

Original Paper

Optimization Pathways for Mental Health Education in Primary Schools from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

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Abstract

At present, there is a serious lack of attention given by China to the systematic cultivation and early development of positive psychological qualities in students. Mental health education has focused more on identifying and counselling children's mental health problems and intervening in serious mental illness; thus, teachers are also more likely to focus on the existing or potential psychological distress of their students. To some extent, this educational model fails to cover all aspects of mental health education because it is problem-focused. Based on the ideas of positive psychology, this paper examines the current situation of mental health education in primary schools and, according to its theoretical and practical value and significance, proposes some specific implementation strategies. It aims to improve the effectiveness of mental health education in primary schools and offer a reference for the implementation and development of such education for primary school students.

Keywords

positive psychology, mental health education, primary education

1. Introduction

Mental health problems in primary and secondary schools are one of the major issues facing society at present. As tragic cases of mental illness among young children at different stages of primary school become increasingly frequent, public attention has begun to be paid to their psychological health. The State-issued 'Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools (Revised 2012)' (hereinafter referred to as the "Guidelines") also specify that the general aim of mental health education in primary schools is to improve the psychological health of students and promote all-around, healthy physical and mental growth; it is also an important link in the reform and development of quality education. The recently released "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health Work in the New Era (2023-2025)" (hereinafter referred to as the

“Action Plan”) will use scientific and effective educational methods and strategies, attract the full attention of teachers at all levels, to improve students’ psychological well-being comprehensively, help them develop an optimistic and positive attitude, and promote the all-round growth of their personalities.

2. The Origins of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology started relatively early abroad. Terman’s research on marital happiness in the 1930s and Jung’s study of the meaning of life are generally considered to be the beginnings of positive psychology. By the 1960s, the increased attention paid to the positive aspects of human psychology had further promoted the development of positive psychology. In the 1990s, under the influence of humanistic psychology and postmodern constructivist psychology, positive psychology appeared in the United States and has been extensively studied by scholars.

Kennon M. Sheldon and Laura King point out that psychologists still do not know how to promote human flourishing and have not paid enough attention to this issue; many researchers are still under the influence of ingrained biases and fail to realize that focusing on the good aspects of human nature is, in fact, a way to better understand it. W.C. Follette and others believed that helping people to organise their surroundings and behaviour, and creating an environment that encourages good behaviour, can improve people’s quality of life. Promoting positive emotions among employees in a company will help the employees themselves and drive the company forward. Researchers in positive psychology focus on the good qualities of people and promote the use of their strengths to make psychological work and interpersonal communication more effective and reasonable.

Positive psychology is one of the more studied areas in the American psychological community. In 1999, the Templeton Foundation set up the Templeton Prize in Positive Psychology to motivate more research in this area. At the same time, the journal “American Psychologist” organised a national annual conference on positive psychology. In January 2000, the journal published a special issue on positive psychology, and in March 2001, it started a special column on the topic. In early 2004, the eighth edition of “A History of Modern Psychology” added a section on positive psychology, and Schultz called it one of the newest developments in modern psychology. In 2003, Miao Yuanjiang and Yu Jiayuan published “Positive Psychology: Concepts and Practice” in the “Journal of Nanjing Normal University”, and it became the first such article in China to systematically introduce this field. The first is to present the basic ideas and development directions of positive psychology, and to indicate that its theoretical progress will have an important and positive effect on contemporary psychology and provide a direction for people’s pursuit of a happy life. Subsequently, many scholars in China have been studying the origins, scope, applications and significance of positive psychology in depth, such as Zhou Qian and Shi Guoxing who have provided an all-encompassing introduction to positive psychology based on the work of Martin Seligman. Zhong Anhua listed the four main purposes of psychological research: expanding the scope of psychological research, improving research methods,

clarifying research goals and increasing the public's scientific literacy in mental health.

3. The Value of Positive Psychology

Mental health education should not only help students cope with negative emotions. Primary school students have many problems in their studies, daily life and the development of their psychology, emotions and cognition. Primary school mental health education should focus on exploring and nurturing students' inner strength. In addition, it should help students develop positive emotions and coping mechanisms to improve their sense of self-regulation and emotional management; thus, it can foster healthy psychological resilience and provide a strong foundation for the growth of a good-natured person. The General Plan is to present the educational goals of strengthening students' psychological resilience systematically through all means. The three main ones are as follows. At the macro level, it is to nurture the potential, cultivate positive psychological qualities and promote all-round healthy development of personality. At the mesosystem level, the goal is to cultivate various cognitive functions; that is, to strengthen one's sense of self, improve social adaptation skills, learn how to handle problems, etc. Finally, at the micro level, various measures are taken for different groups. With the help of professional psychological counselling, students experiencing psychological problems can learn to manage themselves better and thus enhance both their mental health and their ability to study independently.

From a goal-oriented perspective, the Outline not only focuses on cultivating the mental health and all-round development of all students but also gives more weight to those with psychological problems and aims to help them cope with stress and emotions. The issuance and implementation of the Outline have extended the scope of work for educators and introduced new problems in how to make full use of their strengths to achieve the goals of mental health education. According to the theory of positive psychology, in the course of mental health education, schools should focus on promoting students' internal sense of motivation and cultivating good emotions. They should teach students how to face difficulties and take responsibility for their daily lives, helping them grow into responsible young people with a sense of social responsibility, empathy and good mental health. The main idea of 'Outline', promoting all-around development for students, is in line with the spirit of positive psychology. Positive psychology suggests that research should pay more attention to the positive aspects of individuals and groups, such as subjective emotions like acceptance and satisfaction in the present, positive states in the past, positive expectations for the future, and present-day well-being, as well as positive personality traits such as love, courage, innovation and perseverance.

4. The Practice of Mental Health Education for Primary School Pupils from the Perspective of Positive Psychology

4.1 Changing the Goals of Mental Health Education

In line with the ideas of positive psychology, the first goal of education is to motivate students' inner

enthusiasm and ability, making their growth journey more pleasant. Therefore, the overall goal of mental health education should be to improve the psychological health of all students, fully realise their potential, foster a positive attitude in life, and help them develop good mental habits. Specific goals are to help students build a correct sense of self, enhance their self-management abilities, improve their resilience in the face of difficulties, learn to adapt to life in society, and nurture good character. At the same time, for the small number of students with psychological or behavioural problems and disorders, scientific psychological counselling and guidance should be provided to help them solve their difficulties more quickly, regulate their emotions, develop healthy psychological qualities and improve their mental health. Using the methods of positive psychology, we can improve the psychological qualities of students and promote their potential, help them maintain a positive and optimistic attitude towards life, foster the ability to face problems with a positive mindset, and all round boost their overall quality of life.

4.2 Updating Perspectives on Mental Health Education

In light of the above, all primary and secondary schools need to focus on this work now. If the goal is to implement mental health education for primary school students effectively, teachers first need to understand what this kind of education is about. As the first place of education, schools should intensify their daily awareness-raising work to ensure that teachers, parents and students are all more knowledgeable about mental health education. Helping students maintain a good mood will help them better cope with school life and also form harmonious relationships among themselves. A good state of mind can also help students be more organised and effective in tackling problems and studying. The aim of mental health education is to address the root causes of students' psychological problems and is not to teach them knowledge. Teachers should use all kinds of methods to guide students and improve the actual effect of mental health education. Teachers should be aware of the students' learning conditions and changes in emotions at different times. Teachers should pay particular attention to helping students overcome difficulties in their studies or other problems by making their own strengths known to the students and helping them build self-confidence. When teachers and students have a good relationship and a harmonious environment, based on the concept of people-orientation, diversity and inclusivity, it will be conducive for students to grow well. Teachers should also be aware of the differences among students and adapt their teaching methods accordingly, so that each child can develop in a manner suitable for themselves under the guidance of mental health education and foster a positive attitude.

4.3 Collaboration Among Schools, Families and the Community in Mental Health Education

There are some requirements for the environment in applying positive psychology. Mental health education in primary and secondary schools is influenced by the school environment, but it is also strongly shaped by the family and society. Therefore, the three parties need to work together closely: schools should create a positive and healthy environment, families should consciously cultivate an optimistic attitude and good character in their children, and society needs to be more inclusive in

setting appropriate boundaries for primary and secondary school students. All three parties should make full use of their own resources to create a good environment for the all-round development of students.

4.4 Encouraging and Praising Pupils, and Protecting Their Self-Confidence

Objectively speaking, primary school students are at a stage of exploring the world; their knowledge is still limited, and it is unavoidable that they will make many mistakes. At this time, teachers need to help the students keep a positive and optimistic attitude. When teachers give students enough encouragement and praise, it will help foster a spirit of labour and self-cultivation in them. In fact, it is in line with the idea of encouragement put forward by positive psychology, and it is also in the spirit of the Pygmalion effect to use appropriate rewards or praise to help students maintain a good mood. It can be said that this way has become a basic mode of positive psychology in mental health education, namely an educational approach focused on encouragement and praise.

4.5 Creating a Positive Psychological Environment at School

It can be seen that a good school environment helps the school implement mental health education better. Creating a good atmosphere and a positive school culture that can inspire students indirectly and gently is another way to promote the mental well-being of students. Research in positive psychology has shown that the psychological atmosphere of one's surroundings can affect a person's emotions in an indirect way over time. The primary school years are a crucial time for the development of pupils' values and psychological traits; as schools are the main environments for their daily learning and life, the school atmosphere will directly affect the effectiveness of mental health education. Schools can use noticeboards, school radio and official social media platforms to set up a dedicated mental health section and regularly post information on positive psychology, practical ways to regulate one's own emotions, and case studies of positive psychological qualities shown by students. It will help create a positive environment in the school that is favourable for the mental health of students.

At the same time, schools can use various themed campus activities to create an all-encompassing positive psychological experience, such as regularly organising themed class meetings, psychological development activities, positive psychology-themed talks, art competitions, etc. It will help the students feel good about themselves, discover what they are good at, and be encouraged by others through group activities. We can make good use of the school's natural environment and class culture to create a pleasant, welcoming place full of life. Set up "Feedback Boxes" and "Growth Sharing Walls" in the classroom to encourage students to actively share positive feelings about their own growth, help them build a good psychological foundation gradually, and create a positive environment for mental health development.

4.6 Enhancing the Content of Mental Health Education

Given that many primary school students have recently been facing mental health problems, mental health education for young children is needed urgently. Previously, a primary school student in Changchun jumped from a building in an attempt to take his own life because of homework problems; another student chose to end his own life because he could not finish his homework; and a

twelve-year-old girl in Wuxi, Jiangsu, jumped to her death on the first day of school. These tragedies show that if we do not pay attention to the mental health of young children, there will be serious problems for them. In recent years, as the number of children with psychological and behavioural disorders and mental illnesses in China has been continuously rising, mental health problems have become serious issues for public health that attract much attention from both the government and the public. Children are in a crucial period of physical and mental growth, and they are also one of the most vulnerable groups during major public health emergencies. The COVID-19 epidemic in late 2019 has intensified the mental health problems of young children at the primary school level. During the pandemic, primary school students generally showed behaviour such as a lack of self-discipline and selfishness, a sense of inner emptiness and internet addiction; academically, they had poor self-discipline and low efficiency; emotionally, they were irritable, had low self-esteem and self-blame. They often feel extremely anxious and fearful, so they are unable to talk to their friends anymore and have begun to turn to mobile games as a way to cope. Therefore, the current content framework for mental health education in primary schools across China still focuses predominantly on correcting psychological problems; it does not explore deeply enough the cultivation of positive psychological qualities and is not well in line with the actual developmental needs of students. To strengthen the content of mental health education from the perspective of positive psychology, we need to fully integrate the cultivation of positive psychological literacy at all times in education. On the one hand, the existing content for identifying and addressing psychological problems should be kept, and at the same time, add positive elements to the curriculum, such as emotional awareness, character building and discovering one's strengths. Specialized modules should be introduced to help pupils actively recognize their own positive qualities, learn how to proactively accumulate good emotional experiences, and master the ability to draw on their inner strength to face the uncertainties of growing up; these modules will cover positive cognitive training, boosting well-being, cultivating resilience, building healthy interpersonal relationships, etc. At the same time, the content should be organised in a tiered and progressive manner, taking into account the physical and psychological development patterns of primary school students at different ages; in the younger years, the focus should be on helping students adjust to school life, recognise their own emotions and establish basic rules for interacting with peers, and in the middle and older years, the emphasis should be on helping students face academic pressure, dealing with psychological problems during pre-adolescence, and fostering a sense of responsibility and resilience. Therefore, the content of mental health education will be more suitable for the different stages of pupils' growth and better meet their actual psychological needs. In order to enrich the content of mental health education, we should go beyond the constraints of textbooks and incorporate this material into students' daily study and life. It should be integrated into school activities, subject teaching and the daily work of form tutors so that the ideas of positive psychology can be spread everywhere in students' growth, not just in special psychology classes; thus, students can learn to build healthy, positive psychological habits in their daily lives.

4.7 Refining the Mental Health Education Model

Traditional mental health education is mainly in the form of group talks or individual counselling and guidance for students with problems. Both are concerned with psychological issues, so they are far removed from the ideas of positive psychology. Positive psychology is student-centred and considers the basic needs of students to promote the development of their positive qualities. Therefore, all kinds of teaching models should be introduced; for example, teachers can organize class discussions, use role-playing to have students participate actively, connect theory and practice closely, and arouse their interest in learning. Mental health education models are becoming more open nowadays. Help promote the positive mental health of students, and also teach them how to control their emotions in a positive way and maintain emotional stability.

Discussion

In short, there are still many problems with applying positive psychology to students' daily lives in primary schools. One problem is that there are not enough teachers. Most of the mental health teachers are employed part-time in schools; therefore, there may be some deviations in the implementation of relevant concepts and policies, and it will be difficult to carry out all the optimisation measures. There are also problems with the distribution of resources; for instance, the conditions for organising all kinds of mental health education activities are generally better in urban primary and secondary schools than in rural and relatively remote areas. Future research can explore more suitable models for mental health education based on the implementation of policies in different primary schools, at the same time improving the teaching abilities of frontline teachers in positive psychology to provide more effective practical support for integrating this concept into regular mental health education.

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