

A Conceptual Paper: Factors Contributing to Learning Weariness among Vocational School Students in Western China

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Abstract – This study examines the phenomenon of learning weariness—a form of academic disengagement and fatigue—among vocational school students in Western China. The increasing prevalence of learning weariness in this educational context has raised concerns due to its detrimental impact on student performance, motivation, and retention rates. Drawing from a comprehensive review of existing literature, this study identifies a complex interplay of contributing factors, including individual motivation, family dynamics, school environments, and societal perceptions of vocational education. To investigate these dimensions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach. In the quantitative phase, a survey will be administered to measure the prevalence and severity of learning weariness, enabling the identification of students exhibiting significant disengagement. In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews and classroom observations will be conducted with selected students, teachers, and other stakeholders to explore the underlying causes and potential interventions from multiple perspectives. This sequential design facilitates both broad quantification and deep contextual understanding of the issue. The study aims to generate evidence-based strategies to mitigate learning weariness and enhance student engagement. Expected contributions include insights for educators and policymakers on targeted interventions—such as innovative pedagogical practices, strengthened family-school collaboration, and strategies to counter negative societal perceptions of vocational education. Ultimately, the findings will support efforts to create a more supportive and stimulating learning environment, promoting both academic success and overall well-being among vocational students in Western China.

Keywords – learning weariness, vocational school students, western China, mixed-methods

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning weariness among vocational school students has become an increasingly critical concern in educational research, particularly in China's western regions, where socioeconomic disparities and structural limitations in vocational education persist. Defined as a chronic state of academic fatigue and disengagement, learning weariness is characterized by emotional exhaustion, diminished motivation, and a declining sense of academic self-efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Yu, 2018). Recent studies suggest that vocational students are disproportionately affected by this phenomenon, with nearly 70% exhibiting moderate to severe disengagement and approximately 40% considering dropping out due to perceived irrelevance of their studies or lack of institutional

support (Fang & He, 2024; Han, 2023). Given the crucial role of vocational education in equipping students with practical skills and addressing labor market demands, this issue has significant implications for both individual career trajectories and broader economic development.

The causes of learning weariness are multifaceted and interrelated, spanning individual, familial, institutional, and societal dimensions. Psychological factors such as low intrinsic motivation, academic stress, and poor self-regulation contribute to student disengagement (Li & Liu, 2019). Family dynamics also play a crucial role—students from low-income backgrounds or those experiencing high parental expectations often report greater fatigue and frustration with their studies (Tao, 2019; Zhu, 2023). At the institutional level, rigid curricula, outdated pedagogical methods, and inadequate school resources have been identified as key contributors to student disinterest (Yang et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022). Furthermore, vocational education in China continues to suffer from societal stigma, with many students perceiving their academic pathway as inferior to traditional university routes, thereby further diminishing their motivation (Jiang, 2023; Zhou, 2021). These factors collectively exacerbate the prevalence of learning weariness and heighten the risk of academic attrition.

Despite increased research on student burnout and academic fatigue, existing interventions primarily focus on structural reforms rather than student-centered solutions. While efforts such as teacher-student mentorship programs, curriculum modifications, and psychological counselling have shown promise (Guo, 2023; Zhao, 2018), many initiatives remain underutilized, particularly in under-resourced vocational schools. Moreover, there is a limited understanding of how students themselves perceive and navigate learning weariness, leaving a gap in the literature regarding effective, student-driven engagement strategies.

Given these challenges, this study aims to provide a nuanced exploration of learning weariness among vocational students by employing a mixed-methods approach. By integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and observations, the research seeks to identify both the systemic and personal factors contributing to disengagement. Ultimately, the findings will inform evidence-based strategies to enhance student motivation, improve instructional practices, and support policy development in vocational education.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The phenomenon of learning weariness among vocational school students presents a significant challenge to educational engagement and long-term student success.

Empirical studies indicate that chronic disengagement negatively impacts academic achievement, increases absenteeism, and heightens dropout rates, particularly in vocational education settings (Fang & He, 2024; Han, 2023). This issue is further compounded by a lack of institutional mechanisms to effectively address the underlying causes of weariness, leaving many students with limited avenues for re-engagement.

One of the primary contributors to learning weariness is the perceived disconnect between vocational curricula and students' aspirations. Research suggests that when students find course content irrelevant or uninspiring, they are more likely to exhibit disengaged behaviours such as passive participation, task avoidance, and emotional detachment from learning (Qiao, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Additionally, rigid instructional methods and a lack of pedagogical innovation further exacerbate the issue, with many vocational programs failing to integrate experiential or student-centered learning strategies that have been shown to improve motivation (Zhang, 2022).

Beyond the school environment, personal and social factors significantly influence students' attitudes toward learning. Psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and low self-efficacy, has been identified as a key predictor of academic disengagement (Li & Liu, 2019; Han, 2021). Family-related stressors, such as financial instability and parental expectations, further intensify these psychological burdens, leading some students to view vocational education as a last resort rather than a viable career pathway (Tao, 2019; Zhu, 2023). Meanwhile, societal attitudes towards vocational education—often characterized by perceptions of inferiority compared to academic tracks—negatively impact student motivation, reinforcing cycles of low academic confidence and reduced effort (Jiang, 2023; Zhou, 2021).

While prior studies have examined learning weariness through quantitative analyses of academic burnout and disengagement (Maslach et al., 2001; Yu, 2018), few have adopted a holistic approach that considers the interplay of individual, institutional, and societal influences. Moreover, the voices of vocational students themselves remain underrepresented in the literature, limiting the ability of educators and policymakers to design targeted interventions that align with students' lived experiences.

This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a qualitatively-driven mixed-methods design that integrates survey data with in-depth student interviews and classroom observations. By capturing both statistical patterns and personal narratives, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of learning weariness and propose practical, evidence-based strategies for fostering student engagement in vocational education.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Concept of Learning Weariness

In educational research, learning weariness (also referred to as academic fatigue) is characterized by a persistent state of disengagement and exhaustion toward school-related activities. It shares conceptual similarities

with academic burnout, encompassing emotional exhaustion, cynicism or boredom toward learning, and a diminished sense of accomplishment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Yu, 2018). Students experiencing learning weariness often exhibit behavioural, cognitive, and emotional symptoms, including frequent tardiness or absenteeism, diminished concentration, low classroom participation, and a pessimistic attitude toward learning. For instance, Yu (2018) found that vocational students with high levels of weariness reported feeling overwhelmed by their studies and detached from their academic goals. These indicators reflect a significant decline in student engagement and motivation, which, if unaddressed, can lead to long-term academic underperformance and dropout risks.

Recent studies highlight both the prevalence and consequences of learning weariness among vocational students. Jiang (2023) reported that 45% of vocational students in China exhibited low motivation, largely due to perceived societal stigma, while 30% attributed their disengagement to insufficient school resources. Another survey found that approximately 60% of vocational students demonstrated symptoms of learning weariness, with nearly one-quarter experiencing severe levels that contributed to academic failure or dropout intentions (Fang & He, 2024). The impact of learning weariness is evident in student performance metrics, as schools with high levels of disengagement often report increased absenteeism and dropout rates (Han, 2023; Guo, 2023). However, research also suggests that addressing this issue through improved learning environments—such as enhanced classroom facilities and supportive school climates—can significantly reduce student fatigue. Han, Cao, and Yang (2021) found that interventions targeting these factors led to a 15% decrease in dropout rates. Conversely, vocational schools in underdeveloped regions with limited resources reported significantly higher incidences of learning weariness compared to their well-funded counterparts (Gong, 2021). These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted strategies to mitigate learning weariness and enhance student engagement.

Individual-Level Factors:

Student-related characteristics and psychological factors play a crucial role in the development of learning weariness. Students with low intrinsic motivation, weak self-efficacy, or ineffective study habits are more likely to experience boredom and frustration in their coursework. Additionally, psychological distress—such as school-related anxiety or depression—can exacerbate disengagement. Li and Liu (2019) identified school-related anxiety as a significant predictor of academic disengagement among Chinese adolescents. Similarly, Han (2021) found that vocational students with higher psychological resilience and effective coping strategies exhibited lower levels of academic fatigue, suggesting that fostering resilience could serve as a protective factor against weariness.

Peer influence also plays a critical role in shaping student engagement. Negative peer pressure or socialization with disengaged classmates can reinforce apathy toward school. Liu (2021) observed that vocational

students who associated with unmotivated peers were more likely to exhibit academic fatigue themselves, highlighting the role of peer dynamics in sustaining disengagement. Taken together, individual-level factors—including motivation, mental health, and peer influence—collectively contribute to the onset and persistence of learning weariness.

Family Factors

A student's home environment significantly influences their academic engagement. Supportive family relationships and an encouraging home atmosphere are protective factors against academic weariness, while family stressors can exacerbate disengagement. Parenting styles, in particular, have been linked to student burnout. Tao (2019) found that punitive or neglectful parenting correlates with higher incidences of academic fatigue, whereas parental involvement and support foster more positive academic attitudes.

Socioeconomic background is another critical determinant. Vocational students from economically disadvantaged families often face additional stressors, such as financial instability or the necessity to work part-time, which detract from their focus on studies (Li & Qiu, 2020; Zhu, 2023). In some cases, family misconceptions about vocational education—viewing it as an inferior academic track—can lead to misaligned expectations, further diminishing student motivation.

The challenges faced by students in Western China are further compounded by social phenomena such as “left-behind” children—students whose parents migrate for work, leaving them under the care of extended family. This lack of parental presence has been linked to decreased academic motivation and increased psychological distress (Zhu, 2023). Additionally, cultural factors unique to minority ethnic groups in the region may influence students' perceptions of education, potentially shaping their academic engagement in ways that are not yet fully explored in the literature. These findings suggest that when familial support is lacking or when negative pressures exist, students are at a heightened risk of developing learning weariness.

School Factors

The school environment plays a pivotal role in shaping student engagement and, consequently, in either mitigating or exacerbating learning weariness. Several key dimensions—including curriculum design, teaching quality, institutional support, and overall school climate—contribute to students' academic experiences.

Curriculum and pedagogy are central to student motivation. If students perceive the curriculum as irrelevant to their interests or future careers, or if teaching methods rely heavily on rote memorization and rigid instruction, disengagement is likely to occur (Yang et al., 2021; Zhang, 2022). Research on China's vocational education system suggests that curricula have historically been overly theoretical, lacking sufficient emphasis on practical skills that align with student aspirations (Qiao, 2019).

Teaching quality and school management are also significant factors. The presence of experienced, supportive educators is critical to fostering student interest and confidence in learning. Zhao (2018) found that strong teacher support and positive teacher-student relationships were associated with lower levels of school burnout among vocational students. Conversely, negative teacher-student interactions—such as indifference, harsh discipline, or a lack of individualized attention—can exacerbate disillusionment (Han, 2023).

The broader school climate and available resources further influence student experiences. Schools characterized by frequent disciplinary issues, bullying, or an indifferent institutional culture may foster anxiety and avoidance behaviours among students (Zhou, 2021). Infrastructure deficiencies—such as outdated equipment, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate academic support services—have been directly linked to higher levels of frustration and fatigue among vocational students (Gong, 2021; Jiang, 2023). These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive improvements in curriculum design, teacher training, student support services, and overall school infrastructure to effectively address learning weariness.

Societal and Cultural Factors

Broader societal attitudes and economic conditions create the context within which vocational students develop their academic identities. In China, a long-standing cultural bias favours university-bound academic education over vocational training, often perceiving the latter as a less prestigious and lower-status path. This societal stigma has a profound impact on student motivation, as many vocational students internalize negative stereotypes and develop a diminished sense of academic self-worth (Jiang, 2023; Zhou, 2021). The perception of vocational education as a “last resort” rather than a viable career pathway discourages student engagement and aspirations.

Social identity and self-perception also play a role. Being categorized in a devalued educational track can harm students' self-concept, leading to disengagement as a response to perceived discrimination. Furthermore, economic factors influence vocational students' outlook on education. Zhu (2023) highlights how economic hardships and limited local job prospects contribute to students' uncertainty about the benefits of their schooling, reinforcing apathy toward academic efforts.

Community norms and peer expectations further shape student attitudes. In regions where formal education is not highly valued or where dropout rates are high, students may adopt similar perspectives, viewing schooling as having limited personal or professional rewards. These macro-level influences, while indirect, exert a significant impact on vocational students' motivation and contribute to the persistence of learning weariness.

IV. METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design, integrating an initial quantitative survey

with subsequent qualitative inquiry. A mixed-methods approach is well-suited to capturing both the prevalence and underlying causes of learning weariness, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study follows an exploratory sequential design, where the quantitative phase serves as a foundation for the qualitative phase. The survey data will identify key patterns and student groups experiencing high levels of learning weariness, informing the selection of participants and focal issues for the qualitative phase. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods leverages their complementary strengths: the survey offers statistical generalizability, while interviews and observations provide in-depth, context-rich insights into students' lived experiences.

Quantitative Phase: Survey

The first phase involves administering a structured questionnaire survey to vocational high school students in the target region (e.g., multiple vocational schools in Xinjiang). The survey instrument includes a standardized measure of academic burnout or learning engagement, adapted from established scales such as the Student Learning Burnout Questionnaire (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Additionally, the survey includes items capturing key influencing factors such as motivation levels, study habits, socioeconomic background, and school-related perceptions.

A stratified sampling technique will be employed to ensure representation across different demographics, including gender, grade level, and major/trade specialization. The expected sample size consists of several hundred students, providing robust data on the prevalence and distribution of learning weariness. Quantitative data will be analysed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distributions, mean scores) and inferential analyses (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA, or regression analysis) to explore relationships between learning weariness and potential influencing factors. Furthermore, survey results will facilitate the selection of students exhibiting high levels of weariness for the qualitative phase, ensuring that the subsequent inquiry focuses on those most affected by the phenomenon.

Qualitative Phase (Interviews and Observations)

The second phase employs qualitative methods to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of students identified as experiencing significant learning weariness. A purposive sample of approximately 20–30 students will be selected based on their survey responses. In addition to students, a small number of teachers, school counsellors, and parents may be interviewed to gain triangulating perspectives on the issue.

Semi-structured interviews will explore students' daily school experiences, perceptions of the curriculum, relationships with teachers and peers, family expectations, and coping mechanisms. Open-ended questions will allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, with prompts encouraging the sharing of specific examples (e.g., a time they felt particularly disengaged or a

change that improved their motivation). Interviews will be conducted in a conversational manner to ensure a comfortable and open dialogue, and all interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Complementing the interviews, classroom observations will be conducted to examine students' behaviours and interactions in real-time educational settings. Researchers will observe students during lessons, group activities, and school routines, noting indicators of engagement or disengagement (e.g., participation in class discussions, attentiveness, body language, avoidance behaviours). Detailed field notes will be maintained to document patterns and contextual factors influencing student engagement.

Data Analysis and Integration

A rigorous analytical strategy will be employed to ensure the reliability and validity of findings. For quantitative data analysis, survey data will be analysed using statistical software to generate descriptive and inferential statistics. Reliability measures, such as Cronbach's alpha, will be computed to assess the internal consistency of the survey instrument. Regression analyses may be conducted to examine predictors of learning weariness, identifying significant demographic or environmental factors contributing to disengagement.

As for qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) will be used to identify patterns within interview transcripts and observation notes. Qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) may assist in organizing codes and detecting co-occurring themes. An inductive coding approach will be applied, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data. Key themes will include factors such as "lack of curriculum relevance," "peer influence on motivation," and "impact of family expectations." Representative quotes and observational data will be used to illustrate these themes.

To enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, the study will incorporate strategies such as member checking (where select participants review summaries of their interviews for accuracy) and data triangulation (comparing insights from students, teachers, and observational findings). The final stage involves synthesizing quantitative and qualitative findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of learning weariness. Quantitative results will provide a broad contextual overview, while qualitative insights will elucidate the mechanisms underlying observed patterns. This integrated approach ensures that findings are not only statistically valid but also deeply contextualized, offering actionable insights for educational policymakers and practitioners.

By combining statistical rigor with in-depth qualitative inquiry, this study provides a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of learning weariness among vocational students. The methodological design ensures that the conclusions drawn are both generalizable and richly informed by students' real-world experiences.

V. Expected Contributions

This study will contribute to the scholarly understanding of student disengagement by addressing an important gap in the literature. While many prior studies on learning weariness have been conducted in other regions or at a general level, comprehensive research focusing on vocational school students in Western China is limited. By examining multiple levels of influence (personal, familial, institutional, and societal) in a single study, and by capturing students' first-hand perspectives, this research will enrich the theoretical discourse on academic motivation and burnout. The findings are expected to validate and extend theoretical frameworks – for example, by applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to empirical data on vocational education, the study may refine how we conceptualize the interplay of factors affecting student engagement. Furthermore, the study's mixed-methods approach and student-centered focus can serve as a model for researching complex educational phenomena. Academic research into issues like learning weariness provides essential theoretical support for improving educational practices and solving practical problems. In line with that, this work will offer evidence-based insights that deepen our understanding of why vocational students become disengaged, thereby laying groundwork for future interventions and studies.

In addition to theoretical implications, the study aims to yield findings that are directly actionable for educators, administrators, and policymakers. The identification of specific factors leading to learning weariness will inform the development of targeted intervention strategies for vocational schools. For example, if lack of curriculum relevance is confirmed as a major factor, school administrators can revise and adapt curricula to better align with student interests and real-world applications. If family-related issues are significant, schools and communities can devise parent engagement programs or counselling support for students facing home difficulties. Insights from student interviews will highlight what kinds of teaching methods or activities students themselves find engaging – this can guide teachers in adopting more student-centered pedagogies to rekindle interest in the classroom. Policymakers, on the other hand, can benefit from the regional focus of this research by recognizing the resource gaps and policy needs in Western China's vocational education sector. The study may suggest the need for increased investment in vocational schools (e.g., improving facilities, providing training for teachers in student engagement techniques, hiring psychological counsellors) and for campaigns to improve the social perception of vocational education. By disseminating success stories and effective strategies, the research can also help change public attitudes that contribute to stigma. Ultimately, the expected outcome is a set of practical recommendations – grounded in empirical data – that can help reduce student apathy, improve academic performance, and enhance the overall quality of vocational education in the region.

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