

Research on the Problems and Countermeasures in Home-School Cooperation of Mental Health Education in Elementary and Middle Schools : From Bronfenbrenner's Ecosystem Theory Perspective

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Abstract: *The healthy development of an individual cannot be achieved without a healthy mind and a sound personality. It is crucial for individuals to build a strong foundation in primary and secondary school. Moreover, the degree of importance attached to mental health education by parents, society, and schools directly impact on the psychological development of individuals. Drawing upon the ecosystem theory, this article analyzes the current situation of cooperation between families and schools in the process of mental health education. It also proposes targeted strategies to address this issue, aiming to raise awareness and importance of mental health education among families and schools. By establishing a collaborative system between families and schools, every student can have the opportunity for healthy psychological development.*

Keywords: *Home-School Cooperation; Mental health education; ecosystem theory*

1. Introduction

An individual's psychological development is a complex process that encompasses various aspects such as temperament, character, and needs. According to Erikson's stage theory of personality development, the primary and secondary school period plays a crucial role in an individual's psychological development. This period is considered a critical period, as it is highly sensitive to the acquisition of specific skills or behavioral styles, or serves as a preparatory stage for their development. Some behaviors can only emerge in a suitable environment, and if the necessary environmental stimuli are absent during this period, those behaviors may not develop later on. [1]. However, with the development of the social economy, economic pressures are increasing, causing more and more parents to have limited time to take care of their children's physical and mental development. This has gradually fostered a belief that once children are enrolled in school, all responsibility for their well-being falls on the educational institution. Some parents prioritize academic performance above all else, neglecting the importance of their child's mental health. At the same time, teachers, as educators, often fail to give enough attention and guidance to students' mental health within the context of exam-oriented education, which leads to the accumulation of psychological problems among children. When children become aware of their psychological issues, they often lack a proper avenue for resolution or are disregarded by their parents and teachers. Consequently, these unaddressed psychological problems can lead to mental illnesses or irreversible consequences. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, this paper examines the challenges in fostering cooperation between homes and schools in primary and secondary school mental health education. It explores strategies to enhance the environmental support system and aims to establish a more effective mechanism for home-school cooperation in promoting mental health among students. The goal is to prevent mental health issues among primary and secondary school students and facilitate their holistic physical and mental development.

2. Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory

American psychologist Yuri Brown Brenner emphasized the significance of the "human life environment is the key factor affecting the growth of people", to understand the growth of individuals, it is essential to consider the environment in which they live; Bronfenbrenner proposed the concept of "human development ecology," which highlights the mutual adaptation and growth between individuals

and their environments. This process is influenced by various interconnected systems and the broader context in which they exist. He categorizes the environment of individual development into five interconnected systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the time dimension. The microsystem comprises the immediate surroundings that directly interact with the individual, such as the family, school, and community; the mesosystem refers to the combination of interacting factors between different components of the microsystem; the exosystem refers to the environmental system that affects the individual but does not come into direct contact with the individual; the macrosystem encompasses the elements of the entire society; and the temporal dimension refers to how the environment affects and influences development and behavior over a long period. These five systems collectively exert both direct and indirect influences on individuals, shaping their growth and development. ^[2].

3. Ecosystem theory analysis of mental health education for individuals

Mental health education is influenced by its surrounding environment, and according to the ecosystem theory, the environment of mental health education includes five interconnected systems. This paper focuses on the microsystem and mesosystem system, which include the environment that directly interacts with individuals, and the combination of factors between the family society and the school. These two systems have the most direct impact on an individual's psychological development and the effectiveness of mental health education. Therefore, utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, this paper examines the current state of mental health education within the supports provided by the microsystem and mesosystem. It aims to understand the existing situation and proposes suggestions to establish a collaborative home-school system for mental health education.

4. Problems in the current home-school cooperation in mental health education

At present, mental health education is receiving significant attention from the government and society. As early as 1999, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China emphasized the undeniable importance of strengthening mental health education in primary and secondary schools through its Opinions on Strengthening Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools. The document stressed the need to prioritize the cultivation of students' mental health awareness and abilities, and provide them with the necessary support and guidance. At the same time, we should also realize that it is crucial to build a professional team of teachers for mental health education. Such a team can provide high-quality mental health education and lay a solid foundation for the overall development of students. Therefore, we need to commit ourselves to train qualified educators who have the specialized knowledge and skills to effectively carry out mental health education. This also talks about mental health education work carried out not only to fully penetrate the whole process of school education but also to establish school and family mental health education communication channels, guiding and assisting parents in developing a proper view of education that aligns with the form and content of mental health education ^[3]. However, despite the existence of this document for a considerable period, the implementation of mental health education has not been optimistic. The current state of school-based mental health education appears formalistic, and parents' awareness of mental health education is insufficient. These factors hinder the practical implementation of mental health education. Therefore, targeted changes are necessary to promote the healthy psychological development of students.

4.1. Mental health educators' biased understanding of their work

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, schools are part of the microsystem, representing an environment where students have direct contact. Schools are seen as an ideal setting to implement mental health education, and mental health educators, such as psychologists, play a crucial role in directly assisting students with their psychological problems and teaching them self-regulation techniques. Unfortunately, in recent years, there have been numerous incidents and accidents in schools, with a significant proportion being attributed to psychological issues. Paradoxically, mental health educators often find themselves in an awkward position. While they have the potential to detect and prevent psychological problems at an early stage, they tend to be marginalized within the school system. Mental health classes, originally intended to focus on mental well-being, have been overshadowed by the emphasis on grades and transformed into core subjects. As a result, mental health educators may be reassigned to teach other subjects or burdened with administrative tasks. In such an environment, the enthusiasm of mental health educators is greatly reduced, and the development of professional skills is

limited. They may superficially address students' psychological problems without providing genuine help. Over time, these mental health educators may experience professional burnout due to unclear roles within the school and the belief that good grades are of utmost importance. Consequently, unresolved psychological problems among students continue to persist and accumulate. The lack of effective support from mental health educators exacerbates the situation, resulting in a growing number of hidden psychological issues.

4.2. Parents' biased understanding of mental health education

Parents, being the primary individuals with whom students have trust and frequent contact, should ideally bear the responsibility for their children's mental health and be the first to identify any existing problems. However, this is often not the case in reality. There are several factors contributing to this situation.

Firstly, parents tend to idealize their children's development. Traditional Chinese parents, in particular, often hold high educational expectations for their children, hoping they will excel in every aspect of life. These idealized expectations lead parents to prioritize their children's abilities and interests, focusing solely on making them winners in life. A survey conducted by the School of Psychology of Central China Normal University found that one-third of the respondents expected their children to obtain a doctoral degree or higher.

Secondly, the influence of exam-oriented education has caused some parents to prioritize academic scores above all else^[4]. Parents excessively emphasize their children's intelligence while neglecting the development of non-intellectual factors such as character and personality. It is common for parents to impose their own desires and dreams onto their children, disregarding their children's own wishes. This approach harms the parent-child relationship and hinders children's mental health development.

Furthermore, parents' misconceptions about education have a negative impact on children's development^[5]. Excessive educational expectations create enormous learning pressure for children, leading to severe consequences such as anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Research by the China Population Mission Center's Research Report on Healthy Personality of Chinese Youth revealed that more than 80% of primary school students experience test anxiety out of fear of disappointing their parents. Children's mental health is closely linked to their parents' educational concepts, and some psychological problems among children stem from parents' misguided educational beliefs. Overemphasis on grades can result in the neglect of moral development, as positive qualities are undervalued and negative moral issues may be fostered^[6].

Moreover, parents tend to adopt the attitude that mental health is not their responsibility. When their children face psychological problems, many parents attribute these issues solely to academic pressure. While recognizing that their pressure can impact their children's mental health, parents often believe that teachers and the government should bear the primary responsibility. They attribute children's heavy academic pressure and resulting mental illnesses to inadequate government regulations and inappropriate teaching styles. Parents lacking experience in mental health treatment often place the entire burden of mental health education on schools. They rely on the school for their children's healthy mental development but complain about the school's educational methods and express disappointment if their children experience mental problems, without reflecting on their own role in the process.

Lastly, some parents remain skeptical about mental health services. When a psychotherapist uses play therapy to enhance their child's mental health, they may dismiss it as mere play and fail to recognize the deeper psychological issues their child may be facing. This lack of understanding and focus on surface-level observations can lead to tragic outcomes.

4.3. Mental health education in schools is carried out superficially.

There are already several documents requiring schools to have professional psychological teachers. In general, those who work as mental health teachers must have a bachelor's degree or higher in relevant fields such as psychology, education, or other related majors. They should possess the knowledge and skills necessary to address students' personal and emotional issues effectively. Additionally they need to have the appropriate professional qualifications, such as the National Second Class Psychological Counselor Certificate. Practical experience and teaching expertise are also desirable, as they enable mental health educators to understand students' needs and problems and conduct effective mental health education. However, many schools fail to comply with these requirements. Mental health teachers in

these schools are often teachers of other subjects, and mental health courses exist only in name. In cases where students experience psychological crises or display warning signs, schools prioritize concealing the situation rather than addressing students' needs. They may also be reluctant to engage in communication with parents regarding these matters. It is concerning that schools and parents share a similar approach, wherein parents are often held accountable when a student's academic performance is unsatisfactory, while schools neglect to provide practical assistance when students require psychological support. Such a situation is highly problematic and necessitates change. It is crucial for schools to take mental health seriously and ensure the presence of qualified mental health educators. Mental health education should not be treated as a mere formality but should receive the necessary attention and resources to provide practical help to students. Schools should prioritize students' well-being and foster open communication with parents to effectively address psychological issues. This requires a shift in mindset and a commitment to creating a supportive and nurturing environment for students' mental health.

5. Building an integrated system of mental health education between home and school.

Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory suggests that human development is influenced by the interaction of multiple ecosystem environments, including microsystems, mesosystems, and macrosystems. Within the context of the home-school mental health education system, the family and school serve as crucial microsystem environments for children, while the community and culture represent the mesosystem and macrosystem environments. By considering Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory, we can understand that schools play a central role in this process. They primarily provide human resources for mental health education and assume the responsibility of communication with families. The student's community acts as a platform for integrating the school's available resources within the local context. Additionally, families have the responsibility to continuously monitor their children's mental health, aiming to prevent and address any issues as early as possible. Families should actively cooperate with the school's efforts and strengthen their connection with the educational institution. As students, they exist at the intersection of these three systems – family, society, and school – and each system is essential and indispensable in their development and well-being.

6. Suggestions for the Establishment of a Home-School Cooperation System for Mental Health Education

6.1. Emphasize the cooperation and co-responsibility of the family and the school.

In ecosystem theory, the microsystem environment has a crucial influence on human development. Families and schools are the most important microsystem environments for students. Therefore, it is crucial for them to prioritize cooperation, shared responsibility, and joint attention to children's mental and physical health. Schools can collaborate with parents to provide resources and support for mental health education and physical education. Likewise, parents can offer assistance and support to schools in creating a favorable educational environment together. Moreover, schools should take the lead in organizing parent seminars from time to time to emphasize the importance of mental health and educate parents about mental health. This way, parents can gain knowledge about mental health and develop the ability to identify whether their children are mentally healthy or not. They can pay attention to their children's mental well-being during their interactions, if parents find that their children have abnormal emotions or behaviors, they should communicate with the school promptly, forming a dynamic mode of interaction between home and school.

6.2. Focus on the child's socio-cultural background.

Ecosystem theory highlights the importance of the mesosystem and microsystem environments in human development. Therefore, it is very important to focus on children's socio-cultural background in the process of mental health education. Each child is a unique individual whose socio-cultural background affects their values, beliefs, behaviors, and emotions. It is essential for educators to approach this with an open mind, being willing to learn and understand the characteristics of different cultures. Educators and parents need to communicate in a language that is familiar to the children, ensuring that they can fully understand and engage in the educational activities, if there are language barriers, provide translations or verbal explanations to ensure that the children can understand what is being taught. Parents also need to be encouraged to participate in the mental health education process and understand their cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and expectations. Work with parents to ensure that educational content is

consistent with family values and provide support and resources to help them extend education at home. Choose culturally inclusive educational materials, including books, videos, and games, to reflect children from different cultural backgrounds in the educational process, which can help children feel represented and included, and increase their sense of identity and self-esteem. And it's important to allow for differences to exist, as there may be differences in how different cultures define mental health, express symptoms, and treatments. Understanding these differences and respecting children's and families' perceptions can better meet their needs, as well as linking mental health education to the children's socio-cultural contexts, introducing relevant examples, stories, and real-life situations to help children apply what they learn to their daily lives, to focus on every child of different genders, ages, sexual orientations, etc., and to ensure that the educational process does not discriminate against or exclusion of any child.

By paying attention to children's socio-cultural backgrounds and creating an inclusive and respectful environment in mental health education, it is possible to help children develop a positive self-identity, promote healthy development, and enhance their awareness of and ability to address mental health issues.

6.3. Provide diverse educational resources and support.

Ecosystem theory emphasizes the importance of diverse resources and support for human development. In the context of mental health education, providing a wide range of educational resources and support can effectively meet the needs of different students.

Firstly, schools can provide a diverse selection of educational materials that include representation from various cultural backgrounds, genders, ages, and abilities. This can include books, manuals, videos, presentations, and online resources. It is essential for the content and examples within these materials to cover diversity, allowing students to feel represented and included.

Visualization tools are also valuable in the educational process, using charts, images, diagrams, and visualization tools to help students better understand mental health concepts. These tools can help students translate abstract concepts into concrete images and provide a more visual learning experience.

Connections between disciplines can also be extremely helpful at times, so integrate mental health education with other disciplines, for example, by introducing mental health-themed literature into language arts courses and discussing the relationship between the brain and emotions in science courses. Through an interdisciplinary approach, students can increase their overall understanding of mental health. By providing diverse educational resources and support, students can be helped to understand and cope with mental health issues from different perspectives while promoting their overall development and well-being.

6.4. Establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system.

Ecosystem theory emphasizes the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation in human development. Therefore, in the context of building a home-school integrated mental health education system, it is crucial to establish a monitoring and evaluation system to promptly identify and address students' mental and physical health issues. This system also facilitates the evaluation and follow-up of students' mental and physical health status, providing guidance and reference for parents and schools. Establishing a monitoring and evaluation system in home-school cooperation in mental health education is the key to ensuring effective implementation and continuous improvement.

The first step is to set clear goals and indicators: determine the goals and desired outcomes of mental health education and translate them into specific indicators and standards. These indicators can include the level of mental health of students, improvement in knowledge and skills, and behavioral changes. Continuous collection of data and information in the process: Use various methods and tools to collect relevant data and information, including questionnaires, observation records, students' works, academic performance, participation, etc. These data can provide quantitative and qualitative information about students' mental health status and educational effectiveness. Based on the objectives and indicators, develop an assessment plan that specifies the timing, methodology, and persons responsible for the assessment. Ensure that the assessment plan integrates the needs of families and schools, and communicate and coordinate with relevant stakeholders.

Next, analyze and interpret data, analyze and interpret data collected to identify trends, problems, and opportunities for improvement. Use statistical analysis, data visualization, and other analytical tools to help understand the meaning and insights behind the data share the results with parents and educators, and communicate the results of the assessment back to parents, educators, and other stakeholders in a

concise and easy-to-understand format. Reports should include a summary of the data, key findings, recommendations, and improvements to facilitate shared discussion and decision-making.

Finally, there is continuous improvement, using assessment results and feedback to develop and implement improvements. Ensure that monitoring and evaluation in home-school partnerships is an ongoing process that continually adjusts and improves educational strategies, resources, and supports. This requires an open and supportive culture of home-school cooperation that encourages positive communication and collaboration between parents and educators. Joint participation in the monitoring and evaluation process enhances mutual understanding and engagement, and the most effective measure is to provide relevant training and support for parents and educators to enhance their capacity for monitoring and evaluation. This can include training workshops, resource guides, online learning, etc.

By establishing a monitoring and evaluation system, the effectiveness and sustainability of home-school collaboration in mental health education can be ensured. This system contributes to improving students' mental health and enables families and schools to work together in supporting students' mental health development.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the ecosystem theory provides us with a comprehensive perspective that can help us better understand and build a home-school integrated mental health education system. We should focus on the cooperation and co-responsibility of families and schools, focus on the socio-cultural background of the children, provide diversified educational resources and support, and set up a monitoring and evaluation system to promote the all-round development of the children's mental health and physical health.

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