

The Role Positioning and Practical Path Exploration of High School Head Teachers in Mental Health Education

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Abstract

During high school, students are in a crucial period of transition from adolescence to adulthood. Under the interaction of multiple factors such as physical development, psychological development, academic burden, family environment, interpersonal communication and social adaptation, mental health problems are becoming increasingly prominent. The head teacher, as the core force of class management, has an irreplaceable responsibility in mental health education. This paper aims to explore the role positioning of high school head teachers in mental health education, including observer, communicator, collaborator and implementer, and further explore their practical paths, and propose strategies such as strengthening professional training, building collaborative mechanisms, optimizing the class environment, and deepening home-school cooperation, with the aim of providing theoretical references and practical guidance for high school head teachers to effectively carry out mental health education.

Keywords

High school head teacher; Mental health education; Role positioning; Practice path.

1. Introduction

In recent years, mental health issues among teenagers in our country have drawn widespread social attention. The "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Mental Health Work for Students in the New Era (2023-2025)" jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and 17 other departments explicitly states that mental health education for students should be integrated throughout the entire process of moral education and ideological and political work, and a coordinated and interactive mental health work pattern [1] of "schools - families - society" should be established. The high school stage, as a critical period [2] for students' physical and mental development, faces multiple challenges such as academic pressure, interpersonal conflicts and self-identity, and the urgency of mental health education is particularly prominent. Students are at a crucial stage of transition from adolescence to adulthood, and their psychological development is characterized by the coexistence of contradictions, sensitivity and instability, and is highly susceptible to the interaction of internal and external factors.

In the school's mental health education system, the head teacher is on the "front line", being both the manager of the student's daily life and the companion of the student's psychological growth. However, there are still some practical difficulties for current high school head teachers in the practice of mental health education: some head teachers do not have a clear [3] understanding of their role in mental health education, some are under great work pressure and neglect mental health education, some have a single teaching method and lack of innovation, and some do not know how to effectively cooperate with parents and mental health teachers when facing students' psychological problems. These problems directly affect the actual effect of mental health education and also restrict the full play of the role of head teachers in educating

students. Therefore, it is of great theoretical value and practical significance to define the role of head teachers in mental health education and explore scientific and effective practical paths.

2. Policy Background and Practical Requirements

2.1. National Policy for the Top-Level Design of Mental Health Education in Schools

In recent years, the state has placed increasing emphasis on mental health work in schools. The Ministry of Education's "Guidelines for Mental Health Education in Primary and Secondary Schools (Revised in 2012)" sets out the overall goals and main contents of mental health education, particularly emphasizing that "all teachers should participate together and class teachers should play a leading role" [4]. The Healthy China Initiative - Action Plan for Mental Health of Children and Adolescents (2019-2022) further proposed to establish a school mental health education service system and enhance teachers' mental health education capabilities [5]. In 2023, the Ministry of Education and 17 other departments jointly issued the Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Mental Health Work for Students in the New Era (2023-2025), which elevated mental health work to the national strategic level and required "each school to have at least one full-time mental health education teacher". It also emphasizes that "all teachers should take responsibility for students' mental health education, and class teachers are an important force" [1].

The introduction of these policies sends a clear signal that mental health education is no longer the exclusive responsibility of mental health teachers, but a common task for all teachers. Among them, the head teacher is given a more important mission because of the particularity of the role. The policy not only provides institutional basis for head teachers to carry out mental health education, but also sets higher requirements [6] for their ability to educate students psychologically.

2.2. The Real Challenges of Mental Health Education in Senior High School

In reality, mental health education in senior high schools faces multiple challenges. First, there is a high incidence of mental health problems among students. According to relevant research, about 14.8% of teenagers have varying degrees of risk [7] of depression, and problems such as anxiety, self-harm, and Internet addiction are also on the rise, seriously affecting students' healthy growth and academic development. Secondly, there is a general shortage of professional mental health teachers. Many schools have difficulty achieving a reasonable allocation of the student-teacher ratio, and some rural schools have even been lacking full-time mental health teachers for a long time. Again, there is a disconnect between mental health education and regular teaching and learning. It is often regarded as an "extra task" rather than an "obligatory duty", and is difficult to truly integrate into the entire process of education.

In this context, the head teacher, as the educator who has the most frequent contact and the deepest understanding with students, naturally becomes the key support for the implementation of mental health education. Whether a head teacher can effectively assume the responsibility of mental health education is directly related to the effectiveness of mental health work in schools.

3. The Role of High School Head Teachers in Mental Health Education

Based on policy requirements and practical needs, high school head teachers should assume the following four roles in mental health education:

3.1. The "Observer" of Students' Mental States

The head teacher is the direct manager of students' daily study and life, and has the natural advantage of observing students around the clock and up close. As an observer, the head teacher needs to be acutely aware of psychological signals such as emotional changes, abnormal behaviors, interpersonal withdrawal, etc., and be able to detect, pay attention and intervene early [8]. The core of this role lies in "acuity" and "persistence" - having the basic ability to identify psychological problems and establishing a regular observation mechanism, rather than passively responding to problems when they become serious.

In practice, the head teacher can observe students' conditions through multiple dimensions such as classroom performance, recess activities, homework quality, and social dynamics. For example, a student who is usually lively and cheerful suddenly becomes taciturn, or a student with stable grades shows a significant decline, these could be external manifestations of psychological distress. Detecting these signs in a timely manner is the first step in subsequent effective intervention.

3.2. A Popularizer of Psychological Knowledge

Mental health education is not just about problem intervention, but more about positive guidance. The head teacher should act as a popularizer of mental health knowledge, passing on common sense of mental health to students through class meetings, theme activities, daily conversations and other forms, helping students establish correct cognition and eliminate prejudice and stigmatization towards mental health problems. This role helps to build an open and inclusive psychological culture in the class. Many psychological problems can be effectively resolved in their infancy when students are able to confront their emotional distress and actively seek help. The daily teaching by the head teacher often has a more subtle influence on students than a special psychology class.

3.3. The "Collaborator" of Professional Forces

The head teacher is not a professional psychotherapist and is responsible for identifying, guiding and referring. As collaborators, the head teacher needs to form a linkage mechanism with mental health teachers, school doctors, parents, external professional institutions, etc. When serious psychological problems are found in students, professional forces should be referred in a timely manner, and follow-up and cooperation should be done to ensure that students receive scientific and effective assistance [9].

The accurate positioning of this role is very important. If the head teacher considers himself a "psychologist", it may lead to misjudgment or delay due to insufficient professional ability; If all the blame is placed on a psychologist, the best opportunity for intervention may be missed. Only by finding your own position can you play your best role in mental health education.

3.4. The "Connector" of Home-School Co-Education

The family is an important factor influencing students' mental health. As a bridge of communication between home and school, the head teacher should take the initiative to establish regular contact with parents, understand the family environment of students, convey scientific mental health concepts to parents, and guide parents to deal with children's psychological distress correctly. In home-school collaboration, the head teacher should not only convey information but also build trust and form an educational synergy [10].

Especially when psychological problems of students are identified, the understanding and support of the head teacher can often relieve the anxiety and resistance of parents and create favorable conditions for subsequent intervention. Many parents lack awareness of their children's psychological problems and even have a sense of shame, so the patient communication and correct guidance of the head teacher are particularly important.

4. Practical Paths for High School Head Teachers to Carry out Mental Health Education

4.1. Strengthen Professional Training to Enhance The Ability of Psychological Education

At present, most high school head teachers lack systematic knowledge and skills in mental health education, which is an important factor restricting the effectiveness of their work. Schools should incorporate mental health education as a compulsory part of head teacher training and conduct stratified and categorized training. The training should cover: identification and response to common psychological problems, basic processes of psychological crisis intervention, communication skills and conversation techniques, design and implementation of psychological theme class meetings, etc [11].

At the same time, a training model of "expert guidance + peer assistance" can be established based on regional psychological teaching and research institutions or psychological professional resources of colleges and universities. In addition to centralized training, schools can also regularly organize head teachers to participate in psychological workshops, case studies and other activities, allowing head teachers to accumulate experience through the discussion of actual cases and promote the deep integration of theoretical knowledge and practical ability.

4.2. Build a Collaborative Mechanism to Form A Joint Force for Education

It is difficult for class teachers to deal with increasingly complex psychological problems on their own. Schools should establish a four-level linkage mechanism [12] of "class teachers - psychological teachers - school leaders - parents". Specifically, first establish psychological files for students, with the participation of head teachers in dynamic updates to ensure information sharing and connection; The second is to establish a regular consultation system, where the head teacher and the psychological teacher regularly communicate about the situation of the students they focus on and jointly formulate intervention plans; Third, improve the referral mechanism, clarify the boundaries of responsibilities and operational procedures of head teachers in crisis intervention, and avoid "overstepping" or "being absent".

On this basis, schools should also smooth the channels for connecting professional resources both inside and outside the school, and form a comprehensive and multi-level mental health support network. When class teachers feel that there is a strong support system behind them, they will have more confidence and strength to deal with the complex psychological problems of students.

4.3. Optimize the Class Environment and Create A Positive Psychological Atmosphere

The class is the main place where students live every day, and the class atmosphere has a subtle influence on students' mental health. Head teachers should incorporate mental health education into the entire process of class building [13]. First, carefully design psychology-themed class meetings, focusing on themes such as emotion management, interpersonal communication, and coping with setbacks, to guide students to experience and reflect; Second, build a supportive class culture, advocate a class atmosphere of respect, understanding and mutual assistance, and reduce interpersonal conflicts and bullying behaviors; Third, pay attention to special groups and offer more care and support to students with academic difficulties, family changes, introverted personalities, etc.

A good class atmosphere is the best psychological prevention in itself. When students feel accepted, understood and supported, their psychological resilience is also enhanced imperceptibly.

4.4. Deepen Home-School Cooperation and Extend Educational Time and Space

Students' mental health problems are often closely related to the family environment. Head teachers should take the initiative to extend mental health education to the family. The specific approaches include: popularizing the laws of adolescent psychological development and coping strategies for common problems through forms such as parent-teacher meetings and parent schools; Establish a home-school communication mechanism, provide timely feedback on students' performance at school, and understand students' family situations to form a two-way interaction; For students with psychological distress, the head teacher should work with parents to develop support plans, guide parents to create a harmonious family atmosphere, and avoid the predicament of "school intervention and family dissolution".

In addition, the head teacher should help parents recognize the impact of their own emotional state on their children and guide parents to accompany their children's growth in a more scientific and rational way. Many parents' anxiety and stress can be passed on to their children invisibly. The understanding and guidance of the head teacher can often help parents shed their burdens and cooperate better with the school's work.

5. Conclusion

High school head teachers play multiple roles such as observer, popularizer, collaborator and connector in mental health education and are key nodes in the school's mental health work system. In the context of continuous policy intensification and increasingly prominent psychological needs of students, clarifying the role positioning of head teachers and exploring practical and feasible paths are of great significance for enhancing the effectiveness of mental health education in schools and promoting the all-round healthy growth of students. The improvement of the mental health education capabilities of head teachers requires both institutional guarantees and resource support, as well as the professional awareness and continuous learning of head teachers themselves.

In the future, we should further improve institutional guarantees, incorporate the effectiveness of mental health education carried out by head teachers into the evaluation system, and provide necessary incentives and support. At the same time, head teachers themselves should enhance their sense of responsibility and professional awareness, constantly reflect and improve in practice, and truly become guardians and guides of students' mental health. Only in this way can the fundamental task of "cultivating virtue and nurturing people" be implemented and a psychological defense line be built for the healthy growth of high school students.

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