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Comparing the Curriculum Standards on Student Psychology in Finnish, Chinese and British Education Systems

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Abstract: The necessity of incorporating mental health into educational frameworks has been acknowledged on a global scale, particularly in light of the intensification of student mental health crises due to academic pressure and crises such as the ongoing pandemic of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). This paper presents a comparative analysis of the integration of mental health education in the Finnish, Chinese and British education systems. The Finnish education system demonstrates an exemplary approach to integrating mental health into its curriculum. It places a strong emphasis on student well-being, adopting a supportive, student-centred methodology that encompasses community-oriented learning and teacher engagement. In China, recent efforts have concentrated on curricular interventions and teacher support. However, the pervasive academic pressure remains a significant obstacle. The UK system demonstrates a balanced approach between academic rigour and the integration of wellbeing programmes, including personal, social and health education, peer mentoring and library support. The findings of this study indicate that the Finnish model is the most effective in promoting mental resilience, while the Chinese approach demonstrates the challenges posed by cultural attitudes and academic expectations. The UK approach demonstrates the potential for institutional support, although it is constrained by the influence of systemic academic pressures. These insights offer valuable insights into the creation of a balanced educational environment that balances academic and emotional health.

Keywords: Comparative education, Student mental health, Education System.

1. Introduction

The importance of student mental health has received global attention in recent years, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These events highlight the vulnerability of students' mental health and underscore the need for an integrated approach by the education system to support socio-emotional health and academic achievement. Education policy can strengthen its foundations by incorporating mental health support into the standard curriculum to ensure the resilience and stability of the student population [1]. The pandemic has highlighted the need for a strong mental health system and revealed gaps in existing policies and practices that leave many students without adequate support. Yorke et al also previewed the role of socio-emotional learning (SEL) in the visual context of education, particularly during periods of increased uncertainty and stress such as the pandemic [2]. Incorporating SEL and mental health lessons into the daily curriculum can mitigate the negative impact of the crisis on students' well-being and promote emotional resilience and mental

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flexibility [2]. This shift towards incorporating mental health into education is critical not only for academic success, but also to help students develop the skills needed to navigate complex emotional environments, which are increasingly important in today's challenging world.

The objective of this study is to conduct a critical comparative analysis of the integration of mental health education into the educational systems of Finland, China and the UK. The analysis will focus on the following aspects: curricula, teachers, peer support mechanisms and institutional initiatives. By examining these disparate approaches, this study seeks to ascertain how the distinct cultural, social, and policy contexts shape the efficacy of mental health interventions in education.

The value of this study lies in its capacity to identify optimal practices and areas for enhancement in the integration of mental health into the education system. In the global context, where student mental health is increasingly recognised as a key factor in academic success and personal development, an understanding of the strengths and limitations of these three models of education can inform policy makers and educators in the design of effective mental health support strategies. This research contributes to a broader discussion about the creation of balanced educational environments that promote both academic achievement and emotional well-being, thereby supporting the overall development of students.

2. Finnish Education System

Finnish education is known for its sound system and progressive educational philosophy, not only because of its excellent academic performance, but also because of its emphasis on the well-being of students, particularly their mental health. In addition, Finnish education seeks to ensure that students have a healthy mental state through community-oriented learning methods, student-centred teaching methods, the inclusion of creative subjects and the development of relevant skills for teachers. This section explores how Finland has integrated mental health into its curriculum.

2.1. Integrating Mental Health into the Finnish Curriculum

In Finland, mental health education is not a standalone subject; rather, it is integrated into a variety of courses through a multi-disciplinary approach. This includes health education, life skills, physical education, and other disciplines that incorporate mental health content. This approach is central to the Finnish education system, with the objective of promoting comprehensive student development through the harmonious cultivation of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. The 2016 National Core Curriculum, developed in collaboration with educators, policymakers and other stakeholders, requires schools to prioritize the well-being and mental health of students. This emphasises that mental health is an important part of the overall development of students and reflects Finland's commitment to equality and control in education [3]. Lahdemaki also highlighted in the study that the Finnish curriculum is effective in reducing anxiety and stress by fostering a low-stress learning environment in schools and emphasizing students' autonomy, thereby achieving the objective of promoting students' mental health [3]. Consequently, in Finnish schools, mental health is regarded as an educational objective as crucial as academic achievement, which is in stark contrast to the other two education systems mentioned below.

Furthermore, the findings of Vitikka, Krokfors and Hurmerinta indicate that the Finnish curriculum system facilitates students' emotional well-being by fostering a culture of trust and care between educators and learners, providing psychological security, and mitigating the adverse effects of competition and external pressures on students' mental health [4]. Therefore, it can be argued that the Finnish curriculum system has a positive impact on students' happiness. The curriculum system provides students with numerous opportunities to assume responsibility for their own learning, which

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in turn fosters their sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, which are pivotal in promoting mental resilience.

2.2. Community-Oriented Learning and Emotional Well-being

Moreover, the Finnish education system places considerable emphasis on community-oriented learning, which plays a crucial role in promoting students' emotional well-being. As Makinen observes, the literacy education programme in Finland is not constrained by the conventional emphasis on reading and writing abilities [5]. By encouraging students to engage in collaborative learning and community interaction, Finnish schools facilitate the development of emotional and interpersonal skills, as well as a strong sense of belonging [5]. In the context of literacy education, the curriculum is designed to encompass not only the cultivation of language abilities but also the provision of social and emotional support, with the objective of fostering self-confidence and psychological resilience in students [5]. This community-oriented approach has been demonstrated to have a beneficial effect on students' emotional well-being, fostering emotional resilience and facilitating the formation of robust supportive relationships within and beyond the classroom [5].

Sahlberg also highlighted in his book, Finnish Education 2.0, that the educational reform in Finland integrates community values with educational objectives, provides a secure psychological environment for students, encourages them to learn in a relaxed setting, and avoids unnecessary psychological pressure [6].

2.3. Student-Centered Learning and Mental Health Support

The Finnish education system's emphasis on student-centred learning represents a further crucial element in the promotion of mental wellbeing. Aksela posits that Finnish teaching methods frequently utilise a co-design approach, enabling students to actively influence the shaping of their learning experience [7]. This innovative pedagogical strategy effectively challenges the conventional teacher-centred teaching model and has been shown to promote mental health by affording students greater control and autonomy in their learning [7]. Furthermore, this flexible approach to learning empowers students and encourages them to learn at their own pace and in accordance with their interests, which contributes to a less stressful educational environment [7]. This educational system is in contrast to a more rigorous, exam-oriented system, in which mental health issues frequently originate from elevated levels of academic and performance-related stress.

Similarly, Sahlberg supports this conclusion, emphasising that Finland's decision to minimise standardised testing and focus on formative assessments has contributed to a school climate that prioritises well-being over competition [6]. Formative assessment is designed to facilitate students' learning and address deficiencies in their knowledge, rather than ranking their performance [6]. This approach mitigates the psychological stress associated with testing and can foster a balanced and equitable educational environment that enhances students' mental health.

2.4. Combine Art and Music to Promote Mental Health

The Finnish curriculum also offers students an invaluable opportunity for emotional catharsis through the inclusion of creative subjects such as art and music. The EcoSonic Playground project integrates music and STEM in educational settings, facilitating both creative expression and collaborative problem-solving. This approach provides students with creative outlets for managing emotions and stress [8]. Furthermore, artistic expression plays a significant role in supporting students' mental health. It can not only enrich students' academic learning in art, but also enhance creativity, collaborative work and emotional expression in the process of artistic creation [8].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LC18505

2.5. The Role of Teachers in Promoting Mental Health

In Finland, teachers are regarded not only as educators but also as pivotal figures in the provision of emotional and mental health support for students. As highlighted by Pressley, the Finnish education system provides teachers with comprehensive training in educational psychology, equipping them with the skills to identify and address students' mental health needs [9]. Concurrently, teachers in Finland are urged to cultivate positive and nurturing learning environments that not only mitigate academic stress but also foster students' mental wellbeing and autonomy. Simola additionally posits that Finland's "teacher miracle" is not solely reflected in PISA test outcomes, but also in teachers' capacity to furnish students with comprehensive mental health assistance [10]. As a result of sustained professional training, teachers are able to accurately identify students' emotional states and provide timely psychological intervention.

Furthermore, Finland's exemplary performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has garnered global interest, particularly given that it has achieved these outcomes by striking a balance between academic success and mental health without relying on a highly competitive education system. This is in stark contrast to educational models in many other countries, which tend to rely on high levels of stress and competition to drive academic achievement, but often neglect students' mental health [10].

3. Chinese Education System

The Chinese education system's emphasis on academic excellence and high-stakes testing frequently obscures the mental health needs of students. Nevertheless, in recent years, China has made considerable efforts, including the incorporation of mental health education into the curriculum, to address the growing prevalence of academically induced mental health issues among students.

3.1. Challenges and Progress of Mental Health Education in China

The mental health of Chinese students represents an ongoing and evolving concern. Despite a growing awareness of this issue, the existing support structures and policies are still unable to adequately address the increasing mental health needs of this population [11]. The mental health issues prevalent among Chinese students are predominantly anxiety, depression and stress. These are significantly influenced by the country's highly competitive academic standards, exemplified by the Gaokao (the unified national college entrance examination). Such educational systems tend to prioritise students' academic achievement [11]. Furthermore, the implementation of mental health education in Chinese schools is inconsistent, particularly in rural areas [12]. This is due to the lack of sufficient resources and teachers with professional psychological training in rural areas, which results in disparities in mental health support for urban and rural students [11].

Furthermore, the cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues in Chinese society represents a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of mental health programmes [11]. A significant proportion of students are reluctant to seek assistance when they are aware of their psychological difficulties, due to concerns that doing so may be perceived as a sign of weakness or incompetence. Furthermore, parents often fail to prioritize their children's mental health. This is partly due to their limited understanding of mental health issues and the belief that seeking medical attention for these concerns will impede academic progress. The competitive nature of education also contributes to this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the introduction of mental health education guidelines over the past decade demonstrates a growing recognition of the significance of mental health in educational settings.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LC18505

3.2. Curriculum Based Intervention and Psychological Flexibility

Xiao et al. concentrated on the recent advancement of curriculum-based interventions for mental health in China, including the incorporation of integrated mindfulness exercises, stress management techniques, and cognitive-behavioral strategies into existing curricula [12]. The objective of these measures is to enhance the mental flexibility of Chinese college students, thereby facilitating more effective management of academic pressure and improvement in emotional regulation abilities. Mental flexibility can be defined as the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and to maintain a sense of well-being. These skills are of particular importance in a highly competitive academic environment, and their incorporation into the curriculum ensures a more comprehensive coverage and greater engagement.

In a separate contribution, Chen considers the potential for integrating two distinct areas of learning – ideological and political education and physical health – into the curriculum of Chinese schools, with a view to enhancing the provision of mental health education [13]. The practicality of this intervention lies in its capacity to integrate traditional values with modern mental health concepts, integrate mental health principles into broader educational themes, enhance students' emotional and social resilience, and ensure cultural relevance, thereby increasing its acceptability within the Chinese context. A systematic review of mental health interventions for Chinese undergraduates by Yi et al. revealed that integrating the "two lessons" into mental health education resulted in a reduction in anxiety and depression while improving students' overall well-being [14]. Furthermore, the review highlights that while such interventions are effective, they require more comprehensive and consistent implementation across all educational institutions to adequately address the pervasive mental health challenges faced by Chinese students.

3.3. Teacher are Agents of Change

In China, educators are increasingly regarded as pivotal figures in the promotion of student mental health and well-being. Teachers, as agents of change within the education system, play a pivotal role in the care and support of students' well-being. In Chinese schools, teachers frequently possess considerable authority and influence over students, which can be leveraged to promote students' emotional well-being. Furthermore, Wang discovered that when teachers engage with students in a proactive manner, encompassing academic guidance and emotional support, students exhibit a notable reduction in anxiety and stress levels [15].

Nevertheless, this transformation in the role of the teacher necessitates supplementary training and a reorientation of the teacher's responsibilities. It is imperative that teachers are equipped with the requisite skills to identify mental health issues and provide initial support where necessary. However, the considerable demands on teachers' time, coupled with the need to meet academic achievement targets, can impede their capacity to prioritise students' mental health.

3.4. Health Literacy and Sleep

There is another notable factor affecting students' mental health problems in China, namely, health literacy. Zhang et al found that students with lower health literacy are more likely to have sleep problems, which in turn negatively impact their mental health, and given the enormous academic pressure Chinese students face, lack of sleep is a common problem that can exacerbate anxiety and depression [16]. Zhang et al therefore advocate the inclusion of health literacy programs in school curricula to help students make informed decisions about their own health and well-being by teaching students the importance of sleep, stress management, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle [17].

However, the key to Chinese students' mental health problems is the intense competitive pressure brought about by China's exam-centric, or Gaokao, education system. Not only should students be

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given relevant knowledge, but also teachers, especially parents, should be trained and popularized to make the whole people aware of the seriousness of mental health problems, and China's education system should be thoroughly reformed from the bottom up.

4. British Education System

The UK education system employs a range of strategies to advance mental health and well-being. These include curriculum integration, the incorporation of social perspectives, and the provision of support services. These measures are implemented at all levels of education, reflecting a commitment to addressing mental health concerns and promoting students' emotional well-being alongside their academic achievement.

4.1. Integrate Mental Health into the Curriculum

There is a growing interest in the UK's mental health curriculum, namely Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE), which encompasses emotional literacy, resilience and coping strategies. Higher education in the UK is increasingly prioritising mental health, recognising the necessity of integrating wellbeing directly into the curriculum. Houghton and Anderson posit that integrating happiness into the curriculum not only supports students' emotional well-being, but also optimises academic success. Furthermore, the integration of well-being through inclusive teaching practices, such as the fostering of supportive classroom environments, the encouragement of reflective activity and the enhancement of students' sense of belonging, also serves to regulate mental health issues and provide students with the necessary tools to cope with academic stress, thereby promoting more favourable educational outcomes.

In his research, Bartram highlighted the significance of students' emotional states in the learning process. Emotions are frequently regarded as impediments in academic contexts; however, they can also be harnessed to enhance the capacity to learn [18]. It is therefore evident that the creation of an environment in which students are able to express and manage their emotions is of significant benefit to the learning environment as a whole and is of paramount importance in the improvement of student well-being.

4.2. Peer Support Promotes Student Well-being

Peer support constitutes a pivotal element of the UK's strategy for enhancing mental health outcomes within the education system, particularly within higher education settings. Collings, Swanson and Watkins found that peer support had a significant positive impact on students' sense of belonging, emotional well-being and overall engagement with university life [19]. This indicates that peer support offers valuable social assistance, assists in the reduction of feelings of isolation and anxiety, and enables students to cope more effectively with the challenges of university study and life. The university fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning community by providing a structured peer support system that contributes to students' mental health and academic success.

4.3. Libraries Support Student Well-being

In the United Kingdom, academic libraries, which have traditionally been regarded as spaces for academic research, have assumed an increasingly significant role in supporting the mental health and well-being of UK students. In the context of the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus, libraries in the United Kingdom have implemented a series of initiatives with the objective of providing support to students in terms of their mental health and wellbeing. These initiatives include the provision of mindfulness classes, the designation of quiet study areas, and the offering of access to

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literature related to mental health and self-care. Furthermore, the library offers online support services, including virtual health seminars and digital mental health resources, which effectively address students' mental health needs and facilitate timely adjustments to students' mental health in a challenging environment.

Nevertheless, there are considerable obstacles to this strategy of relying on institutional support. The most significant of these is the necessity to educate institutions on the importance of a systematic commitment, including the provision of adequate training for staff and the allocation of sufficient resources. In the absence of institutional support, the aforementioned programmes may be implemented in an inconsistent manner, which could result in some students failing to benefit from them. Furthermore, although the pressure on students in the British education system is not as intense as that in China, it nevertheless persists. The necessity to perform well academically can place students in a perpetually competitive setting, which may have a detrimental effect on their mental wellbeing.

5. Comparative Analysis

The global concern about mental health has prompted educational systems in various countries to gradually devote attention to the development of students' mental health. While there are notable differences in the approach to students' mental health across the educational systems of Finland, China and the UK, the overarching objective of these systems is to foster an educational environment that is conducive to both academic achievement and personal well-being. However, due to the influence of cultural background, educational policies and social values, there are significant differences in the implementation of mental health education across different countries.

5.1. Integration and Focus of Mental Health Curriculum

The fundamental principle of the Finnish education system is the integration of mental health into the curriculum in a seamless manner. This approach is reflective of the system's overarching philosophy, which emphasises the holistic development of students. By integrating mental health education into life skills, health education and other disciplines, Finland demonstrates a commitment to addressing the transfer of knowledge not only in an academic context, but also in the development of students' emotional education and psychological quality.

In contrast, although China has made significant strides in mental health education in recent years, there are still considerable challenges to be addressed. The introduction of curriculum intervention in China has gradually facilitated the enhancement of students' mental flexibility and emotional connection. However, it is evident that mental health remains relatively marginalised in the curriculum.

In comparison to the Finnish system, the UK's mental health education system includes explicit mental health courses, such as personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), which play an important role in students' mental health education. Nevertheless, within the UK system, there is a persistent tension between academic pressures and mental health support, particularly at the higher education level. This can impede the practical role of mental health courses.

5.2. The Role of Teachers in Mental Health Support

Teachers' role in students' mental health education shows obvious differences among the three countries. Finnish teachers are regarded as the core of students' emotional support, and after extensive training in psychology, they are able to effectively support students' emotional development [9]. This makes the Finnish education system advantageous in terms of students' mental health [6].

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In contrast, the role of teachers in students' mental health in China is only beginning to be appreciated. Although the care and support of teachers have been shown to be an important factor in students' mental health, the role of teachers in mental health support is often underutilized due to the heavy workload of teachers and the achievement-led environment [15]. In addition, the training of teachers in mental health is relatively limited, resulting in teachers cannot find problems in time and give correct guidance.

In the United Kingdom, teachers are also under greater pressure to perform academically [20]. Despite this, schools in England have taken on some of the responsibility for healthy psychological support for teachers by bringing in mental health specialists and establishing mental health leadership positions, thus enabling teachers to strike a balance between teaching and emotional support [17].

5.3. The Impact of Community Orientation and Collective Support on Mental Health

Community oriented learning in Finland provides students with an opportunity to develop in a supportive environment. This mode of learning not only promotes academic success, but also enhances students' psychological inertia and sense of belonging by encouraging their cooperation and emotional interaction [5]. In addition, the integration of art and music provides students with a channel for emotional expression, which is conducive to reducing academic pressure [8].

In contrast, China is still significantly deficient in community-oriented mental health support. Although some mental health curricula and interventions have been gradually introduced in schools, the implementation of this support has been undermined by pressure for academic performance [13]. The lack of health literacy also has a negative impact on students' sleep quality and mental health [16].

The UK uses a variety of psychological strategies to support student health, including peer counselling and support from non-academic resources such as libraries. Collings et appointed out that peer tutoring can help reduce students' sense of individuality and anxiety and improve their sense of belonging [19]. Cox and Brewster highlight the role of libraries in students' mental health, especially during the pandemic, by providing important emotional support to students through measures such as online support [21].

5.4. Balancing Academic Pressure with Mental Health Support

The balance between academic pressure and mental health support manifests itself very differently in the three countries' education systems. The Finnish education system creates a relatively low-stress learning environment by reducing the frequency of standardized tests and emphasizing evaluation, enabling students to find a good balance between academic and mental health [6]. This approach has been cited as one of the reasons why Finnish students perform well in PISA tests, as students are better able to reach their potential in a relaxed environment [10].

In China, although the implementation of mental health courses is increasing, the overall academic pressure is still high, especially when students' academic life is filled with competitive exams such as the Gaokao. The cultural "achievement supremacy" leads many students to rarely seek help when mental health problems arise [11]. This cultural pressure limits the effectiveness of mental health education and makes it more difficult for students to cope with academic and emotional challenges.

Although the UK education system contains a variety of mental health support measures, academic competition also puts pressure on students' mental health, especially at the higher education level [21]. Nevertheless, the education system in the UK has had some success in helping students cope with academic stress by embedding some mental health education in the curriculum and providing peer support [17,19].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LC18505

6. Conclusion

Critically, each of the three countries' education systems has its own characteristics and has its own strengths and weaknesses in promoting students' mental health. Finland's success in mental health education is due to its student-centered teaching approach, low academic stress, and the teacher's central psychological role in emotional support, which together create an educational environment that promotes health. However, the spread of such a system may face cultural differences and resource challenges, especially in countries and regions that are more concerned about competition.

Although China has made some progress in mental health education, the deep-rooted culture of academic pressure does affect the effective implementation of mental health education. Future directions should include more systematic teacher training, broader implementation of mental health curricula, and sociocultural shifts to reduce academic pressures.

While the UK's approach to mental health support is varied, there is still a clear contradiction between coping with academic pressures and providing adequate mental health support. Future development requires a better balance between academic achievement and mental health support, ensuring that every student has access to the necessary emotional and psychological support while pursuing academic success.

In conclusion, the way mental health is integrated in the education system is strongly influenced by cultural background, social values and policy orientation. While each country has its own unique approaches and challenges, Finland's experience shows that a learning environment that reduces academic stress, enhances the role of teachers in mental health, and provides emotional support is important for students' mental health and overall well-being.

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