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Exploring the Role of Mental Health Education Courses in Enhancing College Students' Interpersonal Communication Skills

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Abstract: Nowadays, interpersonal communication skills are indispensable for college students. By offering psychological education courses in colleges and universities, more college students can acquire smoother and better social communication skills and experiences, This paper employs focus group discussions to investigate students' real experiences and perceptions after completing a mental health education course, aiming to enhance their interpersonal communication skills. Through this research, the study further reflects on how course learning contributes to the development of students' psychological competencies and offers deeper insights into the course's potential improvement and optimization.

Keywords: Vocational Colleges; Interpersonal Communication; Mental Health Education Course; Focus Group Discussion.

1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication is the foundation for the smooth functioning of human social practice and an indispensable psychological need for individuals. For college students, healthy interpersonal relationships serve as crucial support for personal growth. They not only meet the practical needs of daily study and life but also constitute an essential prerequisite for integrating into collective and social environments. Conversely, poor interpersonal relationships are often a major trigger for psychological problems among college students. [1]

Therefore, educators in higher institutions should pay close attention to students' psychological needs and use diverse strategies to guide and regulate their social behaviors. By helping students build positive and healthy interpersonal models, colleges can lay a solid foundation for their future professional and social development.

As the primary platform for college mental health education, the Mental Health Education Course plays a decisive role in cultivating students' psychological literacy. The scientific design and effective implementation of this course directly affect educational outcomes. Integrating knowledge acquisition, emotional experience, and behavioral training, the course aims to help students understand the standards and significance of mental health, enhance awareness of self-care and crisis prevention, master psychological knowledge, and develop skills in self-cognition, interpersonal communication, and emotional regulation. These collectively improve students' psychological resilience and promote holistic personal growth.

At the skill level, interpersonal communication is a key component of this course. To gain a deeper understanding of students' learning experiences and needs and to examine the course's effectiveness in improving interpersonal skills, the author conducted a focus group interview with students who had completed the course. The discussion centered on the guiding question: "In what ways do you think the course 'College Students' Mental Health Education' has helped improve your interpersonal communication skills?"

2. Participants

Students who had completed the College Students' Mental Health Education course were selected as the sample group. All participants volunteered to take part and demonstrated good expressive ability. Ten students were chosen to form the focus group, including five males (coded as N1–N5) and five females (coded as Y1–Y5). The author served as the moderator. Before the interview, each participant was informed of the purpose, method, duration, and confidentiality of the study. After obtaining consent and signing informed consent forms, the whole interview process was recorded. Each discussion lasted about 45 minutes. When participants had no new viewpoints to express, data collection was considered complete, and the interviewer expressed appreciation to all participants. [2]

3. Construction of the Interview Outline

Based on the results of preliminary investigations, the following interview question was drafted:

"What improvements do you think the College Students' Mental Health Education course has brought to your interpersonal communication skills?"

4. Data Organization

After each discussion, the researcher reflected on whether the conversation focused on the key issues and identified shortcomings in the process. When data collection was completed, the research team applied the content analysis method to analyze and organize the materials and extract the main themes.

5. Interview Results

All the students who participated in the interview believed that the Mental Health Education course had improved their interpersonal communication ability. For example, N3, N4, Y1, and Y2 said, "Through the discussion activities in class,

we met new friends and quickly established connections with our classmates… Some of the games and discussions encouraged us to take the initiative to communicate with others, which helped us get to know more people." Y3 said, "By actively participating in discussions, we not only help each other learn but also learn to listen to what others say." N5 said, "Through the course, I realized that a smile, a gesture, or an activity can help me connect with others. Remembering someone's name after meeting them is the most basic form of respect."

In terms of course experience, Y2, N4, and Y5 mentioned, "The course allowed us to communicate with more people and to learn to think from others' perspectives. It also made us realize the importance of unity and that spiritual communication is more meaningful." N3, N4, and Y5 said, "Before taking the course, the class atmosphere felt serious and distant, but through the course, we learned to talk and study together casually. It increased our interaction and made us realize that communication is not as difficult as we thought… If you take the first step, you might find a like-minded friend."

Regarding interpersonal communication skills, N3, N5, Y2, and Y5 said, "Both the lessons on emotion management and interpersonal communication were very helpful… We learned that expressing emotions properly is important; otherwise, what you mean might be misunderstood. Listening is also important, before, I thought that only eloquent people had good relationships, but now I realize that was too one-sided." N2 mentioned, "After learning about the standards of mental health, I realized that not wanting to socialize is actually an unhealthy sign. My reluctance to communicate was largely due to a lack of skills. Now that I've learned some techniques, I hope they will help me." Y1 said, "When completing assignments, I had to practice some of the skills taught in class. I realized that if I use them more in life, they'll become habits, and people around me will notice my changes."

As for changes after taking the course, N1, Y2, and Y4 said, "After learning the course, we understood more about mental health and gained a clearer understanding of ourselves. In the past, we thought there was nothing likable about us, but now we realize that everyone is unique." N4 said, "I used to think I was a failure and rarely spoke in class, but during an activity, my group members said I looked friendly and approachable. I suddenly realized that my self-perception really affected how I interacted with others. When I spoke in class, I could feel the teacher's encouraging look, which made me believe in myself." Y3 said, "Since childhood, I disliked speaking in public, but in this course, no matter what I said, the teacher never criticized me but encouraged me instead. My classmates even applauded me, and I found this experience wonderful, it made me want to keep going." N4 said, "Whether it's discussions or self-expression, this course made me want to continue. At first, I joined just for the credits, but later, I found that expressing myself and making new friends felt really great."

6. Interview Reflection

Through this round of interviews, it can be confirmed that the College Students' Mental Health Education course has indeed played a positive role in improving students' interpersonal communication skills. However, to truly integrate the course with real-life application, the following aspects deserve further attention:

(1) Enhancing the Awareness of Teachers and Students Regarding the Importance of Mental Health Education Courses

Due to objective circumstances and long-standing educational concepts, both teachers and students tend to prioritize professional learning, paying more attention to academic performance and employment rates. Yet, only individuals with good psychological well-being and strong social adaptability can truly establish themselves and thrive in society. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness among teachers and students about the importance of mental health education courses.

First, both groups should recognize the necessity and significance of such courses to ensure their smooth implementation and reasonable scheduling. Second, a complete disciplinary system for mental health education should be established. Based on students' characteristics, a comprehensive teaching framework should be built across four aspects: curriculum objectives, teaching content, instructional methods, and assessment of teaching effectiveness. Regular teaching seminars should be organized to discuss existing challenges and share good practices, jointly promoting the high-quality development of mental health education.

(2) Setting Class Frequency According to Students' Needs

Although mental health education has received unprecedented attention in China, most vocational colleges still offer the course only once a week. During the interviews, many students expressed that the number of classes was too limited and hoped for more sessions, more credits, and continued learning opportunities even in their second or third year. However, there is currently no consensus on the optimal frequency of mental health education courses. Therefore, when arranging the curriculum, schools should take students' needs into account and set class frequency and duration accordingly. [3]

(3) Ensuring Practicality and Alignment with Students' Psychological Development

University is a critical stage in an individual's growth and has lifelong significance. Although the state increasingly emphasizes mental health education, many institutions still face problems in implementation. On one hand, teaching syllabi should be continuously updated; on the other, educators must first understand the characteristics of their students. Teaching content should be designed in line with students' psychological developmental needs to keep pace with their changing experiences.

Specifically, mental health instructors should be aware of the distinct features of students at different grade levels, ensuring that class content aligns with students' physical and mental development. Teachers should pay attention to students' emotional experiences during learning, understand the causes of their emotions, and teach them methods for emotional regulation. Outside class hours, teachers should also communicate frequently with students to understand their genuine thoughts, identify problems in time, and provide timely intervention.

(4) Designing Reasonable Content and Creating an Engaging Classroom Atmosphere

Current teaching methods in mental health education courses commonly include lectures, case analyses, discussions, and role-plays, aiming to enliven the classroom and enhance engagement. With technological advancement, the teaching approach should move beyond traditional boundaries to establish a more experiential, digitalized, and

diversified model. Such an approach can improve students' participation and sense of immersion, ensuring tangible learning outcomes.

In particular, virtual reality technology can be effectively used to create immersive teaching scenarios, making the course more practical and allowing students to acquire genuinely useful knowledge in an engaging environment. Through dynamic and interactive classroom experiences, students can learn and internalize the knowledge they truly need.

(5) Strengthening Institutional and Resource Support

The teaching of mental health education should not be confined to the classroom; it should extend to practical and experiential activities. To fully realize the function of the course, schools should strengthen relevant resource construction and establish cooperative relationships with external institutions. By encouraging students to apply what they have learned in real-life contexts, mental health education can achieve more substantial and long-lasting effects.

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