achievement—can be further refined through psychometric studies that confirm factorial structures and ensure measurement invariance across different subpopulations. Instruments developed under this framework could significantly contribute to assessment and evaluation in educational institutions, especially for program review and quality assurance purposes.

Finally, researchers may explore moderation effects by incorporating variables such as emotional resilience, learning motivation, or institutional support. These variables could either amplify or buffer the effects described in the model and enrich understanding of the interplay between personal, instructional, and contextual factors.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

From a practical standpoint, this framework highlights several avenues for enhancing student outcomes in preschool teacher education programs. The significant role of the social environment underscores the need for institutions to invest in creating inclusive, socially cohesive learning spaces. Strategies such as peer mentoring, faculty-student engagement activities, community-based learning, and inclusive housing policies can promote companionship, encouragement, and cohesion among students—particularly in vocational colleges with historically low student integration.

In addition, the framework reinforces the importance of teacher professional development. The five subdimensions of teacher teaching ability identified here—subject matter knowledge, instructional planning, assessment, learning environment, and communication—should serve as core pillars in designing training modules for faculty. In-service training, peer observation programs, and reflective teaching practices should be encouraged across higher education institutions to raise instructional quality, especially in regional and rural teacher training colleges.

This framework also calls for curricular reform. Course design in teacher education should reflect constructivist and student-centered pedagogies, enabling pre-service teachers to experience and internalize the type of teaching practices they are expected to implement in early childhood classrooms. Furthermore, formal feedback systems should be established to allow students to assess instructional effectiveness, with results informing ongoing professional learning for educators.

From a policy perspective, ministries and educational authorities should recognize the dual importance of social support systems and instructional quality in teacher education. Funding models and quality assurance metrics should reward institutions not only for academic results but also for demonstrated efforts in building supportive learning communities and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Moreover, specific guidelines could be introduced to support regional equity in preschool teacher education, helping address systemic disparities between urban and rural institutions.

Finally, the model provides a framework for institutional self-evaluation. By adopting the constructs and dimensions articulated here, colleges can implement structured audits of their learning environments and teaching practices, with a focus on identifying strengths and areas for improvement. This evidence-based approach to institutional development can lead to more targeted, effective strategies for promoting academic success.

Conclusion

This conceptual framework highlights the intertwined roles of social environment and teacher teaching ability in shaping academic achievement among preschool education students in Chinese colleges. Grounded in multiple educational theories, the model offers a comprehensive view of how contextual and instructional factors interact. It provides a practical foundation for future empirical studies and actionable insights for improving teacher training and student support systems. Ultimately, fostering both supportive environments and effective teaching is essential for cultivating capable early childhood educators.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The Path of Codification: A Case Study on the Institutional Construction of Incorporating Wild Plant Protection Systems into the Code

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of codification, it is necessary to consider the legislative status quo and theoretical value of the wild plant protection system. Aiming at the legislative shortcomings such as the incomplete legal system for wild plant protection, low hierarchical status, imperfect list system, and inability to connect with other departmental laws, a two-step strategy is proposed. The first step is to identify and fill gaps, summarize, and classify existing norms; the second step is to moderately codify by incorporating relatively important and programmatic provisions into the Ecological Environment Code. It is essential to systematically sort out legal systems, clarify legislative gaps, remedy legislative defects, learn from foreign experience, construct a systematic and ecological wild plant protection system, and enhance the codification level of China's natural resource regulations.

Keywords : Wild plant protection; Moderate codification; Natural resources law; Ecological environment code

Suggested citation : Xu, C. (2025). The Path of Codification: A Case Study on the Institutional Construction of Incorporating Wild Plant Protection Systems into the Code. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 2(6), 342–345. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6.311>

The Trend of Environmental System Codification

Codification refers to the process of reorganizing all regulatory documents of a legal department through review, revision, supplementation, and deletion to form a new and systematic code. The current legislation on resources and the environment has entered an era of systematization and scientificization, with mature conditions for codification. In 2024, the compilation of the Ecological and Environmental Code has been carried out in an orderly manner. However, there is a lack of research on the technical issues of integrating wild plant resource protection into the code. Under the policy background of strengthening ecological civilization construction, further research is needed on how to address the existing problems of the wild plant protection system through inclusion in the environmental code.

Legislative Shortcomings in Wild Plant Protection

The current wild plant protection system mainly focuses on four aspects: the scope of protected objects, habitat security, species collection, and trade. Although wild plant legislation has relatively comprehensive legal norms, there are still issues of insufficient systematicness and coherence, scattered documents, and low hierarchical status.

(1) Inadequate Legal Coordination

The smooth operation of the wild plant protection regulatory system requires effective coordination among the Ecological and Environmental Code, single laws, international treaties, local regulations, and legal interpretations. However, problems such as legislative overlaps, gaps, and conflicts still occur. Take two existing judicial interpretations as examples: the Provisions of the Supreme People's Procuratorate and the Ministry of Public Security on the Standards for Filing and Prosecuting Criminal Cases under the Jurisdiction of Public Security Organs (I) (hereinafter referred to as Filing Standards (I)) issued in 2008, and the Reply of the Supreme People's Court and the Supreme People's Procuratorate on Issues Concerning the Application of Article 344 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as the Reply of the Supreme Court and Supreme Procuratorate) effective in 2020. In fact, these two judicial interpretations serve as bridges connecting the Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants and the Criminal Law. The Regulations protect precious plants growing naturally in their original habitats and endangered/rare plants with important economic, scientific, and cultural value, while Article 344 of the Criminal Law protects precious trees or other plants (including products) under state key protection. Although the scope of criminal law protection is limited, it is evident that administrative regulations and criminal norms differ entirely in their protected objects.

Filing Standards (I) defines "precious trees and state key protected plants" as three categories: ancient and famous trees with significant historical, scientific, or age-value identified by forestry departments at or above the provincial level, precious trees

prohibited or restricted from export, and trees/plants listed in the National Key Protected Wild Plants List. The Reply of the Supreme Court and Supreme Procuratorate states that "precious trees and other plants under state key protection" in Article 344 include ancient and famous trees and wild plants listed in the National Key Protected Wild Plants List. While the two documents appear non-conflicting, Filing Standards (I) is more comprehensive, limiting ancient and famous trees to those meeting specific criteria and including prohibited export plants, whereas the Reply of the Supreme Court and Supreme Procuratorate only mentions ancient and famous trees without covering prohibited export trees. Conflicts at the same legislative level require the new law to take precedence over the old, yet the old law is clearly more detailed and reasonable. Such internal inconsistencies in the legal system urgently need to be resolved during codification.

(2) Gaps in Standards to Be Filled

First, the Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants lack clear provisions on criteria for identifying wild plants. Which department is responsible for identification? How are terms like "endangered" and "rare" defined in quantitative terms? Should the quantitative standards align with international treaties/laws or be more stringent? The ambiguity in identification authorities, responsibilities, and the scope of protected objects requires legislative clarification. Although the identification of wild plants belongs to the natural sciences, it must be reflected in legislation. Based on China's wild plant protection status, corresponding standards and systems should be formulated by referencing other ecological and resource protection systems and included in the ecological protection section of the code.

Second, administrative regulations on wild plant protection lack provisions on risk monitoring mechanisms. In-situ and ex-situ protection systems could serve as the basis for establishing preventive risk monitoring and early warning mechanisms. Specialized agencies should be set up to statistics, identify, and regularly monitor wild plants approaching the "endangered" threshold, particularly species with declining populations that have not yet been listed (but are below "rare"/"endangered" standards), especially those in regions with harsh climates, severe pollution, frequent natural disasters, or poor law enforcement. This prevents delayed relief due to untimely list updates.

(3) Outdated and Rigid Protection Systems

First, regulatory documents are slow to update, with long intervals between revisions of relevant administrative and local regulations. The Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants was first implemented in 1997 and took nearly two decades to be revised. Second, related nature protection documents are outdated and rigid. For example, the Wild Plant Protection List, a critical component of national wild plant protection, lacks regular and dynamic species monitoring. The second edition of the National Key Protected Wild Plants List was only released after a 20-year gap. Compared to other laws in the natural resources field, wild plant protection systems are notably outdated and lagging, failing to meet practical needs. With a large number of endangered plant species in China and slow legal development, the wild plant protection system urgently needs systematic improvement and inclusion in the environmental code, with single laws formulated for special cases to balance the code's stability and flexibility.

Necessity of Codifying the Wild Plant Protection System

(1) Inevitable Choice for Efficient Operation of Legal Communities

Wild plant survival security involves protection zone systems, environmental monitoring systems, and ecological damage compensation systems, while regulated collection and trade require collection permit systems, import-export systems, and coordinated management of ecological damage compensation. For example, mismatches in protected objects between administrative and criminal laws, and differences in protection scope between the Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), hinder the efficient operation of wild plant protection legal communities. During the compilation of the Ecological and Environmental Code, conflicts, repetitions, and value clashes should be avoided among regulations, normative documents, departmental rules, and local government regulations related to wild plants, guided by the code's unified principles and objectives. The codification process must clarify the scope of wild plant protection to prevent chaos in law enforcement and judicial activities caused by conceptual confusion.

(2) Important Path to Harmonize and Improve the Legislative System

Current legislative issues in wild plant protection include incomplete laws and mismatched coordination with administrative and criminal laws, making existing norms insufficient to effectively address law enforcement and judicial work. Practical needs require legislators to construct a full-process system that prevents risks, enables efficient management, and provides effective relief for wild plant protection. As a major national legislative task, the Ecological and Environmental Code can both coordinate single laws and integrate environmental resource legislation, and guide the formulation, revision, and interpretation of subsequent environmental legal documents, holding significant theoretical research value.

Feasibility of Codifying the Wild Plant Protection System

(1) Ecological and Environmental Attributes of Resources

Resources are the sum of natural environmental factors that can generate economic value to improve human welfare in the present and future. In fact, resources also have inestimable social, cultural, and ecological values. Environment, resources, and ecology are generally regarded as "three aspects of one entity." As one of the eight legislatively defined resources, the legal system for wild plant protection is undoubtedly important and merits moderate codification.

(2) Comprehensive and Three-Dimensional Legal Sources

The Constitution requires "coordinated development of ecological civilization" and the construction of a "great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful," stipulating that no organization or individual may occupy or damage natural resources. Although wild plant protection lacks narrow-sense laws, the Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants plays a vital role in law enforcement and justice. The Forest Law and Grassland Law also address rare and endangered wild plants in forest and grassland areas. The Criminal Law stipulates four crimes, including crimes against state key protected plants and illegal felling of trees. Additionally, formal legal sources include the Administrative Measures for Nature Reserves of Forest and Wildlife Types and the Regulations of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Import and Export of Endangered Wild Fauna and Flora. China has acceded to international conventions such as CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity, which are implemented as domestic law.

In recent years, continuously updated policies on wild plant protection have provided reference ideas and directions for code compilation, helping to clarify identification authorities and standards and safeguard ecological security.

Feasible Paths for Incorporation into the Ecological and Environmental Code

(1) Systematization of Legal Norms

First, internal systems such as environmental monitoring, environmental impact assessment, protection zone systems, archive systems, and collection permits must coordinate with each other, clarifying institutional collaboration and responsibility allocation. For example, environmental monitoring must be conducted after protection zones are demarcated, and wild plant archives must be established; environmental impact assessments must link with wild plant protection risk early warning and ex-situ protection systems; and the scope of protected wild plants must be expanded. Second, systems for wild plant protection in different departmental laws (e.g., civil, administrative, and criminal law) must be coordinated, with the Ecological and Environmental Code as the foundation, its provisions on administrative penalties and ecological damage compensation as the middle layer, and the Criminal Law as the downstream control mechanism.

(2) Refinement of Liability Provisions

First, the liability system in the code should be systematic. For example, Article 13 of the Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants requires construction enterprises to submit environmental impact assessment reports including wild plant species impact assessments before construction, and environmental protection departments must consult wild plant administrative authorities, which must respond promptly. However, Chapter IV of the regulations only stipulates criminal and administrative liabilities for enterprises that fail to obtain environmental impact assessment approval for construction projects, without specifying liabilities for fabricating or providing false/misleading information during assessments. After codification, wild plant protection systems should specify administrative, civil, and ecological damage compensation liabilities based on harm severity. Second, liability provisions should be precise. Current wild plant protection norms are overly general; management should be refined according to the severity of actions and consequences. For example, penalties for damaging ancient and famous trees should differ based on the seriousness of the harm.

(3) Normalization of Legislation and Law Revision

To protect the scarcity, ecological value, and natural originality of wild plant resources, protection efforts must be urgent and prioritized, with timely and institutionalized mechanisms for introducing, withdrawing, and amending protected objects. First, wild plant resource protection must be normalized. Local experience in resource protection should be adopted, such as establishing expert groups for wild plant identification and protection, statistics on endangered species populations, and regular national surveys of rare and endangered plants. Second, the ecological and environmental code must maintain open and inclusive normalization, incorporating domestic wild plant protection systems, international treaty frameworks, and academic research achievements on the code in recent decades, with timely updates based on protection needs. Third, single laws must be updated regularly to enhance the applicability of wild plant protection legal systems.

Conclusion

Wild plant protection requires systematic reorganization under ecological civilization principles, refining liabilities and enhancing inter-legal coordination. Codification will establish a practical framework, advancing high-quality ecological governance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Human Resource Management Practices in Zhengzhou's Manufacturing SMEs: A Literature Review on Employee Motivation, Retention, and Well-Being

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Abstract

This literature review examines how human resource management (HRM) practices influence employee motivation, retention, and well-being within manufacturing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Zhengzhou, China. As key players in the regional economy, these SMEs face significant workforce challenges, including high turnover and limited engagement. The review focuses on three core HRM strategies — performance-based incentives, training and development programs, and well-being initiatives — and analyzes their effectiveness through the lens of established theories such as the Resource-Based View, Human Capital Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Findings suggest that tailored, integrated HRM practices can substantially improve employee outcomes and organizational performance, although further research is needed to address gaps related to local contextualization and long-term impacts.

Keywords : Zhengzhou; SMEs; Human Resource Management; Employee Motivation; Employee Retention; Employee Well-Being; Manufacturing Sector; Performance-Based Incentives

Suggested citation : Liu, S., & Jantan, M. D. (2025). Human Resource Management Practices in Zhengzhou's Manufacturing SMEs: A Literature Review on Employee Motivation, Retention, and Well-Being. *Journal of Current Social Issues Studies*, 2(6), 346–349. <https://doi.org/10.71113/JCSIS.v2i6.314>

Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) serve as a critical engine for economic growth, innovation, and employment across developing economies, including China. In particular, manufacturing SMEs in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province, play a vital role in regional industrial output and job creation. As Zhengzhou continues to position itself as a leading manufacturing hub, with expanding sectors in electronics, automotive, and smart equipment, the human capital needs of its SMEs have grown increasingly complex and demanding. However, these enterprises often face significant challenges in attracting, motivating, and retaining a skilled workforce due to resource constraints, intense market competition, and limited institutional support (Hengrui, 2021; Zhao & Miao, 2022).

Human Resource Management (HRM) practices have emerged as a key strategic tool to address these workforce challenges. Effective HRM strategies—such as performance-based incentives, employee training and development, and well-being initiatives—not only enhance individual employee outcomes but also improve organizational performance. While existing literature has extensively explored HRM in large organizations, the unique context of SMEs, especially those operating in fast-evolving manufacturing sectors in cities like Zhengzhou, remains relatively under-researched (Ludviga & Kalvina, 2024).

This literature review aims to synthesize existing studies on HRM practices relevant to manufacturing SMEs in Zhengzhou, with a focus on three interconnected dimensions: employee motivation, retention, and well-being. By critically examining these domains, the paper highlights how tailored HRM approaches can help SMEs overcome workforce-related constraints and build sustainable competitive advantages. Additionally, the review identifies key theoretical frameworks, such as the Resource-Based View and Human Capital Theory, that underpin the understanding of HRM effectiveness in the SME context. In doing so, this review contributes to the growing body of knowledge on SME workforce management in China's rapidly industrializing regions.

Literature Review

Human Resource Management Practices in the Context of Manufacturing SMEs

Human Resource Management (HRM) is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone for the sustainable development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in labor-intensive and innovation-driven sectors like manufacturing. In Zhengzhou, where SMEs form the industrial backbone, effective HRM practices are essential for managing workforce

challenges such as talent shortages, high turnover, and limited employee engagement (Odebiyi & Okafor, 2023). Compared with large corporations, SMEs often operate under tighter financial and organizational constraints, making it imperative to adopt cost-effective and targeted HRM strategies that align closely with both employee needs and business goals (Abdullahi et al., 2024).

Key HRM practices observed in Zhengzhou's manufacturing SMEs include performance-based incentives, training and development programs, and well-being initiatives. These practices serve not only to manage daily operations but also to drive long-term strategic goals such as employee retention, productivity improvement, and organizational resilience in a competitive labor market (Mulyadi et al., 2023).

Employee Motivation: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

Employee motivation is widely understood to be a primary driver of organizational success, particularly in SMEs where each employee's performance has a direct impact on output. The literature distinguishes between intrinsic motivation—such as job satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and purpose—and extrinsic motivation, which includes monetary rewards, promotions, and recognition (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022).

In Zhengzhou's manufacturing context, performance-based incentives are commonly used to link employees' contributions to tangible rewards. While monetary bonuses and commissions remain effective motivators, non-monetary forms—such as recognition, advancement opportunities, and task variety—also play crucial roles in sustaining motivation, particularly under resource constraints (Adewale & Ademayowa, 2025). Studies have shown that when incentive systems are perceived as fair and transparent, employees are more engaged, leading to greater job satisfaction and productivity (Pradhan & Hati, 2022; Rubio-Andrés et al., 2022).

Leadership style and workplace culture further shape motivational outcomes. Supportive leadership that emphasizes feedback, goal clarity, and mutual respect fosters a positive work environment where employees are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (Iddris et al., 2025). SMEs in Zhengzhou benefit particularly from close employee-manager relationships, which can substitute for more formal HR structures (Khatun et al., 2023).

Employee Retention Strategies in Resource-Constrained SMEs

High employee turnover is a persistent challenge for Zhengzhou's manufacturing SMEs, which often lose skilled workers to larger firms offering higher salaries and clearer career paths. The literature suggests that retention strategies in SMEs must extend beyond compensation to address holistic employee needs (Khatun et al., 2023).

Competitive compensation and benefits—while sometimes limited in SMEs—remain foundational to retention (Mattarelli et al., 2024). However, career development opportunities, including training programs, mentorship, and transparent promotion paths, are increasingly emphasized as long-term retention tools. SMEs can leverage partnerships with vocational institutions and local training providers to deliver upskilling programs that enhance job satisfaction and loyalty (Timsina, 2024).

Furthermore, organizational culture has a substantial influence on retention. A culture that values open communication, collaboration, and respect can increase employees' emotional attachment to the firm, reducing the likelihood of turnover. The literature also supports recognition programs and employee involvement in decision-making as cost-effective means of improving retention (Afolashade et al., 2024).

Employee Well-Being and Organizational Sustainability

Employee well-being, encompassing physical, mental, and emotional health, is increasingly viewed as a strategic HRM component. In the manufacturing sector—characterized by physically demanding work, long hours, and production stressors—well-being initiatives are vital for sustaining workforce morale and reducing burnout (Fitri, 2024).

Zhengzhou's SMEs are progressively adopting well-being programs that include ergonomic workplace design, flexible scheduling, mental health support, and wellness activities. These initiatives not only improve employee satisfaction but also contribute to lower absenteeism and turnover. Literature also emphasizes the role of work-life balance, noting that flexible arrangements and supportive family policies can significantly enhance employee loyalty, especially in SMEs where formal benefits may be limited (Sowunmi, 2024).

Theoretical Foundations of HRM in SMEs

Three key theories underpin much of the existing research on HRM practices in SMEs:

- **Resource-Based View (RBV):** Highlights how internal resources, particularly human capital, can be leveraged for sustainable competitive advantage. In SMEs, skilled and motivated employees are among the most valuable and scarce resources (Aldabbas et al., 2023).
- **Human Capital Theory:** Emphasizes the economic value of investing in employee skills, knowledge, and capabilities. This supports arguments for training and development even under financial constraints (Latham, 2023).
- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Provides a framework for understanding motivation by distinguishing between basic needs (e.g., salary, job security) and higher-order needs (e.g., self-actualization, recognition), suggesting that HRM strategies must address multiple levels of employee expectations to be effective (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023).

Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into human resource management (HRM) practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), several notable gaps persist—particularly in the context of Zhengzhou’s manufacturing sector. First, most studies on HRM effectiveness have predominantly focused on large corporations in developed economies, leaving a relative scarcity of empirical research specific to SMEs operating in emerging markets like China. The distinct challenges faced by Zhengzhou’s manufacturing SMEs—such as limited financial resources, informal HR structures, and intense competition for skilled labor—are often underrepresented in global HRM frameworks (Liao et al., 2024; Myataza et al., 2024).

Second, while individual HRM components such as employee motivation, retention, or well-being have been studied in isolation, few works have holistically examined the interplay among these dimensions and their combined impact on firm performance within SME settings. The dynamic interactions—such as how motivation strategies influence retention, or how well-being initiatives reinforce engagement—remain insufficiently theorized or validated in real-world contexts. This lack of integration limits the ability of SME leaders to adopt coherent and evidence-based HRM strategies (Shen & Zhou, 2024).

Third, the literature has not adequately accounted for the socio-cultural and regional factors that shape HRM implementation in Zhengzhou. Local labor market norms, generational attitudes toward work, and regulatory environments can significantly influence the effectiveness of incentive systems or well-being programs. Yet, many models in use are adopted wholesale from Western contexts, with minimal adaptation to China’s unique industrial, institutional, and cultural characteristics (Waseel et al., 2024; Xu, 2024).

Fourth, there is a methodological gap in terms of longitudinal and qualitative research. Much of the existing empirical work relies on cross-sectional surveys or secondary data, which may fail to capture the evolving nature of HRM practices in fast-changing environments like Zhengzhou’s manufacturing sector. Longitudinal case studies and in-depth interviews with SME leaders and employees could offer richer insights into how HRM strategies evolve over time and under various economic pressures (Griffen, 2024).

Future research should therefore prioritize context-specific studies that integrate multiple HRM dimensions and assess their collective impact on employee and organizational outcomes. It is especially important to examine how SMEs in Zhengzhou customize HRM practices in response to constraints and local conditions, and what innovative solutions they employ. Furthermore, researchers should explore how digital tools, such as HR analytics or e-learning platforms, are being adopted by resource-constrained firms to enhance workforce management.

By addressing these gaps, future studies can contribute to the development of more nuanced and practical HRM models that align with the realities of manufacturing SMEs in China’s rapidly transforming industrial landscapes.

Conclusion

This literature review examined how human resource management (HRM) practices—particularly performance-based incentives, training and development, and well-being initiatives—affect employee motivation, retention, and overall well-being within Zhengzhou’s manufacturing SMEs. The findings suggest that even under resource constraints, tailored HRM strategies can significantly enhance workforce stability, productivity, and organizational performance. Moreover, factors such as leadership style and organizational culture further reinforce the effectiveness of these practices by fostering trust, engagement, and alignment with company goals.

Despite the progress in existing research, substantial gaps remain, particularly in understanding the combined effects of HRM practices in the localized context of Zhengzhou. Future studies should explore these interrelationships more holistically and adapt theoretical frameworks to reflect regional socio-economic realities. By addressing these gaps, researchers and practitioners can better support SMEs in developing integrated, sustainable, and people-centered HRM systems that contribute to long-term competitiveness in China’s manufacturing sector.

Acknowledgment

All contributions of the third parties can be acknowledged in this section.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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當前社會問題研究期刊

月刊

2024 年創刊

第 2 卷第 6 期 (總 7 期)

2025 年 6 月

JOURNAL OF CURRENT SOCIAL ISSUES STUDIES

Monthly

Started in 2024

Vol. 2, No. 6 (Sum No. 7)

June, 2025

Submission <https://atripress.org/index.php/JCSIS>

Email jcsis@atripress.org

Website <https://atripress.org>

Asia Technology Research Institute

June, 2025

