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Article

Teacher Dependency and Parental Absence as a Lopsided Support System in Yi Minority English Education

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Abstract: English education in China's ethnic minority regions faces unique hurdles under the "Sanyu Jiantong" trilingual policy, yet the micro-level dynamics of how social support systems function in these contexts remain underexplored. Integrating Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model with Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, this qualitative single-case study investigates the support network of Grade 9 students in Mabian Yi Autonomous County. Leveraging the researcher's "emic" perspective, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and a teacher, alongside extensive classroom and field observations. Our analysis reveals a stark "support imbalance" rooted in socio-economic disparities. Specifically, a dual deficit in familial cultural and economic capital results in a "structural absence" of informational and instrumental support at home. This leaves students in a state of "monopolar dependency", relying almost exclusively on their English teacher for guidance. However, this overburdened teacher, trapped in a structural double bind, adopts pragmatic strategies of "academic triage", leading to a "tacit agreement" of disengagement with struggling students. We conclude that the underperformance in English education in these regions is a complex socio-ecological dysfunction, not merely a pedagogical issue. The study argues that the current model, which asks the teacher to stand as a "lone pillar", is unsustainable. Future interventions must move beyond simple fixes to rebuild the entire support ecosystem, potentially repositioning schools as digital facilitators to bridge the capital gap and empower the marginalized learner.

Keywords: Social Support; Ethnic Minority Education; Teacher Dependency; Cultural Capital; Bioecological Model

1. Introduction

1.1. The English Education in China's Ethnic Minority Areas

In an era of globalization, proficiency in English has become a critical form of capital, essential for both national development and individual social mobility in China [1–3]. The Chinese government has implemented the policy of "Sanyu Jiantong", which aims for students in ethnic minority areas to master their ethnic language, Mandarin Chinese, and English simultaneously [4].

Existing scholarship regarding English in China's ethnic minority regions reveals a complex dichotomy in how the language is perceived. On the one hand, consistent with the global discourse on linguistic capital, English is widely recognized by local stakeholders as a crucial passport for social mobility and integration into the broader economy [1–3]. On the other hand, given the practical constraints, it is frequently perceived as a "double burden" or an intimidating academic hurdle for students who are already grappling with the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese [5]. Consequently, the perception of English in these areas often oscillates between high aspirational value and a sense of practical alienation.

Indeed, the practical implementation of this trilingual education policy has been fraught with challenges, with English often being a weak link for students in these regions [5,6]. These students often "experience difficulties and underperform in mainstream English classrooms" [7] (p. 955), creating a significant barrier to educational equity and future opportunities.

To empirically investigate how these macro-level challenges manifest in a specific local context, this study focuses on Mabian Yi Autonomous County. As a region grappling with the intersection of ethnic diversity, economic transition, and linguistic complexity, Mabian serves as a representative microcosm of the educational dilemmas facing China's minority areas. Located in the mountainous southwestern region of Sichuan province, Mabian is home to a majority Yi population (50.7%) coexisting with Han (48.2%) and other ethnic groups. Economically, it was listed as one of Sichuan's 45 "deeply poverty-stricken" counties in 2017 and officially "shook off poverty" at the end of 2019. Linguistically, the local population is largely bilingual in the Yi dialect of Nuosu and Sichuan Mandarin, with younger generations being more fluent in Mandarin due to compulsory schooling. It is against this complex backdrop of economic disadvantage and existing bilingualism that English is introduced as a third language. This context makes Mabian a compelling case for examining the foundational support structures—or lack thereof—that underpin students' English learning experiences.

1.2. The Need for a Qualitative Lens on Social Support

The academic discourse on English education in China's ethnic area has evolved over four decades, which can be summarized in three stages based on Lu's [8] review.

The Stage of Early Exploration (late 1970s–1980s): Pioneering studies, like Liu and Cui [9], began to explore the unique challenges and advantages of teaching English to minority students in regions like Xinjiang, offering initial pedagogical suggestions. Research in this period was sparse and primarily based on practical teaching experience rather than systematic investigation.

The Stage of Deeper Exploration (1990s–2000s): This period saw a significant increase in research, with more systematic investigations into specific problems. Scholars began to point out issues like the unsuitability of one-size-fits-all textbooks [10] and the poor educational background and professional development needs of local EFL teachers [11]. Motivational studies, such as Yuan et al. [12], identified learning anxiety and attitudes toward foreign cultures as key predictors of achievement.

The Stage of Interdisciplinary Exploration (2010s–present): More recently, scholars have called for employing novel research perspectives from fields like sociology, psychology, and ethnology [13]. Researchers have begun linking English education to broader social issues like poverty alleviation [14]. This study positions itself within this third stage, explicitly adopting a sociological lens to deconstruct the social factors underpinning students' learning experiences.

Social support—defined as the emotional, informational, and instrumental resources individuals perceive from their social networks [15]—is crucial for adolescents' academic success and psychological well-being. Much of the existing research on this topic in China's ethnic minority areas has been quantitative, focusing on identifying problems and proposing countermeasures from a macro perspective [9,12].

These studies have provided valuable large-scale data but often lack the depth to explain why certain support structures are weak or absent and how these dynamics are experienced by the individuals involved. As Lu [8] noted in a review, past research has been limited in perspective, mainly focusing on teaching problems, learning strategies, and psychological cognition [16,17], with insufficient exploration from interdisciplinary viewpoints like sociology [18]. There is a particular need for qualitative research that connects the abstract concept of social support to the tangible realities of family socio-economic status, especially the role of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu [19] terms "cultural capital" [20].

Guided by this need for a qualitative and sociologically grounded perspective, this study employs the lens of cultural capital to unpack the complex realities of social support. It aims to move from the broad quantitative patterns identified in previous research to a rich, contextualized understanding of the lived experiences within a Yi ethnic minority school. Accordingly, this inquiry is driven by the following research questions:

Q1: How do students, parents, and teachers in a Yi ethnic minority junior high school perceive and experience the dynamics of social support in English learning?

Q2: What are the underlying socio-cultural and economic factors that shape the provision and reception of teacher and parental support in this specific context?

2. An Integrated Socio-Ecological Framework for Analyzing Social Support

To comprehensively analyze the complex networks of social support in students' English learning, this study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates three complementary perspectives.

The first component of this framework is Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development [21], which serves as our overarching systemic map. Evolving from his earlier Ecological Systems Theory [22], this model visualizes development as being shaped by interactions within a series of nested systems—from the immediate Microsystem of direct relationships to the overarching Macrosystem of cultural and economic realities [22] (see **Figure 1**).

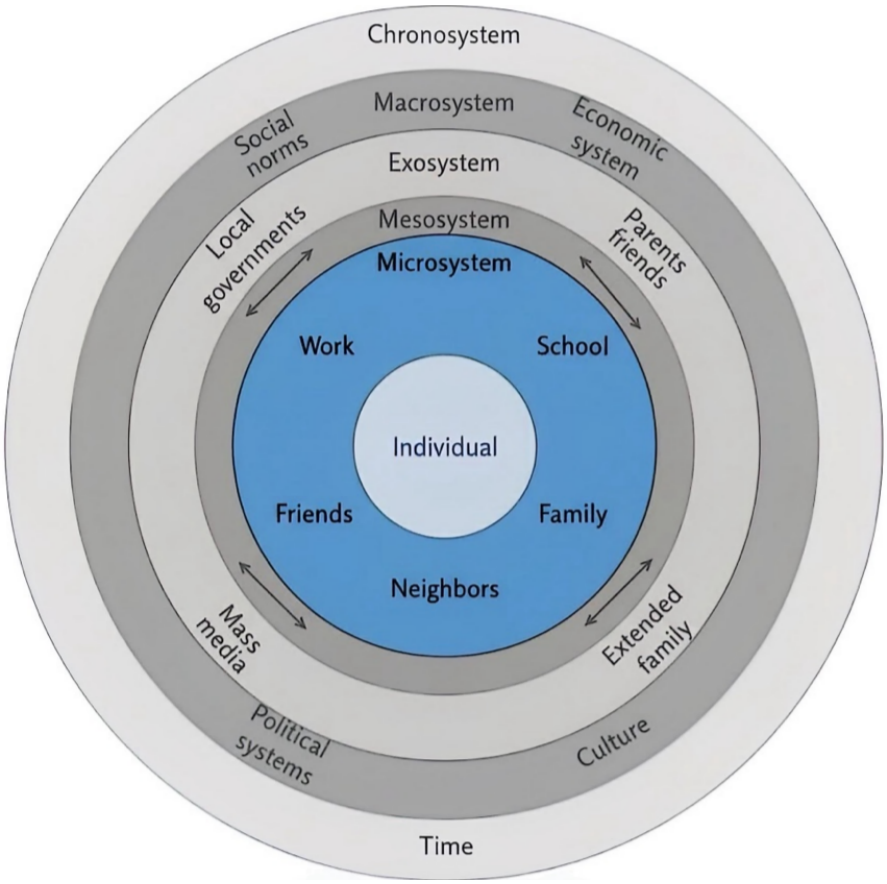

Figure 1. The Bioecological Model of Human Development. Adapted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris [22].

This study uses the model to locate the student within these layers, focusing primarily on the dynamics within the Microsystem (e.g., family, school) and the critical linkages of the Mesosystem (i.e., the home-school connection). This ecological map provides the landscape upon which we can then define the specific actors and actions of social support and, ultimately, diagnose the root causes of support failures [23].

Next, we populate this map by drawing on established social support theory to define the key actors (sources) and actions (types) relevant to an adolescent student. This allows us to specify the "who" and "what" of our investigation.

Finally, while social support theory describes *what* support is (or is not) present, it does not fully explain *why*. We therefore employ Pierre Bourdieu's [19] theory of capital as our primary analytical lens. This allows us to diagnose the structural reasons behind observed support patterns, attributing them to deficits in the cultural and economic capital available to the actors within the ecosystem.

2.1. Defining the Actors and Actions: Sources and Types of Social Support

Within the student's Microsystem, social support is provided by specific actors and manifests in distinct forms. We draw on a rich body of literature to define these core components.

2.1.1. Sources of Social Support for Students

While Tardy's [15] comprehensive model identifies a broad network of support sources suitable for adults, research on adolescents consistently highlights three preeminent sources: parents, peers, and teachers [24]. These three actors constitute the primary social connections for students and are the focus of the present study.

Parental Support. Parents are a foundational part of an adolescent's social support system. Although their direct educational involvement may decrease during secondary school [25], numerous studies confirm that parental social support remains crucial for school adjustment, engagement, and academic success [24,26]. Positive parental support is linked to high life satisfaction, low absenteeism, and a greater desire to engage in learning goals [27,28]. As children get older, parents often transition from direct tutoring to providing educational opportunities and resources [29], a shift that is central to this study's investigation.

Peer Support. As adolescents seek greater independence, peers become an increasingly important source of support [30]. For students, especially those boarding at school, peers function as a powerful source of reinforcement, acceptance, and belonging. Support from classmates and close friends can have significant short- and long-term effects on well-being and academic life [31]. This study considers peers—both classmates and close friends—as a vital component of the support network.

Teacher Support. In the school context, social support from teachers plays a pivotal role. A positive and supportive teacher-student relationship is strongly correlated with students' academic competence, engagement, and positive behavior [32]. For middle school students in particular, teacher support that promotes autonomy and emotional security is directly linked to higher academic achievement and life satisfaction [33].

2.1.2. Types of Social Support

The support provided by these sources can be categorized into distinct types. Following the widely adopted classification system derived from House [34] and Tardy [15], this study focuses on three primary types of social support: emotional, informational, and instrumental. The distinction between informational support ("advice") and appraisal support ("evaluative feedback") is often subtle; therefore, in line with common practice, we combine them into the single category of informational support.

The definitions of these three types, along with student-specific examples, are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Contents and Examples of the Three Social Support Types.

Types	Contents	Examples for Students	Potential Deficit in Mabian Context
Emotional Support	Providing acceptance, care, nurturance, encouragement, and warmth to enhance an individual's feelings of self-worth, self-value, and self-esteem in the face of a problem	• Parents care student's school life. • Teachers treat student fairly. • Peers encourage when a student fails an exam.	• Parents: Absence due to labor migration (left-behind children). • Teachers: Lack of patience due to large class sizes. • Peers: Mutual anxiety or shyness in speaking English (fear of losing face).
Informational Support	Providing well-informed opinions, advice, affirmation, and constructive feedback as well as knowledge and information, to enhance an individual's understanding of a problem	• Parents give advices on students' learning. • Teachers provide timely feedback on students' assignments. • Peers share learning strategies.	• Parents: Inability to tutor English due to low literacy. • Teachers: Teaching focus on rote memorization rather than feedback. • Peers: Inability to provide valid help due to generally low English proficiency.
Instrumental Support	Providing tangible, material resources and services (including time) to resolve an individual's stress associated with a problem	• Parents fund extracurricular courses. • Teachers prepare well for the class. • Peers share learning materials.	• Parents: Financial constraints preventing purchase of materials. • Teachers: Lack of multimedia teaching resources. • Peers: Lack of supplementary learning materials to share with classmates.

2.2. The Analytical Lens: Diagnosing Support Deficits with Capital Theory

Having mapped the ecosystem and defined its key components, we now introduce our core analytical tool for explaining the dynamics within it. Bourdieu's [19] theory of capital provides the necessary lens to understand why certain forms of support are present or absent. We posit a direct and powerful relationship between a family's capital and the types of social support they are able to provide:

Cultural Capital is directly linked to the provision of Informational Support. Parents who possess high institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., higher education degrees) and embodied cultural capital (e.g., proficiency in academic subjects) are equipped to offer their children homework help, learning advice, and effective feedback. A deficit in cultural capital structurally limits a parent's ability to provide this crucial form of support.

Economic Capital is directly linked to the provision of Instrumental Support. Families with sufficient financial resources can provide tangible assistance such as private tutoring, educational technology, books, and a quiet study space. A lack of economic capital severely constrains these possibilities.

Therefore, this study employs this integrated framework to investigate how the distribution of capital fundamentally shapes the social support network of the students in Mabian. Specifically, we aim to first identify the patterns of emotional, informational, and instrumental support from parents, teachers, and peers, and then utilize the concept of capital to explain the structural reasons behind these observed patterns.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method: A Qualitative Case Study

To gain an in-depth, holistic understanding of the complex social processes at play, this study employed a qualitative single-case study design. This approach is uniquely suited for explanatory inquiries that seek to answer "how" and "why" questions regarding contemporary events.

In the context of this study, a case study design is essential because the influence of family capital on educational support is not a simple linear variable, but a dynamic, context-dependent process. It allows us to disentangle how specific forms of capital translate into daily support interactions, and why certain support deficits persist despite policy interventions. This method enables a "thick description" of the bounded system—a single Grade 9 class in a junior secondary school in Mabian—revealing the intricate interplay between home and school environments that quantitative surveys might overlook.

3.2. Site and Participant Selection

The research site is a junior high school in the county seat, serving over 4000 students, the majority of whom are of Yi ethnicity (87%) and from rural households (95%). The selection of the Yi ethnic minority as the focal group was driven by theoretical sampling: they represent a quintessential case of the "trilingual dilemma" (Yi-Mandarin-English) under the "Sanyu Jiantong" policy. Furthermore, gaining authentic access to such a close-knit ethnic community typically presents significant barriers to outsiders; thus, this site was chosen where the researcher's prior engagement allowed for a rare "emic" (insider) perspective.

The specific case was a natural "average" Grade 9 class (n = 40), chosen for its typicality in terms of academic performance, which consistently ranked in the bottom tier of its grade level. From this class, four students were purposively selected for in-depth interviews based on their classroom performance and the English teacher's recommendation, ensuring a representation of different academic motivations and family backgrounds. Subsequently, three of their parents and their English teacher (Mr. Zhang, Pseudonym) were also interviewed to capture multiple perspectives on the support network.

3.3. The Research Journey: Positionality, Entry, and Rapport

The context of this research journey is deeply rooted in the first author's longitudinal connection with the site. Two years prior to this study, the first author served as a volunteer head teacher and math teacher for this specific participant class. This unique history was not merely a matter of convenience but a methodological necessity to secure an "emic" (insider) perspective. In the context of the Yi minority, where cultural distinctiveness and wariness of outsiders can obscure data, the researcher's prior immersion allowed for a nuanced understanding of the local socio-cultural logic that an external researcher might miss.

However, re-entering the field required a conscious renegotiation of roles—shifting from an authoritative "teacher" to a neutral "researcher". To maintain rapport with the current English teacher, Mr. Zhang, who was initially hesitant about being observed due to burnout, the researcher adopted a non-intrusive "learner" stance. It was clarified that the goal was to understand the structural challenges of rural teaching rather than to evaluate his pedagogy. This transparency facilitated candor, allowing Mr. Zhang to share his genuine struggles. Similarly, while the students were familiar with the researcher, building a safe space for them to discuss their English learning difficulties required "prolonged engagement". The researcher spent extensive time in the classroom during breaks without recording data, normalizing their presence until students felt safe enough to reveal sensitive behaviors (such as the "phonetic annotation" shown in **Figure 2**) that they might otherwise hide from school staff.

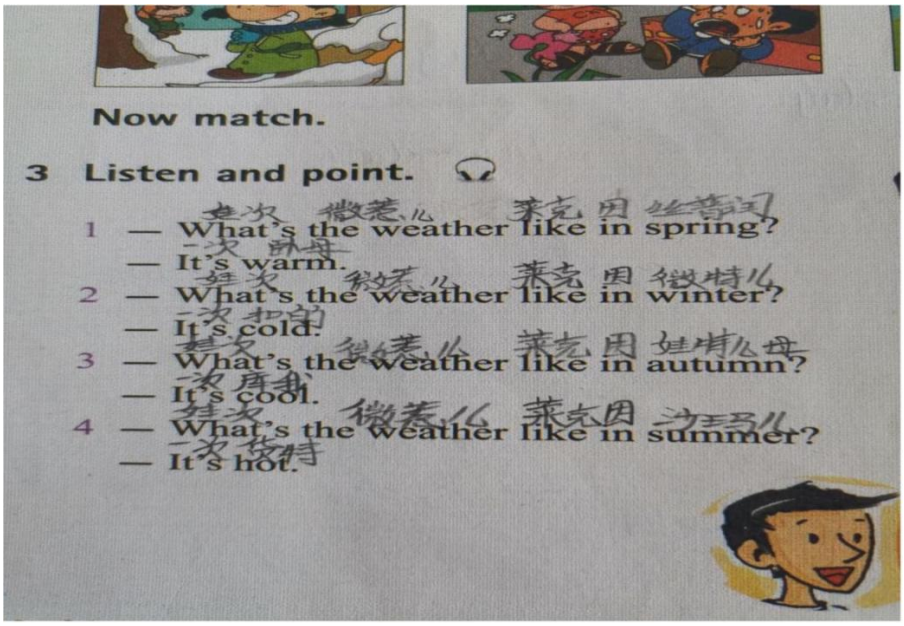

Figure 2. A student's textbook showing the use of Chinese characters to approximate English pronunciation.

To ensure trustworthiness and mitigate potential bias from this prior relationship, several strategies were employed. Firstly, the researcher's previous role was in mathematics, not English, which provided a layer of disciplinary objectivity during English classroom observations. Secondly, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the fieldwork to monitor subjective interpretations, and emerging findings were consistently discussed with a peer debriefer. Crucially, this reflexivity extended to the immediate theoretical analysis of field observations. As captured in the "Researcher's Analytic Note", the researcher did not merely record classroom behaviors passively but actively interpreted them through the lens of capital theory in real-time. This practice allowed us to instantly identify phenomena like the "tacit agreement" of disengagement not as simple misbehavior, but as structural symptoms of the missing home Microsystem support. Finally, we employed member checking with Mr. Zhang to validate that our interpretations accurately reflected his lived experience.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

To gain a rich, in-depth understanding of the support ecosystem, this study employed a multi-sourced qualitative approach to data collection.

Semi-structured Interviews: In-depth, face-to-face interviews were the primary qualitative data source, allowing for a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences. A semi-structured format was chosen because it provides a consistent framework of questions linked to the research goals while still offering the flexibility to probe emergent themes and allow interviewees to elaborate on what they deemed significant. Interviews were conducted with four purposively selected students (see **Table 2** for their information), three of their parents, and the English teacher. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in Mandarin or Sichuan Mandarin to

ensure participants could express themselves freely and comfortably.

Table 2. Basic Information of the Observed Students.

Students	Gender	Ethnicity	Typical Class Performance	English Scores (/100) *
Xiao Lin	Female	Yi	Struggle to follow the teacher	42
Re Xi	Female	Yi	Relatively concentrated	75
Qu Mo	Male	Yi	Sleep on desk	12
A Luo	Male	Yi	Absent-mined	20

Note: * Scores represent the average of the three most recent English examinations prior to the study.

Classroom and Field Observation: Observation was used to gather firsthand, naturally occurring data on social processes. Seven English lessons were observed, with the researcher acting as a "complete observer"—known to the class but not participating. The focus was on teaching methods, student performance, and teacher-student interactions. Field observations extended beyond the classroom to include visits to local English training agencies to understand the broader out-of-school support landscape. Detailed field notes were taken throughout.

Documentary and Field Note Analysis: Data collection was supplemented by an informal analysis of students' English textbooks to identify personal study habits and coping mechanisms. All observations were systematically recorded in field notes, which served as a crucial data source for analysis.

After collecting the data, a sequential approach was used for data analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed with the assistance of an AI voice tool (iFLYTEK) to ensure accuracy. The qualitative data from transcriptions and field notes were then manually analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involved systematically coding the data to identify recurring patterns and concepts, which were then grouped into the broader themes presented in the findings section. Consequently, this rigorous analysis allowed us to construct detailed explanations for the "how" and "why" behind the observed phenomena within the specific local context.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, consent was obtained from the school principal and the participating teacher. All student participants and their guardians were provided with a consent letter explaining the purpose of the study, the procedures, and their rights. Signed consent was obtained from all participating students. Given the variation in parents' educational backgrounds and literacy, verbal consent was obtained from parent participants after a thorough explanation of the study, often with their children present to facilitate understanding.

The confidentiality of all participants was protected. All data collected was used for research purposes only. To ensure anonymity, all student and parent participants' names were replaced by pseudonyms in the final manuscript (e.g., "Re Xi", "Xiao Lin"). The teacher's name was also replaced with a pseudonym ("Mr. Zhang").

All participants were explicitly informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. This was reiterated before each interview.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed a social support system defined by a powerful, interlocking dyad of teacher and parental influence. While the role of peers was also examined, it became clear that in the context of a challenging subject like English, peer support was almost exclusively emotional and social in nature. Students offered each other encouragement and shared in their struggles, but rarely possessed the necessary knowledge to provide tangible informational or instrumental support. Therefore, the critical axis of academic support—where the most significant power imbalances and structural problems lie—was overwhelmingly defined by two themes: an intense reliance on the English teacher and a corresponding structural absence of parental academic support. These core findings, interpreted through the lens of capital theory, are summarized in **Table 3**, which serves as a guide to the detailed narrative and observational data.

4.1. The Observed Reality: A Classroom of Tacit Disengagement

The daily classroom experience forms the crucible in which these support dynamics are forged. Observations revealed a learning environment defined by a stark and pervasive student apathy. The details from a representative class session, summarized in **Table 4**, paint a vivid picture not just of disengagement, but of a system in silent crisis.

Table 3. Thematic Findings Interpreted Through Capital Theory.

Thematic Finding	Root Cause (Capital Theory)	Observable Indicators in Mabian
Theme 1: Over-Reliance on the Teacher	The teacher as the sole accessible source of cultural capital for English learning.	Students identifying the teacher as the "only person who imparts knowledge"; A stark divide between motivated students craving informational support and disengaged students valuing emotional comfort; The teacher's pragmatic acceptance of a disengaged classroom majority.
Theme 2: Structural Absence of Parental Support	A profound deficit in both cultural capital and economic capital within the family unit.	Cultural Capital Deficit: Majority of parents holding junior secondary school qualifications or less; direct statements like "We are unable to tutor"; Economic Capital Constraint: Parents citing tutoring costs as "a little expensive"; scarcity of local training agencies. Support Re-definition: Parental support being confined to compensatory emotional and logistical care.

Table 4. Summary of a Representative English Class Observation.

Time	Teacher's Activity (Mr. Zhang)	Students' Activity & Classroom Atmosphere
Setup	The blackboard was not cleaned prior to class; Mr. Zhang wiped it down himself. The room was somewhat dimly lit.	The class began with active noise as students rushed in from a flag-raising ceremony. A sense of initial, unfocused energy was present.
0–10 min Vocabulary Review	Leads the class in reading new model verbs. He proposes several questions about their usage.	About a third of the class (fewer than 15 students) follow along vocally. When questions are asked, only a few attempt to answer. After a brief silence, the teacher answers the questions himself. The initial vitality begins to fade.
10–30 min Grammar Explanation	Explains grammar points on the blackboard. His tone is even and he does not solicit questions from the students.	Engagement drops sharply. Field notes recorded that 18 students were sleeping on their desks, and at least 4 were whispering. A quiet apathy settles over the room; students are not actively disruptive, but are clearly not involved.
30–45 min Exercise & Wrap-up	Assigns and explains exercises, then writes the answers on the board for students to copy.	Most students do not attempt the exercises independently. They wait and then mechanically copy the answers. Throughout the entire session, fewer than 10 of the 40 students showed any sign of active interaction with the teacher. The class ends in a state of lethargy.

Researcher's Analytic Note: This scene exemplifies the "tacit agreement" of disengagement and the teacher's pragmatic triage, underpinned by a lack of foundational support from the home Microsystem.

The scene detailed in **Table 4** was not an anomaly. It was the norm. The observation that nearly half the class—18 of 40 students—were physically sleeping underscores the depth of the disengagement. The teacher wiping the blackboard himself is a small but powerful symbol of a breakdown in shared responsibility for the learning environment. A "tacit agreement" permeated the room: as long as the disengaged majority remained non-disruptive, their passive withdrawal from learning was accepted.

This pervasive apathy was particularly striking to the researcher, who had served as a volunteer teacher for this same class when the students were in Grade 7. At that time, she recalled them as being "over energetic and even noisy". The transformation from active energy to a state where, on a typical day, fewer than 10 students would interact with the teacher, suggests a process of learned helplessness or gradual burnout over their middle school years. It is within this challenging context that the students' profound reliance on their teacher becomes both understandable and problematic.

4.2. Theme 1: The Lone Pillar—Over-Reliance on the Public School English Teacher

Despite the disengaged classroom atmosphere, students who remained invested in their education viewed their English teacher as the most critical, and often only, source of academic support.

4.2.1. "The Person Who Directly Imparts Knowledge to Us": The Teacher as the Sole Source of Knowledge

For the students, the English teacher was not just an instructor but the gatekeeper to a foreign and difficult subject. Re Xi, a high-achieving student, articulated this sentiment clearly:

"I think the support from the English teacher is the most important, because the teacher is the person who

directly imparts knowledge to us... the English teacher gives me the biggest support and motivation for English learning".

This sentiment of dependency was widespread. Xiao Lin, another student, framed it in more emotional terms, explaining how a teacher's attention could make or break her motivation:

"When a teacher gives a student love, help and high expectations... students will pay more attention to this subject."

This perception positions the teacher as the indispensable pillar of their learning journey, a belief powerfully reinforced by the absence of other knowledgeable adults in their lives.

4.2.2. A Mismatch of Needs: The Dilemma Between Emotional Comfort and Informational Support

A significant tension existed between what students needed and what the teacher provided. Less-motivated students like Qu Mo, who frequently slept in class, valued the teacher's non-confrontational approach, a form of emotional support:

"I think the care, respect and understanding of English teachers are the most important... he doesn't disrespect me, for which I think he is very good".

In stark contrast, the more motivated Re Xi craved robust informational support:

"I think it is better for English teachers to be strict and give us useful help... to transform the difficult knowledge points into those easy to understand".

4.2.3. The Teacher's Perspective: Burnout, Pragmatism, and Competing Demands

The English teacher, Mr. Zhang, was acutely aware of these dynamics. His seemingly tolerant classroom management was a conscious, pragmatic choice born from years of experience. His sense of futility in the face of widespread disengagement was palpable; he described his "average class" as having "poor learning enthusiasm," making teaching feel like an exhausting uphill battle. His decision-making is a direct response to the reality observed in **Table 4**, where active teaching prompts were met with silence, forcing him to answer his own questions. He explained:

"I cannot require all of the students to listen to me equally. I just need them not to interfere with each other... for those who hate learning, I cannot force them because enforcement makes no sense but work negatively to make them rebellious".

Furthermore, his energy was depleted by non-academic duties, particularly "dropout control", which required him to "*go to the countryside to advise students to go back to school one by one for every semester*".

4.3. Theme 2: The Absent Architect—Parental Support Constrained by Capital

While the teacher stood as a solitary pillar, the family foundation of academic support was largely missing. This absence was not due to a lack of care, but a structural inability to provide meaningful help.

4.3.1. "We Are Unable to Tutor": The Void of Informational Support Due to Limited Cultural Capital

The most pronounced feature of parental support was its complete lack of an academic dimension. As Xiao Lin's mother confessed, "We are unable to tutor her homework in junior high school, let alone English". This inability to provide academic guidance was a near-universal theme among the parents. A Luo's grandfather was even more direct, illustrating how foreign the subject was to the older generation:

"I don't know what is English, even if I hear it on the TV, I cannot tell in which language these people are speaking."

This lack of foundational support at home directly manifests in the students' desperate self-scaffolding strategies. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, without parents who can correct pronunciation or afford phonetic resources, students resort to annotating English words with Chinese characters to approximate the sounds.

For instance, the phrase "It's warm" is annotated as "yi ci wo mu" (一次 卧母), and "spring" is marked as "si pu run" (丝普闰). While these annotations provide a temporary crutch for memorization, they fossilize incorrect pronunciation patterns. This visual evidence serves as a poignant artifact of the "capital deficit": the family cannot provide the embodied cultural capital (correct pronunciation) needed to bridge the gap between rural dialect and standard English, leaving students to construct their own, often flawed, bridges.

4.3.2. "A Little Expensive": The Restriction of Instrumental Support by Limited Economic Capital

The families' economic situations severely constrained their ability to provide instrumental support. When asked about extracurricular tutoring, Re Xi's father explained,

> "*The tutoring school is a little expensive... We don't have any extra money for her to attend the English tutoring school.*"

As market-based solutions common in urban China were inaccessible, students were left with no alternative sources of academic help.

4.3.3. "Doing Logistics": Emotional Support as the Primary, Compensatory Parental Role

Unable to contribute informationally or instrumentally, parents redefined their support role as providing emotional and logistical care. In the absence of academic input, their focus shifted entirely to managing their children's basic needs and morale. Re Xi's father poignantly summarized this compensatory role:

> *"We can't help her with her studies. My job is just to make sure that she has food to eat and clothes to wear, and to tell her to listen to the teacher at school. That's all we can do."*

This emotional encouragement, while genuinely heartfelt, functioned as a compensation for the other missing forms of support, leaving their children academically reliant on the school system alone.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study, when viewed through our integrated theoretical lens, reveal more than just a case of inadequate support; they expose a self-perpetuating system of educational disadvantage. The discussion now moves beyond a description of findings to critically analyze the mechanisms of this system, its hidden costs, and its profound implications for policy.

5.1. The Vicious Cycle: Capital Deficits in the Microsystem and the Ruptured Mesosystem

The relationship between parental absence and teacher dependency is a cyclical process. The "structural absence" of parents, dictated by their limited capital, cripples the family Microsystem as a source of academic support. This internal deficit ruptures the home-school Mesosystem, the critical bridge where parental involvement and teacher guidance should meet. The structural absence of parental support, coupled with the lack of effective academic peer networks, forces the entire weight of academic guidance onto the solitary figure of the teacher, whose own Microsystem—the classroom—is already strained. His resulting burnout and pragmatic coping strategies lead to diminished support quality, which further demotivates students. This is not merely a cycle of support failure; it is a textbook illustration of how socio-economic inequality is actively reproduced within the very institutions designed to alleviate it.

5.2. The Paradox of Affective Support: Well-Intentioned Efforts and the Masking of Structural Realities

A deeper analysis of parental support reveals a poignant paradox. Parents in Mabian are not neglectful; on the contrary, their provision of emotional and logistical support is a testament to their care. However, when this

affective support becomes a substitute for, rather than a complement to, the necessary informational and instrumental support, it can have an unintended, insidious effect. By constantly encouraging their children to "work hard" and "listen to the teacher", parents are promoting a narrative of individual meritocracy. While essential for building resilience, this narrative, in a context of profound capital deficit, inadvertently masks the structural barriers to success.

It places the onus of achievement entirely on the student's individual effort, while ignoring the fact that the essential tools for that achievement—the cultural and economic capital that facilitate learning—are absent. This creates a psychological double-bind for the student: they are told that hard work is the key, yet they see their efforts yield minimal results in a difficult subject like English. This can lead to feelings of personal failure and inadequacy, reinforcing the very disengagement observed in the classroom and validating the "myth of meritocracy" in its most damaging form.

5.3. The Teacher as an Agent of Triage and Symbolic Violence

Mr. Zhang's pragmatic classroom management, while understandable from a human perspective, must be critically examined through a sociological lens. His decision to focus on the few engaged students while allowing the majority to disengage is a form of academic triage. He is making a rational choice to allocate his finite resources where he perceives the greatest chance of "success". However, this act of triage is not neutral; it is an exercise of power that reinforces existing inequalities.

Furthermore, this seemingly benign neglect functions as what Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence" [35]. Symbolic violence is a non-physical form of violence manifested in the power to impose a system of meanings and values upon a dominated group, making them accept their own subordination as natural. When the teacher consistently ignores the disengaged students, the implicit message communicated is that they are "un-teachable" or "not worth the effort". The students, lacking the capital to challenge this narrative, internalize this judgment. The "tacit agreement" of silence in the classroom is thus not a sign of peace, but of a collective acceptance of this symbolic violence, where students collaborate in their own marginalization.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the teacher is not the ultimate antagonist but another victim ensnared in a structural "double bind". Buried under what he described as "endless non-teaching administrative burdens" and the relentless pressure to produce scores in a resource-poor environment, Mr. Zhang's "triage" is effectively a survival strategy against professional burnout. He is forced to economize his emotional and pedagogical energy to survive the institutional demands. The teacher, therefore, becomes an unwitting agent of the very system that oppresses both him and his students, transmitting the institutional pressure he endures downward onto the most vulnerable subjects.

5.4. Situating the Findings in a Global Context: The Limits of Compensatory Education

The situation in Mabian is a powerful local illustration of a global policy challenge: the limits of compensatory education. Around the world, from Indigenous communities in Canada to under-resourced urban schools in the United States, educational systems attempt to "compensate" for disadvantaged home environments by intensifying efforts within the school walls [36, 37]. Our findings demonstrate the inherent flaws in this model. By placing the entire burden of compensation on a single actor—the teacher—without fundamentally addressing the capital deficits in the family and community, the policy is doomed to fail. Mr. Zhang's burnout is a direct result of this flawed logic. This study therefore contributes to the international discourse by providing a rich, qualitative account of why such compensatory models often collapse at the classroom level, reinforcing the need for more holistic, ecosystem-based interventions.

5.5. Reimagining the Social Contract: Implications for a New Path Forward

The insights from this study necessitate a fundamental rethinking of support strategies, moving beyond simple fixes to reimagine the social contract of the rural school. This requires a dual approach: first, leveraging accessible technology to bypass the familial support vacuum, and second, restructuring systemic support for the overburdened teacher.

From School-as-Sole-Provider to School-as-Digital-Facilitator: The traditional model expecting parents to act as co-educators in subjects where they possess no cultural capital is untenable. Instead of pursuing unrealistic

interventions like parent training, schools in these contexts should be reconceptualized and resourced as digital learning hubs that facilitate access to a wider ecosystem of support [38–41]. The goal is not to "fix" the family, but to empower the student with tools that compensate for the support deficit.

We acknowledge, however, that this suggestion represents a provocative proposal for future policy direction rather than a simple, immediate remedy. Implementing this shift requires confronting the stark realities of the rural digital divide and the limits of existing teacher capacity. It demands significant investment in infrastructure and a reimagining of the teacher's role to prevent further burnout. Yet, given the persistent failure of traditional support structures observed in this study, we argue that such a fundamental systemic pivot is unavoidable.

This strategic shift can be operationalized through two primary avenues:

Leveraging AI for Personalized, Non-Judgmental Support: The proliferation of free or low-cost AI-powered language learning tools offers a powerful way to provide the instantaneous, personalized informational support that neither the parents nor the overburdened teacher can consistently offer. AI applications can provide immediate pronunciation feedback, grammar correction, and translation services, allowing students to resolve learning problems in real-time without the fear of "looking foolish" by asking a question in class [42]. By providing access to school computers or tablets and curating a list of effective, vetted AI learning apps, the school can foster learner autonomy and provide students with a private, judgment-free space to practice and make mistakes [43,44].

Harnessing Short-Form Video for Engagement and Authentic Input: The widespread use of platforms like Douyin (TikTok) has created a vast, free library of engaging, bite-sized English learning content. Educational influencers and live-streamers provide authentic language input in a format that is highly motivating for adolescents, starkly contrasting with the lethargic classroom environment observed in this study. The school's role is not to replace the teacher, but to act as a curator and facilitator. Teachers can guide students to high-quality educational accounts, integrating short videos into homework assignments to create a "flipped classroom" model where engaging content is consumed at home, freeing up precious class time for targeted interaction. This approach uses mobile learning to bridge the gap between students' digital lives and their academic needs, enhancing motivation and exposure to the language [45].

From Teacher Accountability to Systemic Responsibility: While technology can empower students, it cannot alleviate the immense pressure on teachers like Mr. Zhang. This technological shift must be paired with a policy shift from a narrow focus on teacher accountability to a broader sense of systemic responsibility. This requires re-evaluating performance metrics for teachers in high-poverty areas to include factors like student well-being and their effective integration of digital learning tools [46]. More importantly, it means drastically reducing non-teaching burdens (like "dropout control") and reallocating those resources to dedicated social workers or community liaisons. True support for students begins with genuinely supporting their teachers, creating the conditions where they have the time and energy to guide students through this new digital learning landscape. Critically, any technology-based intervention must also be accompanied by a state-led effort to address the digital divide, ensuring that infrastructure like reliable internet access is treated as a basic utility essential for educational equity.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative inquiry has revealed a system under strain, characterized by a lopsided dependency on an overburdened teacher. This is a direct result of a structural void in parental support, itself a product of limited family cultural and economic capital, leading to a fragile ecosystem of managed disengagement in the classroom.

The primary contribution of this research is its thick, contextualized description of the social support network for English learners, explained through an integrated theoretical framework. However, the study has limitations. As a single-case study, its findings are not intended to be generalized. Furthermore, this study deliberately focused on the teacher-parent-student axis, as our data indicated this was the most critical nexus of academic support. While we characterized peer support as primarily emotional, a future study could be dedicated to exploring the nuanced social dynamics of peer groups in this context and whether any informal academic support structures exist within them.

In addition, future research could build upon this study by conducting comparative case studies across different ethnic groups or regions. A longitudinal study tracking students from Grade 7 to Grade 9 could also provide valuable insights into the process of disengagement observed here. Furthermore, while this study utilized Bourdieu's lens of capital, future research could fruitfully employ "indigenous theories" or the framework of "glocalization" to examine

how global linguistic mandates culturally interact with local ethnic cosmologies. Ultimately, the path to educational equity requires a fundamental shift: we must enact policies that rebuild the entire support ecosystem, rather than continuing to ask the lone pillar of the teacher to bear the structural weight of the students' future alone.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, D.Y.; methodology, D.Y.; validation, A.C.; formal analysis, D.Y.; resources, D.Y.; data curation, A.C.; writing—original draft preparation, D.Y.; writing—review and editing, D.Y.; visualization, A.C.; supervision, D.Y.; project administration, D.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the assessment that it posed no more than minimal risk to participants, consistent with routine educational interactions. The study employed non-intrusive methods (semi-structured interviews and classroom observations), and all procedures adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was rigorously obtained from all participants and their guardians (including verbal explanations for parents to ensure full comprehension). Furthermore, participant privacy was safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms and secure data handling protocols to prevent any breach of confidentiality.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article are not publicly available in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, who are minors from a specific and identifiable community. However, data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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