

## Point of View

# Importance of blending academic and life skills

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## Introduction

In school we first comprehend the academic content and then appear for the test but in real life we first get the test and then learn the lesson, a lesson that we learn by doing. 'Learning by doing' involves utilization of life skills. Thus, we need to equip individuals with life skills. Life skills are beyond rote memorization of academics.

Life skills are not academic skills but the application of knowledge, values and skills leading to optimal development of the individual. It includes many skills like communication, time management, critical thinking, healthy life styles, problem solving abilities etc. People often use these skills in a variety of social situations throughout their lives. Without these life skills they are at a disadvantage in every sphere of life.

The conceptual basis for most of the life skills work undertaken by the United Nations and its partners is the World Health Organisation (WHO) Skills for Health<sup>1</sup>.

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. In particular, life skills are a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner.

'Skills for Health' designates ten skills divided into three broad categories: (1) communication and

interpersonal skills, (2) decision-making and critical thinking skills, and (3) coping and self management skills.

Planning for life skills requires need assessment, goal setting, implementation and evaluation<sup>2</sup>. Life skills based education can either be provided as a part of general education or as a specific issue based education, for example as in the case of HIV prevention through non formal education or through structured short term courses. The present article describes some ways of blending academic and life skills in school settings to make children champions of their lives.

## Blending academic and life skills in school setup

Children of school-going age spend a significant amount of their time in school. Thus, school has a major influence on children not only during school hours but also throughout their lives. Children have ample opportunities for learning life skills along with academic skills in school. One should not underestimate children's abilities. At any age children can make decisions, consciously or unconsciously, which can have significant effect not only on their lives but also on the lives of those associated with them. Children build their character, learn social and civic responsibilities, appreciation for aesthetics, thinking and reasoning, resiliency, communication skills etc from experience sharing, reading, writing, solving arithmetic problems and through many other academic subjects and co curricular activities. The school education should be committed to the optimal development of the whole child.

Academic and life skills education go hand in hand. Life skills can be directly linked to school curricula of languages, mathematics, science and social sciences etc. Academic projects, practical work, internships etc of different academic disciplines give opportunities to children to develop age specific and grade specific life skills. These projects can also be

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used to assess mastery of life skills. For example, when children are given projects they plan, select, collect information related to the theme, comprehend and organize it. At that moment they consciously take decisions about the relative importance of the gathered information. They also generate new and creative ideas maybe with the help of technology, peers, adults etc. This gives them the opportunity to enhance their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. The ability thus developed helps them in choosing an appropriate vocation/career later in life. In this process children also identify their own and the system's strengths and weaknesses. They may also learn to resolve moral dilemmas and challenge society's norms, rules and regulations. Time limits or deadlines for the submission of projects enable them to learn prioritization. Discussion on their projects helps them in developing the abilities of flexibility, adaptability and self assessment. All these skills are important life skills.

### **Role of the teacher**

Teachers can develop thinking and reasoning abilities in children by using participatory or interactive methods of providing teaching and learning experiences. For example, a teacher can start a new topic/subtopic by relating it to their day to day life, previously taught topic or integrating with similar learning experiences of other academic subjects. Pre-assessment of their academic abilities is also important. This can be done by asking questions from children. A teacher can throw the questions to the whole class. She should not ask children to raise their hands as this restricts participation of the students. Instead, the teacher should make it clear to students that she can ask any child to answer the question. Students should also be motivated to ask questions. The teacher should encourage participation of the students in the development of a particular life skill. This technique will keep all the students alert and motivated and help the teacher in diagnosing mental blocks and building the teaching learning experience by opening those blocks. This technique not only helps in learning academic skills but also life skills like decision making, reasoning, controlling, making an appropriate choice, time management, perspective taking skills etc.

Development of leadership qualities is one of the most important life skills. One way of developing this trait in children is by making them class monitor, team leader, row monitor and delegating some responsibilities like collecting notebooks, helping academically weak students, differently able students etc. It will also help in developing friendliness,

empathy and self discipline. Confidence and positive self concept building can be done by encouraging all the students to participate in the activities/programmes of their choice. Stage exposure/highlighting the work of students should be meant for all students and not for only the chosen few. Bagging the medal/position should not be the aim but development of healthy personality should be the long term goal of the school curriculum. Opportunities for effective verbal and non verbal communication like organizing debates, poem recitation, extempore essay writing, poem composition, panel discussion etc should be given to students.

To sensitize children to their social and civic responsibilities, to develop tolerance and resiliency, the school can celebrate events like environment day, health day, festivals etc. The school can also organize activities like mock parliament session etc to develop sense of civic and social responsibilities in children. Children with resilience are able to endure despite past failures.

Children should also be given chances to choose the best alternative or to make informed decisions. Students can be shown the videos of social practices prevalent in the society and later discussion can be held on the chosen theme.

### **Pre requisites for a successful blending**

It is not to say that life skills should take centre stage in school curriculum. Life skills can be taught to students automatically by relating academic with real life experiences. The goal of education is not memorizing the academic content but construction and reconstruction of life experiences by acquiring higher orders of learning. The life skill based education should be cyclic in nature and should be sustained. We should incorporate age appropriate life skills into the curriculum of each grade and into the socio-emotional climate of the school. Life skills education should begin in the junior grades and continue through the higher ones, applying life skills, over time, to more sensitive and complex issues. As educators we must enable our students to master skills like critical thinking, problem solving abilities, decision making, negotiating skills etc for a contented, happy and successful life. We need to be innovative and inspiring in our approach towards teaching.

Periodic review of short and long term objectives is an important aspect of developing academic and life skills<sup>3</sup>. The content of both academic and life skills

programme should be appropriate or relevant and methods of teaching should be effective and suitable for different types of learners. Teachers should be confident with the content of their subject and methods of teaching. Involvement of parents, students and community members is inevitable for effective evaluation. The socio-emotional climate of the school should be child centered rather than adult centered. Provision should be made to support learners in the use of their new life skills outside the classroom, with their families or in their communities. Learning activities should be based on the needs and interests of the child. The curriculum should be designed and implemented in such a manner that it should provide success experience to the children. The life skills education should be moved from the margins of the school to the centre of the curriculum. Many times educators, parents and students may underestimate the value of co-curricular activities and to clarify their myths and doubts periodic orientation programmes should be held.

Hence, individuals fully loaded with academic and life skills will face the challenges of life with confidence and will be the future leaders. They will

grow as individuals who understand the dynamics of interaction, perspective taking skills and will be able to attempt the changes in the universe as they wish to.

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