

# Mental Health Status of Hong Kong Secondary School Students and Construction of its Educational Ecosystem

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**Abstract - This paper is conducted to investigate the deteriorating mental health status of secondary school students in Hong Kong; analyze the causes from multiple layers using an educational ecology perspective; and propose a holistic framework of intervention and support strategies. Through a systematic review of existing empirical literature, government statistics, and related survey reports, combined with field observations, this study corroborates that adolescents in Hong Kong are facing alarmingly high levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. The major drivers of this crisis are intrinsically linked to an intensely competitive academic culture, overwhelming family expectations, anxiety over future prospects, and the compounding pressures of a rapidly changing socio-cultural environment. The ecology of education perspective makes it clear that these factors are interactive within a complex system. The present study assumes that the problem is too systemic to be solved by clinical treatment alone, which often addresses symptoms rather than root causes. Thus, there is a need for change in paradigm. Schools, families, the community, and policymakers must come together to build a multi-tiered support system. Driven by the principles of educational ecology, the system designed will have to prioritize prevention and developmental growth instead of simply remediation. In bringing the various components of a student's ecology together strategically, we can help nurture the capacity for resilience and well-being, moving closer to the ultimate goal—a true all-round education which attends to both mind and character.**

**Keywords - anxiety, depression, educational ecosystem, mental health, stress, support system.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an essential period in human physical and mental development. Adolescence not only affects the quality of current learning and life but also has a profound impact on the future development trajectory. From the point of view of developmental psychology, during this period, the neuroplasticity of the brain is still at its peak, and it is a golden stage to establish healthy psychological patterns and coping mechanisms [1]. If mental health problems [2], such as emotional distress and stress disorders that occur during this period, are not identified in time and given effective interventions, the negative impact brought about will lead to a kind of developmental liability. This kind of liability may bring not only such immediate problems as

dropping out of school and social withdrawal [3] but may also internalize into long-term mental illnesses like anxiety and depression, consistently affecting the individual's employability, ability to build intimate relationships, and overall life satisfaction during adulthood. For families, a mental health crisis among family members will bring about continuous caregiving pressure and economic burden. For society as a whole, this means a decline in the quality of the future workforce and a long-term burden on the public healthcare system, thus creating a far-reaching, multi-layered social problem.

As a highly competitive international city, Hong Kong provides a structure of pressure for students with commonalities yet distinct local characteristics compared with young people in other parts of the world. The high-score-oriented education system lies at the heart of the pressure ecosystem: the

Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE) Examination serves as a high baton hanger, and its one-shot selection function is extremely magnified, with the whole secondary school learning environment highly distorted. Starting from Form Four, every day students have to attend intensive classes, frequent tests, and overwhelming homework. In addition, the narrow pathways to higher education, especially the fierce competition for locally subsidized universities through Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) (with only about 18,000 first-year bachelor's degree places every year) further aggravate this pressure. With this kind of structural predicament, the notion of "success" in Hong Kong society has become increasingly single-tracked, equating personal value and future prospects in general with academic achievement, especially the college entrance examination results. This narrow value system has interwoven a high-pressure web of growth with family expectations, comparisons among peers, and the social atmosphere, which makes it impossible for adolescents to escape and breathe.

This is no longer a theoretical deduction but an imminent crisis. A great number of local empirical studies and media investigations by credible parties in recent years have issued warnings time and again. For example, research data from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Prevention at the University of Hong Kong repeatedly shows that the proportion of secondary school students with a high level of stress, and those who manifest significant anxiety and depressive symptoms, remains persistently high [4]. More distressing is the frequent news reporting of extreme events directly related to the deterioration of students' mental health, such as self-harm and suicide, and the trend of the age of those involved is trending younger. These shocking cases are not only tragedies which families cannot bear but also a painful indictment and a resounding alarm for the entire education system and society as a whole. It clearly tells us that systemic problems have surpassed the tolerance threshold of many individuals. As educators on the front line, we bear inescapable professional responsibilities and a moral mission in this respect. We must forsake the fragmented responses that only treat symptoms and

must have the courage to face up to this deep-seated crisis in the education ecology, boldly conducting fundamental reflection and systemic reform in the education system that we can influence-including curriculum design, assessment methods, campus culture, and relationships between teachers and students-to find a real way out and solution for the next generation.

### **Problem statement**

Mental health issues are a severe social problem among Hong Kong secondary school students, with causes so complexly intertwined in this multi-faceted educational ecosystem. At the heart of the current problems lies an academic environment with high pressure, a single standard of success, and insufficient systemic support; in their totality, these elements put immense psychological and physical stress on students.

The current school system places too much emphasis on public examination results, such as the DSE, regarding academic performance as the major and even sole yardstick for students' worth. This "high-score-first" atmosphere makes students chronically anxious and often suffer from sleep deprivation, interpersonal isolation, and low self-esteem. However, school supporting systems tend to focus on crisis intervention rather than prevention and development. The number of counselors is seriously inadequate, and the widely spread mental health stigma [6] discourages many students from seeking help at an early stage of problems.

There are further gaps in the ecosystem of education [7]. The expectation for higher academic performance from children driven by traditional values places some families in a position where they have less understanding of the children's mental stress, thus causing frequent breakdowns in communications between parents and children. The schools are under pressure to maintain their reputation and keep up with the demands of the curriculum and are unable to fully implement life education and mental health courses put at the center of student well-being. With greater public awareness of this issue, related policies, resource allocations, and public education have not created

an effective synergy; hence, a fragmented and less-than-comprehensive support network is the result. Therefore, the heart of the problem at present is that the entire educational ecology has failed to work together effectively around the core goal of "promoting the holistic health of students". In order to fundamentally improve the situation, fragmented counseling activities are far from enough; systemic reform is needed to establish a multi-layered support ecosystem that integrates "school-family-community-policy" and fully integrates mental health promotion into the daily learning and lives of students.

### **Research aims and research questions**

This research aims to deeply diagnose the current status, causes, and influencing mechanisms of mental health among secondary school students in Hong Kong from an ecosystem perspective. This will be used to construct an evidence-based, multi-layered educational ecosystem support framework that will provide a scientific basis for improving the mental well-being of students, reforming educational practices, and formulating relevant policies.

- What is the current status and characteristics of mental health among secondary school students in Hong Kong?
- What are the most common emotional and behavioral problems students face?
- What are the core causes and mechanisms affecting the mental health of Hong Kong secondary school students?
- How to build an effective, holistic support structure?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The current state of mental health among secondary school students**

These follow-up studies were part of a series of surveys conducted across Hong Kong by the universities and other youth research institutions to determine the status of mental health among secondary school students in Hong Kong. Indeed, it is worrying and has become a prevalent social phenomenon. Empirical data shows that a

considerable proportion of the students are facing moderate to severe mental health challenges [8]. For example, several follow-up studies have shown that over one-third of secondary school students report different levels of emotional distress, with about 15% to 20% showing clinical symptoms that require professional intervention [9]. These figures far exceed the international average of their respective peer groups, which means that this problem is not an individual case; rather, it is a collective phenomenon that has spread throughout the schools, marking a silent public health crisis.

In terms of concrete manifestations, the influence is multifaceted and intertwined. Academic pressure is undoubtedly the core source of stress. In Hong Kong, DSE has been distorted into a kind of "one-shot deal". Students are always preparing for the exams; therefore, chronic fatigue from exams may contribute to deepened learning burnout. More seriously, in this process, the self-esteem of many students is utterly dependent on their academic performance. Their grades are equated with all of life. When their grades are not as expected, they drop into self-doubt and the depths of an existential crisis. The resulting emotional problems can hardly be effectively avoided, with generalized anxiety and specific test anxiety being the most prominent, accompanied by persistent low mood, anhedonia, and irritability, symptoms of depression. Some students also experience physiological manifestations such as insomnia and changes in appetite.

On the behavioural level, in order not to be overwhelmed by unbearable pressure, various maladaptive behavioural problems arise. Internet addiction has become a common refuge in which students seek a sense of accomplishment and control that is missing in reality; avoidance of learning behaviours (such as procrastination and truancy) are growing; more distressingly, self-harm has even become a means of coping with extreme emotional distress in some groups, while refusing to attend school indicates that the problem has severely impaired their social functioning. Furthermore, the quality of interpersonal relationships has also declined sharply. Excessive

competition among peers makes it difficult for young people to establish genuine cooperative relationships, leading to increased social withdrawal and feelings of isolation. Meanwhile, school bullying, including highly harmful and difficult-to-track cyberbullying, is likely to thrive in this high-pressure atmosphere and can cause devastating damage to the mental health of victims.

It should be noted that mental health risks are not distributed evenly among different groups. Empirical studies have clearly indicated that students with slightly lower academic performance, within a results-oriented system, constantly feel frustrated and suffer from low self-esteem; students in SEN circumstances face dual challenges in terms of academic and social adjustment [10] but often receive inadequate support; students from families of lower socioeconomic status or newly immigrated families bear extra pressures brought about by resource scarcity, cultural adaptation, and social discrimination—these factors combine to make such students the most vulnerable and at highest risk in the mental health storm, who urgently need targeted attention and support from society.

### **Relevant theoretical framework to systematically analyze mental health problems**

This research adopts the theoretical underpinning of ecosystem theory and resilience theory as a core analytic framework and attempts to systematically analyze the mental health problems of secondary school students in Hong Kong. The dual perspective enables us to examine, on the one hand, the comprehensive multi-layered environmental context where the problems arise, and, on the other hand, individual positive adaptability in adversity. This goes beyond simple attribution and gives solid theoretical backing to the establishment of an effective support system.

Ecosystem theory [11] underscores that individual development does not occur in a vacuum but rather develops from the complex interactions of a series of nested environmental systems. The ecosystem that affects the mental health of Hong Kong secondary school students can be divided into the following key levels:

**Microsystem** -- This is the innermost environment that directly interacts with the individual, and it mainly includes the personal traits of students, such as temperament, self-esteem, and neurosensitivity, and their physical and mental condition. In the high-pressure environment in Hong Kong, these internal factors determine students' initial psychological reactions and the ways they cope when facing academic demands and interpersonal challenges.

**Mesosystem** -- This system is comprised of the relationships and interactions between two or more microsystems in which the individual actively participates. For secondary school students, the central mesosystem is the interface between school and family. More specifically, the quality of teacher-student relations, the competitive as well as cooperative nature of peer relations, and the general school culture (for example, the emphasis on ranking versus holistic development) in the school setting interact with the quality of parent-child relations, parenting styles (namely, authoritative and enlightened or authoritarian and strict) and parents' expectations for school performance in the family setting. For instance, a high-pressure school policy can escalate conflicts between parents and children in the family, while a supportive family environment can successfully buffer the pressure felt by students in school.

**External system** -- This level refers to the social environment in which individuals are not directly involved but which indirectly affects their development. For Hong Kong secondary school students, parents' work environment (for example, working hours, occupational stress, and stability) affects parents' emotional state and the energy available for companionship, thus indirectly influencing the family microsystem. Furthermore, the abundance and accessibility of community resources (for example, the availability of sufficient youth activity centers and affordable psychological counseling services) and the social atmosphere and value orientation created by mass media all constitute a broad external background influencing students' mental health.

Macro system -- This refers to the outermost system, including the general cultural background, social values, and policy and regulatory environment in which an individual lives. In the Hong Kong context, decisive macro-system factors include selection-oriented education policies such as the DSE examination system and university admission mechanisms and deeply ingrained cultural values, like meritocracy with high emphasis on personal achievement and social mobility, and an ideology of viewing competition as normal. These factors outline the basic operation logics and value system for meso- and micro-systems and represent the root causes of deep-seated psychological stress.

Resilience theory [12] provides a positive perspective to complement ecosystem theory. It does not approach the individual as passively being shaped by his or her environment; instead, it concentrates on his or her potential to actively adapt and bounce back in the face of adversity. This potential is made up of a series of protective factors, which can be broadly differentiated into two main categories, namely internal and external:

(a) Internal protective factors -- these refer to the psychological assets possessed by the individual such as an optimistic personality, problem-solving abilities when faced with difficulties, good emotional regulation skills, and a high sense of self-efficacy. These traits help students maintain hope and find effective coping strategies under the pressure of the DSE.

External protective factors -- These refer to supportive resources from the external environment. Among these factors, family support -- unconditional acceptance and care -- is the most crucial buffer; while good teachers and mentors offer emotional support and practical guidance, becoming "significant others" for the student on campus.

By combining ecosystem theory and resilience theory, this research can clearly depict the complex stress environment faced by Hong Kong secondary school students while focusing on identifying and strengthening the protective factors that help them thrive in adversity; thus, it proposes intervention

strategies that can be both targeted and constructive.

### **Review of local and international research examining mental health**

Situating Hong Kong secondary school students in a broader East Asian context allows for a clear identification of the specificity and commonalities of their problems. Compared with societies like Singapore, Taiwan, and mainland China--also renowned for their intense academic competition--a striking "East Asian model" commonality emerges. Generally, students in these regions face tremendous pressure from standardized high-stakes examinations [13] (the Cambridge A-Levels of Singapore, Taiwan's College Entrance Examination, and China's "Gaokao") resulting in high levels of anxiety, sleep deprivation, and academic burnout.

The shared socio-cultural context behind this is the deeply ingrained tradition of the imperial examination system and diploma-based education, which makes education the core, or even the only, pathway to social mobility. As a result, family and social resources are highly skewed toward the competition for academic achievement.

However, the situation in Hong Kong underlines some very unique characteristics within this commonality. First, the pathways to higher education are relatively narrower in Hong Kong. The competition for locally subsidized university places is exceptionally keen, and institutional and cultural barriers exist for connections with top universities in mainland China or Taiwan. All these have greatly enhanced the "one-shot deal" nature of the Hong Kong DSE Examination, leaving students virtually no other widely recognized "safety net" or alternative paths. Second, as a highly capitalist international city, the utilitarianism and fast-paced culture in Hong Kong are more extreme. Under this value system, which profoundly influences the education industry, a vast and sophisticated tutoring culture has been cultivated, further compressing the leisure time and autonomy of students and exacerbating the instrumentalization of education. By contrast, after Shanghai's implementation of the "double reduction" policy [14], there was an attempt to

systematically alleviate the load on students; Taiwan continued promoting diversified enrollment schemes in education reform (although with effectiveness pending), both at the policy level reversing the single assessment model. Through its streaming system (though carrying its pressures), Singapore has managed to achieve differentiated development to a certain extent.

Therein lies the particularity of the Hong Kong problem: extremely narrow pathways, a highly commercialized tutoring ecosystem, and overall utilitarian values superposed within society-the formation of a more rigid and hopeless pressure structure.

In view of such a serious challenge, it is particularly urgent to review and introduce evidence-based school-based mental health promotion programs. Drawing from preliminary international and local practices, several intervention strategies show their positive results.

Positive education --This model aims at systematically incorporating the science of positive psychology into school curriculum and culture in cultivating students' character strengths, positive emotions, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of meaning in life. For instance, the Geelong Grammar School Project [15] conducted in Australia and elsewhere has demonstrated that students who participated in the project have a significantly higher level of well-being and life satisfaction. Some pilot schools in Hong Kong have introduced activities like "gratitude journals" and "identification of character strengths". Preliminary feedback reveals that these activities help students establish a more solid sense of self-worth and meaning in life under high-pressure environments rather than depending on academic performance.

Mindfulness training -- In mindfulness intervention programs [16], students learn to manage stress and anxiety by becoming a non-judgmental observer of the present moment, their own thoughts, and their own emotions. Many research studies have confirmed that practicing mindfulness can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and enhance

concentration and emotional regulation ability. Some secondary school students taking mindfulness courses in Hong Kong reported that they could calm themselves faster when dealing with examination pressure and worried less excessively.

Growth mindset courses -- These courses teach students that "intelligence and ability can be developed through effort and strategy," thereby changing their perception of failure-from "I am a failure" to "This is an opportunity for me to learn and grow". The implication is clear: such a mindset directly challenges the "fixed mindset" and self-labeling that are so easily formed under the DSE system. Local research is beginning to show that students who receive growth mindset training [17] show increased learning motivation and resilience in the face of academic setbacks.

The mental health crisis of Hong Kong secondary school students has both shared and unique institutional and cultural challenges with East Asian societies. Lessons could be learned from some evidence-tested school-based intervention programs, including positive education, mindfulness training, and growth mindset courses, which might help reverse this crisis. However, what is really needed is to raise such programs from piecemeal extracurricular activities to strategic policies at the school level, with continuous resource support and teacher training from the education authorities. Only then could the rigid framework of exam-oriented education [18] foster an environment truly conducive to nurturing minds.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to realize the research objectives, the core research methods adopted in this study are literature analysis and secondary data analysis. It is determined with two considerations: firstly, it efficiently and systematically integrates existing authoritative empirical data, avoids resource waste caused by

repeated investigations; secondly, it allows for the critical synthesis of existing knowledge, providing a macro-level perspective in understanding the overall picture and the underlying context of the issue, thus giving a strong evidentiary basis for policy recommendations. The whole research will stick to the principle of systematic literature review, pursuing transparent and rigorous analysis and integration of different data sources.

The following three categories of literature and data will be systematically collected and analyzed in this study: publicly available data, reports from official institutions, and data on the utilization of adolescent mental health services. Such data is of high authority and representativeness, serving to grasp the overall picture and policy background of the youth population in a macro perspective. Secondly, empirical research reports from local universities and important NGOs are available. This data serves as the key to understanding the current state of the problem. We will focus on the thematic research reports published by research centers under universities.

Meanwhile, annual surveys, public opinion studies, and thematic discussion reports conducted by NGOs, which have been long rooted in youth services, will also be studied in depth. These documents are usually closer to the front-line situation, with rich qualitative insights and timely trend analyses that can effectively make up for the deficiencies of official data. Finally, academic journal articles that have undergone rigorous peer review provide evidence and theoretical analysis verified by rigid scientific methods, acting as the core basis for constructing the research argument and ensuring academic rigor.

By cross-referencing, synthesizing, and critically analyzing the abovementioned diversified data sources, this research tries to overcome the shortcomings of a single data source and proceed with triangulation [19] to depict a more comprehensive, three-dimensional, and in-depth picture of the mental health of Hong Kong secondary school students and, on this basis, propose more persuasive and feasible countermeasures and suggestions. By cross-

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## **Results and Analysis**

(a) Academic pressure -- It is the core source of stress and has a wide and profound impact. Over 80% of the students surveyed have put forward academic and exam pressures as their first concern in various related surveys.

This data reflects a structural problem within the entire education system. Hong Kong's education system adopts high selectivity, which streams students onto different life paths through public examinations, especially the decisive Hong Kong DSE Examination. The design precipitated the extreme veneration of a single assessment standard; DSE scores are not only a ticket to university but have also been distorted into the sole measure of a student's value, intelligence, and even his future prospect. Under this system, the essence of learning has been distorted from exploring knowledge and self-growth into a long and agonizing "exam preparation competition". Students begin to bear this continuous pressure from junior high school, leading to widespread long-term exam fatigue and profound learning burnout. They lose interest in subjects they were once curious about, and their learning motivation shifts from intrinsic drive to extrinsic coercion. More importantly, this environment easily leads students to develop a conditional self-value system. If academic performance falls short of expectations, it's not just an academic setback, but a fundamental denial of one's own existence, directly triggering anxiety, depression, and even more serious emotional crises.

Family factors -- They demonstrate remarkable duality, shifting from a potentially protective shield to a source of stress. Ideally, the family is supposed to be the warmest haven and most important source

of support for students facing external challenges. Yet in Hong Kong's highly competitive context, many parents, out of deep concern for their children's future, unconsciously become accomplices to the education system.

Their over-emphasis on performance and unrealistically high expectations is subtly transmitted to their children through daily nagging, meticulous attention to grades, and utilitarian arrangements for extracurricular activities. When academic performance becomes the core or even the sole topic of family interaction, the parent-child relationship, which should be based on emotional connection, becomes tense and fragile. Resulting parent-child conflicts [20] become increasingly frequent, and home no longer is home a place for relaxation and rejuvenation but another battlefield demanding performance. This pressure from the closest relationships is far more damaging compared with any other external challenge because it is accompanied by a conditioned fear of love.

Challenges of the digital age: The digital age has brought new challenges [21] and further exacerbated the psychological vulnerability of adolescents. The widespread use of social media created a never-ending stage for a "compare culture". Students are always forced to face, on every corner, their peers elaborately presented "wonderful lives", from academic achievements and extracurricular activities to physical appearances. Such social comparison is constantly gnawing away at their self-confidence and results in general anxiety as regards appearance and achievement. Meanwhile, the virtual nature of the online world offers an ostensibly facilitative alternative. However, with prolonged submergence in online interactions, real-world social skills will decline, further reducing the ease with which they can build serious, deep friendships in face-to-face situations. If the virtual world becomes the primary source of comfort, the probability of internet addiction is thus increased. This will not only affect academic performance but also further detach them from reality, thereby plunging them into a vicious circle of loneliness and emotional deterioration.

Gaps in supporting system -- The support system suffers from grave structural gaps. Although most secondary schools in Hong Kong have established counseling departments, their actual effectiveness is severely limited. The fundamental problem lies in the long-term shortage of resources, resulting in a stark disparity between counselors and students. One counselor often has to care for hundreds of students, rendering intervention work merely superficial. Furthermore, the role of counselors is often blurred; their focus is frequently forced to prioritize crisis management (such as handling self-harm cases) and disciplinary management (such as disciplining students who violate rules), rather than proactive, developmental, and preventative work that promotes the mental well-being of all students. This "fire brigade" approach makes it difficult for the system to effectively screen and intervene early in students who seem to have "minor problems" but are sliding into distress, failing to fundamentally build a defense against mental health issues.

### **Discussion**

In addressing this complex and deep-seated mental health problem at Hong Kong secondary schools, piecemeal measures are inadequate. An ecosystem approach is needed, using ecological system theory to implement reforms at macro, meso, and micro levels in a coordinated way. Only this comprehensive, multi-stakeholder educational ecology support system can truly reverse the current predicament.

### **Macro-system level**

It is necessary at the macro level to reconsider and innovate boldly on the top-level design that shapes the whole educational ecosystem. First of all, the assessment system needs to be reformed. The current DSE, with the expectation in society to "one-exam-determinates-your-future," is the root cause of students' pressure. Reform should be conducted by reducing the weight of a single exam and strengthening the diversity and credibility of school-based assessment, such as holding more thematic workshops and skills demonstrations. Meanwhile, it is necessary to explore multiple admission pathways and establish mechanisms where outstanding performance among students in sports, arts,

vocational skills, and other areas can be recognized by universities and society. This will provide channels not only for students with different orientations but also shake the singular mindset of "all other pursuits are inferior, only studying is superior."

Mental health education needs to be institutionalized into the curriculum: not fragmented lectures or extracurricular activities, but together with language and math, it should become a formal curriculum content with clear class hours, teaching objectives, and assessment standards. Emphasis should be put on mastering the skills rather than knowledge examination. Such a system will ensure that every student can learn systematically how to care for the inner world.

Finally, the government should significantly increase resource investment in this area, the most important indicator of which is to substantially reduce the ratio of students to school social workers and educational psychologists. A specific timetable and targets for reduction to an internationally recognized reasonable level should be clear so that professional support personnel can have enough time and energy for early identification, developmental activities, and individual follow-up. This would ensure the provision of high-quality professional intervention as early as possible for every student in need.

### **Mesosystem level**

The mesosystem is a crucial link between macro-level policies and micro-level individuals, with the core in the collaborative innovation between schools and families.

In shaping a positive school culture [22], one fundamental shift in the role of teachers is very necessary. The role of teachers should go beyond mere transmission of knowledge to caregivers and mentors for students. To achieve these purposes, all in-service and pre-service teachers must be systematically trained in mental health first aid to equip them with the professional competence to identify student emotional distress, offer initial guidance, and make referrals. Meanwhile, education authorities and school administrators should take active measures to lighten teachers' non-teaching

workload, freeing them from tedious paperwork and administrative tasks and allowing more time and energy for them to focus on students and accompany them through difficulties.

Third, positive education needs to be implemented throughout schools and systematically incorporate elements of positive psychology (such as character strength development, the practice of gratitude, and growth mindset) into all aspects of school life, rather than as isolated activities. Schools also have to create diversified opportunities for success by vigorously developing non-academic activities like sports, arts, drama, and service learning and giving equal recognition and awards as academic achievements, enabling students on different tracks to experience the joy of success and build their self-confidence.

In promoting parenting education and home-school cooperation, the key is to provide systematic support for parents. Schools and community organizations should cooperate in widely offering evidence-based parent education [23] courses to help parents understand the characteristics of adolescent psychological development, learn the skills of nonviolent communication, and reflect on excessive anxiety about performance. It will be helpful for them to establish more reasonable expectations, support the students, and establish healthy parent-child relationships. Meanwhile, it is necessary to establish smoother and regular home-school communication channels, not just to call students when problems arise, but regularly to exchange information about students' all-round development, including emotional state, social situation, interests, and strengths, and form a collaborative educational force.

### **Microsystem level**

At the microsystem level, which is where the staff have direct contact with the students, the aim is to empower the students themselves and strengthen their intrinsic protective factors.

There is the systematic development of social-emotional learning [24]. This calls for a properly developed curriculum which systematically instructs students on how to accurately identify and manage

their feelings, how to set positive and achievable goals, show genuine empathy toward others, build and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, and make responsible decisions in complex situations.

And like solving math problems, such skills need to be both learned and practiced. Second, mindfulness and stress reduction practices [25] should be widely promoted on campus: a few minutes of mindful breathing before every class, offering mindfulness electives or workshops, and integrating mindfulness practice into daily campus life. Countless studies have already concluded that this practice is very helpful in allowing students to clear their chaotic thoughts, focus in class, and enhance their ability in regulating negative emotions, providing them with a stable "anchor" in dealing with stress. Finally, an effective peer support network needs to be established.

Through the training of peer counselors, selected and trained students can gain basic listening and supporting skills. Since peers will generally be more willing to open up to peers, this peer support becomes a very powerful supplement to professional guidance, establishing an important early line of defense. When students have difficulties, they first get immediate emotional understanding and support from peers with a deep understanding of their situation, thus reducing feelings of isolation and helplessness.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The mental health crisis among Hong Kong secondary school students is not an isolated incident but a concentrated manifestation of serious imbalance in the entire education ecosystem. This jarring alarm bell distinctly shows how profoundly misplaced our long-standing educational values are: we overemphasize the instrumental value of education, emphasizing academic performance and future economic benefits, while neglecting or even forgetting the most fundamental and noble mission of education—to cultivate a whole person with balanced development in cognition, emotion, sociality, and morality. When school grades become

the only yardstick to measure educational achievement, when schools degenerate into training grounds for skills to pass exams, and when the colors of childhood are smothered by the monotony of gray competition, we systematically deprive young people of the precious opportunities to explore themselves, develop resilience, and experience richness in life.

It is now at a level where there should be serious cause for alarm over the mental health of Hong Kong secondary school students. Its prevalence and severity both mark this as an issue that urgently needs the highest level of government attention, public awareness, and resources, already beyond the realm of an issue of individual students or their family affairs. Delays will only add to personal suffering and social costs.

The problem has multi-layered and systemic causes. Simply attributing it to students' insufficient resilience or parents' excessive pressure cannot be of any use. The real root lies in the highly competitive education system that shapes everyone's behavior, the socio-cultural values dominated by the single standard of success, and the long-term under-resourced and structurally unbalanced support system. The interactions among these three factors turn into a self-reinforcing pressure loop, from which escape is difficult.

Any effective intervention must rise above the individual remediation emphasis of traditional counseling and move to the systemic level, toward the construction of an "educational ecosystem support system" that will marshal the combined power of policy, schools, family, and community. Only when all links in this chain are repaired and strengthened to produce a synergistic effect can we establish a truly sustainable and healthy growth environment for our students.

This work developed the following targeted action recommendations for each sector of society on how to put this vision into action.

Education Bureau -- The political courage to establish a high-level dedicated committee, beyond piecemeal policy adjustments, is necessary to

comprehensively and deeply examine the overall impact of the current education system on the students' mental health. Based on this, a long-term education development blueprint should be worked out with "student well-being" as the core indicator. The blueprint should clearly list mental health promotion as a key objective of education policy and provide corresponding resources and accountability mechanisms.

**Schools** -- A profound self-reform is needed. Students' mental health must be promoted from a slogan to an unshakeable primary objective in school development planning, reflected in financial budgets, human resource allocation, and performance evaluations. The school leadership should take the lead in organizing the whole school to systematically create a caring, inclusive, and positive learning environment and culture so that every student would feel their place and worth on campus.

**Teachers** -- Their role should be expanded from pure knowledge transmission to caregivers and mentors for students. On the one hand, it requires teachers to keep participating in professional development training related to students' mental health and master the "mental health first aid" skills to identify emotional distress and provide initial guidance, thus becoming the first solid line of defense in protecting students' growth.

**Parents** -- They must actively strive to learn and grow themselves, understand the laws of psychological development in adolescence, adjust their overly academics-focused parenting attitudes, place the emotional rapport between parents and children above school performances, and form an honest and trusting alliance with schools to jointly support the comprehensive development of their children.

**General public** -- We are all in the position to shape social culture. We should actively promote diverse values of success through media, public art, and social discussion. We must fight against the single standard of grades-only evaluation and co-create a more tolerant, diverse, and conducive social and

cultural atmosphere that will facilitate the physical and mental growth of young people.

Ultimately, the mental health crisis among Hong Kong secondary school students is a huge and difficult systemic project to overcome. Only when all social sectors—from government officials, school leaders, frontline teachers, every parent to the general public—realize that investment in the mental health of the younger generation is one of the most important investments in the future for Hong Kong society, can we truly join our hands, pool our strength, and transform this suffocating vortex of pressure into fertile ground that can nurture boundless resilience and hope.

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