

How do students with depression receive quality education through support in China's education system?

Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education

**4 QUALITY
EDUCATION**



Introduction

With the advent of globalisation, psychological problems have gradually become one of the most prevalent health issues among children worldwide. In China, development and the growth of information culture have increasingly put children's mental health at risk.

However, traditional Chinese views still minimise or even discriminate against mental illness in children.

Psychological problems can have a very negative impact on children's studies and life.

Chinese society's recognition of children's mental health as a major issue is relatively lower than that of other developing countries. Therefore, to ensure high quality in education, China's education system and regulations should devote more attention to children's mental health. Due to the cultural particularities of China, it is difficult to ensure equal and fair access to learning for children suffering from mental illness.

This research proposal analyses current psychological support services in China and some potential risk factors. It compares and references such services vis-à-vis other countries', to highlight the need for change. The related recommendations focus on educational support and prevention methods for children with depression.

Many social inequality factors can significantly contribute to children's mental health issues.

The recommendations call for more systematic management and improvements of school psychological counselling departments to ensure the quality of learning for students with psychological problems. Animal interaction therapy in the classroom is one method that should be applied, since it has been found to have a positive effect on the recovery of students with depression. Moreover, teachers should keep an eye on students' communications with

their parents and encourage family interaction to prevent children from developing depression in the first place.

Background

Children's well-being and mental health are essential for the world's social sustainability. As a critical aspect of education, mental health has garnered attention from the public, with strategies and support being established to prevent such issues among students.

The upward trend of mental health issues worldwide can be observed in China, as well. But despite significant improvements over the past decade, China's progress in countrywide mental health support services has remained slow in relation to other countries' (Liang, Mays and Hwang, 2018).

Psychological support services in China, specifically for children, need further development. Psychological trauma in childhood could lead to mental health issues in adulthood, with a profound negative impact on human well-being (Wu *et al.*, 2009) Therefore, it is crucial for administrations to identify children's psychological needs and provide them greater access to quality education. This is a critical step towards a sustainable society in China.

Psychological issues represent one of the biggest threats to adolescents' overall health. According to the World Health Organization (2020), poor mental health accounts for 16 per cent of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10 to 19 years, with depression statistically being one of the most significant causes of illness and disability among adolescents.

Among the negative effects of poor mental health among young people with depression, autism, behavioural disorders, and other psychological issues is the possibility of risky behaviours that could threaten their own safety. Suicidal behaviours, self-harm, and unsafe sex have all been commonly associated with poor mental health in adolescents and children. Thus, addressing children's psychological issues from various angles is crucial to preventing risky behaviours as well as further negative effects on their health.

According to Wang, Zhang and Zhang (2020), the rate of non-suicidal self-harm in children and adolescents has reached 19.5 per cent globally, and 27.4 per cent among Chinese middle-schoolers. This means that almost one-third of middle school students have engaged in self-harm behaviours in China, compared to one-fifth worldwide, which illustrates the demand for greater support and proper guidance for students in the country. The gradual uptick in poor mental health is bound to adversely affect younger generations' social development and the appropriate implementation of education.

Amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhou *et al.* (2020) found that 31.3 per cent of Chinese middle- and high-schoolers were suffering from anxiety and depression, and that they were more likely to be affected than other populations. Their study also identified a correlation between awareness of COVID-19 and the prevalence of poor mental health in adolescents. Along similar lines, Chi *et al.* (2021) demonstrated that the left-behind children—those with one or both parents living away from them for work—and students who had a great fear of COVID-19 were more vulnerable than others in China to anxiety, depression, and insomnia. Therefore, counselling to alleviate fear and anxiety towards COVID-19 could be beneficial to countering mental health issues among such youth.

In addition to this research and the attention paid to COVID-19 in general, the deterioration of children's mental health in connection with the pandemic should raise more attention and be investigated globally. Considering the importance of mental health to children's overall health and sustainable development as people, I will focus the analysis here on support services in the education system and quality education for students with depression.

Case evaluation

Depression is a severe mental illness which has a profound influence on people's thinking patterns and behaviours. Although low mood is a typical symptom of depression, situations greatly vary: depression can stem from sullenness, sadness, abasement, or pessimism, be connected to suicidal attempts or behaviours, or lead to displays of anxiety and motor agitation.

Research has identified left-behind children in China as a high-risk group for depression (He *et al.*, 2012). According to Nielsen *et al.* (2005), 120 to 150 million parents had moved away from their children by the early 2000s. Workforce demands in contemporary Chinese society have forced an increasing number of people to migrate from rural to urban areas and away from their families; such a scenario can lead to a higher divorce rate, itself a high-risk factor for youth depression (Meng *et al.*, 2011). Parents' social class has also been correlated with the risk of depression among children.

A study by Zeng *et al.* (2009) pointed to a 43.3 per cent rate of behavioural or emotional issues among left-behind children in China. Therefore, it is crucial to develop psychological support services tailored for left-behind children. As depression rates gradually increase, new

cultural norms among the younger generations could threaten the establishment of quality education.

Inequality in education and support services

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has recognised people with disabilities as being entitled to the same rights and opportunities as their peers without disabilities; within this framework, primary education should be compulsory, available, and free to all (UNICEF UK, 2017). The Chinese Regulation on the Education of Persons with Disabilities (REPD) compels parents, other guardians, and local governments of school-aged disabled youth to exercise supervision, guidance, and inspection over the nine years of compulsory education (Government of the People’s Republic of China, 2017).

In implementing such policies, the Chinese government has opened more public schools and special schools for disabled children and published further regulations to ensure that disabled children receive the nine years of compulsory education. The school enrolment of disabled students—with a focus on hearing issues, blindness, and intellectual disabilities—increased from about 2,000 to 670,000 over 70 years in China (LI, 2019). More attention needs to be drawn specifically to children with depression as a disability.

Several social factors can indirectly raise the risk of poor mental health among Chinese children. As mentioned, due to the Chinese economy’s demands for labour migration, left-behind children have come to represent a large high-risk community for psychological issues. The family’s socioeconomic background is another determining factor for mental health, due to the different degrees of access to resources to support healthy development in children, and

the possible lack of time to parent them due to income-related responsibilities. Moreover, high pressure in the Chinese education system could lead to an increase in stress in adolescents and result in depression and anxiety. Indeed, Shen (2020) found that the feeling of high academic achievement at an early stage of education could lower the risk of depression later on, as a testament to the importance of education practices to children's mental health.

Proposed solutions and changes

To achieve quality education for students with depression, further support is needed in various aspects. Although many special schools have been founded to help children with mental health issues learn more effectively, their development there is still different from that of the average student. To bridge this gap for children with depression and ensure the development of their full potential as students, they should be enabled to learn in regular public school classrooms as much as possible.

Case study

Many studies have established a correlation between depression and academic performance (see e.g. Yasin and Dzulkifli, 2011; Shokrgozar *et al.*, 2019). Depression and anxiety could lead students' academic performance to decline, and this could be more profound for older students. They could also result in higher school dropout rates. Hence, psychological problems can have a deep impact on education; in China, this is true especially among children from vulnerable.

Poor academic performance due to poor mental health can directly affect the college, employment, and income prospects of students in China. Therefore, the influence of psychological problems on children's education in the country should not be ignored.

In the United States, King, Strunk and Sorter (2011) investigated a study-based suicide prevention and depression awareness programme and its effectiveness on high school students. The program involved four 50-minute sessions offering factual information on depression and suicide risk factors, suicide warning signs, and common myths associated with suicide. It provided students with effective strategies to deal with stressors in their daily lives and coordinates to access references when depressed or suicidal. The factors addressed were namely mental and psychological disorders, family dysfunction, medical conditions, drug abuse, self-esteem, sexual identity/sexual orientation issues, school and social stressors, and trauma/violence.

The study found that, after three months of follow-up interventions as part of the programme, students' feelings of sadness and hopelessness and suicidal behaviours significantly decreased, while their help-seeking behaviours and self-efficacy increased (King, Strunk and Sorter 2011). This demonstrates the effectiveness a supportive mental health program can have in addressing and preventing depression in an education system.

Similar interventions should be embedded in Chinese secondary school settings to address the growing trend of depression. While achievement is one of the most important references for the quality of education and students' ability in China, mental health can greatly influence this factor; therefore, improving students' mental health is essential for educational fairness and students' future personal development.

Student support departments in public schools

Appropriate counselling for students in the school environment can effectively reduce their risk of developing psychological problems. Many schools establish support departments to provide a healthy learning environment and mental health services for students, and it is a common feature across the education sectors of certain countries. However, this has not been widely established in Chinese public schools.

The Healthy China Action Plan on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents (2019–2022) has laid out approaches to improve social services and development for children.

According to the plan, by the end of 2022, 50 per cent of family guidance centres should be carrying out mental health education; 60 per cent of secondary psychiatric hospitals should have set up psychological clinics for children and adolescents; and 30 per cent of children's specialised hospitals, maternal and child health centres, and secondary and higher general hospitals should have psychiatric clinics. Moreover, psychological assistance hotlines should be established in various cities, and the rate of awareness of core mental health knowledge among Chinese youth should reach 80 per cent (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

But while this plan has identified various social indicators concerning sustainable mental development for children, it has provided no specific targets, approaches, or guidance for the establishment and supervision of student support departments in public schools. More systematic psychological support services are needed to ensure access to learning for children with depression and to prevent the risk of depression in children, hence safeguarding quality education and sustainable future development for all children.

Student support departments can effectively reduce the stress of peer conflict, identify unhealthy family factors negatively affecting students' mental health, and provide guidance to resolve mental health crises. In preventing psychological issues in children and supporting those with issues, such departments give children with mental health issues a fairer chance at learning to the same standards as other children.

The current psychological support system in Chinese schools is mainly limited to a counselling room where students can schedule meetings with teachers when they feel like they need it (Chao, 2014). While many counselling rooms in schools aim to provide individual guidance, students with depression tend to require further support to ensure their learning, which is not available from most Chinese public schools. One suggestion would be to implement professional support services as a separate department in schools to provide more comprehensive learning support for students with depression. More active intervention in psychological guidance is needed on school campuses, since education and psychological problems directly affect each other and therefore also the provision of quality education.

One of the most significant issues among children with depression is their declining ability to communicate. Therefore, helping such students to establish a healthier relationship with their classmates and teachers in a campus environment is one of the most effective ways to help them learn.

Animal-assisted therapy and activities can positively influence the social function of children with psychological issues. Research has found that the presence of animals in the classroom can motivate children to go to school and achieve friendly and effective communication with classmates, parents, and teachers, who felt that children with depression significantly

improved at school with such activities (O’Haire *et al.*, 2014). Animal therapy and activities would likely have a similar positive effect on children with depression if applied in Chinese classrooms, thus creating more fertile ground for quality education.

Developing positive relationships with peers and parents can reduce stress in students and prevent depression in children. Sufficient interaction between parents and children can reduce the risk of depression (Chong *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, schools should investigate the degree of communication between students and their parents in the long run to prevent the occurrence of depression and negative effects on learning. Schools should issue appropriate reminders for parents or arrange homework to create opportunities for family communication.

However, the latter approach does have limitations. Working hours keep many parents from spending time with their children, especially in families with lower incomes. In Chinese culture, it is the grandparents who take care of many of the children—such as left-behind children—which makes the child-parent communication initiative difficult to implement.

Addressing social inequality

Social inequality is a major cause of children’s psychological problems. For example, differences in family income can lead to differences in the ability to accompany children.

Although many of the pertinent factors are not directly caused by social inequality, they are indirect results of this systemic issue.

Since directly addressing social inequality is difficult in this context, targeted help towards bridging the gap between groups ought to be increased and encouraged. Equality in education

means equal quality and learning opportunities for all children; for children with depression, special programs should be implemented in the education system to ensure such fairness.

As mentioned earlier, left-behind children are a high-risk group for mental illness in need of special assistance. Research has shown that left-behind children in China, especially those raised by their grandparents, are 2.5 times more lonely than other children, due to the lack of communication with their parents (Jia and Tian, 2010). Hence, a major deficiency among left-behind children is care from their parents, which is difficult for the education system to make up for. Schools should therefore provide left-behind children with psychological support from other angles. More psychological research and support initiatives should be carried out in schools in remote areas, and schools should offer after-school activities targeted at left-behind children to make them feel less lonely through peer communication.

Recommendations for the future

Perhaps the biggest difficulty would be to standardise aid across the country for children with depression. Such changes can be difficult due to the sheer number of public schools in China, along with many different cultures, economies, and types of mental illness among children. More studies on support services in schools are needed and methods of assistance should be appropriately amended based on localised findings. Such improvements would require the supervision, implementation, and assistance of official departments, due to the complexity of establishing psychological assistance. Hence, China's Ministry of Education should collaborate with the Ministry of Health to implement psychological aid suitable for children of different age groups in education.

Technological development could contribute to providing adequate support to students with depression. For instance, online cameras have been widely adopted in Chinese pre-schools for parents to access and monitor their children's behaviours in the classroom. The teachers and parents of young children should pay close attention to and carefully examine the students' actions and behaviours to prevent the early onset of mental illness.

Technology could also be applied to support learning among children with mental health issues. Research has demonstrated that robotic therapy can improve the interest and engagement in learning of students with autism (Rudovic *et al.*, 2018). Robotics could inspire creativity and constructive thinking in children with depression, who suffer from persistent inattention. As computers are increasingly incorporated into teaching, more uses of technology should be developed for children with psychological problems. China ought to integrate technology into more education programs that are helpful to children with psychological issues to ensure quality education for depressed children.

Conclusion

Along with the overall development of society and of the information industry, and rapid Chinese growth and social reforms in recent centuries, psychological issues have gradually evolved into a widespread social health problem. Poor mental health has a complex and far-reaching impact on students and on the implementation of education; therefore, it is essential to support and guide children with psychological problems from within the education system. More children have been developing depression in China in recent years, making for a critical negative impact on learning in the country.

This proposal has offered some suggestions for schools to help children with depression, as well as ways to prevent mental disorders. For instance, a systematic psychological

counselling department in public schools could provide more effective assistance. This department could employ staff with a professional psychological background to help students with disabilities learn better. Also, the presence of animals in the classroom could improve the communication problems children with depression encounter in the learning process, as well as alleviate anxiety and increase such students' interest in learning.

For children with depression, enhanced communication is an important factor in countering symptoms. Schools should accompany and encourage communication among students and keep an eye on the time parents spend with their children. Social inequality is another important indirect factor in children's mental health issues: children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, left-behind children, and those from other vulnerable groups should receive psychological help tailored to their specific needs.

Certain depression awareness and suicide prevention programs have been found to have a positive influence on students, and could be embedded in Chinese classrooms. The positive effects of technology on the education of children with depression should also be further researched and developed.

Finally, this series of changes and policies should be implemented and the reforms jointly carried out by China's Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health.

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