

Cognitive Reappraisal and Subjective Well-being to Enhance Secondary Vocational Students' Mental Health

Wang Bodier, Tajularipin Sulaiman and Nuraini Jafri

Abstract – Abstract – Adolescent mental health has become an increasingly prominent concern, particularly in high-pressure educational environments such as vocational schools. In China, the dual-track education system places students into academic or vocational paths based on standardized test performance, with vocational students often facing social stigma and psychological distress. This paper investigates the roles of cognitive reappraisal (CR) and subjective well-being (SWB) in fostering resilience and improving mental health outcomes among secondary vocational students. CR, an emotion regulation strategy involving the reinterpretation of negative experiences, is identified as an important tool for mitigating emotional distress and enhancing coping abilities. SWB, encompassing life satisfaction and emotional experiences, is also emphasized as a critical determinant of psychological well-being. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) theory, and Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), this paper explores how autonomy-supportive environments and emotion regulation can buffer the effects of stress and promote mental health. The analysis suggests that CR can help students reframe academic and social challenges, fostering a positive outlook and emotional stability. Furthermore, enhancing SWB through supportive teacher-student relationships and parental involvement is essential for promoting well-being. This study highlights the importance of integrating CR into educational curricula to build emotional resilience and improve mental health in vocational education settings. Several gaps in existing research are also discussed, including the underrepresentation of vocational students in psychological studies and the need for longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of CR and SWB interventions.

Keywords – Cognitive Reappraisal, Subjective Well-being, Secondary Vocational Students, Mental Health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health has become a global concern, particularly in the context of high-pressure educational environments. In China, the dual-track education system funnels students into either academic or vocational paths based largely on standardized test performance. Those who do not perform well are often enrolled in secondary vocational schools. While vocational education plays a vital role in national workforce development, students in this stream face unique psychological and social challenges that negatively impact their mental well-being. The transition from academic education to vocational education often leads to feelings of failure and stigma, as students perceive

vocational training as less prestigious (Li & Liu, 2018; Zhuang, 2015).

Secondary vocational students often experience lower social status, limited upward mobility, and external stigmatization, which can result in increased vulnerability to emotional distress such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Xu, 2016; Dong et al., 2020). The societal perception that vocational education is a secondary option contributes to these feelings, reinforcing the emotional burdens on students who may already struggle with academic performance. According to data from the Ministry of Education (2023), China currently has over 28 million students enrolled in vocational schools, yet the mental health of this population remains under-researched and under-supported. These challenges call for a more comprehensive understanding of protective psychological factors that can buffer the effects of such adverse conditions.

In fact, studies have demonstrated that adolescents in vocational settings are more likely to experience significant psychological distress compared to their peers in academic tracks, with a higher incidence of anxiety, depression, and feelings of alienation (Li & Liu, 2018; Yu et al., 2017). Given this, fostering mental health and well-being in vocational students is not only necessary for individual development but also for improving overall educational outcomes and societal integration.

Cognitive reappraisal (CR) and subjective well-being (SWB) as factors have garnered growing attention in adolescent psychology. Cognitive reappraisal is an adaptive emotion regulation strategy that enables individuals to reinterpret negative experiences in a more positive or neutral light, reducing the emotional intensity of the experience (Gross, 1998). This strategy is particularly important for vocational students, who often encounter setbacks and stigmatization in both educational and social contexts. By learning to reframe these challenges, students may mitigate feelings of inadequacy and develop a more positive outlook on their experiences (Brockman et al., 2023).

Subjective well-being (SWB), on the other hand, refers to a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of their life as satisfying and emotionally positive. It includes both life satisfaction and emotional experiences, such as the frequency of positive versus negative emotions (Diener et al., 1985). For adolescents, particularly those in vocational education, SWB serves as a key predictor of overall mental health, influencing their ability to cope with stress, interact socially, and perform academically. Research has shown that SWB is strongly linked to lower levels of psychological distress and higher levels of resilience (Fredrickson, 2001; Diener et al., 1999). Yet, despite its importance, SWB remains underexplored among vocational school students, whose socio-economic

Wang Bodier, Universiti Putra Malaysia, (Email address: gs68344@student.upm.edu.my).

Tajularipin Sulaiman, Universiti Putra Malaysia, (Email address: tajulas@upm.edu.my)

Nuraini Jafri, Universiti Putra Malaysia, (Email address: nurainijafri@upm.edu.my).

pressures and academic experiences may affect their overall life satisfaction.

This study aims to examine existing research on cognitive reappraisal and subjective well-being among adolescents and explore their impact on the mental health of secondary vocational students in China. Drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) Theory, the review seeks to clarify the interplay between cognitive strategies, emotional experiences, and environmental support in fostering mental health resilience. In particular, it will explore how CR and SWB can buffer the negative effects of stressors in vocational education settings, enhance coping strategies, and improve overall well-being. By synthesizing these frameworks, the review will provide insights into how educational and psychological interventions can support vocational students in managing their mental health more effectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Subjective Well-being (SWB)

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to individuals' overall evaluation of their lives in terms of cognitive judgments (e.g., life satisfaction) and affective states (e.g., presence of positive emotions and absence of negative emotions) (Diener et al., 1985). SWB has become a prominent measure of mental health and quality of life, especially among adolescents who are developing emotional and cognitive maturity.

SWB is composed of three primary elements: (1) life satisfaction as a global cognitive assessment, (2) positive affect reflecting the experience of emotions like joy or hope, and (3) negative affect which includes distress, anger, or sadness. Higher levels of SWB are consistently associated with better emotional regulation, reduced risk of psychopathology, and greater academic and social success (Fredrickson, 2001; Diener et al., 1999).

SWB in Adolescents and Vocational Students

Adolescents with higher SWB show better emotional adjustment and are more resilient to stressful life events. In contrast, those with low SWB are more vulnerable to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and emotional withdrawal (Zhang et al., 2017). In the context of vocational education, SWB becomes particularly significant due to the increased prevalence of social stigma, lower academic achievement, and reduced parental involvement.

Cui (2018) posits that for vocational students, SWB is not only determined by internal factors like self-esteem but is also heavily influenced by external perceptions, peer relationships, and teacher recognition. Schools that foster supportive teacher-student relationships and allow students greater autonomy in decision-making are more likely to enhance students' SWB (Willey, 2015).

SWB is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internally, traits such as gratitude, self-acceptance, and optimism have been shown to increase SWB (Dewi et

al., 2021). Externally, perceived autonomy support from parents and teachers plays a pivotal role. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), environments that nurture autonomy, competence, and relatedness fulfill basic psychological needs, thereby elevating SWB.

For vocational students, enhancing SWB requires more than emotional resilience—it demands structural changes in how schools and families interact with them. Autonomy-supportive environments that validate their goals, respect their experiences, and recognize their potential can substantially improve their subjective happiness and emotional functioning (Fredricks et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2022).

Cognitive Reappraisal (CR)

Cognitive reappraisal (CR) is a form of emotion regulation in which individuals change the way they think about a potentially emotion-eliciting event in order to modify its emotional impact (Gross, 1998). It is considered an antecedent-focused strategy because it occurs early in the emotion generation process—before a full-blown emotional response is produced.

Gross and John (2003) argue that compared to suppression, which attempts to inhibit outward emotional responses, CR is more adaptive and effective. It reduces negative emotional intensity, enhances positive emotions, and does not interfere with memory, attention, or other cognitive resources. Neurodevelopmental studies also support the view that during adolescence, the maturation of the prefrontal cortex strengthens executive functions such as cognitive flexibility and reappraisal capacity (Schweizer & Blakemore, 2020).

CR in Adolescents and Vocational Students

Among adolescents, frequent use of cognitive reappraisal (CR) is associated with higher emotional stability, lower depressive symptoms, and improved interpersonal relationships. Adolescents who engage in CR are better able to manage and reduce negative emotions, reframe academic setbacks as learning opportunities, and view peer conflicts as solvable challenges rather than threats to their self-worth (Cutuli, 2014; Gullone & Taffe, 2012). This ability to regulate emotions through cognitive reappraisal contributes significantly to better psychological well-being and resilience in adolescents, enabling them to adapt to the various stressors of adolescence, such as academic demands, family expectations, and social pressures.

In vocational education settings, CR is particularly beneficial for students who face unique, layered challenges—academic underachievement, lower perceived autonomy, and uncertain career trajectories. For vocational students, whose education and career path are often perceived as secondary or less prestigious, CR serves as a powerful tool to mitigate feelings of failure and reduce the emotional burden of vocational training. Instead of seeing vocational education as an irreversible setback, students who practice CR can view it as a stepping stone towards developing practical skills, gaining economic independence, and achieving self-worth (Yan et al., 2023).

This reframing helps to alleviate negative emotions such as shame and frustration, allowing students to approach their education with a more positive and productive mindset.

Research has shown that students who are exposed to CR strategies, particularly within educational settings, are better able to handle academic feedback that may otherwise be perceived as a threat to their self-esteem (Wang & Shi, 2024). For example, rather than internalizing poor grades as evidence of incompetence, students who engage in CR are more likely to attribute academic challenges to controllable factors such as effort or learning strategies, which increases their motivation and engagement (Goldin et al., 2008). CR also aids students in managing interpersonal conflicts more constructively, allowing them to engage with peers and teachers in more harmonious ways, thus improving their relationships and overall school experience.

Vocational students in China, particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, may experience heightened stress due to their lower social status and the external stigmatization of vocational education. These students are more likely to feel marginalized and powerless, which further exacerbates their emotional distress. By teaching CR, teachers can help students view their vocational education as a valid and valuable path to personal and professional success. Additionally, CR enables students to reinterpret the challenges they face—such as academic setbacks, job market uncertainties, and societal stereotypes—not as limitations, but as opportunities for personal growth and empowerment. This shift in perspective can enhance students' emotional resilience, promote mental health, and foster a sense of control over their educational and professional futures.

Teachers play a crucial role in modeling and teaching CR strategies in the classroom. Studies show that when educators incorporate emotional regulation strategies, such as CR, into their teaching practices, students tend to develop better emotional control and coping skills. Bai and Huang (2023) emphasize that teachers who model CR behaviours can guide students in transforming their perceived social deficits—such as struggles with academic performance or peer relationships—into internal strengths. For example, through CR, students can come to view peer competition as an opportunity to improve rather than as a source of anxiety. Additionally, when students see their teachers employing CR in response to setbacks, they are more likely to adopt these strategies themselves. This creates a positive feedback loop in which both students and teachers reinforce adaptive emotional behaviours.

Integrating Emotional Regulation Modules into the Curriculum

Practical applications of cognitive reappraisal (CR) in educational settings include integrating emotional regulation modules into the curriculum, using reflective journaling, and role-playing scenarios. Research has shown that such interventions can significantly enhance students' ability to manage negative emotions and improve their mental health. For example, incorporating CR strategies into social-emotional learning (SEL) programs has been proven effective in fostering emotional resilience in

adolescents (Brockman et al., 2023). Teachers can encourage students to express frustrations constructively and help them reframe challenges as opportunities for growth. This process of reinterpreting setbacks can empower students, particularly those in vocational education, who often experience social and academic challenges that lead to feelings of inferiority (Li & Liu, 2018). By teaching students to reframe failure as a learning opportunity, teachers can help them develop a growth mindset, which is crucial for maintaining positive self-esteem and psychological stability (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In addition, role-playing scenarios provide an excellent opportunity for students to practice CR in a safe, controlled environment. Studies have found that role-playing exercises that focus on conflict resolution and stress management enable students to better cope with real-life challenges (Ke, 2024). These activities not only improve students' emotional regulation skills but also promote positive peer relationships, as they learn to reframe interpersonal conflicts in a less emotionally charged way.

Creating safe emotional spaces in classrooms is also essential for fostering the psychological conditions needed for effective CR to occur. According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), autonomy-supportive environments, where students feel respected and valued, are more conducive to the development of emotion regulation skills. When students perceive their classroom as a supportive space, they are more likely to engage in CR strategies to cope with stressors such as academic pressure and peer judgment (Reeve, 2009). Moreover, an emotionally safe classroom environment reduces the stigma surrounding mental health issues, allowing students to seek help when needed without fear of judgment (Gao, 2018).

III. RELEVANT THEORIES

Theoretical Integration

A growing body of research suggests that cognitive reappraisal (CR) and subjective well-being (SWB) are not only individually important but also interactively influence mental health outcomes. Individuals who use CR effectively tend to report higher levels of SWB, as CR reduces negative emotions and increases positive emotional experiences (Chen & Wang, 2014). In turn, high SWB reinforces the motivation and mental clarity needed to use CR during emotional challenges, creating a feedback loop that strengthens both emotional regulation and psychological resilience (Fredrickson, 2001).

From a theoretical standpoint, the interaction between CR and SWB can be explained through three psychological frameworks:

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that autonomy-supportive environments are essential for both CR and SWB. Autonomy support refers to practices that encourage individuals to make their own choices, feel competent in their actions, and develop meaningful social connections. In the context of vocational

students, environments that provide emotional validation, respect students' autonomy, and nurture their competence are likely to enhance CR strategies. These environments, by fulfilling basic psychological needs, can also increase students' life satisfaction and well-being, thus improving their overall mental health. For example, teachers who provide constructive feedback while encouraging self-regulation can significantly boost students' CR abilities and enhance their SWB (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Cognitive Information Processing (CIP)

Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) Theory explains that CR serves as a cognitive strategy to manage internal representations of stressors, such as academic challenges, interpersonal conflict, and career uncertainties. According to Sampson et al. (2020), CR enhances adaptive decision-making by allowing individuals to interpret stressors in a less threatening or more manageable way. This process enables students to improve their emotional resilience by reducing cognitive distortions, which could otherwise lead to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. For vocational students, who often face stigmatization and heightened academic pressure, CR helps reframe educational challenges as opportunities for skill development, thus fostering SWB and mental health (Gao, 2018). This cognitive restructuring can significantly reduce the perceived severity of stressors and improve students' coping abilities (Sampson et al., 2020).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997) suggests that CR and SWB are shaped by social modelling and perceived self-efficacy. According to SCT, individuals learn behaviours through observing others and receiving feedback from their social environment. In the context of vocational education, teachers, peers, and family members serve as key social models. When vocational students observe their teachers or peers effectively using CR to cope with stress, they are more likely to adopt these strategies themselves. Additionally, when students receive positive reinforcement for employing CR (such as improved academic performance or better peer relationships), they develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy, which in turn boosts their SWB. This process emphasizes the reciprocal nature of emotion regulation and mental well-being, where positive emotional experiences and behavioural patterns can be reinforced through social interaction and environmental feedback (Bandura, 1997). For vocational students, who may struggle with feelings of inferiority and social stigma, the social learning process can help shift their mindset and improve their mental health outcomes.

Multiple studies have confirmed the pathway: CR → higher SWB → improved mental health. Ye and He (2012) demonstrated that adolescents who employ CR strategies experience fewer negative emotions, stronger psychological resilience, and higher life satisfaction. These findings are particularly relevant for vocational students who often face emotional challenges due to academic and social pressures. Chen and Wang (2014) further found that

CR enhances students' ability to recover from interpersonal conflict, reinforcing their emotional equilibrium and promoting well-being.

These findings have specific implications for vocational students. The act of reframing social stigma and academic difficulty as developmental stepping-stones can elevate both SWB and long-term mental wellness. Vocational students often face significant social challenges, including perceptions of failure and low social status. Integrating CR training into daily school life can help shift maladaptive interpretations into growth-oriented mindsets. For example, students can be taught to view difficulties in the job market or struggles with academic subjects as opportunities for personal growth and skill development, rather than as signs of inadequacy (Mostajabi, 2020). Additionally, CR can help vocational students cope with the societal pressures surrounding their educational choices and career aspirations, contributing to improved self-esteem and greater emotional resilience.

In conclusion, the integration of CR and SWB is crucial for enhancing mental health, particularly for secondary vocational students who face unique stressors. By adopting an autonomy-supportive approach that promotes CR, educational environments can help students reframe their experiences, strengthen their emotional resilience, and ultimately improve their mental well-being.

IV. CONCLUSION

Secondary vocational students in China face a distinct set of psychological challenges due to academic tracking, social stigma, and limited future opportunities. These challenges, combined with a lack of sufficient mental health support, make vocational students a vulnerable group within the broader adolescent population. Addressing the mental health needs of these students is not only a moral imperative but also a societal necessity. Cognitive reappraisal (CR) and subjective well-being (SWB) have emerged as essential psychological constructs that help buffer the negative effects of stress, improve emotional regulation, and support long-term psychological resilience.

This study synthesizes existing research on how CR and SWB function individually and interactively to enhance the mental health of adolescents, particularly those in vocational education. Drawing upon established theories such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and Cognitive Information Processing (CIP), this review highlights the significance of autonomy-supportive environments, emotion regulation training, and inclusive educational practices. It is evident that CR, when integrated into educational settings, plays a vital role in helping vocational students reframe their challenges, reduce negative emotions, and develop greater emotional flexibility. Furthermore, increasing students' SWB fosters a positive environment where they can thrive both academically and socially.

This study also emphasizes the critical role of educators, parents, and school environments in promoting CR and SWB. Teachers, for instance, can create supportive classrooms where CR strategies are not only taught but modelled, allowing students to adopt these techniques in their daily lives. Similarly, involving parents in supporting

students' emotional regulation and well-being, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can create a consistent and reinforcing support system at home (Ma et al., 2022). Additionally, improving access to school counseling resources, such as one-on-one sessions and workshops, is crucial to providing students with the necessary emotional support.

However, several research gaps remain, including the underrepresentation of vocational students in studies on adolescent mental health, the lack of longitudinal studies to track changes in CR and SWB over time, and the limited cultural contextualization of Western psychological theories in Chinese vocational settings. Future research should focus on these gaps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how CR and SWB influence the mental health of vocational students. Moreover, the development of culturally sensitive tools for assessing CR, SWB, and mental health in this population is essential for effective interventions.

In conclusion, the findings from this review suggest that promoting mental health in secondary vocational students is a multifaceted challenge that requires a collaborative effort from schools, families, and policymakers. By fostering supportive environments that promote CR and SWB, vocational schools can help students not only cope with challenges but also develop the resilience and skills necessary to thrive in their personal and professional lives.

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