

The Impact of Teacher Support on Student Engagement in Ideological-Political Courses: The Mediating Role of Academic Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: In recent years, ideological and political (IP) theory courses have become a central component of moral and civic education in Chinese universities. These courses aim to guide students in developing social responsibility, political identity, and critical thinking, yet many students—especially those majoring in engineering—show low levels of engagement and motivation. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), this study explores how teacher support influences student engagement through the mediating role of academic self-efficacy (ASE). A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 553 undergraduates enrolled in IP courses at three universities in Dezhou, China. Reliable and validated instruments were used to assess three dimensions of teacher support (autonomy, competence, and emotional), academic self-efficacy, and student engagement. Structural equation modeling (SEM) revealed that teacher support positively predicted student engagement, both directly and indirectly through ASE. Competence support exerted the strongest effect, indicating that teachers' constructive feedback and clear instructional structure are central to students' engagement. The findings highlight that supportive teaching environments enhance students' belief in their own academic abilities, which in turn fosters behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation. This study contributes empirical evidence for improving IP teaching by integrating motivational theories and provides practical implications for teacher professional development in higher education.

Keywords: teacher support; academic self-efficacy; student engagement; ideological-political education; higher education

1. Introduction

Ideological and political (IP) education represents a cornerstone of China's higher education system, serving as an essential platform for fostering civic awareness, moral reasoning, and national identity among undergraduates. However, despite its educational importance, IP courses are often perceived by students as abstract and exam-oriented, leading to reduced enthusiasm and limited classroom engagement. Previous studies in educational

psychology have underscored that student engagement—defined as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities—is a key predictor of learning quality, persistence, and success [1]. Enhancing engagement, therefore, requires understanding the contextual and psychological factors that motivate students to participate actively in IP classrooms.

One critical contextual factor is teacher support, which refers to teachers' behaviors that satisfy students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness [2]. Supportive teachers encourage choice, provide structure, and express care, thereby enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and learning persistence. Within Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy support reduces external pressure, competence support strengthens confidence, and emotional support builds a sense of belonging [3]. On the other hand, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) emphasizes academic self-efficacy (ASE)—students' belief in their ability to master learning tasks—as the proximal driver of motivation and engagement [4]. Empirical evidence suggests that teacher support positively affects ASE, which in turn predicts engagement and achievement [5,6].

In the IP course context, this mediating relationship may be particularly salient. Students often face ideological distance or perceive limited relevance between course content and their professional fields (especially in engineering disciplines). Teachers who provide structured, autonomy-supportive, and emotionally caring instruction can bridge this gap by enhancing students' self-efficacy and participation. Hence, this study investigates:

- (1) whether teacher support predicts student engagement in IP courses;
- (2) whether academic self-efficacy mediates this relationship; and
- (3) which type of support—autonomy, competence, or emotional—has the strongest effect.

By addressing these questions, this research aims to integrate motivation theories with the IP education context, offering theoretical and practical insights into

improving classroom participation in Chinese universities.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and Setting

The study adopted a cross-sectional design. Participants were 553 full-time undergraduates (279 male, 274 female) from three public universities in Dezhou, China. All participants were enrolled in compulsory IP theory courses during the spring semester of 2025. The sample included 57% engineering majors and 43% non-engineering majors, with an average age of 19.8 years ($SD = 1.21$). Ethical approval was obtained from university authorities, and all participants provided informed consent.

2.2. Instruments

Teacher Support Scale: Adapted from Skinner et al. and Reeve, consisting of 18 items measuring autonomy support (e.g., “The instructor allows me to express my opinions”), competence support (e.g., “The instructor provides clear guidance and constructive feedback”), and emotional support (e.g., “The instructor cares about my learning”). Cronbach’s α values ranged from .88 to .92.

Academic Self-Efficacy Scale: Adapted from Schunk, containing six items (e.g., “I am confident that I can understand the main ideas in this course”). Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$.

Student Engagement Scale: Based on Fredricks et al, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (12 items). Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$.

2.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Data were collected using online questionnaires distributed through class networks. Missing data (<2%) were imputed using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). Analyses included descriptive statistics, correlation tests, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure construct validity. Then, structural equation modeling (SEM) tested the hypothesized mediation model using AMOS 24.0. Model fit was evaluated through χ^2/df (<3), CFI (>0.90), TLI (>0.90), RMSEA (<0.08), and SRMR (<0.08). Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to test indirect effects.

2.4. Reliability and Validity

CFA results confirmed good reliability (Composite Reliability $\geq .87$) and validity (Average Variance Extracted $\geq .58$). Discriminant validity was established since the square roots of AVEs exceeded inter-construct correlations. Overall, measurement indicators demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties for further SEM analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were computed for all key variables: teacher support, academic self-efficacy, and student engagement. [7] As shown in Table 1, the mean scores for teacher

support ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.71$), academic self-efficacy ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.69$), and student engagement ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.73$) were moderately high, suggesting that most students perceived their teachers as supportive and felt confident in their ability to perform in ideological-political (IP) courses.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Teacher Support	3.64	0.71
Academic Self-Efficacy	3.58	0.69
Student Engagement	3.52	0.73

All correlations were positive and significant. The correlation between teacher support and academic self-efficacy was the strongest ($r = .54$), followed by the correlation between academic self-efficacy and engagement ($r = .59$). These results preliminarily indicate that academic self-efficacy may serve as a mediator between teacher support and student engagement, providing a foundation for subsequent SEM testing.

3.2. Measurement Model

CFA indicated a good fit for the measurement model ($\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .045, SRMR = .042). All standardized factor loadings were above .60 ($p < .001$), supporting convergent validity. The results verified that the three dimensions of teacher support were distinct but interrelated constructs predicting ASE and engagement.

3.3. Structural Model

The hypothesized structural model also fit well ($\chi^2/df = 2.28$, CFI = .95, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .046). Teacher support significantly predicted academic self-efficacy ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) and student engagement ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$). Academic self-efficacy significantly predicted student engagement ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$).

3.4. Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping analysis (5,000 samples) revealed a significant indirect effect of teacher support on engagement through academic self-efficacy ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = .22$, 95% CI [.14, .31]), indicating partial mediation. Among the dimensions, competence support had the largest indirect effect ($\beta = .17$), followed by autonomy support ($\beta = .11$) and emotional support ($\beta = .09$). These findings suggest that students’ belief in their academic capability plays a crucial role in translating perceived teacher support into active engagement.

3.5. Explained Variance

The model explained 38% of the variance in academic self-efficacy and 46% in student engagement, indicating substantial predictive power.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that teacher support not only directly enhances students’ engagement in

ideological-political courses but also indirectly promotes engagement through improved academic self-efficacy. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which posits that autonomy-supportive and competence-affirming teaching fosters intrinsic motivation and self-belief [8]. Competence support showed the strongest effect, suggesting that teachers who provide clear expectations, constructive feedback, and moderate challenge can significantly boost students' learning confidence and sustained participation. Emotional and autonomy support also play crucial roles by fostering positive teacher-student relationships and reducing students' perceived distance from ideological-political content, thereby integrating value recognition with behavioral engagement.

4.1. Interpretation of Findings and Theoretical Validation

The present study examined how teacher support affects student engagement in ideological-political (IP) courses and confirmed the mediating role of academic self-efficacy [9]. The results demonstrated that teacher support significantly predicted engagement both directly and indirectly through academic self-efficacy, which aligns with the central tenets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SDT posits that teachers who provide autonomy, structure, and emotional care satisfy students' basic psychological needs, thereby enhancing internal motivation. SCT emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy as a belief system that influences behavior and persistence [4]. Consistent with these frameworks, the current findings reveal that supportive teacher behaviors foster a positive classroom climate that cultivates students' confidence, which subsequently promotes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Notably, competence support exerted the strongest effect, suggesting that students are more likely to engage actively when teachers provide clear expectations, constructive feedback, and scaffolding that promote a sense of mastery.

4.2. Theoretical Contributions and Cultural Insights

This research makes a theoretical contribution by integrating Western motivational frameworks into a uniquely Chinese educational context. Ideological-political education differs from typical academic subjects because its goals emphasize values, social responsibility, and civic reasoning rather than technical skill acquisition. In such value-oriented settings, engagement depends not only on students' academic motivation but also on their perceived relevance of course content to personal and societal growth. The findings demonstrate that teacher support is a universal construct that retains predictive validity even in moral and ideological domains. This provides empirical evidence that supportive teaching transcends cultural and disciplinary boundaries, while also emphasizing that the forms of support most effective in Chinese IP classrooms—especially competence and autonomy support—are consistent with the Confucian tradition of “teaching with care and guidance.” Furthermore, the results support the argument that self-efficacy serves as a psychological bridge between external instructional

behaviors and internal motivation, showing that cognitive confidence is a crucial element in transforming moral instruction into meaningful engagement.

4.3. Practical Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

Practically, these findings underscore the need for IP teachers to adopt supportive pedagogical strategies that blend structure with autonomy. Teachers should move beyond lecture-based delivery and employ interactive methods such as group discussions, problem-based learning, and reflective projects to build competence and foster engagement. Institutions should implement faculty development programs focused on feedback literacy, motivational communication, and student-centered design. Furthermore, enhancing emotional support through empathy and respectful dialogue can reduce students' resistance and improve the perceived relevance of IP education, especially among engineering students who often see ideological courses as peripheral. Despite its strengths, this study has limitations. Its cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and self-report data may introduce social desirability bias. Future research could employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, incorporate observational data, and include additional mediators such as learning emotions or achievement goal orientation [10]. Comparative studies across different regions or disciplines in China could further clarify how contextual factors moderate the teacher-support–engagement relationship.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study explored the mechanism through which teacher support influences student engagement in ideological-political (IP) courses, emphasizing the mediating role of academic self-efficacy. Based on data from three universities in Dezhou, China, the structural equation modeling (SEM) results provided empirical evidence that teacher support has both direct and indirect effects on engagement. Specifically, students who perceived higher levels of teacher support reported stronger beliefs in their academic capability, which in turn enhanced their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in IP courses. Among the three dimensions of teacher support, competence support demonstrated the strongest total and indirect effects, followed by autonomy and emotional support. These findings confirm that teachers' structured guidance, meaningful feedback, and encouragement are essential for fostering both confidence and active participation among university students.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the integration of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) within the unique context of ideological-political education. The study highlights

that teacher support serves as a contextual antecedent of academic self-efficacy, bridging environmental and psychological factors to explain engagement outcomes. This multidimensional framework advances the understanding of how teacher-student interactions can activate internal motivational processes in courses that emphasize values and civic identity rather than technical skills alone. Moreover, the results validate that academic self-efficacy functions as a universal motivational mechanism that can operate effectively even in value-oriented courses such as IP education. By demonstrating that supportive teaching enhances self-belief and engagement, this research enriches cross-cultural applications of Western motivational theories in Chinese higher education.

5.3. Practical Implications and Future Directions

From a practical perspective, the results underscore the importance of cultivating supportive teaching practices in IP classrooms. Teachers should prioritize competence support through transparent learning goals, constructive formative feedback, and appropriate challenge levels that build mastery experiences. Equally important is fostering autonomy support by allowing students to express opinions, choose discussion topics, and connect course concepts with their disciplinary knowledge, thereby promoting internalized motivation. Emotional support—manifested in empathy, respect, and encouragement—also plays a crucial role in sustaining engagement, especially for students who perceive ideological content as distant or abstract. At the institutional level, universities in Dezhou and beyond should strengthen faculty development programs focusing on motivational teaching, feedback literacy, and reflective pedagogy. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to examine causal relationships and include additional mediators such as academic emotions or achievement goals. In sum, enhancing teacher support and

students' sense of efficacy offers a powerful strategy to transform ideological-political education into an engaging, student-centered learning experience.

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