

Integrating Life Skills in Secondary Education: Teachers' Perspectives and Challenges

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The current study aims to find out the perspectives of secondary school teachers on the incorporation of life skills into their teaching. Selecting purposively, the present study participants include ten teachers from public secondary schools in a district of Punjab, Pakistan. The study used a phenomenological research design to get teachers' perceptions and experiences on the integration of life skills. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Data was analysed through qualitative content analysis with the help of NVivo 14 software. The results of the study showed that teachers, in general, value life skills in education. From the participants' perspective, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication were the most focused skills. However, several constraints, including limited time, increased class size, and limited textbook support, limit the efficiency of implementation. Teachers were of the view that students responded positively to life skills-focused teaching and activities but the means of assessing the progress in teaching these skills were lacking. It also revealed insufficient knowledge identification in learning life skills integration and better resources and curricula adaptability requirements. These results suggest prospective future work at curricular, methodological, and teachers' professional development for better integration of life skills into secondary education. Pakistan's educational policymakers and curriculum developers will find the study useful in improving the integration of life skills in secondary education.

1. Introduction

The world of today is ever-changing and multi-faceted. In the 21st century, youth need the promotion of life skills necessary to face challenges in their academic, personal, and career lives (Saravanakumar, 2020). The UNICEF MENA (2017), which presents 12 core life skills, including critical thinking/problem solving, communication and compassion skills, among other life skills, is a more articulate approach to life skills education globally. These skills are necessary for individuals to be a responsible member of the society. Such skills are acknowledged globally as parts of stable education to ensure students' success in and outside-the classroom (UNICEF, 2017).

The teaching and learning of life skills in schools have received increased attention across the world as both teachers and policy makers support the concept as one which empowers learners to face the challenges of the 21st century. These skills have also been focused on in an international context since students need competencies in addition to content knowledge (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; Prajapati et al., 2017). The effective education system in Pakistan is lacking in many aspects, and therefore, the insertion of life skills in the curriculum is very important. In Pakistan, where weaknesses like resource constraints and traditional teaching-learning practices in the education system exist, integration of life skills education enables many students to fit in this gap. This research explores secondary school teachers' perceptions and practices towards life skills education in Punjab, Pakistan, to align with the proposed 12 core life skills by UNICEF MENA (2017).

Accordingly, life skills are important but remain limited in how integrated they are into the Pakistani context. Studies have been conducted on an exploration of life skills in the textbooks (Jamil, Arif, et al., 2024; Jamil, Chohan, et al., 2024; Jamil, Hassan, et al., 2024; Jamil, Jabeen, et al., 2024). However, there is a shortage of literature focusing on the teachers' perceptions of this issue, especially in the context of Punjab's public schools (Sewani et al., 2023). It is vital to comprehend the above viewpoints for the purposes of naming the challenges to implementing life skills and conceptualizing strategies for integrating them into the curriculum.

This study is based on the UNICEF MENA (2017) life skill approach proposed on the approaches to promote personal and social competence for success in the contemporary world. This model permits current world trends of competency-based education and training and education that focus on the growth of the whole student, as envisaged by UNESCO in 2019. One has to understand that in the Pakistani context, the traditional way of rote learning is still very much accentuated, and these facets integrate quite differently into the learning process. There is need of critical thinking skills which have been focused in many national and international studies (Jamil, Aslam, et al., 2024; Jamil, Mehmood, & Noorani, 2024; Jamil, Mehmood, & Shah, 2024; Jamil, Muhammad, et al., 2024; Jamil et al., 2021; Khan, 2017; Naseer et al., 2022; Razak et al., 2022). The results of this study will help to build the Pakistani secondary education improvement process and will contribute to further educational reforms and the improvement of teachers' qualifications.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How do secondary school teachers understand and perceive the importance of life skills in education?
2. What life skills do teachers perceive as relevant and focused in their teaching practices?
3. What challenges do teachers face in implementing life skills education with suggestions for improvement?

2. Literature Review

Botvin and Griffin (2014) suggest that this form of education will go a long way in helping youth change for the better and refrain from engaging in risky behaviours. Employing longitudinal data, the authors show that life skills training does help in decreasing substance use and increasing social competence among adolescents. Likewise, Prajapati et al. (2017) focused on the importance of life skills labelling, it can increase the student's emotional intelligence and quality of life. With content knowledge, life skills are vital for students in preparation for future endeavours.

Few attempts have been made in the previous literature to examine the approaches adopted across the diverse education systems in the integration of life skills in formal curricula. Yazici and Stancer (2022) reflect on global practices in teaching and learning life skills regarding autistic children in two cities from Turkey and England. Both cities were similar in size and socioeconomic status. It was found that cultural and religious perspectives in Turkey influenced the teaching of life skills.

Some of the recent studies include a successful implementation of the life skills education program in schools, as explained by Srikala and Kishore (2010). In their study, they identified some social benefits they attributed to students' psychosocial competence and academic achievement. But they pointed out some of the limitations of mobility – in particular, difficulties of enhancing such programs to meet wider state and even national needs: the questions of teacher education, resourcing and support.

Pakistan's education system has made many changes to try to address the issue of quality and relevance. The National Education Policy 2009 and any given policies have focused on life skills education (NEP, 2009). Current educational reforms in Pakistan, including the National Education Policy 2017-2025, have adopted life skills. However, there are issues in the implementation or rather interpretation of these policies at classroom levels (NEP, 2017). There seem to be widespread implementation deficits.

Nasheeda et al. (2019) integrated a systematic review of life skills in developing countries. They pointed out that it is likely to get favourable results from such programs. Durrani et al. (2017) explored the context and practices of Pakistani education involving social incorporation and agreement. In their work, discourse analysis was conducted regarding textbooks and curricula, and they remarked that although there were efforts to make some parts of critical thinking and plurality respected, these were masked by nationalist sentiments. Chughtai (2015) investigated previous changes in the Pakistan study's curriculum and textbooks, indicating that although efforts have been made to change from rote learning to critical thinking, it is slow. Muhammad and Brett (2015) conducted a study to analyze Pakistan

Studies textbooks focusing on national identity. Furthermore, Naseer et al. (2022) analyzed the Pakistan Studies textbook regarding the integration of critical thinking skills. In the same way, Jamil et al. (2024) analyzed Single National Curriculum (SNC) 2020 for Social Studies regarding the integration of critical thinking skills development in the textbook.

3. Research Methodology

The current research used a qualitative research design with phenomenology to understand the secondary school teachers' perception of the incorporation of life skills in the context of Punjab, Pakistan. The approach was adopted to obtain detailed information on teachers' perceptions, concerns and approaches towards the implementation of life skills in their classrooms. In selecting participants for this study purposive sampling was used. This method of sampling was used to ensure that identified participants could give ample information about the phenomenon under consideration (Patton, 2002). The methodology was chosen to gain in-depth insights into teachers' experiences, challenges, and strategies regarding life skills integration in their teaching practices. This sampling method was chosen to ensure that the selected participants could provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation. The criteria for selection included:

- Current employment as a secondary school teacher in a public school in Punjab
- Minimum of three years of teaching experience
- Familiarity with the concept of life skills education

The study sample comprised ten secondary school teachers from public schools in a district of Punjab. To be more diverse, the sample consisted of teachers from different subject areas. The participants taught for 3-20 years; therefore, the sample included both new and expert teachers. The main tool of data collection was semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was created consistently with the UNICEF MENA (2017) life skills framework and prior research on life skills education. All interviews were semi-structured and took about 60-90 minutes per participant and were carried out in a place of the participants' choice to avoid any form of distraction and for ease and comfort. All the interviews conducted were recorded with the participant's permission, and the tapes were later transcribed for analysis. The interview data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) and with the help of the NVivo 14 software. The coding of data and generation of reports through NVivo 14 software also contributed to a higher level of systematicity in the analysis and handling of data collections, as well as the possibility of developing graphical representations of identified themes and connections (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

4. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are described through different aspects based on the research questions.

4.1 Teachers' Understanding of "life skills" and importance in Education

Most teachers conceptualized life skills as practical abilities necessary for students' personal and professional success beyond academic knowledge. There was a common theme of preparation for real-world challenges.

Teacher 3 stated, *"Life skills are those abilities that help students navigate real-life situations effectively. It is about preparing them for life outside the classroom."*

Teacher 7 emphasized the long-term impact: *"To me, life skills are the tools we give students to become successful, well-adjusted adults. It is not just about passing exams, but about thriving in life."*

All teachers unanimously agreed on the high importance of life skills in education. The reasons centred around holistic development and future readiness.

Teacher 2 explained, *"Life skills are crucial because education is not just about information; it is about formation. We are shaping future citizens, not just future workers."*

Teacher 9 added, *"In this rapidly changing world, life skills might be even more important than subject knowledge. They are what will help our students adapt and succeed in unpredictable futures."*

4.2 Most Relevant Life Skills Focused During Teaching

Responses varied based on subjects taught, but critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication were frequently mentioned across disciplines.

A Science teacher (Teacher 5) said, *"Critical thinking and problem-solving are at the heart of scientific inquiry. These skills are crucial in my subject."*

An English teacher (Teacher 1) emphasized. *Communication is key to language learning. But I also focus on empathy and respect for diversity, especially when we study literature from different cultures."*

Among the twelve life skills, as described in the framework, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication were the most focused skills. Teachers often cited direct relevance to their subjects and ease of integration.

Teacher 4 explained, *"I focus a lot on critical thinking and problem-solving. These skills are not only crucial for my subject but are also easier to integrate into daily lessons."*

Teacher 8 had a different approach: *"I try to emphasize cooperation and communication. In today's world, the ability to work well with others is just as important as individual skills."*

Teachers provided varied examples, often involving interactive or project-based learning.

Teacher 6, a Mathematics teacher, shared: *"I introduced a project where students had to plan a household budget. It integrated problem-solving, decision-making, and even cooperation as they worked in groups."*

Teacher 10, teaching Social Studies, said: *"We held a mock United Nations debate. It was amazing to see students develop their communication, negotiation, and empathy skills while learning about global issues."*

4.3 Challenges in incorporating Life Skills

Teachers faced different challenges while incorporating life skills. Common challenges included time constraints, large class sizes, and pressure to complete the syllabus.

Teacher 3 expressed frustration: *"With such a packed curriculum and large classes, it's challenging to find time for activities that specifically target life skills development."*

Teacher 7 added, *"Sometimes, there's pressure from parents and administration to focus solely on exam preparation. They don't always see the value of life skills."*

Most teachers felt that current textbooks were inadequate in supporting life skills development.

Teacher 2 critiqued, *"Our textbooks are still very content-focused. They rarely include activities or exercises that explicitly develop life skills."*

Teacher 9 was more optimistic: *"Some newer textbooks are trying to incorporate critical thinking questions, but there's still a long way to go in terms of comprehensive life skills support."*

Teachers expressed a need for training, readymade resources, and curriculum flexibility.

Teacher 5 suggested, *"We need professional development workshops specifically on integrating life skills. Also, having a resource bank of life skills activities for each subject would be immensely helpful."*

Teacher 1 added, *"More flexibility in the curriculum would allow us to incorporate life skills more effectively. We need time and space to be creative in our teaching approaches."*

Most teachers felt current assessment methods were inadequate for capturing life skills development.

Teacher 4 explained, *"Our current exams mainly test knowledge recall. We need assessment methods that can evaluate critical thinking, problem-solving, and other life skills."*

Teacher 8 suggested, *"Continuous assessment, project work, and portfolios could be better ways to assess life skills development. But implementing these on a large scale is challenging."*

Teachers generally reported positive student responses to life skills-focused activities. Teacher 6 shared, *"Students love these activities. They're more engaged and often don't even realize they're learning important skills."*

Teacher 10 noted, *"Initially, some students find it challenging as it's different from what they're used to. But once they get involved, they really enjoy the practical, real-world connection."*

Most teachers reported limited or no specific training on life skills integration.

Teacher 3 said, *"We have had some general workshops on modern teaching methods but nothing specifically on life skills integration."*

Teacher 7, who had attended a workshop, shared: *"I attended a one-day workshop last year. It was helpful in understanding the concept, but we need more in-depth, subject-specific training."*

4.4 Suggestions for improving Life Skills Integration

Teachers presented various suggestions for improvement, focusing on systemic changes and resource provision.

Teacher 2 suggested, *"We need a comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum and assessment system to truly integrate life skills. It can't just be an add-on."*

Teacher 9 emphasized the need for ongoing support: *"Regular training, a supportive school environment, and resources are crucial. Life skills integration should be a continuous process, not a one-time initiative."*

5. Conclusion

This study highlights both the potential and the challenges of integrating life skills education in Punjab's secondary schools. While teachers recognize the importance of life skills, they face significant barriers in implementation, including time constraints, lack of resources, and inadequate training. The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to life skills integration that addresses curriculum design, teacher training, assessment methods, and resource allocation. The study contributes to the growing body of research on life skills education in developing countries, providing specific insights into the Pakistani context. It emphasizes the critical role of teachers in successful implementation and the need for systemic support to enable effective integration of life skills into everyday teaching practices. As education systems worldwide grapple with preparing students for an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world, the insights from this study can inform policy and practice not only in Punjab but in similar contexts globally. By addressing the challenges identified and building on the strategies already employed by teachers, there is potential to create a more holistic and effective approach to education that equips students with the life skills necessary for success in the 21st century.

5.1 Discussion

This qualitative research focuses on secondary school teachers in Punjab, Pakistan in understanding their perception about the incorporation of life skills in classroom practice. Some of the sample findings presented below shed light upon various aspects of life skills education in developing countries, which is important considering the subject storm in Pakistan. These observations suggest that teachers, in general, although they have a broad understanding of what is implied by life skills, appreciate the role of life skills in education. This conforms with the indicator of global transformation in educational practices advocating for the readiness of learners for life challenges (Prajapati et al., 2017). However, the extent of learning and teaching incorporates a variation of ways and includes developing, reviewing, and persuading individual's goals, learner's approaches, behaviours, attitudes, and psychological and social characteristics that influence learning as found in UNICEF MENA educated teachers and teaching 2017 framework. With regards to the likely life skills, a standard of some sort is required within the teachers in terms of a coherent and agreed conceptualization. Thus, this

paper points out the need for a clearer, definitive and coherent conceptualization of the most likely life skills in the education system.

Furthermore, the teachers shared their awareness of life skills, and yet there seems to be a gap between awareness and practice in the classroom setting. It highlights a great need not only to create awareness of life skills but also to offer the teachers, through professional development, strategies for use in the implementation of the same (Marruncheddu & Weidinger, 2016). Among a list of concerns of this study, we highlight the fact that students and teachers both agreed that existing textbooks provide insufficient support for life skills enhancement. Researchers found that teachers can control their use of textbooks in learning activities but stated that the textbooks themselves are not very rich in the suggested learning-teaching materials related to learning and life skills; teachers pointed out that there are not many activity or exercise types that focus on the enhancement of learning and life skills. The absence or shortage of textbooks means additional work must be done by the tutors, who have to look for an appropriate way to integrate life skills on their own. There is some freedom for creativity in lesson design and delivery, and yet most teachers regard it as a problem, not least because of duration factors and numbers. It raises the argument that curriculum and textbooks, including life skills curricula, require modification to provide clearer guidance for teaching and practising life skills as components of learning across content areas (Saravanakumar, 2020). More encouraging is the moderate positive response students have to other life skills-focused activities. According to the same teachers, their students' levels of interest and motivation rise if lessons are contextualized and include such strategies as games. It concurs with the studies done by Botvin and Griffin (2014) about the benefits of life skills training in increasing the students' interest and pro competencies.

5.2 Recommendations

Following are some recommendations based on the findings of the study.

- New textbooks and supplementary material should be developed having life skills activities of real-world application.
- Extensive in-service and pre-service teacher training programs should be implemented, focusing on life skills strategies.
- New assessment methods should be developed and implemented for effective measurement of life skills.
- Investment in educational infrastructure should be increased for lack of teaching materials.
- A comprehensive policy framework should be developed to guide the integration of life skills in the educational system.

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