

Life Skills Development among Freshmen Students

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Abstract

The study investigated life-skills among undergraduate students. The respondents of the survey were 500 young adults aged 18 to 25 years from five universities in Subang Jaya, Malaysia. Life-skills Development Inventory-College Form was used to measure life skills in four domains: interpersonal communication, decision making, health maintenance and identity development. The findings revealed significant gender difference regarding health maintenance. The findings also suggested that educators should provide opportunities for students to practice social skills, so that students will be better prepared in facing challenges in their real life.

Keywords: Life-skills, communication, Physical Fitness, decision making, young adult.

1. Introduction

There are major changes and challenges associated with the period of adolescence, as youths acquire and consolidate on the social capital to make a successful transition into adulthood (WHO, 2009). This is particularly important as individuals begin to make choices and engage in a variety of activities that are influential on their lives. At this stage, decisions regarding education, career, finding a partner and whether to build a family are made (Packer, 2006). This period is considered most stressful, given inherent challenges that may alter their life journey. Hence, it is vital that students are occupied with optimum skills necessary in their adaptation to new life (Packer, 2006). At this period, young adults start their separation from family, with the view of developing identity. They become more independent by creating their own goals and decisions for life.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1997), individuals with adequate life skills adapt and have positive behaviors in dealing with the challenges and demands of everyday life. Skilled young adults are able to form relationships in their social contexts necessary in widening their social spectrum and intimacy (Packer, 2006). Furthermore, WHO (2009) singled out low academic achievement, poor social competence, poverty, truancy and impulsiveness as risk factors for violence among individuals, by developing life skills, their social and emotional skills can help young adults manage their life better.

Based on Brooks (1984) taxonomy of developmental life-skills, Picklesimer (1991) classified generic life-skills into four main categories. The first category was Interpersonal

Communication/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR) related to psychosocial developments consisting of empathy, confrontation, warmth, genuineness, management of interpersonal intimacy and clarity of expression (Brooks, 1984). It is crucial that young adults acquire these skills because it helps in the understanding and acceptance of their social interaction.

For example, versatile interpersonal skills such as the abilities to form multiple types of relationship (e.g., hierarchical, horizontal, & intimacy) and multiple social worlds (e.g., male, female, occupational, ethnicity, language, and religion) create the opportunities for young adults to adapt to the world (Larson, Wilson, Brown, & Furstenberg, 2002). As a result, young adults are able to socialize with their surroundings, while developing good relationship with their social support system.

The second category (Problem-Solving/Decision Making Skills (PS/DM) demonstrated one's capability to find definite solutions to a task, while decision-making skills illustrated decisions without right or wrong answers (Fishoff, 1980). It comprises problem identification, goal setting, information seeking, time management, and conflict resolution skills. For example, most adolescents in Sri Lanka were found to use societal norms as the basis for their decision on future goals (Thalagala, 2004). In this vein, few of them considered their own talents and capabilities before setting their future goals, this confirmed the lack of skills in relevant decision making.

The third category Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance (PF/HM), consist of nutritional maintenance, stress management, coordination, physiological aspects of sexuality and selection of leisure activity (Brooks, 1984). Bad choices can lead to poor health which eventually causes death. As mentioned by Botvin (2000), life skills training program can reduce adolescents' problem behaviours such as cigarette smoking, alcohol use, and drug abuse by providing the necessary information on the dangers of substance and the teaching of self-management and general social skills.

The last category (Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills (ID/PIL) underlies the other three categories and comprises skills such as self-esteem, moral choices, self-monitoring, sex role development, emotional expression, and so on. The skill is important for the development of personal identity and emotional awareness (Brooks, 1984). Chang explained that young adults should be given the chance to create a sense of self, necessary in adolescent development. Too much guidance from parents stunts adolescents' growth in learning and experiencing life on their own. However, without proper direction it is harmful for children as they still need to learn and grow (Chang, 2007).

Furthermore, Larson et al., (2002) argued that life skills can be obtained naturally as one continues to grow into adulthood. Even though it is possible for adolescents to update themselves as they develop, adolescence is a vital stage for the acquisition of life skills. This is because adolescence is a good time for the learning of new things such as language and social rules. It is also the period they develop life time attitudes and habits. As Schlegel and Barry (1991) mentioned, the stage is where adolescents embrace "social persona" (as cited in Larson et al, 2002). Hence, it is difficult to change a person once they have adopted a persona. That is why early intervention is better than treatment.

Essentially, life skills are important during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Without proper skills to adapt and deal with life, adolescents may face problems in later life, such as making wrong decisions, being isolated by society and more. As mentioned by Gazda (1989), life skills are all the skills and knowledge individuals experience besides academic skills which are essential for effective living. This means that excellence in academic skills cannot determine survival in life, if one does not have other skills necessary in life such as effective communication, decision making, self-awareness, problem solving and so on (Gazda, 1992; World Health Organization, 1997). This study intends to understand the life skills development of Malaysian students with the view of identifying suitable prevention and intervention strategies for educational, clinical, counseling and skills building activities. Essentially, the study will prepare Malaysian young adults as they venture into adulthood.

2. Method

2.1 Study Design and Participants

The Life Skills Development Inventory (College Form, LSI-CF) was used to measure the participants' life-skills development. Participants consisted of 500 freshmen, aged 18- 25 (e.g., Pre-University & first year degree) from 5 universities in Subang Jaya, Malaysia (i.e., Segi College, Sunway University, Taylors University, Monash University, & INTI International University). The number of students from each university comprised of 100 students of equal genders (50 male, 50 female). As shown in Table 1, participants were 6.8% Malay, 79.6% Chinese, 8.8% Indian, and other races were 4.8%. Overall, there are 3% married participants and 97% single young adults.

Table 1: Demographic Table (N = 500)

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
18-25	500	100
Gender		
Male	250	50
Female	250	50
Race		
Malay	34	6.8
Chinese	398	79.6
Indian	44	8.8
Others	24	4.8
Marital Status		
Married	15	3.0
Single	485	97.0

2.2. Measurement

Life- Skills: The Life-Skills Inventory-College Form (LSDI-CF) with 88-item self-report items was used to measure college students' life-skills (Picklesimer & Gazda, 1996). This assessment was designed for clinical and research purposes. It predicts potential skill deficits among young adults. The reliability coefficient for the scale was .93 and for each sub-scale were .80, .82, .80, and .82 interpersonal communication, decision making, health maintenance and identity development respectively (Picklesimer, 1991). All the items were scored using a Likert scale of 0 to 3 ranging from 0 completely disagree to 3 completely agree.

Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR) measured the personal psychological development of the young adults. It includes the skills essential for effective communication. The second part, (Problem- Solving/Decision-Making Skills (PS/DM) measured areas such as information assessment skills analysis, problem identification, information seeking, goal setting, time management, solution implementation, systematic planning, conflict resolution and critical thinking. The third part, (Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM), measured the essential abilities for physical fitness, weight control, stress management, athletic participation, motor development and coordination, physiological aspects of sexuality, nutritional maintenance, and the selection of leisure activity. The last part, (Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills (ID/PIL), measured career direction, personal values, sense of place, purpose of life, self-esteem, emotional expression, and capacity for interpersonal intimacy (Taylor, 1991). Demographic form was

administered together with the LSDI-CF questionnaire. Participants were required to answer questions such as age, gender and race/ethnicity.

2.3. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained to ensure the compliance with ethical procedures before the research process began. The researcher selected five universities in Subang Jaya area with English language as a medium of instruction. One hundred participants were sampled from each university to meet the total of 500 participants. The research assistants approached the students in their university where their participation was solicited. The survey booklet was given to each participant, this consisted of the information about the study, the LSI-CF scale, and demographic form. After the participants completed the survey form, a small gift was given by the assistants as a token of appreciation for their participation and time. All the collected data was entered into SPSS version 20 and analysis was done to calculate the descriptive and inferential statistics. T-test was run to examine gender differences in the four subscales of life skills development.

3. Results

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Cronbach's alpha was computed to evaluate internal consistency of the self-skills measure. Result for each dimension showed moderate to strong internal consistency. Descriptive statistics for each life skills' subscale was summed up and averaged. As shown in Table 2, the mean of each subscale includes the skills the participants have the most. Overall, the results indicated that Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR) has the highest mean, $M = [1.90]$ followed by Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills (ID/PIL), $M = [1.83]$, Problem-Solving/Decision-Making Skills (PS/DM), $M = [1.82]$, and Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM), $M = [1.80]$.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Score of Four Subscale LSI-CF

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
IPC/HR	1.90	.32
PS/DM	1.82	.35
PF/HM	1.80	.32
ID/PIL	1.83	.33

Note: IPC/HR (Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills), PS/DM (Problem-Solving/Decision-Making Skills), PF/HM (Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills), ID/PIL (Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills).

Independent t-test was used to investigate if there is a significant difference between genders in the four dimensions of the LSI-CF. As can be seen from Table 3, significant gender difference was found only in Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM) subscale, $M_s = [1.81], [1.78]$, $SD_s = [.34], [.29]$; $t(498) = 1.051$, $p < .05$ ($p = .009$). The result indicated that men showed a higher tendency for physical activities. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference = .030, 95% CI: -0.026 to .0860) was small ($\eta^2 = 0.002$).

Table 3: Comparison of Gender with the Four Subscales of LSI-CF

<i>Emotions</i>	<i>Male (250)</i>		<i>Female (250)</i>		<i>t(498)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen's d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
IPC/HR	1.87	.33	1.91	.30	-1.42	.27	0.004
PS/DM	1.84	.36	1.80	.34	1.58	.56	0.005
PF/HM	1.81	.34	1.78	.29	1.05	.01	0.002
ID/PIL	1.83	.33	1.83	.32	-.09	.86	0.000

Note: IPC/HR (Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills), PS/DM (Problem-Solving/Decision-Making Skills), PF/HM (Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills), ID/PIL (Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills).

4. Discussion

This study described the pattern of life skill development among Malaysian students. The results give a general picture for the identification of suitable prevention and intervention strategies for educational and clinical purposes such as counseling interventions and skills building activities. From the results, it can be concluded that most students has developed Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR). Since young, children are trained to be social beings. This is essential in a diverse country like Malaysia, as society needs to empathize and understand the religion and cultures of others in the country.

The lowest mean was Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM) which is not surprising as the participants were chosen from urban institutions. Children in the city tend to stay at home more because they perceive the outside world as dangerous. Hence, they exercise less. Since the participants are students, they become stressed easily especially during assignments or examinations. Thus, the result may be influenced by the students' circumstances at the time of the survey. However, these results showed that experts should focus more on social skills especially for students, as it is important for them to have healthy lifestyles. As Botvin (2000) mentioned, adolescents with the necessary skills can actually reduce their rate of problem behaviours such as alcohol usage, drug abuse, self-management and general social skills. Therefore, intervention is necessary to help students have better lifestyles as bad choices can affect their life course.

On a different note, the study found significant differences among genders in Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM). The finding could be because males are more active than female which encourages them to exercises more. Moreover, males these days are more conscious about their body weight and shape which could also be the reason for this result. However, the effect size is small, so the result must be interpreted with caution. Hence, more research should be conducted to validate the findings.

There are strengths and limitations in this study. This study is one of the few studies done in Malaysia to investigate the life skills of Malaysian young adults. Besides, the sample for this study is large and diverse. Following these findings, Malaysian experts can use the findings as a guide in the identification of suitable interventions and areas of skills.

However, the study is limited in the sense that respondents were mostly sampled from urban areas. Hence, the life skills development for urban and rural areas might be different as Malaysia has a wide range of society. Similarly, this study only focused on young adults from Subang Jaya area which may not be representative of the whole Malaysia. More research therefore needs to be conducted across Malaysia to confirm or reject the findings of the study.

Nevertheless, researchers can use this study as a guide to provide suitable prevention and intervention such as seminar, or activities on physical fitness and health maintenance among university students. The study also offered information on gender differences in life skills

developments. This can help the specific genders when planning the programs. Researchers may also use this study as a comparisons and guideline for future studies in this area.

5. Conclusion

The study has added to the existing literature on life skills and has found that the essential skills needed for children especially adolescent to prepare for adulthood. According to Picklesimer (1991), there are four categories of life skills which are Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR), Identity Development/Purpose in Life Skills, Problem-Solving/Decision-Making Skills (PS/DM), and Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM) that are essential for development. The aims of this study is to understand the life skills development of Malaysian students, to identify suitable prevention and intervention strategies for educational and clinical purposes such as counseling interventions and skills building activities.

According to the findings, it can be concluded that most students has developed Interpersonal Communications/Human Relations Skills (IPC/HR) because of the natural instinct to socialize. Physical Fitness/Health Maintenance Skills (PF/HM) is higher for males than female which could be because males are more active than females exercise wise. Results from this study can be used to provide suitable prevention and interventions for university students. Researchers can also use this study as a comparisons and guidelines for future studies in this area. Nonetheless, more studies need to be conducted across Malaysia on this areas as more consistent results is better in developing suitable interventions for adolescents.

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