

**EFFECTIVENESS OF LIFE SKILLS TRAINING IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT OF PRE-UNIVERSITY GIRL STUDENTS IN TEHRAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

Many academic successes or failures are rooted in the individual's general perception of his/her abilities in relation to school leanings. Thus the present study has been conducted with the aim of examining the effectiveness of life skills training in enhancing academic self-concept of pre-university girl students in Tehran in 2014. This study is quasi-experimental with control group pre-test/post-test design plus follow-ups. A sample size of 40 persons was selected through single-stage cluster sampling and was randomly placed in two experimental group (20 persons) and control group (20 persons). The experimental group was provided with 9 sessions each 1.5 hour of life skills training and the control group was on the waiting list. Data collection was carried out based on the Delvar's (1993) academic self-concept questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated by using Cronbach's Alpha which amounted to over than 0.7. Similarly, content-related validity was adopted in order to measure the validity of the questionnaire, so that the questionnaire was approved of by the related experts. Analysis of the data obtained from questionnaires was carried out in two descriptive and inferential (analysis of covariance) sections. The results indicated that the scores for academic self-concept for experimental group were higher in post-test than their scores for pre-test ( $p=0.009$ ). Besides, in order to compare the follow-up test and post-test, independent t was used and the results indicated that there is no significant difference between them; in other words, training had a positive effect and the effectiveness of life skills training was also sustainable.

**KEYWORDS:** life skills, academic self-concept, students

**INTRODUCTION**

Undoubtedly, the most basic key of human personality and behaviour is the perception the individual has in his/her mind of him/herself. Even great works we do depends on the perception we have of ourselves. If the perception we have of ourselves is amendable, it definitely affects our personality and behavior. The perception the human being has of him/herself determines his/her talents in various grounds; thus if we have better perception of ourselves, we will be more effective and more creative (Mirsaleh *et al.*, 2010). Self-concept is the individual's general assessment of his/her personality. This assessment is resulted from individual's mental assessment of his/her characteristics which may be positive or negative. Positive self-concept indicates that the individual accepts him/herself in a position of an individual with strengths and weaknesses, and this raises the self-confidence of the individual in social relationships. Negative self-concept reflects the feeling of being worthless and inaptitude as well as incapable (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Self-concept includes a set of characteristics perceived by the individual of him/herself as a unique being, and it is acquired through social relationships. From the viewpoint of Rogers, an individual who has a strong and positive self-concept, in comparison to an individual with weak self-concept, holds a totally different view on the world, and he/she will be more successful in work and education (Ybrandt, 2008). In previous studies, self-concept has been considered an overall structure without any separate dimension (Rosenberg, 1965); however, other individuals emphasize the multidimensionality of this structure (O'Mara *et al.*, 2006). Shavelson *et al.* (1976) have defined self-concept as the perception of the individual of him/herself which is formed through his/her experience and interpretation of the environment. They believed that self-concept is not a being inside the individual, but it is a theoretical structure which possesses the potential ability to describe and predict actions performed by the individual. Because of the theoretical limitations and imperfections as well as the assessment of the above model, Marsh and Shavelson (1985) revised it. In the new model, self-concept is in a form of hierarchy on top of which, i.e. at the first level, general self-concept exists which is composed of beliefs the individual have about him/her and its change is rather difficult. The second level, there are two academic and non-academic areas. Academic self-concept involves specialized topics which are related to subject areas (mathematics, verbal, etc.), and non-academic self-concept is divided into emotional, social, and physical. At the third level, the specific areas of self-concept which are totally exclusive and are more interrelated with real

behavior exist. Each one of these levels have subsets in turn; for example, physical self-concept is divided into two physical ability and physical appearance. Academic self-concept is categorized into concepts of itself in the area of a special topic (such as literature, mathematics, and sciences). Non-academic self-concept encompasses cases of social, emotional and physical self-concepts. In this model, self-concept is organized and multidimensional and like areas of social acceptance, physical action, ability and sports it is hierarchical: general self-concept is stable in it. Some of its levels dependent on the situation are less stable. Self-concept increases as the child grows. It becomes more multidimensional and has two descriptive and assessing aspects (Marsh, 1990).

Academic self-concept is one of the factors affecting academic performance and it is the general attitude of the individuals towards his/her abilities in regard to school learning. Individuals' positive perception of themselves can affect their education and this perception is a positive factor for achieving perfection in education. In contrary, students who do not have a good feeling about their ability, even regardless of their race or color, are rarely successful in their educational activities (Pekrun et al., 2011). Academic self-concept is strongly dependent on relative social information and it is a reflection of others' assessments and has a normative nature. In other words, academic self-concept of each individual is resulted from his/her comparison to others (Ravindranath *et al.*, 2012).

Altogether, it can be said that researchers agree that self-concept is not innate and inborn but it forms as a result of individuals' experiences and interactions with the environment (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). From the viewpoint of Mendaglio and Pryyt (2003), the most important characteristic of academic self-concept is the state which specifies the individual's self-concept as the result of interactions and experiences with others and confirms this fact that academic self-concept is acquirable and learnable over time. On the other hand, since the adolescence is critical in terms of the development of self-concept (Moattari *et al.*, 2005) and given the significant role of academic self-concept in academic performance and achievement of the students (Soufi *et al.*, 2014; Isanejad *et al.*, 2012; Matovu, 2012; Marsh and Martin, 2012; Ghazvini, 2011; Hoseini Dolat Abadi, 2007) and because academic self-concept tries to retain its stability as the individual grows (Jacobs et al., 2002) and it almost stabilizes in adolescence (Matovu, 2012), measure should be taken in order to enhance this educational variable which plays a major role in students' academic performance.

On one hand, there are two development models in adolescents: Faulty developmental model and positive development model. In the faulty model, the adolescent has to think of a way of avoiding negative behaviours and decreasing them, while the positive model considers the adolescent to be a source of growth and development. In the positive approach, adolescence is the period of growth and increasing competence, that is a time when the adolescent expands his/her knowledge about him/herself and his/her status in the society (Lerner et al., 2006). The main focus of the positive model is on the adolescents who are healthy, happy, ethical and totally involved in life. One way of achieving this is to improve life skills.

Life skills mean that the individuals need to defend themselves and their interests against the tough situations of life. Individuals who are under life skills training are more aware of their life and their abilities, and these individuals who have accepted themselves and have self-confidence, are confident that they can progress by making attempt and reach higher level of development (Boa *et al.*, 2008, cited in Houman *et al.*, 2013). World Health Organization (1999) defined life skills as the ability to behave positively and adaptively which enables people to effectively face challenges and demands of daily life. In fact, life skills are those personal and social skills that children and adolescents should learn to be able to behave effectively and confidently towards themselves, other people and the whole society. UNISEF (2007) defined life skills as an approach, based on behavior change or behaviour formation, which considers establishing balance between three areas of knowledge, attitude and skills.

Life skills training was initialised in 1979 by Gilbert Botvin. He compiled a collection of life skills training for seventh to ninth grade students which was greatly welcomed by health specialists. This training program teaches the adolescent how to resist temptation or offer to substance abuse by the peers by using skills of assertive behaviour, decision making and critical thinking. Botvin's goal was to design a single program for the initial prevention and next studies indicated that life skills training can only lead to the expected results when all the skills are learned by the individuals. Studies suggested that this program have been successful in the initial prevention of several types of drugs including cigarette (Botvin, 2000).

Following these activities, since 1993, WHO in cooperation with UNISEF, introduced life skills training program as a comprehensive design for initial prevention and enhancing the level of mental health of children and adolescents (WHO, 1994, 2004). This program was experienced in different countries of the world and there has been promising reports on the efficiency of this program. Life skills training programs are mainly based on social learning theory (WHO, 1994). According to this theory, learning is an active process based on the activity of the learner which is acquired through observing others' behaviors and their consequences. Albert Bandura proposed this theory and believed that human is a social being and his behavior shall be investigated in the light of social relationships. From the viewpoint of Bandura, observational learning is a kind of cognitive learning encompassing the process of attention, maintenance, production and motivation. Training methods such as role playing and plays in which the emphasis is on the objective or visual observation are considered to be among the most effective methods in learning many life skills (WHO, 1994).

World Health Organization proposed 10 skills as the main life skills in the life skills program introduced in 1993. These 10 skills are recognized by the UNISEF and UNESCO as the main life skills. These skills are as follows:

1. Self-awareness, 2. Empathy skills, 3. Problem-solving skill, 4. Decision-making skill, 5. Creative thinking skills, 6. Critical thinking skill, 7. Ability to establish effective communication, 8. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships skill, 9. Coping with emotion skill, 10. Coping with stress skill.

It seems that life skills training are effective in developing and increasing capabilities such as decision making, generating self-motivation, accepting responsibility, positive relationship with others, fostering positive self-esteem, problem-solving, self-regulation and self-efficacy (Kazemi et al., 2011). Life skills training plan was first implemented in 2004 in some forms in some parts of the country by officials of Education Department and with cooperation of some other organization. Adolescence is a critical period during which individuals can learn skills, attitudes and behaviors which are the basis for success in adulthood (Yadav *et al.*, 2009; Lerner *et al.*, 2006; Jones and Lavallee, 2009). Studies have shown that if we provide these individuals with the necessary knowledge and information and create situations in which they can practically experience the knowledge they have acquired, this knowledge as well as the value and attitude will be turned into actualized abilities (Emami Naeeni, 2014).

Studies conducted in the area of life skills training outside Iran have been focused more on the substance, alcohol and tobacco abuse and risky behaviours; while, inside Iran, variables such as anxiety, behavioral disorder, prevention of substance use, depression, self-esteem, etc. are investigated among the adolescent population (Houman et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there has been studies on the variables related to self-concept; for example, life skills training results in the improvement of competencies and abilities (Lou *et al.*, 2008, cited in Ghombavani *et al.*, 2012), individual's perception of self-adequacy, self-confidence (Amani Naeeni, 2014), reinforcement or change of human attitudes, values and behavior (Khalessi and Alikhani, 2003), actualization of these values and attitudes (Bahrami et al., 2013; Sepehrian Azar and Saadatmand, 2012), self-acceptance (Shaghghi and Kargar, 2010), decrease of anxiety (Baghaee Moghadam et al., 2011), mental health (Hajizadehanari *et al.*, 2013; Savoji and Ganji, 2013), and success in life environment such as home and school (Danish et al., 2004, cited in Hodge et al., 2013). In addition, Zera'at and Ghafourian (2009), in a study titled "Effectiveness of Life Skills Training on Academic Self-Concept among Students", indicated that problem-solving skill training (which is one of the life skills) has a positive effect on academic self-concept. Sepehrian and Saadatmand (2012) also indicated that life skills training enhances self-concept. A positive attitude can be fostered in individuals and their psychological wellbeing can be improved by teaching skills of critical thinking and creative thinking (Saghghi and Kargar, 2010). Altogether, it can be said that life skills training has been less examined for the purpose of improving academic variables. Given the inability of high school students to solve new problems and the less-than-average access of Iranian adolescents to life skills and the role of life skills in changing and strengthening individuals' attitude and improving self-concept and critical nature of adolescence in terms of self-concept and its strong tendency to be stabilized in adulthood, this study has been conducted with the aim of teaching life skills to high school students who are in adolescence.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is quasi-experimental with control group pre-test/post-test design plus follow-ups. Statistical population of the study included all the pre-university girl students in district 5 in 2014. In this study, three girls' schools were selected through single-stage cluster sampling; all the pre-university students of these schools were 350 persons who completed the related questionnaires and then 40 persons who gained lower scores and was eligible for participation in

the test were selected from among them; afterwards, they were randomly placed in experimental group (20 persons) and control group (20 persons) after homogenization. The experimental group was provided with 9 sessions (each 1.5 hour) of life skills training and the control group was in waiting list. The instrument for data collection was Delvar's (1993) academic self-concept questionnaire. *Delavar's academic self-concept scale*: this scale contains 40 items and each one of the items can be commented on in four degrees. Thus the respondents can make their comment by choosing one of the options of totally disagree, disagree, agree and totally agree. This scale was made by Delavar in 1993 and its content-related validity is reported 0.78. Besides, this scale was used in a study on the students of Allameh Tabatabaee University and its reliability amounted to 0.78 (Ghavamabadi, 1998). The maximum score in this test is 120 and higher scores of the respondents indicates that they enjoy higher academic self-concept. WHO (1993) life skills training was provided for the experimental group. The content of this method is presented in short in the following table.

Self-growth: identifying positive aspect and characteristics of the students, ability to differentiate between making mistake and being wrongdoer, recognizing the characteristics the individual likes or dislikes, recognizing that human feelings changes in different levels of growth, providing some information on academic self-concept	Step one
Emotional growth: understanding that others feel being rejected and lonely, teaching effective ways of coping with being rejected and lonely, conceptualization of the fact that others cannot foster a feeling in them but they do it themselves. Identifying unpleasant emotions and learning ways of effectively coping with these emotions and teaching ways of coping with being ridiculed and rejected	Step two
Social growth: identifying behaviors indicating collaboration and practicing these behaviors, teaching skills for effective management of disputes, identifying behaviors that may lead to being rejected and ridiculed and teaching to see the outside world from others point of view	Step three
Cognitive growth: identifying choices and determining their importance, separating reasonable beliefs from unreasonable beliefs, teaching ways of making use of reasonable beliefs in personal situations and paying attention to positive and negative consequences of decisions	Step four

## RESULTS

Before investigating the hypotheses, the normality of the data distribution was examined. The findings indicated that the distribution of the research variables data is normal, so analysis of covariance has been adopted to investigate the research hypotheses. In the following sections, research hypotheses are investigated. Hypothesis 1: life skills training affects the improvement of academic self-concept of pre-university girl students in Tehran. In order to investigate the hypothesis, the difference between the scores of post-test and pre-test was determined through analysis of covariance, and there has been a significance difference ( $p=0.009$ ). However, there has not been a significant difference in the control group ( $p=0.48$ ). The results are presented in the following table.

**Table 1. The difference between the scores of post-test and pre-test in both groups**

	Pre-test	Standard deviation	Post-test	Standard deviation	p
Experimental group	76.10	14.96	89.85	9.91	0.009
Control group	74.75	11.57	75.05	12.03	0.48

In regard to the sustainability of the effectiveness of life skills training in experimental group, no significant difference was found between their scores in post-test and pre-test by using independent t (0.86). Thus it can be concluded that the interventions has had a sustainable effect.

**Table 2. The difference between the scores of post-test and follow-ups in experimental group**

	Post-test	Standard deviation	Follow-up test	Standard deviation	p
Experimental group	89.85	14.96	89.40	10.80	0.86

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted with the aim of examining the effectiveness of life skills training in improving academic self-concept of pre-university students. The research results in pre-test and post-test in control and

experimental groups indicated that life skills training have been effective in experimental group. In recent years, this theory that every individual's talent is effective in the education as the sole independent factor, has been questioned and the academic self-concept and its effect on academic achievement motive is stressed. Academic self-concept is one of the factors affecting academic performance and it is the individual's general attitude towards his/her abilities in relation to school learning. Give the interaction between academic self-concept and academic performance of students (Soufi *et al.*, 2014; Isanejad *et al.*, 2012; Matovu, 2012; Marsh & Martin, 2012) and the critical strategic role of education in high school students' academic achievement who are in adolescence and the critical nature of adolescence in terms of self-concept (Jones and Lavallee, 2009), the research results indicated that life skills training has a positive effect on students' self-concept. This result is in line with the confirmation of the research hypothesis. The results of this study are consistent with the results of previous studies (Sepehrian Azar & Saadatmand, 2012; Zera'at Aand Ghafourian, 2009; Shaghaghi and Kargar, 2010; Ravindranath *et al.*, 2012). It is to be mentioned that caution need to be exercised in generalizing the results of the study because this study is related to students in Tehran which is a very small portion of the whole students in Iran regardless of the specific cultures and traditions. Life skills are being taught in Iran as a formal course in high school. Nevertheless, the degree of acquisition of these skills is below average among Iranian adolescents. On the other hand, academic self-concept has been an indicator variable in students' academic achievement, so it is suggested to, firstly, pay more attention to life skills and consider their practical aspects rather than related theories and merely theoretical aspects, and secondly, conduct studies in regard to effectiveness of life skills training in variables such as self-efficacy, development goals, academic performance and other academic variables. Besides, since self-concept begins to form during childhood and it stabilizes during adulthood (Jacobs *et al.*, 2002) and given the effectiveness of these skills in enhancing academic self-concept, it is suggested to begin training for these skills at lower levels of education.

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