

## Life Skills in higher Education: An innovative proposal

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**ABSTRACT:** *The current work presents a literature review about life skills, which have been studied for a long time; however, it was until 1993 when the World Health Organization (WHO) placed them among the 10 basic abilities which allow the individual to develop correctly in various contexts. From that year, a series of actions were taken to standardize a common language around them and have derived in several promotion and research around this topic. In many countries of Latin America and Spain, the teaching of life skills have been incorporated into the basic education and shown good results since its implementation. Regarding higher education, this proposal can prove promising in view of acknowledging that universities at present do not only form specialists in a given discipline, but also promote integral development. It is concluded that teaching life skills in higher education can aid in the students' integral development.*

**KEYWORDS** -Adolescents, higher education, integral development, life skills, mental health

### I. Introduction

At present, higher education has changed according to the international trends, which promote putting the student at the center of all innovations and improvements in the teaching-learning processes. Among some of these innovation and improvement strategies, acknowledging the student's integral development is one of them, which besides preparing professionals in a given field of knowledge, it must prepare people to effectively face the daily life problems and relate to their environment in an adequate way.

The promotion of integral development can be done through different alternatives; one of them is teaching life skills, which is the purpose of the current review. In the first section, the concept and benefits of its promotion will be addressed. In the following section, the documented benefits of teaching these skills in children and adolescent education will be explained. Finally, the initiatives in higher education about the topic will be described, and conclusions about the importance of teaching life skills in higher education will be provided as a feasible alternative for the integral development at this education level.

### II. Conceptualizing life skills

The Life Skills approach was proposed in 1993 by the Mental Health Division of the WHO as an international initiative for education, aimed to prevent diverse psychosocial and health problems in adolescents such as: substance abuse, unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, depression, suicide, etc. [1]. In Latin America, the Pan American Health Organization has been its main promoter. As pointed by Mantilla, life skills are:...skills that allow people to relate better with themselves, with other people and with their environment, therefore, it can be stated that education in Life Skills is an education style centered in the most personal, human and subjective aspects of the individual, without neglecting the role of collective interaction which helps configure his/her personal and social development (p. 8).

Such skills are named generically life skills since they can be taught and trained as skills but not in the strict sense of the word, as they do not only imply the use of a certain skill, but also include attitudes and values that become engaged in a given situation [2].

The different types of abilities which can be called life skills are innumerable and their nature and definition will depend on the setting and culture they are applied. However, according to the WHO[2], there is an essential

group of skills which become the center of the initiatives the program Life Skills are based and are: 1) self-knowledge, 2) empathy, 3) effective or assertive communication, 4) interpersonal relations, 5) decision making, 6) problem and conflict solution, 7) creative thinking, 8) critical thinking, 9) handling feelings and emotions, and 10) handling stress.

The model concept of life skills places them as a link among the knowledge motivating factors, attitudes, values, and positive behavior towards health. Hence, these abilities allow transforming the knowledge “what is known” and the attitudes and values “what is thought, felt and believed” in real skills “what to do and how to do it”. It has also been considered that education in life skills contributes to basic education, gender equity, democracy, good citizen formation, health care and protection, quality and efficiency of the education system, continuous learning, quality of life and peace promotion [3].

Consequently, education in these 10 skills allow improving the ability of keeping a state of mental well-being and display it through a positive and adaptive behavior in the interactions with others, with the own culture and the environment [4] likewise, people acquire the necessary abilities for human development and for effectively facing the everyday life challenges [5]. In this sense, the life skills model sustains the promotion of health and well-being, even when there are programs which use them to prevent specific problems such as substance abuse, teenager pregnancy or AIDS. In the following section, the role of life skills in the children and adolescent educational context will be revised.

### **III. Education of children and adolescents with life skills programs**

In relation to the attention of youngsters in the topic of life skills, it was in the 90s when attention was given to developing them in schools for being ideal learning spaces [6], since schools offer the following advantages [4] : (a) access to youth at a large scale, (b) optimizes money as existing infrastructure is used, (c) allows short and long term assessment, (d) facilitates consulting and experimenting, (e) availability of experienced and potentially capable professors, (f) more credibility with parents and community members, (g) in this setting, various risk factors such as integration problems, aggressive conducts, lack of motivation, etc., can be detected at an early stage and (h) during the school period, children and adolescents acquire beliefs, values and habits which will constitute their future lifestyle [7] .

Particularly, the teaching of life skills has been carried out in elementary education since year 1993; the following is a summary done by Melero [8] which indicates that the life skills approach has proven useful in the following cases:

- a) Developing personal autonomy and social inclusion: in the sense that the balanced management of skills favors positive and respectful socialization processes.
- b) Promoting prosocial behaviors: as they allow building healthy lifestyles in the bio-psychosocial sense of the term health. In this sense, education in life skills favors positive coexisting processes, in students, among them and among the professors, making disrespectful or violent situations less likely. By favoring positive school relations, it favors students' allegiance to the school institution, contributing to improve academic performance.
- c) Promoting equity among men and women; the life skills approach favors gender perspective inclusion in the education life, favoring women empowering processes and male respect to diversity.
- d) Affective-sexual education: as the model favors developing a positive affective, relational world which contributes to preventing risky sexual behaviors.
- e) Negotiated conflict solution: it is worth mentioning the ability of this model to improve emotional self-control and engaging positive ways to address conflicts.
- f) Substance abuse: the education approach has proven its efficacy during the 80s to reducing alcohol, tobacco and illegal drug consumption.
- g) Dealing with violent situations: training in life skills helps recognizing and assertively reacting to threat and violence situations such as bullying, mobbing and other forms of despire.

In addition, specifically Mangrulkar [5] indicate that the syllabi which develop social, cognitive and effective emotion dealing skills in adolescents can exert a powerful influence in the youngster's development, offering abilities which they need for growing.

In agreement with the later, some recent investigations also prove the effectiveness of the life skills proposal. It is worth pointing, that in the following examples, the target population is adolescents who study secondary or high school in Mexico (see TABLE 1).

**Table 1. Results from investigations on life skills**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Study purpose</b>	<b>Instrumentation</b>	<b>Results</b>
Perez de la Barrera, (2006)[9]	Evaluating a sexual education program and life skills which promotes protected sex life in a sample of Mexican adolescents.	The study had two phases: In Phase 1. Construction and validation of 5 scales with the purpose of identifying the predictive power of the following variables: knowledge and beliefs about sexuality; decision making and assertive behavior.	From phase 1. Six scales which evaluated in a specific way were obtained, based on the construct definition selected for each one. The scales allowed making valid measuring of the investigation purposes.
		In phase 2. Identifying the predictive power of: knowledge and beliefs about sexuality; decision making and assertive behavior with the partner for protected sex life in adolescents.	From phase 2. There was a significant increase in the level of assertive communication with the partner among the sexual debutant participants of the program. The participants were formed in the ability of communicating in a clear and direct way with their partner, so, when having sexual relations, they do it in a protected way.
Sánchez Xicotencatl, (2008) [10]	Determining whether there are significant differences in the life skills of adolescents who have and have not consumed alcohol.	The life skills questionnaire by Andrade et al (unpublished) was used; it measures specific life skills for substance consumption and generic life skills of social, cognitive and emotional type. It was applied to a random sample of 5650 public high school students.	Adolescents who have not consumed alcohol show differences in determined skills in contrast with those who have. The have more self-control, empathy, solve conflicts better, handle their anger, etc. In the assertive communication skills, there were no significant differences among these groups.
Pacheco Guzman, (2014) [11]	Evaluating the proposal of an intervention program of life skills for alcohol and marihuana consumption.	Two questionnaires were applied to 360 students from a public secondary school before and after the implementation of a workshop. One of these questionnaires was about habits and another about emotional education. A total of 17 sessions of 100 minutes each one was implemented.	The adolescents who participated in the workshop showed higher scorings in the final evaluation when compared to the initial ones. All the adolescents showed an increment in the protection factors (both consumers and non-consumers) both with a higher increment among non-consumers.
Mena May, (2014) [12]	Evaluating the impact of an intervention program of life skills in violence displays of a secondary school	A total of 66 second grade secondary school students participated in a cross-section study of a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest with a control group. The instrument consisted of the violence	The results revealed that the control and experimental groups showed significant differences in their violence displays such as classroom disruption, violence by professors to students, direct physical violence and general violence scorings. These

	class.	questionnaire CUVE3-ESO. One of the groups was taught a program which consisted of 20 sessions of 50 minutes each one.	differences consisted on lower scorings in the experimental group than in the control.
Puebla Nuñez, (2016) [13]	Developing life skills with the purpose of diminishing the frequency of alcohol and tobacco consumption, as well as violent displays.	A total of 15 students of third grade of secondary school participated. Two instruments were administered before and after the program implementation: 1) An adaptation of the SISVEA questionnaire (to know the frequency of substance consumption) and 2) The CUVE3-ESO (to determine the presence of violence). Each secondary school class which obtained the highest scorings in substance use and violence displays, was administered a life skills program which consisted of 27 sessions of 45 minutes each.	The results indicated that after the implementation of the program, students significantly decreased the frequency of alcohol, tobacco and marihuana consumption. In relation to the violence, significant reductions in seven of the eight factors measured by the instrument were found: 1) verbal violence among students, 2) violence through the information technologies 3) verbal violence from students to teachers, 4) indirect physical violence by students, 5) social segregation, 6) direct physical violence and threats among students and 7) disruption in the classroom.

As it can be observed, these are some examples which illustrate good results when applying a program in different situations: promoted as a strategy to favor changes in sexual behavior [9]; as a protecting factor against addictions [10 and 11]; and, as a strategy to prevent aggressions and violence in schools [12 and 13].

It is also necessary to emphasize that although there is literature which proves that life skills programs have been applied in adolescents at vulnerable situations, not only youngsters with particular problems can benefit from this type of programs, but also those who do not present specific issues, since an intervention focuses on promoting their personal resources, it will positively impact in their personal and social well-being [14] and this is precisely one of the main characteristics of this approach, working with all the population and not only with individuals at risk. The following section presents an analysis of some programs in life skills implemented in different parts of the world:

*EDEX.* This organization was founded in Bilbao in 1973 and today is centered in working three fundamental areas: Education for health, Prevention of drug addiction and Promotion of a citizen culture using the concept model of education in life skills. EDEX has created various programs in Spain for education in life skills, it is a referent in Latin America, and currently is at the cutting edge in creating education strategies which are attractive to children and adolescents to form them under the WHO's scope [15]; some of the best known education strategies are: The adventure of life, Let's retake, Ordago and Tales to Talk, just to mention some. At present, it has offices in Colombia and this is the way it links with Latin America, where these strategies are promoted and implemented by several non-government organizations. It also develops strategies to train teachers and university students in this topic.

*Faith y Joy.* The education experience in Colombia with the life skills project was set up by the organization Faith and Joy, with the aid of the World Bank and the Pan-American Organization of Health, by a contract with the health Department, which allowed its implementation in school centers [16]. In this program, the traditional forms of education and the expected social ways in the adolescents' and youngsters' behavior are questioned through the empowerment of the intervention. Consequently, the fostering of student's assertiveness also modify their relation among peers, teachers, parents and respectful ways of relating based on respect and equity are established. An assumption of this new way of education is that violence prevention is among its benefits.

Chilean program of mental health. Similarly, there is a program in Chile which focuses on promoting life skills, which according to Madriaza [17], it is a mental health program set up by the National Board of School Aid and

Scholarships (JUNAEB), which has the purpose of reducing risk factors. One of the program's lines focuses on developing basic skills of empathy, perspective taking and development of prosocial skills such as non-violent conflict resolution, oriented to working with youngsters at high risk, through preventive workshops with topics such as people's rights, limits in interpersonal relationships, relation construction among aggressors-victims, the consequences of bullying, etc.; likewise, one of the program's impact is that 64% of the children get out of the risk situation and improve school performance, as opposed to those who do not attend the workshops [18].

Official syllabi of elementary education in Mexico. In the case of Mexico, new education model, derived from the Education Reform presented and passed by the Congress on December 2012, proposes among other points, introducing in the new elementary education syllabus, guidelines focused on developing key learning, this means, those which contribute to the integral development of students which allow them lifelong learning, from a humanistic approach and with basis on education research. Therefore, in addition to the academic content, personal and social development of students is incorporated as part of the curriculum, with emphasis on developing socio-emotional skills [19].

In addition, it can be seen the importance that the new curriculum gives to life skills such as self-knowledge, creativity, empathy, conflict resolution among others specified in the elementary education syllabus [20]. It is important mentioning that the education reforms of the current government propose implementing the development of socio-emotional skills, and even propose developing them through training for the labor context according to the program "Youngsters building the future" in the "Beneficiaries" section [21]. In this sense, teaching life skills is not an extra-curricular process, but is deeply linked to the current expectations of the education system in Mexico.

#### **IV. Incorporating life skills in higher education**

The members of the UNESCO, with their eyes set in the future, posed that education should be transformed to contribute to a harmonious human development and to protect the natural environment. It was considered a mission of higher education to form citizens who actively participate in solving problems such as disparities among nations, socio-economic stratification, inter-ethnic and inter-cultural confrontations, environment deterioration and language and culture extinction, so a type of education sustained on four pillars was proposed [22] 1) Learning to know, 2) learning to do, 3) learning to be and 4) Learning to coexist; and later, the joy of learning.

In the first case, learning to know is important to prepare students for self-formation, self-learning and self-evaluating; that the teaching-learning processes favor intellectual curiosity development, critical sense and judgment autonomy [23].

In the second case, learning to do, wants that the student puts into practice his/her knowledge and develops skills, abilities and competences which will need to participate in ever-changing world, organizing scattered knowledge in various disciplines. It also pretends to familiarize students with working in inter-disciplinary teams, avoiding fragmentation in small scientific communities, inclined to super-specialization and self-sufficiency [22].

In the third case, learning to coexist, the teaching-learning methods must stimulate understanding and mutual tolerance among people, both close and external; developing together the individual autonomies, community participation and the awareness of belonging to the human species [23].

Finally, in the fourth case, learning to be, it is stated that "...education must contribute to the global development of each individual: body, mind, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic sense, individual responsibility, spirituality..." [23], so the individual must be capable of making his/her own judgments to determine what to do in the different circumstances of life. Therefore, it must be assumed that education is a permanent process developing in different spaces, extending throughout life [22].

To boost the reforms proposed by the UNESCO, universities have also encouraged changes in their syllabi, education models, service learning service-learning, voluntary work and social security [24].

Similarly, the Institute of Preventive Education and Risk Attention (INEPAR) highlights that beyond professional preparation, university identity must contribute in student formation. According to this institute which focuses on studying addictions and other prosocial risks, in our modern globalized world, the lifestyle of young university students is characterized by being exposed to multiple psychosocial risk factors and stress

levels and psychosocial vulnerability to which they are not quite aware. They state that some research shows that the level of “accumulated risk”, in other words, the sum of risk factors that a high level of university students are living, places them in a condition of psychosocial vulnerability [25].

Considering the later, the implementation of programs which promote life skills in the university context is an innovative proposal. Generally, the programs which promote them are applied in the context of elementary and secondary education as previously mentioned. In the case of universities, the topic of life skills is something that is being gradually adopted. Today, there are some evidences of formation experiences among university student in life skills through various activities such as workshops, courses, etc. The following table provides some examples of the actions taken in various university contexts (See TABLE 2).

**Table 2. Life skills activities addressed too university students (Table made by author)**

Activity	Evidence
VII Encounter of Experts in the Promotion of University Health. Conclusions and recommendations from the Session on Healthy Universities. January 2011. University Francisco de Vitoria. Spain.	<a href="http://noticias.universia.es/vida-universitaria/noticia/2011/01/18/780734/conclusiones-recomendaciones-jornada-universidades-saludables.html">http://noticias.universia.es/vida-universitaria/noticia/2011/01/18/780734/conclusiones-recomendaciones-jornada-universidades-saludables.html</a>
Major in Psychology, 2011 syllabus. Psychology School, Autonomous University of Yucatan. P. 23. Current syllabus valid until 2015. Merida, Yucatan.	<a href="https://www.psicologia.uady.mx/imagenes/Licenciatura/Plan%20de%20estudios+PSICOLOGIA+modif+abril+2011_20may.pdf">https://www.psicologia.uady.mx/imagenes/Licenciatura/Plan%20de%20estudios+PSICOLOGIA+modif+abril+2011_20may.pdf</a>
Seminar on life skills. 2nd Congress, Colombian network of Higher Education Institutes and health promoting Universities. Autonomous University of Manizales. UAM. August, 2012. Colombia.	<a href="http://proinapsa.uis.edu.co/redcups/Biblioteca/Documentos%20REDCUPS/UAM_Catedra_habilidades_para_la_vida.pdf">http://proinapsa.uis.edu.co/redcups/Biblioteca/Documentos%20REDCUPS/UAM_Catedra_habilidades_para_la_vida.pdf</a>
Workshop on Life Skills. Pontifical Javerian University. May 2015, Cali, Colombia.	<a href="http://www.javerianacali.edu.co/noticias/asi-fue-el-taller-habilidades-para-la-vida">http://www.javerianacali.edu.co/noticias/asi-fue-el-taller-habilidades-para-la-vida</a>
Workshop on Life Skills. University of Caldas. February 2015. Colombia.	<a href="http://www.ucaldas.edu.co/portal/taller-de-participantes-habilidades-para-la-vida-jovenes-en-accion/">http://www.ucaldas.edu.co/portal/taller-de-participantes-habilidades-para-la-vida-jovenes-en-accion/</a>
Workshop on Skills for University Life. Arturo Prat University of the State of Chile. July 2015. Chile.	<a href="http://www.unap.cl/prontus_unap/site/artic/0150706/pags/20150706111004.html">http://www.unap.cl/prontus_unap/site/artic/0150706/pags/20150706111004.html</a>
Courses and workshops for Integration and Adaptation: Life Skills. Workshops for students UNAM. Center of Education Counseling (COE). General Direction of Counseling and Education Services. Mexico, 2015.	<a href="http://www.dgoserver.unam.mx/portaldgose/opsicopedagogica/htmls/pdfs/Talleres_alumnos.pdf">http://www.dgoserver.unam.mx/portaldgose/opsicopedagogica/htmls/pdfs/Talleres_alumnos.pdf</a>
Online Course, Life skills in university students. INEPAR. Institute of preventive Education and Risk Attention. Mexico, 2015.	<a href="http://www.inepar.edu.mx/INEPAR/cursos-en-linea.html">http://www.inepar.edu.mx/INEPAR/cursos-en-linea.html</a>
Workshop, Life skills. Tamaulipas University. October, 2015. Cd. Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico.	<a href="http://universidadtamaulipeca.edu.mx/sitio/vent/taller-habilidades-para-la-vida/">http://universidadtamaulipeca.edu.mx/sitio/vent/taller-habilidades-para-la-vida/</a>

Based on the later, it can be understood why the universities are tending to create formation spaces for the student, not only in the professional, but also as a person, so when they talk about the students integral development, they include promoting physical and emotional well-being, taking biological, psychological and

spiritual development of their students as a whole, and proposing that through the development of life skills, healthy, supportive and peaceful lifestyles are promoted, since they are oriented towards human and social well-being.

In the school setting, life skills should not only limit to prepare the youngsters for the labor world, but also, and importantly, reinforce their competences in order to help them face the many risks of current life (for example: HIV/AIDS, substance abuse and violence), as well as to responding effectively to the contexts and tensions they will face in the core of their society and throughout their professional life [26].

An example of this initiative is in the Psychology School of a public university in Merida, Yucatan, Mexico, which currently operates a life skills program based on various education strategies developed by EDEX, implemented through a subject with the same name: Life Skills. This way, the academic field becomes a cross-sectional axis for the students' integral development.

The life skills program in the aforementioned university operates in the following way: during the first two semesters, students take besides their corresponding subjects, the first of three modules from the Life Skills subject. The second module is taken in the middle of the major, and the third in the last year. The sum of the three modules is equivalent to 90 hours [27].

Unlike other universities where the actions are focused in promoting life skills as a complement to their formation, the mentioned course is embedded in the syllabus, as a cross-sectional axis of the curriculum. The formal teaching in life skills in this case, is an action which is worth appreciating if we are to create a positive impact in the integral development of university students.

## V. Conclusion

As a conclusion, there are four considerations which can be reflected in depth and obtain some ideas which allow analyzing the feasibility of this proposal about teaching life skills as an alternative for the integral development of students in higher education.

### 5.1 Why are life skills important?

Adapting to the requirements that the current context demand, is one of the biggest challenges which humans have to face at different life stages. Particularly, in adult life, it is expected that people respond efficiently to these demands that the context imposes. Currently, people have to face a constantly changing and stressing context; hence the importance of teaching life skills from elementary to higher education. Connectivity and immediateness of communication pose important challenges for all people today.

### 5.2 What do Life Skills programs contribute to?

Life skills programs in elementary education are documented as an effective alternative to prevent prosocial risks, besides being an alternative of attention in cases of people with addiction to avoid relapsing and contribute to their recovery. The latter is related to health aspects.

Another area in which these skills can contribute is in education. In the basic levels, it promotes an integral development of the student, diversification of teachers' roles and formation according to the four pillars of education among other advantages.

### 5.3 Why must higher education adopt this initiative?

The impact of the life skills initiative encompasses two areas mainly: health and education. In the health area, universities are ideal spaces to promote healthy lifestyles, responsible decision making and self-care ethics. In the education area, higher education must promote integral development of students and life skills are an alternative to aid in the cognitive, social and emotional dimensions, which are the three areas of the human's integral vision.

Therefore, teaching the 10 life skills can be an innovative strategy in higher education as the formation transcends the cognitive sphere and reaches other areas.

#### 5.4 What is suggested from this revision?

Our experience indicates that it is not enough what is being taught in elementary and preparatory school in relation to life skills, not only because university students show lack of them, but also because the current demands require of people who can face these changing situations and offer a quick response. This area of knowledge requires from people to take decisions responsibly, thinking not only about themselves, but also about the others; similarly, it requires people with empathy, who know themselves and communicate effectively, considering their interpersonal relationships and cooperative problem and conflict solution.

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### **How to Cite:**

Jorge Carlos Aguayo Chan, Efrain Duarte Briceño, “ *Life Skills in higher Education: An innovative proposal*”. International Journal of Arts and Social Science, 2019. 2(2), 10-18. ISSN: 2581-7922. [www.ijassjournal.com](http://www.ijassjournal.com)