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Exploration of the Integration of Positive Emotions and Flow Experience in STEAM Education

Xiao Tang*

School of Innovation and Entrepreneurship of Xinxiang Medical University, Xinxiang 453003, Henan Province, China

***Corresponding author*:** Xiao Tang, 041084@xxmu.edu.cn

Abstract: STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) education aims to cultivate innovative talents with multidimensional literacy through interdisciplinary integration and innovative practice. However, lack of student motivation has emerged as a key factor hindering its effectiveness. This study explores the integrated application of positive emotions and flow experience in STEAM education from the perspective of positive psychology. It systematically explains how these factors enhance learning motivation and promote knowledge internalization, proposing feasible pathways for instructional design, resource provision, environment creation, and team building. The study provides theoretical insights and practical guidance for transforming STEAM education in the new era.

Keywords: Positive emotions; Flow experience; STEAM education; Learning motivation; Educational innovation

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1. Introduction

STEM education, an educational model integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, has become a key approach for cultivating innovative talents in many countries worldwide due to its unique problem-oriented and practical innovation advantages. Since it was first proposed in a report by the U.S. National Science Board in the 1980s, the concept of STEM education has continuously evolved. By the early 21st century, Georgette Yakman further promoted the transformation of STEM education to STEAM education, incorporating Arts into the mix [1]. However, STEAM education places higher demands on students' knowledge base and thinking abilities, undoubtedly increasing the difficulty of learning. This can cause students to feel confused and frustrated when participating in STEAM courses, thus affecting their learning enthusiasm and the expression of their innovative potential.

Learning motivation, as an internal psychological state of goal orientation and energy arousal, has a significant impact on students' academic performance. Research has found that learning motivation is significantly positively correlated with learning outcomes. Individuals with high learning motivation often

demonstrate higher levels of cognitive engagement and deeper application of learning strategies, thereby achieving better academic achievements [2]. Therefore, stimulating students' intrinsic learning motivation has become an urgent task in the ongoing deepening of STEAM education reform.

Positive psychology focuses on individuals' positive qualities and stimulates their inner potential, while also opening up new ideas for STEAM education. Positive emotions and flow experience, as two core concepts of positive psychology, are closely related to learning motivation and academic performance. Positive emotions help broaden cognitive perspectives and stimulate creativity; flow experience can bring about a state of high concentration and full engagement, leading to an optimal experience state. Research shows that in a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere, students are better at cross-disciplinary thinking, which can spark innovative ideas.

In light of this, this paper aims to focus on the integrated application of positive emotions and flow experience in STEAM education from the perspective of positive psychology theory. It seeks to provide new theoretical interpretations and practical paths for enhancing the learning experience of STEAM education and optimizing innovative talent cultivation, thereby contributing to educational transformation in the new era.

2. Conceptual analysis of positive emotions and flow experience

Positive emotions refer to the pleasant feelings experienced by individuals in specific situations, encompassing various positive emotional states such as joy, excitement, and pride. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory suggests that positive emotions not only broaden an individual's attention span and cognitive range but also promote the accumulation of physical, intellectual, and social resources, thereby bringing adaptive benefits to the individual [3]. In educational settings, positive emotions experienced by students, such as learning interest and exploratory interest, are significant for maintaining learning focus and enhancing cognitive engagement, having a notable positive impact on promoting effective student learning.

Flow experience was first proposed by American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, describing the optimal experience state where individuals are fully engaged in an activity and gain subsequent satisfaction and joy [4]. The three core elements of flow experience are clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance between skills and challenges. Compared to mere concentration, flow experience not only emphasizes highly focused attention but also highlights the optimal integration of positive affect and intrinsic motivation. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes students' active knowledge construction, which highly aligns with the generation logic of flow experience. Undoubtedly, creating flow experiences in teaching situations helps stimulate students' learning motivation, guide students to deeply engage in learning, and achieve the internalization and transfer of knowledge.

An in-depth analysis of the relationship between positive emotions and flow experience reveals that they share commonalities in individuals' positive emotional experiences but with different emphases: positive emotions focus on emotional outcomes, while flow experience focuses on the experiential process. In STEAM learning, positive emotions provide the driving force for learning, while flow experience helps students maintain focus on complex tasks. Positive emotions are the prerequisite and starting point for flow experience, while flow experience is the deepening and continuation of positive emotions. Thus, we construct a theoretical framework for the synergistic enhancement of STEAM education effectiveness through positive emotions and flow experience, aiming to provide theoretical reference and practical inspiration for the optimization of STEAM education and innovative talent cultivation.

3. The mechanism of positive emotions in enhancing STEAM learning motivation

3.1. Awakening the exploratory impulse and activating intrinsic learning motivation

Exploratory impulse is the internal drive for learning. STEAM education aims to cultivate students' practical skills and innovative consciousness, while the innovative spirit stems from an individual's curiosity and desire to explore the unknown, serving as the internal drive that propels individuals to continue learning and exploring. From the lens of positive emotion theory, a STEAM scenario full of novelty and joy is more likely to awaken students' exploratory impulses, prompting them to fully engage in learning. Therefore, educators should create emotional and inspiring teaching situations based on the student perspective, following the action principles of positive emotions, to activate students' internal exploratory motivation, making learning a journey of discovery full of novelty and joy, and encouraging students to continuously explore unknown domains.

3.2. Optimizing teacher-student interaction and promoting knowledge meaning construction

The construction of knowledge meaning is a process where students complete the mastery of knowledge under the guidance of teachers, and both teachers and students generate new knowledge based on the mastery of new information [5]. In STEAM learning, the understanding, integration, and application of knowledge are particularly important, requiring not only students' active knowledge construction but also cognitive breakthroughs through positive interactions. Emotion theory suggests that teachers' infectious teaching style can stimulate students' enthusiasm for participation, and a joyful classroom atmosphere helps establish positive interactive relationships between teachers and students. Therefore, in STEAM teaching, teachers should use vivid and inspiring language to shorten their distance from students and encourage them to actively express their views. The teacher-student relationship should transform from traditional management and obedience to equality, mutual trust, and progressive inquiry, allowing students to achieve a comprehensive understanding of knowledge through active participation.

3.3. Strengthening a sense of achievement and consolidating the foundation of learning interest

Sustained learning motivation is inseparable from students' sense of achievement. The sense of achievement is students' subjective experience of their skill improvement in learning, which is crucial for maintaining learning motivation. STEAM education has relatively high requirements for students' cognitive levels, and teachers should pay attention to strengthening students' sense of achievement in the teaching process. From the perspective of positive emotion theory, ingeniously integrating psychological joy factors into problem design, project practice, achievement display, and other links can cultivate students' interest in STEAM learning imperceptibly. Meanwhile, teachers should also promptly capture and recognize students' progress, further stimulating their sense of achievement and learning enthusiasm through encouragement and affirmation, forming a virtuous learning cycle.

4. The mechanism of flow experience in STEAM knowledge internalization

4.1. Matching task difficulty and unleashing learning potential

STEAM learning, with its unique characteristics of practical integration and innovative exploration, places high demands on students' basic skills. Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that whether an individual can experience flow depends on their perception of their skill level and the challenge of the task; only when task requirements match their skills can they fully engage and gain a sense of control [6]. Therefore, in STEAM education, teachers

need to fully consider students' skill levels and find the right balance between accessibility and development. By reasonably setting task difficulty, they can stimulate students' desire for knowledge and learning potential, promote the internalization of learning content, and become an important driving force for enhancing students' innovative thinking and practical skills.

4.2. Creating immersive situations and enhancing learning focus

The learning environment is a key factor affecting students' concentration and has a profound impact on the degree of knowledge internalization. STEAM learning requires students to identify essentials and achieve knowledge integration among vast amounts of information, which places higher demands on concentration abilities. Immersive experiences can create a sense of being present in the situation, thus promoting the generation of flow, helping participants focus all their attention on the current activity, and more effectively gaining new knowledge, experiences, or results [7]. This suggests that teachers should boldly experiment, potentially integrating emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) into teaching to create immersive learning environments for students. Through these situational simulations, not only can students' learning interests be stimulated, but their deep understanding of knowledge can also be promoted, making learning content more vivid and lively. The focused atmosphere provided by immersive experiences offers ideal conditions for the generation of flow, helping to enhance students' cognitive concentration and promote the natural internalization of knowledge.

4.3. Emphasizing feedback and stimulating motivation for transfer and application

Flow experience, as a state of deep learning, is conducive to cultivating students' exploratory spirit and innovative thinking, promoting the transfer and application of knowledge in new situations. Learning self-efficacy is one of the important proximal factors affecting the level of learning engagement [8]. From the perspective of self-efficacy, when students continually experience the joy of success in the STEAM learning process, it will greatly enhance their ability to apply knowledge. Therefore, in STEAM teaching, process evaluation should be emphasized. Online assessments, peer evaluations, teacher comments, and other methods can be adopted to provide positive feedback on students' progress in practice, helping them experience a sense of achievement in learning, and thereby enhancing their courage to explore the unknown and their innovative spirit.

5. Constructing a STEAM education paradigm of "positive emotions + flow experience"

STEAM education is a comprehensive systematic project involving many elements such as educational concepts, curriculum design, teaching organization, and resource allocation. In the educational context, cultivating students' positive emotions and creating flow experiences require educators to base themselves on the needs of the times, focus on student development, and continuously explore and practice new teaching concepts and methods on the basis of inheriting excellent teaching traditions, to provide students with the best STEAM learning experience.

5.1. Instructional design: Transforming educational concepts and optimizing teaching design with a student-centered approach

STEAM education should fundamentally aim to promote students' comprehensive development. This requires educators to establish student-centered and individualized educational concepts. As proposed by Lev Vygotsky's

Zone of Proximal Development theory, instructional design should fully consider students' cognitive starting points, knowledge foundations, and thinking characteristics to stimulate students' intrinsic learning motivation [9]. In setting teaching objectives, both knowledge goals and emotional goals should be considered, with stimulating interest and cultivating focus as important pursuits. In terms of teaching content and activity design, teachers should adopt new teaching methods such as Project-Based Learning (PjBL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), and Interdisciplinary Thematic Inquiry to design problem situations and project tasks related to students' life experiences, allowing students to gain a sense of achievement and joy in the process of solving problems and completing projects. The teaching process should also emphasize teacher-student and student-student interactive communication to create a positive and joyful atmosphere. Additionally, it is important to provide timely feedback to students, helping them clarify their learning progress and maintain learning motivation. In short, various teaching strategies should be skillfully used to mobilize students' emotions, generating positive emotions and flow experiences imperceptibly, making learning a dynamic process of knowledge generation and competency enhancement.

5.2. Learning environment: Integrating educational resources and creating immersive learning scenarios

The learning environment has a significant impact on students' emotional experiences and level of concentration. In optimizing the design of learning environments, schools should fully consider students' subjective feelings, integrate internal and external resources to provide students with deep and comprehensive learning experiences, and take multiple measures to create a learning atmosphere that is immersive, engaged, and positively oriented. On one hand, efforts should be made to create immersive physical spaces. "China's Education Modernization 2035" clearly states that modern information technology should be fully utilized to enrich and innovate curriculum forms. AI, VR, AR, and other technologies can be fully utilized to construct learning environments that integrate virtual and real elements, creating immersive learning situations to make STEAM learning more vivid and interesting. For example, in science classes, virtual laboratories can be created to allow students to experience the joy of scientific inquiry immersively. On the other hand, attention should be paid to creating a humanistic environment. Efforts should be made to construct inclusive and trusting teacher-student relationships and partnerships, allowing students to gain emotional support through positive interactions. Furthermore, teachers should provide rich and diverse learning resources, such as utilizing Open Educational Resources (OER) and online learning platforms, to support students' independent exploration. Schools, families, and society should collaborate to expand the time and space for STEAM learning, allowing students to experience the significance of STEAM learning in diverse contexts.

5.3. Team building: Innovating talent cultivation models and constructing teaching "communities"

Teachers are the organizers and guides of classroom teaching, and their emotional teaching skills directly affect the quality of teaching. Schools should strengthen the training of teachers to improve their interdisciplinary integration skills, affective teaching skills, and technology application skills. Firstly, teachers should be helped to understand the mechanism of generating positive emotions and flow experiences, master relevant teaching strategies, and reshape their roles as "learning designers" and "emotion guides." Training content should include interdisciplinary knowledge integration, innovative teaching methods, learning environment design, educational technology application, etc. Training forms can adopt various approaches such as workshops, case studies, online learning, etc., emphasizing the combination of theory and practice. Secondly, schools

should create a collaborative and innovative teaching and research culture, build interdisciplinary teaching and research platforms, and promote collaborative lesson preparation, refinement, and research among teachers of different disciplines. Teachers should center on students' learning needs, conduct collaborative exploration of practical problems in teaching, and continuously refine wisdom and optimize solutions in the cycle of "theory-practice-re-theory-re-practice." Thirdly, schools should proactively open up to the outside, engaging in multi-party cooperation with universities, research institutions, industry enterprises, etc., to establish an integrated "industry-learning-research-application" collaborative education mechanism. Industry experts, university professors, etc., can be invited to participate in curriculum development and project guidance, providing diverse perspectives and rich resources for teachers' professional growth and teaching innovation. Teachers should be encouraged to step out of campus and engage in social practices on enterprise front lines to understand industry needs and update knowledge structures.

Furthermore, teachers should actively embrace information technology, using online platforms to expand learning spaces and engage in online discussions and remote collaboration with colleagues across regions and schools to co-build and share quality teaching resources. Teachers should also strengthen the collection and analysis of learning data, using intelligent technologies to optimize teaching strategies and provide personalized and precise learning support for students. Lastly, schools should create a cultural atmosphere that respects individuality and encourages innovation, establish a diversified teacher evaluation system that balances process and outcome evaluations, focus on teachers' performance in teaching innovation, student development, social service, and other aspects, and motivate teachers' enthusiasm and creativity. In summary, schools should systematically promote teachers' professional development from multiple dimensions such as training models, teaching and research organization, open collaboration, intelligent application, and cultural construction, comprehensively enhancing teachers' professional qualities and innovative abilities. This will provide solid teacher support for the deep integration of positive emotions and flow experiences in STEAM education, leading students' comprehensive development through teachers' continuous growth.

6. Conclusion

STEAM education emphasizes cultivating students' innovative abilities, but how to stimulate their intrinsic learning motivation has always been a challenge in teaching practice. Unlike previous research perspectives focusing on cognitive factors, this paper, based on positive psychology theory, approaches from the perspective of emotional experience, exploring the application value of positive emotions and flow experience in STEAM education. This paradigm shift helps broaden the theoretical horizon of STEAM education research and provides new ideas for solving the problem of learning motivation. This offers some insights for universities to optimize STEAM education practices, namely, they should base themselves on students' internal needs, integrate emotional experiences into the entire teaching process, and stimulate learning enthusiasm through participation and interaction, making STEAM learning a fertile ground for cultivating innovative competencies.

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Disclosure statement

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