

Research on a Model for Promoting Preschool Children's Mental Health Based on Emotion Education: Theoretical Reconstruction and Practical Paths from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Yibo Sun

Jinyuan Kindergarten, Zhuhai National Hi-Tech Industrial Development Zone, Zhuhai City, Guangdong Province, China

Abstract: This study aims to address the "intellect over emotion" bias in preschool education and construct a culturally adaptive preschool mental health promotion system. Based on the upgraded "2+1+3+2" model, it integrates international theories including Goleman's Emotional Intelligence theory and Bowlby's Attachment theory with Liu Naihua's localized educational concepts of "emotional nourishment" and "life-based education". Through theoretical interpretation and case analysis, the study explores the dual-subject collaboration of kindergarten and family in emotion education, and designs practical paths of comprehensive acceptance, understanding and expression of emotions. The results show that the model can help children transform from passive emotion recipients to active emotional managers, and it constructs a three-dimensional ecological system for preschool mental health promotion with both international vision and local characteristics. The study provides a scientific practical framework for preschool emotion education and mental health cultivation.

Keywords: Emotion education; Preschool mental health; Promotion model; Cross-cultural integration; Social and emotional learning.

1. Introduction

Mental health is the foundation of young children's cognitive development, personality perfection and social adaptability formation. The Guide for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 explicitly lists "emotional stability and happiness" as the primary goal in the health domain, marking China's preschool education shift from physiological care to psychological nurturing [1]. However, traditional early childhood education is trapped in "score worship" and "skill-based training", neglecting emotion's regulatory role as an internal behavioral driving force. Empirical emotion guidance can no longer meet the demands of modern preschool education, and there is an urgent need for a scientific and localized mental health promotion model integrating cross-cultural theories and practical experiences. This study upgrades the existing "2+1+3+2" model, incorporating the ecological emotion education concept of Western scholars and Liu Naihua's educational thought that "education is life influencing life" [1]. It combines Goleman's five-component emotional intelligence framework with Liu Naihua's methods for constructing a "truth, kindness, and beauty" educational environment to conduct in-depth research on early childhood emotion education. The study hypothesizes that the cross-culturally integrated "2+1+3+2" model can effectively realize the synergy of kindergarten and family in emotion education, and through the step-by-step cultivation of children's emotional understanding, expression and regulation abilities, it can effectively promote the development of preschool children's mental health and form a sustainable educational ecosystem.

2. Synergy of two parties: Co-constructing an educational ecosystem from a cross-cultural perspective

"Synergy of two parties" refers to the deep coupling of kindergarten and family, the two core domains of early childhood education, which is not only the connection of physical spaces but also the synchronization of educational philosophy and methodology. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory clarifies the decisive impact of the microsystem (family) and mesosystem (home-school connection) on individual development [4], while Liu Naihua regards the family as the child's emotional "secure base" and the kindergarten as the "expansion playground" [1], forming a cross-cultural consensus on the home-kindergarten synergy in emotion education.

2.1. Kindergarten: The dual variation of professional leadership and cultural infusion

As a professional educational institution, the kindergarten is the "source" of emotion education, undertaking the responsibilities of environmental creation, curriculum infiltration, faculty development and community linkage.

2.1.1. Environment creation: From "emotion-friendly" to "emotional resonance"

The foundation of kindergarten emotion education is to create an "emotion-friendly" environment, and the deeper goal is to establish an "emotional resonance field". Drawing on the "positive relationships" definition in the UK's Early Years Foundation Stage framework and combining Liu Naihua's "education of love" concept [1], environmental creation includes implicit curricula and explicit signage. For

example, decorating corridors with "World Emotion Faces" containing both Western expressions and Eastern micro-expressions such as shyness and reverence helps children build a cross-cultural emotional lexicon, laying a foundation for cross-cultural emotional cognition.

2.1.2. Curriculum infiltration: Multiple representations and whole language intervention

Guiding children to express emotions through body language, verbal communication and art is the key to curriculum implementation. Referencing the "active learning" principle of the American HighScope curriculum, the study designs "Emotion Workshops", where teachers act as both observers and participants. In line with Liu Naihua's view that "teachers should squat down to see the world" [1], teachers encourage children to vent emotions through colors and use narrative therapy to help children describe the emotional logic behind their drawings with complete sentences, realizing the whole language intervention of emotional expression.

2.1.3. Faculty development and professional ethics

Specialized emotion education training for teachers is crucial. On the basis of courses such as the Satir Family Therapy Model, the study introduces training based on the US CASEL Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework [7]. Combined with Liu Naihua's reflections on "teacher emotional labor" [1], the study holds that teachers' emotional stability is a prerequisite for successful education. Therefore, kindergarten administrators need to establish "Teacher Emotional Support Groups" to relieve teachers' work pressure, ensure teachers master self-care skills, and thus provide children with sufficient psychological nutrition.

2.1.4. Community linkage: Breaking down the walls of education

Utilizing community resources for emotion education is an important extension of kindergarten education. Based on Liu Naihua's practical experience [1], "Parent-Child Emotion Drama Festivals" are more effective than inviting psychological experts for lectures. By having parents and children co-play roles in picture books such as My Little Emotion Monster, they experience emotional transitions through play, which is more in line with children's learning characteristics and realizes the organic combination of edutainment in emotion education.

2.2. Family: The advancement from emotional support to scientific parenting

The family is the primary site for emotion education, and Bowlby's Attachment theory points out that a secure attachment is the cradle for the development of children's emotional regulation abilities [3]. Based on this theory and combined with Liu Naihua's educational suggestions [1], the family's emotion education practice is mainly carried out from three aspects: leading by example, heartfelt companionship and learning improvement.

2.2.1. Leading by example: The mechanism of mirror neurons

Parents' emotional expression styles directly affect young children through mirror neurons. Due to the "implicit expression" cultural trait common in Chinese families [1], children have difficulties in acquiring direct emotional vocabulary. Therefore, the study recommends parents implement a "Mood Diary" plan, recording three emotional events daily and reflecting with the framework "I feel... because...". This not only enhances parents' emotional

awareness but also provides a linguistic template for children's imitation, playing a role of emotional demonstration.

2.2.2. Heartfelt companionship: The scientific path from observation to intervention

Carefully observing children's emotional performance is a compulsory course for parents. The study introduces Betty Bailey's "3A Principle" (Acknowledge, Accept, Address), requiring parents to first acknowledge, then unconditionally accept children's emotions, and finally guide solutions. Liu Naihua emphasizes the importance of "slow parenting" [1], opposing rushed corrective education. When children exhibit negative emotions, parents should judge the intensity of emotions through observing facial muscle tension and body stiffness, just like Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners performing "observation, listening, inquiry, and palpation", and carry out targeted emotional intervention.

2.2.3. Learning and improvement: Development of localized resources

Parents' systematic learning is the guarantee of scientific emotion education. The study recommends a combination of Chinese and foreign learning resources: on the one hand, Western classics such as How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk; on the other hand, Liu Naihua's Practical Manual for Infant Emotion Education [1], which proposes "frustration simulation training" to solve problems such as excessive protection caused by the one-child policy. For example, deliberately creating small difficulties such as a block tower collapsing to guide children's recovery from frustration, which effectively cultivates children's emotional regulation abilities.

3. The 1+3 principle of emotion education: Deep integration based on neuroscience and psychology

The "1+3" principle is the operational core of the emotion education model, where "1" is the core concept of all-round acceptance, and "3" are the behavioral paths of understanding, expressing and regulating emotions. This principle system absorbs Goleman's discourse on self-awareness, self-management and social awareness [2], and combines Liu Naihua's educational philosophy of "following nature and cultivating integrity" [1], forming a unique practical logic based on neuroscience and psychology.

3.1. 1 core: All-round acceptance — Security construction based on positive psychology

"Allowing, acknowledging, and accepting the existence of all emotions" is the cornerstone of emotion education, which is consistent with Seligman's Positive Psychology view that well-being stems from accepting reality [5]. Combined with Liu Naihua's research on children's emotional cognition [1], the core of all-round acceptance is reflected in two aspects: eliminating the dichotomy of emotions and creating a safe emotional environment.

3.1.1. Eliminating the dichotomy: Transcending "good" and "bad" emotions

Traditional concepts divide emotions into "good" and "bad", such as regarding happiness as good and anger as bad, which easily causes "emotional shame" in children [1]. The study introduces the concept of the "Emotion Spectrum", pointing out that moderate anger is an adaptive reaction to

maintain boundaries (e.g., fighting back when toys are snatched), and only anger leading to aggressive behavior needs intervention. This view helps children establish healthy emotional cognition: all emotions are messengers, and there are no good or bad emotions, only different handling methods.

3.1.2. Creating a safe environment: Psychological Container Theory

Based on Bion's Container Theory and Liu Naihua's educational suggestions [1], the caregiver (mother or teacher) should act as a "container", receiving children's unmanageable raw emotions and transforming them into digestible emotional experience. To prevent psychological problems caused by emotional suppression, the kindergarten sets up an "Emotion Corner" as a "psychological refuge" filled with pillows, plush toys and stress-relief tools, providing children with a safe space to release emotions and realizing the protection of children's emotional expression.

3.2. 3 principles: Stepwise development of cognition, expression, and regulation

Based on the theory of mind, art therapy, play therapy and executive function training, the study designs three step-by-step behavioral paths of emotional understanding, expression and regulation, and combines Liu Naihua's embodied cognition and situational teaching methods [1] to localize the practical paths, realizing the gradual development of children's emotional abilities from passive to active.

3.2.1. Understanding emotions: From cognition to empathy — Application of Theory of Mind

The first step of emotional ability development is to help children identify and name different emotions. The study not only uses emotion cards but also introduces the "Emotion Thermometer" tool, and combines Liu Naihua's "embodied cognition" teaching method [1], guiding children to use body movements to represent emotional intensity: 0 degrees for stiff (fear), 50 degrees for relaxed (calm), and 100 degrees for boiling (rage), realizing the intuitive cognition of emotions. For the development of empathy, based on Hoffman's empathy research [8] and aiming at the problem that Chinese children "know but do not act" [1], the study adds the "Perspective-Taking Experience Box" segment, through role-swapping games such as "If I Were Mom", guiding children to experience others' standpoints, and cultivating children's empathy and social emotional learning ability [7].

3.2.2. Expressing emotions: From suppression to release — Fusion of Art Therapy and Play Therapy

Encouraging children to express emotions appropriately is the key to releasing psychological energy. On the basis of the document's mention of painting, music and sports, the study refines the localized practice path by combining Judith Rubin's art therapy theory and Liu Naihua's teaching methods [1]. In art therapy, children are guided to find emotional imagery in scribbles and transform negative emotional imagery into positive ones, realizing the sublimation of emotions. In play therapy, the study introduces Liu Naihua's "situational teaching" concept [1], placing abstract emotional concepts into specific life contexts through "Emotion Story Relay", designing open-ended outcomes to stimulate children to think of multiple solutions to emotional conflicts, and cultivating children's cognitive flexibility in emotional expression.

3.2.3. Regulating emotions: From passive to active — Training in Executive Function

Helping children develop from passively expressing emotions to actively controlling them is the ultimate goal of emotion education, which is closely related to the maturation of the brain's prefrontal cortex (executive function). The study introduces multiple self-regulation strategies: on the one hand, the "Butterfly Hug" deep breathing method to calm the nervous system; on the other hand, combining Liu Naihua's advocated "stillness training" [1], arranging 5 minutes of daily "meditation time" to enhance children's concentration and emotional resilience. In terms of problem-solving skills transfer, the study teaches children to use "I-Messages" to express emotions and needs, realizing the leap from emotional venting to rational communication, which is the specific embodiment of Liu Naihua's "life is education" [1].

4. Two elements of emotion education: The intersection of humanism and Chinese traditional culture

The "Two Elements" are the guarantee system of the emotion education model, namely "Establishing genuine friendly relationships" and "Focusing on the child's strengths". These two elements echo Rogers' Humanistic Psychology and Seligman's "Strengths Perspective" from Positive Psychology [5], and are deeply rooted in Chinese traditional Confucian "benevolence" and Liu Naihua's "Appreciative Education" [1], realizing the intersection of humanism and Chinese traditional culture in emotion education.

4.1. Establishing genuine friendly relationships with children — The Power of Congruence

Rogers emphasized that counselors must possess the quality of "congruence" (genuineness), which is especially important in early childhood education. Combined with Liu Naihua's in-depth insights into early childhood education practice [1], establishing genuine friendly relationships is carried out from three aspects: showing one's true self, responding seriously to children's interests and providing clear and specific feedback.

4.1.1. Showing one's true self: De-authoritization

Adults should show children real emotions, voices and lives [1]. Liu Naihua criticizes some teachers for "working with masks on" [1], which confuses children's emotional cognition. The study advocates "humanized vulnerability": when teachers make mistakes, they should express their true emotions and ask children for help, which not only narrows the teacher-student distance but also models for children how to face mistakes calmly, realizing the de-authoritization of educational relationships.

4.1.2. Responding seriously to children's interests: Follower, Not Leader

Referring to the Reggio Emilia Approach and combining Liu Naihua's discovery that Chinese teachers tend to "indoctrinate" rather than "listen" [1], the study promotes the "Learning Stories" recording method. Teachers act as faithful recorders and appreciators rather than evaluators, carefully observing and describing children's learning behaviors, and responding seriously to children's interests and needs, realizing the transformation of teachers' roles from leaders to followers in emotional communication.

4.1.3. Clear and specific feedback: Implanting a Growth Mindset

Based on Dweck's Growth Mindset theory [6] and Liu Naihua's "process-oriented evaluation" [1], the study advocates descriptive praise and process-oriented feedback, focusing on children's effort, strategy and persistence in the learning process rather than just the results. For example, affirming children's perseverance in trying to build blocks, which reinforces children's self-efficacy, makes them believe that they can change their emotional state through their own efforts, and implants a growth mindset in children's emotional development.

4.2. Focusing on the child's strengths — A Practice Field for Positive Psychology

"Focusing on the child's strengths" corrects the bias of traditional problem-oriented education, and Seligman's research shows that focusing on strengths significantly boosts individual well-being [5]. Combined with Liu Naihua's educational view that "every child is a unique seed" [1], the practice of this element is carried out from three aspects: talent identification, designing targeted activities and encouraging positive qualities.

4.2.1. Observing and Understanding the Child's Interests: Talent Identification

Through a "Multiple Intelligences Observation Scale", teachers and parents carefully observe children's explicit talents (art, sports, etc.) and dig for implicit strengths (resilience, pro-sociality, etc.) [1]. These implicit strengths are important protective factors for children's future mental health, and identifying children's strengths is the foundation of appreciative education and positive psychology practice in emotion education.

4.2.2. Designing Activities Based on Budding Abilities: Precise Grasp of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Based on Vygotsky's ZPD theory and Liu Naihua's tiered teaching ideology [1], the study divides emotion education activities into three levels according to children's age and ability: basic level (lower class) for emotion recognition and naming, intermediate level (middle class) for emotion cause analysis, and advanced level (upper class) for emotion conflict resolution. This tiered design ensures that children at each stage gain a sense of achievement within their capabilities, and realizes the precise promotion of children's emotional development.

4.2.3. Encouraging Positive Qualities: Awakening Virtues

Combined with Liu Naihua's emphasis on "Gratitude Education" [1], the study designs a "Compliment Bombing" session, where children sit in a circle every Friday afternoon to point out one good deed another child did that week. This positive reinforcement not only boosts the self-esteem of the praised child but also teaches other children to discover and appreciate the goodness in others, fostering a positive emotional atmosphere in the group and awakening children's positive moral qualities such as gratitude and kindness.

5. Model optimization and challenge response under cross-cultural comparison

In the process of deepening the "2+1+3+2" model, it is necessary to face the challenges brought by cultural

differences and the digital age directly. The study combines the characteristics of Chinese culture and the background of the digital age, and optimizes the model on the basis of absorbing Western emotion education theories [7], realizing the localized adaptation and modern optimization of the model.

5.1. Cultural adaptation of Eastern and Western Emotional Expression

Western emotion education emphasizes individualism and direct expression, while Chinese culture influenced by Confucianism values the "Doctrine of the Mean" where "joy and anger are not shown in one's countenance". Direct application of the American CASEL framework [7] in Chinese classrooms may cause "cultural indigestion". Liu Naihua's solution is the "combination of implicit and explicit expression" [1]: the study teaches children to use "emotion codes" (e.g., pinching the palm to represent anger) for implicit expression in inappropriate environments, and use writing and drawing for emotional catharsis afterward. This "delayed gratification" style of emotional expression respects Chinese cultural characteristics while safeguarding children's mental health, realizing the cultural adaptation of the emotion education model.

5.2. Emotional interference and response in the Digital Age

The digital age brings new challenges to early childhood emotion education, and Sherry Turkle warns of the erosion of empathy by screens. Combined with Liu Naihua's advocacy for "nature education" [1], the study adds a "Digital Detox" segment to the model: limiting children's daily screen time to 30 minutes, and replacing screen time with outdoor emotion exploration activities such as "Searching for Spring Colors" and "Barefoot Walking". These activities regulate children's emotions through seasonal perception and tactile stimulation, alleviate the negative impact of digital products on children's emotional development, and realize the modern optimization of the model.

6. Conclusion

This study constructs and upgrades the "2+1+3+2" preschool mental health promotion model based on emotion education, which has important theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, the model breaks the boundaries of single cultural research, integrates international classic theories of emotional intelligence, attachment, and ecological systems with localized educational concepts, realizing the cross-cultural integration of early childhood emotion education theories. It also combines positive psychology, growth mindset theory and social and emotional learning framework with neuroscience and psychology research, enriching the theoretical system of preschool mental health education and providing a new theoretical perspective for cross-cultural early childhood education research. Compared with existing research, this study not only optimizes the numerical structure of the original model but also constructs a three-dimensional ecological system with clear connotation, complete structure and operable paths, making up for the deficiencies of existing models in cultural adaptation and practical operability.

In practice, the model clarifies the synergy mechanism of kindergarten and family in emotion education, designs specific and localized practical paths from the core concept of

all-round acceptance, the three behavioral paths of emotional understanding, expression and regulation, and the two guarantee elements of genuine relationships and strength focus. It effectively solves the "intellect over emotion" bias in current preschool education and the problem of disconnection between home and kindergarten in emotion education, and provides a set of scientific and operable practical frameworks for preschool educators and parents. The model can help children transform from passive emotion recipients to active emotional managers, cultivate children's positive emotional quality and mental health literacy, and lay a solid foundation for their lifelong happiness and development.

However, the study also has some unresolved problems: the research is mainly based on theoretical interpretation and case analysis, and the long-term effect of the model needs to be verified by large-sample longitudinal tracking research; the application effect of the model in different regions, different socioeconomic status families and different age groups of children needs to be further explored; the quantitative evaluation system of the model's effect is not yet perfect, and it is difficult to carry out accurate quantitative research on children's emotional development changes.

In the future, relevant research can be carried out from the following aspects: first, conduct large-sample longitudinal tracking research on the application of the model in kindergartens and families of different socioeconomic statuses, to verify the long-term effect and universality of the model; second, utilize EEG and other neuroscience technologies to quantify the changes in children's brain activation patterns before and after emotional intervention, and construct a scientific quantitative evaluation system for the model's effect, providing a more solid neuroscientific basis for preschool mental health promotion; third, further optimize the model according to the characteristics of different age groups and regional cultural characteristics, and

form a more refined and localized preschool mental health promotion system; fourth, carry out teacher and parent training based on the model, popularize the scientific concept and practical methods of emotion education, and realize the sustainable development of preschool mental health education. In general, emotion education is the underlying logic of preschool mental health development, and the cross-culturally integrated "2+1+3+2" model provides a new path for preschool mental health promotion, and its in-depth research and practice will surely promote the high-quality development of early childhood education.

References

- [1] Liu, N. (2022). *Practical Manual for Infant Emotion Education*. Beijing Normal University Publishing Group, Beijing, China.
- [2] Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books, New York, USA.
- [3] Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books, New York, USA.
- [4] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.
- [5] Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. Free Press, New York, USA.
- [6] Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House, New York, USA.
- [7] Greenberg, M. T., & Kusché, C. A. (1993). Promoting social competence in young children: The PATHS curriculum. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8(3), 323-344.
- [8] Hoffman, M. L. (2000). *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.