A Review of the Sense of Life Meaning in Primary and Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The sense of life meaning is an individual's subjective experience of the value, purpose, and significance of life, which has a significant impact on mental health and quality of life. Primary and secondary school students are at a critical period of physical and psychological development, making the cultivation of a sense of life meaning particularly important. This article provides a comprehensive review of recent research on the sense of life meaning among primary and secondary school students, covering aspects such as definition, measurement tools, influencing factors, and intervention measures. It also proposes directions for future research. By reviewing existing literature, this article aims to provide theoretical support and practical recommendations for educators, psychologists, and policymakers to promote the mental health and holistic development of primary and secondary school students.

Keywords

Primary and secondary school students; sense of life meaning；influencing factors; intervention measures.

1. Introduction

Sense of Meaning in Life refers to an individual's subjective experience of the value, purpose, and significance of life. It is a crucial component of mental health. Middle and elementary school students are in a critical period of physical and psychological development. The sense of meaning in life during this stage has profound effects on their self-identity, emotional regulation, and behavioral choices. However, many middle school students lack sufficient awareness of the meaning of life during this critical period. This deficiency leads to a lack of clear life goals and directions, a negative attitude towards life, and may result in various academic and psychological issues, even suicidal thoughts. In recent years, increasing research has focused on the sense of meaning in life among middle and elementary school students, exploring its definition, measurement tools, influencing factors, and intervention measures. This article aims to comprehensively understand the current state of research on the sense of meaning in life for middle and elementary school students through a review of related literature, providing references for future research and practice.

2. The Connotation of Sense of Meaning in Life

Regarding the definition of sense of meaning in life, different scholars and researchers may have varying interpretations and expressions. Generally speaking, it can be broadly categorized into two mainstream perspectives: unidimensional and multidimensional concepts.

From a unidimensional viewpoint, foreign scholars have offered a series of explanations for the sense of meaning in life. Frankl (1963) believes that the sense of meaning in life is an instinct that motivates us to continuously pursue worthwhile and meaningful endeavors, prompting us to accept challenges and grow. Crumbaugh (1964) operationally defines the sense of meaning in life as the internal experience of perceiving oneself as a valuable individual. Heine et al. (2006)

suggest that the process of forming a sense of meaning in life involves psychological cognition of the connection between the self and the external world, and this cognition evolves and updates with the enhancement of cognitive abilities, thereby deepening the understanding and recognition of life's meaning. Defining the sense of meaning in life as a positive attitude towards life, domestic researchers have interpreted it from various dimensions. He Yingqi (1987) proposed that the sense of meaning in life refers to an individual's perception of life goals and significance. This perception plays a crucial role in guiding individuals to recognize the value and direction of life, leading them to seek a sense of existence and worth (Song Qiurong, 1992). He Yuling (1999) suggests that the meaning of life is a unique responsibility for each individual, guiding them to explore life's direction and value, and fulfill their unique mission. Chen Xiuyun (2008) views the sense of meaning in life as an individual's perception of their purpose and value in existence. In the study by Lai Xuefen, Bao Zhenzhou, and Wang Yanhui (2016), the sense of meaning in life involves an individual's understanding and experience of their own life, as well as the recognition of goals and tasks.

From a multidimensional perspective, the academic community has developed classifications ranging from two-dimensional to seven-dimensional models. In the early 1980s, Reker and Peacock (1981) proposed a seven-dimensional model of the sense of meaning in life, which includes: purpose in life, existential vacuum, control over life, acceptance of death, will to find meaning, goal seeking, and future meaning. Towards the end of the 20th century, Wong (1998) and Reker (2000) introduced a three-dimensional model of the sense of meaning in life, encompassing three core dimensions: cognitive, motivational, and emotional. Similarly, Li Hong (2006) suggested that the sense of meaning in life not only includes self-transcendence but also involves exploring the meaning of life, pursuing self-transcendence, and life control, a view shared by Chen Lingyu and Song Guangwen (2019). King et al. (2006) also support the three-dimensional theory of life meaning and were the first to explicitly propose this concept. They divided it into three parts: coherence, purpose, and significance (Martela & Steger, 2016). Steger et al. (2009) proposed that the sense of meaning in life is reflected in people's understanding of life's meaning and their recognition of personal goals and responsibilities. This concept covers both the presence of meaning and the search for meaning. The presence of meaning reflects individuals' perception and identification with the meaning of life, belonging to the cognitive category; while the search for meaning reflects the motivation and achievement of goals obtained during the exploration of life's meaning, belonging to the motivational category.

In summary, regarding the understanding of the sense of meaning in life, the academic community generally agrees on two basic aspects. First, the sense of meaning in life usually encompasses certain objective and valuable goals or missions. Second, as individuals strive to pursue and achieve these goals or missions, they experience a subjective sense of accomplishment, meaning, and satisfaction, thereby gaining a deeper appreciation of the meaning of life.

3. Life Meaning Measurement Tools

3.1. Major International Life Meaning Measures

The Purpose in Life Test (PIL) is the most well-known and widely used life meaning scale. Developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick in the 1960s, based on Frankl's concept of life meaning, the PIL measures the extent to which individuals find meaning and purpose in life. The test consists of 20 items rated on a 7-point scale, with scores ranging from the lowest 20 to the highest 140. Each item uses bipolar adjectives for evaluation, such as: "I often feel: very bored (1)... full of energy (7)." While the scale demonstrates good reliability, its validity has faced considerable criticism (Reker & Fry, 2003). Firstly, it lacks a stable factor structure; sometimes

three factors are identified, other times four or five. Secondly, the PIL has a high correlation with social desirability, overlapping significantly with related concepts like happiness (Steger et al., 2006).

The Life Regard Index (LRI), developed by Battista and Almond in 1973, consists of two subscales: Framework and Fulfillment. The former assesses the extent to which individuals comprehend their purpose in life through meaningful life frameworks or goals, while the latter examines the sense of fulfillment that follows once this framework is recognized (Battista & Almond, 1973). The Framework and Fulfillment subscales measure the cognitive and emotional components of life meaning, respectively. The scale uses a 5-point Likert-type scoring system ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 5 "Strongly Agree". Each subscale contains 14 items, half of which are positively worded and the other half negatively worded. In a study by Steger (2008), both the total LRI scale and its subscales demonstrated internal consistency reliability above 0.87. However, like the PIL, the LRI also faces issues with unclear factor structure and high overlap with other related concepts. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that the structure of the LRI is neither two-factor (Framework vs. Fulfillment or Positive Meaning vs. Negative Meaning) nor four-factor (Positive Framework, Negative Framework, Positive Fulfillment, Negative Fulfillment); instead, parallel analysis suggests three factors. Additionally, due to items such as "I am passionate about my life," the LRI conflates the measurement of life meaning with that of enthusiasm, energy, and happiness (Steger, 2007).

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), developed by Steger et al. in 2006, addresses the issues of unclear item content, unstable structure, and insufficient measurement comprehensiveness found in the previously mentioned scales. It also examines the fundamental human motive of seeking meaning in life. The MLQ consists of two subscales: Presence of Meaning (MLQ-presence) and Search for Meaning (MLQ-search). The Search subscale (MLQ-search) measures the extent to which individuals seek meaning in their lives and includes five items; the Presence subscale (MLQ-presence) measures the degree to which individuals feel their lives are meaningful and also contains five items. The scale uses a 7-point Likert-type scoring system. In multiple studies, even across different age groups (18-24, 24-44, 45-64, and over 65 years old) and cultural backgrounds (United States, Spain, Japan), both subscales have demonstrated good internal consistency reliability (0.79-0.93) and test-retest reliability (about 0.70 after one month, 0.63 and 0.53 after eight weeks, and 0.50 and 0.41 after thirteen months), and confirmatory factor analysis has confirmed a stable two-factor structure (Steger, 2008). Both MLQ-P and MLQ-S exhibit good convergent and discriminant validity, and when distinguishing between the related concepts of life meaning and life satisfaction, the discriminant validity of MLQ-P is significantly higher than that of PIL and LRI. Currently, the MLQ is widely used in research across various age groups and cultural backgrounds.

3.2. Major Domestic Measures of Life Meaning

The Purpose in Life Test (PIL). The PIL was developed by Song Qiurong (1992) based on a localization study and modification of the original PIL scale. It consists of five dimensions: autonomy, enthusiasm for life, future expectation, future avoidance, and life goals, with a total of 20 items. The scoring system uses a 7-point Likert-type scale. These dimensions aim to more accurately capture adolescents' perception and pursuit of life meaning. The use of this scale helps to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents' cognitive and emotional experiences regarding life meaning, providing a powerful tool for psychological research on adolescent mental health.

Self-Transcendence Life Meaning Scale. This scale is based on in-depth interviews (Li Hong, 2006), aiming to explore people's pursuit and cognition of higher levels of life meaning. Unlike those centered around self-focused life meaning, it may place more emphasis on individuals' cognition of goals, values, and beliefs beyond themselves, as well as their understanding of

society, the environment, and overall significance. The scale contains 8 items and uses a 4-point scoring method.

Life Meaning Scale. This scale was developed by Wang Mengcheng and Dai Xiaoyang (2008) based on a localization revision of the MLQ scale. It contains 10 questions, scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale is divided into two dimensions: life meaning possession dimension and life meaning search dimension. The life meaning possession dimension aims to assess individuals' perception of life meaning, while the life meaning search dimension measures the degree of active seeking for life meaning. Through this revision, the Life Meaning Scale better adapts to local culture and specific population needs, thereby enhancing its accuracy and effectiveness in measuring life meaning.

Currently, among the tools for measuring life meaning globally, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) developed by Steger et al. (2006) has gained widespread recognition for its reliability and validity, becoming a commonly used tool. Domestic scholars have used and revised this scale multiple times, and it has been confirmed to be well-suited to the Chinese context (Chen Wei et al., 2015; Wang Mengcheng, Dai Xiaoyang, 2008). Studies indicate that the Life Meaning Scale maintains high reliability and validity within the Chinese cultural background, accurately measuring the life meaning of the Chinese population.

4. Factors Influencing the Sense of Life Meaning in Primary and Secondary School Students

The sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students is influenced by various factors, including individual factors, family factors, school factors, and social factors.

4.1. Individual Factors

In exploring the formation process of the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students, individual factors play an indispensable role. These factors profoundly affect how children perceive and understand their place and value in the world.

Research indicates that the sense of life meaning is closely related to age. The overall trend shows that as age increases, individuals' sense of life meaning gradually strengthens (Park, 2010). Adolescence is a crucial stage for the development of an individual's sense of life meaning, during which individuals begin to explore themselves and form preliminary understandings of life meaning. An individual's personality traits influence their perception and pursuit of life meaning. The health level of an individual's personality is positively correlated with their sense of life meaning (Zhou Fangjie et al., 2015). Specifically, among the five major personality traits, extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are positively correlated with life meaning, while neuroticism is negatively correlated with life meaning (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Henningsgaard & Arnau, 2008; Liu Qingying, 2021). Additionally, positive personality variables such as gratitude (He Qingsen et al., 2022), self-worth (Ding Cuilu et al., 2021), self-concordance (Ye & Ye, 2020), self-identity (Kong Xiangna, 2005), and psychological capital (Ma Wenyan et al., 2022) have significant positive predictive effects on the sense of life meaning. For instance, Ye and Ye (2020) found that helping adolescents improve self-concordance and interpersonal relationships can enhance their sense of life meaning. Values significantly affect the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Studies show that practical and conformist values are significantly positively correlated with junior high school students' sense of life meaning, while utilitarian and indifferent values are significantly negatively correlated, with indifferent values having a significant predictive effect on life meaning (Zhou Shisi, Li Xueping, 2021).

Psychological characteristics such as self-compassion, emotions, self-esteem, and positive coping behaviors influence the sense of life meaning. Higher self-compassion leads to greater

life meaning (Yela et al., 2020). Compassion helps college students face, overcome adversities, and recover from them, transforming pain into positive emotions, thereby generating a greater sense of thriving and life meaning (Chio et al., 2021). Individuals with higher positive emotions experience a stronger sense of life meaning (Chen Xiaoyan, Chen Yiwen, Zhang Yuting, 2021). Adopting positive coping strategies can protect an individual's sense of life meaning from the impact of negative events or emotions. For example, maintaining good interpersonal relationships through active coping strategies can help resist the negative impact of rumination, further protecting their sense of life meaning (Talebi & Masoud, 2014).

4.2. Family Factors

The family is the earliest and most important environment for a person's growth, having a significant impact on the development and growth of its members. Research shows that parenting styles have a crucial influence on the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Warm, understanding, equal, accepting, democratic, and harmonious parenting styles are conducive to cultivating a high level of life meaning (Chen Yaqian, 2021). Conversely, negative, authoritarian, and harshly punitive parenting styles are detrimental to the cultivation of life meaning (Liu Mingjuan, 2009). A good parent-child relationship positively affects the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Parental support and understanding can enhance children's self-worth and goal-setting abilities (Reed & Enright, 2006). Family function significantly impacts the sense of life meaning; good family function correlates positively with security and life meaning (Sheng Zizhen, 2024). Family rituals imbued with symbolic meaning help individuals establish a sense of identity within the family unit (Fiese, B.H., 2006), promoting a sense of belonging and enhancing the subjective experience of life significance (King, L.A. and Hicks, J.A., 2021). Intimate family interactions can become cherished memories, often extending positive emotions when individuals reminisce about past family activities, thereby stimulating the presence and enhancement of life meaning (Shelley, E., Taylor, Sherry, K., et al., 1989). A good parent-child relationship is one of the important ways to enhance the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Parenting styles significantly influence the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students, while warm parent-child relationships contribute to cultivating a high level of life meaning (Callan V.J., 1987). The experience of family happiness helps individuals enhance their sense of purpose in life and self-efficacy, thereby affecting the sense of life meaning (Chen Jin, 2022). Family conflicts and unstable family environments may lead to feelings of confusion and helplessness in children (Bowlby, 1988). External family economic conditions, such as family income, positively predict adolescents' sense of life meaning (Shang Shijie et al., 2016).

4.3. School Factors

Schools are crucial venues for the learning of primary and secondary school students and significantly influence their sense of life meaning. Studies show that student-centered schools, where growth is prioritized, tend to have higher levels of life meaning among students; conversely, schools that focus primarily on academic performance often exhibit lower levels of life meaning. Advancing interdisciplinary integration and offering a variety of active courses can enhance students' sense of life meaning (Gong Jie, 2022). A positive teacher-student relationship has a positive impact on the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Teacher support and encouragement can boost students' self-confidence and goal pursuit (Wentzel, 1998). A positive school atmosphere significantly affects the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. The school's culture, values, and educational methods influence students' self-identity and goal setting (Harter, 1999).

4.4. Social Factors

Research has found that social support positively affects the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Support from friends, classmates, and the community can enhance children's sense of social belonging and self-worth (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Different cultural values and belief systems influence individuals' understanding and pursuit of life meaning (Triandis, 1995). Neal Krause, Peter C. Hill, and Gail Ironson (2019) discovered that the sense of life meaning is related to three socially centered virtues: compassion, forgiveness towards others, and providing social support to others.

5. Interventions for Enhancing the Sense of Life Meaning in Primary and Secondary School Students

To promote the sense of life meaning among primary and secondary school students, researchers and educators have proposed a series of intervention measures, including psychological interventions, educational interventions, and social support.

5.1. Psychological Interventions

Mindfulness meditation, as an effective psychological training method, helps students better understand their inner world by cultivating awareness and acceptance, thereby enhancing their sense of life meaning (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Through focusing on the present moment, mindfulness meditation aids students in keenly observing changes in emotions and thoughts, fostering the ability to accept all experiences, whether positive or negative. This enables students to better understand themselves, find self-identity and value. When faced with academic pressure and social confusion, this deep self-understanding prompts students to reflect on the meaning of life, strengthening their sense of life meaning and allowing them to face the challenges of growth with a more positive and determined attitude.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT enhances the sense of life meaning by changing individuals' negative thought patterns to help students establish a positive outlook on life (Beck, 1976). It focuses on individuals' thought patterns, identifying and questioning irrational beliefs, and replacing them with positive thoughts. When students learn to view failures and challenges in an objective and rational manner, their fears about life decrease, and their hope for the future increases. This transformation not only improves students' ability to cope with learning and life challenges but also makes them feel their progress during their growth journey, significantly enhancing the sense of life meaning.

Existential Therapy. Existential therapy enhances the sense of life meaning by exploring the significance and purpose of life, helping students establish a positive outlook on life (Yalom, 1980). In the fast-paced modern lifestyle, students often feel lost and question the meaning of their lives. Existential therapy assists them in confronting questions like "Why live?" and "What is the direction of life?" Through deep self-exploration, courageously analyzing inner desires, values, and existential dilemmas, they gradually understand the value of life, strengthening their sense of life meaning.

5.2. Educational Interventions

Life education courses. Life education courses aim to guide students to deeply explore the meaning and value of life through a combination of theory and practice, helping them build a positive view of life, thereby enhancing their sense of life meaning (Parks & Biswas-Diener, 2013). These courses typically encompass knowledge from various fields such as philosophy, psychology, and ethics, broadening students' perspectives and encouraging them to think about the meaning of life from multiple angles. Additionally, practical activities are an important component of life education, allowing students to experience the richness and diversity of life

through hands-on experiences, thus cherishing life more and facing life's challenges with a positive attitude.

Goal-setting training focuses on helping students establish clear life directions by teaching effective goal-setting techniques, stimulating their intrinsic motivation, and enhancing their sense of life meaning (Locke & Latham, 2002). Research indicates that specific and challenging goals can significantly improve individual performance and satisfaction. Therefore, goal-setting training first teaches students how to set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals to ensure they are both challenging and realistic. Next, through regular reviews and adjustments, it helps students maintain the dynamism and adaptability of their goals, ensuring they always align with personal development needs. Additionally, goal-setting training emphasizes the values behind the goals, encouraging students to reflect on the significance of each goal for their lives, thereby gaining deeper satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment in the pursuit of these goals.

Gratitude education is an effective method for cultivating a positive mindset by guiding students to recognize the beauty in life, helping them develop a grateful attitude, and thus enhancing their sense of life meaning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude education typically includes several aspects: Firstly, it involves keeping a daily gratitude journal to help students form the habit of expressing thanks regularly. This simple practice not only boosts students' happiness but also makes them more attentive to positive aspects of life. Secondly, organizing gratitude-sharing activities allows students to express their appreciation for others in a group setting, enhancing positive interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, gratitude education encourages students to participate in volunteer work and social service activities, experiencing the joy of giving and deepening their understanding of life's value. Finally, through case analyses and discussions, it helps students understand the importance of a grateful mindset for personal growth and mental health, fostering an optimistic attitude when facing challenges.

5.3. Social Support

Family support plays a crucial role in the growth process of students by providing emotional and material support, helping students establish a positive attitude towards life, and enhancing their sense of life meaning (Reed & Enright, 2006). The family is the first social environment that students encounter, and emotional communication and support from family members are vital for students' emotional development and mental health. Encouragement and affirmation from parents can boost students' self-confidence, enabling them to face life's challenges more positively. Additionally, material support provided by the family is fundamental for students' healthy growth. Stable economic conditions can alleviate financial burdens on students, allowing them to focus more on their studies and personal development. Families also pass on positive values and attitudes through everyday role modeling, helping students set correct life goals and moral concepts.

Peer support also plays an important role in students' social relationships by providing emotional and social support, helping students build positive social relationships, and enhancing their sense of life meaning (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Mutual support and understanding among peers can help students find resonance and support when facing pressures and challenges. This not only helps alleviate feelings of loneliness and anxiety but also promotes the development of their social skills and teamwork abilities. Moreover, peer support can help students establish healthy interpersonal relationships, learn effective communication and conflict resolution, laying a solid foundation for future interactions.

Community support helps students establish a positive sense of social belonging and enhances their sense of life meaning by providing educational resources and community activities (Putnam, 2000). The community is another important place for students' socialization. By

participating in community activities and utilizing community resources, students can better integrate into society and broaden their horizons. Educational resources provided by the community offer rich learning and development opportunities for students. Additionally, community activities such as volunteer services, cultural festivals, and community projects not only enhance students' sense of social responsibility but also help them establish a positive sense of social belonging. By participating in these activities, students can feel their contributions and value to the community, thereby enhancing their sense of life meaning.

6. Future Research Directions

Despite the abundance of research on issues related to the sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students, there are still many areas worthy of further investigation: (1) Most current studies adopt a cross-sectional design, lacking dynamic tracking of the development of life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Future research should use longitudinal designs to explore the changing trends and influencing factors of life meaning at different developmental stages. (2) The sense of life meaning in primary and secondary school students may vary under different cultural backgrounds. Future research should investigate the characteristics and influencing factors of life meaning among primary and secondary school students in different cultural contexts to provide more targeted intervention measures. (3) Research on life meaning involves multiple disciplines such as psychology, education, and sociology. Future studies should strengthen interdisciplinary integration, exploring the formation mechanisms and intervention effects of life meaning in primary and secondary school students from multiple perspectives and levels. (4) Currently, there is relatively little research on intervention measures for life meaning in primary and secondary school students. Future research should enhance the evaluation of intervention effects and explore the applicability and effectiveness of different intervention measures.

7. Conclusion

The sense of life meaning holds significant importance for the mental health and overall development of primary and secondary school students. By reviewing existing literature, this article systematically introduces the definition, measurement tools, influencing factors, and intervention measures of life meaning, providing theoretical bases and practical suggestions for educators, psychologists, and policymakers. Future research should further explore the development dynamics, cultural differences, and interdisciplinary integration of life meaning in primary and secondary school students to promote their mental health and comprehensive development.

Acknowledgments

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