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REVIEW ARTICLE

A Brief Exploration on the Role of Educational Psychotherapists in the 21st Century China

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ABSTRACT

This short article provides an introduction to educational psychotherapists in China and the importance of their professional role. It traces the early developments of educational psychotherapy founded by Irene Caspari during the 1960s in the United Kingdom, and also compares the field with educational therapy which took its roots in the United States in the 1970s. Besides, the article has attempted to explore the historical development of educational psychotherapy in China during the early years of the 21st century AD until the current situation. In addition, this article also touches briefly how this professional group provides intervention for those who need their service

Keywords: Caspari Foundation, Educational psychotherapy, Educational therapy, Irene Caspari

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Caspari Foundation (2024), Educational Psychotherapy (EPT) is described as “a high-level specialist intervention that supports children and young people's learning. It is based on psychoanalytic and attachment theories. It takes place in school where children and young people are seen in an environment familiar to them and their families” (para. 1-2). EPT “has much in common with a number of approaches to work with children suffering from emotional problems of one sort or another (e.g., play therapy; narrative therapy)” (Best, 2013), though it is itself a distinctive field in a number of ways.

Educational psychotherapy (EPT) originated in the United Kingdom in the mid-20th century. The field was primarily founded by Irene E. Caspari (b.1915-d.1976), a German child psychotherapist of Jewish descent from Berlin. She worked with children facing emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties.

Caspari believed that emotional and psychological factors significantly impacted learning and educational outcomes.

In 1935, Caspari, then aged 20 years old, “fled the Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany and arrived in the United Kingdom” (Caspari Foundation, 2024, para. 3). Much later, in 1961, she became a Chief Educational Psychologist and worked at the Tavistock Clinic in London. Caspari developed an approach that combined psychoanalytic concepts with educational interventions to help children overcome learning obstacles rooted in emotional struggles. Educational psychotherapy seeks to address the complex interplay between a child's emotions, development, and learning, making it distinct from both traditional psychotherapy and educational support.

Caspari's approach emphasized the importance of understanding a child's internal world and its influence on their learning processes, creating a holistic framework that continues to influence modern therapeutic practices. “Her work, outlined in her book *Troublesome Children in Class* (Caspari, 1976) and *Learning & Teaching: The Collected Papers of Irene Caspari* (Caspari, 1984; posthumously published) marked the creation of what would become Educational Psychotherapy: a unique and much-needed approach to working with children, families and school staff who struggle with emotional barriers to learning” (Caspari Foundation, 2024, para. 4).

2. EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY VS EDUCATIONAL THERAPY

The Educational Psychotherapy was introduced in the UK in the 1960s, while the Educational Therapy was introduced in the USA in the 1970s (Chua & Chia, 2023a, 2023b). Both intervention approaches are designed to support students with learning difficulties or emotional challenges, but they differ in focus, theoretical frameworks, and implementation.

According to Chua and Chia (2023a), the Educational Psychotherapy (EPT) combines the elements of psychotherapy with educational support. Its focus is on the emotional and psychological aspects of learning difficulties, often addressing underlying trauma, attachment issues, or emotional blockages that interfere with a child's ability to learn. EPT practitioners are trained to understand the psychological factors impacting learning and behavior. The intervention approach is commonly used for children with emotional and behavioral difficulties that affect their academic progress, using a therapeutic approach integrated into educational settings (see Best, 2013, for more detail).

The Educational Therapy (EdTx), unlike EPT, focuses more directly on learning strategies and academic skill-building. Practitioners in EdTx are known as Educational Therapists (ETs). The Association of Educational Therapists (AET, 2002) has defined an educational therapist as “a professional who combines educational and therapeutic approaches for evaluation, remediation, case management, and communication/advocacy on behalf of children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities or learning problems” (p.1). In other words, these practitioners work with students to overcome specific learning challenges (such as dyslexia, ADHD, or executive functioning issues) using customized academic interventions. While emotional support is provided, the primary focus of ET is on teaching learning strategies, improving academic performance, and addressing learning disabilities through specialized instruction. Practitioners have a background in education, special education, or related fields, and may work with psychologists but are not typically trained in psychotherapy.

It is interesting to note the close relationship and overlap between EPT and EdTx. Both approaches aim to help students overcome obstacles to learning, but educational psychotherapy places more emphasis on the emotional and psychological factors, while educational therapy in the USA tends to focus on the cognitive and learning strategies side. In both contexts, practitioners work closely with other professionals (e.g., psychologists, teachers) to address a child's holistic needs, but the specific methods and training requirements differ.

In short, while EPT and EdTx share a common goal of helping students with learning difficulties, educational psychotherapy in the UK integrates psychotherapeutic practices more deeply than educational therapy in the USA, which is more academic-focused.

3. THE HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY IN CHINA

As already mentioned earlier, the educational psychotherapy (EPT) is a specialized form of therapy that aims to support children and young people with emotional and behavioral difficulties in educational settings. The history of educational psychotherapists can be traced back to the early 20th century when psychologists and educators began to recognize the importance of addressing mental health issues at school. However, the term 'educational psychotherapy' was not formally used until 1961.

Long before Irene Caspari came into the scene, one of the early pioneers in the field of psychotherapy was Anna Freud, the daughter of Sigmund Freud. Anna Freud (b.1895-d.1982) was a British psychoanalyst of Austrian-Jewish descent, who worked with children and adolescents and developed innovative techniques for understanding and treating their emotional problems. She founded the Hampstead Child Therapy Course and Clinic in London in 1952, which became a leading center for formal training of educational psychotherapists.

Another influential figure in the history of educational psychotherapy is Melanie Klein (b.1882-d.1960), one of the founding pioneers of psychoanalysis, known for her work with children and the development of play therapy. Klein's theories on child development and the importance of early experiences in shaping personality have had a significant impact on the field of educational psychotherapy (Spillius, 1983; also see Klein, 1948).

In the mid-20th century, the field of educational psychotherapy began to gain recognition as an important component of mental health services for children and young people. Educational psychologists and counselors started to work more closely with schools to support students with emotional and behavioral difficulties, leading to the establishment of specialized educational psychotherapy services in many countries.

Today, educational psychotherapists work in a variety of settings, including schools, colleges, and mental health clinics. They use a range of therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and play therapy, to help children, adolescents and young people overcome emotional and behavioral challenges and reach their full potential in education.

The historical development of educational psychotherapy in China can be traced back to the early 20th century (Meng et al., 2022). At that time, China took a more receptive approach to Western psychological theories and therapeutic methods. The field of educational psychotherapy gradually emerged in China (Hsuan-Ying, 2015). With the progressive development of Chinese society and the reformation of the education system, mental health is now seen as essential to the well-being of the general population. As a result, there is an increased demand for such allied services in mental healthcare, and it has led to a growing need to have more qualified educational psychotherapists available in the country.

In China, educational psychotherapists mainly undertake tasks such as mental health education in schools, student counseling, and family education guidance. Through psychological testing, counseling, and guidance, they help students and parents solve psychological problems and improve students' academic performance and quality of life.

Currently, educational psychotherapists in China mainly undergo training and study in psychology, education, and related fields, and obtain the necessary certificates and qualifications before they can engage in related work. With the continuous development and improvement of China's mental health services, the role and importance of educational psychotherapists are increasingly recognized and valued. They play an important role in promoting the mental health development of students and improving the quality of education.

Overall, the history of educational psychotherapists is a testament to the evolving understanding of mental health in children and the importance of providing support and intervention in educational settings. Through their work, educational psychotherapists continue to make a positive impact on the lives of young people and their families.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT SITUATION OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY IN CHINA

Educational psychotherapy in China has seen significant development and growth in recent years as the country recognizes the importance of addressing mental health issues in children and young people. The field has evolved to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society and educational system, with a focus on providing support and intervention to students struggling with emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Historically, mental health issues and emotional well-being were not given much attention in Chinese schools. However, as the awareness of mental health issues has increased globally, China has also started to prioritize the mental health of its students. This has led to the recognition of the importance of educational psychotherapy in schools and the training of professionals in this field.

In recent years, there has been a growing demand for educational psychotherapists in China, with more schools and educational institutions seeking to provide mental health support to their students. Educational psychotherapists in China use a variety of therapeutic approaches, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, play therapy, and mindfulness techniques, to help students cope with stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges.

The Chinese government has also taken steps to support the development of educational psychotherapy in the country. In 2019, the Ministry of Education issued guidelines on the promotion of mental health education in schools, emphasizing the importance of providing psychological support to students. This has led to increased funding and resources for mental health services in schools, including the training of educational psychotherapists.

Despite these advancements, there are still challenges facing educational psychotherapy in China. Stigma surrounding mental health issues remains a barrier to seeking help, and there is a shortage of trained professionals in the field. Additionally, there is a need for more research and evidence-based practices to guide the work of educational psychotherapists in China.

Overall, the development of educational psychotherapy in China reflects a growing recognition of the importance of mental health in education and the commitment to providing support and intervention to students in need. With continued efforts to raise awareness, increase training opportunities, and improve access to services, educational psychotherapy in China is poised to make a positive impact on the well-being of students across the country.

5. CASE EXAMPLES

The following case examples are provided here to illustrate why the need for educational psychotherapists in China:

Case 1: Sarah, a high school student, is experiencing high levels of anxiety related to academic performance. Through educational psychotherapy, she learns coping strategies to manage her stress and improve her study habits.

Case 2: John, a college student, is struggling with low self-esteem and lack of motivation. Through sessions of educational psychotherapy, he explores underlying issues and develops a positive self-concept and goal-setting skills.

Case 3: Emily, a young child, is having difficulties with attention and focus in the classroom. With the help of educational psychotherapy, she receives strategies to improve her concentration and succeed academically.

Case 4: Alex, a middle school student, is dealing with bullying at school, leading to feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. Educational psychotherapy helps him develop assertiveness skills and build resilience to cope with bullying.

Case 5: Maria, a university student, is struggling with time management and procrastination, impacting her academic performance. Through educational psychotherapy, she learns strategies to improve her organization skills and prioritize tasks effectively.

Case 6: Tom, a young adult, is facing challenges transitioning from high school to college due to anxiety and fear of failure. Educational psychotherapy assists him in building confidence, setting realistic goals, and managing his anxiety to succeed in his academic pursuits.

Case 7: Jessica, a teacher, is experiencing burn out and stress due to workload and challenging students in her classroom. Educational psychotherapy sessions help her develop self-care strategies, boundaries, and effective classroom management techniques to improve her well-being and teaching experience.

Case 8: Michael, a parent, is struggling to support his child with learning difficulties and behavioral issues. Educational psychotherapy provides him with tools and techniques to better understand and communicate with his child, as well as strategies to create a supportive and structured home environment to help his child thrive.

Case 9: Rachel, a college student, is facing perfectionism and unrealistic academic expectations, leading to anxiety and fear of failure. Through educational psychotherapy, she learns to challenge her negative thought patterns, set more realistic goals, and develop self-compassion to improve her mental well-being and academic performance.

6. THE IMPORTANCE AND URGENT ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

In China, the practitioners in educational psychotherapy are very much in demand to address the current urgent psychosocial as well as mental health issues that have plagued the Chinese population (Wang et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2012). Several of these urgent issues are included as follows:

6.1 Mental health concerns

Many students and educators experience mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress. Educational psychotherapist provides a safe space to address these concerns and develop coping strategies to manage them effectively.

6.2 Learning difficulties

Students with learning disabilities or difficulties may face obstacles in academic achievement and self-esteem. Educational psychotherapist can help identify and address these challenges, providing tailored interventions to support their learning and development.

6.3 Behavioral problems

Some students exhibit behavioral issues that impact their academic performance and social interactions. Educational psychotherapist offers strategies to address behavior problems, improve self-regulation skills, and enhance social-emotional competence.

6.4 School-related stress (also known as academic stress)

The pressure to excel academically, social challenges, and school transitions can contribute to stress and anxiety in students. Educational psychotherapist helps individuals navigate these stressors, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

6.5 Family dynamics

Family dynamics and relationships can significantly influence a student's well-being and academic success. Educational psychotherapist may involve family therapy to address communication challenges, parenting styles, and support systems to create a positive home environment conducive to learning.

It is crucial to address the abovementioned urgent issues by educational psychotherapists in China before the challenging problems become too huge to be properly managed. Individuals, especially school-age children, with challenging issues need to seek educational psycho-therapeutic services as early as possible so that appropriate support and guidance are promptly provided to manage and, hopefully, to overcome many psychosocial and mental obstacles, and in turn, to enhance their academic performance, and improve their overall well-being in educational settings.

7. CONCLUSION

The role of educational psychotherapists in the 21st century China is vital in addressing the diverse and complex mental health and social issues which include the needs of individuals (children, adolescents and young adults) in various educational settings (e.g., elementary and high schools, colleges and universities). As Chinese society continues to evolve and faces new demographic, socio-economic and geo-political challenges ahead, the importance of educational psychotherapists cannot be understated.

Firstly, educational psychotherapists as well as educational therapists (though this group of professionals is very lacking in China) play a crucial role in promoting mental wellness, supporting positive attitude, and fostering conducive learning environments for students, educators, and families. By providing customized intervention programs, counseling sessions, and general or specific psychoeducation for families and the general public, they help individuals navigate challenges, such as mental health issues, learning difficulties, behavioral problems, and school-related stress.

Furthermore, in a rapidly changing and competitive educational landscape throughout China, educational psychotherapists can bring a unique skill set to support students in developing resilience,

coping strategies, and self-awareness to thrive academically and socio-emotionally. Their expertise in understanding the intersection of psychology and education enables them to address urgent issues and promote holistic well-being in individuals.

Finally, within the context of the 21st century China, where mental health awareness is growing and educational pressures are high, the presence of educational psychotherapists remains crucial in creating a supportive and inclusive educational system for future generations. By recognizing the importance of mental health and providing specialized support, educational psychotherapists can continue to contribute to the overall well-being and success of individuals in the Chinese educational landscape.

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