

The Necessity of Including Life Education in Chinese Basic Education Curricula

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Abstract: Teenagers are at a critical stage of physical and mental development. They embody the prospects for the nation. The incorporation of life education into basic education curricula poses positive effects on adolescents' development of a fundamental understanding of life and its purpose. This study aims to provide a brief overview of global practices in life education, review current life education research in China, and analyze the necessity of including life education in adolescent schooling.

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Introduction

SOCIAL existence and development depend on the functioning of all individuals' lives. Hence, it is crucial that education set the development of life as its pivotal goal in order to actualize individuals' potential and maximize their contributions to society. Life education has the capability to fuel healthy development and the formation of a positive outlook on life and values in teenagers (Ma, 2013). Currently, a sizeable portion of Chinese adolescents exhibit a lack of sense of meaning in life, lose hope for the future, or even develop suicide ideation. Squandering time and energy is a more prevalent phenomenon among them (Niu, 2011). Issues like these call for the normalization of life education. Incorporating life education into school curricula should become a focus of innovation in basic education.

There is no conclusive definition of life education to date. Academics have attempted to conceptualize it from various perspectives. Xu (2002) argued that life education is an educational activity that should be applied to individuals throughout their life span and used to foster their survival ability and meaning in life so as to enhance their quality of life. According to Liu (2004), life education is intended to inspire the purpose of life and humanistic consciousness in educated people to improve the integrity of their lives. Xiao and Chen (2013) proposed to study life education from the perspective of the "whole life" theory and include survival education, life development education, and death education as its essential aspects. As per their study, life education is not only a subject of discourse but, more importantly, a significant domain of practice. Despite the differences in focus among these arguments, the commonality is also evident, namely, the stress on the connection between education and actual life, the humanistic concern for students, and the importance of awakening their sense of purpose in life. In this study, we define life education as an educative process in which teachers, by tapping into all educational resources available, educate students to understand, appreciate, respect, and treasure life, to improve self-knowledge, and to develop life purpose to enhance the quality of life.

Global Status of Life Education

Globally, life education research derived from death education studies, which evolved into explorations of life-death relations and subsequently initiated life education in primary and secondary schools.

In the United States, the formation of positive views of life and death is treated as an essential component of optimal adolescent development and has been included in K–12 curricula as a critical element of life education (Wang, 2007). Walters (2006) emphasized that life education could help prepare children for the challenges of life and that it should permeate the en-

tire life of individuals. Emotional regulation, character building, and the capability of confronting challenges are the three main components of life education in American schools, which are meant to promote the balanced development of all aspects in students and increase the promise of their growing into happy and responsible individuals.

Australian primary and secondary schools establish specialized offices for the execution of life education with the explicit objectives of educating students to develop rational, objective attitudes towards death as well as other encounters in life, to cherish their lives, and to lead a meaningful life. Furthermore, drug issues are a primary component of life education in these schools, and school education on drug use has become a major resource for the community's drug abuse prevention endeavors. It is intended to instruct students to stay away from drugs and, in the meantime, serve as a drug addiction prevention measure for society as a whole. What's more, building on experts' research results, life education curricula in Australian basic education schools are well-designed, focusing on students' acquisition of self-development abilities, adaptation to societal development, and effective communication with others (Wang, 2007).

Life education in the U.K. adheres to the idea of "whole person" education, an educational theory advocating student holistic development as the primary goal of education. A relatively mature life education system has been established in this country, with curricula centered on civil education and supplemented by health education. Home-school partnerships have been emphasized in student life education. Schools and parents jointly sponsor a variety of activities to intensify students' understanding of the meaning of life. Parents receive instructions on how to integrate life education into their children's day-to-day lives. Schools in the U.K. also pay considerable attention to student death education and have made attempts to improve students' comprehension of death by increasing death-related subject matter in teaching and mimicking the process of death as classroom games (Liu, 2012).

Japanese schools run a significant life education program known as "Extra Education" (He, 2002). Japan has a severe issue with suicide and one of the highest suicide rates among minors in the world, making life education for teenagers overwhelmingly imperative. As a result, life education in Japanese schools places special emphasis on fostering a love of life and courageous attitudes towards challenges in life in students.

Contrary to the aforementioned countries, Germany does not have a specialized section on life education in its primary and secondary school curricula. Instead, it incorporates life education into the "benevolence education" program, which has been a fundamental component of basic education. The core of "benevolence education" is to pursue "public goodness – to care for all living things and to view the combination of humans and their humanistic and natural environment as a grand community of life. "The Love for Small

Animals” serves as the first lesson in benevolence education. Compassion for the vulnerable, leniency towards others, and refusal to use violence are the key contents of this program. In addition, education on death also draws a lot of attention in German basic education (Wang, 2015).

Life Education Research in China

Life education in China has a profound historical heritage. Confucianism advocates “contributing to society and the world, pursuing benevolence and virtue” as the goal of life; Taoism emphasizes the natural state of human life. Theoretical and practical explorations of life education in China, which began in the late 1970s, have produced a plurality of research results. This section of the article seeks to summarize previous research on aspects of the conceptualization of life education, life-education relationships, and education on death.

Conceptualization of Life Education

Prior studies on the concepts of life education can be classified into four categories. The first category focuses on the association between life education and the goals of education. For example, from the perspective of human-centered education, Xu (2002) argued that life education is an eternal theme in the domain of education, as education is an endeavor seeking to continuously improve the quality of life of individuals. The second category concentrates on discussing the contents of life education. For instance, Fang (2006) defined life education as a synthesis of moral, social, and mental health education, covering a diverse range of topics such as life and safety, life and growth, life and value, and life and humanistic care, etc. The third category focuses on exploring the nature of life education. According to Xiao and Chen (2013), life education is by nature an effort to assist students in determining their purpose in life. It is a novel educational theory rather than merely an instructional subject matter. The fourth category attempted to generalize about the significance of life education. In this category of studies, the importance of life education was evaluated from the perspectives of lifespan education, whole-person education, spiritual education, life meaning education, and more (Liu, 2013).

Relationships between Life and Education

The relationships between life and education have been heavily discussed in existing research. Cheng (2002) stated that life education is the starting point of overall education; that the state of life can graduate from existence to being with the help of education; that any specifically stipulated educational

objective has the risk of becoming out-of-date; and that the ultimate goal of education is to direct life towards integrity and infiniteness. Gu (2013) stressed that the essence of education is life education, and that life education is not only a matter of educational substance but also a matter of educational philosophy. According to Li (2010), education should work to inspire “life consciousness” in students because individuals with life consciousness can better understand themselves, others, and the environment. Life consciousness should permeate the values, ways of thinking, and behaviors of all teachers and students.

Death Philosophy Education

A number of researchers studied the possibilities of introducing death education into classroom instruction. Zheng (2009) initiated a course named “Chinese Death Wisdom” in his school, specializing in interpreting a variety of views of life and death. In his doctoral dissertation, Li (2010) proposed that life education should include two aspects: “education about life and death” and “education for life and death”. The former prioritizes the delivery of knowledge about life and death, while the latter emphasizes students applying knowledge about life and death in their practical lives and subsequently developing it into life and death wisdom.

The Necessity of Incorporating Life Education in Basic Education Curricula

An Imperative Reaction to Current Social Issues

The social nature of humans determines that their personal development is closely intertwined with the social environment (Liu, 2012). In the era of great social transformation, despite the mainstream values of society being healthy and positive, coexisting with them is a degenerate social culture, which is most likely to have a negative impact on teenagers whose outlook on life and the world is immature. Currently, without a clear perception of meaning in life, numerous teenagers feel hopeless about their existence and prospects. Vicious incidents such as self-harm, violence towards others, and animal abuse occur frequently. In response to this situation, it is necessary to refresh and innovate traditional youth education by integrating life education into basic education curricula in order for the national basic education system to adjust to social changes and suit the development needs of society.

A Fostering Factor for the Healthy Development of Teenagers

Against the backdrop of an increasingly materialistic society with fast-paced lifestyles, effective life education can play a significant role in promoting healthy adolescent development. Burdened with intense academic competitions and interpersonal complications, teenagers unable to ease the pressures in an appropriate way may develop a negative mentality, which can pose detrimental effects on their lives and studies or even pose threats to their lives. Helping teenagers cope with psychological issues and attain healthy physical and mental growth is not only a key objective of life education but also a school's obligation. Life education for adolescents can cover a wide range of subjects, including the origin, process, meaning, and value of life, facilitating their development of a positive understanding of life and, as a result, heightening mental resilience and fostering stronger character.

A Boost to the Outcomes of Basic Education

A key component of life education is the cultivation of life purpose in adolescents, which is of vital significance for the improvement of educational outcomes. The reform of Chinese basic education is intensifying, aiming to transform educational objectives, patterns, and methods (Gao, 2005). One shared goal among all the reformatory efforts is to make the shift in teaching model from a teacher-dominated to a student-centered instructional paradigm with a focus on student key competency development. The novel teaching paradigm is characterized as goal-directed, requiring the autonomous learning abilities of students. Life purpose education, intended to inspire teenagers to discover and pursue goals that give their lives meaning, can serve as a response to this requirement. McKnight and Kashdan (2009) posited that purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning' (p. 242). They identified five roles that purpose in life fulfills, namely, stimulating behavioral consistency, generating target-motivated behaviors, stimulating psychological flexibility, fostering efficient personal resource allocation, and applying higher-level cognitive processing. Unquestionably, students with proper life purpose education have a stronger awareness of commitment, goal-directedness, and personal meaningfulness, which can all contribute to their self-directed learning and academic progress. In addition, teaching students to live purposefully helps encourage holistic development in them by improving their capacities to determine longer-term aims, plan actions to approach these aims, and build the self-efficacy to achieve them. Therefore, efforts to integrate life purpose throughout the student's school experience

may provide an effective route for Chinese teachers and administrators to optimize the outcomes of basic education and fulfill the objectives of educational reform.

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