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From 'One-Size-Fits-All' to 'Age-Appropriate Teaching': A Critique of the Current State and Paradigm Construction of Mental Health Education Lesson Examples for Primary and Secondary School Students — A Case Study on 'Emotional Management'

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Abstract

The current mental health education classes in primary and secondary schools are “one-size-fits-all,” ignoring the characteristics of different student age groups, resulting in three deep-rooted issues: a disconnect between goals and methods leading to the failure of cultivating higher-level abilities, the absence of emotional experience causing emotional education to become hollow preaching, and the reversed developmental sequence violating the basic laws of psychological growth. To address these issues, this study constructs a "three-dimensional sequential" age-appropriate education model, with the core features being the coordinated progression of cognitive complexity, socio-emotional depth, and teaching strategies. It establishes a differentiated evaluation system that aligns with the developmental tasks of each educational stage and provides a series of lesson examples on "emotional management." The goal is to solve the problem of insufficient specificity in mental health education, combining theory and practice to find a systematic solution to these issues.

Keywords

Mental Health Education; Age-Appropriate Teaching; Case Study; Sequential Design; Emotional Management.

1. Introduction

The essence of education is to promote human development. In the history of human educational development, standardized teaching, a product of the industrial revolution’s pursuit of maximizing efficiency, is no longer suitable for the demands of social development under the impact of AI. Therefore, the personalized development of education and teaching according to individual needs must be placed on the agenda. Both the content and form of education must undergo a great transformation in line with the development of the times. Jean Piaget and Erik H. Erikson mapped out the developmental trajectories of individuals in the fields of cognition and sociality [1]. Any effective educational intervention must be based on a deep understanding of specific developmental stages, and mental health education is no exception. However, a perplexing “paradox” exists in our current educational practice: while we possess precise maps depicting developmental differences, we tend to ignore the diversity of children's development in classroom teaching, strictly enforcing so-called "standardized" procedures. This paradox directly leads to the symptom of "one-size-fits-all" teaching.

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2. Current Diagnosis: A Multiple Pathological Analysis of the "One-Size-Fits-All" Phenomenon

Through the in-depth deconstruction and systematic analysis of "emotional management" themed lesson examples from primary to junior high school in video content and Chinese academic resources [2], we identify three deep-seated pathological phenomena prevalent in current mental health education practices.

2.1. Pathology I: Alienated Disconnect between Goals and Methods

In the analysis of many case studies, we found a severe structural disconnection between teaching goals and methods. A typical symptom of this is that advanced emotional cognition goals are established but are paired with low-level, simple recall activities. This disconnection is evident not only in the surface design of the lessons but also in the underlying educational philosophy.

Specifically, a lesson targeted at middle school students sets the goal of "learning to use cognitive reappraisal strategies to regulate anxiety," which requires high levels of abstract thinking and metacognitive abilities. However, the core teaching activities remain at a surface level, such as watching short videos on emotional recognition and simple group discussions about "what to do when you're anxious." This design completely ignores the hypothetical-deductive reasoning and abstract thinking abilities that adolescents should have in the formal operational stage, as identified by Piaget.

Effective anxiety management teaching should guide students to deeply analyze "the irrational beliefs behind anxiety" and learn how to identify and challenge those automatic thinking patterns that lead to emotional distress, rather than staying at the superficial level of emotional sharing. This deep disconnection between goals and methods prevents the course from moving from "talking about emotions" to "managing emotions," ultimately rendering the education superficial and ineffective.

2.2. Pathology II: Structural Absence of Emotional Experience

The essence of emotional learning lies in its embodiment, experiential nature, and contextuality [3]. However, many current lessons fall into the cognitive trap of "emphasizing knowledge transfer over emotional experience," transforming what should be a dynamic emotional education into a monotonous psychological concept teaching course.

For example, in a lesson for fifth-grade students titled "Understanding Anger," the teacher spends a lot of time systematically explaining " the definition and classification of anger, its external manifestations, and internal harmful mechanisms," and then gets students to mechanically repeat the standardized slogan "control your anger." The entire teaching process is disconnected from the students' real emotional experiences and life contexts.

This design seriously contradicts the core developmental needs of children in this age group (the "industry vs. inferiority" stage of Erikson's theory) to build achievement motivation and psychological resilience through actual operations and concrete experiences. In this lesson, students may accurately recite "standardized knowledge" about anger but have never truly experienced the natural rise, moderate release, and return of anger in a safe emotional environment. This lack of genuine emotional experience makes the emotional education ineffective, as it cannot touch the students' inner feelings, nor can it translate into practical life skills.

2.3. Pathology III: The Reversal of Developmental Sequence

The most serious and concerning pathological phenomenon is the fundamental conflict between the design of some lessons and the psychological development patterns of students, resulting in the absurd situation of "reversed difficulty levels."

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Upward Reversal: We observed cases where younger children (pre-operational stage, characterized by concrete thinking and symbolic play) were asked to discuss highly abstract implicit emotional concepts, such as "What is loneliness?" or "What is jealousy?" These concepts are far beyond the cognitive understanding capabilities of children and are not aligned with their life experiences or emotional understanding.

Downward Reversal: Similarly, there is a prevalent phenomenon where middle school students (formal operational stage, capable of complex systems thinking and abstract theoretical thinking) are engaged in "emotion face recognition" or "emotion role-playing games," which are overly simplistic activities. Although these activities may appear fun and lively, they severely underestimate the cognitive development level and developmental needs of middle school students

This dual reversal of the developmental sequence creates "structural injustice" in education, depriving younger students of the necessary cognitive scaffolding and emotional support, while not providing older students with the intellectual challenges and emotional depth they require. Every age group of students is deprived of their basic educational right to receive developmentally appropriate support.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Piaget divided children's cognitive development into four stages, providing a scale for designing cognitive goals in emotional management lessons: the pre-operational stage (2-7 years), where children primarily engage in concrete thinking and need to understand emotions through tangible things; the concrete operational stage (7-11 years), where they develop logical reasoning and can explore the causal relationships of emotions; the formal operational stage (11-18 years), where they can engage in abstract thinking and master emotional regulation strategies. Based on this, this study sets up a cognitive development ladder: "Identify and Name - Understand and Attribute - Regulate and Integrate."

3.2. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson pointed out that the core task for younger primary school children (grades 1-2) is to gain a "sense of initiative," so emotional education should focus on cultivating the courage to express emotions; for older primary school children (grades 3-6), it is about developing a "sense of industry," addressing self-acceptance and interpersonal emotional issues; and for middle school students (grades 7-9), facing the "identity vs. role confusion" crisis, emotional education should guide the integration of emotions with the self-system. This framework directly informs the social focus of each developmental stage.

3.3. Embodied Cognition Theory

Embodied cognition emphasizes that cognition and emotion are shaped through bodily experiences. Emotional learning is essentially an embodied construction process, such as expressing anger through physical movement or externalizing emotions through art [4].

3.4. Integrated Framework: From Theory to Diagnostic Tools

Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Erikson's psychosocial development theory, and embodied cognition theory as the three foundational references, this educational paradigm systematically and differentially designs teaching goals, content, activities, and evaluation by considering physiological age, cognitive level, and socio-emotional development status. The core aim is to pursue 'developmental adaptability,' rather than simple age categorization. Focusing on the theme of emotional management, the design follows the logical sequence of "cognitive progression - social depth - practical upgrade," resulting in a series of teaching plans

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that incorporate both stage-specific differences and internal coherence. Specifically, cognitive complexity progresses from concrete to abstract, emotional depth extends from self to others, and strategy difficulty increases from intuitive to systematic. A dynamic evaluation system is established to match the emotional development goals of each stage, with lower levels using behavior observation-based performance evaluation, higher levels implementing task completion-based formative evaluation, and middle school using strategy-reflection-based comprehensive evaluation. This creates a closed-loop system for "evaluation - goals - teaching".

To translate theory into practical tools, this study constructs a “three-dimensional adaptability” diagnostic framework (Table 1), which evaluates the quality of lessons from three dimensions: cognitive adaptability, social relevance, and embodied practice.

Table 1. “Three-dimensional Adaptability” Diagnostic Framework

Educational Stage	Core Psychological Needs (Erikson)	Cognitive Development Characteristics (Piaget)	Embodied Practice Needs (Embodied Cognition)	Core Diagnostic Indicators
Primary School Lower Stage (Grades 1-2)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Pre-operational stage, concrete thinking, emotional expression	Requires bodily movement, sensory experience support	Degree of emotional recognition in concrete terms; proportion of body expression opportunities
Primary School Upper Stage (Grades 3-6)	Industry vs. Inferiority	Concrete operational stage, budding logical reasoning	Requires situational participation, cooperative interaction	Rationality of emotional attribution; depth of group practice
Middle School Stage (Grades 7-9)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Formal operational stage, mature abstract thinking	Requires problem exploration, strategy rehearsal	Systematic application of strategies; depth of self-reflection

4. Paradigm Reconstruction: Systematic Construction of the “Age-Appropriate Teaching” Theoretical Framework

Based on the in-depth diagnosis and problem analysis presented earlier, we have developed a “three-dimensional age-appropriate teaching” mental health education theoretical paradigm aimed at addressing the three major pathologies mentioned. The core of this paradigm lies in the “three-dimensional integrated” sequential design principle and differentiated evaluation system.

4.1. Three-Dimensional Collaborative Structure of the Theoretical Model

The core theoretical innovation of the “three-dimensional integrated” design model is the simultaneous and progressively incremental system design across three dimensions: cognitive complexity, socio-emotional depth, and teaching strategies.

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Table 2. "Emotional Management" Theme Three-Dimensional Serialized Design Theory Model

Design Dimension	Theoretical Foundation	Primary School Lower Stage (6-8 years)	Primary School Upper Stage (9-12 years)	Middle School Stage (13-15 years)
Cognitive Dimension Goal	Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory	Identification and Naming: Recognizing basic emotions from specific events and expressions	Understanding and Attribution: Understanding complex emotions and exploring the causes of emotions	Regulation and Integration: Using abstract strategies to manage emotions and integrating them into the self-system
Social Dimension Focus	Erikson's Social Development Theory	Egocentrism: Safely expressing my emotions and feelings	Interpersonal Interaction: Understanding and processing your emotions and our relationship	Social Identity: The role and meaning of emotions in groups and society
Core Teaching Strategies	Constructivism & Social Interaction Theory	Gamification, Embodiment, Role-playing, Drawing, Emotional Experience Exercises	Contextualization, Collaboration, Case Analysis, Group Discussions, Brainstorming	Abstraction, Metacognition: Debates, Socratic questioning, Cognitive Restructuring Training
Corresponding Pathology Solutions	Comprehensive Application of Developmental Theory	Building self-confidence through successful experiences	Enhancing construction ability through understanding	Forming a sense of identity through integration

4.2. Deep Differentiated Design of Stage-specific Lesson Examples [5]

4.2.1. Primary School Lower Stage Lesson Example: "The Wonderful Journey of the Angry Little Fireball"

Design Concept: For children in the pre-operational stage, this design uses the symbolic thinking characteristic of this age group. Through the concrete representation of "Angry Little Fireball," it helps children recognize physical sensations of anger and learn safe emo tional expression methods.

Core Activity Design:

Deep reading of the picture book "I Turned Into a Fire-breathing Dragon," experiencing emotional changes through the story's context.

"Emotional Thermometer" body experience game, where students express different levels of anger through physical movement.

"Angry Little Fireball" drawing creation, visualizing and concretizing abstract emotions.

"Safe Expression of Anger" role-playing, learning appropriate behaviors through play.

Theoretical Depth Explanation: This design deeply responds to the core developmental task of "building a sense of industry" in Erikson's theory, providing children with the opportunity to gain successful experiences in a safe environment through the creative combination of art and play. At the same time, the embodied activity design fully aligns with the pre-operational stage children's reliance on actions and images for cognitive development, fundamentally addressing the issues of the absence of emotional experience and the reversal of developmental sequences.

4.2.2. Primary School Upper Stage Lesson Example: "The Psychological Code Behind Anger"

Design Concept: Based on the development of logical reasoning abilities in children in the concrete operational stage, this lesson guides them to explore the multiple causes of emotions in depth and to learn cognitive skills such as perspective-taking and emotional acceptance.

Core Activity Design:

In-depth, multi-angle analysis of a "corridor collision" event, understanding the reasons for different emotions triggered by the same event.

Creation and performance of a small script titled "Anger ABC (Belief - Emotion - Consequence)."

Group collaboration to build a "list of anger management and calming strategies," fostering problem-solving abilities through teamwork.

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Writing and reflection in an "emotional diary," cultivating habits of emotional observation and recording.

Theoretical Depth Explanation: This design achieves a high degree of unity between cognitive goals (understanding the causality of emotions) and teaching activities (logical analysis tasks), effectively resolving the issue of the disconnect between goals and methods. Through contextual case analysis and social group collaboration, it not only enhances students' logical thinking abilities but also cultivates cognitive flexibility in understanding others and thinking from multiple perspectives.

4.2.3. Middle School Stage Lesson Example: "The Art and Practice of Managing Anger"

Design Concept: Fully utilizing the abstract thinking and metacognitive abilities of adolescents in the formal operational stage, this lesson aims to cultivate their ability to systematically manage complex emotions and develop self-regulation strategies.

Core Activity Design:

In-depth philosophical discussion on the “pros and cons” of anger, cultivating critical thinking.

Systematic learning of the "Cognitive Triangle" theory and practical application training.

"Real-life situation simulation training," where strategies are tested and optimized in practice.

Building and sharing a "personal emotional management philosophy," forming a systematic cognitive framework.

Theoretical Depth Explanation: This design fully addresses the strong need for abstract thinking and philosophical reflection in adolescents during the formal operational stage, scientifically guiding their metacognitive abilities toward deep monitoring and effective regulation of their own emotional processes. At the same time, through the deep exploration of identity, it directly addresses Erikson's core developmental crisis of "identity vs. role confusion" during adolescence.

4.3. Differentiated Reconstruction of the Age-Appropriate Evaluation System

To thoroughly address the deep-seated contradiction of "knowledge-action separation," we have reconstructed a differentiated evaluation system that precisely matches the developmental goals of each educational stage:

4.3.1. Lower Grades: Observational Performance Evaluation

The focus of evaluation is on students’ accuracy in identifying emotions, appropriateness of expression, and behavior regulation ability in real or simulated situations. A multi-dimensional behavioral observation scale is used, focusing on students’ natural responses rather than standardized answers.

4.3.2. Upper Primary School Grades: Applied Formative Evaluation

This evaluation focuses on students' depth of understanding the causal relationships of emotions, ability for perspective-taking, and initial application of problem-solving strategies in case analysis. A combination of process and outcome evaluation is used, emphasizing the demonstration of students' thinking processes.

4.3.3. Middle School Stage: Strategic Reflective Evaluation

The core of this evaluation is students' flexibility in applying strategies in complex situations, the objectivity of effect assessment, and the depth of metacognitive reflection. The portfolio assessment method is used, requiring students to create personal emotional management growth portfolios, showing the long-term development of strategies and deep thinking processes.

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5. Conclusion: Educational Awareness and Humanistic Care Returning to the Essence of Child Development

The ultimate value of education lies in a deep understanding of the developmental laws of "human beings" and respect for humanity. This study is not only a theoretical response to the phenomenon of "one-size-fits-all" mental health education but also a profound call — a call for education to return to the fundamental laws of child development and for teaching to be based on a deep understanding of these developmental laws.

True educational equity is not about making all children receive the same education, but about ensuring that each child at different developmental stages receives "just the right" educational nourishment. Only "age-appropriate teaching," based on a profound understanding of developmental laws, can make mental health education truly become the "spiritual nutritionist" and "development accelerator" for students' healthy growth, rather than an "invisible shackle" that hinders their natural development.

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