

Developing the Curriculum and Instruction Model for Suicide Prevention and Life Education in Taiwan

Ya-Wen Huang, Po-San Wang, and Chia-Chia Lin

Abstract This chapter attempts to develop a curriculum and instructional model for life education as the basis of suicide prevention. Suicide has become an urgent problem in Taiwanese society as well as in the international community. The “Life education” model is proposed as the foundation for suicide prevention. By integrating the theories of the experiential learning circle, affective education, life skills, shared experience, and traditional Confucianism, a curriculum and teaching model known as the Shared-experience Life education and life skills Instruction Model (SLIM) has been developed. The SLIM model is anticipated to serve as a reference for basic education in suicide prevention.

1 Instruction

1.1 *The Statistical Perspective on Suicide*

From the statistical perspective, suicide and homicide rank high in the ten leading causes of death in Taiwan. According to the statistics for Taiwan in 2008, suicide is the ninth leading cause of death in the overall population of Taiwan, the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds, second only to accidental injuries, and the 11th leading cause of death among youth of 14 years old. Homicide and suicide are the fifth and the tenth leading cause of death in young people aged

Y.-W. Huang (✉)

Department of Healthcare Administration, Asia University,
No. 500, Liufeng Road, Wufeng Township, Taichung 41354, Taiwan, ROC
e-mail: ya3910@asia.edu.tw

P.-S. Wang and C.-C. Lin

Department of Life Education and Health Promotion,
National Taipei University of Education,
Taipei, Taiwan, ROC

1–14 years [1]. These statistics highlight the importance of “life education” for young people. Life education is the primary prevention policy for suicide and self-injury in Taiwan. To date there has been much discussion about the content of life education, though somewhat less discourse on how it should be taught.

1.2 Life Education in Taiwan

Life education has been incorporated into the high school curriculum as an open course since 2006. There are eight open courses of Life Education in the high school curriculum: Introduction to Life Education, Philosophy and Life, Religion and Life, Death Education, Moral Reflection and Choice, Ethics of Sex and Marriage, Ethics of Life Science and Technology, Personality Integration, and Spiritual Development. However, the life education curriculum for junior high and elementary school has not as yet been set up. The teachers in junior high and elementary school are encouraged to integrate life education into all other subjects’ instruction.

The content of life education has been discussed extensively. Sun examined and interpreted the concept, suggesting that the content should cover three areas: the doctrinal and religious philosophy of life, basic and applied ethics, and the integration of personality and emotional education [2]. Chang considered that the nature of death as well as the experience of funerals and the grieving process can facilitate deep reflection by the individual on the relationship between the self and others, society, nature, and even the universe. One can examine the ultimate meaning and value of life, face death positively, overcome fear and anxiety regarding death, and further embody the meaning of life [3, 4].

Chang’s study proposed that the curriculum content of life education in the junior high school could be divided into five categories: (1) Education of People with Self, (2) Education of People with Others, (3) Education of People with the Natural Environment, (4) Education of People with Society, and (5) Education of People with the Universe [3, 4]. Such a classification overlapped highly with the categories of the existing 9-year curriculum system in Taiwan. Huang interpreted life education as having five major orientations: (1) religious-orientated life education, (2) physical health-oriented life education, (3) career-oriented life education, (4) life and moral education-oriented life education, and (5) death education, or thanatology-oriented life education [5].

In Taiwan, the so-called 9-year curriculum system for elementary school and junior high school students has been constructed and divided into seven learning domains. For each learning domain the competence indicators are designed by educational committee members. Huang and Chang used questionnaires and focus group interviews to develop the core concepts, curriculum objectives, and capacity indicators of life education [6]. Core concepts and competence indicators include: (1) four competence indicators of religion, belief, and human life; (2) 18 capacity indicators of physical and mental health education; (3) six capacity indicators of

career education; (4) 19 capacity indicators of ethical and moral education; and (5) 12 capacity indicators of death education.

In 2001, the Taiwan Ministry of Education started the “Health Promoting School Program.” In accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO), the Ministry of Education and the Department of Health listed six categories for health promotion in schools: the health policies of the school, the physical environment of the school, the social environment of the school, community relations, life skills, and health services. Regarding the category of Life skills, in 2004 the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the WHO classified life skills into the three core contents of (1) communication and interpersonal relations, (2) skills of decision making and critical thinking, and (3) skills of coping and self-management. Life skills education is an important aspect of life education.

2 The Model

2.1 Objectives

For this chapter an attempt was made to develop a curriculum and instructional model for life education to serve as the basis of suicide prevention.

2.2 Methods

To develop the curriculum and instructional model for life education, a literature review of the theory of the experiential learning circle, affective education, life skills, shared experiences, and traditional Confucianism were integrated into the model construction.

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Experiential Learning Circle

Kolb pioneered the famous experiential learning circle, which includes the four elements of (1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) forming abstract concepts, and (4) testing in new situations [7, 8]. Kolb and Fry suggest that the experiential learning cycle can begin from any one of the four elements, but has to ensure the continuous spiral that often starts from the action of concrete experience [9]. In Kolb’s theory a person makes connections between concrete experience and forming abstract concepts, as well as between testing in new situations and observation and reflection [7].

2.3.2 Distance of Sensation and Shared Experiences

Kondo, the president of the Japan Life Education Research Association, promotes shared experience theory, which states that emotions, anxiety, despair, and death should not be experienced alone [10]. The accumulation of “my emotional experience shared with someone” makes one feel “I am not a person alone,” thus resulting in the acceptance of “It will be fine just as how I am” and further self-acceptance.

Kondo also refers to the “sensation distance” in his book. An 8-year-old girl being carried by her mother spoke of “a smell of mother’s flavor.” Presuming this was the odor of sweat or perfume, her mother asked “what flavor?” The child replied: “a gentle feeling, a good and comforting smell, soft and reassuring.” Smell is one of the five senses, only able to be utilized if close enough to the target object; it is proposed as the secret of “spiritual touch.” The shortest “distance of sensation” is taste, followed by touch, smell, hearing, and sight.

2.3.3 Affective Education

Affective education is the foundation of life education. Chung indicated in his theory of affective communication that the nature of affective education is based on rational and emotional integration [11]. The teaching model of the communication of the rational and emotional is as follows: Events experience → Sensory → Emotion revealing and sensibility → Rational reflection and communication → Integration of rational and emotional sensibility → Toward the beauty of life (appreciation and forgiveness) and toward the ethics of life (respecting and caring).

2.3.4 Confucian Life Education [12]

The purpose of education is to make people holistic human beings whose abilities are well developed and coordinated. A human’s abilities can be divided into inside and outside abilities: physical on the outside and mental on the inside. Mental ability can be further divided into three parts: knowledge, emotion, and will. Education can also be divided into three sectors: intellectual, moral, and esthetic (i.e., affective) [13].

Huang analyzed the Confucian view of “holistic education,” which includes three dimensions: (1) body and mind in one; (2) the success of self and all others in one – blend harmoniously and grasp thoroughly the human, natural, and cultural world; and (3) unity of the heavenly and the human [12].

In “Mencius: Gaozi Part I,” Mencius said that noblemen view things from “mind” and villains view things from “body.” Bodily eyes and ears do not think, thus are easily cheated by and attracted to external phenomena. In Chap. VI of *Daxue* by Zhu Xi, he states that man achieves the “mind control of body” and “body and mind in one” through self-cultivation.

The second dimension of holistic education refers to the success of self and all others in balance. Confucius suggested, “by helping others succeed, you will be

able to achieve success.” Tetsuo explained that the self in Confucian thought is a “self-awareness of subjectivity.” The individual and society is a continuum, and the point is how to expand self-success to social success. Mencius stressed that human beings are born with “mind,” which is expressed as four beginnings of “sense of compassion,” “sense of shame and evil,” “sense of modesty and yielding,” and “sense of right and wrong.” In “Mencius: Dedication Part I.1,” he stated that “people who harbor these four beginnings should grow and develop them.”

“The sense of compassion is benevolence. The sense of shame and evil is righteousness. The sense of modesty and yielding is right. The sense of right and wrong is intelligence.” Citing from *Shangshu*, Mencius establishes continuity between “emperor hearing, emperor observing” and “people hearing, people observing.” Any ruler who breaks such continuity should be reprimanded as a dictator.

“Mencius: Dedication Part I.1” mentions that a saint also has his limitations in pursuing the heavenly order. “The third dimension of ‘holistic education’ is to respect the dignity of nature and humanity.” The foundation of “holistic education” is based on the awakening mind [12].

2.3.5 The Meaning of Life [14]

“Seeking a will to meaning” is the objective of logotherapy. Unless the subject is helped to see reasons behind the pain that seems to be meaningless, his or her will to live will be insufficient. Mental health is founded on a degree of tension between “have achieved already” and “should have to complete” or “what is” and “what should be.” A dangerous misconception in mental health is that the concept of “balance” is the most important requirement.

As life is definitely interesting, our task is to “find” its meaning. In 1929, Frankl developed three types of value (or three possibilities) in order to find the meaning of life: doing a singular thing that represents an achievement or a creation; experiencing an encounter with another person; or facing destiny, such as contracting cancer – even in this case one is still be able to give meaning to life, transforming suffering into the capability of human achievement.

The meaning of life may be changed. According to logotherapy, we can use three different ways to find meaning: (1) through the creation of tasks, (2) through realizing the value of life, and (3) by suffering. Obviously, the first way represents merits or achievements, while the second way involves the experience of something, such as the nature of work or culture; or through an experience with another individual, such as love, one may find the meaning of life.

2.3.6 SLIM: The Shared-Experience Life Education and Life Skills Instructional Model

Having integrated the above-mentioned experiential learning circle, affective education, theoretical foundation of the meaning of life, and Confucian thought,

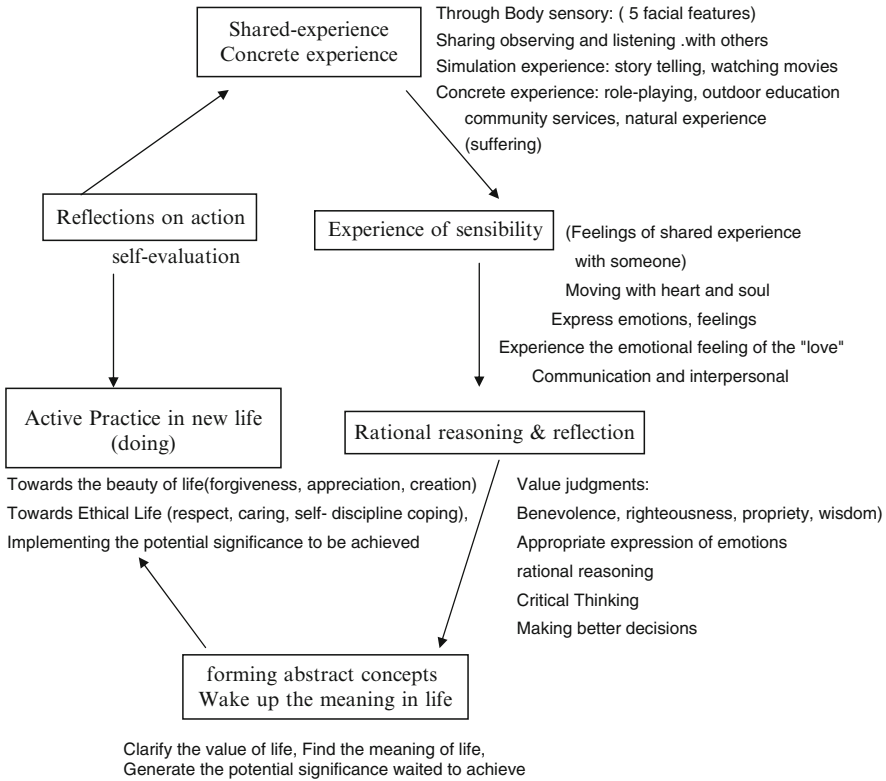


Fig. 1 SLIM: The Shared-experience Life education and life skills Instructional Model (designed by Ya-Wen Huang)

a teaching model can be constructed: the Shared-experience Life education and life skills Instruction Model (SLIM), shown schematically in Fig. 1.

3 Discussion

Life education is intended to help people develop coordination of sense and sensation as well as to help them be aware of meaning in their life. Nietzsche stated, “he who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear almost any ‘how’.” Victor E. Frankl, master psychiatrist of the search for meaning, often asked his patients with severe pain, “why do you not commit suicide?” Some patients answered they wished to stay alive for their children, while some responded that their talents were yet to bear fruit. By using such delicate questioning and thoughtful analysis of modern existence, Frankl was able to help sorrowful patients redefine their meaning and responsibilities [12].

Having integrated the experiential learning circle and affective education into the SLIM model, both theories focus on cultivating the coordination of sense and sensation, then experiencing life anew.

Regarding education, both Confucius and Mencius, as well as other ancient Confucian scholars, emphasize mostly the development of “mind” capability in value judgment, and the establishment of a theoretical basis of “mind” dominating “body.” The SLIM model also integrates the Eastern Confucian thought of mind dominating body and the Western experiential learning elements of Kolb’s “observation and reflection.” The mind is for thinking. Mencius emphasizes that the “mind” of a “large field” possesses the capability of “thinking,” while “organs of ears and eyes from the body” of the “smaller field” do not. He then said in “Dedication Part I,” “the nature of a nobleman is based on the roots of benevolence, righteousness, rites, and intelligence in mind.” Therefore, in the SLIM model, “the roots of benevolence, righteousness, rites, and intelligence in mind” becomes the core value for the element of “Rational reasoning and reflection.”

Scientifically based evidence of the positive effect of the SLIM model, based on the Preschoolers’ Peer Interaction Curriculum [15] and the Self-Esteem Curriculum [16], have been published. A study based on use of the SLIM model to structure a drug abuse prevention strategy model for elementary schools has been carried out [17].

4 Conclusion

Suicide has become an urgent problem in Taiwanese society as well as in the international community. Solutions to this problem require that all interested parties devote themselves to create and develop counter-measures. The author suggests that “life education” is the foundation for education in suicide prevention. To provide a curriculum and a way of teaching life education, the Shared-experience Life education and life skills Instruction Model (SLIM) has been developed from multiple theories of the experiential learning circle, shared experience, affective education, life skills, the philosophy of life, and Confucian thought.

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