

Life Skills Education to address the Challenges during Adolescence

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Pabi Maya Das

Darla Middle Secondary School, Chhukha, Bhutan

Abstract: Life Skills Education plays a pivotal role in safeguarding children's personalities the 21st century as they are entrusted with different kinds of adversity such as changes in the global economic, technological transformation, social problems, and critical health issues. Academic success alone is inadequate to meet the difficulties confronted in one's daily life. Bhutan strongly believes in the well-being of the citizens and Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been the guiding principle in the country's development and in enhancing values in the Bhutanese children. Along with GNH principle, Life Skills Education plays a significant role in emotional, intellectual, social, and physical development of an individual. Life Skills Education (LSE) has been incorporated in many developing countries including Bhutan and has prepared children to overcome the challenges in everyday life. This article describes LSE and its importance in the educational systems to enable students to develop positive behavioral changes, sound livelihood values, skills, and positive attitudes to deal with critical health issues, make informed use and decisions, and enhance self-esteem in Bhutan.

Introduction

Bhutan is a small mountainous country situated between China to the north and India to the south and it strongly believes in the wellbeing and happiness of the citizen which is largely influenced by the harmonious coexistence of people and the natural environment. The GNH has been the guiding principle in the country's development and the GNH values are strongly embedded in the school curriculum. Bhutan has adolescent-youth, who are more than half, under 28 and these youths are energetic, passionate, committed, compassionate, and full of new ideas. Although these people represent many opportunities for the nation, they fall under the vulnerable group, making the difficult transition from childhood into adulthood (UNICEF, 2017). Knowing this fact, Bhutan has given priorities for young people on the basis of evidence of needs, issues, and assets by adapting the LSE since adolescents, not only take risk but also involves in risks taking behaviors, such as physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, crime violence, early marriage and motherhood, a wide range of health issues including sexually transmitted infections (including HIV and reproductive health issues (UNICEF, 2017) and face

many challenges related to academic pressure and negative peer pressure. To overcome these risk-taking behaviors and enhance physiological competencies, Life Skills Education is must for adolescents for a healthy transition to adulthood (Vranda & Chandrasekhar-Rao, 2011). For an individual, academic success is no longer enough to meet the challenges he/she faces in the school, workplace, home, or any other places. If an individual understands life skills, he/she can self-manage, solve problems, understand the environment, work in a team and manage time and people.

According to World Health Organization (1997), "Life Skills Education are the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enables individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." Bhutan has chosen ten core life skills recommended by the World Health Organization. They are self-awareness; decision making; problem solving; critical and creative thinking; interpersonal relationship skills; empathy; coping with emotions and stress; and effective communication. To elaborate, Life Skills are categorized in three broad areas:

- Thinking skills: Thinking skills help to enhance a logical and analytical skill which enables appropriate decision making

in life and develops problem solving skills.

- **Social skills:** Social skills enhance collaborative working skills, knowing about self, communicating effectively, interpersonal relationships, empathy skills and adaptation. Well-developed social skills are critical for developing positive relationship with the society.

- **Emotional skills:** Emotional skills involve coping and understanding emotion and stress. They enable recognition of sources of stress in our everyday lives and respond to emotions like anger and sadness appropriately.

LSE in Bhutan embraces ten tenets of Life Skills as explained below. The tenets were formed in conjunction with the world organizations such United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and WHO.

1. **Creative Thinking:** those skills that enable an individual to explore available alternatives and various consequences. In addition, it also helps to look beyond the direct experience and come up with diverse solutions to a problem.

2. **Critical Thinking:** those skills that enable an individual to analyze information and experiences consciously and can determine the factors that influence attitudes and behavior.

3. **Decision Making:** a process of evaluating issues by looking at all the possible options to solve the problem. It helps an individual to deal constructively with decision making.

4. **Problem Solving:** making decisions about each option and choosing the one which is best. Furthermore, it enables one to deal constructively with problems and these problems can sometimes turn into an opportunity. This skill leads to decision making and managing emotions.

5. **Self-Awareness:** includes our ability to recognize our strengths, weaknesses, desires, values, character, needs, desires, aspirations, and feelings. Developing self-awareness skills enables us to correct our habits, do better in our lives and make us a successful person.

6. **Effective Communication:** the ability of an individual to express verbally and non-verbally in a way the culture accepts. Listening is an important part of effective communications skills.

7. **Interpersonal Relationship:** the relationships that are developed over a period of time and require constant nurturing, and it helps relate to the people we interact with.

8. **Empathy:** an ability to imagine what life is with the other person or in other words an ability to walk in their shoes. It is an extremely important but less used life skill. It helps to feel for the other person and strengthen interpersonal

relationships.

9. **Coping with Stress:** an ability to recognize sources of stress in everyday life and enables an appropriate response. It also helps with being aware of negative emotions like anger or sadness.

10. **Coping with Emotions:** an ability to recognize emotions like anger and sadness that have negative effects and an awareness of how they influences one's behavior.

Life Skills Education in Bhutan

LSE took its stand in Bhutan 2000 in the 4th Annual Education Conference through unanimous recommendation that Reproductive Health and Drug Education to be introduced in schools as per the need of growing adolescents. With the support from the WHO, resource packages were developed and orientation on the concept of LSE and its utilization in adolescent reproductive health was conducted in 2003. In 2004-2005, 17 teachers who had been trained in 2003 were given intensive training on the LSE and adolescent reproductive health. In 2006, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education trained the school health coordinators and Counselors, and then in 2008 a guidebook was developed for teachers. (Department of Youth & Sports, Ministry of Education, 2014).

Furthermore, between 2009-2013, about 7,184 individuals district education officers, principals, counselors and health coordinators were trained in life skills education knowledge in 2009 to 2013 with the support from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), WHO, and GFTM. Since then, LSE has been part of Bhutanese education and has helped children and adolescents learn to deal with the difficulties of growing up and risk situation (Department of Youth & Sports, Ministry of Education, 2014).

Likewise, the school-based action research on implementation of LSE in schools was conducted in 15 schools in Bhutan with the funding agency from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The topics covered were LSE to reduce substance abuse; LSE to solve absenteeism in school; enhance positive behavior and reduce the use of substance in youth through LSE; LSE as a positive disciplining intervention for students with disciplinary issue in school; LSE for addressing adolescent reproductive sexual health (teenage pregnancy, sexual activities, STIs, HIV/AIDS); challenges in implementing LSE in schools; LSE for positive behavioral outcome. The result indicated positive impacts such as a

decline in physical fights and destructive behaviors in schools, increased capability of students to make decisions, increased self-esteem, and positive behavioral change (Kuensel 2019). Consequently, it was implemented in the curriculum and has now become mandatory for all the teachers to integrate it in their daily teaching and other co-curricular activities. Now, it is mandatory to teach LSE twice a month in a formal teaching through modality varying from zero period, extracurricular, library period, assembly time speeches and debates. Apart from the school curriculum, LSE has been embraced by the universities to engage students in every classroom. Likewise, life skills based on comprehensive sexual education training is also given to the teachers who teach visually impaired students to empower healthy behavior and help them to avoid risks and make appropriate decisions at appropriate times. It has been also implemented in the nunneries and monastic bodies.

Imparting Life Skills Education in Classroom

In Bhutan a Guidebook for Teachers has been developed by Comprehensive School Health Programme, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education supported with the support from the UNFPA. It covers a wide range of topics including healthy environment, time management, menstrual health, substance abuse, reproductive health, stress management, communicable diseases, dealing with peer pressure, sex education, etc. School teachers play key roles in imparting the LSE in classrooms to address various issues or challenges that adolescents come across through different strategies depending on the nature of the topic. Some of the strategies used to impart Life Skills Education are:

Role Play: This is an effective strategy to put oneself in someone else's shoes, enabling them to correct their mistakes. It also provides the best strategy for practicing and handling similar situations in real life. In addition, it is fun and motivating. For instance, to make students recognize that dropping out of school may be easy but has long term negative consequences, a role play is the best strategy because it enhances empathy, self-awareness and coping with stress skills.

Group Discussion: Group discussion is helpful as it facilitates more interaction among the learners, enabling them to work in the team collaboratively. For example, in order learn time management, students are encouraged to participate actively in the group discussion which enables them to explore the areas that the students themselves feel are a waste of time. In addition, students are aware that time management requires

self-awareness, critical thinking and coping with stress and emotion.

Case Studies: Case studies provide a chance to explore and analyze the challenges, dilemmas, and solutions. This is a powerful tool for thought discussion allowing students in creative and critical thinking and decision making skills.

Integration of LSE in the Lesson Plans: Integration of Life Skills through the content helps in management of classroom, appreciating students' work/performance, and encouraging students to come forward.

Storytelling: Storytelling promotes a feeling of well-being and relaxation and helps in development of imagination and creativity and critical thinking skills. It enhances attention and listening skills and develops patience and endurance.

Drama: The drama classroom is one of the few places where real world life skills are still taught. It enables effective communication, self-confidence, self-evaluation, and creative thinking skills.

Games: Games are mostly liked by students as they promote team work, and social skills. Various activities are incorporated to teach topics related to health issues and effective communications.

Challenges in Implementing Life Skills Education

Despite the positive behavioral changes observed in the adolescents through implementation of Life Skills Education, it also has some implementation challenges.. A study conducted by Department of Youth & Sports, Ministry of Education (2014) found that there are an inadequate number of trained teachers, inadequate LSE materials, inadequate support from the school authorities, less frequency of LSE in school, and difficulties in discussion on sexuality with parents.

Conclusion

LSE plays a pivotal role in safeguarding youth's personality in the 21st century as they are entrusted with different kind of adversity such as changes in the global economy, technological transformation, social problems, and critical health issues. Life Skills has become an interest in the mental health of many people and incorporating it in daily life has become a vital learning tool for continued existence, social development, and quality of life of a person. Currently, adolescents confront lot of challenges such as negative peer pressure, low-self-esteem, academic pressure, teenage

pregnancy, and social stigma in day-to-day life. To overcome the challenges, Life Skills can be used as an effective tool to take control/charge of their life. Many studies have shown that LSE has an ability to promote physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing and can influence the way people feel, think, and perceive things, and improve productivity, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationship. Implementation of LSE in Bhutanese education has been a milestone in the reduction of negative peer pressure, drug abuse, and unwanted teenage pregnancy and resist both peer and media pressure to smoke, drink and use drugs. Therefore, LSE must be embraced as part and parcel of adolescents' lives as it can empower them to handle the problems they encounter as they journey through life. Despite difficulties in implementation, it is important to further enhance LES in other organizations.

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