

Identifying Executive Challenges of Life Skills education in Secondary School (A Phenomenological Study)

Article info

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Authors:

Tayebeh Ranjbar
Ahmadabadi¹
Gholam Ali Ahmadi²
Mehdi Davaei³
Alireza Asareh⁴

Abstract

Purpose: This study was aimed to understand the lived experiences of teachers about the executive challenges of life skills education in secondary school.

Methodology: This qualitative research was performed using phenomenological method. Data collection tools was semi-structured interviews. For this purpose, using the criterion-based method and chain based sampling, 13 interviews with teachers who were familiar with the skills education were conducted. Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data. To validate the research, Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria were used.

Findings: The analysis of the interviews indicates 4 comprehensive themes (social challenges, economic challenges, content challenges, method challenges), 17 organizing themes and 43 basic themes. The results showed that items such as non-involvement of students, non-involvement of parents, unfamiliarity with the life skills, resistance of stakeholders, ideological view, lack of attention to the needs of adolescents, lack of appropriate resources, irrelevant content, overemphasis on knowledge, chaotic content structure, double financial burden on the education system, lack of financial involvement of stakeholders, No budget allocation, lack of familiarity of teachers in teacher training with topics related to life skills, multiple academic pressure on students, inappropriate assessment and inappropriate teaching tools play a major role in the ineffective implementation of life skills training.

Conclusion: According to the above findings, it can be said that teaching life skills will not be effective regardless of the challenges that exist in this regard, so solving these challenges is one of the most basic prerequisites for teaching life skills.

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1. PhD student in Curriculum Development, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
 2. Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University (Corresponding Author)
GholamAli _ Ahmadi @sru.ac.ir
 3. Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Sciences, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
 4. Professor, Faculty of Humanities, Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University

1. Introduction

The educational system is considered to be among the vastest systems in each society that can determine the destiny and future of a society (Hosseinzadeh, Mohammadi, Haghighat, 2021). This system in our country and other countries have always sought to nurture perfect human beings who have a balanced growth in all aspects of their personality and can fulfill their responsibilities and duties as a responsible citizen. Due to the wide global changes, the evolution of the curriculum in various dimensions of goals, content, teaching and learning strategies and adaptation to the needs of student is one of the greatest human challenges today (Sadat Moniri and Mohammadzadeh 2018). The term life skills refer to a large group of psychological, social, and interpersonal skills that help individuals make informed decisions, communicate effectively, develop coping and personal management skills, and live healthy lives. (Heydari, Mohammadi, Radmehr 2017). Life skills are a set of abilities that provide the basis for adaptation and positive and useful behavior. These abilities enable the individual to take on the responsibilities of his or her social role and to deal effectively with daily wants, expectations and problems, especially in interpersonal relationships, without harming himself or herself and others. Life skills can guide actions related to others as well as actions related to the environment in a way that leads to more health, and this means more physical, mental and social comfort (Zalinger et al., 2013).

Paying attention to children and caring for them not only guarantees a healthy life in childhood but also provides the conditions for a healthy life in adulthood (Sarkhosh et al 2022), in other words children and adolescents with psychological skills have positive mental health (Sarji Ganji, 2013). Ethical skills such as emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and resilient development in adolescents help them to act with greater psychological support in dealing with high-risk behaviors and to have greater mental well-being. These skills serve as an essential resource for the development of psychosocial, emotional-cognitive, behavioral, and resilient skills for negotiation and the challenges that young people face in becoming productive citizens.

Given the role of life skills as a strong catalyst for the development of positive behavior, developing these skills in the early years of life helps children succeed in their social and emotional challenges such as coping with emotional pain, conflict, peer pressure, and relationship management (Holt et al., 2008). In addition, many researchers have emphasized the need to implement sustainable life skills curricula as a top priority (James et al., 2006). In our country, however, life skills programs with short modules were developed specifically to address risky behaviors (such as life skills training programs that include a series of sessions on communication skills, anger management, decision making, creative and critical thinking skills) (Naseri and Babakhani, 2014) but many of these programs still lack detailed planning and therefore have not been implemented effectively (Holt et al., 2008).

However, some experts and researchers have suggested that life skills programs should be considered with the aim of improving the attitude and knowledge of learners by increasing the number of courses and specific topics and increasing the time spent teaching these courses in educational systems. (Thomson et al., 2012). In addition, to ensure skills development, some content needs to be taught through skill-based activities (James et al., 2006). UNICEF also emphasizes programs that are ongoing and sustainable through regular planning, careful implementation, and monitoring and evaluation to learn skills and change attitudes. (UNICEF, 2012). This weakness may be due to the lack of program structure that is common in the developing country. This shows that program evaluation and follow-up are equally important in sustainability. (Moon., 2021). Countries must believe in life skills training and receive and provide appropriate training (James et al. 2006). In particular, life skills are a group of psychological and interpersonal skills that enable individuals to make informed decision-making, critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, building healthy relationships and empathy with others, and helps managing and coping with life in a healthy and productive way.

Life skills may be about personal activities or activities related to others, they may also be used to change the environment to a healthy environment (Hatami and Karsian, 2013). All important documents related to education for sustainable development in the world and Iran, including all emphasize on life skills training. The results of the research generally show that although the components of life skills training are mentioned unbalanced in these documents, they show that what is taught in schools is not enough. (Defitrika

and Mahmudah, 2021). Now that education has changed in line with international trends, it is necessary to increase the teaching of these skills and to put students at the center of all innovations and advances in the teaching and learning process. Recognizing students' integrated progress in life skills is also increasingly necessary (Hu, 2014). In the lives of today's adolescents, who are forced to make demands from a variety of backgrounds and are forced to face ever-changing pressures, the importance of teaching them life skills becomes more important than ever (Velasco et al, 2021). In addition, promoting a healthy lifestyle through responsible decision-making and self-care ethics prompts education systems to improve the level of these skills and attitudes of students.

In addition, long-term monitoring and evaluation studies are needed to gather empirical evidence for the skills training program. Thus, referring to important documents such as the National Curriculum Document that emphasize the importance and necessity of paying attention to life skills in curricula, the main issue in this study is that given the importance and necessity of paying attention to life skills in various and countless planning that exist in educational systems around the world training, why have we not seen its effective implementation in practice? What were the obstacles in this direction?

Research question

- What are the major challenges and barriers to implementing life skills training in high school?

2. Methodology

The present research has been done in a qualitative and phenomenological (descriptive) way. The purpose of phenomenological research is to describe life experiences as they are in life. Strabert and Carpenter (2003) consider phenomenology as a practice that aims to describe special phenomena or appearance of things and life experiences. The focus of phenomenology is life experiences, because these experiences make the meaning of each phenomenon for the person and tell the person what is real and real in his life and with him (Adiba Haj Bagheri, 2011), and because the phenomenological method tries to describe human experiences in context in which it occurs provides the richest and most descriptive information, so the use of this method is suitable for elucidating and describing the phenomenon in more depth. The study participants included all educators and who were involved in the life skill education of students. The number of research samples was 13 educators were interviewed every 13 cases. Research participants were selected using criterion-based method and chain based sampling. The number of samples was determined based on the researcher's information saturation; That is, the number of interviews went so far that the researcher's information in the field of research was saturated and then no other information was added. In the discussion of assessing the validity of the research, the interview questions were modified and approved by 4 professors in the relevant field after they were designed. To record the interviews, all conversations were recorded audio. The recorded interviews were then carefully listened to by the researcher himself and written word by word. After the recorded interview was recorded in writing, the "members' check" method was used to confirm the validity of the interviews. Thus, the written text of the interview was sent again to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the content and to correct the content if necessary. Data analysis was performed by thematic analysis. In this way, after studying the written text of the interviews and constantly comparing the concepts and phrases in them, semantic codes were selected. The selected codes were then classified around the three axes of basic themes, organizing themes and comprehensive themes. To validate the research, Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria were used. Two methods were used for the reliability criterion. The first method was review by participants. In this method, after each interview and writing the text, the interviewee is contacted by email and in addition to the text of the interview, the researcher is provided with the initial analysis to ensure their accuracy by the interviewer. Also in the second method, which was described by peers, two university professors who used this method were contacted via email; In such a way that parts of the written text of the interviews were given to them and they were asked to codify those parts. In fact, the aim was to obtain knowledge of the accuracy of the interviewer's coding process as well as the lack of bias in the initial analysis. In relation to transferability criteria, purposeful sampling method was used and as mentioned, based on the chain sampling method, first a person who was familiar with the phenomenon of life skills training was interviewed and then through him with other Interviewees were contacted and interviews continued.

3. Findings

After conducting a total of 13 interviews with teachers who were familiar with life skills training and studied them several times, 4 comprehensive themes (social challenges, economic challenges, content challenges, method challenges), 17 organizing themes and 43 basic themes were extracted.

Table 1: Comprehensive, organizing and basic themes and baseline extracted from the interviews

Comprehensive themes	Organizing themes	Basic themes	Narrative evidence
Social challenges	non-involvement of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ignoring the interests of the student - Incompatibility with students' ideals - Irrelevant and meaningless content 	<p><i>The main audience of the social skills training is students, but many students for various reasons do not show much desire to participate in these trainings, and this has narrowed the conditions for such training</i></p> <p><i>(Participant No. 3)</i></p> <p><i>Many students, when looking at these types of programs, see that there is no connection between these programs and their mental issues and concerns</i></p> <p><i>(Participant No 1).</i></p>
	non-involvement of parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ignoring the concerns of parents -Ignoring the needs of parents -Lack of attractiveness and over-occupation of parents 	<p><i>You see, the important point here is this: I, as a teacher, make up 50% of the education and the other 50% of the education should take place at home and with the support of the parents, but unfortunately the parents do not show any interest in teaching their children life skills.</i></p> <p><i>(Participant No. 9).</i></p> <p><i>An important point that I want to point out is that parents</i></p>

			<p><i>want their concerns to be answered in such programs. In fact, the program should be responsive, but unfortunately this is not the case (participant No 6).</i></p>
	<p>unfamiliarity with the life skills</p>	<p>-Being unfamiliar with life skills - Being non-native -The abstract nature of life skills</p>	<p><i>Take a look at the community from the worker, the doctor, the engineer, the teacher, the school principal and the student who still do not fully understand the importance of life skills and teaching it as if the word is strange to them (participant No 5).</i></p> <p><i>Such training must be able to give objectivity to itself and be touched by its beneficiaries, otherwise it will not have the necessary effectiveness (Participant No. 11).</i></p>
	<p>resistance of stakeholders</p>	<p>-Opposition to change - Interests at stake</p>	<p><i>I feel that our society has become a society resistant to change, and whenever a new idea comes up, such as life skills training, some people immediately take a gesture and want to stand in front of it under any pretext (Participant No. 12).</i></p> <p><i>By implementing some programs such as life skills, the interests of some people are</i></p>

			<i>endangered and they start to oppose inadvertently (Participant No. 9).</i>
	ideological view toward life skills	-One-sided mentality -Hesitant and skeptical view	<i>Unfortunately, in our society, everything is measured by politics and ideology, and when it comes to life skills training, some people make a fuss that you want to act against religion and prevent the implementation of these trainings, unless these trainings are completely in accordance with their wish (participant No 1). Some people think that everything they say is right and should be done, and this leads to a one-dimensional view of life skills training (Participant No 7).</i>
Content challenges	Lack of attention to the needs of adolescents	-Relying solely on content -Teacher-centered - Not practical	<i>Adolescent age group from different classes of society has special psychological and physical conditions, but unfortunately in the educational content of life skills, this issue is not considered and all adolescents are seen as the same (participant No 8). A very important issue in education, including life skills, is over-reliance on the teacher, and this problem really</i>

			<i>needs to be addressed (Participant No 12).</i>
	Lack of appropriate resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Useless content -Inappropriate translation content - Comprehensive lack of content 	<p><i>Most of the resources that exist in this field are either related to several years ago or are translations that are not of good quality. When we talk about life skills training, the resources we have should be appropriate to the conditions of the day (Participant No. 13).</i></p> <p><i>Resources should be comprehensive and cover all aspects of life, but in practice we see that only some aspects are considered (Participant No. 9).</i></p>
	irrelevant content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not paying attention to being multidimensional - Not paying attention to being interdisciplinary -Lack of communication between different parts of the content 	<p><i>One of the most important things I would like to point out is the dispersion of life skills content. When you look at this content, you can easily see that everything is being taught separately and unrelated (Participant No. 2).</i></p> <p><i>The process of life is a complex and multidimensional process, so the program that is designed in this field must be multidimensional, which unfortunately is not</i></p>

			<i>the case (Participant No. 11).</i>
	Overemphasis on the dimension of knowledge	- The excessive emphasis on book -Cognitive dimension training -No attention to the attitudinal and emotional dimension	<i>The only thing we have learned in life skills training is the transfer of knowledge to students, contrary to the name of life skills which emphasizes skills, we actually see that only theoretical things are transferred to students (Participant No. 7). When we want to teach someone life skills, without a doubt, cultivating that person's emotional literacy should be a priority, but our teachings emphasize only the knowledge dimension (Participant No. 13).</i>
	Chaotic content structure	-Improper organization Lack of communication between different section - Ignoring the horizontal and vertical relevance of the content	<i>Any training for successful must follow a certain sequence and structure, but in the content of life skills training, this issue is not observed or is poorly observed. In the content of these courses, the principles of content organization have been practically ignored (Participant No. 10). In my opinion, designing a lesson</i>

			<i>and naming it life skills training is not very effective, we should be able to teach life skills in addition to other courses and related to them (Participant No. 7).</i>
Economic challenges	Double financial burden on the educational system	Lack of sufficient financial capacity of the educational system Heavy training costs	<i>The educational system in our country has about one million teachers and staff and fourteen million students who have high costs. Certainly, the implementation of life skills training puts additional costs on the educational system (Participant No. 4). If you make a simple estimate of the costs, you will realize how much the implementation of the smallest training course in the education system will incur (participant number 1).</i>
	No financial involvement of stakeholders	-Lack of economic justification of stakeholders -Chaotic economic situation of stakeholders	<i>The ultimate goal of life skills training and those who benefit from it is people such as students and parents in particular and the community at large, but in practice we see that these people are reluctant to invest in such programs. (participant No 11). There are some important points in</i>

			<i>life skills training, first, that parents should be justified in this regard in order to have financial participation, and the second point is the bad economic situation that makes the implementation of these trainings sterile (Participant No. 5).</i>
	No budget allocation	-Lack of funding for programs -Insufficient costs and financial injection	<i>The driving force behind any program is the budget. Unfortunately, at higher levels of education, issues such as life skills are not taken seriously, and we see that budget allocation is low (Participant No. 6). The amount of money that should be spent on a program such as life skills training and the amount of budget allocated to these programs is not coordinated at all (participant No 4).</i>
Methods Challenges	Lack of familiarity of teachers in teacher training with topics related to life skills	- Alienation of teachers with life skills -Lack of adequate training for teachers -Inadequate structure of teacher training programs	<i>An overview of the teacher training curriculum and the courses it offers shows little attention to issues such as life skills training. When the teacher who is the basis of the training is not familiar with this issue, it is certain that its implementation will</i>

			<p><i>be difficult (participant No 10). Many teachers cannot even provide a comprehensive definition of life skills. In such a situation, what do you expect from life skills training? (Participant No 12).</i></p>
	<p>Multiple academic pressures on students</p>	<p>-Extra educational burden for students -Educational dropout</p>	<p><i>Our education system puts a lot of academic pressure on students due to the overemphasis on the knowledge dimension, so in such a situation, adding life skills training is a double burden for students (Participant No. 2). Unfortunately, sometimes with the implementation of such programs, we see that students have problems in their education and even learning their main courses becomes difficult (Participant No. 7)</i></p>
	<p>-Improper evaluation</p>	<p>-Inappropriate paper pencil evaluations - Traditional and inefficient evaluations</p>	<p><i>As it is clear, life skills are practical, so the evaluation method should be appropriate to its nature, but we see that in practice, methods such as written tests, etc. are used to assess these skills (Participant No. 11). An important question in this regard is whether</i></p>

			<i>life skills training can be measured by four oral or written questions? (Participant No. 8).</i>
	Unsuitable tool for teaching	-Do not use new teaching methods - Inadequacy of content and teaching methods -Use the speech method	<i>Unfortunately, there is no proper understanding of life skills training, and those involved in this field want to implement such training in methods such as lecturing, which will undoubtedly fail (Participant No. 6). What is the place of using movies, music and methods such as marquee in training such as life skills? Unfortunately, new methods are not considered in these trainings (Participant No. 11).</i>

4. Conclusion

There are several challenges facing the implementation of life skills training for adolescents, some of which were addressed in the present study, including the items following: non-involvement of students, non-involvement of parents, unfamiliarity with the life skills, stakeholder resistance Ideological view toward the life skills, lack of attention to the needs of adolescents, lack of appropriate resources, one-dimensional content, overemphasis on the knowledge dimension, chaotic content structure. It is clear that factors such as the involvement of parents and students in such programs provide the basis for their successful implementation. In line with the present study, Rezaei (2015) believes that the readiness of society to face such programs plays an important role in its implementation, without the readiness of stakeholders involved in life skills training, all efforts in this field will be futile. Razi and Sami (2018) also believe that in the curriculum of Iranian schools, issues such as how to implement, the type of content required by students, the appropriate space and time for life skills training need more attention, an issue that shows inappropriate content in this area. As mentioned in the present study, the educational content in this regard is scattered and lacks the appropriate structure. Danesh et al (2013) in a study showed that media methods, goal setting, law recognition, culture recognition, teamwork and how to use the media are among the indicators that have been neglected in Iran's life skills program. As mentioned in the present study, there are major shortcomings in the methods of teaching life skills that have made such programs difficult. Schlatter (2020) also believes that the level of attention to the different needs of students, including the needs related to creativity and innovation in life skills training programs is neglected, a category that in the present study is considered as lack of attention to the needs of teenagers. The results of the research of Santos et al. (2019) indicated that the cognitive dimension in life skills training is considered more than other dimensions. As mentioned in the present study, the knowledge dimension of life skills is emphasized more than other dimensions. The

next point is the lack of attention to integrated approaches in life skills training programs. It seems that the successful implementation of such programs requires a comprehensive approach. Lee (2017) pay attention to integrated approaches in this type of training. In general, life skills training as a foundation of life in this century should be considered more than ever.

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