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AVENUES OF LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper stresses the significance of life skills and life skill based education in improving the quality of life. Through this paper the author addresses the issues that are faced by the adolescent children and tries to extend the reach of life skill education to higher education level. Presently the concept of life skills and life skill based education is being implemented by Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), India in schools that are under the board's jurisdiction. Keeping the present Indian context in mind, the paper tries to explore the avenues that can be used to develop life skills among adolescents. Further, it suggests the practical and feasible means, through which the concept of life skill can be included in the present education system without much changes in the existing curriculum. The pivotal role of teachers and the co-curricular activities in developing life skills among adolescents is outlined.

Keywords: *Life skills, Life skill Based Education, Higher Education.*

Significance of the concept

In the present context, our young children and adolescents are faced by different issues like conflict, violence, and gender and ethnic discrimination. Other than these external issues, there are some internal issues too in the life of a young person who is in the adolescent stage. They want to develop their own identity, they struggle to manage with their emotions, they are inclined to make relations especially with those in the opposite gender, they always affected and influenced by peers, groups and media, and they are having a curious and rebellious mind to experiment anything including drugs and intimate relationships. So the present adolescents are to deal effectively with internal as well as external forces and issues. To tackle these issues, our students require more than what the best numeracy and literacy skills can provide. That is why the 164 nations committed to Education for All (EFA) have included "life skills" as a basic learning need for all young people (UNICEF, 2012). Life skills have been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1994, p.1). 'Adaptive' means that a person is flexible in approach and is able to adjust in different circumstances. 'Positive behaviour' implies that a person is forward looking and even in difficult situations, can find a ray of hope and opportunities to find solutions (CBSE, 2011). The family and the society have their own roles in coping their younger generations with several life skills, but, may be in an informal manner. A wrong orientation could also be possible because of the varying atmosphere prevailing in these agencies. Traditional mechanisms for passing on life skills is inadequate because of the growing influence of media, increased cultural and ethnic diversity and the rapid rate of social change (WHO, 1994). In this context, school could be the best agency to inculcate the life skills to all students by considering the interest of the nation and the requirements of the society. This is the reason why the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has included life skills as a core component to be considered in the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) of children.

Core life skills

There are innumerable life skills. But only a few skills are considered as core life skills which would help for the promotion of health and well being of children and adolescent. WHO has listed out the core life skills to be mastered in order to become an empowered child or an adolescent. They are

- Creative thinking
- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Effective communication
- Interpersonal relationship
- Self awareness
- Empathy
- Coping with emotions
- Coping with stress (WHO, 1994)

A closer look in to the above skills reveals that they are complementary to each other, but in varying degree. A meaningful and uniform mastery in all those core skills are necessary for an individual child for his/her effective management of future life. The complementary nature is more dominant in case of the skills paired and discussed in the above paragraphs. A meaningful education should provide necessary inputs for the development of each of these skills paired under five life skill areas.

Merits of life skill education

Development of these life skills in an adolescent is very significant to make them deal with the internal and external issues. It is possible through Life Skill Based Education (LSBE). LSBE refers to an interactive process of teaching and learning which enables learners to acquire knowledge and to develop attitudes and skills which support the adoption of healthy behaviours (UNICEF, 2011). LSBE does not take place in a vacuum, and the ultimate expression of life skills learning – adaptive and positive behaviour – is greatly influenced by the environment in which individuals live, learn and act (UNICEF, 2011a). LSBE promote the learning abilities of adolescents by developing healthy behaviour, interpersonal relationship and mental well being. Hence it should start before or during the adolescent period, right before the negative patterns of behaviours being established (WHO, 1994). The LSBE in schools is helpful to improve pupil-teacher relationship (Parsons, Hunter & Warne, 1988). It was also found that the academic performance of students had been improved through LSBE (Weissberg, Caplan & Sivo, 1989). Zabin et al, (1986) found that LSBE helped to improve attendance of children.

An adolescent who is mentally and emotionally fit can deal effectively with the negative influences that he/she may have to face in the day to day life. The academic subject content can be dealt by any teacher and even a good student can learn it himself/herself. But this does not guarantee a meaningful and balanced life. There are instances that all of us know, where an academically brilliant student may miserably fail in the real life. The divorce rate among executives in multinational companies because of several job related reasons and the suicides committed by students because of a mere scolding of parent or teacher or because of failure in an examination can be attributed to lack of life skills competency. Majority of our new generation lacks ability for critical and creative thinking and proper decision making. They cannot control their emotions. One among the many causes of the increasing cases of hyper tension and other life style diseases could be the inability to manage the stress, which is a part and parcel of the present job sphere. A student in the adolescent age, if provided with LSBE, he/she acquires mastery in life skills by the time they pass out from our higher education institutions. This will help them to deal effectively with the ‘storm and stress’ associated with adolescent period as well as they will be empowered to deal any kinds of issues they may have to face in their future life. The above factors necessitates the need for a teaching- learning process which is more life skill oriented.

Life skill based teaching

The best way to develop life skills is to learn from own and other’s experiences by observing others behaviours and its consequences (WHO 1994). The role of a teacher here is to provide ample opportunities and situations to the students so that they can acquire, process and structure these

experiences actively (Bandura, 1977), which is discussed explicitly in his social learning theory. Allow the children to actively participate in the teaching learning process. Teacher should provide some situations where any of the life skill can be discussed. Encourage the children to discuss about it. Brain storming sessions or group activities can be used for this. Once they have a conceptual clarity, allow them to practice the skill in different real life situations, which is the more significant component of life skill education (WHO, 1994). Teacher can encourage children to continue the practice in other situations too. This is the ideal way to teach life skills to adolescent children.

Present Indian context

The target group for life skill based education could better be the students in the age group 12-19. This means that at least in the 6th or 7th standard, life skill based education should start and it should continue till the student completes his graduation (under 10+2+3 pattern). If we can start life skill based education in an earlier stage, before negative patterns of interaction and behaviour have become established (WHO, 1994), it would be much more effective.

The teachers in the present higher secondary and graduate classes are already overburdened with different tasks and they even have to 'rush' through portions to 'finish' the syllabus (Personal communication, teachers, 2012). In this context, the most effective methods to inculcate these skills like brain storming, collaborative learning and other time consuming methods may not be feasible to practice in a regular manner in our classrooms. But we cannot take it as an excuse for not providing training in life skills, which is very significant to their adolescent as well as future life. Within the limitations of the present Indian classrooms, the teachers have to think creatively the means to inculcate these skills in our younger generation adolescent learners, who are very delicate and brittle. There are ample opportunities in our present education system to incorporate life skills training. One way or the other, our schools can provide life skill education and training. A dedicated work force is the only necessary criterion. A purposeful and well planned improvisation of the current classroom transaction pattern, with provision for increased student participation and responsibility of learning could be a good beginning. Meaningful use of co curricular activities could be a best venue for developing life skill.

Avenues for life skills development in higher education institutions

One among the many ways that can be adopted in the present Indian context is to make the dominating method of teaching-lecture method- more effective. A study was conducted in Pakistan to find out the best teaching method for higher education levels through a student feedback. Most of the students rated lecture method as the best teaching method. Ability to deal with more students, content coverage, provision for asking questions and writing notes (Sajjad, 2010) were some of the reasons that students like in lecture method. The experience and expertise of a teacher is considered as the strong holds of lecture method. An expert teacher can give ample space for students to clear doubts and to have interaction and an amalgamation of the recent developments in ICT with this method yield more fruitful results (Sajjad, 2010). Lecture method presents factual material in direct and logical manner, with experience which inspires, stimulates thinking to open discussion, and useful for large groups (McCarthy, (1992) as cited in Sajjad, 2010). Sullivan & McIntosh (1996) said that with planning and effective presentation techniques, the lecture can be a highly effective and interactive method for transferring knowledge to students.

The significance of lecture method cannot be underestimated in the higher education system of India. It is not difficult to blend the lecture with different techniques to cater the needs of LSBE. When it is used purposively, it can become as good as any other method, especially for imparting life skill education. A teacher should purposively include the elements of life skill/s in his/her routine lecturing. It is neither a simple nor an easy task. Teacher has to put more effort to identify that life skill, which could be developed along with the content what they teach. Before transacting the content, the teacher should be well aware about the life skills that can be transacted, may be in varying degree, through his/her lectures. In the present technologically advanced environment, the students may not find it difficult to identify the academic content which is required for their intellectual development. Keep the explanations brief, to the point and rich with further learning

references. Develop the content through students' participation. This will encourage the students to think in a non threatening environment. Identify situations, related to the content, where a possibility to teach any of the core skill exist. Add brief venues for collaborative learning in the form of discussions or collective opinions. Creativity, critical thinking and some other skills in tune with the context can be developed and fostered in this way. Place real life contexts and allow students to reflect upon. These exercises will drastically improve their skills. It could not be possible to develop all the life skills through this method and at the same time it may take more than one lecture to introduce and develop one life skill. But it is sure that if all teachers take this as a responsibility, the development of core life skills in students would not be a herculean task.

Another means is the seminars and project works. All the collages rely on these methods, but as a ritual for internal assessment and grading. Encourage students to take up small projects and seminars as part of their curriculum and provide them with constructive criticism. It should not be mistaken as the projects or seminars given for final evaluation. It should be a part of routine classroom work and should complement the lectures. Communication, problem solving and many other skills of students could be improved through this strategy. If planned and implemented properly, it could complement the lectures and some of the life skills as mentioned above could be automatically develop in students.

Significance of co-curricular activities

In the present context of higher education, we comfortably forget the significance of co curricular activities. Encourage the students to participate in the co curricular activities like sports and games. Along with a healthy body, they would get the basic life skills for a healthier living too. Children will have many opportunities to develop life skills through co curricular activities along with many other means (Ministry of education, 2012). Participation in co curricular activities should not be for state level or national level competitions. Let it be a part of curriculum. A playground is the best place to learn the core life skills like empathy, emotion and stress management, interpersonal relation and so on. Allow the students to learn these skills in a more conducive and free environment beyond the four walls of the classroom. The significant role of physical education is rightly pointed by the ministry of education (2009). Allow the students to participate in various co curricular and physical activities, which would certainly lead to meaningful acquisition of different life skills that too without much effort from the side of teachers.

Empowering teachers

If we are able to do this much to our students, they will definitely learn the core life skills. It only requires a well thought out planning of class room and co curricular activities. Once the students are competent in various life skills, they can easily deal with the external and internal issues which otherwise could pose threat to their healthy life patterns. Adolescence is a period, where there are chances for emotional instability, role confusion, rebellious nature, and antisocial gang formation, indulgence in violence and fights and even unacceptable or unhealthy sexual practices. The mastery over life skills could help them to deal effectively with these issues. When they reach adult hood, they would be well armed to deal effectively with the challenges of life and job. But at present, many of our teachers are 'dumping' academic information over their students. The pressure from the family and the teaching pattern of our teachers would finally lead a student to think that academic excellence is the one and only aim of education. Academic performance has its own credit but it is not enough for a meaningful life. A meaningful life in the society demands all round development of each of its citizen. A mere academic excellence will not contribute much in this regard, unless it is blended with different life skills. This is possible only through empowered teachers. If a teacher wishes, he/she can develop a child in to a well adjusted adult who is fit for the society.

The in service teacher training programmes are the best venue to orient and empower teachers in this regard. Teachers in higher education sector usually do not get a pre-service training except those who are teaching in the higher secondary level. It is also not sure that those teachers who are trained through pre-service programme would immediately join in the profession. But the teachers

attending various in service programmes are coming to these courses directly from the teaching field and are going back to the same field just after the programme. This would help them to practice what they have learned immediately on the target group. Hence training about the ways to impart life skills to students should be an integral part of all the in service programme like orientation and refresher programmes. Let the teachers be armed first. Then allow them to practice what they have learnt. We can hopefully wait for a better generation who are healthy both in mind and spirit.

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