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A Research on the Relationship Between Emotional Burden and Educational Expectation among Young Caregivers—Based on the Moderating Effect of Perceived Policy Absence

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Abstract. Young caregivers are children and adolescents undertaking unpaid family caregiving responsibilities within their families. Because this group is relatively small and often lacks formal channels for recognition and support, their need are frequently overlooked by public services. Existing scholarship predominantly focuses on their mental health and academic performance, while few studies investigate how emotional burden shapes educational expectation, as well as the moderating role of perceived policy absence. Based on questionnaire data from 237 Chinese young caregivers, this study applies hierarchical regression and bootstrap methods to test the proposed model. Results indicate that emotional burden significantly negatively predicts educational expectation. Furthermore, perceived policy absence strengthens this negative association: when young caregivers perceive higher policy absence, the detrimental effect of emotional burden on educational expectation becomes more pronounced. This study contributes empirical evidence to understand the educational psychology of Chinese young caregivers and offers practical implications for targeted future support-policy design.

Keywords: young caregivers, emotional burden, educational expectation, perceived policy absence

1. Introduction

The *Outline of the Development of Chinese Children*prioritizes children's development and emphasizes support for children in vulnerable circumstances and their families [1]. The *Minor Protection Law of the People's Republic of China* stipulates multi-party responsibilities for safeguarding minors' rights [2]. Collectively, these legal and policy documents construct a child-protection system oriented toward children's rights and family-based support. Nevertheless, current domestic policies largely target minors as care recipients, with insufficient attention directed toward young caregivers — children and adolescents who bear substantial unpaid family-care responsibilities.

International contexts have developed relatively mature institutional arrangements for young caregivers. In the United Kingdom, the *Care Act* and *Children and Families Act* mandate local governments to identify and assess young caregivers' needs [3, 4]. National census data show

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around 120 000 young unpaid caregivers aged 5-17 in England [5]. Japan also incorporated young caregivers into national policy agendas after 2021 and launched national surveys and school-based identification systems [6]. These international practices demonstrate that young caregivers have become a visible research and policy concern.

Existing international research has explored young caregivers' care responsibilities, mental health and educational outcomes [7]. Prior studies confirm that caregiving tasks bring considerable emotional stress and may produce a "caregiving penalty" that harms adolescents' academic and future opportunities [8]. Educational expectation, a critical predictor of long-term educational attainment, remains under-studied among Chinese young caregivers. Most existing work focuses on objective academic performance rather than subjective educational aspirations. Moreover, prior policy-related research concentrates on objective policy supply, ignoring young caregivers' subjective perception of policy absence. Subjective perception of institutional support may reshape how care-related stress translates into developmental outcomes.

Against this background, this study addresses two core research questions: (1) What is the relationship between emotional burden and educational expectation among Chinese young caregivers? (2) Does perceived policy absence moderate the association between emotional burden and educational expectation? Drawing on questionnaire data of 237 young caregivers, this study employs correlation analysis, hierarchical regression and bootstrap resampling to test the theoretical model. This paper fills empirical gaps in Chinese young-caregiver research and provides evidence for designing localized support measures.

2. Literature review

In recent years, young carers have become an important topic in education, sociology, and public policy. Existing studies are mainly concentrated in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan. In general, the literature focuses on three areas: the characteristics of young carers, the developmental effects of caregiving, and support systems.

First, studies on the characteristics of young carers mainly examine their definitions, caregiving tasks, and identity recognition. Joseph et al. [9] described young carers as children and adolescents who take on long-term caregiving responsibilities within the family . They usually care for family members who are ill, disabled, or in need of long-term support. Janes et al. [10] found that their responsibilities include not only daily care, but also emotional support and household management. At the same time, Phelps [11] argued that young carers often remain "invisible." Their caregiving role may be overlooked by schools and society. A national survey in Japan also showed that some children begin caregiving during primary school. Their care recipients include parents, grandparents, and siblings [6].

Second, studies on the developmental effects of caregiving mainly focus on mental health and education. Janes et al. [10] found that long-term caregiving responsibilities increase psychological stress and may affect social adjustment. Wang and Niu [12] also found that greater caregiving burden among young carers was associated with higher psychological distress and more negative cognitive and emotional outcomes. This suggests that emotional burden is an important consequence of long-term caregiving responsibilities. Hamilton and Redmond [13] found that young carers generally had lower levels of school engagement than non-carers. Some young carers also experienced more school absence and poorer academic performance. Robison et al. [14] found that young carers were significantly less likely than their peers to expect to enter further or higher education. This provides direct evidence that caregiving responsibilities may also be related to young carers' expectations for their educational future. In addition, Jacob and Wilder [15] argued

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that educational expectation refers to an individual's subjective judgment about future educational attainment. It can be influenced by family and social environments. This provides a theoretical basis for understanding the educational development of young carers.

Finally, studies on support systems mainly examine the role of social and policy support. Janes et al. [10] suggested that support from families, communities, and service organizations can reduce caregiving stress. [16] found that many young carers remained unidentified and were not included in formal support systems. This reflects continuing gaps in institutional support.

However, several research gaps remain. First, most existing studies are based on Western social and cultural contexts, while empirical evidence on young caregivers in China remains limited. Second, although educational expectation is considered an important predictor of future educational attainment, few studies have specifically examined educational expectation among young caregivers. Third, previous studies have mainly focused on objective policy provision and have rarely examined young caregivers' subjective perceptions of policy absence. Such perceptions may play an important role in shaping their psychological expectations. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between emotional burden and educational expectation among young caregivers in China. It also introduces perceived policy absence as a moderating variable to address these gaps in the existing literature.

3. Development of research hypotheses

3.1. Emotional burden and educational expectation

Educational expectation reflects individuals' evaluation of available personal resources and future possibilities, which are deeply shaped by current emotional experiences. Two theoretical pathways explain why emotional burden may reduce educational expectation among young caregivers.

First, the resource-dilution perspective [17] argues that time, energy and cognitive resources are finite. Sustained family caregiving consumes substantial psychological resources, leaving fewer personal resources for school-related investment. Depleted resources may undermine academic confidence and dampen expectations for future education.

Second, time-perspective theory and future-orientation research suggest that chronic emotional distress shifts individuals' attention toward immediate urgent demands rather than long-term goals [18, 19]. Persistent emotional burden makes young caregivers prioritize day-to-day caregiving tasks, weakening positive future planning and lowering educational expectation. Accordingly:

H1: Emotional burden negatively affects educational expectation among young caregivers.

3.2. Moderating role of perceived policy absence

Perceived policy absence describes young caregivers' subjective judgment that formal policy and institutional support are missing for their group. When individuals perceive a lack of responsive institutional support, the adverse impacts of stress may become amplified. Two psychological mechanisms underpin this moderation effect.

First, high perceived policy absence may trigger learned helplessness [20]. If young caregivers attribute their care-related distress to social neglect and institutional unresponsiveness, they may develop a reduced sense of personal control over their own futures. Second, absent perceived policy support undermines self-efficacy [21]. Lower self-efficacy discourages persistence toward long-term difficult goals. Young caregivers may come to believe personal efforts cannot improve their

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situation, further lowering educational aspirations. In other words, the negative influence of emotional burden should be stronger when perceived policy absence is high.

H2: Perceived policy absence moderates the relationship between emotional burden and educational expectation. Specifically, higher perceived policy absence strengthens the negative effect of emotional burden on educational expectation.

4. Research methods

4.1. Participants and procedure

This study focused on young caregivers. Based on the definition presented above, participants were required to meet the following criteria: (1) aged 5–25 years; (2) currently providing unpaid care to a family member; (3) caring for a family member with an illness or disability, such as a parent, grandparent, or sibling; and (4) having provided care, practical help, or emotional support to a family member for at least six months.

Purposive sampling was used. In May 2026, questionnaires were distributed to young caregivers from three schools, including one primary school, one middle school, and one high school. A total of 632 questionnaires were distributed and returned. Among them, 237 were valid. Of the 237 valid participants, 91 were male (39.2%), 125 were female (53.9%), and 16 preferred not to disclose their gender (6.9%). The mean age was 13.75 years. The average daily caregiving time was approximately 1.51 hours.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Emotional burden

The emotional burden measure was adapted from the Zarit Burden Interview [22]. Six items focusing on emotional experiences were selected. Sample items included "Caregiving tasks make me feel emotionally exhausted" and "I often feel depressed because of caregiving." Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Higher scores indicated greater emotional burden.

4.2.2. Educational expectation

Educational expectation was measured using three self-developed items. Sample items included "I expect to complete at least a university education," "No matter how difficult it is, I want to pursue opportunities for higher education," and "I have clear and high educational goals for the future." Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Higher scores indicated higher educational expectation.

4.2.3. Perceived policy absence

The perceived policy absence measure was adapted from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support developed by Zimet et al. [23]. Twelve items were selected and revised. Sample items included "I feel that the government lacks specific support for young caregivers like us" and "My school has no support policies designed for students with caregiving responsibilities." Each item was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (completely true). Higher scores indicated stronger perceived policy absence and lower perceived policy support.

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4.2.4. Control variables

The control variables included age, gender (1 = male, 0 = female), daily caregiving time, and family economic status.

4.3. Data analysis

SPSS 26.0 was used for quantitative data analysis. First, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to examine common method bias. Second, descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analyses were performed. These analyses described the sample characteristics and examined the relationships among emotional burden, educational expectation, perceived policy absence, and the control variables. This study used the PROCESS macro to test the moderating effect. Bootstrap resampling was set to 5,000 samples, with a 95% confidence interval.

Third, hierarchical regression analysis was used to test H1 and H2. The predictor variables were first mean-centered. In Step 1, only the control variables were entered. In Step 2, the main effects of emotional burden and perceived policy absence were added. In Step 3, the interaction term between emotional burden and perceived policy absence was entered. If the interaction effect was significant, a simple slope analysis was conducted and a moderation effect figure was produced. Finally, the bootstrap method was used to test the robustness of the results.

5. Result

5.1. Common method bias test

All variables in this study were measured through questionnaire scales. Therefore, common method bias needed to be examined. Harman's single-factor test was used. All measurement items were entered into an unrotated principal component analysis. The results showed that the first factor explained 21.37% of the total variance. This value was lower than the 40% threshold. Therefore, common method bias was not a serious problem in this study.

5.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients of the main variables. Emotional burden was negatively correlated with educational expectation ($r = -0.414$, $p < 0.01$). This result provides preliminary support for H1. Perceived policy absence was also negatively correlated with educational expectation ($r = -0.352$, $p < 0.01$). It was positively correlated with emotional burden ($r = 0.306$, $p < 0.01$).

For the control variables, daily caregiving time was negatively correlated with educational expectation ($r = -0.227$, $p < 0.01$). Family economic status was positively correlated with educational expectation ($r = 0.258$, $p < 0.01$). Age and gender were not significantly correlated with educational expectation.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables (n = 237)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	13.75	1.71	1.000					
2. Gender（1=male）	—	—	-0.098	1.000				

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Table 1. (continued)

Daily Caregiving Time	2.64	1.33	0.069	-0.045	1.000			
4. Family Economic Status	2.92	0.87	-0.116	0.081	-0.108	1.000		
5. Emotional Burden	3.41	0.96	0.083	-0.067	0.316**	-0.224**	1.000	
6.Perceived Policy Absence	3.17	0.91	0.078	-0.052	0.248**	-0.236**	0.306**	1.000
	3.68	0.82	-0.086	0.072	-0.227**	0.258**	-0.414**	-0.352**

5.3. Regression analysis of emotional burden on educational expectation

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test H1 and H2. H1 predicted that emotional burden would negatively predict educational expectation. H2 predicted that perceived policy absence would moderate this relationship.

In Step 1, the control variables were entered. These variables included age, gender, daily caregiving time, and family economic status. In Step 2, emotional burden and perceived policy absence were entered. In Step 3, the interaction term between emotional burden and perceived policy absence was entered. All predictors were mean-centered before the interaction term was created. The results are shown in Table 2.

Model 1 included only the control variables. Daily caregiving time negatively predicted educational expectation ($\beta = -0.189$, $p < 0.01$). Family economic status positively predicted educational expectation ($\beta = 0.236$, $p < 0.001$). Age and gender were not significant predictors. The adjusted R^2 of Model 1 was 0.103. This means that the control variables explained 10.3% of the variance in educational expectation.

Model 2 included the main effects of emotional burden and perceived policy absence. The model explained more variance than Model 1 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.168$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional burden negatively predicted educational expectation ($\beta = -0.347$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived policy absence also negatively predicted educational expectation ($\beta = -0.241$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H1 was supported. Young caregivers with higher emotional burden tended to report lower educational expectation.

Model 3 included the interaction term. The interaction between emotional burden and perceived policy absence was significant ($\beta = -0.175$, $p < 0.01$). The model explained more variance than Model 2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.030$, $p < 0.01$). The adjusted R^2 of Model 3 was 0.294. This value was higher than that of Model 1 and Model 2. Therefore, Model 3 had the strongest explanatory power. These results show that perceived policy absence moderated the relationship between emotional burden and educational expectation. Thus, H2 was supported.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results of emotional burden predicting educational expectation (n = 237)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Control Variables			
Age	-0.059	-0.040	-0.036
Gender（1=male）	0.059	0.061	0.056
Daily Caregiving Time	-0.189**	-0.105	-0.103

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Table 2. (continued)

Family Economic Status	0.236***	0.161**	0.155**
Main Effect			
Emotional Burden		-0.347***	-0.356***
Perceived Policy Absence		-0.241***	-0.239***
Interaction Term			
Emotional Burden × Perceived Policy Absence			-0.175**
F	7.99***	16.71***	15.72***
R^2	0.116	0.284	0.314
Adjusted R^2	0.103	0.266	0.294
ΔR^2	—	0.168***	0.030**

5.4. Simple slope analysis

A simple slope analysis was conducted to examine the direction of the moderating effect. The effect of emotional burden on educational expectation was tested at two levels of perceived policy absence. The low-perception group was defined as one standard deviation below the mean. The high-perception group was defined as one standard deviation above the mean. The results are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3. Results of the simple slope analysis

Level of Perceived Policy Absence	Simple Slope（β）	"t" value	"p" value
Low-Perception Group（M - 1SD）	-0.193	-2.89	0.004
High-Perception Group（M + 1SD）	-0.516	-6.74	< 0.001

The results showed that emotional burden negatively predicted educational expectation in the low perceived policy absence group ($\beta = -0.193$, $p = 0.004$). The effect was stronger in the high perceived policy absence group ($\beta = -0.516$, $p < 0.001$). This means that emotional burden had a stronger negative effect when young caregivers perceived more policy absence. Figure 1 also shows this pattern. The slope was steeper under high perceived policy absence. This result further supports H2.

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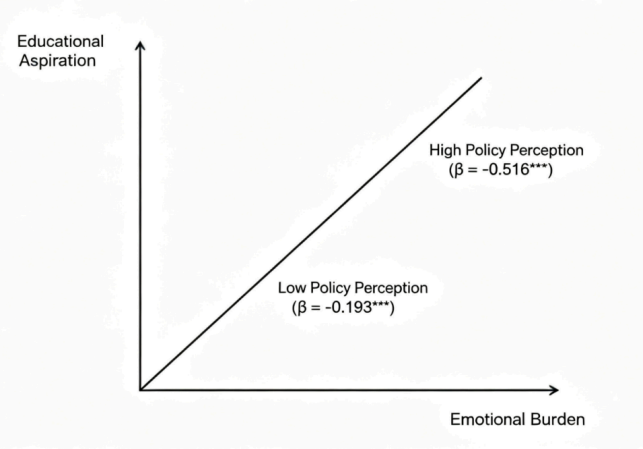

Figure 1. The moderating effect of perceived policy absence on the relationship between emotional burden and educational expectation

5.5. Robustness test

A robustness test was conducted using the Bootstrap method. PROCESS Macro Model 1 was used. The number of bootstrap resamples was set to 5,000. Bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals were calculated.

The result showed a significant interaction between emotional burden and perceived policy absence. The effect coefficient was -0.137. The 95% confidence interval was [-0.241, -0.040]. The interval did not include zero. This result further supports the moderating effect of perceived policy absence.

6. Summary and discussion

6.1. Research conclusions

Based on survey data of 237 Chinese young caregivers, this study confirms two key findings. First, emotional burden significantly reduces young caregivers' educational expectation. When adolescents exhaust psychological resources coping with ongoing caregiving pressure, they tend to downgrade their educational goals.

Second, perceived policy absence amplifies the negative association between emotional burden and educational expectation. Subjective feelings of institutional neglect transform personal emotional stress into a broader sense of powerlessness. Without perceived policy support, young caregivers cannot buffer care-related pressure, creating a vicious cycle of burden and lowered future aspirations.

6.2. Research contributions

Theoretically, this study extends existing literature in two ways. It enriches research on young caregivers by shifting attention from academic performance to subjective educational expectation. Further, this study introduces perceived policy absence as a moderating variable, revealing that institutional subjective perception shapes how care-related stress translates into developmental outcomes. It expands the explanatory boundary of the resource-dilution model and future-orientation theory within the Chinese sociocultural context.

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Practically, the results carry clear implications for multi-agent interventions. Schools, civil-affairs departments and youth-service organizations could jointly build identification and registration mechanisms for young caregivers. Targeted aid including special scholarships, flexible school arrangements and psychological counselling should be provided. Public-education campaigns can raise social recognition for young caregivers, lowering their sense of policy absence.

6.3. Research limitations and future directions

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional questionnaire design cannot establish strict causal inference; we can only test correlational relationships among variables. Second, the sample is dominated by primary-school-age participants, limiting generalizability across middle-school, high-school and college-age young caregivers. Third, the present study relies exclusively on self-report data, which may bring response bias.

Future research should adopt larger and more diverse samples. Longitudinal panel data and multi-source information (teacher, caregiver informant reports) are encouraged to replicate and extend the current model. Qualitative work could further explore how policy perceptions are formed among young caregivers in Chinese local contexts.

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