

Preparation and compilation of a life-skills curriculum for students in the high school period

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Abstract

The concept of life skills is a great group of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that can help people make decisions, make an effective relationship, develop their coping skills and self management, and have a productive and safe life. The purpose of this study was to determine the essential life skills for Iranian high-school students, to design appropriate curriculum pattern for life skills, and to evaluate their effectiveness.

A questionnaire with 50 items was administered on 600 high-school students (150 students of each grade), a questionnaire with 50 items was administered on 240 parents and a questionnaire with 12 items was administered on 150 high-school teachers, 20 high-school curriculum experts, and 10 faculty members of the universities. The results of the study indicated that the self-awareness, effective communication, interpersonal

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relationship, coping with stress, decision-making, problem solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking are important priorities for all groups.

An appropriate curriculum pattern for life skills was also designed. This curriculum pattern includes purposes, syllabus, type of content, instructional methods, and evaluation methods of life skills. In experimental stage of the study, curriculum of self-awareness skill, which was in first order in last stage, was administered on 120 subjects by a pretest-posttest with control group design. Analysis of data indicated that teaching of self-awareness skill to students is effective in advancement of this skill.

Keywords: Curriculum planning, Life skills, Self-awareness skill Iranian high school students.

Introduction

The mental health of the society is under the direct influence of its each and every individual's mental health. If an individual is faced with substance abuse, or having difficulties of personal or occupational, family or educational nature, which in a way jeopardizes his mental health, the mental health level of the entire society will impair. Any action for treatment of these persons helps both the person to improve, and also impacts the society's mental health. To be more precise, the better solution is prevention, which can be applied before individuals face such problems and hence causing reduction in the individual's mental health level as well as that of the society. Since the many problems and difficulties that are caused in today's world are unavoidable and the members of the society are constantly dealing with, creating and strengthening abilities and skills to guarantee individuals' mental health is essential.

In 1996, in order to prevent and also improve the individual and social mental health level, the World Health Organization (WHO),

prepared a program titled “Teaching Life-skills”. The goal of this program was to increase the children's and adolescents' psychosocial abilities in order that they could face life necessities and problems with compatibility. The Life-skills Program is based on this principle that children and adolescents need and have the right to defend themselves and their desires in difficult life circumstances.

Organizations and theory-makers have different attitudes for categorizing life-skills and have considered various skills for life skills. In its latest categorization of life-skills, UNISEF has offered three general categories with its sub-categories: 1. Relationship and interpersonal relationships; 2. Decision-making and critical thinking skill; 3. Skill for facing problems and personal management.

In year 1996, WHO introduced ten main skills as the life skills and classified them in the following five groups: 1. Self-awareness – Sympathy, 2. Relationship – Interpersonal relationships, 3- Decision-making – Problem solving, 4. Creative thinking – Critical thinking, 5. Controlling feelings and emotions – Coping with stress

In the current research, life skills have been divided to three groups which are: affective skills, social skills, and cognitive skills. This division has been strictly for versatility and preventing scattered-ness, in order that the curriculum-planning preparation stages can be facilitated. Therefore life skills are not really separate from each other and it is possible that some skills that are put in various groups may overlap. The skills for each group are described as below:

Affective skills	Social skills	Cognitive skills
Self-awareness	Sympathy	Decision-making
Controlling emotions	Effective relationship	Problem-solving
Coping with stress	Interpersonal relationships	Creative thinking
	Responsible citizenship	Critical thinking
	Conflict resolution	

Research-wise questions

The researches that have been conducted in the field of life skills in Iran and other countries aimed to answer two questions: first, “what skills could be called life skills?”, second, “by which method life skills could be taught?”. In several of the conducted researches, which were focusing on the first question, the researchers worked on carefully picking life skills through specific methods such as need-assessment. For example, in order to identify the necessary life skills for the middle school Iranian students, Adib (2003) used the need-assessment method and found ten essential skills for this educational period. Other researches have selected skills, have assumed them as life skills, and have then worked on teaching them (For example Timberluck, 2000; Geener et. al., 1993; Elias et al. 1991; narrated by WHO, 1996; Fat-h-Ali Lavasani, 1999). In other words, a group of researches have emphasized both selecting skills as well as teaching them. This is while other groups have only emphasized teaching the skills and evaluating the results. In this research it has been tried to use both methods. This means that the necessary life skills for the Iranian high school students were selected by utilizing the need-assessment method and then the curriculum was prepared, tried out and finally assessment was done on it.

Since the essence and description of life skills is not similar in different countries and cultures, the main aim of this research has been to establish the life skills necessary for Iranian students of the high school period and designing a suitable curriculum for them and then clarifying its extent of impact. The following research questions were designed for this purpose:

1. What are the necessary life skills for Iranian high school students according to the opinions of high school students, teachers, parents, specialized persons in relation to high school level curriculum planning, and the intellects in education?
2. What is the appropriate curriculum model for life skills in the high school period?
3. Is the designed curriculum effective in increasing the the high school students life skills level?

Methodology

In order to find the life skills and the preparation of a primary life skills, first we referred to various sources such as text books, publications, research reports, and electronic sources. Among these we can refer to UNISEF, 2003; WHO, 1996; Hall, 2002; Stevens and Stevens, 2000; Timberluckm 2000; Adib, 2003; Fat-h-ali Lavasani, 1999; Ramazan-khani and Sayyari, 2000; Kiamanesh, 2000; and related Web sites. After reviewing the common and different points between the suggested skills in different sources, a list of life skills for middle school students was compiled. This list was used for designing the need-assessment questionnaire for students, parents, teachers, experts and intellects in the field of education. These questionnaires were: 1. The questionnaire for students' life skills need-assessment; 2. The questionnaire for parents' life skills need-assessment 3; The questionnaire for

teachers' experts' and intellects life skills need assessment; and 4. The questionnaire for life skills (self-awareness)

Cases

Since the research has been conducted in two stages, the target population has been different for each level. In the first stage, the stage for preparation and compilation of the curriculum, the target population included all students in the high school period, their parents, and teachers in all education regions in the city of Tehran in the school year 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. The selected sample in this stage of need-assessment include: 1- 600 students in the middle school period, 150 students in each educational grade (75 girls and 75 boys); 2- 240 of the student parents, with an educational degree of at least high school diploma; 3. 150 teachers in the high school period; 4. 20 of the experts in the region; 5. 10 of the experts in the field of education. In the pilot stage, 120 of the students in the high school period, 30 from each grade (15 boys and 15 girls) were selected.

Findings

1. the various groups of the research sample, that is the high school period students, parents, teachers, and curriculum planning experts in the high school period and experts in education have prioritized the necessary life skills for Iranian high school students differently. The prioritization done by the students is as follows: 1. Self-awareness 2. Effective relationship 3. Decision-making 4. Coping with stress 5. Interpersonal relationships 6. Problem-solving 7. Critical thinking 8. Creative thinking 9. Controlling feelings and emotions 10. Sympathizing 11. Responsible citizenship 12. Conflict resolution.

2. The curriculum model for life skills in the high school period was designed according to library studies, conducting questionnaire, and analyzing the opinions by students, parents, teachers, and experts and intellectuals. This model included goals, content syllabus, type of content, teaching methods, and evaluation methods for each of the life skills.

3. The suggested model for the life skills curriculum for the high school period enhanced the students' life skills.

Discussion and conclusion

Self-awareness skill, in the majority of the prioritizations, is the most essential skill for the high school period students. In the categorization by the World Health Organization (1996), this skill and the sympathizing skill are a main life skill category. In this category, the self-awareness skill includes awareness of one's strength and weaknesses, having a realistic image of self, awareness of one's rights and responsibilities, explanation of values, and motivation for understanding. In the categorization by UNISEF (2003) the self-awareness skill is among the skills for facing issues and personal management and is considered a skill for increasing the internal locus of control. UNISEF (2003) has defined self-awareness as awareness of personal rights, influence of values, attitudes and strength and weakness. Hall (2002) also has placed similar skills to self-awareness in the category related to health. Also in Adib's research (2003), where the life skills for students of the middle school period have been categorized, self-awareness has the first rank among all skills. In the pilot research conducted by Fat-h-Ali Lavasani (1999), self-awareness is considered one of the main skills. In addition to self-awareness skill, other skills have had high priorities according to different groups of people. These included skills for effective relationship, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress, decision-making, problem-

solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking. This is in coordination with the life skills suggested by the World Health Organization (1996), YUNISEF (2003) and Hall (2002).

In majority of the researches, the skill for responsible citizenship has the lowest rankings. While in Adib's research (2003), it is a skill with top priority. The findings of the current research is in coordination with the fundamental skills that are used in the research by Fat-h-Ali Lavasani (1999). In that research several life skills have been considered fundamental, which include social skills, skills of self-awareness, problem-solving, and defending against negative emotions.

In the current research, life skills have been divided into three general categories of affective skills, social skills, and cognitive skills. The research results showed that the necessary skills for students in the high school period exist in all three categories. Skills of self-awareness and coping with stress from the category of affective emotions, skills of effective relationship and interpersonal relationships from the category of social skills, and skills of decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, and creative thinking from the category of cognitive skills were these mentioned life skills. Therefore the skills from the three general categories are prioritized as the essential life skills in the following format: two skills from the three skills in the affective skills category, two skills from the five categories of social skills, and all the four skills from the four skills of the cognitive skills category. Therefore in the opinion of different groups in the research sample, the cognitive skills have the highest priority and the social skills have the lowest.

In the section of the research findings, a suitable curriculum model of life skills for students in the high school period was proposed. In this model, goals, content syllabus, content type, teaching methods and evaluation methods was separately compiled for each skill.

From the goals point of view, the proposed curriculum for life skills is based on the students' daily life issues and from the contents point of view it is semantic knowledge which according to Myer (1986; translated by Farahani, 1997) is related to the person's real knowledge. This type of knowledge is being decoded in the long-term memory in semantic way, which is also called semantic memory.

The methods for teaching life skills are based on active learning and constructivism approach. In this approach it is believed that each student structures his personal knowledge about a subject based on his previous learning and the content introduced by teacher.

From the evaluation point of view, the proposed curriculum for life skills is based on written and performance tests. Due to the existence of both semantic knowledge and process knowledge in the content proposed for life skills, both types of written and performance tests for evaluating the life skills are necessary.

In order to evaluate the designed curriculum, the self-awareness skill was taught to a sample consisting of 120 high school students. This was conducted in a pilot project. The analysis of the collected data in this section showed that teaching this skill based on the provided model for life skill curriculum is effective in strengthening this skill among the high school students.

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