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Life skills among school-going adolescents in South India: A gender comparison

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: The stress faced by adolescents in the current situation is enormous. Research studies show that various psychosocial factors and life skills deficits are the mediating factors resulting in behavioral, psychological, and health-related problems among adolescents. The present study aims to study and compare the life skills among 8th- and 9th-grade male and female students attending the schools of Udupi, Karnataka, India.

MATERIAL AND METHODS: A descriptive research design was considered for the present study. The study was conducted in two settings, that is, rural and urban areas of Udupi District, of Karnataka. In the study, 8th- and 9th-grade students attending two urban schools and eight rural schools of Udupi District were considered as the study population for the current study. A total sample of 594 students equally representing two schools in urban and eight schools in rural based on male and female ratio and medium of instruction were drawn from the study population. The schools were selected based on the willingness of the school administration. The schools were selected based on the medium of instruction with equal representation of gender. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to draw the sample, giving equal representation to domicile, gender, and medium of instruction. A semi structured data sheet and Life Skills Scale were administered. Written informed consent was taken from all participants and parents. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any point in time.

RESULTS: The present results reveal that 48% of the adolescents had a moderate level of life skills; 29% of them had a high level of life skills, and the remaining 23% of them had a low level of life skills. Female students had better overall life skills, social skills, and emotional skills compared to male students, whereas male students had better thinking skills than females had. Female students tend to cope with stress better than males [$p < .001$]. Male students had better interpersonal relationships and critical thinking life skills compared to female students ($P = .001$).

CONCLUSION: Female students tend to cope with stress better than male students. Strengthening life skills among school students can be a popular approach for prevention and health promotion in schools. Identification of life skills at an early stage can be effective in providing life skills training for the promotion of mental health among school children. Schools should incorporate life skills in their course and curriculum to support and promote mental health.

Keywords:

Adolescents, gender, life skills, school

Introduction

The stress faced by adolescents in the current situation is enormous. Research studies show that various psychosocial factors and life skills deficits are the

mediating factors resulting in behavioral, psychological, and health-related problems among adolescents. The adolescents are in a state of confusion, stress, and uncertainty about coping with their lives due to mood disturbances brought on by hormones and the immaturity of the “impulse control”

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center in their brains.^[1] With a tremendous shift in the structure of society, there is a reported rise in teen stress, which can be because of disturbed family dynamics, peer pressure, inability to cope with studies, drug abuse, lack of competence, and so on, leading to maladaptive behavior.^[2] Adolescence is a transition period that bridges childhood and adulthood, during which major physical, cognitive, and psychological changes must be addressed. This transition is so crucial that adolescents face problems in certain areas of life such as parent-child conflicts, substance abuse, violence, risky behaviors, and mood changes. If these issues are not resolved, the individual suffers role diffusion or negative identities, which results in mismatched abilities and desires, directionless and unprepared for the psychological challenges of adulthood.^[3,4] The emotional problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) tend to occur in later childhood. Childhood behavior and emotional problems with their related disorders have significant negative impacts on the individual, the family, and society. They are commonly associated with poor academic, occupational, and psychosocial functioning.^[5]

According to WHO, Life Skills refer to “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enables an individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”.^[6] According to UNICEF, “Life Skills”-based education is more important than numerical and literacy skills. The life skills area is not only linked to the pedagogy of active learning but also concerned with addressing the balance between knowledge, attitude, and skills.^[7,8] The World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes life skills into the following three components [1997]: 1] Critical thinking skills/Decision-making skills including the skills of Problem solving, Decision-making, Critical thinking and Creative thinking, 2] Interpersonal/Communication skills, consisting of Effective communication, Interpersonal skills and Empathy, 3] Coping and self-management skills like Coping with emotions, Coping with stress and Self-awareness. Current evidence emphasizes that life skill education plays a vital role during the adolescent period for holistic growth.^[9,10] The research study indicated that the life skills intervention was associated with significantly reducing depression, anxiety, and stress among school adolescents.^[10] Incorporating gender considerations into life skill training is essential due to the different ways in which boys and girls experience and respond to adolescence. Research has highlighted significant differences in how male and female adolescents develop life skills, with variations influenced by gender, socioeconomic background, and geographical location.^[11,12] Studies^[12-14] consistently show that these factors not only shape their life skills but also impact their

psychological well-being and academic performance, suggesting a need for tailored educational strategies to support diverse developmental needs across different adolescent groups. Hence, the present study's aim was to study and compare the life skills among 8th- and 9th-grade male and female students attending the schools of Udupi of Karnataka, India.

1. To study the sociodemographic variables of 8th- and 9th-grade students of Udupi District, Mangalore.
2. To find the gender difference in life skills among 8th- and 9th-grade students of Udupi District, Karnataka.

Materials and Methods

Study design and setting

A descriptive research design was considered for the present study. The study was conducted in two settings, that is, rural and urban areas of Udupi District. There were 51 schools in urban and 241 schools in rural areas of Udupi District as listed by the Udupi District Education Report 2014–15. Hence, all the students studying in 8th and 9th grades of urban and rural areas of Udupi District were considered as universe. In the study, 8th and 9th-grade students attending two urban schools and eight rural schools of Udupi District were considered as the study population for the current study.

Study participants and sampling

A total sample of 594 students equally representing two schools in urban and eight schools in rural based on male and female ratio and medium of instruction were drawn from the study population. There were 292 high schools in Udupi district, out of which 198 were Kannada medium, 93 were English medium, and one Urdu medium school. There were 35,357 students studying in 8th and 9th grades, out of which 18,454 were boys and 16,903 were girls. Initially, a list of 8th and 9th grade students of urban and rural areas of Udupi District was prepared, with the prior permission and co-operation of the school administration. The schools were selected based on the willingness of the school administration. The schools were selected based on the medium of instruction with equal representation of gender. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to draw the sample, giving equal representation to domicile, gender, and medium of instruction. Schools were selected from the list provided by the DDPI office of Udupi District. In the schools, the selection of students for the study was conducted using a systematic sampling method, specifically the Nth name selection technique. This method was implemented by choosing every Nth student from the class attendance register. The value of N, the interval at which students were selected, was determined based on the total number of students in each class. In this study, the inclusion criteria are designed

to encompass a diverse group of students from both 8th and 9th grades, ensuring a balanced representation of age and academic level. Both male and female students were included to maintain gender diversity. The study involves students from Kannada and English medium schools, ensuring linguistic diversity. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria specifically exclude students who are hearing or visually challenged.

Data collection tool and technique

The questionnaires were handed over to the students in the classroom by the researcher after obtaining consent from the principal. Informed written consent was taken from the students after explaining the purpose of the study. Students were provided an opportunity to clarify the queries as the researcher was present with the students until they completed the questionnaire. All the tools were translated based on WHO guidelines for tool translation. The scales were translated into the Kannada language.

Semistructured data sheet

A semi structured data sheet was prepared by the investigator. This data sheet covered age, gender, religion, family type, domicile, number of children in the family, parent's education, sibling education, annual income, and occupation details of the parents.

Life skills scale

The life skills scale (LSS) was used in the current study developed by Vranda,^[15] which has 115 questions scored with 5 5-point scale to assess each question. The scale classifies that a person who scores less than 397 has low life skills, those who score between 398 and 437 have moderate life skills, and those who score 438 and above have high life skills. The efficacy and utility of the life skills scale with diverse populations such as school children, institutionalised children, and street children have already been established by many researchers. The internal coefficient alpha for the overall scale was .94. The test-retested reliability coefficient ranges from .7 to .95, and the overall reliability coefficient was .96. The scale measures ten generic life skills ascribed by the World Health Organisation. Life skills scale has 10 Items on Decision Making [14, 28, 35, 46, 53, 54, 62, 69, 74, 89], 13 items on Problem Solving [13, 17, 19, 27, 38, 52, 66, 76, 85, 90, 92, 95, 99], 12 items measuring Empathy [26, 37, 51, 63, 71, 79, 82, 83, 96, 101, 105, 113], 10 items on Self-awareness [1, 12, 22, 29, 40, 50, 55, 65, 93, 109], 10 items on Communication Skills [2, 5, 8, 21, 36, 59, 64, 80, 84, 98], 18 items measuring Interpersonal Relationships Skills [3, 16, 20, 30, 39, 49, 58, 70, 77, 86, 91, 94, 102, 107, 108, 110, 111, 115], 9 items each on Coping with Emotions [6, 9, 25, 33, 41, 61, 67, 75, 103] and Coping with Stress [4, 15, 24, 31, 43, 47, 56, 97, 112], 14 items to measure Creative Thinking Skills [10, 34, 42, 48, 60, 73,

78, 81, 87, 88, 100, 104, 106, 114], and 10 items to measure Critical Thinking Skills [7, 11, 18, 23, 32, 44, 45, 57, 68, 72].

Statistical analysis

The data sheets were coded and the responses were entered into a master sheet for processing the data analysis. The socio-demographic details were coded and entered in SPSS 16, and life skills scores were calculated. The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. The frequency was obtained to explain the distribution of the study subjects.

Ethical consideration

Written informed consent was taken from all participants and parents. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any point in time.

Results

Table 1 shows the representation of the sociodemographic profile of the respondents. In the current study, 52% of them were males, whereas the remaining 48% of them were females. In relation to medium of instruction, 51% of them were from English medium schools and 49% of them from Kannada medium schools. As far as domicile was concerned, the majority of them were studying in Rural Schools [81%] and only 19% of them were studying in urban schools. A majority [75%] of them come to religion belongs to Hindu by religion, followed by Christian [21%] and Muslim [4%].

Table 2 describes the extent of life skills among the students. As far as gender is concerned out of 311 males 79[12%] had low life skills, 131[22%] had moderate life skills and 101[17%] had high life skills. Out of 283 females, 54[9%] had low life skills, 156[26%] had moderate life skills and 73[13%] had high life skills.

Table 3 depicts the level of core life skills among male and female students. Differences were found in the level of life skills between the genders. Significant differences were found in relation to coping with stress, interpersonal relationships, and critical thinking life skills between the male and female students. The female students tend to cope with stress better than male students, and it was statistically highly significant at <.001 levels. The mean score was 33.73 among female students compared to 30.22 among male students. The male students had better interpersonal relationships and critical thinking life skills compared to female students. Among male students, the mean score was 68.78 compared to 68.16 among female students as far as having interpersonal relationship life skills was concerned and it was statistically significant at .001 levels. Similarly, the mean

score of critical thinking among male students was 36.11 compared to 35.83 among female students, and it was statistically significant at .03 levels. However, the current study did not find any significant difference about creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, and coping with emotions and life skills between the male and female students.

Table 4 illustrates the level of a group of life skills between the genders. Significant differences were found

Table 1: Sociodemographic profile of the respondents [n=594]

Sociodemographic Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	311	52
	Female	283	48
Medium of instruction	English	301	51
	Kannada	293	49
Domicile	Urban	114	19
	Rural	480	81
Religion	Hindu	446	75
	Muslim	23	4
	Christian	123	21

Table 2: Classification of life skills based on gender [n=594]

	Classification of Life skills		
	Low [<397]	Moderate [398-437]	High [>438]
Gender			
Male[n=311]	79[13%]	131[22%]	101[17%]
Female[n=283]	54[9%]	156[26%]	73[13%]
Total	133[23%]	287[48%]	174[29%]

Table 3: Gender-based core life skills among the respondents [n=594]

Core Life Skills	Male n=311 Mean [SD]	Female n=283 Mean [SD]	t [df=592]	P	Effect size [Cohen's d]
Creative Thinking	52.23[7.16]	51.4[6.20]	1.49	0.73	-
Critical Thinking	36.11[5.12]	35.83[4.59]	0.71	0.03*	0.03[.06]
Decision Making	34.5[4.19]	34.26[3.98]	0.71	0.06	-
Problem-Solving	48.25[6.09]	48.82[5.51]	-1.18	0.15	-
Self-awareness	38.18[4.95]	38.52[4.45]	-0.88	0.11	-
Empathy	43.16[5.73]	44.43[5.43]	-2.78	0.13	-
Interpersonal Relationships	68.78[7.76]	68.16[6.57]	1.05	0.001**	0.04[.09]
Effective Communication	35.03[4.02]	35.00[3.92]	0.89	0.49	-
Coping with Emotions	33.02[4.30]	33.17[4.21]	-0.43	0.59	-
Coping with Stress	30.22[4.58]	30.73[3.63]	-1.50	<.001***	-0.06[.12]

* - <.05. ** - <.01. *** - <.001

Table 4: Gender-based group life skills among the respondents [n=594]

Life Skills Group	Male n=311 Mean [SD]	Female n=283 Mean [SD]	t [df=592]	P	Effect size [Cohen's d]
Thinking Skills	171.08 [18.13]	170.31[15.52]	0.56	0.03*	0.02 [.04]
Social Skills	185.14 [17.19]	186.11[14.81]	-0.73	0.01**	-0.03 [-.06]
Emotional Skills	63.24 [7.42]	63.90[6.67]	-1.14	0.04*	-0.04 [-.09]
Overall Life Skills	419.47 [38.34]	420.32[31.21]	-0.29	0.01**	-0.01 [-.02]

* - <.05. ** - <.01. *** - <.001

between the male and female students across the group of life skills. Female students had better overall life skills, social skills, and emotional skills compared to male students. As far as thinking skills were concerned, male students had better thinking skills than females had. Overall life skills and social skills were more among female students, and they were statistically highly significant at .01 levels. The mean score for overall life skills among female students was 420.32 compared to 419.47 among male students. Correspondingly, the mean score for social skills among female students was 186.11 compared to 185.14 among male students. Female students had more emotional skills than male students, and it was statistically significant at .04 levels. The mean score of emotional skills was 63.90 among female students compared to 63.24 among male students. Male students had more thinking skills than female students, and it was statistically significant at .03 levels. The mean score among male students was 171.08 compared to 170.31 among female students.

Discussion

In the current study, differences were found in the level of life skills between the genders. Female students tend to cope with stress better than male students do, and it was statistically highly significant. The mean score was high among female students compared to male students. This result is consistent with findings from other studies, indicating that women often employ more emotion-focused coping strategies, which can be more effective in managing stress in certain contexts.^[16] A study was carried out among 259 male and female adolescents,

between the ages of 13 to 18, studying at various high schools in Kuwait. Results confirmed that both genders used various coping strategies as a mechanism to deal with stressful situations. A significant difference was found in the use of these coping strategies between male and female respondents. Females relied on coping strategies more than their male counterparts and were more likely to seek outside social support. Accommodative strategies were dominant for both males and females. Females tend to seek more external sources of support and are less likely to engage in denial or other strategies deemed less effective in coping with stressful situations.^[17] Similarly, female students had better overall life skills, social skills, and emotional skills compared to male students. Overall life skills and social skills were more among female students. Research by Leaper and Friedman^[18] supports the notion that socialization practices and gender roles could influence the acquisition of life skills, with females often being encouraged to develop interpersonal skills and self-regulation from a young age.

Correspondingly, the mean score for social skills among female students was high as compared to the male students. Female students had more emotional skills than male students. This is supported by literature suggesting that female children are often socialized to be more communicative and cooperative, which enhances their social skill set^[19] Kaur^[9] found a significant relationship between emotional maturity, school, home, and psychological environment. Girls were found to be more emotionally mature than boys were. Research has shown that there are noticeable differences in how life skills are developed and exhibited between males and females. Females generally excel in interpersonal and communication skills due to their more relational upbringing, while males often show stronger skills in areas like strategic decision-making and negotiating, influenced by traditional gender roles.^[20] Research by Soresi and Nota^[21] has illuminated gender differences in these life skills, particularly in decision-making self-efficacy. They discovered that males often have higher confidence in their decision-making capabilities, whereas females are more likely to believe in their perseverance and ability to complete tasks.

Limitations and recommendations

The study primarily focused on gender comparison; other psychosocial variables were included in the study. The extent of life skills among the students would have been explored based on various social factors. The study restricted only to quantitative variables.

Conclusion

In the current study, almost equal representation of gender was maintained and more or less equal

representation of medium of instruction was preserved across the study subjects. In the current study, differences were found in the level of life skills between the genders. Female students tend to cope with stress better than male students do, and it was statistically highly significant. Strengthening life skills among school students can be a popular approach for prevention and health promotion in schools. Life skills empower students to deal effectively with the demands of everyday life by improving self-regulation, making informed decisions, and building supportive social relationships.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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