

# An Experimental Study on the Impact of Positive Education on School Engagement and Psychological Well-being among Boarding School Students in China

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## Abstract

*Current researchers are paying more and more attention to the impact of school engagement and psychological well-being on the comprehensive development of adolescents in boarding schools, but how to improve them still needs further verification. This study explores the impact of positive education intervention on school engagement and psychological well-being of students in boarding schools in China. The study adopted an experimental design, with 167 middle school students as the research subjects. The experimental group received a 12-week positive education intervention, and the control group received regular mental health education. The results showed that compared with the control group, the school engagement and psychological well-being levels of the experimental group were significantly improved, which laid an empirical foundation for integrating positive education into various disciplines in the future.*

**Keywords:** *Intervention; Positive Education; Psychological Being; School Engagement.*

## Introduction

In recent years, with the development of the economy and changes in educational concepts, more and more parents choose to send their children to boarding schools, and more and more problems have arisen (Fox, 2022). Rural boarding schools are the most developed schools among boarding schools in China, and have important research value (Xue & Li, 2022). At present, the total number of rural boarding students has reached 32.7651 million, including 9.346 million primary and secondary school students (Wu et al., 2021). According to the research of Guo et al. (2017), the prevalence of psychological problems among adolescents in boarding schools is 5%~54.3%, mainly including depression, anxiety, suicide, etc.

Positive education has been developed recently, referring to positive psychology in the educational environment (Wang et al., 2021). Seligman et al. (2009) define positive education as an approach to education that fosters traditional academic skills and skills for happiness and well-being. Positive education programs are school-based well-being interventions that implement positive psychological interventions in order to increase psychological well-being and reduce mental ill-health (Morrish et al., 2018). Seligman's advocacy and promotion of positive psychology has set off a new wave of psychological research in the world. Under this background, positive education has been practiced and applied on a large scale.

School engagement is a multidimensional construct concept proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004). The currently accepted view is that there are three types of participation: behavioral participation, emotional participation, and cognitive participation. Behavioral participation includes participation in academic, social, or extracurricular activities; emotional participation includes positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, scholars, or schools; cognitive participation includes thoughtfulness and willingness to make the necessary efforts to understand complex ideas and master difficult skills (King et al., 2021; Martins et al., 2022). In schools, improving students' school engagement is related to improving their well-being (Hämäläinen et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Fernández et al., 2018). Improving engagement can reduce high levels of boredom and dissatisfaction among students and high dropout rates in urban areas (Bekker et al., 2023). In addition, engagement is not static, it is malleable (Reeve et al., 2020), so in the educational process, educators need to improve student engagement so that they can adapt to changes in the environment. the

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use of psychology and positive education in schools enhanced adolescents' social skills, cooperation, empathy, and self-control, as well as their learning and school involvement strengths (Seligman et al., 2009).

Psychological well-being encompasses autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relationships, and self-acceptance (van Agteren et al., 2021). Prevention is better than cure. Positive education plays an important role in psychological problems and promoting students' well-being. Compared with other countries, China started late in the field of positive education (Jianping et al., 2024). However, in recent years, with the continuous development, dissemination and practical exploration of positive psychology theory, this field has also achieved fruitful results in China (Zheng, 2018). Duan and Bu (2019) proposed some practical and innovative methods for positive education practice, such as the single-session rapid intervention model, which can reduce students' negative emotions and improve their well-being. In addition, the Hummingbird Project is an intervention method based on the concept of family, which significantly improves children and adolescents' mental health and well-being by encouraging them to engage in activities (Platt et al., 2020). These empirical intervention methods not only enrich the theoretical basis of educational practice, but also provide new directions for promoting positive education in China.

## Literature Review

### *School Engagement*

Recently, the fields of school education and educational psychology have gradually paid attention to events related to student well-being and classroom engagement (Wong et al., 2024). Previous meta-analyses have shown that student well-being and classroom engagement may have a positive impact on their academic performance (Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Wong et al., 2024). A large number of related studies have further shown that there is a significant positive correlation between school engagement and academic performance (Carmona-Halty et al., 2021). For example, Lee (2014) found that students' engagement in school has a positive effect on their academic performance. These studies show that by improving students' school engagement, their important academic performance and overall well-being can be effectively improved.

Because school engagement is closely related to academic performance, there are more and more intervention studies aimed at improving school engagement. Studies have explored various intervention measures to improve adolescents' school engagement. Previous studies have shown that rational behavioral emotional therapy (REBT) has a significant effect on improving students' school engagement (Asogwa et al., 2020). Because school engagement requires students' focus and commitment, physical activity is also considered an effective way to promote school engagement (Wong & Liem, 2022).

Furthermore, adolescents' support and sense of belonging from their peers help them gain satisfaction, thereby enhancing school engagement (Allen et al., 2018). Positive education interventions are rooted in positive psychology and are expected to improve students' emotional and cognitive engagement by focusing on well-being, resilience, and positive relationships (Green et al., 2021). Programs such as growth mindset training and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs can help students develop coping strategies and emotion regulation skills, which are essential for sustained engagement (Mahoney et al., 2021).

### *Psychological Well-being*

Although schools focus on academic performance, more and more boarding schools focus on the overall development of students and pay more attention to students' psychological well-being. Especially in boarding schools, adolescents experience physical changes, face increasing peer pressure, and participate in dangerous things such as alcohol, drugs, and sex (Noll et al., 2020). In terms of mental health, adolescence is a period of growth and seeking and establishing life goals (Erikson, 1968). Zhang et al. (2020) believes that psychological well-being is a happy psychological state, and education should aim to pursue happiness in life and cultivate a positive personality.

The mental health problems of adolescents in boarding schools are very prominent and deserve further study. Enhancing psychological well-being through school-based interventions that focus on preventing

psychological problems from occurring can improve adolescents' coping and engagement (Tomé et al., 2021). Researcher has reviewed articles on the impact of positive psychology interventions on psychological well-being over the past decade, and a large amount of literature shows that positive psychology interventions have the potential to improve people's psychological well-being (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2022; Halliday et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2019; Mangan et al., 2020; Vuorinen et al., 2019; Young et al., 2022).

### *Positive Education*

According to the discipline of positive psychology, a person's well-being is made up of five elements: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA; Seligman, 2011). Multi-component positive psychological treatments (MPPIs), such as PERMA, have been shown in a meta-analysis study to be beneficial in raising people's well-being and lowering their negative feelings, such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Hendriks et al., 2021). Seligman et al. (2009) defined positive education as a comprehensive approach to student growth and development that draws from a variety of ideas and includes well-being, character strengths, and happy emotions.

Positive education, also known as happiness education, has the core concept of improving students' happiness through education (Lan, 2020). In 2008, Meng Wanjin systematically illustrated the practice system of positive mental health education in "Positive Mental Health Education", which promoted the application of positive psychology in Chinese psychological education (Zheng, 2011). From 2014 to 2018, the Positive Psychology Research Center (PPRC) of Tsinghua University provided rigorous training and courses for teachers from 19 schools in Guangdong, Sichuan, Hunan and other places, benefiting more than 17,500 students. In addition, more than 600 principals have completed the PPRC positive education training program. In 2018, the positive education project of all schools in Beijing, guided by the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, involved 15,000 students and 1,000 teachers. The project emphasizes the cultivation of students' positive character, growth mindset and courage to promote academic performance and overall well-being.

However, most current studies on positive education still focus on individual student applications, lacking systematic and well-structured comprehensive practice projects (Juzhe et al., 2019). There is a lack of corresponding extracurricular exercises and applications after classroom learning, making it difficult to consolidate what has been learned. This also provides a theoretical and practical basis for this study.

### **Present Study**

To date, although the benefits of positive education have been explored in various contexts, most research has focused on improving students' academic performance and well-being. There are few intervention studies on how to improve adolescent school engagement and psychological well-being, especially in settings such as boarding schools. Therefore, research findings and conclusions are easily affected by school and adolescent characteristics, limiting generalization to other settings. Therefore, in order to verify the effects of positive education intervention on school engagement and psychological well-being of adolescents in boarding schools, the following research questions were raised: (1) Can the positive education intervention improve school engagement of adolescents in Chinese boarding schools? (2) Can the positive education intervention improve psychological well-being of adolescents in Chinese boarding schools?

### **Methodology**

#### *Study Design*

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of a positive education intervention on school engagement and psychological well-being of adolescents in boarding schools in China. In this experimental study, a pre-test and post-test (repeated measures) design was applied.

## Participants

Using stratified sampling, and random allocation techniques to sample adolescents in boarding schools. This study used 167 adolescents as the final sample size. These adolescents were randomly assigned to the experimental group (n=84) and the control group (n=83). Participants are 12-16 years old (baseline; participants in grades 7-9, M=14). The intervention group received positive education intervention for 12 weeks, with one class per week for 60 minutes taught by researchers. The whole intervention course lasted three months. After twelve sessions, all participants in the intervention and control groups completed the field filling and recycling of the questionnaire and scales again. Only participants who completed the pre and post test data were included in the study sample.

## Intervention

Utilizing the PERMA model as a foundation (which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment). The program comprises a series of 12 weeks. Within each activity, participants engage in a structured sequence of four stages: Warming up, cognition, experience, and share are the four processes that make up each activity.

**Table 1. Intervention phases and details.**

Phase	Details
1	The researcher will orchestrate mindfulness experiences for adolescents, involving 5-minute meditation sessions preceding each activity. Scholars and educators advocate for meditation as a school-based initiative to enhance student well-being (Huppert & Johnson, 2010).
2	The researcher will play the video session to enhance participants' understanding of the underlying theory, stimulate positive emotions, and facilitate enthusiastic participation in subsequent activities.
3	The researcher will incorporate proven positive education activities to further enhance adolescents' school engagement and psychological well-being.

Note. Each activity will involve documenting and articulating feelings.

## Instruments

### EPOCH

The Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness (EPOCH) measures adolescents' well-being (Kern et al., 2016) which is aligned with the multidimensional nature of human flourishing as defined by Seligman (2011), the founder of positive psychology. The EPOCH assesses five positive characteristics that sustain enhanced well-being: engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness (Kern et al., 2015). A sample item is “*I get completely absorbed in what I am doing*”. The Cronbach's alpha value for the 20-item EPOCH was 0.911.

### School Engagement Questionnaire

The School Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Lam et al. (2012). The questionnaire contains 16 items, including three dimensions: behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “unlike me very much” (1) to “like me very much” (5). A sample item is: “*In class, I work as hard as I can*”. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value for the 16-item SEQ was 0.912.

## Data Analysis

To show the difference in the school engagement and psychological well-being scores of the experimental

group and the control group, descriptive Statistics and repeated measures ANOVA were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention in improving school engagement and psychological well-being scores of junior high school students.

## Results

As shown in Table 2, the demographic characteristics of the participants ( $N = 167$ ) in the experimental and control groups were based on grade, length of boarding and frequency of going home. From the data, it can be seen that the participants' grade and length of boarding are consistent, that is, the higher the grade, the longer the boarding duration. In terms of grade and length of boarding, the experimental group had 28 first-year students, 33 second-year students, and 23 third-year students (accounting for 33.3%, 39.3%, and 27.4% of the total, respectively), and the control group had 27 first-year students, 34 second-year students, and 22 third-year students (accounting for 32.5%, 41.0%, and 26.5% of the total, respectively). In terms of frequency of going home, the number of participants who responded once a week in the experimental group was 83 (98.8% of the total), and the number of participants who responded once a week in the control group was 82 (98.8% of the total). The sample was almost evenly distributed in the two groups.

**Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants**

Variable	Group	
	Experimental	Control
<b>Grade</b>		
1	28 ( 33.3%)	27 ( 32.5%)
2	33 ( 39.3% )	34 ( 41.0% )
3	23 ( 27.4% )	22 ( 26.5% )
<b>Total</b>	84 ( 100% )	83 ( 100% )
<b>Length</b>		
Half a year to a year	28 ( 33.3% )	27 ( 32.5% )
Less than two years	33 ( 39.3% )	34 ( 41.0% )
More than two years	23 ( 27.4% )	22 ( 26.5% )
<b>Total</b>	84 ( 100% )	83 ( 100% )
<b>Frequency</b>		
Once a week	83 ( 98.8% )	82 ( 98.8% )
Two weeks back	1 ( 1.2% )	1 ( 1.2% )
<b>Total</b>	84 ( 100% )	83 ( 100% )

Tables 3 and 4 show that the post-test scores of school engagement of the students in the experimental group ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = .95$ ) were higher than those of the students in the control group ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ); the post-test scores of psychological well-being of the students in the experimental group ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = .87$ ) were significantly higher than those of the students in the control group ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .75$ ).

**Table 3. Results of Mean  $\pm$  SD and analysis summary in two groups about school engagement.**

Group	Time	Mean	SD	N
Experimental group	Pre	2.90	1.05	84
	Post	3.22	.95	84
control group	Pre	3.33	.93	83
	Post	3.12	1.04	83

**Table 4. Results of Mean  $\pm$  SD and analysis summary in two groups about psychological well-being.**

Group	Time	Mean	SD	N
Experimental group	Pre	2.85	.94	84
	Post	3.38	.87	84
control group	Pre	2.85	.80	83
	Post	2.94	.75	83

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention at two time points (pretest and posttest), a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted on school engagement and psychological well-being (Table 5). The results showed that the main effect of time on school engagement was significant,  $F = 5.129$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , with a small effect size (multivariate  $\eta^2 = 0.030$ ). For psychological well-being, the main effect of time was also significant,  $F = 20.915$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , although the effect size was smaller (multivariate  $\eta^2 = 0.112$ ).

**Table 5. Summary of the repeated-measures ANOVAs for school engagement and psychological well-being.**

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
School engagement Psychological well-being	3.892	1	3.892	5.129	0.025	0.030
	0.889	1	7.889	20.915	0.000	0.112

Note. SS: sum of squares; MS: mean square; df: degrees of freedom;  $p < 0.05$ .

## Discussion

This study contributes to a growing body of research that explores the effectiveness of positive education intervention in promoting school engagement and psychological well-being among adolescents, especially in boarding schools. While previous studies have shown that positive education can help improve school engagement and well-being, their specific impact in boarding school settings remains underexplored (e.g., Fredrick et al., 2022). This study addresses this gap. These results support the conclusion that the intervention is effective in enhancing both school engagement and psychological well-being.

This study provides valuable insights for education policymakers and administrators by highlighting the effectiveness of positive education interventions in fostering school engagement and psychological well-being. At present, most schools still use the traditional mental health education model to counsel students (McCalman et al., 2020). This study undoubtedly provides them with a better way, and this study also supports the inclusion of this intervention program in the boarding school curriculum. Of course, it is also necessary to pay attention to the individual differences of adolescents in boarding schools, and if necessary, develop personalized intervention programs to meet the unique needs of different students.

Positive education intervention significantly enhanced participants' school engagement, which is also different from previous research. For example, in the Netherlands, researchers used whole-school teaching

methods to intervene with school staff to improve students' happiness and engagement. The final results showed that student engagement showed a positive trend, but the results were not significant (Goldberg et al., 2022). The significant improvements observed in this study may be attributed to the unique characteristics of Chinese boarding school students as well as specific components of the intervention, such as meditation and gratitude practices, that allow students to experience feelings of mindfulness and harvesting happiness. This highlights the importance of context-specific approaches in designing effective educational interventions to meet the cultural and psychological needs of diverse populations.

This study verified that positive education can effectively enhance the school engagement and psychological well-being of adolescents in boarding schools by improving positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (Seligman, 2018). This finding is consistent with studies from different cultural backgrounds, such as similar effects observed in studies in other countries. This shows that positive education interventions are cross-culturally applicable in improving school engagement and psychological well-being, especially in the Chinese boarding school environment.

The significance of this study is mainly reflected in two aspects. First, it shows that boarding schools can significantly improve students' well-being and school engagement by introducing positive education measures and integrating them into specific subject courses. Second, the study found that positive education intervention can produce significant psychological changes in just three months, indicating that this method can achieve the expected results in the short term, which provides a feasible path for school practice. Future research should further explore the long-term sustainability of these effects and evaluate their applicability in different cultural and educational contexts.

In summary, this study provides strong evidence for the implementation of education in Chinese boarding schools and verifies the theoretical basis of the PERMA model. At the same time, this study also provides practical suggestions for education policy makers and practitioners, showing that integrating these interventions into boarding school curricula can effectively promote adolescents' school engagement and psychological well-being.

## Conclusions

This study explores the impact of a positive education intervention on school engagement and psychological well-being among boarding junior high school students in China. The conclusions drawn from the results of this study can be summarized in three key aspects. First, positive education intervention has a significant impact on school engagement and psychological well-being of boarding junior high school students. School engagement and psychological well-being were significantly improved after the intervention. Second, routine mental health education had no significant impact on school engagement and psychological well-being, while positive education intervention showed significantly better results.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Studies

Although this study has some interesting findings, some limitations must be acknowledged. The first limitation is the geographical limitation. Since this study focuses on a specific area for intervention, boarding schools in China are widely distributed, and there are still many boarding adolescents who have not received the impact of positive education. This means that generalization of results can be limited.

Another limitation of the study is time constraints. The present study used a repeated measures design at only two time points with no delayed post-test follow-up. It was therefore unable to demonstrate the long-term effects of positive education intervention and address the difficulties of long-term practice.

Third, only one positive education intervention was used and it was not compared with other interventions. Therefore, future research could introduce a multi-group experimental design to compare the effects of multiple interventions to further verify the differences and effects of different interventions on school engagement and psychological well-being. For example, positive education interventions could be compared with other psychoeducational methods (such as cognitive and behavioral interventions). Finally,

multi-group comparisons could reveal the differentiated effects of interventions in different student groups (such as age, gender, and school type), thus providing better results.

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