





Research Paper

Consequences of life skills training in ensuring the mental health of elementary school students

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to investigate the outcomes of life skills training on the mental health of elementary school children. This qualitative theoretical study recruited 26 curriculum planning graduates and elementary school principals and teachers in Bushehr Province, Iran selected via purposive sampling (snowball method). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews until reaching theoretical saturation. The validity and reliability of the research tools and collected data were confirmed through Holsti's method and the Lincoln and Guba model. The core categories and subcategories extracted after analyzing the data were successful decision-maker (outcome of developing cognitive skills), rationality in all life matters (outcome of developing intellectual skills), useful family member - a competent global citizen (outcome of developing communication skills), and choosing the optimal lifestyle (outcome of developing emotional skills). According to our findings, "teaching life skills through the curriculum" ensures the mental health of elementary school children.

Keywords: *Mental Health; Elementary School Children; Life Skills*

Introduction

Improving individuals' health indicates dynamism and progress in societies in today's everchanging world (Muzata and Thomas, 2019). The rate of social changes and the expansion of mechanical life endanger the mental health of human society, and according to Orvati Aziz (2016), many people lack the necessary skills to face various life issues. As such, the World Health Organization presented a life skills training program to improve mental health and prevent psychosocial harm in children and adolescents (Shafii et al., 2010).

According to a UNICEF declaration (2015), teaching skills such as effective communication with others, self-awareness, decision-making, problem-solving thinking, critical thinking, and creative thinking guarantees people's health. The WHO (2020) has also identified life skills training as the most cost-effective way to achieve physical and mental health.

Most children receive formal education in the education system from the age of six. Adibmanesh and Sadr (2021) believe that elementary school is the period for a life skill training course and has a positive effect on the development of healthy personality and mental health of children. Jim (2021) believes that such a course has an effective role in establishing healthy relations with family members and peers, developing social relations, and improving their quality of life.

At present, Iranian elementary schools enjoy an extracurricular course for life skills training called "Keramat (dignity) plan". However, according to the interviewees, it depends mostly on the teachers' tastes and has not yielded the desired result. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the effect of life skills training through the curriculum on the mental health of elementary school children.

Methodology

This was a theoretical qualitative study based on the systematic theoretical approach, which has many applications in education. The study population included graduates of educational sciences (especially curriculum planning) who were serving as administrative experts, principals, and teachers in the elementary schools of Bushehr Province, of whom 26 were selected using purposive sampling (snowball method). Data were collected through raising the research question of "What are the effects of teaching life skills to elementary school children through the curriculum on their mental health?". The study continued through semi-structured interviews until reaching theoretical saturation. Reaching theoretical saturation in qualitative research is considered the gold standard for ending sampling (Strauss & Corbin,

2014). Data were analyzed according to the systematic grounded theory in three coding stages as follows. In the open coding stage, all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and compared using a line-by-line analytical-comparative approach, and related concepts were tabulated. In the axial coding stage, concepts related to one axis were grouped together to form main categories and subcategories. In the selective coding stage, the final theory was developed based on the main categories. The validity and reliability of the research tool and data analysis were assessed according to Holsti's method (observed agreement percentage) and based on the Lincoln and Guba evaluation model (1994) including four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Results

The research findings based on the main categories and subcategories are as follows:

A) "Successful decision maker" with the subcategory of "developing cognitive skills" including components of:

Self-awareness skill: Being aware of your feelings and emotions, developing self-confidence and self-esteem, recognizing weaknesses and strengths, and developing knowledge of self and others.

Decision making skill: Independence in decision making; ability to lead a team; successful in choosing a job, a friend, or a spouse; participating in group decision-making and humanitarian activities, and judgment based on reason.

B) "Rationality in all life matters" with the subcategory of "Development of intellectual skills" with the components of:

Creative thinking skill: Optimal use of potential abilities, smart look at the world, fostering a spirit of exploration and healthy competition, creating new ideas, and acquiring self-employment skills and financial independence.

Problem-solving thinking skill: Faith in one's abilities, optimal use of intellectual powers, finding the roots of problems, choosing the best solution among the available options, and getting help from experts.

Critical thinking skill: Fostering a spirit of logical reasoning and being demanding, avoiding hasty judgment, ability to hear dissenting opinions, avoiding verbal violence, respecting different cultures, and saying no to tempting offers.

C) "Useful family member - a competent global citizen" with the subcategory of "Developing communication skills" including components of:

Interpersonal communication skill: Understanding the feelings of oneself and others, healthy communication with others, successful in family life,

active presence in social groups, and healthy verbal and nonverbal communication in socializing with others.

Effective communication with others skill: Pioneer in developing friendships and intimate relations, future career success, respect for different cultures and races, and observing privacy in communication.

Empathy skill: Understanding the feelings and emotions of others, keeping secrets, boosting self-confidence in others, gaining the trust and empathy of others, and developing a human character.

D) "Choosing the optimal lifestyle" with the subcategory of "Developing emotional skills" including components of:

Stress management: Identifying and modulating stressors, strengthening the spirit of positive thinking, time management, and avoiding inappropriate ambitions.

Emotion management: Recognizing and moderating different emotions in different situations; understanding the impact of emotions on health; reasonable acceptance and coping with failures and sorrows; making wise decisions in emotional situations; preventing emotional diseases; avoiding resentment, jealousy, and hatred; fostering emotional intelligence toward transcendence, and enjoying life.

Discussion and conclusion

The most important achievement of this research was the effective role of "training and learning" in ensuring people's health, which is consistent with the research by Jim (2021), Nasheeda et al. (2019), Albert & Davia (2011), and Adibmanesh & Sadr (1400). The "successful decision-maker", the outcome of learning self-awareness and decision-making skills, was in line with the views of Khanifar & Pourhosseini (2017) and the research of Nasheeda et al. (2019). The "Rationality in all matters of life", the outcome of acquiring skills of creative thinking, problem-solving thinking and critical thinking, was consistent with the research by Butvin & Kanter (2000) and a UNICEF Declaration (2015). "The useful family member - a competent global citizen", the outcome of acquiring skills of interpersonal communication, effective communication with others and empathy, was consistent with the results of research by Sinclair et al. (2008) and Javadipour et al. (2014). "Choosing the optimal lifestyle", the outcome of acquiring stress management and emotion management skills, was consistent with the research by Hojjati et al. (2021) and the views of Gelman (2016). Also, the necessity of teaching life skills from elementary school was in accordance with the results of the research by Gholami & Javdani (2010) and Orvati Aziz (2010).

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