

Pathways to Life Skills in High Schools and Universities-Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences

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Abstract

Keywords:

life skills; life skills education; teachers' perceptions; critical thinking; qualitative research.

Education needs to reshape the individual's role in the societies of the future. In an unknown world of different technologies, job requirements, and societal structures, the current education systems may not be sufficient to equip young generations with the competences needed to succeed and thrive in the world they will inhabit as adults. In order to develop the skills needed for the future, learners should have access to an education that emphasizes both the importance of hard skills and life skills in a close relationship and interdependence. Built upon the impact of teachers' belief system on educational practice and using an inductive approach, our study aims to investigate perceptions and experiences of high-school teachers and professors from different faculties regarding life skills. Our foci were on the perceptions of life skills needed in education, barriers and effective practices related to life skills development and educators' life skills. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 7 professors from 3 universities and 13 teachers from 13 high-schools in Romania. The findings from the thematic analysis revealed three main themes emerging from participants' responses: "the conceptualization and impact of life skills", "educating life skills", "teachers' and professors' life-skills in action". Practical implications and recommendations are discussed.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Lebenskompetenzen; Lebenskompetenz Erziehung; Lehrerwahrnehmung; kritisches Denken; qualitative Forschung.

Die Bildung muss die Rolle des Einzelnen in den Gesellschaften der Zukunft neu gestalten. In einer unbekannt Zukunft mit unterschiedlichen Technologien, beruflichen Anforderungen und noch nicht erfundenen gesellschaftlichen Strukturen reichen die derzeitigen Bildungssysteme möglicherweise nicht aus, um junge Generationen mit den Kompetenzen auszustatten, die sie benötigen, um in der Welt, in der sie als Erwachsene leben werden, erfolgreich zu sein und zu gedeihen. Um die für die Zukunft erforderlichen Fähigkeiten zu entwickeln, sollten die Lernenden Zugang zu einer Bildung haben, die sowohl die Bedeutung von Fachkenntnissen als auch von Lebenskompetenzen in enger Beziehung und gegenseitiger Abhängigkeit hervorhebt. Aufbauend auf den Auswirkungen des Glaubens systems von Lehrern auf die pädagogische Praxis und unter Verwendung eines induktiven Ansatzes zielt unsere Studie darauf ab, die Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen von Gymnasiallehrern und Professoren aus verschiedenen Fakultäten in Bezug auf Lebenskompetenzen zu untersuchen. Unsere Schwerpunkte lagen auf der Wahrnehmung von Lebenskompetenzen, die in der Bildung benötigt werden, auf Hindernissen und effektiven Praktiken im Zusammenhang mit der Entwicklung von Lebenskompetenzen sowie auf den Lebenskompetenzen von Lehrern. Die Daten wurden durch halbstrukturierte Interviews mit 7 Professoren von 3 Universitäten und 13 Lehrern von 13 Gymnasien in Rumänien erhoben. Die Ergebnisse der thematischen Analyse zeigten drei Hauptthemen, die aus den Antworten der Teilnehmer hervorgingen: "die Konzeptualisierung und die Auswirkungen von Lebenskompetenzen", "die Vermittlung von Lebenskompetenzen", "die Lebenskompetenzen von Lehrern und Professoren in Aktion". Es werden praktische Implikationen und Empfehlungen diskutiert.

1. Introduction

Education needs to reshape the individual's role in the societies of the future. There is already an important debate about the role of the educational systems in preparing the young generations for solving the unpredictable and complex challenges of the VUCA world. In an unknown future of different technologies, job requirements, and societal structures not yet invented, what is typically taught in most schools today may not be sufficient to equip today's children with what they need to succeed and thrive in the world they will inhabit as adults (NRC, 2012). In

order to develop the skills needed for the future, learners should have access to an education that emphasizes both the importance of hard skills and life skills in a close relationship and interdependence.

2. Theoretical framework

The current educational frameworks widely adopted the integrated design of hard skills with soft and life skills (Mourshed et al. 2014). For example, the Partnership for 21st century skills (P21, 2009) designed a well-structured framework for describing



the skills for the future. Each skill is defined by specific key-competences. The three main categories of the skills are: (1) learning and innovation (2) life and career skills and (3) information, media and technology skills. Those sets of competencies are interrelated and require some specific core knowledge for each academic subject and domain. Under the umbrella of learning and innovation skills there are mainly the competencies of communication, collaboration, creativity, problem solving. Life and career skills refers to adaptability, flexibility, self-directedness and self-management, intercultural competence. Third, information, media and technology skills are defined as the main competencies used in the interaction with digital and technology tools and information.

Another important and applicable framework for improving individual and collective functioning comes from positive psychology, the character strengths framework (Peterson and Seligman 2004). The benefit of implementing the character strength framework in education is that it allows students to thrive and develops a service oriented approach that facilitates community involvement. Skills such as courage, motivation, creativity, empathy, are essential for our communities in the future. (Park & Peterson, 2009). Character strengths are a cluster of multidimensional positive traits that are essential for well-being and productivity which have cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social dimensions (Park and Peterson 2006a, 2009). In the positive psychology classification, the VIA classification is a taxonomy for the character's strengths and characteristics. Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified six essential attributes that are consistently highly studied and have roots in philosophy and religion. These include transcendence, humanity, justice, courage, wisdom, and temperance. They also discovered 24 character strengths, which are the mental processes or mechanisms that characterize these strengths and provide as examples of how they show as traits. The 24th strengths are: bravery, creativity, curiosity, appreciation of beauty and excellence, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, hope, humility, humor, judgment, kindness, leadership, love, love of learning, perseverance, perspective, prudence, self-regulation, sense of meaning, social intelligence, teamwork, zest. (Peterson & Seligman 2004). Character strengths are essential for children's and adults' lifelong optimal development and flourishing (Harzer 2016; Park & Peterson 2006a). They have been demonstrated to manifest in a variety of situations and contexts and to

contribute to productivity and optimal functioning (Proyer et al. 2015). It has been proposed that developing, using, and practicing character strengths allows people to apply their potential (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Seligman 2012).

The third important framework related life skills that are relevant for the future, is the LifeComp model of European Commission (Sala et al., 2020), a tool for personal, social and learning key competences. It can be used to design educational activities and as a guideline for curriculum modifications. LifeComp framework encompasses a set of competences that will enable people to prosper in personal and professional areas. There are nine competences in LifeComp, each with three descriptors. The personal area encompasses self-regulation, flexibility, wellbeing. Those three competences are referring to the competencies of awareness, self-management and the management for uncertainty and challenges, but also to the sustainable lifestyle. The social area encompasses empathy, communication and collaboration. The social dimensions are related to the understanding of others and values of diversity and effective communication and teamwork. The learning to learn area is defined by growth mindset, critical thinking and managing learning. The competencies of the third area encompasses a flexible cognitive orientation toward learning and progress, but also the capacity to assess the information and to develop innovative solutions and to adopt an effective plan related to the learning process. (Sala et al., 2020). The main purpose of the LifeComp conceptual model is to support the educational practices and to offer a common understanding of key-competences at European level.

All the life skills frameworks we presented above are offering a broad perspective over the importance of promoting life skills for building sustainable educational systems and communities. Understanding those frameworks and the competences they promote may serve for fostering resilience and help students successfully navigate the world changes and challenges.

Life skills play a dual role, serving both preventive and promotional functions with immediate, short-term benefits, as well as more indirect, longer-term impacts. The overall influence of life skills is intertwined with socioemotional health and cognitive, social, and moral development (Brown et al., 1999). Life skills offer direct motivational advantages, contributing to positive short-term outcomes such as enhanced life satisfaction and even influencing academic

achievement (Waldron, 2009). Additionally, life skills are associated with increased self-esteem (Hajizadehanari et al., 2013) and a positive self-concept. According to Hajizadehanari et al. (2013), they play a crucial role in various aspects of individuals' psychological and social well-being. In the longer term, life skills are associated with healthy coping strategies in challenging contexts (Irannezhad, 2017).

Most of the life skills education takes place within classrooms and heavily relies on teachers. Nevertheless, research findings indicate that the national curricula play a significant role in influencing teachers' approach to informal life skills education (Anagün, 2018). The adoption of educational practices is primarily influenced by teachers' belief systems, constituting the most crucial factor (Levin & Nevo, 2009). The synergy between beliefs and behaviors is evident, with beliefs exerting a profound impact on teachers' classroom practices (Fullan, 2011).

3. Rationale and Aim of the Study

There is a research gap regarding the teachers and professors' perceptions about the relevance of specific life skills in schools and in their professional life. The need to understand how teachers and professors conceptualize life skills and how they perceive their role in the development of those skills for students is important in order to develop effective teacher training programs. Moreover, it is essential to explore the teachers and professors' perspectives about their own life skills and the need to develop them. Therefore, we aim to provide a better understanding of life skills through the perceptions of teachers and professors from different high-schools and universities in Romania. We adopted a qualitative approach to respond to our research questions.

The primary questions were:

(1) what kind of perceptions do teachers/professors have of the life-competencies needed to be developed as a teacher/professor in high-school/university?

(2) what are the main perceived barriers and effective practices related to the development of life-competencies in schools?

(3) which are the life-competencies teacher/professor must develop in order to increase the effectiveness of their professional success?

4. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The participants were 7 professors from 3 universities in Romania and 13 teachers from 13 high-schools in Romania, with different teaching experience and from all main domains (arts and humanities, social sciences, life science, technology). There were 6 males and 12 female participants. The interviews were conducted in 2023 by volunteers, other than the principal investigators, online or on-site, depending on the participant availability. Interviews were transcribed and coded.

2.2. Data analysis

We adopted a social constructivist framework, emphasizing the subjective nature of reality and the significance of individuals' experiences and perceptions (Hays & Singh, 2012). From a social-constructivist approach the researcher's objective is to "make sense of (or interpret) the meaning others have about the world" (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Therefore, we explored how participants understand and construct knowledge regarding life skills development in schools and universities based on their experiences (Creswell, 2013). We analyzed the responses using the thematic analysis process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). We read the transcripts and connected it to the research questions to reduce them to meaning units and to organize the meaning units in codes. After the initial coding process, we organized the codes into 22 categories. In the last step, we organized the data into three main themes with several sub-themes.

5. Results

Three primary themes were derived from the participant responses, as follows: (1) The conceptualisation and impact of life skills, (2) Educating life skills, (3) Teachers 'and professors ' life-skills in action. In the section below, we list each of these themes, along with the sub-themes we found for each theme and some quotes from the interviews.

3.1. The conceptualisation and impact of life skills

The first powerful theme that emerged from the participants' responses is related to the personal understanding of life skills in the context of education and the perception regarding the main competencies schools and universities need to pay attention to in order to facilitate students' future personal and professional success. The sub-themes we extracted

are: life skills as adaptability and well-being skills, the need of various life-skills, the power of critical thinking

Firstly, life skills, seen mainly as a mean of *adaptation and well-being*, is expressed concisely and directly by these responses:

“Life skills are the skills that people need in order to live a full life, to develop personally, socially, professionally and to live with others”. (Teacher 3)

“I believe that these competences refer to a person's ability to adapt to the various circumstances they face in order to cope with life's various challenges and to know how to handle a wide variety of situations”. (Professor 7)

“Life skills refer to those personal skills...characteristics...ways of thinking that help good social integration, good resource management, and beneficial emotional activation”. (Teacher 5)

Second, *the need for various life-skills/competencies* was mentioned by all of the participants. They explicitly mentioned the importance of many life-skills:

“In my opinion, there is a need of many life skills as critical thinking, creativity, the ability to relate and work in a team, the ability to organize your time and focus your effort towards a specific goal, the ability to persevere despite failures, the ability to communicate and listen to the opinions of others (related to these are empathy, kindness, understanding), the capacity for self-criticism and self-evaluation, so necessary for personal development, and much more.” (Professor 2)

“I believe that the most useful and necessary life skills that school should develop are critical and creative thinking skills, communication skills and collaboration and teamwork skills.” (Teacher 12)

“There are various life skills that can be developed and incorporated into university curricula, but some of the most important and essential, in my opinion, are the following: critical thinking and problem solving, effective communication, time management, financial literacy and negotiation, media literacy, emotional intelligence, resilience and flexibility”. (Professor 1)

Third, *the power of critical thinking* as a sub-theme was extracted from the large majority of the responses. All the participants selected critical thinking as a top skill which is relevant for enhancing students' potential.

“Critical thinking and problem solving are, in my opinion, essential life skills that allow people to examine information, evaluate claims and come up with original solutions to challenging problems. Achievements in a variety of spheres of life, including academic, interpersonal and professional outcomes, depend on these skills.” (Professor 1)

“Critical thinking is an indispensable skill in the personal development of young people....Young people will be able to better understand the problems they face, find the best solutions and form relevant opinions based on reason.” (Teacher 9)

“Critical thinking is a vital skill for any human being, because it helps him to understand himself, those around him, the way the world is constructed, the ways in which life can be lived, the activities that make life more enjoyable and give it meaning etc”. (Teacher 12)

“If I were to pick one skill, it would be the ability to think critically. This skill is essential in any field and helps the young person to make informed decisions, understand and evaluate arguments and approach problems in a creative way”. (Professor 7)

3.2. Educating life skills

The second theme revealed the perceived valence of the educational experiences related to life skills development in schools, focusing on the negative and positive aspects of engaging in the development of life skills in schools and universities. Responses reveal two subthemes: perceived barriers, effective educational practices.

First, the perceived barriers in the development of life skills in high-school and universities are reflected in the following responses:

“The main barriers to developing these skills in students include lack of motivation, lack of confidence in their own abilities, fear of taking risks and being judged, and learning or mental health problems.” (Teacher 12)

“I think there are some important issues in the development of life skills. One of them is the absence of a coherent educational system that explicitly and systematically includes these skills. Instead of being treated as an integral aspect of the learning process, these skills are often seen as an afterthought or a "bonus" added at the end. They are also not always easy to assess and are not always taken into account in standardized examinations.” (Professor 4)

“Learning is group-based, not personalized. In order to ensure that as many students as possible have access to education and because there is a shortage of teachers, there are many students in a classroom, which does not allow teaching to be done in an individualized, personalized way. As far as university education is concerned, universities, in order to ensure their survival, are geared towards attracting as many students as possible.” (Teacher 5)

Second sub-theme revealed some common effective educational practices related to life skills development:

“...active learning techniques such as discussion and role-playing, experiential learning through internships, cooperative and cooperative learning programs through the workplace and its continuous development, collaborative learning through group projects...and self-assessment techniques.” (Professor 2)

“...creating a positive learning environment, encouraging students/students to express their ideas and opinions, providing constructive feedback and creating personalized learning opportunities tailored to individual needs can develop life skills...” (Thacher 3)

“Life skills can be developed through various activities such as: debate and reflection sessions on different topics (understanding the internal and external political context, religious or ethnic tolerance, etc.), teamwork, critical analysis of written articles, role play, simulation (courtroom).” (Professor 6)

3.3. Teachers and professors life skills in action

The third theme which emerged from the responses is related to the importance of teachers' own life skills and personal development for helping build students' life skills. The main sub-themes refer to: interpersonal skills and intrapersonal skills.

Firstly, the interpersonal skills sub-theme revealed the importance of communication, empathy people management for professors and teachers:

“A good professor must be empathetic, precisely in order to set an example of caring for others.” (Teacher 8)

“I believe that the most important skills for a teacher are those related to people management/leadership and non-violent communication. I believe that they allow the pedagogical activity to be managed in an efficient and

pleasant way (for both teachers and students).” (Teacher 3)

“Empathy- We need to realize that students are human and come with a certain emotional baggage and we need to know how to handle the situation in a way that makes the student feel understood, included.” (Professor 1)

Second, the intrapersonal skills sub-theme revealed the importance of an open, flexible and creative mindset and emotional competence for professors and teachers:

“Any teacher, regardless of the subject taught, should first and foremost be emotionally mature, therefore coherent with oneself, a socially desirable person and capable of educational interaction with children and young people.” (Teacher 11)

“In terms of teachers' skills, I believe that - just as with students - teachers should have this ability to look at things from multiple perspectives and this degree of mental flexibility and continuous curiosity.” (Professor 6)

“Professors need to adopt a growth mindset regarding their own potential of learning to be better facilitators of learning.” (Professor 2).

6. Discussions

The results of our study revealed valuable findings about the teachers' and professors' perceptions related to the development of life skills in schools and universities in Romania. The research contributes to a more deeply understanding of the topic in order to build more effective teacher training programs and educational strategies. Analyzing the themes and subthemes which emerged from the responses, we can see a close connection between the responses of the teachers and professors, revealing a common understanding of the topic, but also similar experiences and perceptions about the students' and their own life skills. There was a shared understanding among teachers and professors regarding life skills, emphasizing adaptability, critical thinking, and diverse skill sets.

The first theme revealed participants' perceptions of life skills in the educational context, with a focus on competencies deemed vital for students' future personal and professional success. The participants' articulations reflect a collective recognition of the interconnectedness of life skills and their integral role in personal and professional success. Participants expressed their consideration of students' individual

needs for developing life skills and the importance of building upon individual needs to build various competencies. This is consistent with various models of life skills development showing the relevance of multiple skills building (Cronin et al., 2020; Cronin et al., 2023). The consensus on the significance of critical thinking underscores its perceived importance in enhancing students' potential across various aspects of life. Our participants' evaluation of the importance of life skills and the perceived value of critical thinking is in line with previous studies: critical thinking is regarded as the most elevated intellectual activity in human interaction, empowering individuals to participate in the meaningful decision-making process (Rönnlund et al., 2019).

The second theme, "educating life skills", underscored the dual nature of the educational experiences related to life skills development, presenting both perceived barriers and effective educational practices. The challenges outlined indicate areas for improvement in educational systems, while the effective practices provide insights into positive approaches to fostering life skills in students. The barriers and educational good practices identified are in line with previous research results showing that active and collaborative teaching strategies, community-based projects, debates etc. provide opportunities to discover and develop life skills (Waldron, 2009). Both teachers in high schools and in universities see opportunities and the need to infuse life skills education into daily activities, which is in line with Brand & Moore (2011) research.

The third theme highlights that teachers' life skills, particularly in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, play a crucial role in shaping students' life skills. The emphasis on empathy, effective communication, emotional competence, and a growth mindset underscores the holistic approach required for quality teaching and learning experiences. Teachers and professors play a pivotal role in enhancing the educational quality, refining school environments, and effectively implementing curricula. Consequently, life skills are essential for educators involved in the education and character development of students (Koksal, 2013). Moreover, it is important to mention that the training of life skills may significantly improve didactic outcomes (Gazda et al., 2001).

7. Conclusions

These findings provide important insights into the educators' perspectives about building life skills in high-school and university students in Romania,

offering a foundation for curriculum development and educational strategies that foster a comprehensive set of life skills. Many research has suggested that teachers' belief system and mindset influence pedagogical approaches, students' efficacy and performance. (Cronin et al., 2023).

With the aim to investigate the perceptions of teachers and professors from different high-schools and universities in Romania on the life skills needed for students' successful development, our study enriches the understanding of the specificity of Romanian educators' perspective over the topic. There are also some limitations we assume, related to the small number of the participants, the voluntary participation, and their selection from the NW part of the country. Future research should address a more diverse and larger sample of teachers and professors.

The paper provided several findings that can inform teacher training strategies and curriculum approaches by providing an analysis of the perspective on the life competences of the teachers and professors with various academic backgrounds and career levels.

The finding may also provide the foundation for the development of practical recommendations for academics and high-school teachers to develop students' life skills.

Incorporating open and diverse mindsets and strategies into the educational settings will contribute to building an effective vision that can equip students with the tools they need to thrive and be successful.

Authors note:

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