Effective Intervention Paths of School Social Work in the Social Support System for Poor College Students in Shanxi Province, China

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore effective intervention paths of school social work in optimizing the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province, China. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 2 education bureau leaders, 3 university funding center administrators, 5 counselors, 20 poor College Students, and 2 focus groups (10 students each) via purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding with ATLAS.ti software. The results identified three core statuses of the current social support system: government-dominated financial support, insufficient emotional support, and fragmented school-based support. Corresponding problems included a single support subject, unbalanced support content, and inefficient coordination mechanisms. Three effective intervention paths were proposed: constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative support network, optimizing the structure of support content, and establishing an integrated school social work service mechanism. This study provides empirical evidence and practical references for improving the social support system for poor College Students and promoting the professional development of school social work in China.

Keywords: School social work, Poor College Students, Social support system, Intervention paths

1. Introduction

Poverty among college students remains a prominent social issue in China, despite the continuous improvement of the national student financial aid system. The 2024 China Student Financial Aid Development Report indicates that although the coverage of financial aid for poor College Students has exceeded 95%, many students still face multiple challenges such as economic pressure, psychological distress, and inadequate social support (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025). Shanxi Province, as a key region in central China with a large number of low-income families due to industrial restructuring (Zhao, 2024), its poor College Students are particularly vulnerable to insufficient social support, which affects their academic performance, psychological well-being, and social integration (Li & Kamarul Bahrin, 2024).

Social support systems play a critical role in mitigating the adverse impacts of poverty on college students, including reducing psychological stress, enhancing academic engagement, and improving subjective well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Yu et al., 2023). However, existing support systems for poor College Students in China are often dominated by financial aid, lacking attention to emotional, informational, and developmental support (Hou & Guo, 2018). School social work, as a professional practice focusing on students' holistic development, has unique

advantages in integrating resources, providing personalized services, and promoting system optimization (Yang, 2020). Nevertheless, the development of school social work in Shanxi Province is still in its infancy, facing challenges such as insufficient professional personnel, unclear service boundaries, and weak institutionalization (Niu, 2022).

Against this background, this study explores the effective intervention paths of school social work in the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province. The research objectives are: (1) to investigate the current status of the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi; (2) to identify the key problems in the existing system; (3) to propose targeted intervention paths based on school social work. This study enriches the empirical research on school social work in the Chinese context and provides practical guidance for improving the well-being of poor College Students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Status of Poor College Students in China

Poor College Students refer to those from low-income families who face difficulties in covering tuition fees and living expenses. According to the 2024 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), China still has a considerable number of people living in multidimensional poverty, with education and economic deprivation being the main dimensions (United Nations, 2024). For these students, economic pressure not only affects their daily life but also leads to psychological problems such as inferiority, anxiety, and low self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2020; Ogbuagu et al., 2025). Studies have shown that poor College Students in China have lower levels of subjective well-being and academic engagement compared to their non-poor peers, largely due to insufficient social support (Yu & Zhou, 2022; Zuo et al., 2024).

2.2. Social Support System for Poor College Students

Social support systems for poor College Students in China mainly include formal support (government funding, school aid, and social donations) and informal support (family, peer, and community support) (Barrera, 1986; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Government funding is the core of formal support, including scholarships, grants, student loans, and work-study programs (Qi et al., 2022). However, this support is often standardized and lacks flexibility, failing to meet the individual needs of students (Hou & Guo, 2018). Informal support, especially peer and family support, plays an important role in emotional comfort, but many poor students face inadequate family support due to their families' economic conditions (Li et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2023).

2.3. Development Status of School Social Work in China

School social work was introduced into China in the 1980s and has developed rapidly in recent years, with a focus on student development, psychological counseling, and resource integration (Li & Lin, 2019). The Ministry of Education has emphasized the integration of social work into school education to promote students' holistic development (Wang, 2019). However, the development of school social work in China is uneven across regions. In economically developed areas such as Guangdong and Shanghai, school social work has achieved remarkable results in student support and school management, while in central and western regions like Shanxi, it is constrained by factors such as insufficient funding, lack of professional training, and low social recognition (Niu, 2022).

2.4. Difficulties and Feasible Paths of School Social Work Intervention

The main difficulties in school social work intervention include: (1) a single support subject, with insufficient participation of non-governmental organizations and enterprises (Luo & Liu, 2022); (2) unbalanced support content, focusing on economic support while neglecting emotional and developmental support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990); (3) fragmented support mechanisms, with poor coordination between different support providers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Feasible paths proposed in existing studies include: constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative network based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); optimizing support content to achieve the optimal matching of support types and student needs (Cutrona & Russell, 1990); and embedding school social work into the school management system to form an integrated service mechanism (Yang, 2020; Peng, 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the complex dynamics of the social support system for poor College Students and the intervention potential of school social work. Qualitative research is suitable for investigating subjective experiences and social phenomena in specific contexts, allowing for in-depth understanding of the research problem (Patton, 2014).

3.2. Sampling Method and Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with rich experience and relevant insights into the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province (Marshall, 1996). The sample included: (1) 2 leaders from the Shanxi Provincial Department of Education, responsible for formulating student financial aid policies; (2) 3 administrators from university funding centers (Shanxi University, Taiyuan University of Technology, and Shanxi Normal University), with more than 5 years of experience in student aid work; (3) 5 college counselors, who have close contact with poor College Students in daily work; (4) 20 poor College Students from different majors, with family economic difficulties certified by the school; (5) 2 focus groups, each consisting of 10 poor College Students, to explore collective experiences and perspectives. All participants were informed of the research purpose and signed informed consent forms.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions from October to December 2024. Each in-depth interview lasted 45-60 minutes, and each focus group discussion lasted 90 minutes. The interview outlines included questions about the current status of social support, existing problems, and expectations for school social work services. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in transcribed text.

3.4. Data Analysis Process

Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory, including three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Patton, 2014). Open coding involved breaking down the transcribed text into concepts and categories; axial coding focused on identifying the relationships between categories; selective coding involved integrating categories into a core theoretical framework.

ATLAS.ti 22 software was used to manage and analyze the data, ensuring the rigor of the analysis process.

3.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, four strategies were adopted: (1) triangulation, comparing data from different participants (leaders, administrators, counselors, and students); (2) member checking, sharing the analysis results with 5 participants to verify accuracy; (3) peer review, inviting two social work scholars to review the research process and results; (4) detailed documentation of the research process to ensure transparency (Patton, 2014).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study was granted ethical approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (Study Protocol Code: USM/JEPeM/PP/24070607). All study procedures, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis, were conducted in strict compliance with international ethical guidelines and research norms.

4. Result

4.1. Current Status, Problems, and Effective Intervention Paths

The analysis identified three core statuses of the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province, corresponding three key problems, and three effective intervention paths (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Current Status, Problems, and Intervention Paths

Current Status	Key Problems	Effective Intervention Paths
1. Government-dominated financial support, with limited participation of social forces and family support (Ministry of Education, 2025; Qi et al., 2022)	1. Single support subject, insufficient coordination between formal and informal support	1. Construct a "government-school-community-family" multi-stakeholder collaborative support network based on ecological systems theory
2. Emphasis on economic support (tuition fees, living expenses), lack of emotional support (psychological counseling, interpersonal guidance) and developmental support (career planning, skill training) (Yu et al., 2023; Zuo et al., 2024)	2. Unbalanced support content, failure to meet the holistic needs of students	2. Optimize support content structure, integrate emotional, instrumental, and developmental support based on optimal matching theory
3. Fragmented school-based support, with separated functions of funding centers, counselors, and psychological counseling centers (Chen, 2021; Wang, 2019)	3. Fragmented support mechanism, inefficient resource integration	3. Embed school social work services, establish an integrated support mechanism with social workers as coordinators

4.2. Detailed Explanation of Intervention Paths

Multi-stakeholder Collaborative Support Network aims to break the current situation of government-dominated support by integrating resources from schools, communities, families, and social organizations. School social workers act as coordinators to establish a communication platform between different stakeholders. For example, social workers can cooperate with community organizations to provide part-time jobs for students, link family support through home visits, and attract social donations through public welfare projects. This path is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, emphasizing the interaction between individuals and their social environments to form a comprehensive support network.

Optimized Support Content Structure means school social work should adjust the support content from a single economic focus to a holistic support system covering emotional, instrumental, and developmental dimensions. Emotional support includes individual counseling and group activities to alleviate students' psychological stress; instrumental support focuses on improving the flexibility of financial aid to meet individual needs; developmental support includes career planning workshops and skill training to enhance students' employability. This path is guided by Cutrona and Russell's (1990) optimal matching theory, ensuring that the type and intensity of support match students' specific needs.

Integrated School Social Work Service Mechanism emphasizes that embedding school social work into the school management system is crucial for improving the efficiency of support services. Social workers should be incorporated into the student support team, cooperating with funding centers, counselors, and psychological counseling centers to formulate personalized support plans for each poor College Student. For example, social workers can conduct needs assessments for students, coordinate resources from different departments, and track the effectiveness of support services. This path draws on Li and Lin's (2019) embeddedness theory, emphasizing the integration of social work services into existing institutional structures to achieve sustainable development.

5. Discussion

This study identified three core problems in the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province: a single support subject, unbalanced support content, and fragmented support mechanisms. These findings are consistent with previous studies on poor College Students in China (Hou & Guo, 2018; Niu, 2022), indicating that the structural problems of the social support system are widespread in central and western regions.

The proposed intervention paths highlight the core role of school social work in optimizing the social support system. The multi-stakeholder collaborative network addresses the problem of a single support subject by integrating resources from multiple sectors, which is supported by Yang's (2020) research on school social work participating in student financial aid. The optimized support content structure responds to the unbalanced support content by meeting students' holistic needs, which aligns with Zuo et al.'s (2024) finding that perceived social support and positive emotions are key factors affecting the subjective well-being of poor College Students. The integrated service mechanism solves the problem of fragmented support by embedding social work into the school system, which is consistent with Li and Lin's (2019) research on the local path of school social work.

The intervention paths proposed in this study have important practical implications. First, the multi-stakeholder collaborative network can expand the sources of social support, reducing the reliance on government funding. Second, the optimized support content structure can improve the effectiveness of support services by meeting students' diverse needs. Third, the integrated service mechanism can enhance the sustainability of support services by integrating social work into the school system. However, the implementation of these paths requires the joint efforts of the government, schools, and social organizations, including increasing investment in school social work, training professional personnel, and improving relevant policies.

This study also has some limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, and the findings may not be fully generalized to other regions. Second, the qualitative research design limits the ability to quantify the effectiveness of intervention paths. Future research should expand the sample size, adopt a mixed-methods design, and conduct longitudinal studies to verify the long-term effectiveness of the proposed paths.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the effective intervention paths of school social work in the social support system for poor College Students in Shanxi Province through qualitative research. The results show that the current social support system is characterized by government-dominated financial support, insufficient emotional support, and fragmented school-based support, with corresponding problems of a single support subject, unbalanced support content, and fragmented support mechanisms. Three effective intervention paths are proposed: constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative support network, optimizing the support content structure, and establishing an integrated school social work service mechanism.

This study enriches the empirical research on school social work in the Chinese context and provides practical references for improving the social support system for poor College Students. The proposed intervention paths emphasize the core role of school social work in integrating resources, meeting diverse needs, and promoting system optimization, which is of great significance for enhancing the well-being of poor College Students and promoting educational equity. Future research should focus on the implementation and evaluation of the intervention paths to provide more evidence for the professional development of school social work in China.

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