

Life Skills Education Among Upper Primary School Students in Kerala: From Curriculum Intent to Meaningful Practice

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Abstract: *The importance of life skills education is being increasingly seen as an important aspect of holistic schooling, particularly in the upper primary years when children undergo significant cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural development. Life skills are skills that help learners to deal with everyday obstacles in a constructive way, develop healthy relationships, manage emotions, make informed decisions, solve problems and participate properly in society. Life skills have become more and more present in educational policy and curriculum discussions, but there is a constant concern about how much they are systematically developed, practiced and integrated into students' daily conduct. The essay discusses the importance, status, obstacles and prospects of life skills education among the upper primary school pupils in Kerala. Drawing on the life skills framework of the World Health Organization, experiential learning theory, social cognitive theory, social and emotional learning perspectives and contemporary Indian educational policy, this article argues that life skills should be conceptualised as lived competencies rather than an additional body of knowledge. The article critically evaluates the Kerala educational scenario in terms of curriculum reform and school-based life-skills programs and highlights important challenges in curricular integration, teacher preparedness, time allocation, assessment, contextualisation, continuity and behavioural transfer. Indian research evidence demonstrates that structured life-skills interventions can boost student competences and that pedagogy is vital for turning curricular aims into meaningful learning experiences. The article discusses an integrated framework for awareness, experience, practice, reflection, transfer and internalisation to improve life skills education at the upper primary level of schools in Kerala. It concludes that the future of life skills education lies not in adding yet another subject to an already packed curriculum, but in transforming ordinary classroom and school experiences into opportunities to develop capable, reflective, resilient, empathetic and socially responsible learners.*

Keywords: Life Skills Education, Upper Primary Education, Kerala, Experiential Learning, Social-Emotional Development, Curricular Integration, Behavioural Competencies, School Education

1. Introduction

Increasingly, education is expected to prepare learners not only for examinations, but also for the complex psychological, social, emotional and civic demands of everyday life. Academic knowledge is important, but knowledge alone does not ensure that learners can make good judgements, regulate their emotions, form healthy relationships, solve new issues, cope with stress, or respond properly to social difficulties. Therefore, the contemporary vision of education lays more and more importance on competences helping learners to use the acquired knowledge in actual life.

This wider view of education is based on the development of life skills. Life skills are abilities that help to promote adaptive and constructive behaviour, and enable people to deal well with the demands and obstacles of everyday life (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). The model often contains self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, interpersonal connections, decision-making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, coping with emotions, and coping with stress. These skills are not solitary, they are interrelated. For example, decision making is affected by self-awareness and critical thinking whereas effective interpersonal interactions require communication, empathy and emotional regulation.

The value of life skills is particularly obvious in the upper primary years. At this level, learners are confronted with a

growing number of peer interactions, social expectations, academic competitiveness, emotional shifts, health-related decisions, digital settings, and situations that require independent judgement. The upper primary years are consequently a key developmental phase in transitioning from behaviour guided by external forces to growing self-regulation and responsible decision-making.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has reinforced the importance of holistic development in India by urging a shift in education from rote learning to understanding, experiential learning, critical thinking, creativity, character development, and the development of well-rounded individuals with contemporary competencies (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020). The 5+3+3+4 curricular structure of the policy designates Grades 6-8 as the Middle Stage and explicitly promotes experiential learning and inter-subject linkages.

The importance of life skills education is particularly true in the Kerala environment. The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Kerala has established the Kerala Curriculum Framework 2023 as part of the state's ongoing curriculum reform initiative. SCERT is a state-level research and academic institute for the promotion of progress in school education and teacher education. Kerala has also initiated school-based interventions connected with health, welfare and life skills development. An evaluation of school mental-health programs in Kerala identifies Ullasaparavakal as a program based on life-skills lessons facilitated by

teachers (Raman & Thomas, 2023). But there is an important question that remains unanswered in the wake of these changes. Has the transformation of life skills from curricular intentions to everyday abilities been sufficient among upper primary learners?

This issue moves the focus from whether life skills are discussed in educational programs to whether they are experienced, practised, exhibited and transferred by learners. This paper explores this topic and proposes a more integrative, experiential and behaviour-oriented approach to life skills education in Kerala.

Conceptualising Life Skills Education

Life skills education is neither moral education, personality development, health education or a package of desired habits. It is part of a bigger process whereby learners build cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and behavioural capacities necessary to respond effectively in everyday situations. The WHO framework provides a useful basis, recognising 10 fundamental life skills: self-awareness, empathy, communication, interpersonal connections, decision-making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, coping with emotions and coping with stress (WHO, 1997).

The importance of life skills at the upper primary level

Upper primary schooling is a transitional period of development between childhood and early adolescence. Students gain the capacity to think beyond immediate experience, to see other points of view, to control their actions, and to participate in ever more complex social connections. This is so because they are simultaneously exposed to situations that require more autonomy. Such as:

- Academic obligations;
- Negotiating relationships with peers;
- Reacting to societal pressure;
- Health choices;
- Handling success and failure;
- Handling conflict;
- Answer criticism;
- Regulating emotional fluctuations;
- Information assessment;
- Responsible use of digital platforms and
- Engaging in communal life.

Thus, living skills should not be regarded as supplemental competencies that can be handled after the formal learning of academic subjects. They are the mechanism via which academic learning becomes meaningful in life. Tiwari and Bajpai (2021) in their evaluation of studies on life skills education in the Indian school setting, highlighted the potential of schools to contribute to the development and internalisation of life skills. The upper primary level is especially suitable since learners are old enough to engage in reflection, discussion, role play, collaborative problem solving and real life projects, but are still in a very formative era of development.

Life Skills Education in Kerala Scenario

Kerala has always laid great priority on universal education, learner participation, social development and curriculum innovation. The state's continual modifications to the curriculum provide a crucial framework to incorporating life

skills into ordinary school activities. The Kerala Curriculum Framework 2023 is an essential modern reference point for school education in the state. Its development should be seen within the framework of the wider shift toward learner-centred, holistic education. The Kerala environment is also unique in that life-skills education has not been completely missing from classroom practice. School health, mental health, wellbeing and life skills programs have been established at different levels. For example, Ullasparavakal is cited by Raman and Thomas (2023) as a mental-health and life-skills program in schools in Kerala.

An impact study attached to the Health Education and Life Skills Programme/Ullasparavakal also presented findings on the attitudes and skills of students in various areas of life skills such as decision making, problem solving, critical thinking, self-awareness and interpersonal relationships. However, the existence of programs does not inevitably ensure all-round life-skills development. Programs may vary in duration, teacher preparation, commitment to program, ways of teaching, assessment processes, and chances for transfer. This leads to a large difference: Availability of a program does not mean availability of program implementation; availability of program implementation does not mean availability of behavioural internalisation.

Curriculum Presence to Curriculum Practice

One of the major issues in life skills education is the gap between curriculum on paper and curriculum in reality.

One life skill might be:

- Curriculum documents,
- Normal activities,
- Instructor guides,
- School programs,
- Awareness campaigns or
- Co-curricular activities.

But just because it's in the materials doesn't mean pupils have enough opportunities to practise it. For instance, a textbook may have a section on empathy. Students might get the definition of empathy right on a test. But true empathy involves the learner's recognition of another person's sentiments and an appropriate response in a real interpersonal setting. In a similar way, a textbook can teach problem solving, but real competency in problem solving involves students experiencing difficulties, analysing causes, producing alternatives, evaluating viable solutions, executing decisions, and reflecting on consequences. Thus, this distinction can be expressed as: Curriculum purpose Classroom interaction Learner experience Practice Behavioural application. If any of the steps are weak, it can minimise the impact of the life skills education.

The role of the teacher

To successfully introduce life skills education, the role of the teacher must be redefined. The teacher needs to be:

- Facilitator- designing learning experience that matters.
- Model- modelling good behaviour.
- Mentor- helping kids navigate tough situations.
- Observer- identified behavioural strengths and areas for development.
- Feedback giver can help learners comprehend the repercussions of their answers.

- Motivator- Encourages involvement and risk taking in a safe setting.
- Reflective practitioner- Adjusting instruction to meet the needs of pupils.

This position demands teacher education programs to pay attention not only to theoretical understanding of life skills but also practical techniques for assisting them. Teacher preparedness becomes a particularly salient issue, since life skills education often involves teachers leading discussion, disagreement, emotional expression, group dynamics and reflection – duties which are very different from traditional subject delivery.

Challenges of Life Skills Education in Upper Primary School

- 1) Overloaded curriculum: Teachers may see life skills as an added burden when most of the classroom time is taken up with academic subject. The answer is not so much to develop another subject but to embed life skills in existing curricular experiences.
- 2) Teacher preparation: Teachers may value life skills, but may not have training in experiential facilitation, behavioural observation and assessment.
- 3) Challenges in Evaluation: Life skills are complicated, contextual and multi-dimensional. If they're just measured by objective exams, they may not tell the full story.
- 4) Inconsistent application: The success of programs can be greatly influenced by individual teacher motivation, school leadership, availability of resources, and institutional priorities.
- 5) Limited transfer opportunities: In classroom activities, students could practise a skill but have little chances to use it in authentic circumstances.
- 6) Cultural and context diversity: Kerala has a great variation in socio-economic, geographical, linguistic, family and school situations. Therefore, life-skills exercises should be contextualised and not imported without adaptation.
- 7) Digital transformation: Life skills are needed increasingly for digital engagement, online information, social media, privacy, communication and appropriate use of technology.

2. Conclusion

Life skills education is an important part of modern education in schools, as the ultimate goal of education is not only academic achievement but also the development of individuals who can manage themselves, relate positively to others, make responsible decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, and cope constructively with the challenges of everyday life.

Life skills education at this stage is very essential for upper primary pupils in Kerala as these years are a crucial developmental shift. Curriculum reform, school-based wellbeing initiatives and a culture of education that promotes learner engagement already give the state an essential base. Kerala Curriculum Framework 2023 and the general direction of the national curriculum reform create scope for further developing this area. But the real challenge is to transition

beyond program presence to meaningful practice. Definitions, lectures, occasional awareness sessions or written assessments are not enough for effective development of life skills. They need experience, participation, practice, reflection, feedback and transfer. Indian research findings suggest that structured interventions may promote life skills. Research on pedagogy underpins the relevance of inquiry, collaboration and learner-centred approaches. The aim should not be to produce students who can simply claim that empathy, communication, problem solving, critical thinking or emotional regulation are vital. The goal should be to train students who can exhibit these competencies when real situations call for them. Therefore the basic movement you need is: From knowledge to ability, from teaching to experience, from Stand-Alone Activities to Curriculum Integration, Knowledge to conduct and From programs to school culture. In the end, good life skills education should enable the upper primary learners to become not only successful students but also self-aware persons, reflective decision-makers, effective communicators, empathetic peers, creative problem-solvers, emotionally balanced persons and responsible members of their communities.

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