

Original Research Article

"Co-construction·heart-building" healing garden: Exploring a new paradigm of ecological labor practice based on horticultural therapy

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Abstract: This paper presents the "Co-construction · Heart-Building" Healing Garden labor education program, which aims to explore a new paradigm of ecological labor practice grounded in horticultural therapy. By deeply integrating labor, aesthetic, psychological, and ideological-political education, the program seeks to enhance the positive psychological qualities of university students. This case study conducted in-depth research on student needs, provided diversified guidance, and meticulously designed and implemented a variety of branded horticultural activities, including the co-construction of pocket gardens and horticultural therapy sessions. These initiatives enabled students to experience the growth of life and achieve spiritual healing through their participation in labor. Furthermore, the case leverages diverse labor venues to construct a comprehensive labor education environment, holistically fostering students' positive mindsets and their capacity for happiness and creativity. The program emphasizes the positive impact of labor on mental health, guiding students to cultivate self-confidence, optimism, and psychological resilience through intimate interaction with nature, thereby igniting the light of hope within their hearts and enabling them to profoundly understand and experience the value of labor and the meaning of life .

Keywords: horticultural therapy; ecological labor; healing garden; mental health education

1. Implementation background of labor education

In alignment with national directives such as the "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening Labor Education in Primary, Secondary, and Higher Schools in the New Era" and the "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Student Mental Health Work (2023—2025)," this case study aims to achieve the educational goal of "promoting mental health through the simultaneous development of five educations." It utilizes horticultural therapy as its theoretical foundation to explore a new paradigm of ecological labor practice, thereby fulfilling the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education .

Currently, students face significant challenges, including high academic pressure and increasingly prominent mental health issues. Among them, high-concern groups exhibit particularly severe psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. These issues not only impair students' physical and mental health but also pose potential risks to their future growth and development. Consequently, identifying and implementing effective mental health education methods is of paramount importance.

The implementing unit for this case is the School of Architectural Engineering, which leverages its rich horticultural resources and professional experience by integrating plant cultivation, flower arrangement, and other practical horticultural activities into the curriculum of the "Landscape Architecture" program. However, effectively combining these resources with students' mental health needs has become a pressing issue. To address this, the case introduces horticultural therapy as a theoretical basis, integrating it with the program's practical horticultural activities to explore a new paradigm of ecological labor practice .

"Horticultural therapy," as an auxiliary psychotherapeutic method, alleviates stress and rehabilitates the mind through contact with natural environments and participation in horticultural activities, exerting positive effects on physical, emotional, cognitive, and social capacities. "Ecological labor practice" is an educational method aimed at cultivating students' ecological awareness and labor skills, with its core focus on enabling students to understand the relationships between humans, nature, and society through hands-on activities, thereby enhancing their literacy in ecological civilization. Therefore, this case employs the "Co-construction · Heart-Building"

Healing Garden labor education project as its implementation vehicle. Through ecological labor practices based on horticultural therapy, students personally experience the healing power and charm of nature, effectively addressing current mental health challenges. It is expected to help students establish a positive mindset, enhance self-awareness and emotional regulation skills, and lay a solid foundation for their future comprehensive development.

2. Specific implementation content

2.1. Framework for ecological labor practice based on horticultural therapy

The School of Architectural Engineering, the implementing unit, has integrated practical horticultural activities like plant cultivation and flower arrangement into the "Landscape Architecture" curriculum, accumulating horticultural resources and experience. College mental health surveys show some students, especially those in high - concern groups, face anxiety and depression. So, this case uses horticultural therapy as the theoretical basis and the "'Co - construction · Heart - Building' Healing Garden" as the labor education project. It aims to let students experience nature's healing power through horticultural activities, integrating labor, aesthetic, moral, and mental health education, and constructing a new ecological labor practice paradigm based on horticultural therapy. The case focuses on group counseling, monitoring student feedback during horticultural practices. Through these activities, it conveys the importance of psychological resilience, self - efficacy, hope, and optimism, and guides students to reflect on life's meaning. The long - term goal is to help students understand life's meaning through practice, enhancing self - confidence, cultivating optimism, igniting hope, and strengthening psychological adaptability and life - value awareness. The specific paradigm is shown in the figure below.

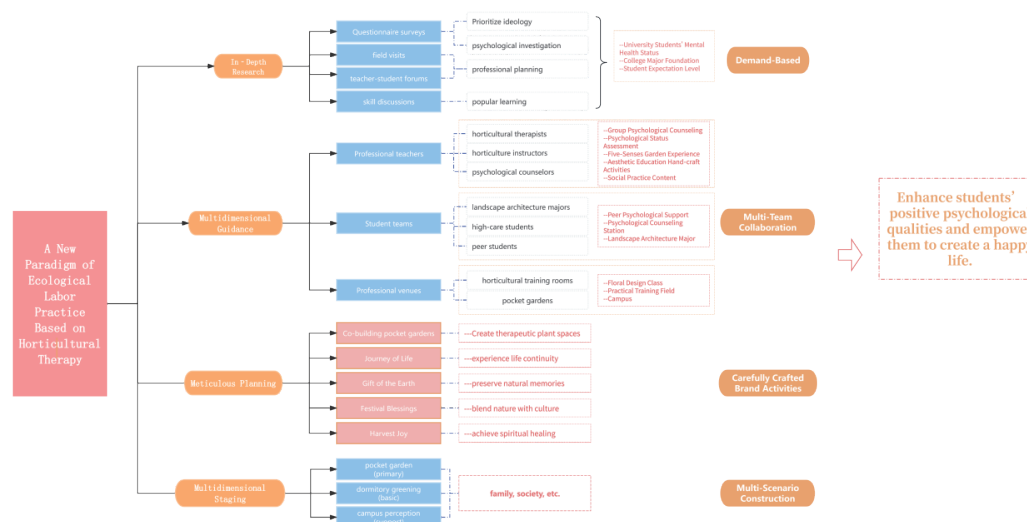


Figure 1. A new paradigm of ecological labor practice for university students based on horticultural therapy.

2.2. Exploration of ecological labor practice based on horticultural therapy

2.2.1. In-depth research to accurately assess student needs

To understand students' psychological needs and mental health status precisely, the case conducted systematic research before practical activities. The team designed and administered psychological needs questionnaires to collect students' views on mental health, analyzed stress points in their academic lives, and sorted out their expectations for mental health services. It also conducted individualized interviews with high - concern students for primary data.

In addition, the team carried out field visits and held symposiums with faculty and students to directly grasp students' true thoughts. During the symposiums, they discussed labor practice arrangements to align activities with students' needs.

To enhance professionalism and safety of labor practices, the team organized skills workshops. Specialized instructors provided training for students and teachers to ensure correct operation and avoid safety risks, and it also promoted teamwork.

Through these research and activities, the team grasped students' psychological needs and health status, laying a foundation for subsequent labor practice activities. The case believes these efforts will facilitate students' self - growth and help them achieve health and happiness through labor practice.

2.2.2. Diversified guidance to jointly foster student growth

In this labor practice case, a diversified guidance team including horticultural therapists, teachers, and counselors was formed. They collaborated from labor, psychology, and integrated education perspectives to plan and guide students' practical activities. Professional teachers assessed students' psychological states, and psychological group counseling improved teamwork and psychological qualities. Student teams were important too. Landscape architecture students provided technical support, and peer students offered emotional support, creating a harmonious atmosphere and providing practical opportunities and spiritual healing for special - attention students. The case used professional venues. The horticulture training room offered a realistic labor environment, and the pocket garden project let students create green spaces, experience labor fruits, and cultivate a sense of life's meaning. In summary, this innovative labor practice system effectively used teamwork, enabling students to gain knowledge and skills through labor and enhance self - worth and the sense of life's meaning through collaboration.

2.2.3. Meticulous planning focused on healing students' minds and souls

Table 1. Practical activity content and psychological guidance.

Week	activity theme	activity content	Activity Leader
1	and become partners with nature	Task of seedling selection, wheat grass adoption and observation Open the healing group's activity log.	Psychological Counselor/Cultivation Society/ Psychological Station
2	Plant Hope	Repot and build a garden discussion.	Psychological Counselor/Campus Community/ Campus Psychological Center
3	Create a healing plant space	Set up a pocket garden on site.	Psychological Counselor/Station/Cultivation Society
4	Feel life going on and growing	Watch the growth of the seedlings, Wheat grass and plant cuttings.	Garden therapist
5	Use nourishing energy	Plant care, Watering and fertilizing and making ecological tank.	Garden therapist/landscape architecture teacher
6	Leave a beautiful memory of nature	Color the cloth bag, emotional guidance.	Psychological Counselor/Cultivation Society/ Psychological Station
7	Feel the earth's gift	Pick vegetables and peppers, harvest feelings.	Psychological Counselor/Station/Cultivation Society
8	A Journey of Stillness in Blossom	The results of cuttings and the five senses of flowers.	Psychological Counselor/Campus Community/ Campus Psychological Center
9	Festival Grace	Zongzi is wrapped with mugwort leaves during the Dragon Boat Festival.	Psychological Counselor/Station/Cultivation Society
10	Delicious Harvest	Pick tomatoes, share kitchen.	Psychological Counselor/Campus Community/ Campus Psychological Center
11	Start a new journey	Showcase achievements, share photos and videos, share on-site, and exchange gifts.	Garden therapist, psychological counselor, psychological support center, and community building group

Note: The activities are designed to align with seasonal changes, festivals, and specific times of year. Each event builds upon the previous one, maintaining continuity and creating a sense of value. For example, the fabric bags created through the rubbing technique can later be used to hold sachets made from herbs. The pressed flower sections can be transformed into picture frames or keepsake albums, while the mugwort and wormwood used during the Dragon Boat Festival can be creatively repurposed.

The "Co-construction · Heart-Building" Healing Garden labor education project, as the core of this case, is a series of professionally characterized ecological labor practice activities meticulously planned based on horticultural therapy theory and students' actual conditions. These activities aim to enrich students' extracurricular lives while carrying profound psychological and educational significance, as shown in **Table 1**.

In the "Co-construction of Pocket Garden" activity, students personally built their own green spaces, experiencing the growth and changes of life through their labor. Weekly horticultural healing activities, through plant observation and sensory experiences, guided students to focus on themselves and express their inner feelings. In this process, students learned to converse with nature and listen to the voice of their hearts in silence. The "Journey of Life" activity, using breathing exercises and physical perception of plants, helped students relax their bodies and minds, releasing tension and stress. This case guided students to embrace nature, feel the gifts of the earth, and experience the connection and harmony among living beings. Activities such as "Festival Grace"

and "Joy of Harvest" further integrated horticulture with traditional culture, allowing students to appreciate the profound heritage of Chinese culture in a joyful atmosphere.

To strengthen students' teamwork and social skills, this case grouped participants to jointly execute horticultural tasks, such as planting and maintaining plants. In observing the life cycles of plants, students deeply discussed the growth and changes of life, thereby cherishing the present more and bravely facing the future. To ensure the effectiveness of horticultural therapy, this case regularly employed qualitative and quantitative methods for monitoring and evaluation. By collecting student feedback, the therapeutic activities and garden area design were continuously adjusted to maximize the healing effect. These meticulous details made the branded activities in this case more responsive to student needs, providing robust support for their mental health.

The "Co-construction · Heart-Building" Healing Garden labor education project not only enriched students' extracurricular lives but also sowed the seeds of health deep in their souls. As these activities advance, students will reap growth and happiness in labor, embracing future challenges with a more positive mindset.

2.2.4. Multi-dimensional venue setup to comprehensively promote student development

In this case, the pocket garden, dormitories, and the whole campus form a comprehensive labor - education venue. It aims to provide spiritual healing for students through horticultural activities and promote their all - round growth. The pocket garden, the main practice site, lets students experience horticultural labor, hone practical skills, and nourish souls. The dormitory plant healing corner adds greenery to daily life, helping students beautify the dorm, release stress, and relax. The whole campus is a large labor - practice stage, guiding students to perceive campus life, experience biodiversity, and providing a peaceful study space. Moreover, this case extends horticultural therapy to families and society. It encourages students to integrate horticultural activities into family life to strengthen parent - child relationships. It also collaborates with communities on community - garden co - construction projects, enabling students to feel the social value of horticulture. Additionally, the "Park 20 Minutes" micro - healing project is introduced to encourage students to visit nearby parks for horticultural labor or nature observation to relax and enhance self - awareness. Through these diverse labor venues and well - planned healing projects, this case hopes students can find joy in labor, discover healing in nature, and achieve physical and mental harmony and all - round development.

3. Outcomes and efficacy

The "Co - construction · Heart - Building" Healing Garden labor education project was launched in early November 2023 and lasted over eight months. With high student enthusiasm, about 300+ person - times participated.

First, in psychological education, students reduced academic stress and improved mental states through gardening and other practical activities. Interaction with nature gave them spiritual solace and a positive attitude. Professional counselors also provided spiritual healing and growth.

Second, for teamwork and social skills, labor practice activities offered collaboration opportunities. In joint horticultural tasks, students deepened understanding and trust, fostering teamwork. This improved collaborative ability impacts personal growth and future career development.

Finally, in aesthetic education and innovative capabilities, activities like garden co - construction and landscape design stimulated students' creative potential and aesthetic sense. Building beautiful environments enhanced their artistic literacy and taught them to discover and create beauty. These activities also encouraged innovation and elevated their innovative consciousness and practical skills.

4. Experience and lessons

This labor education case achieved significant results by implementing a series of key measures, including in-depth research, diversified guidance, meticulous planning, and multi-dimensional venue setup. Its main success factors are summarized as follows:

(1) Foremost is the precise insight into student needs, utilizing questionnaires and interviews to deeply understand students' psychological expectations, ensuring activities are closely aligned with their actual needs .

(2) Efficient team collaboration, establishing a diversified guidance team, leveraging the college's professional strengths, and forming a powerful synergy.

(3) The case meticulously planned diverse activity content based on horticultural therapy theory, organizing practical activities rich in psychological and educational value .

(4) The case expanded diversified labor venues, from pocket gardens to dormitories, campuses, and even families and communities, constructing a comprehensive platform for labor education .

(5) The case achieved integration across multiple educational domains, comprehensively enhancing students' positive psychological qualities and their capacity for happiness and creativity .

From the perspective of lessons learned, the case realizes labor education is not just skill - transmission but also soul - nourishment. Integrating mental health education into labor practice helps students find joy in work and achieve spiritual healing and growth. However, the case has shortcomings. The sustainability and depth of activities need strengthening, and more attention should be paid to student feedback and long - term effects after activities. There is also room for improvement in resource integration and utilization, and cooperative channels need to be expanded to enrich labor education resources. In the future, the case will deepen labor education practice, strengthen continuous tracking and evaluation of activities to ensure long - term educational outcomes. It will also actively seek external collaborations, introduce high - quality resources to promote labor education development and help students achieve comprehensive growth.

5. Promotion and application

This labor education case possesses broad applicability and is particularly suitable for promotion and implementation in schools at all levels, especially primary and secondary schools, aiming to foster students' mental health and comprehensive development. Its application scenarios include but are not limited to school labor courses, mental health education activities, and extracurricular practices. Through practical activities such as gardening and handicraft making, students can personally experience the joy of labor, cultivate a spirit of teamwork, and achieve spiritual healing effects through interaction with nature .

During the promotion process, special attention should be paid to the following points :

(1) Ensure the safety of activities by providing students with professional skills training to prevent accidents .

(2) Flexibly adjust activity content based on students' actual situations to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the activities, meeting the needs of different students .

(3) Emphasize the continuity and evaluation of activities, with timely adjustments and optimizations to ensure the long-term stability of educational outcomes .

Through a scientific and rigorous promotion approach, this case is expected to bring positive impacts to more students, helping them achieve healthy growth and contributing to the cultivation of well-rounded talents for the new era.

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