

# **Lifeskills for Prospective Teachers**

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*The author presents an international perspective on life skills education arguing the development of a healthy self-concept and skills in self-reflection are necessary for living in a world of rapid change.*

In an era of accelerating change we need to be more aware of the impact of change on our environment, personal life, and the relationships among individuals, organizations and families (Leider, 1994). Life skills offer self-empowerment in relating to self and others while providing coping strategies for understanding the past, managing the present, and creating the future. It is essential for a person to acquire life skills and take charge of one's own life (Nelson-Jones, 1995; Hopson and Scally, 1981; Leider, 1994; Corey, 1995; and Eagan, 1998). This paper defines what life skills are, why life skill education is important, and how invitational theory can provide a strong foundation for life skill curricula. A special emphasis is placed on teachers in Hong Kong that represents a rapid changing society mingled with the cultures of the East and the West. The paper also describes how the life skills programme is implemented in the Hong Kong Institute of Education (the largest teacher education institute in Hong Kong) so that prospective teachers can equip themselves with the basic psychosocial competence skills. It is anticipated that this Life Skills Model could be shared among counterparts who believe in positive human values, inviting and affective education, and the holistic development of an individual in the new millennium.

## Defining Life Skills

Life skills are defined as a repertoire of life management and problem solving skills involving personally responsible choices, mental wellness, and learning processes so that people can attain their full human potential and become equipped to deal with change throughout the life span. Life skills instruction is a psychological and developmental task based on positive human values and life adjustment as it relates to the study of human relationships, work, and leisure in multiple dimensions. This differentiates the current definition from more behavior-based tasks such as tying shoes, navigating public transit, and work related skills. The advocated repertoire of competence skills involves enhancing self-esteem, communicating and cooperating with others, acquiring and using information, assessing conflict management, decision-making, problem solving, self-management, and promoting physical and mental health. Furthermore, life skills also include the acquisition of some guidance and counseling and self-helping skills. The ultimate goal of life skill education is to improve quality of life in a humanistic and inviting way while developing holistically a person for the well being of the society as a whole.

## Life Skills Helping

According to Richard Nelson-Jones (1991), "Life skills are personally responsible sequences of choices in specific psychological skill areas conducive to mental wellness. People require a repertoire of life skills according to their developmental tasks and specific problems of living" (p.13). Thus, life skills empower individuals to become more competent, caring, productive, and contributing members of society. Life skills education assists individuals in making responsible choices while maximizing their happiness and fulfillment at different stages of life. Life skills involve the processes of thinking, feeling, and acting that develop an *attitude* favoring positive change, *knowledge* revealing how to change, and *skills* in realizing desired changes. It focuses on the problems and the potential of people focusing on a person's

strengths in the hope that change and self-development will eventually take place. Applied areas for life skills comprise: “(1) feeling, (2) thinking, (3) relationships, (4) study, (5) work, (6) leisure and (7) health” (Nelson-Jones, 1991, p.13).

### **Life Skill Model for Responding to Change**

Life skills are subject to interpretation and there is no one single formula to define what life skills are. Western theorists of education (Leider, 1994; Hopson and Scally, 1981; and Nelson-Jones, 1995) have developed life skills frameworks from different perspectives. (Leider, 1994) argued life skills “help individuals respond to the challenge of today's rapid change” (p.4) and life skill processes present the “concept of change and self-management in a personal action plan” (p.5). Leider's model of change focuses on ways of dealing with change, discovering purpose in work and living, creating a personal vision, and tracking daily priorities. It helps individuals to improve in areas of time management, values of life, vitality and leisure interest, purpose of life, career goals, and spiritual life.

### **Life Skill Teaching Programme**

Hopson and Scally (1981) contributed significantly to practical life skills teaching in the U.K. and across the globe in the post-industrial society since the early 1980's. They focused life skill instruction on developing a range of personal competencies that will equip young people to take charge of their lives, manage their own careers, and fulfill a variety of life-roles in the rapidly changing world. They discussed life skills in relation to five specific areas: education, work, home, leisure, and the community. This programme could be delivered through a series of planned lessons or workshops, such as Life Skills Teaching Programs (No. 1 to 4) (Hopson and Scally, 1989).

Instead of a deficiency model of education or socially conforming adaptive model, teacher educators in Hong Kong have taken a

proactive, career-oriented, and practical model to introduce the life skill framework for growth and development. Education must attend to personal competence and self-empowerment because current educational change demands a switch from an academic, subject-oriented curriculum to a more practical, needs-based curriculum. It is hoped that teachers, in turn, could help school children learn life skills so that they would become more self-empowered, more creative, innovative, and committed members of human community.

### **Life Skill Counseling and the Five-Stage Life Skill Helping Model**

Richard Nelson-Jones considered that a skilled person should possess an awareness in each of these areas: responsiveness, realism, relating, rewarding activity, and right-and-wrong. He later advocated life skills counseling as a “people-centered approach for assisting clients and others to develop self-helping skills” (Nelson-Jones, 1993, p.31). He designed DASIE, a five-stage life skills assistance model for helping clients to manage problems and change. The model (Nelson-Jones, 1993) includes five activities: “(1) develop the relationship, identify and clarify problems; (2) assess problems and redefine in skills terms; (3) state working goals and plan interventions (4) intervene to develop self-helping skills; (5) end and consolidate self-helping skills” (p. 38).

## **The Skilled Helper Model and Counseling Approaches**

In a similar vein, other theorists identified different venues for helping people develop strategies for helping themselves. Egan and Cowan (1979) developed a skilled-helper model with three stages: understanding the current scenario, identifying the preferred scenario, and taking action. They also developed six areas of skills: physical development, intellectual development, self-management, value-clarification, interpersonal involvement, and small-group involvement. Corey (1995) also developed a group of counseling processes based on different contemporary counseling models such as psychoanalytic approach, existential approach, person-centered approach, Gestalt therapy, transactional analysis, behavioral approach and reality therapy.

## **Paradigm Shifts from Cognitive Domain to Affective Domain in Education**

The developmental education movement emphasizes human development in different terms. Western cultural development coupled human development theory with the need for career and life management skills to meet with the changing society, and thereby encouraging the development of life skill education in schools. This represented a paradigm shift of emphasis from an academic and subject-based cognitive domain to a more practical and need-based affective domain in education. Psycho-education (Ivey, 1976); human resources development (Carkhuff, 1987); life skills training and development education (Hopson & Scally, 1981; Leider, 1994; and Nelson-Jones, 1994) group process and practice to counseling and psychotherapy (Corey, 1990; Egan and Cowan, 1979; and Gazada, 1989); personal and social education (Watkins, 1995); invitational education (Purkey & Novak, 1996); and the whole school approach (Gybers, 2000) all served similar purposes and continually emphasized the respect of human values and development.

## **Invitational Education for Life Skill Helpers**

Purkey (1970) has continually developed the invitational education approach to help with an emphasis on the importance of the self-concept approach to teaching, and learning. *Self-esteem building* is one of the key skills young people have to acquire for healthy growth and development. Purkey and his colleagues have brought life skill programs alive with the support of positive human values and communicating proactively through five P's - people, places, programs, policies, and processes. The incorporation of the concept of invitational education and values of affective education in the life skill programme is a further amalgamation of humanistic education in the current developmental education reform worldwide and in Hong Kong (Purkey and Schmidt, 1996; and Purkey and Novak, 1996).

## **Theoretical Concepts Underpinning Life Skills Counseling**

Nelson-Jones developed life skill counseling in a more psychological way and attributed his thoughts to the merger of others' work in the helping profession as follows:

The emphasis on the importance of supportive helping relationships and sensitively attending to clients' feelings shows the influence of Carl Rogers' person-centered approach. The emphasis on thinking skills is derived from the writings of Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck . . . among others. The emphasis on action skills represents the influence of the behaviorists. The emphasis on personal responsibility, choice and courage has origins in the work of Viktor Frankl, William Glasser, Abraham Maslow (1962) . . . Harry Stack Sullivan, Gerard Eagan and Robert Carkhuff were forerunners in presenting stage models of counseling sessions

and the counseling process (Nelson-Jones, 1995, p. 350).

### **An Eclectic Approach to Life Skill Education**

As presented here, life skills cover the broadest spectrum of personal competency skills and include various aspects of the study of work, leisure and self-management as well as the ability to relate self to the community. Life skills can also be viewed as a self-help process, a proactive curricular activity, an experiential group process, and a whole school approach. Based on the above rationale, the Hong Kong Institute of Education has developed the conceptual framework of the life skill module to be incorporated in the initial teacher education program.

### **Life Skills for Prospective Teachers in Hong Kong**

#### **Contextual Background of a Changing Hong Kong Society**

A life skill programme is essential in Hong Kong. Recent events represent turbulent change. Hong Kong experienced the change of sovereignty from the British Colony to a Chinese Special Administrative Region in 1997 (Tung, 1997). During the transition period, not only were there political changes (such as national identity crisis) there was an economic crisis in the Asian Pacific region and a concurrent rise in the unemployment rate. There were concurrent social changes such as the change of family structure as a result of more Hong Kong investment across the border in China. Youth and children were further affected under the current education reform movement that resulted in the abolition of some public examinations. Teachers are now faced with students bringing a broader array of problems to the classroom. There is a demand for “whole child” development and a switch in emphasis from an academic, subject-centered curriculum to a more practical, needs-based curriculum geared to the changing demand of the economy and society. Ranges of personal competency skills are needed to equip students to fulfill a variety of life roles in the

rapid changing world. Coupled with the ever-changing educational policy and a seldom-reduced teacher-pupil ratio, pre-service teachers (and even in-service teachers) have had to equip themselves with a repertoire of skills to cope with demands and challenges to teach in the turbulent society.

### **Rationale for Incorporating Life Skill Module in Formal Teacher Education Curriculum**

The implementation of life skill modules in teacher education is in congruence with the rationale of the Chief Executive's policy guidelines issued by the Hong Kong Government and Education Department, respectively. There has been an appeal for whole person development (HKSAR/PRC, 2000) and life-long learning (Education Commission, 2000) apart from the traditional knowledge acquisition. The desired attributes of a teacher now include a sense of mission in education, moral character, love and care of school children, and positive life views. As such, the life skill programme prepares and supports the development of quality school-teachers before they go out to teach (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 1997).

Government policy (Education Commission Report No. 4, 1990) has made appeals for a more interesting curriculum that caters to the needs of students. The Guidelines on Whole School Approach to Guidance (1993) pointed out that students at school should not merely attain academic success but also social and emotional maturity. According to Gybers (2000), the first step toward these goals is an educational system that protects the self-esteem of students and reinforces their positive behaviors. As a result, it is hoped students will form an inner self that is positive, self-motivated, and self-disciplined. In a similar vein to life skill teaching, the Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools (1996) aims to help students develop learning skills and an inquisitive mind that will enable them to reach well-thought conclusions and to communicate with others effectively. The Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools (1997) elaborates that students need to develop personal



fulfillment, well being, and a sense of enjoyment. As such they need a growing awareness of their sexuality while developing a regard for interpersonal responsibility. This is compatible with the implementation of life skill programmes.

### **Teaching the Life Skill Module in a Teacher Education Institute**

In Hong Kong, life skill programmes are implemented in a variety of ways. They have been introduced in classroom teaching, in informal or formal curricula, in guidance activities, and in extra-curricular activities in schools. It is common for the student affairs office or counseling service to play a significant role in organizing life skill activities for prospective teachers based on the individual needs and interests. However, it is likely to be more cost-effective for the academic departments to develop the systematic life skill programmes in the formal curriculum for all prospective teachers concerned.

The Hong Kong Institute of Education envisioned the importance of life skills for human development and pioneered the implementation of life skill programmes for student teachers for more than a decade. Currently, life skill programmes are taught in the domain of General Education under the Department of Educational Psychology, Counselling and Learning Needs. With a team of lecturers specializing in guidance and counseling, the life skill model continues to be refined and modified to meet the needs of students in the local Asian Chinese context. In addition to western reference materials and textbooks, materials from Hong Kong and other Asian countries are also used.

### **Life Skill Teaching: A Hong Kong Instructional Module Beliefs and Objectives**

A set of core beliefs establish the fundamental context of the Hong Kong approach:

- Every person is unique, valuable and worthy of respect
- Each person is primarily responsible for what happens to him or her
- Any undesirable situation may contain some opportunities for personal growth
- We are responsible for managing stress and anxiety
- Failures are potential learning experiences from which we can grow and learn
- Tomorrow will not be the same as today
- We have to monitor our own well-being and development periodically.

Without the above beliefs and philosophy of life, any helping programme would seem like a body without a soul as the inner meaning of the programme has not been taken to the heart.

Life skill modules are designed to meet the fundamental personal and learning needs of prospective teachers. Students are expected to be able to understand the importance of self-development. They should identify and acquire personal and teacher-related skills and competencies in self-assessment essential for teaching. They need to know the nature and scope of life skills in the modern society to acquire the appropriate skills and resources to empower themselves, and to demonstrate various levels of reflectivity skills in interpersonal and societal situations.

### **Contents of Life Skill Module**

The Hong Kong Institute of Education has developed the conceptual framework of life skills around four main major categories: Learning, Relating, Working (and Playing), and Developing Self and Others. Each area is subcategorized into three dimensions: Self-development, Self-in-Group and Self-in-Society. The development of life skills is interwoven with the acquisition of eight ma-

major competency skills according to the local context and needs: acquiring and using information, assessing involvement, making decisions, making judgment, communicating with others, cooperating with others, promoting interest, and critical thinking.

A typical life skill programme covers the following topics:

- Understanding self: understanding and developing the personal and professional self; building social skills, and coping with change
- Study and work: time management, utilization of information and resources, managing study projects, and skills for cooperation, collaboration, and networking
- Becoming a professional teacher: taking initiative and basic leadership skills, developing professional responsibility, and being a life-long learner

### **Teaching-Learning Process and Assessment**

The life skill programme is a 2-credit module with a 2-hour session each week lasting for 15 weeks or a total of 30 hours. In delivering the module, a variety of approaches such as experiential learning, mini-lectures, group discussion, and case studies are employed. Assessment of students is based on a self-regulated reflective journal and a completed group project. Evaluation criteria include finding evidence of the student's attitude to learn and develop, skill/knowledge development, and utilization of skills as evidenced in journals. The programme is considered a success if participants are able to reflect on what they have learned and state that they have changed in a positive way. According to the evaluation questionnaires on the life skill module, most students gave positive feedback. They found the module lively, practical, and enjoyable.

### **New Vision and Mission of Implementing Life Skill Programs**

With the issuance of the Chief Executive's new 2000 Policy Address (HKSAR/PRC, 2000) and with the Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 2000) appealing for holistic education for the new century, life-long learning and all-round development, it is certain that the design and implementation of life skill modules in the teacher education programmes are appropriately targeted.

## Conclusion

The rapid changing Hong Kong society is mainly characterized by the pluralistic, multiple-optioned, and individualistic orientation to the information era. Coupled with the political, social, and economic changes in the post-modern era, life skill education is judged essential to all groups in the region. Life skill programmes cover a broad spectrum of competence skills, including learning about self, relating to others, and handling rapid social changes. It also includes the basic respect for human values, self-management, study, work, and leisure. Inclusion of life skills education in Hong Kong teacher training programs represents a substantive expansion of the traditional emphasis on academic subjects. Although the results of life skill programmes have not been empirically established due to the newness of their introduction, the inclusion of life skills goals and beliefs in the curriculum constitute a formative step to the education for the whole child in Hong Kong schools.

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