Application of Case Teaching Method in Mental Health Education

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Currently, mental health education in Chinese colleges mainly applies the disciplinary teaching mode. In this education mode, case teaching method is undoubtedly one of the effective important ways to develop students' good mental qualities. Case teaching method in mental health education is to create a certain context by using a particular typical case. In that context, students may have profound experience through the interaction between teachers and them as well as the interaction among themselves. Thus students are promoted to change their cognition structure and develop their emotions and behaviors. This paper tends to better direct the teaching practice of mental health education in colleges and universities by briefly discussing the function of case teaching, its implementation mechanism and its application in practice.

Keywords: case teaching method, mental health education, interaction, mental qualities

The basic aim of college mental health education is to help all the college students develop good mental qualities. The mental qualities are formed gradually through practical activities in an individual’s life, therefore, mental health education should be based on the real life instead of on a series of concepts and theories. Also, the development of students' mental qualities cannot simply be based on lecturing the theoretical knowledge or ethnics. Rather, students must be involved in accumulating their personal experiences to develop their own mental qualities.

At present, mental health education in Chinese colleges mainly applies the disciplinary teaching mode as limited by the education background and teaching conditions (The Education Ministry, 2011). Therefore, case teaching method is undoubtedly one of the effective important ways to develop students’ good mental qualities.

Case teaching method in mental health education is to create a certain context by using a particular typical case. In that context, students may have profound experience through the interaction between teachers and them as well as the interaction among themselves. Thus, their cognition structure is changed and their emotion and behavior are further developed. Since experience is the intermediary link between cognition and behavior in mental health education, and it is the foundation to observe, feel, evaluate, and improve oneself, only by profound experience can we reach valuable conclusions to mental health and self-improvement and lay a solid foundation for the development of good mental qualities.

By discussing the role and function mechanism of case teaching as well as its application in mental health education in colleges, this paper tends to find better ways to direct the teaching practice of mental health education.

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The Function of Case Teaching Method in Mental Health Education

The Scaffolding Function

By researching on children’s study and mentality, the psychologist Reuven Feuerstein found that children not only learn directly, but also indirectly from intermediate learning experience (Zhang, 2009). The intermediate learning experience means the explanations of the environment and events given by those adults or older children to help those younger children learn in the learning context. In that case, the intermediate learning experience becomes the scaffold to support children’s learning. This scaffolding function usually refers to those effective help and support provided by the context as a linking bridge, which are used to improve the development of learners’ cognition, emotion, and behavior. As a kind of intermediate learning experience, case teaching method functions as the scaffold tool to support teaching.

First of all, the scaffolding function characterizes in supporting teachers’ teaching. By controlling those tasks beyond students’ ability, students will focus their attentions on those within their abilities and grasp them quickly.

The major task of college mental health education is to let students clearly understand and recognize different types of mental obstacles in their life and studies by learning psychology and also help them acquire the ability to adjust themselves and transcend themselves. It involves a lot of jargons and abstract concepts and theories. If the teachers simply lecture and explain the theoretical knowledge, students may find it quite difficult to grasp their accurate meanings.

For example, the teacher wants to explain the term of “defense function”. According to the theoretical concept, “Defense mechanism is an individual’s habitual subconscious response. It aims at protecting individuals from the pressure of anxiety caused by self-conflict. It can meet the demands of the reality and the ego as well” (Chen, 2011). Such kind of explanation may make students confused, as those students who are not psychology majors have not been equipped with a basically systematic knowledge of psychology. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to understand the terms such as “self” and “ego”. However, a term like “defense mechanism” is the basic theory to develop good mental qualities and it is a must for the students to understand and accept. In this case, using case teaching method as the teaching scaffold can be very effective. An appropriate case contains the typical characteristics and background of defense mechanism. What it depicts is the events happening in the real life. Teachers can take the case as the scaffold and meanwhile get students involved in thinking and analyzing the questions. Meanwhile, teachers can guide students to think about the way the defense mechanism comes into being, learn to recognize the active defense mechanism and the negative defense mechanism as well as learn to find a more active and effective way to deal with the self-conflicts.

Second, the scaffolding function characterizes in providing students a scaffold to learn. A case uses vivid and detailed language to depict an actual situation. Compared to the abstract concepts, a case can attract students’ attention more and help them focus their attention on the learning tasks. Meanwhile, in the case teaching process, the teachers can motivate students’ curiosity, induce their motivation and stimulate them to think by setting up questions.

The Internalization Function

Internalization refers to the application of knowledge learnt from the external environment by the individual. During the case teaching process, students internalize the knowledge by the observation and
analysis of the case as well as the discussion and communication related to the case and thus form the cognition structure. The cognition structure is the knowledge structure in students’ mind, which is the internalization of the objective disciplinary knowledge system in students’ mind. The construction of the cognition structure is a process where students actively relate the old knowledge with the newly-learnt knowledge, absorb the newly-learnt knowledge, and enlarge and rebuild the old cognition structure.

Case teaching method emphasizes the interaction function. Since each student in the class has different personal experience and background, it is impossible for them to reach a completely same understanding of a certain piece of knowledge. Rather, their understanding can be quite diversified. Through the discussion and communication of the case, students’ opinions will often differ and their mind will be inspired. They learn to embrace different opinions and respect people of different attitudes with an open mind. They learn to understand and respect others, thus transcend their old understanding and achieve the rebuilding of the cognition structure and integration of their personality.

Since this cognition is formed voluntarily during the teaching process, case teaching method can help students apply the mental health knowledge learnt from the case to their real life more effectively, and help them keep mentally healthy by solving various kinds of mental problems.

The Transfer Function

The case used in the case teaching method is a complete description of a factual incident. It contains the cause of the mental problem, the background and the solutions. It is helpful for the students to recognize the mental problems both of themselves and of others with the study of the case. In this way, students can transfer the mental health knowledge learnt from their textbooks to the analysis of their own mental problems or those of others. With the study of the case, students can grasp the nature of those mental problems accurately, learn their causes and further find out the solutions.

At the same time, an appropriate case is always typical. Students can often find a lot of similarities between the case and their own problems. In real life, students are also confronted with the similar situation and often suffer from them. Therefore, the case can inspire the students and help them effectively solve the current mental problems through transfer.

The Application of Case Teaching in Mental Health Education

The function of case teaching is realized by such a mental mechanism as “specific context—the motivation of learners’ interest and emotion—the change of learners’ cognition and belief”. To be specific: (1) The detailed and vivid cases are used to eliminate students’ weariness from the over abstraction of theory, stimulate their learning interest and enhance their willingness to accept; (2) Cases are used to specify those abstract concepts and rules so that students are directed to observe and analyze the meanings and manifestations of those concepts and rules in their real life; and (3) Cases are used to promote students to observe and reflect the individual’s mental event and mental experience, thus to adjust and improve their own mental qualities.

The application of case teaching method in mental health education mainly include three procedures, that is, the selection of case, the preparation before the application and the discussion and communication of the case in class.

The Selection of Appropriate Cases

A case is the basic teaching material. Therefore, it must be carefully selected. First of all, the case selected
by the teacher must be closely related to the content of the class so that student can relate the case to what they are going to learn more easily. Thus, it cannot only maintain the theoretical knowledge systemic, but also achieve the goals of combining theory with practice and transferring knowledge to ability. If the teacher blindly brings some cases that have nothing to do with the teaching content into the class only for the vividness and activeness of the class atmosphere, it is very likely for the students to miss the important teaching point. Instead, they would merely memorize several particular contexts in the case but are unable to relate the case to the theory. As a result, the teaching aim fails.

Secondly, teachers should do their best to choose those cases which are attractive, targeted and timely. This is also related to the discussion effect afterward. To those interesting topics, students will actively participate, think seriously and express their opinions voluntarily. If students are excitedly and actively involved, the teaching effects will surely turn out to be satisfactory. If the selected case fails to attract the majority students’ interest, students would be reluctant to join in the case study. Consequently, no matter how skilled the teacher is in organizing the class, it is difficult to achieve the intended effect.

Take the subject of “interpersonal relationship” as an example. We have prepared different cases for students of different grades. For the freshmen, the case that we have selected is like this. A freshman did not get along well with his roommates. He first moved away from the dormitory, then dropped off the school but finally went back to school. For the senior college students, we have chosen such a case as the confusion and decision-making of a new recruit (Guo, 2011).

Finally, teachers should choose cases of which the description of the background information is as detailed as possible. Generally speaking, college students, be them a two-year college diploma or a four-year college diploma, are socially inexperienced. Their mental experience is not rich enough. Their understanding of the social life, their exploration of themselves as well as their knowledge of the mental rules are all limited. The experience that they have is mostly indirect. Therefore, it is very likely for them to deal with different kinds of mental problems with a partial vision and to solve them with ideal theories instead of analyzing those problems in essence. That is why the background information of a case should be as detailed as possible. Only by letting students know the social context where an individual lives in and realize the diversity of the mental problems can it be possible for students to find the effective solution.

The Preparation Before the Application

As a teacher, the first thing to do is to identify the teaching focus and teaching difficulties. The focus of case teaching can be the transmission of knowledge and the explanation of concepts and theories. But the particular teaching focus of case teaching is the recognition and analysis of problems, the classification and explanation of materials and data, the evaluation of the solutions and the design of alternative plans and decisions. The teaching focus should be based on the teaching aim, the students’ characteristics and the content of the case. The difficult teaching points in case teaching are often those beyond students’ understanding and cognition. In order to help students solve those problems, teachers need to guide and inspire students, and even help students prepare for the related knowledge if necessary. Teachers need to be fully prepared in mind in this regard and make the arrangement in advance so that they can avoid some embarrassing situations that may hinder the teaching procedures and waste the precious teaching time.

Secondly, teachers need to familiarize the case materials and have a complete idea of the events in the case, including the causes, the background and the solutions. Meanwhile, teachers need to further analyze the case by
predicting students’ possible response to the case or sort out their own ideas by referring to the textbook or lecture notes. Based on those preparations, teachers then participate in students’ discussion and communication to draw their own conclusions and suggestions. Only by such kind of preparation process can the discussion be successful, deep and fruitful.

Thirdly, teachers need to consider the application of the case in an all round way, make out the specific application plan and identify the approaches and procedure. There are a number of teaching approaches available in mental health teaching, such as role play and group discussion. Teachers should choose the suitable approaches to meet the teaching aim and students’ characteristics in practice.

In addition, teachers have to think about the discussion topics and their order in the case teaching, about the allocation of time in the lecture, the duration for each part and the intended effect. They also need to think about how to lead in by a quickest and most effective way and how to end the teaching with a striking key point, etc..

**The Discussion and Communication of the Case**

The discussion of the case is a difficulty in case teaching. The key to the successful case teaching is how to direct student to participate actively, bring their initiative into play and stimulate their creativity. The way that the author often uses is to start the discussion from a relatively easy problem, then move gradually to the deeper level. During this process, students’ ability to participate in analysis and discussion is constantly developed to meet the demands of case teaching.

Take the content of learning to deal with the negative emotions as an example. In the case discussion, after presenting the students several cases of irritability, indifference, over anxiety and groundless fears, we ask students the following questions from an easy level to a difficult level. Is the emotion response of the character in the case a deteriorating one? What do you think is the reason to that response? If the character were your friend, what would do you do to persuade him? Are there any similar situations happening in your life? These questions effectively help students understand that the nature of “emotion obstacles” usually include the unbalance of emotion intensity, the inappropriateness of emotion expression, the improper reference of emotion subject and the domination of negative emotion. The discussion of case not only help student focus on the cause of the emotion, but also guide them to transfer what they have learnt from the case to their real life and help them solve similar personal problems.

While students are analyzing and discussing the case, teachers should provide guidance timely. But they are not suggested to give the so-called authoritative opinions and standard answers. The point is to guide student to observe and reflect themselves so that they can develop positive and good mental qualities by themselves.

**Several Particular Issues of the Application of Case Teaching Method in Mental Health Education**

Mental health education aims at cultivating students’ mental qualities, which determines that the teaching content, teaching mode and teaching approaches of case teaching method in mental health education is apparently different from other disciplines. Seen from the recent years’ teaching practice, the author holds that several issues call for particular attention.

**The Notion of Case Teaching Method Must Be Interpreted Accurately**

Case teaching method is by no means example teaching method. The modern case teaching mode is a
teaching method centralized in students’ discussion of the case (Ma, 2010). Here are its main manifestations. The teaching content is closely related to the discussion of the case. The main role of the teacher is a guider and an evaluator while students are actively involved in discussion and free expression of their opinions. The case teaching method is not simply to find the correct answer, but to value the thinking process to reach a conclusion. This thinking process is exactly the important technique to achieve the teaching goal.

**The Organization and Composition of the Case Must Be Stressed**

A case is not a random event or example. It is different from the example that we talk about in our daily life. Instead, this kind of case must be typical enough to exemplify a certain mental phenomenon or mental problem and to reflect the common problems or the urgent problems among students.

The teaching materials needed in case teaching should have its unique resources, nature and systems of content arrangement. The teachers have the responsibility to select and organize the materials for discussion. They need to pick out the suitable cases from abundant materials, which often require the school to provide rich information as a guarantee. The establishment of a case database is the fundamental material guarantee to the application of case teaching method.

**The Creativity of Teachers Must Be Continuously Improved**

That teachers are highly qualified is the preposition to the success of case teaching. During the practice of case teaching method, first of all, teachers should be qualified with a solid theoretical knowledge of psychology and a strong capacity of critical thinking and argumentation. They have an in-depth analysis of the mental phenomenon from the outside to inside. Otherwise, they just simply induce the case teaching to one-sidedness and superficiality. Secondly, teachers should be qualified with the corresponding ability and skill to organize the class. In case discussion, teachers must raise a series of questions related to those facts in the case to stimulate students’ desire to learn, inspire them to participate and voice their opinions. After each student expresses their view, the teacher is expected to be able to further guide and promote student to enrich their views. Thirdly, teachers should value equality. Instead of being obsessed with the authoritative role, they should be fully aware of dialogue and communication. They are able to listen to students’ different opinions and respect their viewpoints. Even if problems and shortcomings are detected in the discussion process, teachers should have students solve them by themselves in discussion by giving students inspirations.

**Other Teaching Methods Should Be Combined With Case Teaching Method**

While case teaching method has extraordinary advantages, it has its own deficiencies. For instance, it emphasizes more on the development of the ability to solve practical problems and overlooks the integrity of the theory system. On the development of ability, case teaching method is highly advantaged. However, the successful transmission of basic theory should be aided by lecturing. Generally speaking, before the discussion, teachers should transmit the basic theory to students, or after the discussion, they should help students achieve the uplifting from individuality to commonality and from sensibility to sense.

Besides, in the teaching practice of mental health education, a variety of activities can be applied, including mental drama, mental game, behavioral training, and sports activities, to help students accumulate the sensational and direct experience and to promote the achievement of the mental health education goal.

In a word, the application of case teaching method in college mental health education has great significance. But this teaching method has higher requirements for teachers’ comprehensive qualities.
Teachers need to learn continuously, explore and reform teaching method and improve their comprehensive abilities, which is the important prerequisite of the effective implementation of mental health education in college.

References
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