

Chinese Universities Lack a Course About Family Education

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Abstract: China's total fertility rate declined to 1.30, the lowest level in the record, as demonstrated by China's seventh national census data in 2020. This figure indicates that China has been among the countries with "a quite low fertility rate", classified by the international academic community. China's society has encountered a small tidal wave of "feminism" over the past decade, during which people dare to reflect and discuss the traditional Chinese concept of love and marriage on a larger scale, and the popularization and revelation of fertility-related topics more emerge. However, these trends have also aggravated the phenomenon of "gender antagonism", "fear of marriage and childbearing" and "non-marriage and infertility" among young Chinese people. As China is in the stage of social transformation, the involution is pervasive in various fields, and the rate of national anxiety remains high. These negative social phenomena are deeply related to the traditional Chinese education system.^[1]

Keywords: Family education; Chinese colleges

China is known worldwide for its test-based education, of which the competition is highly keen, and the reform of the Chinese education system is now urgent. Family education is a crucial link to the reform of the education system. Family education curriculum in a narrow sense refers to the knowledge content related to family and self-growth education, and in a broad sense, includes marriage education, sex education, childbirth and parenting education, mental health education, and others. These are urgently needed by young students but are still very deficient in the Chinese education system. Under China's traditional culture and special national conditions, education has been faced with a heavier task of the times, which affects the shaping of the national concept of marriage, the national mental health level, and the future direction of fertility rate.

1. Problems Encountered in Chinese Family Education at Present

1.1 Chinese-style parenting: grandparenting

In China, if you are a pregnant woman or the husband of a pregnant woman, the most frequently asked question when you meet your friends must be "When the baby is born, which elder in your family will help to take care of the child?"

The grandparents assist the parents with the daily lives of their grandchildren and accompany them as they grow up, of which the concept of "grandparenting" is a form of family education respected by traditional Chinese culture, and has become a widespread social phenomenon in China, being a typical manifestation of Chinese family education pattern in the new era.^[2] The latest "Survey Report on Grandparental Involvement in Family Parenting in Chinese Urban Areas" released by the Family Education Professional Committee of the Chinese Society of Education shows that nearly 80% of families have grandparental involvement.

Grandparenting is a double-edged sword, and the advantages are undeniable, that is, both young parents can work without delaying their personal career development, they do not have to sacrifice their personal pursuits, and the family income can be better ensured. But the long-term absence of parental role can easily lead to the future estrangement of parent-child relationship. Some studies have shown that the cognitive dependence level in children raised by grandparents is higher than paternal parenting or co-parenting, especially more highlighted in "interpersonal attribution" and "obedience to authority".^[3]

In the context of economic pressures and grandparenting, Chinese young people are significantly weaker in independent ability. "Self-differentiation concerns the process of an individual's sense of self diverging from the multigenerational family system to which he or she is emotionally attached to and anchored to, and it is a key task in individual growth. The family of origin has a profound influence on children's self-differentiation. In the context of traditional Chinese family culture, the interaction patterns between parents and children prevent children from developing good self-differentiation due to an overemphasis on mutual emotional attachment".^[4] If the cycle of grandparenting cannot be broken and optimized, then the younger generation in China will not be able to obtain a faster and newer evolution in parenting issues, the quality of parenting will be greatly reduced, and the psychological health and sense of family education of the next generation will be hindered.

1.2 Anxiety and the trend of low fertility rate during the period of social transformation in China China is in a special historical period of social transformation.

With reference to the development process of modern countries, various mental health problems will always emerge in the period of social transformation. Coupled with the competitive examination-oriented education taking shape in China, the life anxiety of Chinese people, especially marriage anxiety and parenting anxiety, has attracted the attention of the whole society. According to media reports, marriage anxiety and child-rearing anxiety in China have become a social phenomenon that is difficult to ignore. "The current child-rearing anxiety shows the characteristics of social anxiety, such as competition anxiety, safety anxiety and health anxiety, reflecting a kind of social survival state, while the family anxiety is the epitome of social anxiety."^[5]

In China, the only-child group in the 1980s and 1990s is extremely special, because they have no sibling family relationship, and enjoy the care and favor of their parents alone. Since the post-80s and 90s have now reached the age of marriage and childbearing,

they often need the support of their parents due to the high housing prices and child-rearing costs. Thus, the intergenerational relationship is closer, and the influence of the original family will continue to be passed on to three generations.

In addition, the new media communication is characterized by high speed, fragmentation, low information quality, and difficulty of distinguishing between true and false, and between good and bad. The communication mechanism of social networks makes emotional messages easier to attract attention and resonate emotionally, thus aggravating the anxiety of some parents. As a result, the negative emotions of unease will infect more young people through online media, spreading the anxiety to more people.

2. The Necessity for Establishing Family Education Courses in Colleges and Universities

2.1 What should be covered in family education courses

2.1.1 Marriage and Relationship Education

In October 2020, China Youth Daily launched a questionnaire survey to 1,028 college students nationwide, the results of which showed that 88.23% of college students support establishing relationship courses in college.

In 2021, a piece of news was forwarded by multiple major media that Yu Feng, a professor, dean and doctoral supervisor of the Department of Psychology, School of Philosophy at Wuhan University, gave a lecture on “The Psychology of Love” at the university. The classroom was fraught with so many students that even the hallway outside the classroom was also full of students, who tried to see and hear through windows. Professor Yu said that the original intention for offering the “relationship course” is that he found that unhealthy relationships often exist among college students, and even serious ones can affect the students’ sense of values.

College students are facing the social pressure of work, marriage and children soon after graduation, and thereby marriage anxiety has long entered the university campus. Marriage and relationship courses have become the preparation by many college students to learn family knowledge before entering society.^[6] Mr. Huang Daiqing, the head of Shenzhen University’s “People and Society” course, once set up a marriage and family class in his teaching program. He asked the students to give feedback on “the most wanted knowledge about marriage”, and the students’ responses included: how to know themselves, the pros and cons of cohabitation, how to protect themselves in cohabitation, how a man should be responsible for his girlfriend, how to learn to refuse, and others. Mr. Huang said that based on the feedback, college students nowadays also have a desire to know more about marriage and sex.

2.1.2 Sex education

In China, sex education is still a relatively backward content, and a subject that needs to be studied and of which appropriate scale needs to be set. In 2019, the top international academic journal *Science* published an article from the Chinese CDC and Tsinghua University School of Medicine titled “HIV upsurge in China’s students”, which stated that according to the data from Chinese CDC, the number of college students newly diagnosed with HIV has increased by 30% to 50% annually over the past few years. The growing epidemic disease is due to a lack of sex education among young people, which leads to a lack of safety measures, negligence and risk-taking.

Wang Cuntong, a professor at the School of Sociology and Psychology, the Central University of Finance and Economics, gave a course named “Sexual and Reproductive Health of University Students”, in which he pointed out that the four major problems recognized by the sexual and reproductive health community with regard to the current situation of the sexual health of university students were: premarital sex, unsafe sex, the infection rate of sexually transmitted diseases, and the rising proportion of unmarried pregnancies and abortions. According to data, as many as 13 million abortions are performed in China every year, with women under 25 years of age accounting for more than half of the total. College students have even become the “main force” of abortion. Among female adolescents who have premarital sex, over 20% have unexpected pregnancy, of which 91% end in abortion.^[7]

Referring to sex education from an international perspective, countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden are developed countries recommended by UNESCO for sex education. These countries do not have sex education courses in their universities, but their sex education starts from kindergarten and continues through primary, middle and high school, and by the time it comes to the university level, sex has entered the level of scientific research, rather than the stage of learning. In China, on the contrary, it is the lack of sex education in primary and middle schools that has made sex education in universities a very urgent task.

2.1.3 Knowledge of fertility and child-rearing education

The sex education is deficient in the Chinese education system, let alone the almost zero knowledge of fertility. By searching online, the author can hardly find literature on knowledge about fertility on campus, but a glimpse of students’ demand can be found in one survey. In a report titled “Research on Fertility Health Education Courses in Colleges and Universities”, researchers distributed 720 questionnaires in a Chinese university during the 2010-2012 academic year, of which results showed that university students’ main sources of sex knowledge were the Internet, television and newspapers and magazines, a few came from exchanges with school-mates, and less than 8% came from family and school education. Only 16.6% of students knew about contraception and birth control, but almost no one knew about eugenics and healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth periods. 85.6% of university students believed it is necessary for them to know about fertility, and 82.1% thought it was necessary to offer such a course on fertility and rearing in college.^[8]

Fertility education classes are a logical extension of sexual health education. Learning about perinatal care, breastfeeding, infant and child health, pregnancy, abortion, and others, helps to establish a correct view of pregnancy and rearing among young people and improve fertility health, thus improving the quality of the entire population in the long run.^[9] The popularization of fertility science in China is very limited that many people become parents in a hurry without the opportunity and time, or even the awareness, to study proper knowledge, which is a great hidden danger in the education of the next generation.

The lack of knowledge and learning within is the cause of parenting anxiety and marriage anxiety, not just out of financial pressure. In a situation of uneven and polarized information, schooling has the advantage of systematically imparting to students the

knowledge they need in the most scientific and objective way, helping them to shape their own ability to think, examine and judge, so as to make better decisions for their own future lives.

2.1.4 Mental health education

At a time of rapid change and growth in personal cognitive development, the establishment of mental health courses in university will not only popularize the importance of mental health for young people, but also enhance their awareness of mental health care and psychological crisis prevention, reduce the prejudice towards psychological education and counseling of the younger generation, understand their own development, cultivate continuous self-improvement after graduation and improve their psychological quality.^[10]

Aiming at the university student group, the Basic Requirements for Mental Health Courses for Students in Colleges and Universities lists seven types of psychological problems they are likely to encounter.

- (1) Career planning and capacity development during university
- (2) Psychology of learning
- (3) Emotion management
- (4) Interpersonal communication
- (5) Sex psychology and romantic psychology.
- (6) Stress management and frustration coping
- (7) Life education and psychological crisis coping.

The problems of anxiety and mental illness in Chinese have called for earlier intervention of professional psychological education in universities, and the establishment of mental health courses in universities can break the backward perceptions of mental problems and prepare to reduce the psychological problems of the next generation of young people.^[11]

2.2 The importance of stage of higher education

2.2.1 Physical and psychological development needs and enters the mature stage

Since the marriage ban for college students has been lifted in 2013, Du Huiping, member of the CPPCC National Committee and vice president of Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, once said: “the group of college students is a very special identity. They are both students and adults. They need to correctly handle the relationship between love, marriage, family and studies, and also need to play the role of students and adults.” If we can set up marriage and family education courses in universities and set up certain credits to increase the attractiveness of the discipline, family marriage education courses can become a compulsory course for most students.^[12]

From the perspective of physical development, college students are in the stage of transition from adolescence to adulthood, and sexually mature young men and women begin to be curious about their bodies. At this time, it is necessary to strengthen education to enable young people to learn how to protect themselves. As for the perspective of psychological development, due to the long-term examination-oriented education in China, students’ ability of autonomous learning is poor. Therefore, when they start to learn in colleges and universities without the supervision by teachers, there will be some confusion, annoyance caused by love problems, conflicts with their original families, and others.^[13]

2.2.2. Concentrated group of the educated

Setting up family education courses in colleges and universities is the last chance of concentrated time for young people to learn before leaving the campus. After graduation, students will be employed by different companies at various areas, and it will be difficult for them to have the opportunity to carry out popular science education for them.

Therefore, the college period is a stage of collective education. Compared with the app or web-based courses that people use for family education and learning after entering the society, offering family education courses in colleges and universities is a way to achieve the best teaching effect.

2.2.3 Mature education conditions

Recently, the website of the Ministry of Education released a “Proposal on Setting up Family Education Majors in Relevant Colleges and Universities to Train Professionals for the Construction of a Family Education Guidance Service System Covering Urban and Rural Areas”. According to the proposal, in recent years, the Ministry of Education has actively promoted colleges and universities to strengthen the construction of family education-related majors and courses, so as to improve the quality of personnel training. China has realized the importance of improving the educational curriculum in schools, and thereby it is necessary to train more professional teachers to promote the program.

China will continue to support normal universities and other qualified universities to set up family education-related majors in accordance with the law, support colleges and universities to strengthen the construction of courses related to family education, and promote the sharing of high-quality curriculum resources. to provide a reserve of professionals for the construction of a guidance system for family education covering urban and rural areas.

2.2.4 Limited conditions for social learning

In China, the new generation of parents are very anxious. They spend a lot of money to send their children to receive education from top schools, participate in competitions, and achieve excellent grades. The university offers the course of “Family Pedagogy” to educate college students, enabling these potential parents in the future to have access to these extremely important knowledge and skills in their future life as soon as possible, and have the consciousness of learning pedagogy in advance. At the same time, students can realize the importance of pedagogy for self-development and growth, such as the importance of mental health, relationship, communication skills and others. When they enter the society in the future, they will have a stronger ability to identify information, and will not be kidnapped by anxiety, creating a more scientific and happier growing environment for themselves and their families and children.

3. Conclusion

Over the past 70 years since the founding of People's Republic of China, the cause of education and the historical and economic process have undergone enormous changes. Since the reform and opening up, China has always regarded the development of education as the core task. China has established the largest education system in the world, but the road of education reform is still very long and full of challenges.

In today's Chinese society, low fertility rate, national anxiety and various kinds of social contradictions have attracted the attention of the country. The author believes that by promoting the establishment of family education courses in colleges and universities and setting up multi-dimensional, high-quality and appropriate curriculum arrangements, the long-term negative cycle in Chinese education and culture can be broken, helping future young people to supplement the required courses of life in the high-quality learning environment on campus, assisting young people in receiving marriage education, sex education, childbearing education and mental health education scientifically, improving the mental health level of the younger generation, expanding physical fertility knowledge, and increasing the national quality.

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