Promoting Positive Psychology in Senior High School

Baotong Liu*

Jinan New Channel-JUTES High School, Jinan, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 171103001@mail.sdufe.edu.cn

Abstract. Nowadays, many high school students face massive pressure from studying and have less time for them to sleep, which causes them to have mental issues that need to be solved, such as depression or anxiety. Previous research has established that positive psychology is associated with broad attention, creative thinking, and holistic thinking, whereas negative emotions restrict focus on narrow attention in high school students. Based on positive psychology, this paper discusses an effective method of solving this issue. This paper takes 100 senior high school students as research samples through a questionnaire survey and observation method analysis. It is found that the positive psychology curriculum has played a positive role in the education of senior high school students. It proves that positive psychology is applicable in high school classrooms, although some improvements need to be made. This paper could help high schools and other institutions that educate students under 15 to above 18 to figure out a method for them to reduce the likelihood of high school students having mental problems through positive education.

Keywords: Psychology, Positive Psychology, High-school Education.

1. Introduction

According to the WHO, the mental issue takes 1/4 of the total health issues in China. There are over 30 million children below 17 years old who have psychological issues and behavior problems [1]. Positive Education is a recently developed mode of education, which can be broadly recognized as the use of Positive Psychology in the field of education [2].

Nowadays, students, especially high school students, have a tremendous amount of pressure in China. Some of them even jump out of the window and commit suicide. A study finds that about 23% of Chinese high school students are depressed to varying degrees (see Figure 1) [3]. Chinese high school students are required to get up at 5:30 am and study until 11:30 pm. Positive psychology was started by Martin E. P. Seligman. Previous research has established that positive psychology is associated with broad attention, creative thinking, and holistic thinking whereas negative emotions restrict focus on narrow attention in high school students [4-7]. Schools are an excellent location for positive education [8]. Howell (2009) showed that students with a positive attitude were more likely to report higher grades, higher self-control and lower procrastination than students with negative attitudes [9]. Suldo et al. (2011), based on a dual-factor model, found that students with higher happiness had the highest scores and the lowest absenteeism rate [10]. Therefore, positive psychology is complementary rather than competing goals with high schools' academic development. Moreover, in order to let students do better in written exams, many schools cancel PE or Art classes and replace them with academic courses whose grades are the only criteria in the university admission process, leaving students deprived of a sufficient amount of physical and art activities.

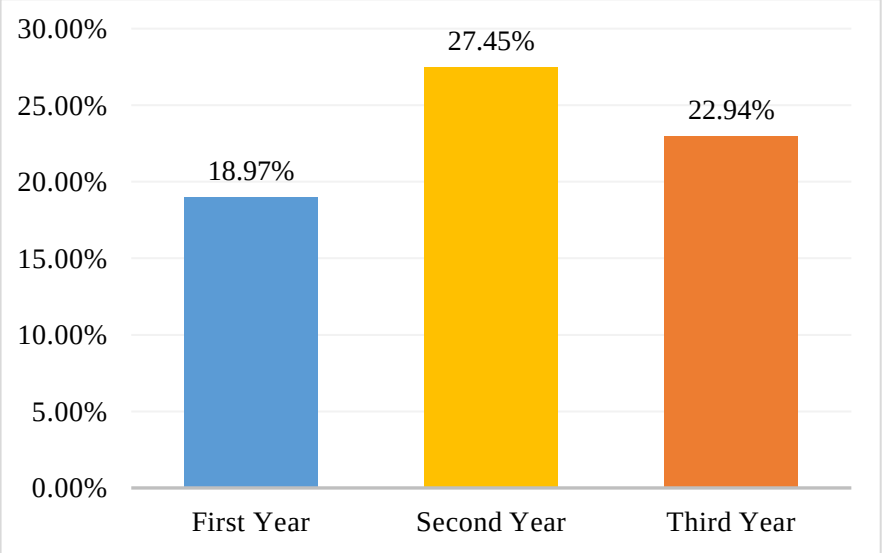


Fig. 1 The statistics in a Chinese high school [3]

2. Method

2.1. The Subject

The author selected a high school department in Jinan, Shandong Province, China as his subject. The project used a sample of 100 high school students. The participants were aged 15 to 18 (some did not prefer to say their ages).

2.2. Research Methods

The author used two rounds of questionnaires created by Wenjuanxing (a platform providing functions equivalent to Amazon Mechanical Turk), one before the delivery of Positive Psychology lessons and one after, to evaluate the course. Additionally, the author used observation, text messages, and letters written by the school principal of the high school that he investigated to obtain feedback pertaining to his Positive Psychology course. In addition to the surveys, the author also consulted students to provide their opinions about the effectiveness of the Positive Psychology course. Overall, most students said that they are no longer worried about “exam phobia” and depression. Also, the school principal said that students had improvement in avoiding “irrational thoughts”. There might be better options to evaluate the PP course but due to COVID-19, the methods used are the only options available.

2.2.1 The first questionnaire

The author used Wenjuanxing for producing the first questionnaire. It illustrates the samples' self-evaluation of their psychological state and the factors that affect their states of emotion. It helps the author to know the situation of the subjects' happiness level and their personal information. It has nine questions in total.

2.2.2 Demo classes

The method used in this paper was developed by Professor Tal Ben-Shahar who is the New York Times Bestselling author of Happier [8]. He taught one of the most popular courses at Harvard University and is currently writing, consulting, and lecturing worldwide on positive psychology and leadership. He holds his Ph. D. in Organizational Behavior and BA in Philosophy and Psychology from Harvard. In positive psychology course (Tal Ben-Shahar, Happier), it consists of 23 lessons to tackle various mental issues. It touches on how to internally process the difficulties and a number of practical tactics to reduce the stress level. The thought process is defined as 3M-3P method (see Figure 2) in positive psychology.

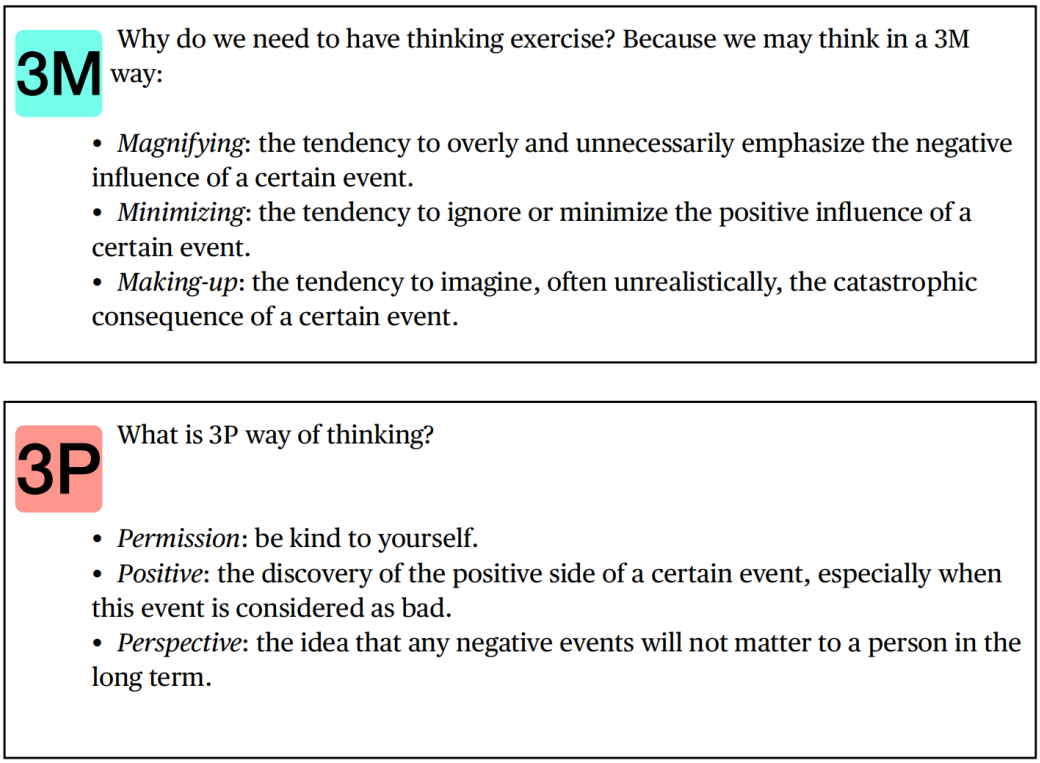


Fig. 2 3M-3P method

(Photo credit: Original)

Then, the author created a demo class theory and a quick access book for students and give the subjects the handbook and then presented the demo class in front of them and make them an online questionnaire (with the same application), after their demo class to find out their changes.

The author also made a handbook for positive psychology to make the class outline clear for the subjects to read and it would also play a role in the handbook of solving problems positively. This guide introduces simple skills that readers can follow to improve their mood and mental state. It includes Thinking exercises and Behaviour exercises. The result of following this guide is mood improvement.

2.2.3 The second questionnaire

The second survey was released by the author with the same application after their demo class to evaluate his course. It mainly depicts the critical changes that the subjects have after their demo class to evaluate his course. It was released for a month period. It was given to the 100 subjects online and has 100 submitted.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic

The sample size of the surveys is 100. Within this sample, more than 90% of the participants are over 15 years old, which is the beginning age for high school education in China (see Figure 3).

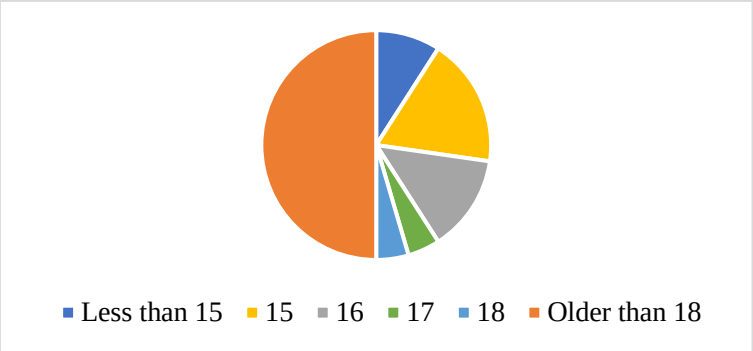


Fig. 3 The distribution of age in the samples, measured in percentage

(Photo credit: Original)

The majority of the participants are female students (around 45%). There are around 34% of the total are male students. And there are 20% of them prefer not to mention their gender (see Figure 4).

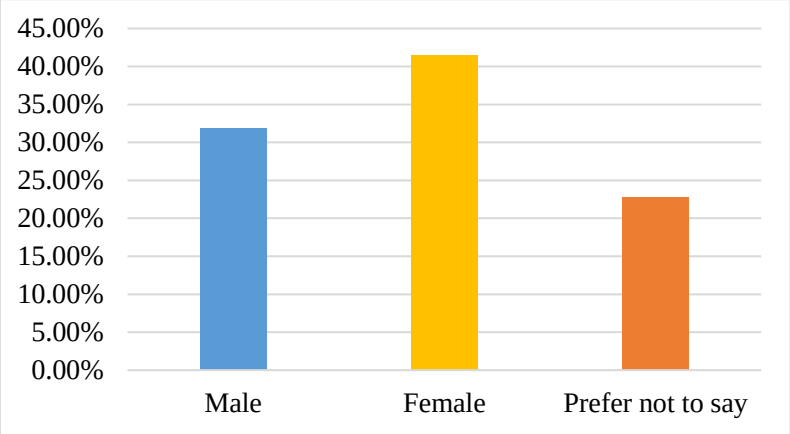


Fig. 4 Gender distribution in the survey

(Photo credit: Original)

3.2. Overall Effectiveness of Positive Psychology Course

According to the survey results and feedbacks given by the subjects and school principal, the PP course seems to effectively better high school students' moods. Despite this, the author wants PP to be implemented in high schools, and improvements to this Positive Psychology course can also be made, such as making the skills in Positive Psychology more feasible.

In the first survey, there are four common reasons identified for making participants unhappy (listed in the first column) and the figures in parenthesis show the corresponding percentages of people suffering from that particular reason. After taking the PP lessons, on average, 96.5% of people state that their feelings about such unhappy reasons get improved (listed in the second column) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Top 4 Unhappy reasons and improvements

Unhappy Reason	Improvements
Lots of homework to do (36.36%)	96%
Bad relationship with other students (27.27%)	96%
Family issues (22.73%)	97%
No freedom to pick favorite course (22.73%)	97%

The survey showed that the subjects replied that this demo class made helps them in their stressful time and they felt better than before. A large percentage of the subjects felt that their attitudes towards the events in their lives, for example, made them feel anxious or depressed, changed. What is more is that, when they face family issues, 72% of them made a large change in their attitudes towards it.

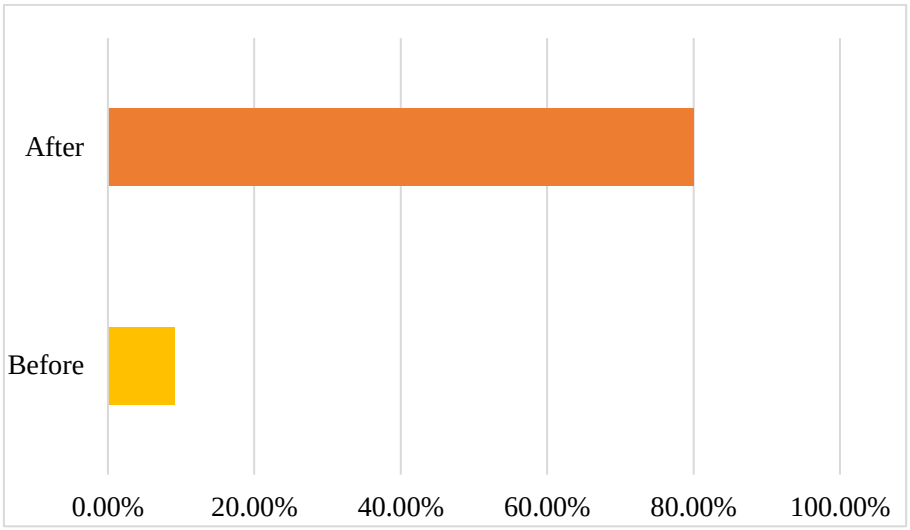


Fig. 5 Improvement in sleeping

(Photo credit: Original)

43% of them did change their sleeping habit to over 8 hours. The situation in the first survey was that most of them slept less than 8 hours, and for family issues, most of them tend to treat them in an irrational way (see Figure 5).

3.3. The Feedback from Classmates and School Principal

In addition to the surveys, the author consulted the subjects (100 students who participated in the Positive Psychology lessons) and the school principal to provide their opinions about the effectiveness of the Positive Psychology course. Overall, the participants have said that they are no longer worried about "exam phobia" and depression. Also, the school principal said that students had improved in avoiding "irrational thoughts".

It turns out that the positive psychology demo class really made a dramatic difference in the subjects' state of mind and their perspective on lives.

4. Discussion

This study took 100 senior high school students as research samples. It provided that positive psychology courses have played a positive role in the education of senior high school students. According to the author's survey results and feedback given by the subjects and school principal, the PP course seems to effectively better high school students' moods. Findings demonstrated that the positive psychology course improved their mood, reduced students' stress, and increased sleep time. Specifically, the participants have said they are no longer worried about "exam phobia" and depression. Also, students had improved in avoiding "irrational thoughts."

The subjects could improve their mood because it made them think positively, to not focus on what "really works" rather than what "do not work", which are the meaningless negative thoughts that lead to their unhappiness. For example, the anxiety after their monthly assessment about the failure has not happened. Because the subjects learned how to apply the 3Ms (Magnify, Minimize, and Making-up) and 3Ps (Permission Perspective and positive), they could notice the reasons that they have the negative feeling and how to solve it rationally and focus on what "really works."

The demo class taught them various methods for them to face negative thoughts and how to keep themselves a positive attitude, so subjects could keep themselves positive attitude by exercising, meditating (to give themselves a period of time to not thinking about anything but breathing in order to relax their minds) and gratitude exercising (to say something grateful or do something to present their gratitude to people who give help to them). If they face negative feelings such as failures, they could overcome them through what they have taught in the demo class.

However, most of the participants care more about their privacy, which causes the reply number not to be good as expected. Secondly, due to limited research time, the demo class is just the tip of the iceberg for positive psychology. There is still a lot to do in future studies to make the demo classes more formal and practical.

5. Conclusion

The surveys were thought of as a self-reporting evaluation of how lesson takers feel about the author's PP course. Nonetheless, there are some limitations for this to be implied in the real life.

The sample size is too small and there is no sufficient "representativeness" of this sample. This is because the students who answered the surveys are from the author's high school. This is a private international high school where most students are from the upper-or upper-middle-class. They can't speak for students from different social groups.

In the future, the author plans to create a more objective method to test if the Positive Psychology course will improve students' mental states or not. For instance, the author may partner with psychologists and parents to observe students' behaviors after taking lessons. The author believes this is perhaps a less biased approach than letting students self-report. Pertaining to the second limitation, the author intends to enlarge the sample size and include more students with more diverse backgrounds, such as offering Positive Psychology courses to students in the suburban area (most Chinese students from this area are "financially disadvantaged").

References

[1] Shannon Shldo, Amanda Thalji, John Ferron. Longitudinal academic outcomes predicted by early adolescents' subjective well-being, psychopathology, and mental health status yielded from a dual factor model. Journal of Positive Psychology, 2011, 6(1), 17-30.

[2] Sh, J. M., Williams, P., O'Connor, M., & Robinson, J. (2013). An applied framework for positive education. International Journal of Wellbeing, 3(2), 147-161.

[3] Andrew Howell. Flourishing: Achievement-related correlates of students' well-being. Journal of Positive Psychology, 2009, 4(1), 1-13.

[4] Barbara L. Fredrickson, Christine Branigan. Positive emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought action repertoires. Cognition and Emotion, 2005, 19(3), 313-332.

[5] Jacolyn M. Norrish, Paige Williams, Meredith O'Connor, Justin Robinson. An applied framework for positive education. International Journal of Wellbeing, 2013, 3(2), 147-161.

[6] Carlos A. Estrada, Alice M. Isen, Mark J. Young. Positive affect improves creative problem solving and influences reported source of practice satisfaction in physicians. Motivation and Emotion, 1994, 18, 285–299.

[7] Julius Kuhl. A functional-design approach to motivation and self-regulation: the dynamics of personality systems interactions, in: M. Boekaerts, P.R. Pintrich & M. Zeidner (Eds), Handbook of self-regulation (San Diego, Academic Press), 2000, 111–169.

[8] Martin E. P. Seligman, Randal M. Ernst, Jane Gillham, Karen Reivich, Mark Linkins. Positive education: positive psychology and classroom interventions. Oxford Review of Education, 2009, 35(3), 293-311.

[9] J. M., Williams, P., O'Connor, M., & Robinson, J. An applied framework for positive education. International Journal of Wellbeing, 2013, 3(2), 147-161.

[10] Ben-Shahar, T., Happier London, McGraw-Hill Education, 2008.