

An Analysis of the Challenges and Approaches to Improving Psychological Education in Higher Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: Psychological education plays a significant and distinctive function in the ten educational systems of ideological and political education in universities and colleges. As a type of education, higher vocational education continues to struggle with the value, mode, and system of psychological education, which hinders the realization of psychological education's function. This paper uses Xi Jinping's important exposition on mental health as its theoretical basis, implements the concept of "all-round education," and, from the perspective of the synergy of elements in the overall process of educating people, integrates the resources of psychological education of people, time and space to provide a model for colleges and universities to construct a pattern of moral and psychological education.

1. Introduction

As one of the top ten educational systems of ideological and political education in colleges and universities, "psychological education" plays a significant and distinctive role in the implementation of the essential mission of cultivating individuals to "bear new value in the new era" [1]. As of March 2023, there were fewer than sixty papers and one dissertation titled "Psychological Education in Higher Vocational Colleges" on CNKI, proposing theoretical and practical issues of psychological education in vocational colleges. Research on the precise education path based on the peculiarities of higher vocational education and students is evidently lacking. The objective of fostering high-quality technical and skilled talent necessitates increased psychological expectations for students in higher vocational programs and new standards for psychological education in vocational schools. Vocational colleges have a long way to go before fully embracing moral and psychological education.

2. Fulfillment of the function of psychological education in higher vocational colleges: challenges in cultivating morality in students

Considering the development of mental health education in colleges and universities over the past four decades, fruitful results have been yielded, and irreplaceable and significant contributions have been made to the cultivation of socialist builders and successors with all-around growth. However, the value of psychological education in colleges and universities has not been adequately emphasized, particularly in higher vocational

institutions, which continue to suffer development bottlenecks in focusing on "people," incorporating "morality," and extending to include various "aspects."

2.1. In terms of value, the effects of behavioral motivation and morality have not yet been fully demonstrated

Behavioral psychology typically employs behavioral motivation as one of its approaches. From the perspective of the psychological education process in higher vocational colleges, schools should encourage students to actively participate in the great practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics, combine the "Youth Dream" with the "Chinese Dream," and help students be steadfast in realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, solidifying positive behaviors with firm confidence and beliefs, and internalizing them into personal values. Yet, schools are not exerting sufficient effort, diminishing the usefulness of psychological education and behavior motivations.

As a result of the influence of the western psychological theory of "value-free," this idea is misunderstood in mental health teaching at vocational institutions. Some individuals insist on and closely adhere to "value-free" as one of the ethical prerequisites of psychological counseling. Some believe that "value-free" is synonymous with "student-centered," meaning that the words and actions of students are excusable or reasonable and should be accepted unconditionally. Others may simply apply the "value-free" idea to the entire psychological education process, which should be utilized in the counseling procedure. We do not deny the practical significance of "value-free" in the counseling process. Yet, psychological education must be guided by values. Whether in the context of

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psychological counseling or other educational activities, value intervention is an indispensable component. College students are in the most crucial phase of their lives, during which their values are being shaped. Vocational colleges must incorporate socialist core values into all facets of psychological education and provide timely and accurate value guidance and intervention for college students, filling their spiritual world, enhancing ideological and moral cognition, promoting moral and emotional recognition, bolstering moral behavior, and thereby shaping noble moral personalities.

2.2. In terms of the education model, there is insufficient cooperation concerning efficient cooperation, content connection, and means development

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized a new mechanism for educating people at the National Work Conference on Building and Enhancing College Students' Ideological and Political Education: "Educating people from three aspects." As one of the top ten educational themes, "psychological education" encompasses the notion of collaborative education with efforts from all staff, throughout the entire process, and from all aspects; yet there are still shortcomings in practice.

2.2.1, The effort to educate people under joint management has yet to be improved.

Specific examples include the exhaustion of full-time mental health educators who "fight alone" and the misconception among other educators that "psychological education has nothing to do with them." In addition, the collaboration between the home and school and between the school and hospital is only a formality or insufficient. At some schools, the number of full-time mental health educators is insufficient, and some take on multiple positions. The mental health education team's professionalization lacks motivation, and the system is ineffective.

2.2.2, The follow-up mechanism is imperfect, and process-wide awareness of psychological education is lacking.

It is evident that the majority of mental health education occurs in the freshman year. Once identified as "problem students" through psychological evaluation, individuals have to carry this label throughout their university years. In addition, "normal student" management is disregarded. There is insufficient dynamic monitoring of students' mental health. As the primary method for educating people, psychological courses are primarily taught in large classes during freshman year. In the sophomore and junior years, only elective courses are provided, if any. Hence, it is not possible to tailor psychological education to the needs of students at different educational stages.

2.2.3, The development of means throughout all aspects is insufficient, and psychological education needs to be strengthened in all aspects.

It is evident that integrating psychological education with other educational components is insufficient. In addition, psychological education has not been organically incorporated into other educational systems, including curriculum, management, practice, organization, and culture. For instance, the psychological education function of campus material culture is poorly developed, the educational role of campus spiritual culture has not yet been emphasized, and the educational value of the Internet needs to be enhanced.

2.3. In terms of the education system, the integration with moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor education are not close enough, and the attempts in the same direction are not enough

Psychological education provides a fundamental assurance for the healthy growth and holistic development of college students. Improving the mental health of college students provides a fundamental guarantee for the "five ways of life." It creates a psychological foundation for the development of the "five ways of life" by understanding the psychological process of students' intellectual, emotional, volitional, and practical growth. Cultivating and training students' "non-intellectual components" facilitate the growth of their "five ways of life." Sukhomlynsky once said: "Without psychological cultivation, physical, moral and aesthetic cultivation is impossible." Currently, psychological education and moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education in higher vocational institutions are not sufficiently integrated, nor is their combined impact emphasized.

2.3.1, "Cultivating Virtue with Heart" needs to be further coordinated

China's colleges and universities have developed psychological education in moral education for a long time, accumulating rich findings and effectively fulfilling the task of "cultivating morality with heart." Nonetheless, mental health education at higher vocational schools began very late. Coordination and integration of mental and moral education are poor in some universities due to factors such as the establishment of mental health education teams and working mechanisms. In terms of integrating psychological methods into moral education to strengthen affinity, understand and evaluate moral education confusion from a psychological perspective, and boost efficacy, there is still considerable potential for development.

2.3.2, "Promoting intelligence with heart" needs to be further promoted

Intellectual education is an educational activity that

systematically conveys knowledge and abilities to students, and it is the only way to develop “competent” newcomers to the era. Psychological education not only promotes knowledge education but also provides support for intellectual education in numerous ways, including the development of students’ personalities and the enhancement of non-cognitive variables. In order to boost students’ learning motivation, raise learning interest, master learning methodologies, cultivate inventive thought, and then “expand knowledge” and “promote intelligence with heart,” higher vocational institutions must further develop their psychological education.

2.3.3, “Strengthening the body with the heart” has yet to be further demonstrated

At the 2018 National Education Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that “we must establish the educational concept of health first, open a full range of physical education classes, and help students enjoy physical exercise by enhancing their physique, enhancing their personality, and exercising their will.” The importance of psychological education in sports is demonstrated in two areas: the physical health of college students and the promotion of physical education. Higher vocational colleges must further strengthen psychological education to improve the psychological quality of college students, thereby improving individual physical functions; guide students to love sports through the psychological level to overcome the fear of adversity in sports; and integrate psychological education activities into sports to enhance teaching effects.

2.3.4, “Cultivating beauty with heart” still needs to be further deepened

At the National Education Conference, General Secretary Xi Jinping underlined, “We must thoroughly strengthen and improve school aesthetic education, insist on educating people with aesthetics and culture, and therefore enhance students’ aesthetic and humanistic abilities.” Cai Yuanpei, the father of Chinese aesthetic education, once said, “The objective of aesthetic education is to create a dynamic and sensitive spirit and a noble and pure soul.” Aesthetic education is an education that cultivates sentiment and purifies the soul. The inner aesthetic world of college students is dependent on their psychological health. From the standpoint of psychological education and soul cultivation, higher vocational colleges do not make adequate attempts to enhance students’ personality beauty at present. Consequently, schools must address the aesthetic confusion of pupils, increase aesthetic orientation, rectify aesthetic distortions, cultivate noble aesthetic tastes, and promote appropriate aesthetic values.

2.3.5, “Help with heart” still needs to be further improved

Labor, which may promote comprehensive education,

plays an indispensable and crucial function in the national education system. General Secretary Xi Jinping requested at the 2018 National Education Conference that “labor education” be incorporated into the education and training system of colleges and universities in the new era. Integration of psychological education with labor education at higher vocational colleges is insufficient at this time. Specific manifestations include a lack of awareness that psychological education can help students develop a passion for labor skills, a paucity of methods for resolving students’ labor psychological confusion through psychological education, and insufficient practice in assisting students with labor psychological adjustment, etc.

3. Reflections on the Role of Psychological Education in Higher Vocational Colleges in Light of Xi Jinping’s Vital Speech on Mental Health

During the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, General Secretary Xi Jinping “adhered to the people-centered approach, gave great priority to mental health work, and made a number of significant expositions”^[2]. Not only did he conduct scientific research and express an opinion regarding the mental health of the public, but he also offered suggestions for building a harmonious social psychology. His understandings are not only the legacy of Marx’s humanistic psychology concept, but also the active promotion of the Chinese Communists’ mental health concept, establishing a rational and comprehensive mental health education philosophy. Using this as a theoretical foundation to lead higher vocational institutions in psychological education is of critical importance.

3.1. Theoretical significance

3.1.1, It addresses the positioning, direction, and trend of psychological education and provides a new theoretical foundation for psychological education in higher vocational colleges

On the theoretical basis of Xi Jinping’s expositions on mental health, we can adhere to the value orientation of psychological education, solve the problems of functional orientation, practical direction, and the development trend of psychological education in higher vocational colleges, and clarify the significance of psychological education in students’ moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor skill development. His expositions enrich and broaden the theoretical study of mental health education in higher vocational institutions to some extent.

3.1.2, It enriches research on the value of ideological and political education in higher vocational institutions in the modern era and promotes the discipline of ideological and political education so that it can evolve with the times.

The theory transcends the traditional boundaries of moral education dominated by ideology and politics, focuses on the fundamental and crucial role of mental health in ideological and political education for college students, and adapts to the changing development of the new era and the realistic needs of coordinating ideological, political, moral, and psychological education, thereby promoting ideological and political education that is in step with the times. Taking the positioning of higher vocational education as a logical starting point, it simultaneously implements the national “Vocational Education Quality Improvement and Training Action Plan” (2020-2023), expands the research objects of higher vocational psychological education, enhances the theory of psychological education in colleges and universities, and broadens the research scope of ideological and political education.

3.2. Practical significance

3.2.1, Student level: increasing strategies for fostering outstanding youth in the new era

Such a theory meets the desires of students, respects the psychological needs of “subjectivity” of vocational students at a crucial stage in their lives, and meets the cognitive level and psychological characteristics of vocational student groups, thereby accurately tapping the unique value of psychological education and implementing effective education that is close to the students’ hearts. It effectively nurtures “great young people in the new era who have beliefs, are willing to assume responsibility, can withstand hardship, and are willing to fight”.

3.2.2, Teacher level: addressing the “knowledge” and “action” issues of psychological education in higher-level vocational education

Following the law of knowledge and action, the theory encourages efforts from the psychological education subject, process, and field to construct a practice system that connects all individuals, integrates the entire process, and penetrates all aspects. In addition, it refines the precise teaching of psychological education and efficiently promotes the “education of the heart and morals,” which gives practical references for “how to do” and “what to do” in psychological education.

3.2.3, School level: enhancing moral education in vocational schools

Based on the reality of complex changes in psychological education in higher vocational schools, the theory takes

advantage of vocational education to highlight its characteristics in psychological education, promotes the coordination of organizational, time, and space elements, and constructs a mechanism of “educating people from three aspects” for psychological education in order to carry out the fundamental task of cultivating people with virtue.

4. The Methods of Achieving the Function of Psychological Education in Higher Vocational Colleges: The Appropriate Approach from the Perspective of “Educating People from Three Aspects”

Systems thinking is the logical prerequisite for promoting psychological education [3]. Under the direction of Xi Jinping’s exposition on mental health, higher vocational colleges systematically integrate the resources of psychological education in the elements of people, time, and space, realizing mental health education from the fundamental goal of “education of the heart” to the important goal of “education of morality” and eventually the ultimate goal of “educating people.”

4.1. Linking all people and elements to form the psychological education community

Psychological education requires that all employees be interconnected, with all faculty and staff expected to collaborate toward the common goal.

For colleges and universities, fostering socialist builders and successors with a balanced growth of morality, intelligence, physique, aesthetics, and labor skills is a difficult task and goal of the times. All instructional personnel must be required to share responsibilities in order to prevent psychological professionals from fighting alone. It is not the purpose of psychological education to lower the workload of full-time psychological teachers or increase the duties of other teachers. Higher vocational colleges should diligently implement the requirements of “educating people from three perspectives” by cultivating the positive psychological energy of all faculty and staff, ensuring that all efforts are directed toward the same goal, and drawing a “concentric circle” of psychological education [4] in order to create a mental health education ecosystem and ensure that psychological education is effectively implemented.

4.2. The whole process is integrated, the content is progressively coordinated, the mind is enlightened, and a complete psychological education chain is built throughout the three years of students’ learning

In terms of time elements, psychological education demands the integration of the entire process. In order to realize the transition from addressing students’

“psychological difficulties” to “ideological confusion” and achieve the advanced goal of fostering “value-driven” youth in the new era, it is necessary to construct a psychological education system that is consistent throughout the entire college years of students.

4.2.1, The content of psychological education should demonstrate continuity and logical progression

The content design of psychological education should correspond to the idea of development, addressing the psychological needs of students at different educational stages, and practical measures should be taken throughout the “whole process” [5] to maintain the continuity of psychological education. In addition, it must be cleverly integrated into the “five ways of life” and work in the same direction, ensuring that psychological education is natural; it must emphasize development, that is, it must serve the needs of students’ growth and future careers, integrating positive personality and professional psychological quality into education and teaching, with theoretical courses emphasizing the intellectualization of people and practical courses emphasizing the practical application of psychological knowledge. Additionally, psychological education should reflect the characteristics and attributes of higher vocational education, focusing on the cultivation of labor spirit, professional ethics, and the spirit of hard work, and fostering talents with technical skills who have ideals, are courageous enough to assume responsibility, can endure adversity, and are willing to fight.

4.2.2, The method of psychological education aligns with the psychological features of students in higher vocational colleges

Psychological education must prevent “method disembedding” and avoid getting half the result with twice the effort. The proper educational approach is crucial. Teachers of mental health education should pay close attention to research on “Gen Z” youth groups [6], based on the cognitive level and psychological features of higher vocational students in the new era. Teachers should “consider students’ cognitive, developmental, and emotional demands as their starting point” [7], using the emotional connection as a medium, requiring students and teachers to co-create educational activities that match with students’ “proximal development zone” [8]. Incorporating positive psychological experience, suggestion, identification, and other methods with psychological techniques such as empathy, teachers can adopt measures such as focusing on integrating theory and practice and selecting in-class and after-class activities that adapt to social life experience to solve psychological confusion in a subtle manner, thereby realizing the role of valuable guidance and ideological navigation.

4.3. All educational components must be coordinated

Psychological education requires strengthening the psychological role of situational interaction in the educational environment, giving full play to the environment’s hidden educational function, fostering interaction between individuals and the environmental system, and constructing a material, interpersonal, and Internet environment that demonstrates the function of psychological education.

4.3.1, Build a material environment for psychological education that fosters the subject’s self-awareness

Being the environmental system’s mesosystem, the school environment is a crucial area for psychological education. There are components of psychological education in all educational venues at colleges and universities, with the classroom being the most essential for mental health education. In developing the field of psychological education, spaces such as student dorms, gymnasiums, and libraries play a significant role in educating individuals. Higher vocational colleges should be adept at investigating the material environment for psychological education and the material culture that incorporates socialist core values, as well as constructing the psychological education elements in material scenes. A real and experiential educational environment can activate the intuitive feelings of students and promote their emotional identity, which influences their value judgments and ultimately cultivates their self-awareness.

4.3.2, Create a psychological and interpersonal atmosphere that is conducive to emotional experience

The teacher-student relationship is a unique type of relationship that develops via their interactions. The effectiveness of psychological education is directly impacted by the frequency and quality of contacts.

First, psychological education in the classroom should foster a psychological and interpersonal environment conducive to emotional experience. To support the reform of curriculum in ideological and political psychology teaching, psychological education must achieve knowledge dissemination, skill training, and value guidance through classroom instruction. Teachers take theories, realities, and students’ emotional attitudes into account and integrate professional knowledge and academic resources into educational elements through two-way interactions with their students. It assists in enhancing students’ learning motivation, stimulating their interest in learning, and enhancing their sense of fulfillment [9]. Instructors must insist on the unity of precepts and deeds, as well as an equal conversation with students, utilizing curricular knowledge and their own charisma to influence students and thus promote the character development of their students.

Second, developing such an environment is the most

effective method of post-class psychological education. The interaction between teachers and students after class is not only necessary for implementing the requirement of “educating people from three aspects,” but it also acts as a weak link in psychological education as a whole [10]. Teachers should serve as both learning tutors in the classroom and life tutors outside the classroom. Teachers should also interact closely with students via the Internet after class to discuss or provide guidance regarding knowledge learning and skill training that students care about, combining it with students’ employment; provide specific and personalized guidance based on personal career planning and psychological development, which is closely related to the development of students’ careers. Internet-based communication between teachers and students outside of the classroom can fulfill a variety of hidden educational roles, including ideological enlightenment, value guidance, emotional recognition, and problem-solving.

4.3.3, Build an Internet environment suitable for psychological education

To adapt to the “new standard” of higher vocational students’ knowledge acquisition in the new era, higher vocational institutions must develop an Internet suitable for psychological education and a rich new media matrix. To dispel erroneous psychological beliefs, timely Internet postings of logical theories written in simple language are necessary. Posts containing psychological knowledge should be provided as succinct, self-contained diagrams. As a “development booster,” promotional videos featuring real-world scenarios and clear content will be shown to students. It is necessary to systematically integrate and apply the campus Internet platform, conduct interactive themed psychological micro-lectures in a timely manner, and organize and broadcast psychological micro-videos and psychological short plays directed and performed by students in order to establish a welcoming and credible online spiritual home.

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