

Uncovering 'Mental Subhealth': Insights from Boya Middle School on Adolescents' Need for Connection and Self-Expression in China's Low-Resource Regions

Polly Ruiying Xu (ICI Fellow)
Xuanxuan Huang (Research Partner)

Introduction

In recent years, China has witnessed a significant increase in mental health disorders among adolescents, a concern that has sparked public debate and research. Studies show that mental disorders, including anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, are affecting Chinese children at an increasingly young age. According to a 2021 survey by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, 17.5% of Chinese children aged 6-16 suffer from some type of mental disorder (Li et al., 2021), with cases of severe distress, such as suicides, drawing national attention (Ni, 2023).

While these statistics are alarming, relying solely on a macro-level overview may abstract the students into mere data, highlighting the need for micro-level insights to provide a more nuanced understanding. This study seeks to contextualize the rise in mental health concerns among Chinese adolescent students by delving into their everyday school experiences, offering a deeper look at how they navigate an apparent epidemic of mental health deterioration. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of students' perspectives, exploring their motivations, needs, and aspirations for personal growth. By uncovering these situated insights, the study seeks to foster greater empathy among researchers and practitioners, suggesting pathways for developing programs that truly resonate with and address the specific needs of students from similar backgrounds.

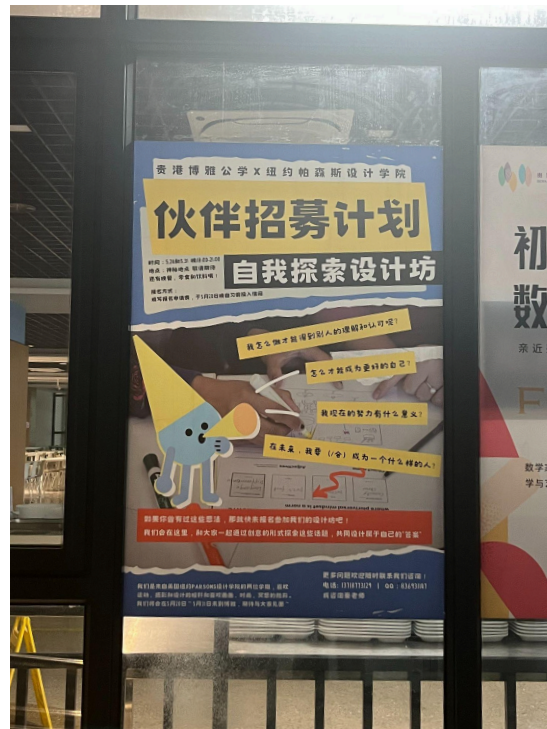
Research Design

To contextualize the growing mental health challenges among adolescents in China, it is crucial to recognize that students from different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds experience them in distinct ways. For example, students in elite public schools in metropolitan areas like Beijing and Shanghai may deal with heightened anxiety, driven by a schedule packed with extracurricular training ranging from robotics and piano lessons to Olympiad mathematics and Go, coupled with intense pressure from parents to excel in an increasingly competitive environment. In contrast, students in regular or vocational schools in remote counties face different challenges, including limited access to educational and recreational resources,

compounded by a lack of attention and support from the education system, which tends to concentrate resources on only a few top-performing students in selected key schools.

This study focuses on a two-week field research project conducted at Boya Middle School in Guigang, a fifth-tier city in Guangxi Province, which ranks third-lowest in terms of GDP per capita among all provinces in China as of 2023 (China NBS, 2024). Access to high-quality educational resources in this region is relatively limited. As of 2024, low-resource cities in the fourth to fifth tiers constitute 218 of the 337 prefecture-level cities in China (The Rising Lab, 2024), making this context representative of a broader trend across the country.

Boya Middle School, a private institution that serves students from relatively affluent families within the local community, had been selected as the field site due to its advantage in accessibility. However, its students still experience pressures typical of adolescents in low-resource, small cities, such as fierce competition for limited opportunities and a rigid, highly regimented school schedule. With school hours running from 6 AM to 10 PM on weekdays, these boarding students spend the majority of their time in class or supervised self-study sessions, leaving little room for personal pursuits or recreational activities.



Workshop recruitment poster on campus

To investigate the experiences of these students, the research team employed a mixed-methods approach that combined practice-based research, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, alongside secondary data collection. A core component of the practice-based

methodology involved facilitating two weekly workshops with 24 students from the 7th and 8th Grades. Prior to the workshops, the team conducted initial interviews with the school principal, the school psychology counselor, and a small group of students. These conversations provided valuable insights into the school’s cultural and educational dynamics, which informed the design of the self-discovery workshops.

The workshops included designed activities such as collage-making on self-identity and ideal future, impromptu theatrical exercises exploring various emotions, flying paper planes written with personal worries, and creating individual future personas. To capture a comprehensive range of student experiences, the research team also designed and distributed registration and feedback forms to gather additional qualitative data. The practice-based methodology aimed to create a safe, supportive space for students to express themselves while simultaneously engaging in participatory, student-centered activities. This approach facilitated the collection of authentic qualitative data— in the form of both the processes and the artifacts the students produced.



Students making collages on their self-identities and ideal futures

Findings

I. Contextualizing the Prevailing Condition of “Mental Subhealth”

During an initial conversation with the principal of Boya Middle School, he commented that “60% of the students have some mental problems,” which he followed with the remark that the school was already performing above average in this regard. As such, the research team entered the field holding a certain suspension from hearing such an unexpected estimate.

Rather than encountering students visibly suffering from severe anxiety or depression as portrayed in the media, the research team observed that most students appeared to behave like

average middle school students, experiencing the typical ups and downs of adolescence. However, teachers from each grade, including the psychology teacher, expressed concern about the prevalence of mental health incidents among students, creating the impression of a ghost haunting the place – everyone talks about it yet it appears to be invisible.

1) Boredom and Reduced Vigor

When reviewing the workshop registration forms completed by the students, the team noted that many students mentioned feeling “bored” or “annoyed” as one of their primary reasons for joining. Initially dismissed as commonplace complaints, these sentiments repeatedly appeared in the students’ responses during workshop activities like “flying paper planes of worries” and in subsequent in-depth interviews with a few students, signaling a pervasive condition of “mental subhealth” among the students. This state was characterized by reduced vigor, a sense of monotony, and a general lack of engagement with daily life.

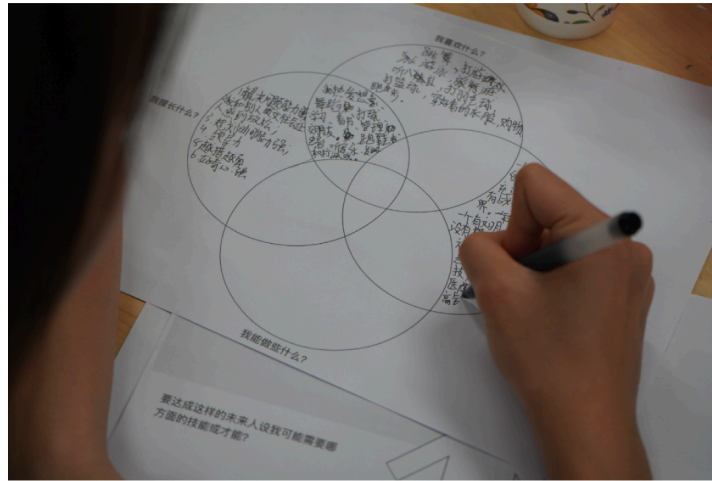


Students flying off paper planes written with their worries

Students often described spending weekends lying in bed and doomscrolling for hours, a recurring theme in interviews. This behavior, however, should not be mistaken for fatigue or a simple lack of ambition as it reflects a deeper underlying factor. Indeed, besides the highly regimented schedule and heavy workload, another limitation particular to low-resource regions was the lack of cultural and recreational resources. The limited cultural and recreational resources in Guigang further exacerbated the problem, restricting students’ only one-and-half-day weekly leisure time options to visiting one of the city’s two shopping malls or engaging in passive digital entertainment. While mobile games and social media offered immediate relief, their long-term impact on students’ well-being and personal development remained uncertain.

2) Relatively Negative Self-Perception

Another element of the students' subhealth state was their relatively negative self-perception. During the "Design My Future" activity, students were guided to reflect successively on their passions, strengths, causes they care about in the world, and the immediate action they could take before filling out a designed worksheet. Nevertheless, some students listed traits that are commonly deemed as undesirable in the "What Am I Good at" section, such as "procrastination", "self-judgment", "bullshitting", and "pretending", while two students left the section blank entirely.



Students filling out the "Design My Future" worksheets

This phenomenon was corroborated by the school's psychology teacher Mr. Dai, who mentioned during preliminary interviews that many Boya students struggled to identify their strengths. According to Mr. Dai, in one exercise during his class, students were asked to name three personal strengths, but most found the task difficult - particularly the girls. Their understanding of strengths seemed narrowly confined to areas where they could outperform their peers, rather than encompassing broader personal qualities or values.

Similarly, during post-workshop interviews, when asked about aspects of their lives they wished to change, rather than attributing these challenges to external factors, students tended to focus on areas where they felt they fell short of their own expectations, particularly with regard to academic performance. For example, one student admitted, "I've become too lazy—it's hard for me to stay concentrated," while another expressed that he wanted to improve his "executive capacity" for studying.

II. Unveiling Students' Desires for Connection and Self-Expression

While the psychological challenges faced by students in Boya Middle School were evident, understanding their intrinsic motivations and unmet needs required careful exploration. Many students expressed a profound sense of uncertainty about their futures, lacking a clear sense of

direction or purpose. Few students could grasp immediately apparent motivations, presenting a challenge in identifying specific, actionable objectives beyond general desires for academic success, reduced academic pressure, and increased leisure time. These broader aspirations, while entirely reasonable, are difficult to address through micro-level interventions.

However, the workshops and interviews revealed a more nuanced and deeply felt need: the students' yearning for understanding and self-expression. Several participants shared feelings of loneliness and a desire to be truly heard, but also hesitated or feared to express themselves openly. A recurring theme among the students was a longing to be truly seen and understood by others, as captured in responses that emerged during the workshop activities, such as "Mum doesn't understand me" ("mum不理解") and "I wish others don't see me as obedient" ("希望大家不要觉得我很懂事"). Others articulated their struggle with self-expression, wanting to have "the courage to express myself" ("敢于表达的勇气").



Students improvising plays that explore different emotions

This reluctance to authentically self-express appears to stem from a combination of internal and external pressures. Some students described feeling "smoothed out" ("被磨平") due to the social pressure of conformity, while others feared judgments, especially from peers, such as being labeled as "pretentious" ("装") or being gossiped about behind their back ("怕背后被人蛐蛐"). Such social distrust caused the students to avoid displaying vulnerabilities in the school setting, where they spend five to six days of their week full-time. Additional barriers included frequent departure of trusted teachers due to the high turnover rate common to private schools as well as a resulting sense of loneliness.

These findings point to a critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of student needs in the current education system: the desire for trusted relationships and a safe space for self-expression. Addressing these needs requires fostering an opportunity and environment where students feel

seen, supported, understood, and empowered to articulate their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or rejection.

Next Steps

Near the end of an hour-long follow-up interview with a 7th Grade student, her comment revealed the profound potential self-expression through storytelling has in empowering and shifting the narrator's perspective:

“Actually, having this chat makes me feel that my whole life isn't so bland and boring after all. Because just now I've been recounting and retelling my story, all of a sudden I realize that my life is so interesting.” (“其实这么一聊就感觉自己一整个生活也并不是那么平淡无味的。因为刚刚我一直都在叙述我的事情，重新叙述我的事情，突然觉得自己的生活这么有趣。”)



Students co-creating their ideal environment for relaxation

Building on this foundation, the team intends to explore creative storytelling practices as a potential method to encourage the students to share their stories and feelings with greater ease and, through this process, build trusted connections and attain meaningful perspective transformation. As a next step, the team will continue to explore and address questions with a focus on the following areas:

1) **Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces**

How might we create a safe, encouraging, and inclusive environment, where the students feel supported to express themselves openly and authentically? Such spaces provide the emotional safety and encouragement necessary for meaningful engagement in the storytelling process.

2) Engaging Students with Creative Methods

How might we leverage creative approaches to engage students in a way that feels both enjoyable and effective? The aim is to inspire their active participation without adding to their already heavy academic burden, while also offering them accessible and empowering avenues to express themselves and discover their unique voices.

3) Designing Experience for Long-Term Impact

How might we guide the storytelling experience to foster a lasting impact on the students? With designed guidance, the storytelling experience may not only help students make sense of their current experiences but also inspire shifts in their understanding of themselves and their circumstances over time.

Appreciation for India-China Institute's Support

The generous support from the India-China Institute was instrumental in shaping the field research. Besides supporting basic travel expenses, ICI's funding enabled the implementation of the practice-based research approach, including transforming the classroom into a welcoming and engaging space through thoughtful decorations and preparing materials and refreshments for workshop activities.



Decorated classroom for holding workshops

By assuming the roles of workshop facilitators, the team was able to quickly build rapport with the students, creating a space where they felt comfortable sharing authentic perspectives often withheld from adults in their usual environments. Thanks to ICI's support, this approach significantly enhanced the team's understanding of the students' lived experience, strengthening the foundation of the research.

References

- China National Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Annual GDP Per Capita by Province*. National Bureau of Statistics of China. <https://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103>
- Li, F., Cui, Y., Li, Y., Guo, L., Ke, X., Liu, J., Luo, X., Zheng, Y., & Leckman, J. F. (2021). Prevalence of mental disorders in school children and adolescents in China: diagnostic data from detailed clinical assessments of 17,524 individuals. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13445>
- Ni, D. (2023, May 25). *China Is Getting Seriously Worried About Student Anxiety*. Sixth Tone. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1012956>
- The Rising Lab. (2024, May 30). *2024 New First-Tier City Attractiveness Ranking Releases: Wuxi Returns, Kunming Falls Out Again - Knowledge City Data Platform*. Data Yicai. <https://www.datayicai.com/report/detail/1000009>