

LIFE SKILLS AS DETERMINING FACTORS FOR MENTAL HEALTH OF ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Adolescents face many transitional changes in this stage of their life, many emotional, psychological and social problems result in several mental health issues in their later life. Learning various life skills can cause positive effect on mental health of individuals. The present study was designed to investigate the effects of life skills on mental health of adolescents through cross sectional research method. This study was completed with a sample of 360 adolescents; 180 male and 180 female adolescents selected through multistage random sampling technique from schools. They provided data on Life Skills Scale (Vranda, 2009) and Mental Health Inventory (Ritvo et al., 1997). Multivariate analysis showed the significant impact of life skills on mental health of adolescents. Findings showed that life skills such as problem solving, communication skills, self-awareness, coping with emotions, interpersonal relationship skills, creative thinking and coping with stress have significant impact on mental health of adolescents. The components of mental health; depression, anxiety, positive affect and behavioral control were found regressed upon life skills of adolescents. These findings have implications for psychologists and academicians who could execute the core life skills in school curriculums and can be taught to adolescents to promote their mental health. In this way an increase in psychological health can contribute to student's motivation to learn effectively to deal with several social, emotional and psychological problems.

Keywords: *Life skills, mental health, depression, anxiety, positive affect*

Introduction

During the life span, adolescence is a transition period that brings not only physical but also many cognitive and psychological developments to an individual. Since biological development has a significant part in bringing physical changes to an adolescent; the mental and social changes altogether also play a combined role in development of adolescent. In this storm and stress phase, adolescents may experience child-parent conflicts, aggression, emotional changes, and risk behaviors. These problems are crucial to address and if not handled carefully, the adolescents may develop negative identity and experience role diffusion that further results in uneven expectation and skills, unclear goals, and are unprepared to face the life issues of later adult period. This further creates uncertainty due to mental stresses, dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and social expectations in the adolescents. It indicates clearly that an adolescent remains in risk taking situations and faces risky behaviors. Therefore, adolescents must learn social competence and life skills for smooth and sound transfer from adolescence period to adulthood (Vranda & Chandrasekhar-Rao, 2007, Prasad, 2018).

Being a part of any society, life styles of individuals demand certain changes with respect to moral, social and religious values. Adolescents are directly affected by these inevitable life changes in terms of physical, psychological and social health. Resultantly, the exposure with high-risk behaviors such as onset of drug use, unprotected sexual behavior, extremism, conduct behaviors and low self-esteem and confidence during school life activities is observed in them (Mangrulkar, 2022).

Psychosocial competence plays a significant role in promoting the mental and physical health (Srikala & Kishore, 2010). Improvement in psychosocial competence contributes in social wellbeing and particularly in dealing with life stresses. To overcome such difficulties and improve psychosocial competence the adolescents need to acquire life skills (Vranda, 2009). Individual's certain abilities to adapt positive behaviors and deal effectively with challenges and demands of everyday life are defined as life skills (Chaudhary & Mehta, 2012). There are ten generic life skills based on various interventional researches and developmental theories considered crucial for every individual. These ten life skills are decision-making, problem solving, empathy, self-awareness, communication, interpersonal relationship skills, coping with emotions, coping with stress, creative thinking and critical thinking (Sulfikar, 2016; Vranda, 2009). Life skills education promotes the learning of healthy behavior, positive relationships and mental health of individuals (Kaur, 2011).

Mental health refers to individual's well-being, recognition of own potential and ability to cope with the daily life stressors with capacity of contributing within society and working productively (Galderisi et al., 2015). According to research, increased adaptability and flexibility in dealing with early life stressors helps in promoting mental health of individuals (Weare&Nind, 2011). An improved life skill of adolescents tends to exert positive impact on their mental health and reduces the risk for facing any behavioral or emotional problems in future (Lendrum& Humphrey, 2012). According to Tuttle, Campbell-Heider and David (2006), by adding life skills in the curriculum, students showed extraordinary capabilities towards mental health and academic promotion and flexibility. Life skills not only improve the mental health but also contribute and benefits academically (Tajdary et al., 2018)

Interest in studying life skills has become more popular among mental health professionals in the last decade. Hamburg (1990) outlined life skills education in terms of teaching of needful abilities for coping with life pressures, healthy dealings with people, and living in a complex community. Decision making, communication, self-awareness, and interpersonal relations are the most generic life skills. Nelson-Jones (1993) reported that life skills are conducive to psychological wellness because of personally responsible series of self-helping choices. The entire range of life skills are needed to a person for their life challenges and developmental tasks. According to the self-determination theory proposed by Ryan & Deci (2017), the basic psychological needs such as need for autonomy, competence and relatedness are useful in optimizing the life skills of adolescents (Cronin et al., 2018).

As the emergence of life skills during past decade, mental health professionals are showing more interest in this phenomenon (Wei, et. al., 2021). Some of the studies have also found a number of positive effects of the life skills training and responding various psychosocial factors such as depression, anxiety, aggression and interpersonal conflicts between individuals (Luna-Adame, Carrasco-Gimenez & Rueda-Garcia, 2013; Shabani et al., 2014). Young people hold the promise of our future; helping them for their problems and working with them in certain areas of life is always considered as the priority in different cultures across the time. Considering the extended range of relevance of life skills that encourage the learning of skills and help to promote positive healthy behavior, positive relationships with others, and mental health, it is preferably benefited to examine the impact of life skills on adolescents studying in schools. Therefore building on and extending previous research, present study was objectified to evaluate the effect of life skills on the mental health of Pakistani adolescents.

Method

Participants

A sample of 360 elementary school students studying in class 8th, 9th, and 10th was recruited through multistage random sampling

technique from six schools of three cities; Multan, Bahawalpur and Bahawalnagar. The sample consisted of 180 male and 180 female (equal representation of both genders) adolescents with age range 13-17 years (Mean = 15.54, SD = 1.015).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Participants were included in this research from public sector schools only. The private schools were excluded because students of private schools are already receiving basic life skills due to their difference curriculum and advanced extra-curricular activities. Any participant having age more than 17 were also excluded in this research.

Instruments

Following measurement tools were used to collect the data:

Life Skills Scale. Life Skills Scale by Vranda (2009) is a 115-items scale responding on a 5-point Likert scale that measures the adolescents' degree of life skills in ten different domains including decision making = 10 items, problem solving = 13 items, empathy = 12 items, self-awareness = 10 items, interpersonal relationship skills = 18 items, communication skills = 10 items, coping with stress = 9 items, coping with emotions = 9 items, creative thinking = 14 items and critical thinking = 10 items. The scale was translated in Urdu. The reliability coefficient of the original scale was reported as 0.96 and Cronbach alpha for the present study data was found 0.71.

Mental Health Inventory. Mental Health Inventory by Ritvo et al., was designed to measure mental health of adolescents. It has 18 items with 6-point Likert scale that measures four dimensions of mental health; depression (5 items), anxiety (5 items), behavioral control (4 items) and positive affect (4 items). The reliability coefficient of original version of inventory was 0.93 and for the present data it was found 0.77.

Procedure

This study was a cross sectional research in nature. To select the sample, the sampling was done at two stages by using multistage sampling technique. At first stage of sampling, the schools of male and female students were first sampled through randomization. Total six schools were selected; three for each gender. After obtaining the institutional permission from the school principals, the students were contacted during the class time. A booklet containing all measurement tools along with demographic information sheet was administered to every recruited student with the help of class teachers. All the necessary information regarding the research and scales were provided to the participants and their willingness to participate in this study was obtained through the consent form. The participants of this research were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

Results

In order to assess the impact of ten life skills on mental health of students, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. Fitness of the model analyzed through multivariate tests is provided in Table 1. Moreover, the main analysis for measuring the partial eta of effect sizes is given in Table 2.

Table 1
Multivariate Tests for Effects of Life Skills

Life Skills	Wilks' Λ	F	Sig	Partial eta Squared
Intercept	.71	35.37	.00	.29
Decision Making	.99	.70	.58	.00
Problem Solving	.92	7.26	.00	.07
Empathy	.98	.15	.96	.00
Self-Awareness	.95	3.85	.00	.04
Communication Skills	.94	4.91	.00	.05
Interpersonal Relationship Skills	.96	3.05	.01	.03
Coping with Emotions	.92	7.03	.00	.07
Coping with Stress	.93	6.14	.00	.06
Creative Thinking	.95	4.17	.00	.04
Critical Thinking	.98	1.17	.32	.01

df=4, $p < 0.01$,

Multivariate analyses (Table 1) present the significant Wilks' Λ for life skills of problem solving = 0.923, self-awareness = 0.957, communication skills = 0.946. whereas for interpersonal relationship skills = 0.966, coping with emotions = 0.925, coping with stress =

0.934 and creative thinking = 0.954. Further, partial eta values showed significant effect sizes of these seven skills. However, values of wilks' lambda and partials eta for life skills of decision making, empathy, and critical thinking are not found significant.

Table 2
Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Source	Dependent Variable	Mean Square	F	Partial eta
Decision Making	Anxiety	14.739	.099	.008
	Depression	.161	.821	.000
	Behavioral Control	.185	.843	.000
	Positive Affect	.470	.717	.000
Problem Solving	Anxiety	.911	.681	.000
	Depression	32.758	.001	.029
	Behavioral Control	26.327	.019	.016
	Positive Affect	54.759	.000	.042
Empathy	Anxiety	.306	.811	.000
	Depression	1.395	.506	.001
	Behavioral Control	.646	.712	.000
	Positive Affect	.298	.773	.000
Self-Awareness	Anxiety	8.852	.200	.005
	Depression	6.526	.151	.006
	Behavioral Control	52.994	.001	.031
	Positive Affect	12.102	.066	.010
Communication Skills	Anxiety	36.994	.009	.019
	Depression	.676	.644	.001
	Behavioral Control	43.263	.003	.025
	Positive Affect	25.448	.008	.020
Interpersonal Skills	Anxiety	37.947	.008	.020
	Depression	.937	.586	.001
	Behavioral Control	8.503	.181	.005
	Positive Affect	20.538	.017	.016
Coping with Emotions	Anxiety	146.915	.000	.073
	Depression	1.118	.552	.001
	Behavioral Control	2.015	.515	.001
	Positive Affect	2.474	.405	.002
Coping with Stress	Anxiety	47.978	.003	.025
	Depression	14.783	.031	.013
	Behavioral Control	46.955	.002	.028
	Positive Affect	26.817	.006	.021

Creative Thinking	Anxiety	.072	.902	.000
	Depression	3.998	.261	.004
	Behavioral Control	74.870	.000	.043
	Positive Affect	1.078	.583	.001
Creative Thinking	Anxiety	2.692	.479	.001
	Depression	.319	.751	.000
	Behavioral Control	17.645	.054	.011
	Positive Affect	1.396	.532	.001

df=1, *p < 0.01, R-squared: (a) .347, (b).214, (c) .420, (d) .331.

Table 2 presents the statistics for the partial eta to demonstrate the effect sizes of each life skill on every aspect of mental health individually. Findings show that life skills of problem solving, self-awareness, communication skills, interpersonal relationship skills, coping with emotions, coping with stress, and creative thinking have significant partial eta squares which indicate the significant impacts on anxiety, depression, behavioral control and positive affect.

Discussion

In Pakistan, young people comprise a significant proportion of its total population. Younger population between age 10 to 18 are 38% of the Pakistani population (UNICEF, 2020) and these adolescents are vulnerable to variety of risks and disadvantages such as educational, social, psychological and environmental hazards that can further lead to different behavioral and mental health problems among adolescents. Individuals are empowered to behave in healthy and positive manner due to life skills (Tungpunkom, Maayan, & Soares-Weiser, 2012). Given the desire and opportunity to do so, the present study was conducted to examine the effects of different generic life skills on components of mental well-being and mental health.

A core set of ten life skills introduced by WHO (1993) were studied in the present research among adolescents who were approached in schools. Life skills were found at different levels among adolescents. Findings of mean scores in Table 1 revealed that problem solving, self-awareness, communication skills, interpersonal relations, coping with emotions and stress, and creative thinking were higher in adolescents. However, adolescents did not report the skills of decision making, empathy, and critical thinking.

According to the findings, anxiety, depression, behavioral control, and positive affect were found significantly affected by problem solving, further, the components of mental health were also found significantly affected by both self-awareness and communication skills (Muktamar et al., 2018). Anxiety, depression, behavioral control, and positive affect were also found affected by interpersonal skills and coping with emotions which are in line with the findings of previous studies (Sulam, Syakur, & Musyarofah, 2019). Furthermore, the life skills of coping with stress and creative thinking impacted the anxiety, depression, behavioral control, and positive affect. Findings of the present study also reported that decision making, empathy and critical thinking didn't have significant impact on mental health, similar findings have been reported previously in a study conducted by Kurniawan, Sayuti, & Kuat (2018).

The findings of this research indicate that presence of life skills and psychosocial competencies within the adolescence leads to the improved mental health of the school students. Hence the self-determination theory is considered to be supporting the evidence of integrating life skills such as competence, autonomy and relatedness are crucial for mental health of the adolescents. The results of this

study are supported by the previous literature, for example as proposed by Kaur (2011) that learning the life skills and enhancing psychosocial competencies helps in improving the mental health of the adolescents. Similar findings are in tune with the findings of work reported by Weare and Nind (2011) and Tuttle et al., (2006); that the positive life skills flourish the coping mechanism and mental health promotion. Moreover, Sobhi-Gharamaleki and Rajabi (2010) also provided the consistent support to this current finding that the mental health can be improved through the life skills. Another work by Samari and Lalifaz (2005) also stated that lack of life skills in the adolescents would risk the behavioral control and positive affect among adolescents (Ali, et al., 2020). Hence, the results of this study propose that acquiring life skills can help in determining the mental health of individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this research indicated that life skills of adolescents have significant effects on their mental health. A summary of review of the literature has already affirmed the valuable role of life skills in the mental wellbeing of individuals in general and adolescents in particular. This study has been an addition to literature investigating the importance of life skills in improving mental health because previous researches were addressing the academic outcomes but not for mental health. Thus, the findings postulated that life skills are meaningful in the life of one adolescent for his/her mental health. Those who have improved life skills and psychosocial competencies have better mental health. Learning life skills and utilizing life skills intervention will help in enhancing the various psychological and social aspects of life of life in adolescents of Pakistan.

Limitations and Suggestions

In spite of the major findings from the present study, the research has few limitations that should be acknowledged for future research. Though a representative sample has been approached through random sampling, a larger sample is required to generalize the present findings. Sample taken from only public schools is another limitation related to sample because the adolescents from private schools were not approached and it is quite expected they may have different picture of life skills and its impact on their mental health due to a different academic environment. Therefore, future research on sample from private schools could be a good idea to explore the question under study.

Self-reported measures have been used to collect the data on life skills and mental health while ignoring the qualitative aspects of these variables. A mix-method utilizing both quantitative and qualitative tools would help more in exploring the impact of life skills and mental health among adolescents. Moreover, the present study suggested that a comprehensive life skills education should be introduced by teachers that will also facilitate better teaching executing core life skills because the life skills will then further support children's positive educational and mental health outcomes.

It will be helpful in providing a safety net to our youth through life skills learning that will protect them from hazards, which affect their education, developmental and psychosocial well-being. In addition to the life skills training in educational institutions, it is also suggested that the parents should also be given awareness

about the importance for life skills for positive growth of children. For this awareness promotion and intervention implementation, our society and mass media can play a vital role and they should get engaged with government stakeholders for the mental health promotion of our young ones.

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