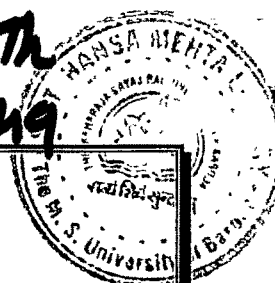


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A LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM FOR ADOLESCENTS IN SCHOOL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

The study used a quasi - experimental nonequivalent control group design to develop and implement a context specific life skills program for 13-14 year old school going urban adolescents. Based on the needs assessment involving 40 individuals, a tool was designed and administered to assess the life skills of the adolescents. Using cluster sampling, 260 adolescents and four teachers were identified from two schools in Udaipur, Rajasthan. A manual for imparting life skills was designed. A training workshop for the teachers and a sharing workshop for parents were organized prior to the implementation of the program. ANCOVA on the posttest results with pretest scores as a covariate indicated significant differences between the groups at .05 alpha levels. Program evaluation shows that more inputs are needed for reducing tension and anxiety, recognizing emotions, and initiating leadership among adolescents. Negligible gender differences were observed in the different domains of life skills, except for the session on reproductive health.

Adolescence and Life Skills Education

"A period of storm and stress", "a transitory phase of the life span", "a time for learning and exploration", "a period of vacillating and contradictory emotions", "first starting step into the adult world", "achieving autonomy, independence and gaining full maturity", these are some phrases that are commonly used to conceptualize adolescence. Adolescence is perceived as a period when an individual oscillates between the two statuses – childhood and adulthood (Lerner & Spanier, 1980).

"Life skills education is designed to facilitate the practice and reinforcement of psychosocial skills in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way; it contributes to the promotion of personal and social development, the prevention of health and social problems, and the protection of human rights"(WHO, 1999, p. 2). Life skills, like other functional skills, if acquired effectively can help one to understand the way one feels and perceives self as well as others. Life skills are defined as "The abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1997, p. 4).

Highlights of the Literature Review on Life Skills

- Instead of a deficit perspective, adolescents need to be viewed as potential resources full of strengths, capable of developing themselves by utilizing the support and guidance from the human resources present in their contexts – the family and the school.
- Life skills are an excellent example of encompassing all the relevant components for healthy adolescent development from this perspective.
- The existing researches and programs reviewed provide the evidence that many programs consider the concept of life skills education more in terms of adolescent reproductive and sexual health (especially prevention of teenage pregnancy, abortions, HIV /AIDS/ Sexually Transmitted Infections, sex and sexuality education) whether in formal or non-formal set ups. It is important to focus on the all round development of the adolescent and not merely on reproductive health aspects.
- Adolescents in urban contexts are experiencing the multiple effects of globalization more powerfully in their day to day lives. They need to be equipped with life skills to meet the demands and pressures of this rapidly changing context.

Rationale of the Study

The literature related to adolescents and the positive development perspective proposes the urgent need to envision adolescents from a positive youth developmental framework. This concept has its roots in evaluation of interventions and programs, particularly designed and implemented for community based youth and adolescents having life skills as an integral component. Several stakeholders believe persistently that more research is needed with school going adolescents as going to school does not exempt adolescents from engaging in risky behaviors (UNICEF, 2005). Besides, the challenges posed by the increasing demands of the urban context reinforce the need to work with this group of adolescents. Moreover, there is dearth of life skills programs for school going adolescents in urban Rajasthan. Thus, an action research on implementing a life skills program for school going adolescents in Udaipur, Rajasthan was planned.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Life skills have many dimensions which are adapted according to the contextual need for program planning. Based on the available literature in the field and the critique and evaluation of the existing programs, evaluation of experts, and the framework developed by UNFPA - WOHTRAC (2003), the present study adapted the following domains and sub-domains of the life skills:

1. **Self-oriented Skills** (self-awareness, self-concept, self-esteem)
2. **Thinking Skills** (critical, creative, problem solving, decision making)
3. **Social Skills** (emotions and relationships, empathy, sympathy)
4. **Communication Skills** (inter, intra-group and self)
5. **Management Skills** (life, stress, time, conflict management, negotiation with self and others)
6. **Adolescent Health and Awareness** (legal rights, basic nutrition and reproductive health)

Broad Objective

Develop and implement a program for school going adolescents (13-14 years) to build life skills for their holistic development and healthy living

Specific Objectives

1. Assess developmental and contextual needs of school going adolescents for building a life skills program
2. Develop a life skills assessment tool for school going adolescents
3. Develop and implement a life skills program for school going adolescents
4. Assess and evaluate the life skills program
5. Prepare a life skills education training manual for educators in urban school settings

Method

Research Design

The *quasi - experimental nonequivalent control group design* was used to carry out an action research. It comprised needs assessment based on which the program was designed and implemented, followed by assessment and evaluation. A manual for educators in the schools was also prepared. The research design is depicted below:

Control Group	R	O	X	O₁
Experimental Group	R	O	X1	O₁

Where,
R is the present state of existing groups
O is pretest
X is no treatment
X1 is the life skills program
O₁ is posttest. (Cook & Campbell, 1979)

Methodology

The following plan of action was adopted.

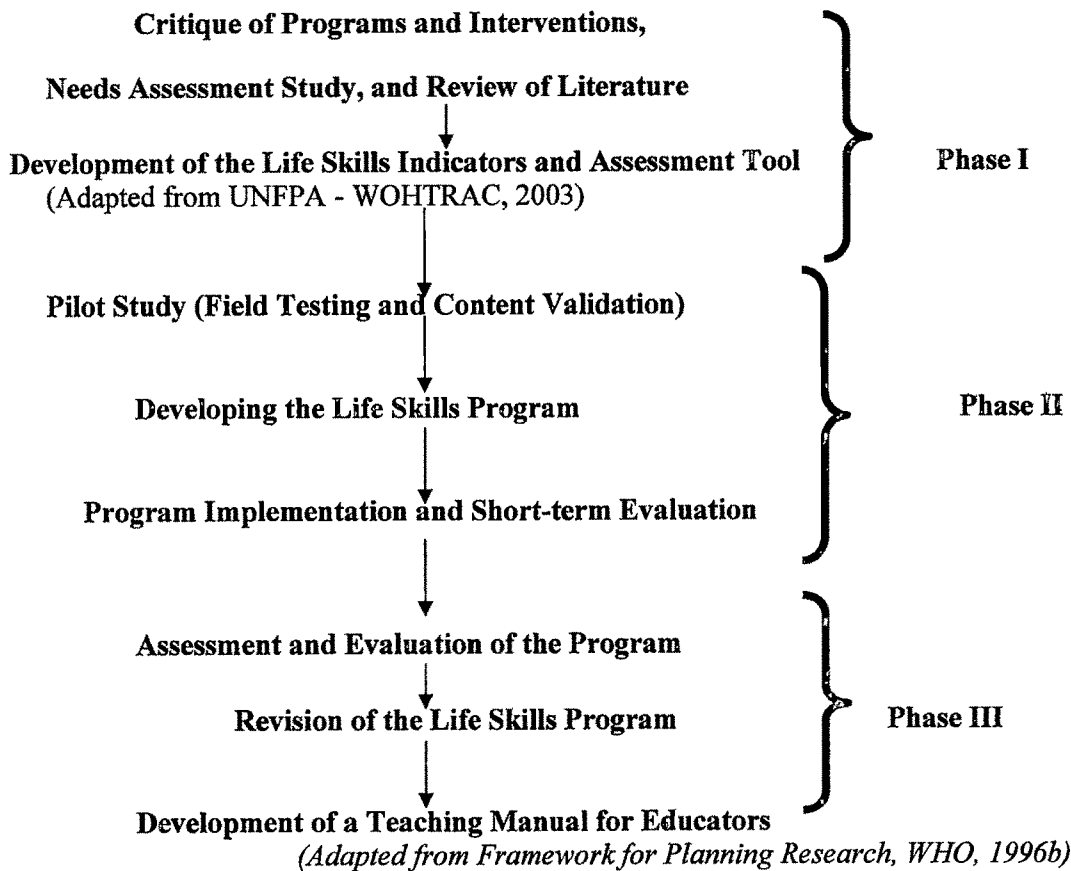


Figure 2. Plan of action and methodology of the action research



Sample

The sample comprised 304 individuals from Udaipur, Rajasthan. Two sample groups were identified for the two phases of the study. Sample I was the Needs Assessment Study Group, and Sample II was the Intervention Program Group.

Sample I - Needs assessment study group: The sample for the needs assessment was purposively identified from upper-middle class families with adolescents in the age group of 13-14 years. Forty individuals comprising 10 mothers and 10 fathers, four school teachers and six experts from different fields were identified. Each individual was interviewed for 20-30 minutes using the open-ended interview schedule designed specifically for the needs assessment study.

Sample II - The intervention program sample group The program was implemented in two schools. Using *cluster sampling*, students of two sections of standard VIII (13-14 years of age) during the academic year 2003- 2004 were selected for the study purpose. The control group and the experimental group were selected from different schools matching on the above criteria. Class teachers of the respective classes were involved and trained in conducting the sessions as educators.

Study Phases

The study was conducted in three phases namely **1. Development Phase, 2. Implementation Phase, and 3. Maintenance Phase** (*Adapted from Framework for Planning Research, WHO 1996b*).

Procedure of Data Collection

Data was collected in two phases. The first phase of data collection occurred prior to program implementation for both the groups, that is, pre-testing of the life skills of adolescents. The second phase of data collection, that is, post-testing of the life skills of adolescents took place after an interval of six months after the implementation of the life skills program.

Evaluation

The process evaluation was done simultaneously which fed into the program as it happens in action research designs. The evaluation form was completed by the teachers and adolescents themselves, and a focus group discussion was conducted to get feedback on each session.

Data Analysis

Statistical and qualitative analyses of data were performed. The software package *SPSS (Software Package for Social Sciences, Version 11 0)* was used to analyze the data. The scores on the posttest were compared to analyze the effectiveness of the program. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to account for the pretest differences in the experimental and control groups. Qualitatively, the responses of the adolescents were analyzed in the form of frequency and percentage tables, meta-matrices, case profiles and process charts to gain further understanding of adolescents' responses on the different domains.

Results and Interpretations

Section A: Needs Assessment Study

In the development phase of the study, a needs assessment was conducted, wherein the sample group comprising experts, adolescents and their parents were interviewed. A brief summary of the needs assessment discusses the overall views of the group about adolescents and the ongoing changes during the period of adolescence.

Section B: Development of the Life Skills Assessment Tool

The tool developed by UNFPA - WOHTRAC (2003) for the assessment of life skills of peer educators for the UNFPA project was adapted. The focal steps concerning the development of the tool consisted of the development of the domains and the sub-domains followed by the indicators, structuring the methodology of implementation, and finalizing the items. The tool was given for content validation to four experts from the fields of Human Development and Family Studies, Psychology and Education.

Section C: Development and Implementation of the Life Skills Program

The life skills program views adolescents as potential resources. The sessions of the program were based on the emerging domains, sub-domains and indicators as a result of the needs assessment study. The program incorporates a need-based 'adolescent friendly' approach, utilizing the abilities and skills of adolescents and enhancing them further. It offered continuity and sequence. The program was implemented over one month. Three or four sessions were conducted each week for students from two sections of standard VIII. The sessions related to reproductive and sexual health was conducted separately for girls and boys. Each session lasted for 40-50 minutes approximately. A two day workshop was shortened to one day for training the teachers as life skills educators.



Section D: Results of the Life Skills Program

Statistical analyses were carried out for the groups using SPSS 11.0 version. ANCOVA on the post test scores with the pretest scores as a covariate indicated significant differences between the groups at .05 alpha levels.

The qualitative results are presented activity wise according to the life skills tool developed in accordance with the life skills program development framework. A significant outcome of this research is the teaching manual for imparting life skills. The manual describes the life skills activities and provides detailed information on each session. The design of the manual is clear and concise for easy understanding and it follows a self-explanatory approach.

Section E: Evaluation of the Life Skills Program

Experts in the field (two from Human Development and Family Studies, one from Education and one from Psychology), teachers and participants in the program evaluated the life skills assessment tool as well as the life skills program, individually. The tool was advised to be shortened in length and the program required adding a few activities, which were incorporated by the investigator.

Discussion

Life Skills Programs: Issues and Challenges

Several issues need to be addressed in order to render a life skills program successful.

- ***Conceptualizing Contextually and Culturally Sensitive Interventions:*** Adolescence is defined in different cultures and societies as per the social norms. An intervention should be planned as per the needs assessment in a defined context.
- ***Life Skills Program: The Content, the Learner, and the Process:*** The essence of the life skills concept lies in adapting programs with variation in content depending on the context. Some strategies that made the life skills program successful in the present study include *variety in content, concentrate on the needs of the learner, flexible planning is a quintessential element, awareness of own limitations , and learning from others*
- ***Life Skills Program in Schools: Grass is not so Green on This Side...***

The school settings, especially during the adolescent years, provide opportunities for building skills and positive habits. The main aspects involved in implementing a life skills program in the school context are discussed in terms of the following aspects:

- Feasibility of the Life Skills Program
- Life Skills Program: Integrated or Separated?
- Training of the Life Skills Educator
- Parents and Teachers: Key Stakeholders in Adolescents' Lives
- **Sustaining the Life Skills Program:** Sustenance of the life skills program remains a major problem. Sometimes the educator trains the teachers for program implementation but the school does not follow up (e.g., no policies at the national level, no time for life skills in school curriculum, teachers are overloaded with work, shortage of funds and resources).

Implications for Future Research, Policies and Programs

Based on the present research experiences, the following recommendations are made for future programs and policies:

- ✓ Involvement of major stakeholders is a must at all the stages of the life skills program and the development of policies (WHO & UNICEF, 2006).
- ✓ All life skills programs should have a holistic approach. The program should begin with needs assessment; it should be implemented in a contextually sensitive manner; and evaluated very vigilantly.
- ✓ Future programs should build on past ones to avoid repeating mistakes and conserving inputs for the success of the program.
- ✓ Government policies should make life skills programs mandatory in schools.
- ✓ Increasing utilization of the peer educator model for life skills programs in school may ensure greater continuity of such programs in the school context.