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Review of the Role of Psychological Curriculum in Vocational and Technical Education in China

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Abstract

The integration of psychological education in China's vocational and technical education (VTE) schools is increasingly recognized for its role in promoting students' personal and professional growth. This review synthesizes recent research to evaluate the integration of psychological education in VTE schools and its benefits, outcomes, and challenges. A psychological curriculum is found to enhance both students' personal and professional development. However, key findings also highlight the inconsistency in the implementation of psychological education among VTE schools and the insufficiency in updating the curriculum to address students' changes due to the transformation in technology and economy. Proposing a mixed-methods approach, the study employs stratified random sampling to survey 500 VTE students and purposive sampling to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 30 students. Quantitative data analysis provides insights into students' experiences with psychological education, while qualitative findings offer a deeper understanding of how psychological curricula influence their academic and career development. This research contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the need for a more structured, evidence-based psychological curriculum in VTE institutions.

Keywords: Psychological Education, Vocational and Technical Education (VTE), China, Career Readiness, Curriculum Integration

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

In recent years, vocational and technical education (VTE) in China has experienced significant growth, driven by the Chinese government's prioritization of this educational sector. A series of policies and initiatives have been introduced to accelerate its development (Xu et al., 2021). VTE, particularly at the higher education level, has become a central force in expanding access to higher education and has been a key focus in China's cross-century higher education reform (Stern & Patti, 2023). Various educational institutions—ranging from vocational high schools to adult education centers—play a role in delivering VTE. These institutions include diverse types, such as Peasant Colleges, Administrative Colleges, and Distance Education Colleges, demonstrating the broad scope of VTE across China. Recent statistics indicate that over two million individuals are currently enrolled in vocational institutions across the country (Liu et al., 2023).

The expansion of VTE has been accompanied by a strong focus on localism and vocationalism, principles that are evident in the program structures and curricula. The dynamic relationship between VTE programs and local communities is a key feature of this system. Vocational training schools, in particular, maintain close ties with employers, allowing them to adapt to changing labor market demands (Zhao & Zhou, 2020). Vocational higher education is of great importance for multiple reasons. It provides essential infrastructure and services, such as technological innovation, equipment maintenance, and hospitality, through the training of skilled and knowledgeable professionals. VTE integrates both intrinsic and developed values associated with an individual's occupation, enabling people to become proficient in their respective trades. As a result, VTE is often linked to economic growth and competitiveness. Countries with robust VTE systems are seen as more successful in global competition (Hu & Lin, 2022).

In China, the need for a skilled workforce remains urgent. Despite efforts to reform and develop the VTE system, there is still a significant gap in skilled labor. Of the 270 million workers in the country, only 87 million, or 32%, are considered well-

qualified with the necessary skill sets (Wang & Fan, 2021). To address this shortage, China's higher VTE system must continue to evolve, focusing on reforms in areas such as recruitment, teaching methods, and technical training. The shift from knowledge-based education to ability-based education has introduced innovative models, such as simulation companies, to better prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce (Li et al., 2023). While the importance of VTE in equipping individuals with technical skills is widely recognized, the role of psychological education in enhancing students' personal and professional development has received growing attention. Psychological education or a psychological curriculum refers to structured educational programs designed to enhance students' psychological well-being, emotional resilience, and socio-emotional competencies. These programs aim to support students' personal development, career readiness, and adaptability in the rapidly evolving labor market.

Educational psychology is strategically embedded into the general education, career readiness, and teacher training subjects within China's VTE curriculum. Given the increasing recognition of mental health as a vital component of student success, psychological curricula in VTE institutions integrate mental health education, social-emotional learning (SEL), and career development programs (Li & Zhang, 2022). Students encounter psychological principles from their first year through courses such as mental health education, moral education, and ideological-political education, progressing to applied psychology in the career development and employment guidance course by their final year. This integration ensures that students develop not only technical expertise but also the psychological resilience and adaptability necessary for professional success. These curricula emphasize self-awareness, emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and stress management, aligning with China's broader educational reforms aimed at holistic student development (Wang et al., 2021).

Additionally, psychological counseling services are increasingly embedded in VTE schools to support students in managing academic pressures, personal challenges, and workplace transitions (Chen & Huang, 2023). Government policies, such as the National Plan for Mental Health Work (2015–2020), highlight the importance of integrating psychological well-being into education, particularly in vocational training settings where students often face high levels of career uncertainty and social

stigmatization (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). By addressing both psychological and professional readiness, psychological education in China's VTE schools contributes to students' long-term success in an evolving labor market.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite governmental efforts, the integration of psychological curricula in VTE institutions remains inconsistent, with many programs lacking comprehensive mental health education components. A national survey found that less than 40% of vocational institutions have dedicated psychological courses integrated into their curriculum (Zhang & Huang, 2023). Many programs rely on one-time workshops rather than structured psychological education, leading to gaps in long-term student well-being. Besides, many vocational schools lack trained mental health educators, making psychological education inconsistent across institutions (Guo et al., 2022). Without a standardized framework, psychological curricula remain fragmented and underdeveloped, impacting students' emotional resilience. An experiment found that psychological education is not mandatory in all VTE institutions, and where present, it is often superficial, limiting its impact on students' career adaptability and stress management (Wang, 2021). This inconsistency poses challenges in adequately preparing students for the psychological demands of both their academic and future professional lives.

Moreover, the profile of VTE students has evolved in recent years due to technological advancements and economic shifts in education and employment prospects. Research suggests that today's VTE students exhibit higher levels of anxiety, reduced attention spans, and different career aspirations compared to those from previous cohorts (Zhang & Huang, 2023). However, psychological curricula in vocational and technical education (VTE) have not fully adapted to the changes, leading to misalignment between student needs and institutional practices. As Industry 4.0 and artificial intelligence (AI) revolutionize the job market, vocational students face increased pressure to develop digital competencies, problem-solving skills, and adaptability (Chen & Xu, 2023).

1.3 Research Gap

While there is a growing body of literature on mental health education in general educational settings, research specifically focusing on the implementation and effectiveness of psychological curricula within China's VTE institutions remains limited (Guo et al., 2022; Zhang & Huang, 2023). Studies have explored the application of positive psychology in secondary vocational schools, emphasizing the need for tailored mental health education strategies (Wang, 2021). However, empirical evidence assessing the impact of psychological curricula on VTE students' mental health outcomes, resilience, and career readiness is scarce (Chen & Xu, 2023). Although the benefits of psychological education in VTE are widely recognized, there remain notable research gaps, particularly regarding its long-term impacts (Stern & Patti, 2023). Existing studies primarily focus on its short-term outcomes, such as stress reduction and resilience enhancement, while less is known about its enduring effects on career development and sustained mental health (Liu et al., 2023). Additionally, VTE students face unique challenges, such as high levels of career uncertainty, social stigmatization, and a lack of psychological support within their institutions (Sun & Zhao, 2021; Yang & Li, 2023). Compared to their counterparts in academic universities, VTE students often exhibit higher anxiety regarding employment stability and self-efficacy issues due to societal perceptions of vocational education (Liu et al., 2023). There is a lack of longitudinal studies comparing the psychological resilience, learning styles, and career motivations of VTE students from previous years to those of today (Wang & Liu, 2022). Existing research mostly focuses on general education students, overlooking the unique characteristics of vocational learners.

Moreover, many VTE institutions in China still emphasize traditional psychological education approaches that do not fully prepare students for the mental and emotional challenges associated with automation and digitalization (Wang et al., 2022). The economic shifts brought by globalization and post-pandemic recovery efforts have further exacerbated students' career uncertainty and stress, but psychological curricula have not been sufficiently updated to address these emerging concerns (Liu et al., 2023; Sun & Zhao, 2021). Addressing these research gaps are crucial for developing effective, evidence-based psychological curricula that cater to the specific needs of VTE students

in China and equip them with the emotional resilience required for their professional and personal growth (Ministry of Education of China, 2023).

The primary objective of this research is to explore the integration of psychological curricula within VTE schools in China, focusing on how these curricula have failed to adapt to contemporary challenges such as technological advancements and economic shifts. Specifically, the study aims to assess how the unique characteristics of vocational learners, such as their heightened career uncertainty and social stigmatization, are overlooked in the current psychological education framework. By examining the existing psychological curricula gaps, this research seeks to provide insights into the necessity of updating curricula to address the evolving needs of VTE students. The expected outcome is to develop recommendations for a comprehensive, modernized psychological curriculum that considers both the psychological well-being and career preparedness of vocational students, ensuring that they are equipped with the emotional resilience and adaptability necessary for their professional futures. This updated curriculum will better support VTE students in navigating the demands of an increasingly complex and competitive job market.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Integration of Psychological Education in VTE Curricula

Recent reforms in China's vocational and technical education (VTE) have emphasized integrating psychological education into the curriculum, aiming to enhance students' career success and personal well-being (Stern & Patti, 2023). The integration of psychological education into general education courses focuses on moral education, career development, and mental health awareness. The key courses include mental health education, moral education, ideological-political education, and career development and employment guidance. Mental health education is typically offered in the first year as part of general education courses. It covers topics such as stress management, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and resilience. It introduces students to fundamental psychological concepts related to mental well-being and coping strategies. In addition,

moral education and ideological-political education are introduced as compulsory subjects throughout the first and second years of study.

Besides integrating psychological principles related to values, ethics, personal development, and social responsibility, it also addresses identity formation and motivation in a professional context, pedagogy, and educational psychology. In the final year, before students enter the workforce, students have to enrol in the course, career development and employment guidance. It includes psychological theories of career choice, motivation, adaptability, and emotional intelligence in the workplace. It aims to help students develop confidence, communication skills, and professional identity (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Some schools offer dedicated courses on self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal communication, equipping students with essential psychological skills for both personal growth and professional success (Li & Zhang, 2022). These courses are designed to address common psychological challenges among VTE students, such as low self-esteem, career anxiety, and workplace adaptation difficulties (Wang et al., 2021). These reforms reflect an increasing focus on mental health, especially regarding its role in preparing students to adapt to increasingly complex professional environments. Research shows that psychological education can significantly improve students' coping abilities, interpersonal skills, and adaptability, enabling them to face challenges and uncertainties in their careers more effectively (Merlin & Soubramanian, 2024). Through psychological courses, students not only learn stress management but also enhance skills in communication and collaboration, helping them to be more confident and flexible in teamwork and social interactions.

Furthermore, students in VTE often experience pressure due to shifts in the job market and high societal expectations, making psychological support crucial in this context. Liu et al. (2023) found that psychological courses help students manage these mental burdens effectively, maintaining emotional balance throughout their studies. Through psychological support courses, students learn to adjust their mindset, solve personal challenges, and strengthen their adaptability. This not only improves their academic performance but also prepares them psychologically for challenges in their future careers. The inclusion of these psychological courses has made VTE more

comprehensive and human-centered. This shift has positively impacted the growth of vocational students, offering them more well-rounded development opportunities and equipping them with the resilience needed to thrive in diverse work environments and pursue long-term career growth.

Furthermore, SEL programs are embedded in VTE curricula to develop students' self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making skills (Huang et al., 2022). Through interactive workshops, role-playing exercises, and mentorship initiatives, students enhance their teamwork, leadership, and emotional resilience, which are critical for workplace integration. These programs are often linked to career counseling services, where students receive guidance on job readiness, workplace adaptability, and stress management in professional settings (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Most VTE institutions operate psychological counseling centers, staffed by trained professionals who provide individual counseling, group therapy, and crisis intervention. These services help students manage stress, emotional distress, and personal conflicts, which are particularly relevant given the pressures of vocational training and job market uncertainty (Chen & Huang, 2023). In addition, psychological health screenings are increasingly being conducted to identify at-risk students and provide timely interventions (Zhao & Liu, 2020).

2.2 Personal Development Outcomes

Research indicates that integrating psychological education into VTE brings multiple benefits for personal development, especially in fostering students' self-awareness, confidence, and mental well-being. Smith et al. (2020) found that students who participated in psychology courses reported significant improvements in self-awareness and confidence, abilities essential for both academic achievement and social success. With enhanced self-awareness, students gain a clearer understanding of their strengths and interests, enabling them to make more informed career choices (Johnson et al., 2021). This skill not only directly aids their career planning but also increases their motivation and sense of accomplishment during their studies. In addition, psychology courses provide students with effective tools for managing stress and alleviating anxiety, leading

to better mental health outcomes (Li & Gao, 2019). These tools are particularly valuable in helping VTE students cope with the academic demands and societal pressures unique to their field, as many students face stress and anxiety concerning career uncertainties and social expectations. Through psychological courses, students learn strategies to recognize and handle these emotions, such as emotion regulation techniques, positive thinking, and self-encouragement, all of which support their mental well-being.

Beyond formal instruction, many VTE institutions promote mental health awareness through extracurricular activities, including student-led mental health clubs, psychological well-being campaigns, and peer counseling initiatives (Wang et al., 2021). These initiatives foster a supportive campus culture where students feel encouraged to discuss psychological concerns openly and seek professional assistance when necessary. Overall, the inclusion of psychological education in VTE not only fosters well-rounded personal development but also contributes to students' long-term mental health. These courses help students build resilience and adaptability, equipping them to confidently face challenges in their future careers. This shift holds significant practical value for enhancing VTE as a whole, providing students with a strong psychological foundation for career success.

2.3 Professional Development and Employability

One major advantage of integrating psychological education into VTE is its significant contribution to enhancing students' employability and fostering personal development. By cultivating core workplace skills such as communication, problem-solving, and adaptability, psychological education equips students to navigate the demands of today's competitive labor market with confidence and composure (Heckman & Kautz, 2021). Furthermore, it enables students to manage interpersonal relationships and adapt to dynamic work environments effectively.

A key component of this education is self-exploration, which helps students identify their strengths and interests, crucial for personal and career development. Increased self-awareness allows students to align their career aspirations with their

inherent capabilities, resulting in more fulfilling and meaningful career choices (Stern & Patti, 2023). Reflective exercises, such as journaling and peer feedback, provide valuable insights into students' values, motivations, and potential career paths. By fostering a deeper understanding of their personal identities, psychological education not only enhances job satisfaction but also empowers students to pursue careers that resonate with their authentic selves, thus contributing to both their professional success and overall well-being.

Heckman and Kautz (2021) emphasize that psychological courses play a pivotal role in equipping students with essential emotional management and interpersonal relationship skills. These courses enhance effective communication and conflict resolution abilities, making students more competitive in team collaboration. Similarly, Merlin and Soubramanian (2024) found that students who complete psychological courses demonstrate higher levels of adaptability and interpersonal skills, which are critical for initiating and sustaining successful careers. By strengthening these soft skills, students are better prepared to tackle job tasks and adapt to the rapidly evolving demands of the professional world (Law & Jaafar, 2024). A focus on emotional regulation within psychological curricula further enhances students' ability to manage stress and build resilience against academic and occupational challenges. Emotional intelligence training enables students to recognize, articulate, and regulate their emotions, allowing them to respond to stressful situations with composure (Heckman & Kautz, 2021). Moreover, skills such as empathy and active listening improve their capacity to navigate interpersonal conflicts and thrive in diverse, collaborative environments (De Vries & Reeves, 2019). By fostering resilience, these courses prepare students to view setbacks as opportunities for growth, equipping them to approach challenges with a problem-solving mindset and a positive outlook (Luthans et al., 2021), ultimately enhancing their readiness for the complexities of the modern workplace.

Moreover, the integration of psychological education helps foster a proactive learning mindset, encouraging students to embrace new knowledge and skills. This openness and enthusiasm for learning are essential qualities in the workplace, especially as technology evolves rapidly and job demands diversify (Smith et al., 2020). Research indicates that students who possess such abilities are not only more competitive in the

job market but can also achieve sustained progress throughout their careers, as they can flexibly respond to new challenges and continuously improve themselves (Li & Gao, 2019). Psychological courses guide students in self-reflection and goal setting, motivating them to remain proactive in their learning journey and become self-driven learners. These skills not only help students achieve better academic outcomes but also provide a solid foundation for their future career growth (Johnson et al., 2021).

2.4 Career Decision-Making and Job Performance

Psychological education plays a crucial role in career decision-making and job performance by helping students better understand their strengths and preferences, which fosters informed and fulfilling career choices. Recent studies emphasize that psychological capital, including self-esteem and self-efficacy, significantly enhances students' ability to make confident career decisions. For instance, Johnson et al. (2021) found that courses focused on psychological education equip students with tools to align career choices with personal aspirations, leading to greater occupational satisfaction.

Psychological education equips students with decision-making frameworks and enhances their adaptability, ensuring they are better prepared for the job market. This preparedness includes a stronger capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving, which is essential in rapidly evolving professional landscapes (OECD, 2021). Courses often incorporate real-world scenarios and simulations, allowing students to practice employing these decision-making skills in contexts that mirror actual workplace challenges (Davidson et al., 2020). Furthermore, psychological education encourages a mindset of lifelong learning, motivating students to continuously seek out new skills and knowledge even after formal education has concluded (European Commission, 2022). By instilling confidence in their capabilities, students are more likely to pursue internships and job opportunities that may initially seem outside their comfort zone, fostering both personal and professional growth (Heckman & Kautz, 2021).

Moreover, psychological flourishing—a combination of well-being, optimism, and positive self-regard—acts as a mediating factor in reducing career decision-making

difficulties. Pignault et al. (2023) highlighted that students with high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy are less likely to face career-related uncertainties, emphasizing the importance of developing these traits through education. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2024) demonstrated that social support and psychological capital interact to improve career decision-making self-efficacy, ultimately reducing the challenges associated with career planning.

2.5 Mental Health and Well-Being

The role of psychological courses in promoting mental health and well-being has been extensively researched and validated. Heckman and Kautz (2021) found that students who participated in psychological education reported significantly lower levels of stress and anxiety compared to those who did not engage in such courses. Psychological education equips students with coping mechanisms to manage academic and personal pressures, thereby fostering a supportive learning environment (Liu et al., 2023). Moreover, psychological courses enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation, positively impacting students' overall academic outcomes. Likewise, Zhou et al. (2024) highlighted that psychological education improves students' psychological capital, including self-esteem and self-efficacy, which are critical for addressing academic and personal challenges. Additionally, psychological courses increase students' sense of social support, enabling them to maintain mental balance when facing feelings of isolation or academic stress (Pignault et al., 2023).

3.0 Methodology

To address the research objectives, this study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the integration and effectiveness of psychological curricula in Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) schools in China. This approach is chosen because it allows for both the exploration of in-depth, qualitative insights and the measurement of broader trends regarding implementing psychological education in VTE

settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The population for this study consists of students enrolled in Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) institutions in China. These students are from various disciplines, including engineering, business, healthcare, and information technology. The study focuses on students who have had some exposure to psychological education courses or mental health-related programs as part of their curriculum.

The quantitative phase will involve administering a structured survey to VTE students across a representative sample of institutions in China. The survey will measure key variables such as students' perceived mental health status, the impact of existing psychological curricula, and the alignment of these curricula with their academic and career readiness needs. This method enables collecting large-scale data to identify patterns and gaps in the curriculum from the students' perspective. Stratified random sampling will be used to ensure representation across different regions (urban and rural areas), institution types (public and private VTE institutions), and academic disciplines. This method helps minimize selection bias and ensures the findings are generalizable to a broader student population (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A total of 500 VTE students from at least 10 institutions across different provinces in China will be surveyed. This sample size allows for robust statistical analysis and ensures adequate representation of students with diverse educational experiences. The survey data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify students' perception of the current psychological curriculum, academic, mental well-being, and career preparedness. Regression analysis will be conducted to examine the impact of the curriculum features on students' mental health status, academic and career readiness.

Furthermore, the qualitative component will consist of semi-structured interviews with VTE students. Interviews are an effective method for exploring complex psychological issues and obtaining in-depth perspectives from students. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of qualitative data in understanding the context-specific challenges faced by VTE students, especially in relation to mental health (Liu et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). The interviews will provide rich, detailed insights into the specific psychological needs of VTE students, such as career uncertainty and social stigmatization, and how the current curricula address or neglect these needs. These

interviews will explore students' evolving perspectives on the role of psychological education in their personal development, career decision-making, employability, and overall well-being.

A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to select students who have participated in psychological education courses at vocational institutions in China. A total of 15 participants will be recruited from diverse disciplines, ensuring a comprehensive representation of VTE students' experiences and trajectories. This approach enables a rich exploration of individual experiences across different student profiles (Wang & Li, 2021). Additionally, 3 focus groups of 5 students will be conducted to facilitate discussions among peers, providing a collaborative perspective on the learning outcomes and challenges associated with psychological courses (Huang & Yang, 2021). This study will adhere to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participants' confidentiality, informed consent, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Ethical approval will be sought from the relevant institutional review board. Participants will be assured that their responses will be anonymized and used solely for research purposes. Data from interviews and focus groups will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This method allows for identifying patterns, themes, and categories within qualitative data and enables an in-depth exploration of how psychological education shapes students' personal development, mental health, and career paths (Huang et al., 2022). The iterative coding process will reveal emerging themes over time, providing insights into both the immediate and long-term benefits of psychological education.

4.0 Conclusion

The integration of psychological curricula in China's Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) institutions remains a critical yet underexplored area. Despite growing recognition of the importance of psychological education in enhancing students' mental well-being and career readiness, existing curricula have not been sufficiently updated to address the evolving challenges posed by technological advancements and economic shifts. Furthermore, the unique psychological needs of vocational learners, including

career uncertainty and social stigmatization, are often overlooked in curriculum design. This study highlights the inconsistencies in implementing psychological education across VTE institutions and underscores the need for a more structured and evidence-based approach. By examining student experiences and perceptions through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the findings provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of current psychological curricula and areas for improvement. The research aims to contribute to policy recommendations that promote a more inclusive and responsive psychological education framework in VTE settings. Ultimately, addressing these gaps will not only enhance students' academic and professional preparedness but also foster their overall psychological resilience. Future research should continue to explore the long-term impact of psychological education on VTE students' career development and well-being, ensuring that psychological curricula evolve in tandem with the changing demands of the vocational education landscape.

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