

## **Psychology Teachers at a Loss**

*By Zhang Mingyue*

Lin Chuyi is a psychology teacher. Not the type of professor teaching psychology at a university, nor a licensed therapist. She works at a county-level junior high school in Zhejiang Province.

Psychology teachers, literally speaking, teach popular science courses on mental health. But it is much more than that. Lin dislikes the job title, finding it as weird as what it means.

“I can do anything,” she said. “Be it a reporter, an editor, writing news releases for the education bureau’s website. I clean the teachers’ offices. I do makeup for students during campus activities. I host visitors. Anything is possible.”

Lin had the idea of being a therapist during high school, when she was struggling and engaged in self-harm. “I was sensitive to my emotions and was in awe: How could one’s mental state so much impact one’s life?”

In her senior year, Lin’s interests shifted. She pursued a bachelor’s degree in sound engineering. But then, family loss and breakups brought her back to the journey of exploring emotions. She turned to the campus counselors and had over a dozen

counseling sessions during her undergraduate years.

“I felt like counseling could really help,” she said. She started self-learning psychology. When pursuing a master’s degree in applied psychology, Lin never imagined becoming a teacher. Upon graduation, however, there seemed no better choice. “A tenured teacher with a stable salary was attractive,” she explained.

Lin joined as a psychology teacher in 2018. Her school advertised one position for a psychology teacher that year. Only five people applied, with three making it to the interview stage. In contrast, a position for an English teacher received over 100 applications.

When Lin started, a full-time psychology teacher was considered a bonus for the school. By having this post, the school earned extra points in the year-end assessment organized by the education bureau. “As for what a psychology teacher would do, the school leaders didn’t see counseling or pop-science courses as essential,” she said.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education in China issued a policy, requiring every primary and secondary school to have at least one full-time psychology teacher. This emerging group of educators, now became a necessity, continued to grow.

Han Mei, a recent graduate, joined a county-level school in Guangdong Province in

August, 2023. She is the first and only full-time psychology teacher in the school with around 5,000 students from primary to junior high.

Being in the position for nearly a semester, Han has little time for her “psychological” work. She teaches “moral and legal” to third graders. The course is compulsory in elementary school, covering topics like handling interpersonal relationships, patriotism, and legal knowledge.

"My workload is heavy," she said. She only has two hours on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for counseling. "The counseling room is newly built to pass inspections from education authorities; not many students seek appointments yet."

Han has created a space to let off steam in the room, with padded walls, standing sandbags, and a human model with boxing gloves. Outside, there's a mailbox where students anonymously write. Senders are asked to leave their class and a nickname for contact. Documents are yet to be completed: registration forms for visitors, individual counseling records, mental status files of all students, and so on.

"Schools have been building or renovating counseling rooms these years," said Zhan Chun, another recent graduate, working as a high school psychology teacher in Jiangsu Province. The counseling room in her school is being expanded this term. Students willing to do counseling have to visit her office.

“Only one or two come each week,” she said. “I share an office with teachers of other subjects. Students may find it uncomfortable to discuss mental issues there.”

Anyhow, counseling is not their main focus. Apart from a few who make an appointment, most students entering the counseling room go through a process of screening for the high-risk. Nationwide, primary and secondary schools are required to conduct a yearly mental health assessment for all students, said Lin Chuyi.

“We purchased software from a medical institution; students fill out questionnaires on computers,” she introduced. “We identify students with high warning levels, and class teachers recommend at-risk students based on daily observations.” Then, they invite these students for face-to-face talks. County education bureau also get the test results.

What happens next? Psychology teachers are not responsible for much. If a student is assessed by them with mental issues, such as showing suicidal tendencies or extreme behaviors, his parents will be contacted. Parents sign agreements with the school, agreeing to seek treatment from medical institutions, and follow doctor’s orders. Teachers then mark this student as high-risk on the education bureau website.

“I refer to what I do as ‘guiding,’ rather than ‘counseling’,” said Li Xiaodou, a primary school psychology teacher in Guangdong Province since 2014. “It can’t be

entirely value-neutral. After all, we are called teachers, not counselors. Our duty is to educate, while therapeutic counseling is the work of institutions.”

Li has a passion for her profession: “More or less we have to deal with some chores, but that doesn’t stop me from getting a sense of well-being.” Three years ago, Li started a WeChat official account called “World in a Pocket”. The character in her name, “dou”, refers to a pocket in Chinese. She reminds people of Doraemon. From her magic pocket, she shares her course designs, counseling cases, and recommends books and lectures related to counseling skills.

Sometimes Li updates how she’s doing. On October 28, 2023: “The drawings my students made for their parents in class flooded my WeChat Moments; parents expressed gratitude. Suddenly, I feel awesome.” On September 27, 2023: “A crazy week, with a big task every day. Yesterday, checked by the district authorities, today talked with parents, and over ten students waiting for ‘guiding’.”

“Novice psychology teachers face a tough time,” she said. “Many of them are like pioneers in the Wild West, with no peers for company, lacking resources, and not being taken seriously. I offer the materials I’ve organized to help them.”

Lin Chuyi attends job training sessions two to three times per semester. The training focuses on teaching techniques, especially lesson planning design. There has never

been training on counseling skills.

Lin: “Schools prefer psychology teachers, especially green hands, to win prizes in teaching competitions and give public lessons. In plain terms, it’s a vanity project: They want the most obvious achievement.”

When it comes to counseling, nobody cares whether or not a student finds solace through a sole conversation. Lin’s efforts are seldom acknowledged: “Social training for counseling techniques is expensive. In my first year on the job, I spent almost 50,000 yuan on training. The school never subsidized a penny, and I couldn't continue it.” Now she just read relevant books.

“I do this because I care,” she said. “I care about whether I can help.”

Bai Taorui, 22, failed the postgraduate entrance exam in winter 2022. He had planned to pursue a graduate degree in medical schools, then work in a hospital’s psychiatry or counseling institution. Bai returned to his hometown in Yunnan Province six months later. There, in the autonomous prefecture of a minority Lisu, he became a middle school psychology teacher.

Bai teaches pop-science lessons for sixteen classes of first-year high school students.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he takes on the routine duties of a class teacher: He leads

morning exercises, watches students during meals and lunch breaks, and maintains order during evening self-study. “I wonder why a group of teenagers needs someone to watch over them while eating,” he said. “One of my colleagues also did these things in her first two years.”

The school doesn’t specify the duration of counseling, but Bai and two other psychology teachers take turns manning the counseling room. They ensure that students who visit between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. are attended to. Apart from regular shifts, he spends considerable time dealing with students “sent” to the counseling room.

“Over 500 students were assessed as ‘first-level warning,’ the highest risk level, in this year’s mental health assessment,” he said. “We don’t even know how to report the result to the education bureau.” Less than a month before the winter break, nearly half of these students have not yet been contacted. “There are even more with lower risk levels that we drop thought of handling.”

Located in the autonomous prefecture, Bai’s school has ninety percent minority students, and eighty percent come from rural areas. “Divorce, alcohol abuse and domestic violence are widespread in their families,” he said. “It’s so common for a relative to die from drinking.”

To make up for the low quality of enrolling students, the school extends study time.

All students are boarders. Starting from the first year, they have only one day off each week—every Saturday is dedicated to extra lessons. In September, the autonomous prefecture witnessed two suicides of high school students jumping into rivers.

Bai recalled the first student he received: A senior girl with severe depression, a victim of campus bullying, engaged in self-harm. Her father refused to send her to the hospital. He attributed the symptoms to phone addiction and the relationship thing.

Bai and the girl talked once a week for three months. Inspired by what she was going through, Bai designed a course on campus bullying, using the Netflix Korean drama “The Glory” as a case. It helps capture their attention, he said.

There’s also a boy who left an impression on Bai: “He is mischievous, doesn’t follow classroom rules, always smiling.” The boy was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and spent the summer in the hospital. When feeling down, he turns to Bai. “Every time after we talked, he pleaded with me not to tell other people,” he said. “He didn’t want them to see a cheerful person doing counseling.”

One afternoon in late October, Bai went out for training. He swapped shifts with a colleague to be on duty in the counseling room. At supper time, he received a call from the colleague: The bipolar boy was piercing toothpicks into arm; the entire forearm was a blur of blood.



“He didn’t take his medicine on time,” recalled Bai. “He came to the counseling room looking for me, but I wasn’t there. I dare not imagine if he had a knife.”

Bai has never been so aware of being needed.

On Teacher’s Day, September 10, Bai posted on Moments to commemorate his first year as a teacher. He wrote: “The meaning of life is not in living, not in dying, but in existing.” In the photo, he holds a bunch of flowers, a camera hanging around his neck, sitting in a classroom, with students behind peeking out and grinning.

“I would call myself an ‘emotion trash can’; I devour their bad moods,” he said. “But witnessing a student’s state improving with my help, makes it all worthwhile.”

“I’m living by the sense of accomplishment.”

Counselors in medical institutions are guided by experienced peers, said Wang Yuxuan, a novice psychology teacher in Hunan Province. “The work mode is called supervision, which improves counselors’ skills and mental quality.”

“Schools, however, are unwilling to spend money on it,” she shrugged. When faced with negative emotions encountered at work, Wang consults her college professors.

Once she paid for the online supervision service, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand yuan each time. “After about ten counseling sessions, in theory, one should undergo supervision. The cost is too high.”

After work hours, Lin Chuyi still steps into the counseling room, but she comes as a clinic visitor, not the counselor. “Every day I deal with those who either want to commit suicide or self-harm; it feels like I can’t give a hand,” she said. “I can’t even solve my own problems.”

She learned mindset adjustment from her counselor: Don’t expect changes from the clinical visitors; just get to know them, with curiosity.

Lin had attempted to change a job. She applied twice to a local hospital’s psychiatric department but faced rejection during the interviews. The hospital is hiring again in the past month, but the requirements have increased, demanding a counseling certificate. This time she can’t even apply. “There are few counseling institutions in my county, while I have no plans to go to the big city,” said Lin. She is 33.

“When I was in college, I went through the process of overturning everything and starting all over again,” she said. “Now I lose the courage.”

Lin only appreciates the flexibility of time that her job brings. This semester, her

classes are scheduled in the afternoon. Most mornings she attends an online reading club. She has her own office, “don’t have to worry about others affecting me or me affecting others.”

Lin designed a course on sex education, when she was 30, but the school leaders said it could not be held. It was too sensitive. Later, she recorded the course into a video, participated in the local teaching competition, and won the first prize.

Before Lin came, the school’s previous psychology teacher resigned, precisely due to the principal not letting her offer some courses. “I understand the feeling,” said Lin. “I feel like being restricted everywhere.”

That teacher fought for it several times, then gave up. Lin wonders if she would still like to try.