

# The Basic Principles of School Mental Health Education

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**Abstract:** School mental health education involves educators consciously, purposefully, and systematically influencing students' psychology using psychological educational methods and means based on the physical and mental development characteristics of students. The objective is to enhance students' psychological quality, develop their potential, cultivate optimistic and positive psychological traits, and promote the holistic development of their personalities. School mental health education is an integral component of quality education, a crucial element in cultivating high-quality talents for the 21st century, and a symbol of modern schools.

**Keywords:** School; Students; Mental health education

**Online publication:** February 26, 2024

## 1. Goals, tasks, and contents of school mental health education

### 1.1. Goals of school mental health education

In 2002, the Ministry of Education released the "Guidance Outline for Mental Health Education for Primary and Secondary School Students" (hereinafter abbreviated as "Outline"). This outline clearly articulated that the overarching objective of mental health education is to enhance the psychological well-being of all students, foster their full potential, and cultivate optimistic and positive psychological traits to facilitate the sound development of their personalities. Fundamentally, the comprehensive improvement of students' psychological well-being represents the primary goal of mental health education. However, achieving this goal requires pursuing a series of specific objectives. The specific objectives of mental health education encompass enabling students to consistently develop a correct understanding of themselves and strengthening their self-regulation, resilience to setbacks, and adaptability to their surroundings. Furthermore, it aims to nurture students' robust personalities and positive psychological attributes. For a minority of students experiencing psychological distress or disorders, the aim is to offer scientific and effective psychological consultation and counseling. This assistance aims to swiftly help them overcome obstacles, self-adjust, enhance their mental health, and bolster their capacity for self-directed learning. Specifically, these objectives comprise three key aspects: "formation," "maintenance," and "promotion." "Formation" involves cultivating and shaping the psychological attributes of primary school students, thereby assisting them in establishing a favorable mental state. A positive mental

state is a critical condition and assurance of mental health. “Maintenance” refers to preserving the mental health of primary school students by using various methods to mitigate and prevent adverse impacts on their psychological well-being. “Promotion” aims to continually enhance and elevate students’ mental health through diverse approaches tailored to their growth, developmental needs, and individual characteristics.

## **1.2. Tasks of school mental health education**

To accomplish the overarching goal of mental health education, the “Outline” outlines key several tasks. These include promoting comprehensive quality education and improving the relevance, effectiveness, and proactive nature of moral education within schools. It aims to encourage students to seek help when facing psychological or behavioral issues and fosters the development of healthy psychological traits. Moreover, the objective is to maintain students’ mental health by minimizing adverse effects and nurturing a new generation characterized by good physical and mental health, innovative thinking, practical skills, ideals, morality, culture, and discipline. Recognizing regional disparities, the “Outline” advocates working principles of “active promotion, fact-based approaches, zoning planning, and tailored guidance.” This necessitates varied regions to actively engage in mental health education according to their specific conditions. Larger cities, economically developed areas, and medium-sized cities should prioritize mental health education. Teachers should possess comprehensive knowledge of psychological theories and specialized counseling skills, and significantly enhance their personal attributes. Both urban and rural primary and secondary schools, where feasible, should undertake mental health education in a planned, incremental manner, tailored to their realities. Priority should be placed on forming a core team of mental health education teachers and consolidating regional experiences for broader dissemination<sup>[1]</sup>. In areas lacking the necessary conditions, creating regional plans for mental health education based on reality is vital. This involves focusing on pilot schools, conducting teacher training, and gradually advancing mental health education initiatives.

In practical education and teaching, school mental health education primarily encompasses three tasks. Firstly, the task involves addressing students’ psychological needs. Primary school students, as developing individuals, require the fulfillment of various psychological needs to establish and maintain mental well-being. The presence of a sense of security, recognition, acceptance, respect, and love from others significantly influences their psychological state. Therefore, the primary objective of mental health education involves meeting students’ psychological needs using diverse channels and approaches. Secondly, the task includes providing guidance for students’ psychological development. Targeted education through psychological counseling is essential for students’ mental health. Teachers should proactively intervene in common psychological growth issues students may face. By offering psychological counseling and other methods, educators can assist students in understanding and preparing for potential challenges, enhancing their success in school life. Teachers should also promptly address negative or unfavorable psychological states or problems by engaging in conversations, providing psychological counseling, or employing other means. This proactive approach aims to resolve issues or prevent more severe consequences. Thirdly, the task involves timely detection of psychological and behavioral issues among students. Recognizing that some students may experience serious psychological disorders or illnesses due to diverse life experiences and individual differences, teachers should promptly identify these issues and collaborate with relevant departments to ensure that students receive immediate assistance and treatment.

## **1.3. Contents of school mental health education**

The primary content of mental health education comprises disseminating fundamental knowledge about mental health, instilling an awareness of mental well-being, understanding basic psychological regulation methods,

recognizing psychological abnormalities, and grasping fundamental mental health principles. The emphasis lies in enabling students to acquire common knowledge relevant to learning, interpersonal communication, career decisions, life skills, and social adaptation.

To accommodate the age variances among students, the “Outline” delineates distinct requirements for mental health education content across different grade levels. Mental health education for lower primary school students predominantly focuses on aiding their adjustment to new environments, fostering comfort in new learning environments, and experiencing the pleasure of acquiring knowledge. It also encourages their willingness to engage with teachers and classmates, promoting friendships through humble and friendly interactions. For middle and upper grades in primary school, mental health education centers on enabling students to experience the satisfaction of overcoming challenges in both learning and life. This includes adjusting their approach to learning, enhancing interest and confidence, adopting a balanced view of academic performance, overcoming aversions to learning, and relishing the joy of learning successes. Additionally, it aims to cultivate proactive attitudes toward graduation and further education. Students are encouraged to develop a collective consciousness, engage effectively with classmates in activities, nurture outgoing, sociable, eager-to-learn, and independent personalities, and cultivate the ability to autonomously participate in activities.

## **2. Basic principles of school mental health education**

### **2.1. Principle of teaching students according to their aptitude**

The principle of teaching involves implementing targeted education based on the psychological development characteristics and the laws of physical and mental development among students.

Just as no two sand grains or leaves are entirely identical, within a diverse population of students, no two individuals are entirely alike. Students exhibit significant differences in abilities, personalities, interests, and family backgrounds. Consequently, mental health education must be customized to align with the psychological development characteristics and the laws governing the physical and mental growth of primary school students. These need tailored educational approaches to suit each student’s unique characteristics. Teachers should not only understand the commonalities in the psychological development of primary school students at different age stages but also understand the distinct individual traits and real-life expressions of each student. Throughout the educational process, teachers should prioritize recognizing individual differences and supplying diverse forms of education and counseling tailored to meet the specific needs of each student. This approach helps students enhance their mental health and fosters the healthy development of each student’s psychology.

### **2.2. Principle of comprehensive development for all students and psychological qualities**

Targeting all students through universal educational activities is key to fostering a positive understanding of mental health education and gradually enhancing their psychological well-being. Quality education, aimed at advancing the overall quality of the nation, prioritizes learners’ needs and society’s long-term development. It focuses on the comprehensive improvement of students’ fundamental qualities. Within quality education, mental health education holds significant importance. It aligns with students’ physiological and psychological development characteristics, using relevant psychological educational methods to cultivate positive psychological traits. This approach aims to foster the holistic and balanced development of their physical and mental health, thereby elevating their overall quality. Thus, school mental health education should cater to all primary school students, elevating their collective mental health and promoting comprehensive enhancement of their psychological well-being<sup>[2]</sup>. In conducting mental health education, teachers must embrace concepts of comprehensive, sustainable, and lifelong development. Attention should be directed toward fostering various

psychological qualities, aiding students in optimizing their overall psychological makeup, and fostering the harmonious development of cognitive abilities and personalities. Only individuals possessing well-rounded psychological qualities can appear as high-quality, innovative, and healthy individuals. Given that psychological development is ongoing, sustaining lifelong psychological growth becomes imperative to keep pace with the rapidly evolving knowledge economy era. Implementing this principle demands that teachers accurately understand the characteristics and laws governing students' physical and mental development. Adopting a tolerant approach toward addressing developmental challenges faced by students, teachers should offer encouragement, expectations, appreciation, and affirmation. It is crucial to avoid solely focusing on students' exam results or specific behaviors. Instead, teachers should envision students' developmental prospects with a perspective rooted in growth and change, fostering the healthy progression of students' psychology.

### **2.3. Principle of student subjectivity**

Subjectivity, which encompasses autonomy, initiative, and creativity, represents the fundamental characteristic of student subjectivity. The principle of subjectivity underscores the importance of teachers recognizing students as the primary agents of mental health education. It emphasizes respecting their status as active participants, encouraging their active engagement, and tapping into their enthusiasm and creativity.

The objective of mental health education revolves around nurturing the healthy development of each student's psychology. Students serve as both the primary agents of psychological development and the principal participants in mental health education. All aspects of mental health education must be conducted through the subjective feelings and experiences that arise from students' activities. The effectiveness of mental health education hinges on the active involvement of students in these activities.

Implementing the principle of subjectivity necessitates a shift in teachers' mindsets, establishing a scientific understanding of students. In traditional teaching, students are often positioned as passive recipients—"I teach, you learn" or "I teach, you listen"—where students are entirely reliant on teachers, resulting in an unequal relationship. Such an approach erodes students' individuality and detrimentally impacts their physical and mental well-being. Establishing a scientific view of students involves recognizing them as individuals with their own thoughts, personalities, and values within mental health education. Teachers must respect students' agency, acknowledge their unique differences, and cater to individualized teaching based on these differences. Furthermore, teachers should actively cultivate students' awareness of their roles as active participants, harnessing their initiative and creativity. Teachers ought to create environments that enable each student to actively engage and take the lead in mental health education<sup>[3]</sup>. This approach aims to facilitate students' growth and development of their psychological qualities while building upon their existing foundations.

### **2.4. Principle of respect**

Each primary school student is an independent individual with inherent rights and dignity, standing on equal footing in terms of personality with teachers. Teacher-student respect manifests in teachers recognizing and honoring students' rights and human worth. This encompasses fostering open, democratic, and equal communication with students, such as engaging in discussions, squatting down to their level for conversations, and genuinely listening to their perspectives. Moreover, it involves acknowledging and valuing the unique differences among students, accepting their individualities, and trusting and embracing each student's distinctiveness.

Respect serves as a fundamental prerequisite for successful education, rooted in teachers' empathy towards students. Empathy entails teachers' ability to understand and empathize with students' subjective experiences,

perceiving their psychological state from the students' viewpoint and genuinely entering their inner worlds.

Implementing the principle of respect necessitates fostering equal, friendly relationships between teachers and students, and among students themselves. Genuine respect from teachers requires not only verbal expressions but also practical demonstrations through actions. It involves a shift in teachers' mindsets, perceiving students as independent entities, and fostering democratic and egalitarian interactions. Teachers should adopt a conversational tone that encourages discussion, inviting students to share their thoughts and feelings <sup>[4]</sup>. This approach builds trust and allows students to confide in teachers. Conversely, a more authoritarian approach can inhibit students from sharing their concerns or joys. In mental health education, respecting students' personalities is paramount. This involves refraining from physical punishment, verbal reprimands, ridicule, or shaming, as well as avoiding disclosing students' weaknesses or secrets to others. Additionally, it is crucial to provide opportunities for primary students to express their viewpoints, considering their reasonable opinions and suggestions whenever possible.

## **2.5. Principle of prevention and development over correction**

Mental health education serves multiple functions, including prevention, development, and correction. However, in primary school mental health education, prevention and development take precedence. During this phase, primary school students undergo rapid physical and mental development. Hence, school-based mental health education must prioritize their growth and development needs. It should aim to resolve issues arising during their growth, aiding them in achieving optimal psychological well-being within their environmental context. This includes maximizing their psychological potential, fostering harmonious personality development, and facilitating smooth adaptation to life and society. Additionally, addressing psychological and behavioral problems in individual primary school students through counseling and treatment is essential. For students with psychological disorders, schools should arrange specialized institutional support or enlist experienced counselors for treatment <sup>[5]</sup>.

Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing this principle by imparting basic mental health knowledge to students, deeply understanding their needs, promptly identifying psychological distress, and teaching self-regulation techniques. This approach aims to promote the healthy development of students' psychology. Moreover, teachers should grasp general patterns concerning the emergence and development of various behavioral issues among primary school students. This understanding enables early detection and corrective measures for psychological and behavioral concerns among these students.

## **2.6. Principle of participation**

The principle of participation in mental health education emphasizes the involvement of both educators and learners. It necessitates full participation from all primary school students alongside equal engagement from teachers. This approach integrates teachers' scientific guidance with active student involvement, fostering an organic combination in mental health education.

Each student craves self-expression and interpersonal communication. They seek an understanding of their inner worlds and opportunities to highlight their talents, interests, and personalities. Traditional teaching often falls short of meeting these psychological needs, affecting the holistic development of children's physical and mental well-being. As the goal of mental health education is to promote healthy psychological development, student participation in activities becomes integral to its effectiveness. The extent and quality of student engagement in these activities directly impact their educational gains.

Implementing the principle of participation necessitates that teachers provide opportunities for every

student to engage in mental health education. It involves paying special attention to ordinary students who may not typically receive recognition. Teachers should understand these students' unique needs and offer practical support. Additionally, teachers should foster a democratic, equal, and harmonious psychological atmosphere within mental health education. They should participate as regular members, neither as mere bystanders nor as authoritative figures. Instead, teachers should act as coordinators and facilitators, guiding students toward healthy and harmonious development during activities.

## **2.7. Principle of diversity in collaborative work**

The principle of diversity in collaborative work highlights the necessity of multiple forces working together in mental health education. It emphasizes the need for varied and diverse educational content, forms, and methods that align with the physiological and psychological development traits of students.

Cultivating students' psychological qualities is not solely the responsibility of one teacher but is shared among all educators. Each teacher's conscious attention to students' physical and mental development is crucial for fostering their healthy growth and positively influencing them in their interactions. Moreover, student psychological development involves not only schools but also families and societal environments. Collaboration among these parties is essential to truly enhance students' psychological well-being. Considering the uniqueness of each student, varied in age, gender, developmental traits, and psychological needs, targeted mental health education becomes essential. Educational content, forms, and methods should be diverse and adaptable to cater to the distinctive characteristics of different students <sup>[6]</sup>.

Implementing the principle of diversity in collaborative work necessitates the involvement of every facet of the school to become a platform for student mental health education. Each teacher should act as a counselor for student mental health. Additionally, establishing a comprehensive social assistance system is imperative, fostering a collaborative network among schools, families, and society, collectively focusing on the physical and mental development of young individuals.

## **3. Approaches and methods of school mental health education**

The primary approach to mental health education involves its seamless integration into the entire educational process within schools. This encompasses subject teaching, various educational activities, and the responsibilities of class teachers, emphasizing mental health education for students. The Ministry of Education emphasizes in the "Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools" the integration of mental health education into all school activities. The goal is to foster an environment—materially, interpersonally, and psychologically—that aligns with the requirements of mental health education. This involves leveraging teachers' charisma and role modeling in education, aiming to establish democratic, equal, and respectful teacher-student relationships. Schools employ various methods for mental health education, adapting approaches to their specific contexts. They emphasize the comprehensive role of diverse methods to enhance the efficacy of mental health education. In primary schools, these may include game-based activities to create an engaging learning and social environment. Schools might offer mental health elective courses, activity classes, or specialized lectures encompassing psychological training, problem analysis, role-playing, counseling, and lectures to disseminate scientific mental health knowledge and nurture positive psychological qualities. Moreover, schools supply direct guidance to address students' learning and life-related issues through psychological counseling, alleviating distress, diagnosing, and rectifying related psychological and behavioral issues. Students with severe mental illnesses receive timely identification and referrals to medical psychological diagnosis and treatment centers. Simultaneously, schools actively engage families in mental health education.

They guide parents to adopt a proactive parenting approach, grasp mental health education methods, cultivate positive psychological qualities, and create a conducive environment for family mental health education. Parents are encouraged to influence their children positively through their ideals, pursuits, character, and behavior.

Psychological health education emphasizes practical results by harmoniously combining form and content. Schools tailor specific approaches and methods in accordance with their unique circumstances to implement psychological health education effectively.

### **3.1. Main approaches to mental health education for primary school students**

#### **3.1.1. Creating an environment that meets the psychological health requirements of primary school students**

Primary school students undergo rapid physical and mental growth, heavily influenced by their school and family environments. These settings significantly impact their mental health. Therefore, fostering a supportive school and family atmosphere that nurtures primary school students' mental health is essential. This involves creating a safe, joyful, and harmonious environment, serving as the foundation for their mental well-being.

Establishing a conducive environment for primary school students' mental health involves focusing on both school and family settings, encompassing material and psychological aspects. A clean, serene, and aesthetically pleasing campus provides an uplifting environment. The cultural elements within the school subtly influence children, imparting valuable messages of perseverance and progress. Factors like teacher-student relationships, peer connections, learning ambiance, and overall school atmosphere significantly affect students' mental health. Among these, the teacher-student relationship holds special importance. A democratic and equitable teacher-student bond fosters a sense of security and trust in students, encouraging them to freely express thoughts and emotions, seek guidance, and receive support when needed. Recognizing that academic performance is crucial but not the sole aspect of a student's life is vital<sup>[7]</sup>. Overemphasizing grades can burden students psychologically and hinder their healthy development. Therefore, creating an environment conducive to students' psychological health involves teachers respecting, understanding, and accepting each student, fostering democratic and equal relationships, and enabling students to experience the joy of learning and personal improvement.

Additionally, the family environment, including material conditions, psychological atmosphere, and parenting styles, significantly impacts students' mental health. Cultivating a positive family environment is crucial in promoting students' mental well-being and should not be overlooked.

#### **3.1.2. Integrating mental health education into subject teaching**

Integrating mental health education into subject teaching is vital as teaching forms the core of a school's activities. School education mainly relies on subject teaching to achieve its objectives. Subject teaching provides ample time and diverse content, offering significant potential to nurture students' positive psychological traits. To implement mental health education within subject teaching, all teachers need a solid understanding of mental health education. They should identify psychological education elements within textbooks and foster students' healthy psychological development. For instance, in Chinese language classes, while guiding students through lessons like "Diving," teachers can explore the admirable qualities of the captain, emphasizing skills like understanding connections between things, courage, and wit. Simultaneously, they can analyze the reasons and psychological changes when a child climbs a crossbar, reinforcing self-control awareness<sup>[8]</sup>. Similarly, studying stories like *Jiang Xiang He* can guide students to learn the excellent qualities of Xiangru Lin, such as considering the bigger picture, open-mindedness, honesty, admitting mistakes, and correcting them. These stories facilitate learning about personal and collective relationships and enhance group awareness.

Besides exploring psychological resources in textbooks, teachers must also integrate psychological health education into various aspects and the entire process of classroom teaching. In Chinese language classes, teachers can emphasize careful character recognition during literacy lessons, encouraging students to observe character shapes and stroke order, fostering habits of keen observation. When teaching reading, encouraging students to evaluate text, engage in discussions, and stimulate imagination can offer psychological health education. In composition lessons, cultivating observation skills, critical thinking, positive attitudes towards life, and emotional expression helps develop various aspects of a student's personality.

Furthermore, teachers should adopt teaching methods and attitudes that support students' skill development and the formation of positive personal traits.

### **3.1.3. Conducting mental health education through specialized mental health education courses**

At present, many schools have implemented dedicated mental health education courses designed to enhance the mental health awareness of primary school students. These courses aim to equip students with fundamental knowledge about mental health, enabling them to understand their physical and mental development, identify their own psychological and behavioral issues promptly, and address these problems through self-adjustment or seeking appropriate assistance. The primary objective is to ensure their overall well-being and facilitate comprehensive development.

Psychological health education courses differ from conventional teaching activities focused on knowledge and cognitive development. Instead, their emphasis lies in nurturing the emotional growth and personal development of students. Unlike general psychotherapy or specialized psychological counseling, which addresses psychological disorders or obstacles, psychological health education courses concentrate on preventive and developmental aspects<sup>[9]</sup>. They aim to cultivate a normative and healthy psychological state in students while promoting the realization of their full potential.

### **3.1.4. Integrating mental health education in class team activities and class teacher work**

Class team activities and the role of the class teacher serve as crucial channels for enhancing the holistic development of primary school students. These activities can seamlessly integrate psychological health education, effectively expanding the scope of learning and improving the quality of class interactions. By consciously aligning class team activities with the content of mental health education, teachers can foster emotional intelligence, fortify students' determination, and enhance their adaptability to various life situations through these engagements.

The daily responsibilities of a class teacher carry significant weight in the moral and psychological growth of primary school students. Class teachers possess in-depth knowledge of their students' personalities, needs, and potential issues. Therefore, it is vital for them to use mental health theories as guidance in their work, consciously supporting and advancing the mental well-being of their students.

### **3.1.5. Strengthening individual psychological counseling through various means**

Psychological health education aims not only to encompass all primary school students but also to address individual differences and psychological challenges among them. Many schools have set up dedicated spaces for psychological counseling, providing valuable individualized support. Moreover, personalized assistance can be extended to primary school students through avenues like "whispering mailboxes" and "love hotlines." Schools with the necessary resources may establish online consultation platforms accessible via the campus network. Through mediums like email or posts, students can freely seek guidance and receive tailored assistance for their specific needs.

## **3.2. Methods of mental health education**

### **3.2.1. Conversation and consultation interview methods**

#### **(1) Conversation method**

Conversation is a fundamental method employed by mental health educators during psychological counseling, involving direct interaction between teachers and primary school students. This approach requires teachers to apply psychological knowledge and principles through conversations to address students' psychological issues and eliminate barriers. It is a professional skill that demands training and repeated practice for ability. These conversations can take the form of individual consultation interviews or group discussions and are commonly used in class teacher work and psychological counseling.

When engaging in conversations with students, teachers need to not only listen to their words and observe their actions but also comprehend their deeper psychological activities through expressions, speech, and behavior. Simultaneously, they should ensure clarity in communication. It is important to note that psychological counseling conversations differ from traditional teacher-student dialogues or heart-to-heart talks between class teachers and students. In psychological counseling conversations, the emphasis is on inspiring students to consciously understand. It is student-led, allowing the counselor to patiently listen to the student's concerns, observing their cues to identify the primary issues and gradually delve into the core problem.

#### **(2) Consultation interview method**

Psychological counseling primarily involves conversations between counselors and students seeking help. During counseling interviews, the main goal is to identify the actual issues faced by students within a supportive counseling relationship and then devise suitable approaches to address their current situation. To conduct effective counseling interviews, it is crucial to initially understand the problems encountered by students. Establishing a conducive psychological atmosphere and fostering relationships with students are key aspects. This creates a sense of safety, trust, reliability, respect, and understanding.

In face-to-face interviews, counselors should cultivate active listening skills, encouraging students to express themselves freely. It is important to guide the conversation while maintaining a supportive environment. Various techniques like encouragement, interpretation, empathetic responses, attentive listening, explanations, and sharing of personal experiences can be employed during these interviews to facilitate productive discussions and understanding.

### **3.2.2. Establishing psychological records**

Creating psychological records for all primary school students serves multiple purposes. It aids teachers and parents in assessing a student's psychological state for targeted education, helps students gain self-awareness and tap into their potential, and plays a preventive role for students with psychological issues.

These records typically include basic student information (name, gender, class, age, contact details, class teacher, address, family structure, interpersonal dynamics, home environment, financial status, parent-child relationships, etc.) and psychological development status (temperament, personality, intelligence, motivation, adaptability, learning abilities, social interactions, self-awareness, interests, etc.). Such data can be gathered through observations, conversations, self-reports, and testing. However, it is crucial to adhere to fundamental principles when using psychological records, such as maintaining confidentiality, preventing misuse, and showing utmost respect for students' privacy and dignity.

### **3.2.3. Role-playing**

Role-playing involves creating scenarios where primary school students assume particular roles, enabling them

to practice behaviors and empathetically experience the emotions of others. This interactive method is engaging and vivid, allowing students to actively participate, deepen their understanding of various situations, and foster empathy.

### **3.2.4. Discussion method**

This method involves teachers organizing small groups or the entire class for open discussions on specific topics. It aims to encourage primary school students to exchange viewpoints and share experiences, fostering an understanding of different concepts and behaviors. Teachers should focus on guiding the discussion topic and direction while allowing students ample opportunity to express their opinions.

## **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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