

Original Article

The Effect of Life Skills Training on Anxiety and Behavioral Problems in Children

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate the effect of Life Skills Training on anxiety and behavioral problems in children using a quasi-experimental method with a pre-test and post-test and a control group. The statistical population of the present study included all students in Ardabil city. A sample of 100 people (50 boys for the control group and 50 Boys for the experimental group) was selected from the mentioned society by cluster sampling method. The experimental group participated in Life Skills Training for twelve sessions (three sessions per week), each lasting two hours, while no intervention was performed in the control group. Mattson's (1982) Social Responsibility Questionnaire and Lawrence-God Anxiety Questionnaire were used to collect data. A covariance analysis test was used to analyze the data. The results showed that Life Skills Training reduces students' anxiety, antisocial behaviors, and aggression, and on the other hand, it increases appropriate social skills, superiority, and relationships with peers.

Keywords

Life skills training
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Social Responsibility
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Introduction

Today, due to the necessity of social transformations, the education system is considered one of the most complex and largest social organizations in every country and has an inseparable link with economic, social, and cultural growth and development and has gradually changed from a simple and basic state to a more complicated one (KarimiArghini et al, 2022). The irresponsibility of students can lead to the inability to establish healthy and loving relationships with others, difficulty in decision-making, consecutive academic failures, dropping out of school, and most importantly turning to drug use, alcohol consumption, aggression, and delinquency (Khadivi and Elahi, 2012).

On the other hand, anxiety, as a part of every human's life, exists in all people to some extent and, at moderate levels, it is considered a normal response. In general, anxiety expresses an unfavorable emotional state that is a product of people's mental pressure and struggles, and its primary feature is fear of future events. Today, it is accepted that anxiety disorders are the most common disorders, affecting 15-20% of the youth population. During growth, children and teenagers experience a wide range of anxieties. Sometimes these anxieties are so

intense that they make their daily life and education difficult. Their emotions, behavior, and feelings are more flexible and any preventive and therapeutic measures can contribute to the development of a healthy and balanced personality in the future (Atari et al, 2019). According to Al-Kurdi et al, (2020) life skills and social interactions play a significant role in people's behavior. The issue of life skills is vital for the comprehensive development of learners, encompassing social, physical, mental, and emotional growth (HosseinKhanzadeh et al, 2013). Life skills help individuals learn more about themselves—their personality, needs, goals, strengths, weaknesses, emotions, values, and identity (Jenaabadi et al, 2015). Life skills training aims to prevent, control, and manage problems, and it is suitable for group and individual interventions as an educational strategy. Numerous studies have shown that training life skills can effectively reduce anxiety and depression (Ghazavi & Feshang, 2016; Goli, 2019), as well as academic failure (Javidi et al, 2019). In recent decades, psychologists have concluded that many disorders and injuries are caused by the individual's inability to properly analyze personal issues, lack of feeling of control, and insufficient preparation for problem-solving. Moreover, life challenges have underlying causes rooted in inadequate

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coping strategies. Therefore, considering the complexities and the expansion of social relations in the modern era, it is essential to equip people, especially students, to deal with difficult situations (Metani et al, 2013). Successful learning of life skills affects the learner's feelings about himself and others and improves psychosocial abilities such as self-esteem, self-expression and responsibility, and effective interpersonal communication. These abilities help a person to deal with life's conflicts effectively and provide the basis for mental health. The main goal of the World Health Organization in creating the life skills plan in the field of mental health is to encourage different societies to develop and apply life skills training programs that focus on the development of mental abilities such as problem-solving, dealing with emotions, self-awareness, social adaptation, and stress control among children and adolescents. Learning and practicing life skills strengthens or changes human attitudes, values, and behavior, and many problems can be prevented with the emergence of positive and healthy behaviors (Naderi et al, 2018). Social psychologists believe that anxiety, as a destructive factor, is learned through experience and modeling, so it can be reduced or controlled with the help of educational methods and modeling. Among these pieces of training is life skills training. Therefore, with the help of life skills training, anxiety, and its components can be significantly reduced and controlled in all people, especially students and teenagers (Naderi et al, 2018).

Several studies have been conducted on the effects of life skills training on different mental aspects and results have shown that training these skills has been effective on mental health and has led to improvements in social skills, reducing depression, anxiety, and stress (Willems et al, 2017; Hark Son et al, 2016; kholtapeh & Nazari, 2022; Ahmadi & et al, 2024). Hejazi et al. (2015), in their research entitled "Effect of life skills training on reducing anxiety and depression of people with opioid dependence," concluded that the average anxiety and depression scores of the experimental group decreased in the post-test phase. Narimani et al (2016) showed that the acceptance/commitment training decreased social anxiety in students with specific learning disorder. Bakhshani et al. (2022), in their research entitled "Effectiveness of Social Skills Training on Social Anxiety Disorder in Students with Learning Disabilities" showed that social skills training reduced social anxiety in the intervention group. The covariate (pretest of anxiety) was also significant. Conclusions: This study showed that social skills training could reduce social anxiety in children with LDs. Mohagheghi et al (2021), in their research, concluded that the life skills training intervention is effective for children's self-monitoring and creative thinking in the post-test phase and this effect is also stable in the follow-up phase. Jacobs et al. (2022), In their research, conducted that the intervention group students' perceptions of in-class experiences with life skills such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, effort, goal setting, identity experiences, time management, and promoting social norms were enhanced over time,

compared to the control group. Khanzadeh et al. (2013), in their study titled "Effect of life skills training on students' anxiety and aggression" found that life skills training significantly reduced anxiety and aggression in the experimental group. Several studies have examined the effects of life skills education on various mental aspects and, findings indicate that these skills are beneficial for mental health and have led to the improvement of social skills, and reduction of depression, anxiety, and stress. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of life skills training on increasing social responsibility and reducing anxiety among students in District 2 Imam Reza, Ardabil.

Method

Participants

This research was an applied, semi-experimental study involving a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of the present study included all elementary students of District 2 of Imam Reza (AS) School in Ardabil who are studying in the academic year 1400-1401. According to the purpose of the research, a sample of 100 people (50 Boys for the control group and 50 for the experimental group) was selected from the target population. The participants in the research were selected using the cluster sampling method. After the implementation of multi-stage cluster sampling, first, the desired school was randomly selected, then two classes were selected from among the classes, and then 100 students were Assigned to one experimental group and one control group.

Instrument

Matson Youth Social Skills Questionnaire (MESSY):

The Matson Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY) is a self-report measure developed by Matson, Rotatori, and Helsel (1983). The scale consists of 62 items rated by the child or adolescent according to a five-point Likert scale. The items are related to 6 factors /dimensions originally named 'Appropriate Social Skill', 'Inappropriate Assertiveness', 'Impulsive /Recalcitrant', 'Overconfident', 'Jealousy/Withdrawal' and 'Miscellaneous Items' (items that are difficult to classify). The validity and reliability of the questionnaire have been confirmed in previous research. Based on expert opinions, the validity of the measurement tool has been confirmed for assessing the research variables. The reliability of the questionnaire is also using Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81 has been achieved.

Lawrence Good existential anxiety questionnaire:

Existential Anxiety was assessed by Good & Good Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (1974), which was developed as a True-False rating scale with 32 items that mainly relate to meaninglessness. Of the 32 items, 26 were positively worded (i.e., a 'yes' indicates

existential anxiety), while 6 were negatively worded (i.e., a 'no' indicates existential anxiety). The final score of existential anxiety ranges from 0 to 32. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire have been confirmed in previous research. Based on the opinions of experts and professors, the validity of the measurement tool has been ensured in measuring the research variables. The reliability of the questionnaire, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, was found to be 0.86.

Procedure

The instructional content of this study was obtained from the training package of life skills. The experimental group participated in life skills training for

twelve (three sessions per week), each session for two hours, and no intervention was administered to the control group. For data analysis, multivariate (MANCOVA) and univariate (ANCOVA) analysis of covariance tests were used, due to the appropriate statistical power and controlling the effect of the pre-test, SPSS version 22 software was used.

Results

In this section, the research hypotheses are discussed. First hypothesis: Teaching life skills reduces anxiety. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of students' anxiety scores before and after the training, separately for the control and experimental groups.

Table 1. Comparison of anxiety index scores of two groups in pre-test and post-test

Index	Groups	number	pre-test mean	pre-test standard deviation	post-test mean	post-test standard deviation
anxiety	experiment	50	17.48	0.863	16.66	1.847
	Control	50	18.66	1.825	18.32	3.519

As shown in Table 1, the mean anxiety scores in both experimental and control groups have decreased in the post-test. However, it seems that the amount of this

reduction in the experimental group is greater than in the control group. The results of the univariate analysis of covariance are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of covariance analysis of intergroup effects of life skills

Source of changes	sum of squares	Degree of Freedom	average of squares	The value of the F statistic	Significance level	Effect Size
Constant	200.116	1	200.116	25.101	0.001	0.206
pre-exam	0.770	1	0.770	0.097	0.757	0.001
group (anxiety)	69.539	1	69.539	8.722	0.004	0.083
error	773.33	97	7.972			
Total	31433	100				

According to the values in Table 2, it is clear that the significance level for the group variable is less than the value of 0.05. Therefore, at the confidence level of 0.95, the assumption of the equality of scores after the anxiety test between the training and control groups is not confirmed. As shown in Table 1, the post-test mean

scores indicate that life skills training reduces anxiety levels in female students. Therefore, the first sub-hypothesis of the research is confirmed. Also, according to the effect size (0.083), it is concluded that %8.3 of the difference in anxiety post-test scores was related to life skills training.

Table 3. Multivariate covariance analysis to investigate the effectiveness of life skills training on social responsibility

Variable	title of test	Degree of Freedom	value of the F statistic	amount	title of test	Significance level
life skills	Pillai's test	0.617	28.618	5	89	0.001
	test Wilks Lambda	0.383	28.618	5	89	0.001
	Hotelling's test	1.608	28.618	5	89	0.001
	Roy's Largest Root	1.608	28.618	5	89	0.001

As shown in Table 3, the results of multivariate covariance analysis indicate that the multivariate F value for teaching social skills in all tests is statistically significant at $P < 0.05$. Therefore, it can be said that there is a significant difference between the students of the

experimental and control groups at least in one of the indicators of social responsibility. To find out this difference, a univariate analysis of covariance test has been used.

Table 4. The results of covariance analysis of intergroup effects

Index	sum of squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean squared	value of the F statistic	Significance level	Effect Size
Adequate social skills	100.558	1	100.558	56.566	0.001	0.378
Antisocial behaviors	492.926	1	492.926	27.725	0.001	0.230
Aggression and impulsive behaviors	672.435	1	672.435	32.593	0.001	0.260
Superiority, self-confidence	153.025	1	153.025	15.491	0.001	0.143
Relationship with peers	106.814	1	106.814	9.830	0.002	0.096

According to the values in Table 4, the effect of life skills training at a significance level of 0.05 on various components. Specifically, it showed a significant impact on social skills ($F=56.566$, $p<0.05$), antisocial behaviors ($F=27.725$, $p<0.05$), aggression and impulsive behaviors ($F=32.593$, $p<0.05$), seeking superiority and high self-confidence ($F=15.491$, $p<0.05$), and relationships with peers ($F=9.830$, $p<0.05$). These results indicate a statistically significant difference in the experimental group.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effect of life skills training on increasing social responsibility and reducing anxiety among students. The results of the analysis showed that teaching life skills reduces students' anxiety, antisocial behaviors, and aggression, and on the other hand, it increases appropriate social skills, superiority, and relationships with peers. The findings of the present research are aligned with those of Jenaabadi et al (2015), Ghazavi et al (2016), Goli, (2019), Javidi & Garmaroudi, (2019). Hijazi et al. (2015) concluded that the average anxiety and depression scores of the experimental group decreased in the post-test phase. In fact, life skills training is effective in reducing the anxiety and depression of people addicted to opioids and can be used as an educational method to reduce the mental disorders of people addicted to opioids. In their research, studied the effect of life skills training on the happiness of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. The findings showed that the mean happiness scores of mothers of intellectually disabled children in the experimental group increased after life skills training. Khanzadeh et al. (2013) in their research entitled "Effect of life skills training on students' anxiety and aggression" found that life skills training significantly reduced students' anxiety and aggression in the experimental group. In explaining this finding, it can be said that in recent decades, psychologists have come to the conclusion that many disorders and injuries are caused by the inability of people to properly analyze personal issues, lack of feeling of control, and sufficiency to face situations. Difficulty and lack of preparation to solve life's problems and issues in a proper way have their roots. Therefore, according to the changes and complexities and the expansion of social relations in the current era, it seems necessary to prepare people, especially students, to deal with difficult situations. This anxiety has been reduced by implementing life skills training. It can be concluded that teaching life skills has an important effect on reducing students' anxiety. A study titled 'The Relationship Between Identity Status and Communication Skills in Nomadic and Urban High School Students' concluded that advanced identity status positively predicts communication skills in all research groups. Also, disturbed identity status negatively predicts communication skills and emotion control in urban students, but it did not predict communication skills in nomadic students. In addition, disturbed

identity status is a negative predictor of communication skills in boys, but it is not able to predict communication skills in Boys. A study investigated the effect of life skills training on the knowledge, attitudes, and abilities of middle school students in choosing a healthy lifestyle. The result of this research showed that the students who participated in the life skills training program smoked less compared to those who did not participate. Many people lack the necessary and basic abilities to face life's problems. Countless studies have shown that many health problems and psycho-emotional disorders have psycho-social roots. We all face challenges and problems in life, however, everyone responds to issues in a special way. People who successfully deal with these challenges have three skills: 1- Flexibility 2- Foresight 3- Being logical. In fact, training life skills gives a person a coping attitude to have more control over his life. Therefore, it can be concluded that training life skills improves the social skills of students.

The current research, like other studies, has limitations that may have affected the results of the research. Among the limitations of this research are: 1) Since the population of this study consisted of early-year students in Ardabil city during the 1400-1401 academic year, for this reason, due to some cultural, financial, environmental differences, etc., caution should be taken in generalizing it to other male populations. 2) The present experiment was conducted only on a group of boys due to time and administrative limitations. Therefore, it was not possible to compare girls and boys in the effectiveness of life skills.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the current research, it should be noted that many problems of adolescents with social anxiety can be rooted in family interactions and learned in the family environment during childhood, and the factors that maintain them are also in this environment. Therefore, teaching life skills to those who spend the most time with adolescents and have the greatest influence on them may increase the likelihood of reducing inappropriate behaviors.

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