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Who Compensates? Examining the Social Support Hierarchy in English Learning for Yi Minority Students in China

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Abstract

In China's multi-ethnic regions, English education remains a significant challenge. For ethnic minority students like the Yi, social support networks are critical for academic achievement and buffering learning stress. While qualitative studies suggest a "compensatory support hierarchy" exists due to limited family-based cultural and linguistic capital, this model has not been quantitatively examined. This study aims to fill this empirical gap. Adopting a quantitative, single-case study design, this study surveyed junior high school students (N = 40) in Mabian Yi Autonomous County. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-samples t-tests (with Cohen's d), and multiple linear regression. The findings reveal: (1) A significant support hierarchy exists, with Teacher Support (M = 4.38) rated significantly higher than Peer and Parent Support. (2) Multiple regression confirmed that Teacher Support was the only significant unique predictor for both higher English achievement (β = .384) and lower learning stress (β = -.403), while both Peer and Parent Support showed no significant predictive power. (3) Students with higher English achievement (p = .016) and lower stress levels (p = .030) perceived significantly more teacher support, suggesting a "Matthew Effect" driven by accumulative capital dynamics. This study concludes that in a context of limited family cultural and linguistic capital, the teacher acts as the primary institutional conduit for compensatory support serving as a key driver of, and buffer for, students' English learning.

Keywords: social support, English education, Yi minority, cultural capital, teacher support.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of English proficiency in China is intrinsically linked to opportunities for social mobility and global integration (Nguyen, Hajek, 2023). However, this pursuit is academically fraught for students in multilingual and multicultural contexts, particularly those from ethnic

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minority groups (Kim, 2026). These students must navigate a complex trilingual environment, often balancing their ethnic mother tongue (eg., Nuosu Yi), the national language (Mandarin), and a global language (English) simultaneously (Chen, Manosuthikit, 2025; Mouboua et al., 2024).

To understand how students access support in this high-stress context, we ground our investigation in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital. Specifically, we distinguish between three forms: social capital (networks of relationships), cultural capital (family educational background), and linguistic capital (proficiency in dominant languages like Mandarin and English). For students from rural ethnic minority backgrounds, these forms of capital are often limited. Lareau (2000) provided an early account of how family capital deficits shape educational outcomes, and recent studies confirm that low socioeconomic status still restricts rural Chinese students' access to English resources (Wu, Tarc, 2024). In particular, while parents in these contexts may offer emotional support, they often lack the specific cultural and linguistic capital – such as English proficiency or familiarity with academic norms – to provide the informational and instrumental support essential for academic success (Wu, Tarc, 2024; Echeverri-Sucerquia, 2010).

This capital deficit creates a potential support vacuum in the family domain. Yet, social support is a key mediator of academic outcomes, particularly for students navigating high-stress trilingual environments (Azpiazu et al., 2024; Wang, Eccles, 2012). A growing body of research confirms that both parental and school support contribute to academic achievement and learning resilience (Werang et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2025), and familial support remains a crucial focus for minority and first-generation students globally (Cuevas, 2025). Students typically build support networks through parents, teachers, and peers (Malecki, Demaray, 2002), with each source serving distinct functions: parents offer emotional comfort and financial support (Wu, Tarc, 2024); teachers provide direct academic guidance (Sadoughi, Hejazi, 2023); and peers create collaborative spaces for language practice and shared empathy (Lopez, Estremera, 2025; Wang, Jokikokko, 2024). Given the capital constraints faced by parents in rural minority areas, and the fundamentally imbalanced support networks documented in such contexts (Li, Zhou, 2025), we hypothesize that a "compensatory support hierarchy" exists. In this hierarchy, school-based actors – teachers and peers – become the primary sources of academic support, superseding the role of the family in this specific domain.

Despite the plausibility of this hypothesis, two major empirical gaps remain. First, existing studies rarely examine Chinese ethnic minority groups such as the Yi. Yi trilingual learners may face unique structural capital deficits that are distinct from those of mainstream populations. Second, previous research on minority student support has largely relied on qualitative methods (e.g., Yang, Chen, 2026). While these studies suggest the existence of a support hierarchy, they have not quantitatively tested its structure or measured its statistical impact on academic outcomes.

This study aims to fill these gaps by quantitatively examining this hypothesized compensatory hierarchy. Focusing on Yi trilingual learners, we seek to isolate the unique predictive power of each support source (teacher, peer, parent) on two key academic outcomes: English achievement (measured by recent midterm exam scores) and English learning stress (self-reported). By disentangling the distinct roles of support sources and types, this research provides a rigorous empirical model of the social support network in an under-researched trilingual context. The findings are expected to offer education policy makers and practitioners clear, evidence-based targets for designing interventions to mitigate learning stress and improve English achievement for this vulnerable student population.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Support as a Critical Buffer in Multilingual Contexts: Sources and Types

Social support is a well-established factor influencing both academic success and emotional well-being, particularly within the high-stress, multilingual settings that ethnic minority students navigate (Azpiazu et al., 2024; Wang, Eccles, 2012). In these contexts, students often face a compounded cognitive load from managing multiple languages (e.g., L1, L2, and L3) alongside affective challenges, such as Foreign Language Learning Anxiety (FLLA) (Zhang, 2019; Chen, Chang, 2004; Sparks, Ganschow, 1993). A robust body of research demonstrates that perceived social support functions as a critical buffer against these unique, compounded stressors (Holt, Espelage, 2007). A supportive environment can directly mitigate learning anxiety (Wang et al., 2021; Song et al., 2022), and recent research confirms this strong link between social support, academic stress, and learning engagement among adolescents (Suwajo et al., 2024). Consequently,

strong support networks are consistently linked to higher school engagement (Wang, Eccles, 2012), better overall school adjustment (Azpiazu et al., 2024), and improved academic achievement (Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, 1997).

To operationalize the concept of social support, it is crucial to differentiate it along two primary dimensions: its source (the provider) and its type (the action) (Cleary, 2017; Tardy, 1985). The interplay between these dimensions determines the network's effectiveness. For adolescents, the social support network is primarily composed of three distinct sources: parents, teachers, and peers. These three groups represent the key actors within the student's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), and validated instruments like the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS) are specifically designed to measure the perceived support from these three discrete sources (Malecki, Demaray, 2002).

These sources provide support across three widely recognized types. According to House (1981) and Tardy (1985), these support types are distinct, each serving a specific function. Emotional support involves expressions of empathy, care, trust, and nurturance, which build an individual's self-worth and resilience. In contrast, informational support operates on a cognitive level, providing the advice, guidance, constructive feedback, and knowledge that are useful for problem-solving. Finally, instrumental support refers to the provision of tangible aid, material resources, or direct services, such as financial assistance or time, to resolve a problem. Crucially, in any given socio-cultural context, these sources and types are not interchangeable. A key hypothesis of this study is that in the specific context of rural, trilingual China, a student's access to a specific type of support (e.g., informational) is structurally dependent on its source (e.g., teacher vs. parent). Understanding this structural composition is the first step toward modeling its impact.

2.2. The Hypothesized Support Hierarchy in a Trilingual, Minority Yi Context

The specific socio-cultural context of Yi students, a trilingual (Yi, Mandarin, English), rural, and often low-SES environment, provides a critical test case for social support theories. This context theoretically realigns the roles of each support source, creating a hypothesized hierarchy that this study aims to quantify.

In developmental psychology, parents are considered the foundational source of support, providing the primary emotional base that fosters resilience and academic motivation (Grolnick, Kurowski, 1999). However, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital provides a critical lens for understanding the limits of this support. While parents may provide high levels of emotional support, their ability to provide academic informational support (e.g., homework help, grammar advice) or instrumental support (e.g., affording extracurricular courses) is directly constrained by their own "cultural capital" (e.g., educational attainment, English proficiency) and "economic capital" (Echeverri-Sucerquia, 2010; Lareau, 2000). Recent research in China confirms this, finding that family-based cultural capital is a significant mediator of English proficiency, particularly for rural and lower-class students (Wu, Tarc, 2024). This leads to the hypothesis that parental support, while emotionally present, will have a non-significant predictive relationship with English-specific academic achievement.

A positive teacher-student relationship is a powerful predictor of L2 motivation and engagement (Henry, Thorsen, 2018; Karam, 2006), and a recent meta-analysis confirms that teacher support is a robust predictor of L2 learning motivation across studies (Sadoughi, Hejazi, 2023). In a context where parental academic support is structurally constrained, the teacher's role becomes amplified. The teacher transitions from being just an instructor to being the primary source of expert informational support (e.g., timely feedback, clear explanations) and a potential "cultural broker" who bridges the gap between the students' home life and the academic field (Chen, 2025; Bassey, 1996). Recent research from China powerfully demonstrates that a strong teacher-student relationship can actually moderate the negative link between low socioeconomic status and foreign language achievement (Ma et al., 2025). This suggests that for Yi students, the teacher is not just a source of support, but potentially the most critical source. This leads to the hypothesis that teacher support will be the strongest unique predictor of both English achievement and reduced learning stress.

The third source, the peer group, is essential for adolescent social and emotional well-being (Wentzel, 1998). In L2 learning, peer interaction provides vital, low-stakes opportunities for practice, socialization, and the collaborative negotiation of meaning (Wang, Jokikokko, 2024; Paradowski et al., 2021; Philp et al., 2013). Recent studies also highlight the role of peer social support in the context of collaborative L2 writing and feedback (Lopez, Estremera, 2025; Xu, Rahim, 2025). Positive peer interactions are directly linked to higher academic engagement and

motivation in L2 learning (Shao et al., 2024). Peers are an especially potent source of emotional support, as they share the same struggles and can provide unique encouragement. However, their capacity for informational support may be inconsistent; if the entire peer group lacks high proficiency, they may be unable to provide accurate academic guidance (Long, Porter, 1985). This leads to the hypothesis that peer support will be a strong predictor (especially for mitigating stress) but will be secondary to teacher support in its predictive power for academic achievement.

2.3. The Present Study

This literature review, framed by social support and capital theories, establishes a clear theoretical model of a compensatory support hierarchy. It posits that in the specific context of Yi trilingual learners – where parents often lack the cultural and linguistic capital to provide informational and instrumental support for English learning – the structural constraints on parental academic support elevate the role of teachers and peers as the primary providers of informational and instrumental support. This hierarchy, however, has not been quantitatively modeled or empirically validated.

Significant gaps remain in the literature. First, existing studies rarely examine Chinese ethnic minority groups such as the Yi, who may face unique structural capital deficits distinct from mainstream populations. Second, previous research on minority student support has largely relied on qualitative methods (e.g., Yang, Chen, 2026). While these studies suggest the existence of a support hierarchy, they have not quantitatively tested its structure or measured its statistical impact on academic outcomes. Consequently, we lack a clear, quantitative map of this support network, nor do we know the relative statistical weight or unique predictive power of each support source on key academic outcomes.

This study is designed to fill these gaps by empirically testing the compensatory support hierarchy. Based on the theoretical framework and literature review presented above, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the hierarchical structure of the social support network for Yi students learning English?

RQ1a: Are there significant differences in the support received from teachers, peers, and parents, and what is the magnitude of these differences?

RQ1b: Are there significant differences in the types of support received (emotional, informational, instrumental), and what is the magnitude of these differences?

RQ2: Controlling for other support sources, what is the unique predictive power of teacher, peer, and parental support on students' English achievement (measured by recent midterm exam scores) and learning stress (self-reported)?

RQ3: Do students with different levels of English achievement and learning stress perceive significantly different levels of support from their teachers?

Correspondingly, we propose three hypotheses:

H1 (Hierarchy): Students will perceive a clear hierarchy of support sources, with Teacher Support being rated significantly higher than Peer Support, and Peer Support being rated significantly higher than Parental Support.

H2 (Teacher's Predictive Power): Teacher Support will be more significant to predict academic outcomes. Specifically, Teacher Support will positively predict English scores and negatively predict Learning stress, even when controlling for parent and peer support.

H3 (Parent's Predictive Power): Parental Support will have less significant unique predictive power over English scores or Learning stress in the multiple regression models.

By examining these hypotheses, this study aims to provide an empirical model of the social support network for Yi trilingual learners. The significance of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it provides a rigorous test of social support and capital theories in an under-researched trilingual context by disentangling the distinct roles of support sources and types. Practically, by identifying who matters most and what type of support is most critical, this study is expected to offer education policymakers and practitioners clear, evidence-based targets for designing interventions to mitigate learning stress and improve English achievement for this vulnerable student population.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Participants

This study employs a quantitative, single-case study design within a cross-sectional framework. The "case" is a single, intact classroom of Yi ethnic minority students, representing a

bounded system. This design was chosen over a large-scale survey because the primary goal is not to achieve broad statistical generalizability, but rather to provide a deep, holistic quantitative snapshot of the social support mechanisms and their relationship with academic outcomes within one specific, representative educational context (Yin, 2018). This approach allows for the testing of theoretical propositions in a real-world, under-researched setting.

The research was conducted at a junior secondary school in Mabian Yi Autonomous County, Sichuan Province, a representative Yi ethnic minority region in Southwest China. The sample (N = 40) represents one intact Grade 9 class. All students in the class voluntarily agreed to participate in the survey, resulting in a 100 % response rate for this specific case. This N = 40 sample thus constitutes a complete census of the chosen case, providing a robust dataset for analyzing the internal dynamics and shared perceptions of this specific social group.

3.2. Instruments and Measures

Data for perceived social support were collected using a quantitative survey instrument adapted from the well-validated Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (CASSS; Malecki, Demaray, 2002). Aligned with the theoretical framework (Sources × Types), the instrument was divided into three sections measuring perceived support from Parents, English Teachers, and Peers. The items were adapted from the original CASSS and contextualized to the English learning environment. Following the (Types) framework, items measured Informational Support (e.g., "My English teacher often teaches us methods for memorizing words"), Emotional Support (e.g., "When I perform poorly, my English teacher will respect my feelings"), and Instrumental Support (e.g., "When I miss class, my classmates will share English notes with me"). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Completely Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree").

A validity and reliability analysis were conducted on the adapted scales for the current sample (N = 40). All three subscales consisted of 12 items each. The internal consistency for each subscale was high: Parental Support (12 items, Cronbach's α = .820), Teacher Support (12 items, Cronbach's α = .894), and Peer Support (12 items, Cronbach's α = .867). Furthermore, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy indicated good construct validity for all scales (Parental: .733; Teacher: .742; Peer: .846).

Students' perceived learning stress was measured using a 13-item researcher-developed scale. The development of this instrument was theoretically informed by the foundational constructs of the original 33-item Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS; Horwitz et al., 1986). Specifically, our items were designed to capture the core anxiety factors (e.g., communication apprehension, test anxiety) identified by Horwitz et al. (1986), while also adapting them to the specific socio-cultural and academic pressures of the Yi trilingual context. Our approach aligns with the development of more concise anxiety measures in the field, such as the 8-item Short-Form FLCAS (S-FLCAS), which was first extracted by MacIntyre (1992) and later validated and popularized by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) and Botes et al. (2022). The final 13-item scale covers multiple facets of stress, including affective responses (e.g., "I feel anxious about my English grades") and cognitive appraisals (e.g., "English is my weak subject"). All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Completely Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"). The scale demonstrated a good reliability and validity in the current study (Cronbach's α = .856, KMO = .828).

English Achievement was measured using students' official school records. To ensure a stable and reliable measure of academic performance, the variable was calculated by taking the average of the students' scores from the three most recent unified school examinations. The total possible score for each examination was 100 points.

For the purposes of analysis, several composite variables were created. To address RQ1a (comparison by sources), three composite variables were created by calculating the mean score of all items pertaining to each source: Parent Support, Peer Support, and Teacher Support. To address RQ1b (comparison by types), three composite variables were created by calculating the mean score of all items pertaining to each type (across all three sources): Emotional Support, Informational Support, and Instrumental Support. For RQ2 (predictive power), the three source variables (Parent Support, Peer Support, Teacher Support) were used as predictors, with two outcome variables: English Achievement (midterm exam scores, out of 100) and Learning Stress (composite mean score from the 13-item scale, on a 5-point scale).

3.3. Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

All valid data from the 40 participants were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. The analysis strategy was structured to directly answer the three research questions:

To answer RQ1 (Hierarchy): A series of Paired-Samples T-Tests was conducted to determine if the mean differences between the three support sources and three support types were statistically significant. Cohen's d is reported as the measure of effect size.

To answer RQ2 (Predictive Power): Two standard multiple linear regression models were conducted. This method was chosen to assess the unique predictive power of each support source while controlling for the others. Model 1 (Predicting Achievement): English Scores was entered as the dependent variable, with the three source variables entered simultaneously as predictors. Model 2 (Predicting Stress): Learning Stress was entered as the dependent variable, with the same three source variables entered as predictors. Given the sample size (N = 40), the statistical power for these regression models is limited. Therefore, these models are considered exploratory. The analysis will focus cautiously on the magnitude and direction of the standardized beta coefficients (β) and the overall model fit (R^2), alongside statistical significance, to identify theoretically meaningful patterns.

To answer RQ3 (Group Differences): The sample was split by the median for English Scores (Median = 35.5) and Learning Stress (Median = 3.58). Independent-Samples T-Tests were performed to compare the mean Teacher Support scores between these groups. Cohen's d is reported. The significance level was set at .05 for all inferential tests.

This study was conducted in accordance with all ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Approval was obtained from the school administration. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from the guardians of all students, and assent was obtained from the students themselves. Participants were explicitly informed that their participation was completely voluntary, anonymous, and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. All students in the class chose to participate. To ensure anonymity, the survey data was numericized, and no personally identifiable information (such as names) was collected. All data was stored securely on an encrypted hard drive accessible only to the research team.

4. Results

This section presents the quantitative findings, structured to answer the three research questions in order. First, Table 1 provides the comprehensive descriptive statistics for all core variables.

A preliminary review of the Outcomes variables in Table 1 indicates that the sample (N = 40) represents a population facing significant academic challenges. The mean English Score was 35.53 (out of 100, SD = 8.87), and the mean Learning Stress was 3.51 (SD = 0.91), a level notably above the scale's neutral midpoint.

For the primary variables of interest, the descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal a clear hierarchy, which is visually represented in the radar charts in Figure 1. For Support Sources, Figure 1 clearly illustrates that Teacher Support (M = 4.38, SD = 0.81) was perceived as the strongest source. This was followed by Peer Support (M = 3.28, SD = 0.94), with Parent Support (M = 2.52, SD = 0.87) receiving the lowest mean rating. For Support Types, the hierarchy was less pronounced but still distinct. Emotional Support (M = 3.56, SD = 0.69) was the most perceived type, followed by Informational Support (M = 3.39, SD = 0.92) and Instrumental Support (M = 3.22, SD = 0.88).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables (N = 40)

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)	Min	Max
Support Sources				
Teacher Support	4.38	0.81	2.50	5.25
Peer Support	3.28	0.94	1.33	5.25
Parent Support	2.52	0.87	1.17	4.17
Support Types				
Emotional Support	3.56	0.69	2.08	4.83
Informational Support	3.39	0.92	1.50	5.08
Instrumental Support	3.22	0.88	1.00	4.92
Outcomes				
English Scores	35.53	8.87	18.00	55.00
Learning Stress	3.51	0.91	1.50	5.33

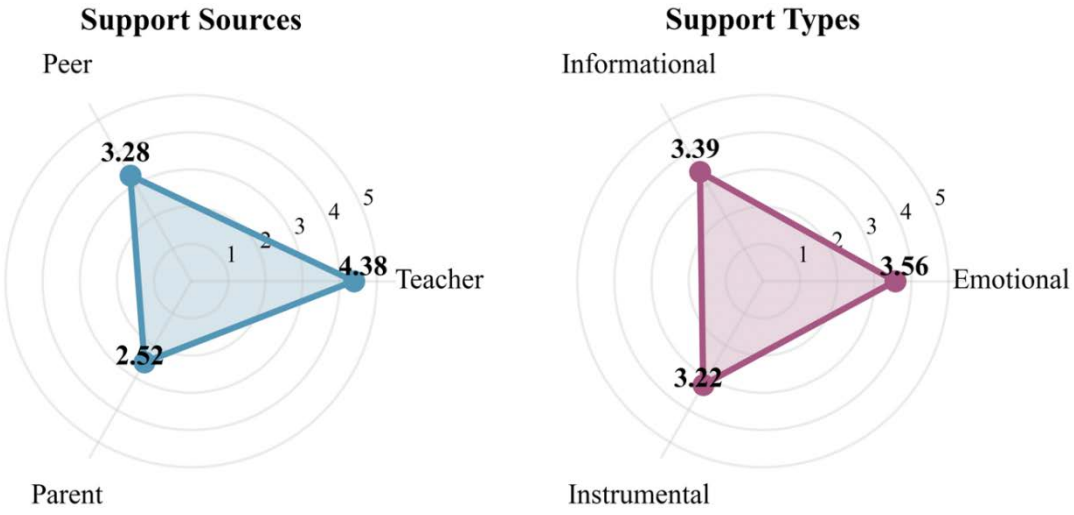

Fig. 1. Social Support Profiles

4.1. The Hierarchy of the Social Support Network

To answer the first research question (RQ1), which addressed the hierarchical structure of the support network, a series of paired-samples t-tests was conducted.

First, to address RQ1a (Support Sources), the mean scores of the three support sources were compared. The results, presented in Table 2, reveal a clear, statistically significant, and robust hierarchy. Perceived Teacher Support (M = 4.38) was rated significantly higher than both Peer Support (M = 3.28; t (39) = 5.67, p < .001) and Parent Support (M = 2.52; t (39) = 9.47, p < .001). Furthermore, Peer Support was also rated significantly higher than Parent Support (t (39) = 3.96, p < .001). The effect sizes (Cohen's d) for these differences were all substantial, ranging from medium (d = 0.63) to very large (d = 1.49), confirming a clear hierarchy: Teacher Support > Peer Support > Parent Support.

Table 2. Paired-Samples T-Test Results for Support Sources (N = 40)

Comparison Pair	Mean Diff.	t-value (df = 39)	p-value (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Teacher vs. Parent	1.86	9.47	< .001***	1.49 (Very Large)
Teacher vs. Peer	1.10	5.67	< .001***	0.89 (Large)
Peer vs. Parent	0.76	3.96	< .001***	0.63 (Medium)

Notes: ***p < .001

Second, to address RQ1b (Support Types), a comparison of the three support types revealed a different and more nuanced pattern, as shown in Table 3. Emotional Support (M = 3.56) was perceived significantly more than Instrumental Support (M = 3.22; t (39) =2.45, p = .019), with a small-to-medium effect size (d = 0.43). However, no other differences were statistically significant. The differences between Emotional and Informational support (p = .301) and between Informational and Instrumental support (p = .246) were not significant. This indicates that students in this sample perceived Emotional and Informational support at similarly high levels.

Table 3. Paired-Samples T-Test Results for Support Types (N= 40)

Comparison Pair	Mean Diff.	t-value (df = 39)	p-value (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Emotional vs. Instrumental	0.34	2.45	.019*	0.43 (Small-Medium)

Comparison Pair	Mean Diff.	t-value (df = 39)	p-value (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Emotional vs. Informational	0.17	1.05	.301	0.21 (Small)
Informational vs. Instrumental	0.17	1.18	.246	0.19 (Small)

Notes: * p < .05.

4.2. Unique Predictive Power on Student Outcomes

To address RQ2 – which investigated the unique predictive power of each support source on achievement and stress – a two-step analysis was conducted.

As a preliminary step, a Pearson Correlation analysis was run as a preliminary step. The results, presented in Table 4, provided initial evidence of the relationships. Teacher Support was the only source significantly correlated with both outcomes, showing a moderate positive correlation with English Scores (r (38) = .390, p < .05) and a moderate negative correlation with Learning Stress (r (38) = -.410, p < .01). Importantly, the correlations between the three predictor variables (Teacher, Peer, and Parent support) were all low (r < .30), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern for the subsequent regression analysis (see also Figure 2).

Table 4. Pearson Correlation Matrix with 95 % Confidence Intervals (N = 40)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Teacher Support	–				
2. Peer Support	.280 [-.06, .57]	–			
3. Parent Support	.230 [-.11, .53]	.250 [-.09, .54]	–		
4. English Scores	.390* [.09, .62]	.140 [-.18, .44]	-.040 [-.35, .28]	–	
5. Learning Stress	-.410** [-.64, -.11]	-.190 [-.48, .12]	-.010 [-.32, .30]	-.210 [-.50, .10]	–

Notes: 95 % Confidence Intervals shown in brackets below each correlation coefficient.
*p < .05, *p < .01.

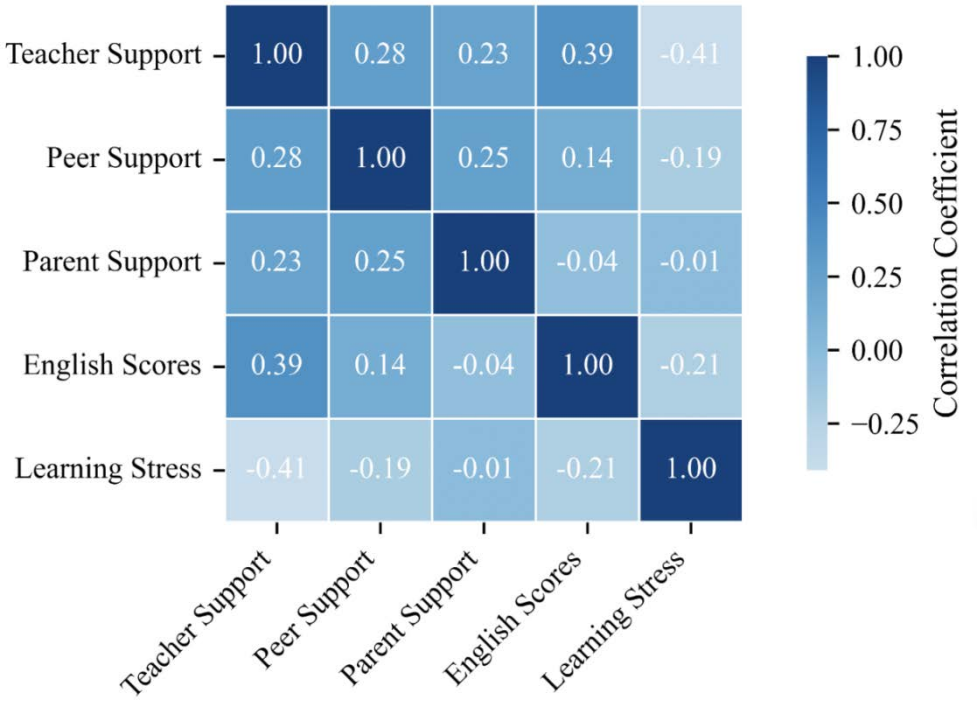

Fig. 2. Correlation Matrix of Study Variables.

Following this preliminary analysis, two standard multiple regression models were conducted to assess the unique predictive power of each support source while controlling for the others. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Results Predicting Student Outcomes (N = 40)

Predictor	**Model 1: English Scores**			**Model 2: Learning Stress**		
	Std. Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Std. Beta (β)	t-value	p-value
Teacher Support	**.384**	**2.53**	**.016***	**-.403**	**-2.67**	**.011***
Peer Support	.028	0.18	.855	-.104	-0.68	.499
Parent Support	-.135	-0.89	.381	.059	0.39	.700
Model Fit	R^2 = .18 F (3, 36) = 2.65 p = .063			R^2 = .19 F (3, 36) = 2.76 p = .056		

Notes: Significant predictors (*p < .05) are shown in bold.

For Model 1 (Predicting English Scores): While the overall model did not reach statistical significance (F (3, 36) = 2.65, p = .063, R^2 = .18), the individual predictor analysis strongly supported this study's hypothesis. As predicted, Teacher Support was the only significant positive predictor (β = .384, t = 2.53, p = .016). Peer Support (β = .028) and Parent Support (β = -.135) were not significant predictors.

For Model 2 (Predicting Learning Stress): Similarly, the overall model for Learning Stress approached but did not reach statistical significance (F (3, 36) = 2.76, p = .056, R^2 = .19). However, as hypothesized, Teacher Support again emerged as the only significant unique predictor (β = -.403, t = -2.67, p = .011). Peer Support (β = -.104) and Parent Support (β = .059) were not significant.

These key findings are visualized in Figure 3, which clearly illustrates that Teacher Support was the only predictor to have a statistically significant effect on both outcomes.

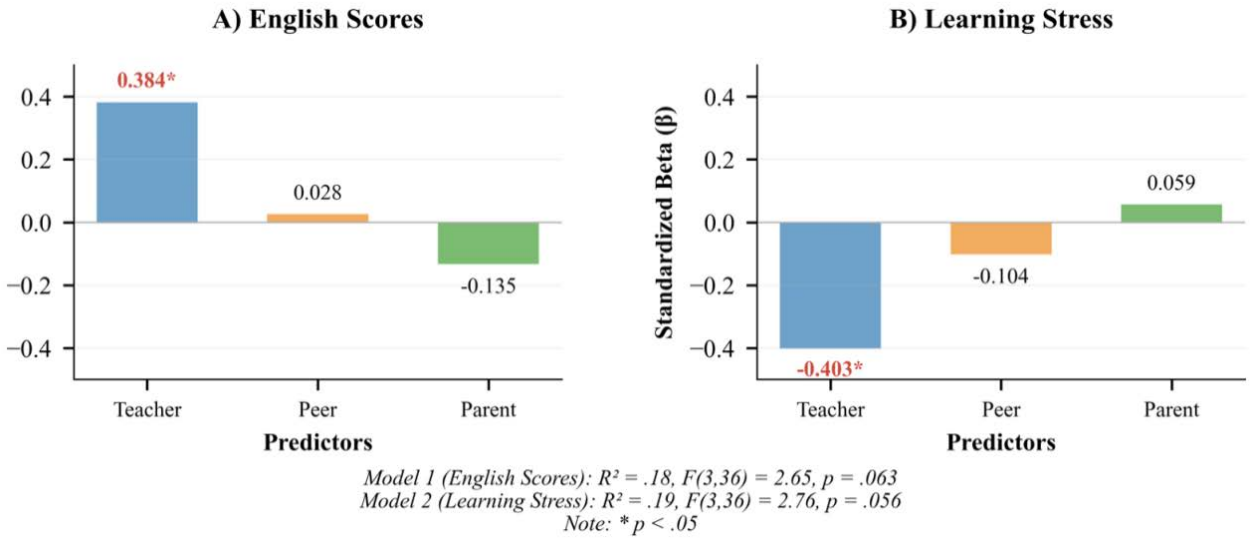

Fig. 3. Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Students Outcomes

4.3. Group Differences in Teacher Support

The third research question (RQ3) explored whether students with different outcome levels perceived different levels of teacher support. To investigate this, the sample was split by the median for both English Scores and Learning Stress, and independent-samples t-tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 6 and visualized in Figure 4.

Table 6. Independent-Samples T-Test Results for Teacher Support by Group

Group Comparison	N	Mean	t-value (df = 38)	p-value (2-tailed)	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
By English Scores					
High-Score Group	20	4.72	2.53	.016	0.82 (Large)
Low-Score Group	20	4.04			
By Learning Stress					
High-Stress Group	20	4.08	-2.25	.030	-0.73 (Medium)
Low-Stress Group	20	4.68			

Notes: * p < .05.

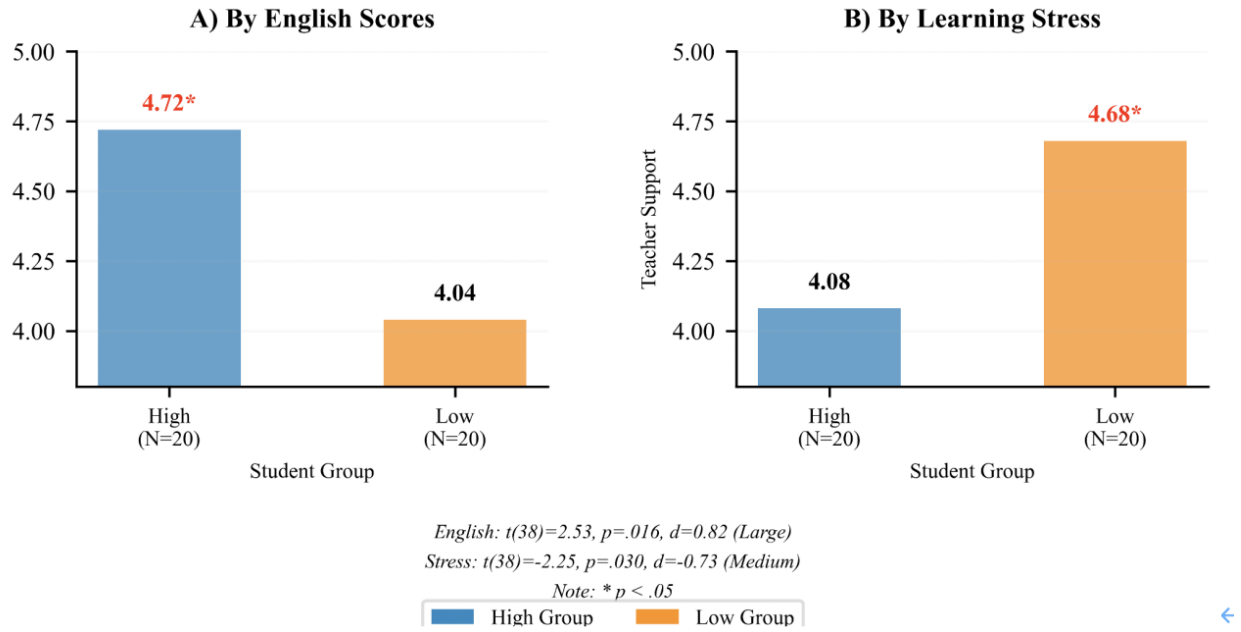

Fig. 4. Teacher Support: Group Comparisons

As shown in Figure 4A, a significant difference was found between the High-Score and Low-Score groups. The High-Score group (N = 20, M = 4.72) perceived significantly more teacher support than the Low-Score group (N = 20, M = 4.04). This difference was statistically significant (t (38) = 2.53, p = .016) and represented a large effect size (Cohen's d = 0.82).

A significant difference was also found based on stress levels, as illustrated in Figure 4B. The Low-Stress group (N = 20, M = 4.68) perceived significantly more teacher support than the High-Stress group (N = 20, M = 4.08). This difference was statistically significant (t (38) = -2.25, p = .030) and represented a medium effect size (Cohen's d = -0.73). In summary, the results indicate that students who were already performing better (higher scores) and feeling better (lower stress) perceived significantly higher levels of support from their teachers.

5. Discussion

The quantitative results of this study provide strong empirical validation for our central theoretical framework – the compensatory support hierarchy. The findings not only map the structure of this hierarchy but also, through regression modeling, confirm the causal mechanisms hypothesized in our literature review. The discussion is organized around our three research questions, interpreting the findings in dialogue with the established literature on social support and cultural capital.

5.1. The Hierarchy of Support: Quantitative Evidence for the Capital Deficit

The first set of findings provided a clear, quantitative map of the support network, confirming our first hypothesis (H1). The perceived hierarchy of support was unequivocally T-P-P

(Teacher > Peer > Parent), with the low mean score for Parent Support (M = 2.52) being statistically and practically significant.

This finding does not imply a lack of parental love. Rather, it provides powerful empirical evidence for the "structural absence" of academic support theorized by Bourdieu (1986) and Lareau (2000). Critically, this absence is not monolithic; it reflects a specific constellation of capital deficits. Parents in this context lack the cultural capital – such as educational attainment and familiarity with academic norms – to provide effective informational support (e.g., homework guidance). More fundamentally, they lack the linguistic capital – proficiency in English, the target language – to assist with language-specific tasks. This dual deficit in cultural and linguistic capital renders them unable to serve as effective academic resources, despite their emotional availability. Our data quantitatively confirms what recent qualitative studies in similar Chinese contexts have suggested: in the specific, high-capital domain of English learning, rural and lower-class parents are structurally constrained from providing effective informational or instrumental support (Wu, Tarc, 2024). This finding gives statistical weight to the "capital deficit" model documented in other minority contexts (Echeverri-Sucerquia, 2010).

In stark contrast, Teacher Support emerged as the dominant perceived source (M = 4.38). This finding provides strong validation for our compensatory hypothesis. In a context where the family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) is constrained, students are not left in a vacuum; they actively and successfully turn to the school. This aligns perfectly with the literature positioning the teacher as a "cultural broker" (Bassey, 1996; Chen, 2025), serving as the students' primary access point to the specific cultural and linguistic capital required for English proficiency.

Finally, the analysis of support types (RQ1b) adds crucial depth. The finding that Informational Support (M = 3.39) was perceived as highly as Emotional Support (M = 3.56) is critical. It confirms that students are not merely seeking affective comfort; they are actively seeking the specific strategic guidance (e.g., advice, feedback) that our capital-based framework predicted would be lacking at home. This preference for informational support underscores the students' recognition that the cultural and linguistic capital they need for academic success must come from institutional sources rather than from their families.

5.2. The Teacher's Unique Predictive Power: Confirming the Compensatory Pillar

The multiple regression analysis provides the most robust evidence for our model, offering clear support for hypotheses H2 and H3.

As hypothesized (H3), even after controlling for other sources, Parental Support showed no unique predictive power for either English achievement or learning stress. This finding reinforces the capital deficit argument: while parental emotional support is present and may contribute to general well-being (Grolnick, Kurowski, 1999), it does not translate into a statistically significant impact on these specific, high-stakes academic outcomes. This pattern diverges from studies in more resource-rich contexts where parental support has been found to significantly predict academic outcomes (Xiao et al., 2025; Werang et al., 2025). The discrepancy suggests that the predictive power of parental support is contingent on the availability of cultural and linguistic capital, a condition that is not met in this rural, trilingual context. The absence of predictive power reflects the structural reality that cultural capital and linguistic capital, not emotional availability, are the key resources required for improving English achievement and mitigating learning stress.

Conversely, and in full support of H2, Teacher Support was the only significant predictor for both higher English Scores (β = .384, p = .016) and lower Learning Stress (β = -.403, p = .011). This confirms the teacher's "dual function" as both an academic driver (informational/instrumental) and an affective buffer (emotional). This finding provides strong, localized evidence for the mechanisms identified in broader L2 motivation studies (Henry, Thorsen, 2018; Sadoughi, Hejazi, 2023) and, most importantly, aligns with recent Chinese-context research demonstrating that strong teacher-student relationships can moderate the negative link between low socioeconomic status and foreign language achievement (Ma et al., 2025).

From a capital theory perspective, the teacher's unique predictive power can be understood as a form of capital compensation. Where parents lack the cultural and linguistic capital necessary for English learning, the teacher steps in as the primary source of these capital forms. The teacher provides linguistic capital through explicit language instruction, corrective feedback, and modeling of academic discourse. Simultaneously, the teacher transmits cultural capital by socializing students into the norms, expectations, and strategies of academic success – knowledge that is often unavailable within the family microsystem. In this sense, the teacher functions not merely as an

instructor but as an institutional conduit for the very forms of capital that students require to succeed but cannot access at home.

A notable and unexpected finding related to our hypothesis on peer support. We hypothesized it would be a secondary predictor, but in the regression model, peer support had no unique predictive power for either outcome. This contradicts some literature that finds a strong link between peers and engagement (Shao et al., 2024). However, it does not mean peers are unimportant. This finding likely refines our understanding of the hierarchy:

Informational Inconsistency: As theorized (Long, Porter, 1985), peers in this low-proficiency context may be unable to provide accurate informational support, thus having no effect on achievement. This reflects a collective deficit in linguistic capital among peers, limiting their capacity to serve as reliable sources of academic guidance.

Statistical Eclipsing: The teacher's role as the sole institutional and expert provider of support may be so overwhelmingly powerful in this compensatory model that it statistically "eclipses" the more informal, affective support provided by peers.

5.3. A "Matthew Effect": A Critical Complication of the Compensatory Framework

Our third research question (RQ3) was designed to test the limits of this compensatory model, and its findings add a crucial layer of complexity that, at first glance, seems to contradict the very idea of "compensation". We found that students who were already doing well (High-Score group) and feeling less stressed (Low-Stress group) perceived significantly more teacher support.

This presents a paradox: How can support be "compensatory" if it flows disproportionately to the students who need it least? This paradox can be resolved by examining the accumulative logic of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital – whether cultural, linguistic, or social – tends to accumulate in ways that advantage those who already possess it. In this context, students who enter school with even small amounts of cultural capital (e.g., educated parents, exposure to print materials) or linguistic capital (e.g., early exposure to Mandarin or English) are more likely to be perceived by teachers as "teachable" or "motivated." This perception triggers a positive feedback loop: these students receive more teacher attention, which further enhances their capital, leading to higher achievement and lower stress. Conversely, students who lack these initial capital endowments are more easily overlooked, receiving less teacher support and falling further behind. Thus, while the structure of compensation (the teacher as a resource) exists universally, its distribution is governed by capital-based sorting mechanisms. This finding provides quantitative evidence for a "Matthew Effect" in education, as famously applied to language learning by Lamb (2011). In his qualitative study of a similar developing context (Indonesia), Lamb (2011) identified "positive and negative feedback loops" that widen the gap between high and low achievers over time.

The Positive Loop (Our High-Achievers): Lamb (2011, p. 15) describes how students with small early advantages (often from family "cultural capital") are noticed by the teacher, are more stimulated, develop an identity as a "good learner", and actively seek more interaction. Our quantitative data provides a snapshot of this: our high-achievers are those already in this positive loop, perceiving (and likely receiving) more support.

The Negative Loop (Our Low-Achievers): Conversely, Lamb (2011, p. 16) shows how low-achievers are often identified as "slow", sit at the back, are easily distracted, and develop an identity as a "poor learner". Our data – showing that low-achievers perceive less support – is the statistical signature of this tragic negative cycle.

Therefore, our finding does not invalidate the compensatory framework; it refines it with a critical warning. It suggests that while the institution (the school) provides a compensatory structure (the teacher), the practice of that compensation is not automatic. It is subject to a Matthew Effect, where a student's existing (even small) advantages and their "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1986) dictate their ability to successfully access that compensatory support. In other words, while the school provides the potential for capital compensation, the actual distribution of that compensation is mediated by students' pre-existing capital endowments and their capacity to activate teacher investment. This dynamic aligns with recent conceptualizations of minority family stress, which emphasize how structural inequalities shape the distribution of resources within educational settings (Li, Zhou, 2025).

5.4. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study – particularly the confirmation of the teacher as the sole predictive pillar and the complicating "Matthew Effect" – have profound and immediate implications for educational policy in similar minority and low-SES contexts.

First, the finding that parents lack the specific cultural and linguistic capital needed for academic support implies that interventions focused on "fixing" parents (e.g., asking them to help with English homework) are misplaced and likely ineffective. Policy should instead adopt an asset-based approach, valuing parents' emotional support while redirecting academic resources elsewhere. Recognizing the limits of family-based capital, resources should be strategically allocated to the institution that can effectively compensate for these deficits – the school. This aligns with the emphasis on structural rather than individual-level interventions found in recent scholarship on minority student support (Cuevas, 2025).

Second, our data is unequivocal: the teacher is the system. They are the only effective agent for both driving achievement and buffering stress. From a capital perspective, the teacher serves as the primary conduit for both cultural and linguistic capital in this context. Therefore, any policy or funding aimed at improving outcomes for these students must be directed at strengthening this specific pillar.

Finally, the "Matthew Effect" finding (RQ3) is a stark warning. It is not enough to simply have a supportive teacher in the building. If that support is only successfully accessed by high-achievers, the school is failing in its compensatory mission. The capital-based sorting mechanisms identified in this study demand a proactive intervention.This implies an urgent need for professional development that moves beyond standard pedagogy and equips teachers with proactive, culturally responsive strategies to identify and engage the low-achieving, high-stress students who need their support the most but are least likely to seek it (Antony-Newman, 2025). Drawing on Cuevas's (2025) work on familial support for first-generation students, teacher training should also cultivate an understanding of the diverse capital resources students bring from their home environments, enabling educators to build bridges rather than assume deficits. Teachers would benefit from training that helps them recognize and disrupt the capital-based feedback loops that perpetuate inequality, ensuring that compensatory support reaches those who need it most.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine a hypothesized "compensatory support hierarchy" for ethnic minority Yi students in a trilingual English learning context. The findings provide strong, empirical validation for this model. We confirmed a distinct hierarchy in which Teacher Support is perceived as the dominant source, significantly superseding Peer and Parent Support. This result provides clear, statistical validation for the "structural absence" of parental academic support predicted by Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital. Critically, this absence reflects not a lack of parental care, but a dual deficit in cultural capital (e.g., educational attainment, familiarity with academic norms) and linguistic capital (e.g., English proficiency), which together constrain parents' ability to provide the informational and instrumental support essential for academic success.

The study's main contribution lies in its regression models, which confirm the function of this hierarchy. We found that Teacher Support was the sole significant and unique predictor for both higher English achievement and lower learning stress, supporting our hypothesis (H2) that the teacher functions as the primary compensatory pillar. From a capital perspective, this finding positions the teacher as the key institutional conduit for the cultural and linguistic capital that students require but cannot access at home. However, this compensatory framework is complicated by the discovery of a "Matthew Effect", which revealed that this critical teacher support is disproportionately perceived by students who are already high-achieving. This finding suggests that while the structure of compensation exists universally, its actual distribution is governed by accumulative capital dynamics – students with initial advantages are better positioned to activate and benefit from teacher support, while those most in need risk being overlooked.

The conclusions of this study must be considered in light of three main limitations. First, the "quantitative case study" design (N = 40) provides a deep snapshot but is not statistically generalizable, necessitating replication with larger, multi-site samples to test the consistency of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents claims of causality. A longitudinal study is required to explore the likely bi-directional relationship between teacher support and achievement. Finally, the non-significant finding for peer support in the regression model is a provocative area for future inquiry. This may be due to the overpowering statistical weight of teacher support in this context, and future mixed-methods research is needed to delve deeper into

the specific mechanisms of peer interaction and to clarify under what conditions peer support becomes educationally consequential.

Despite these limitations, this study provides a rigorous, empirically grounded test of social support and capital theories in an under-researched trilingual context, demonstrating how cultural, linguistic, and social capital intersect to shape academic outcomes. By identifying the teacher as the critical compensatory pillar and revealing the capital-based sorting mechanisms that perpetuate inequality, the findings offer policymakers and educators clear, evidence-based targets for intervention. Ensuring that compensatory support reaches the students who need it most will require strengthening the teacher's role while equipping educators with strategies to recognize and disrupt the feedback loops that systematically disadvantage low-achieving, high-stress learners.

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