

THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT IN PRIVATE COLLEGES IN CHINA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between teacher-student interaction, peer relationships, and classroom engagement in private undergraduate university classrooms. The study uses correlational and descriptive methods for data collection. The object of the study is all undergraduate students majoring in English at a private undergraduate university in Shandong, and 301 students are selected as a sample through random sampling. The results show that there is a significant positive correlation between classroom engagement, teacher-student interaction, and peer relationships. Teacher-student interaction and peer relationships have a direct and significant effect on classroom engagement. In addition, peer relationships indirectly and significantly affect classroom engagement by influencing teacher-student interaction in the classroom. Teacher-student interaction also had an indirect and significant effect on classroom engagement by moderating peer relationships. The results of this study suggest that enhancing teacher-student interaction and peer relationships in the classroom is essential for increasing classroom engagement.

Keywords: Teacher-Student Interaction, Peer Relationships, Classroom Engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with developing the reform and opening up for more than 40 years, private higher education in China has become an important place to grow and develop higher education and a major force in promoting higher education reform. After the 20th Party Congress, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council 2023 issued the Outline of Strategic Planning for Expanding Domestic Demand (2022-2035), which proposed encouraging social forces to provide diversified educational services, and supporting and regulating the development of private education, pointing out for private higher education to provide diversified educational services, the private higher education in the direction of high-quality development (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023, No. 1).

Developing and improving private higher education is reflected in several ways, for example, the scale of operation, faculty, student participation, academic level, and employment rate. Among them, student engagement is an effective indicator reflecting higher education quality. Weng's (2020) study showed that students who actively participate in classroom teaching are more motivated to learn and have more obvious improvement in critical thinking ability and communication skills. Many scholars regard undergraduate classroom engagement as an important perspective to decipher the law of teacher-student interaction and reflect the quality of classroom teaching.

In addition, students participating in teaching is seen as an important factor influencing educational outcomes in higher education, helping promote the high quality of university education, through a better understanding of the quality of student learning and an understanding of the processes and mechanisms of effective learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student classroom engagement has gradually become a new standard and an important basis for measuring the quality of higher education.

However, private universities still have some differences in resource allocation, faculty strength, and academic research compared to public colleges and universities (Shu & Zhang, 2023). These differences may have an important impact on students' learning experience and classroom engagement. For example, the faculty of private universities may also differ from public universities in terms of their academic background and teaching experience (Kang, Leilei et al., 2018), which may affect the quality of education classroom engagement, and learning outcomes.

Yang's (2024) study showed that teacher-student interaction and peer relationships play a significant role in enhancing student classroom engagement, but the study of the relationship between the three in private undergraduate colleges and universities has not been demonstrated, and related studies are less involved. To fill this research gap, this study aims to explore how the effects of teacher-student interaction and peer relationships on classroom engagement in private undergraduate colleges and universities. The main questions of the study include: 1. How do teacher-student interaction and peer relationships affect classroom engagement? 2. Is there a regression effect in the relationship between teacher-student interaction and peer relationships on students' classroom engagement?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of classroom engagement can be traced as far back as the research of educational philosopher Ralph Tyler in the 1930s. In his research, student involvement was defined as the amount of time as well as effort that students put into their academics. Since then, different scholars, including Astin's student involvement, Tinto's student integration, and George Coe's student engagement, have proposed different ways of expressing and defining the concept, but while there are subtle differences, there is also a clear overlap of connotations. However, while there are subtle differences, there is also a clear overlap of connotations (Lisa Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

In addition to the diversity of conceptualizations and measurements, researchers have pointed out that student engagement, by its very nature, has a developmental, multilevel, and multidimensional structure (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Weilin Shi, 2011). For example, studies have classified student engagement as social, academic, and intellectual based on the target audience (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009). Some studies have also classified student engagement as behavioral, affective, and cognitive based on the mode of engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

The differentiation and examination of the multidimensional structure of classroom engagement not only help to deepen and improve the theory of classroom engagement but also provide targeted insights into the reform of teaching practice in colleges and universities. However, although there is a huge amount of research on classroom engagement, the relevant research on classroom engagement in private colleges and universities is still insufficient.

Teacher-student interaction is a basic and universal form of participation in the educational process, which is crucial to achieving educational goals and promoting the healthy development of personality. From a sociological point of view, interaction is intricately linked to roles. Ma (1999) delved into teacher-student interaction through role analysis, arguing that interactions embody the dynamics of roles, and each role is defined through these interactions.

Teacher-student interaction within higher education plays an important function in student engagement. Teachers play an important role in facilitating student engagement, and teachers' behaviors and attitudes play an important role in influencing student engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2022; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Of course, some studies have pointed out that there is a prerequisite satisfaction condition for the influential role of teacher-student interactions on student engagement, and that relatively speaking, students who are well-prepared academically and more academically engaged interact more frequently with their teachers (Hu & Kuh, 2002; Reschly & Christenson, 2022). Even in the research on student engagement in domestic universities, the role of teacher-student interactions on student engagement has been corroborated by empirical studies. Zhu Hong (2007) found that student interactions with professional teachers can directly increase student engagement in a variety of ways, including classroom learning, after-school learning, inter professional learning, and extracurricular activities, and consequently indirectly enhance student development.

La Greca (2005) suggested through a questionnaire that the student-student relationship is the relationship that students form in and out of the classroom. The student-student relationship is an organic linkage of mutual influence and interaction between students in and out of the classroom; it can be manifested through three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and affective.

The theory of significant others put forward by American sociologist Mills mainly elaborates on the important influence of others on individuals during the socialization process of individual growth. According to the degree of the individual's need for others can be divided into 4 stages, i.e., parents, teachers, peers, and social groups, and through the four stages, it can be seen that the importance of peer relationships is also highlighted as the individual grows older (Zhong, Xin, Liu, Juhong, & Chen, X., 2014).

La Greca & Harrison (2005) found that harmonious student-student relationships and the resulting sense of belonging to peers could reduce students' feelings of depression while learning. Ho and Wei's (2015) study found that there is a significant positive correlation between peer relationships and individuals' subjective well-being. Gong found through her study (2016) that harmonious peer relationships can enable students to develop a positive psychology. Peer recognition gained during interactions can reduce negative emotions, increase positive emotions, and improve students' social adaptability.

In addition, the effect of peer relationships on student classroom engagement and academic achievement has been confirmed in many studies. For example, Berndt & Keefe (1995); and Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012) examined the quality of friendships and the importance of friends' school-related behaviors (classroom participation and disruptions) in a study of seventh and eighth-grade students. Perceived quality of friendship predicted changes in self-reported behaviors throughout the school year. Students with supportive, close, and confirmed closest friends were more engaged in class throughout the school year. In contrast, students whose closest friendships involved frequent integration and competition or rivalry showed increased disruptive behavior during the school year.

An additional finding is that children who enjoy positive relationships with their peers also tend to be engaged in and even excel at academic tasks more Children's social competence with peers has been related consistently and positively to academic accomplishments throughout the school-age years (Wentzel, 2017).

In summary, many studies have demonstrated the importance of student classroom engagement, teacher-student interaction, and peer relationships; however, relatively few studies have been conducted on the relationship between the three, so this study will explore the relationship between the three with undergraduate students at a private university in Shandong, China.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study used descriptive correlation analyses aimed at describing the relationship between teacher-student interaction, peer relationships, and classroom engagement in classrooms of private undergraduate colleges and universities in Shandong Province, China.

3.2 Sample

As a private college, Qingdao Hengxing University is representative and typical of China's higher education system. Private colleges play an important role in the development of higher education in China, and they are often unique in terms of their educational model, teacher-student interaction mechanisms, and classroom participation. An in-depth study of such colleges can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current status and characteristics of issues such as faculty-student interaction, peer relationships, and classroom engagement in China's private higher education system. A total of 301 students participated in the questionnaire survey using a random sampling method, including 53 male students and 248 female students.

3.3 Instrumentation

3.3.1 Teacher-Student Interaction

Fisher, Fraser, & Cresswell (1995) used the Teacher-Student Relationship Questionnaire to measure teaching and learning interaction. The scale consists of four dimensions and 20 question items, and a 5-point force scale is used. Since its introduction, many academics have utilized the Teacher Interaction Questionnaire (QTI), and it has been validated in

various educational settings in the Netherlands, the United States, and Australia (Fisher, Fraser, & Cresswell, 1995). Its use in various cultural and contextual environments has consistently demonstrated its ability to provide valid, reliable, and insightful data on learning environments in general and teacher interactions in particular.

3.3.2 Peer Relationships

Peer relationships were developed by Fatih Aydogdu (2022), which comprise 21 items across four sub-dimensions, utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale to assess responses. This scale's structure was validated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), showing good statistical value and structural validity. The internal consistency, measured by Cronbach's α , for the overall scale, was found to be 0.93, with sub-dimensions scores of 0.94, 0.90, 0.87, and 0.84, respectively.

3.3.3 Classroom Engagement

Adopted was designed to measure college students' classroom engagement by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler (2005) the questionnaire is made up of 15 items with a 5-Likert scale. It comprises four subfactors: the first factor is skill engagement, which includes Nine items, $\alpha=0.82$. The second factor is affective engagement, which consists of five items, $\alpha=0.82$. The third factor is interactive engagement, which includes six items, $\alpha=0.79$, and the fourth is performance engagement, which consists of three items, $\alpha=0.76$ (Elçi, Ki'tapçı, & Ertürk, 2007).

3.4 Data Analyzing

Data were analyzed using SPSS (2022) and linear correlation techniques. Descriptive indicators such as mean, standard deviation, and correlation coefficient were calculated. Regression analysis was used to test the regression relationship between the variables.

4. RESULTS

The means, standard deviations, and linear correlations of the variables targeted for this study are presented in Table 1. These variables include teacher-student interaction, peer relationships, and student classroom participation. Students' mean classroom engagement score is 3.19 ($M=3.19$), indicating that students' self-assessed classroom engagement is above average ($M=3$). The mean score for teacher-student interaction is 4.26 ($M=4.26$), and the mean score for peer relationships is 4.28 ($M=4.28$), significantly higher than the average for both variables. Analysis of the data revealed a significant beneficial relationship between student-teacher interaction, peer relationships, and student-classroom participation. Specifically, there is a stronger relationship between peer relationships and student classroom participation ($r=0.93$, $p < 0.001$). At the same time, there is a meaningful association between teacher-student interaction and student classroom participation ($r=0.81$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, there is also a clear beneficial relationship between peer relationships and teacher-student interaction ($r=0.88$, $p < 0.001$). The results suggest high-quality teacher-student interaction and strong academic motivation significantly contribute to classroom engagement. In particular, peer relationships

significantly influence classroom engagement more than teacher-student interaction. There is also a clear beneficial relationship between peer relationships and teacher-student interaction, suggesting that they may synergistically enhance students' classroom participation.

Table 1: Mean, Standard Deviation and Correlation Coefficients between Research Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2
Teacher-student interaction	4.26	0.82		
Peer-relationships	4.28	0.79	0.88	
Classroom engagement	3.19	0.58	0.81	0.85

To verify whether there is a regression relationship between the variables in the relationship of teacher-student interaction, and peer relationships on the influence of student classroom participation, we first set up a model as in Figure 1, with teacher-student interaction, peer relationships as the mediator variable and student classroom participation as the dependent variable. It was verified by multiple regression analyses in Tables 2, 3, 4, which showed that the coefficient of the mediating variable peer relationships ($t=9.4$, $p<0.001$) is significant, $\beta=0.6$, and the coefficient of the independent variable teacher-student interaction ($t=4.3$, $p<0.001$) is significant, $\beta=0.27$ (Table 6). The mediating effect values of 0.46 for teacher-student interaction and 0.23 for peer relations indicate that teacher-student interaction and motivation have a synergistic effect in influencing students' classroom participation, as shown in Figure 2.

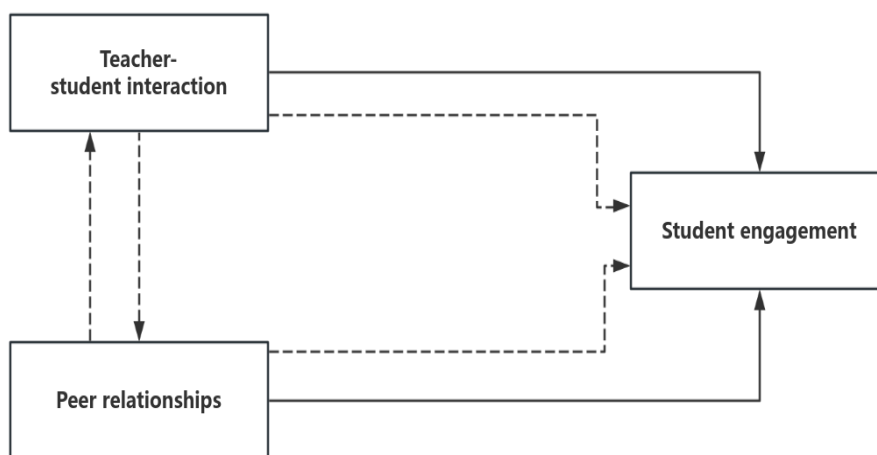


Figure 1: Predefined Model of Variable Relationships

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction on Peer Relationships

Independent variable	R ²	F	B	Beta (β)	t	p
Teacher-student interaction	0.78	1101.7	0.86	0.88	33.1	< 0.001

Note: The dependent variable is peer relationships

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Peer Relationships on Teacher-Student Interaction

Independent variable	R ²	F	B	Beta (β)	t	p
Peer relationships	0.78	1101.7	0.91	0.88	33.1	<0.001

Note: The dependent variable is teacher-student interaction

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction and Peer Relationships on Student Participation in the Classroom

Independent variable	R ²	F	B	Beta (β)	t	p
Teacher-student interactions	0.74	423.7	0.26	0.27	4.3	<0.001
Peer relationships			0.57	0.60	9.4	<0.001

Note: The dependent variable is student classroom participation

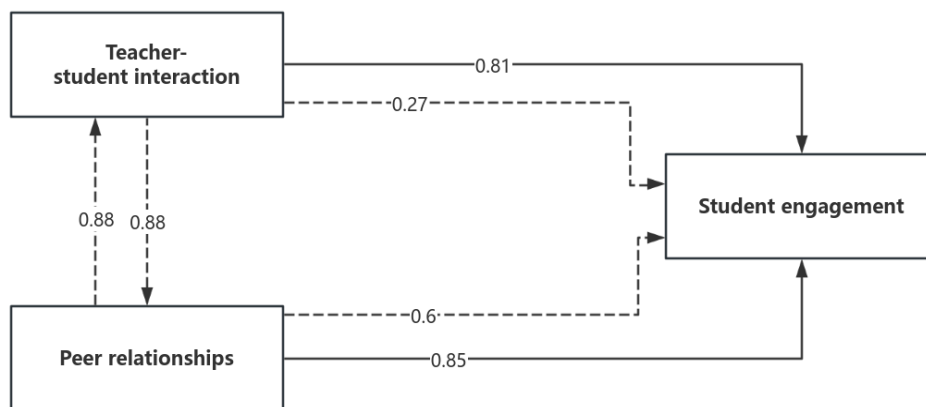


Figure 2: Variable Relationship Modelling

To confirm the effectiveness of the mediating role of teacher-student interaction and peer relationship in students' classroom participation, model 1 (process 4.2) was chosen for re-validation in this study. As the results in Table 5 show, the 95% confidence intervals for the mediating role of teacher-student interaction between peer relations and student classroom participation are [0.03, 0.54]; and the 95% confidence intervals for the mediating role of peer relations between teacher-student interaction and student classroom participation are [0.21, 0.73]. Since these intervals do not contain zeros, they indicate a significant mediating role.

Table 5: PROCESS Test for the Mediating Role of Teacher-Student Interaction and Peer Relationships

variable	pathway	B	SE	LICI	ULCI
Teacher-student interactions	direct effect	0.57	0.06	0.45	0.70
	indirect effect	0.23	0.14	0.03	0.54
Peer relationships	direct effect	0.65	0.04	0.54	0.73
	indirect effect	0.49	0.13	0.21	0.73

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Outline of the Strategic Plan for Expanding Domestic Demand (2022-2035), with its new requirements, has pointed out the direction of high-quality development for private higher education. Student engagement is an effective indicator of the quality of higher education, and student classroom participation is considered an important factor influencing the educational outcomes of higher education institutions, which can help universities to better understand the quality of student learning, student engagement has gradually become a new standard and important basis for measuring the quality of higher education (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2023, No. 1).

Jafari & Asgari's (2020) study pointed out that university teachers, as the core element of the higher education system, not only bear the key responsibility of promoting the development of high-quality connotative education but also are an indispensable part of achieving the mission of the university. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of teachers' classroom performance and their ability to interact with students is particularly necessary. Especially in the micro-environment of the classroom, the dynamic teacher-student communication not only influences students' classroom engagement but also shapes their motivation and learning habits.

Among the many factors affecting students' classroom participation and learning quality, peer relationship is a very important factor that cannot be ignored. As a social person, college students have a stronger desire for interpersonal relationships than any other period. Good interpersonal relationships can provide college students with a good external and psychological living and learning environment, which in turn affects students' engagement. Therefore, it is of great value both in theory and in practice to explore how peer relationships work on students' classroom engagement.

Based on these considerations, this study constructed a hypothetical model about the relationship between teacher-student interaction, peer relationships, and student classroom engagement. Through the construction and analysis of this model, we expect to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which teacher-student interactions affect the student's learning process and to provide empirical evidence and theoretical support for improving the quality of higher education.

The first finding of this study suggests that teacher-student interactions and peer relationships have a direct and substantial impact on students' academic performance. Another result of this study suggests that peer relationships indirectly and significantly affect student participation in class by acting on teacher-student interactions in the classroom. The findings of the last item suggest that teacher-student interactions have an indirect and substantial effect on classroom participation through moderating peer relationships.

In the classroom, teacher-student interactions can make the classroom content livelier and more interesting. Through teacher questions, group discussions, and hands-on activities, teachers can stimulate students' curiosity and interest in learning. Through interactive teaching, it helps to deepen students' understanding of knowledge. Teachers can understand students' confusion in time and provide personalized counseling in the process of interaction.

Students can ask questions, participate in discussions, and personally experience and practice what they have learned in the interactive process, so that they feel the dynamics of the learning process and the sense of participation, and thus become more engaged in it. Peer relationships provide students with emotional support, and when accepted and supported by their peers, they feel more secure and confident in the classroom, as a result, they are willing to join in active participation in discussions and activities better, leading to increased classroom engagement. Peer relationships can also stimulate students' interest and motivation in learning. Because of the role modeling in peer relationships, students will also be motivated to participate more actively in the classroom when they see their peers' positive performance.

In teacher-student interactions, teachers provide students with immediate feedback and support. This timely feedback can help students overcome obstacles in learning and enhance their sense of security and self-confidence (Reschly & Christenson, 2022). When students feel the teacher's attention and support, they will participate more actively in classroom activities and thus achieve excellent learning outcomes.

Such positive teacher-student interactions not only enable them to acquire good interpersonal skills and competencies but excellent learning outcomes are also known as an important factor for them to acquire good peer relationships. Similarly, positive peer relationships make students more confident to participate in classroom interactions, and group discussions by giving them emotional support. This classroom interaction, group discussion, etc. in turn feeds back to the teacher's interaction, creating a virtuous circle that promotes students' classroom participation.

Through our case study of Qingdao Hengxing University of Science and Technology, we uncovered the intricate and important interrelationships between teacher-student interactions, peer relationships and classroom participation. The findings of this study not only enrich our understanding of the dynamics of undergraduate student teaching and learning in higher education but also provide valuable insights and transferable lessons for other private undergraduate institutions and the wider undergraduate education sector. Therefore, this study has important theoretical and practical value and provides a strong reference for relevant educational policymakers and teaching practitioners.

In addition, based on the results of the study, we recommend that educational administrators pay attention to the importance of peer relationships in student management. Good peer relationships can significantly promote students' motivation and engagement in learning; therefore, educational administrators should pay attention to the current situation of college students' friendships, care about their peer relationship problems, and create a good friendship environment for them to promote learning engagement.

This study has some methodological limitations, mainly in the selection of the sample size. To overcome these limitations and enhance the accuracy of the questionnaire, a wider sample should be considered for future research to ensure the generalisability and reliability of the results.

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