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**RESEARCH PAPER**

## Elementary School Teachers' Perspectives about Life Skills Integration: A Phenomenology Study

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### ABSTRACT

Life skills in the elementary classroom are becoming more acknowledged and crucial in preparing students for the 21st century. This study aimed to explore elementary school teachers' perspectives on the experience of life skills integration in the learning process. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used. 8 public elementary school teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded verbatim with the permission of the participants, followed by analysis using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). It was found that teachers highly value life skills and have a wide range of interactive strategies that they use to incorporate life skills into subject teaching. The study recommends that the implementation of effective life skills integration necessitates the revision of the curriculum, systematic professional development, and supportive school leadership, as well as teacher creativity and commitment at the individual level.

**KEYWORDS** Life Skills Integration, Learners' Engagement, Phenomenological Study, Teacher Perspective, 21st Century Skills

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### Introduction

Life skills integration means incorporating the psychosocial and practical skills which are essential for life, including decision making, critical thinking, empathy, communication and problem solving into all aspects of teaching and learning. This way, students should build up not only academic knowledge but also develop the skills in their application of knowledge in an efficient and ethical manner when faced with real-world tasks. At the elementary level, as the students' habits, attitudes and social behaviors are still developing, life skills education can help children to grow and develop their self-regulations, social competencies and resilience as well as their cognitive development. Family-school collaboration, including parental involvement, can also be an added boost to life skills development, although some teachers may have negative perceptions of the "interference" provided by parents (Asal et al., 2024).

Life skills education (LSE) has been proven to be a very effective psychological and educational intervention, improving the psychosocial health and mental well-being of the learner. Research indicates that structured life skills programs can enhance coping skills, boost self-confidence and emotional intelligence, and foster positive problem-solving and decision-making within real-world situations (Prajapati et al., 2017). Thus, integration of life skills education into a school's system and school curriculum is suggested. Incorporated into the regular school curriculum, life skills can help students

manage stress in academics, social issues, and their own lives to foster well-being and engagement.

Today's society is changing in the social, economic and technological spheres, with novel requirements on young people following their learning, social and career paths. Life skills are now widely acknowledged to be part of human initiatives, but not optional extras (Kumar, 2020; UNICEF, 2003). International-level organizations like UNICEF (12 Core life skills) and national research like what has been done by Ahmad et al. (2024) and Jamil et al., (2024) highlight the need for the possession of these skills for responsible citizenship and social participation. However, there is a disconnect between policy rhetoric and what happens in schools, as evidenced by the fact that many education systems still focus on the learning of knowledge and performance in exams instead of alignment with skills, attitudes, and values (Dey et al., 2022; Singh & Agarwal, 2024).

Generally, the integration of life skills, in the sense of teamwork, effective communication, decision-making, self-awareness, and problem-solving, is limited and only mentioned in the curriculum documents at the elementary level in Pakistan. There are also a range of factors that hinder the meaningful integration of LSE into teaching and learning daily in the classes, like the burdened curriculum, lack of pedagogical direction, teachers' lack of training, and teacher accountability measures focusing on exams (Hasrat et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024). Within the context of Pakistan, phenomenological studies on life skills integration in education have started investigating lived experiences and teacher knowledge of life skills integration, where there is strong conceptual endorsement but significant gaps in its representation in the classroom (Ahmad et al., 2024; Hasrat et al., 2024). Given the background provided so far, the present study is dedicated to looking at practices and activities in which elementary teachers are currently engaged to integrate life skills in their classes, as well as how they see the positive and negative aspects of doing so.

## **Literature Review**

International discussions on 21st-century learning focus on the fact that students must have more than their academic skills; they must have a wide range of transferable skills to deal with the uncertain labour market and society of the 21st century. According to various reports, including the World Economic Forum (WEF), the future workforce is increasingly demanding skills in complex problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking and socio-emotional competencies (Caratozzolo et al., 2024). It is therefore important, Lammi (2024) argues, that schools should abandon the old educational method of rote learning and small-scale tests, in favor of learning experiences in which students learn how to think critically, deal with uncertainties, engage in cooperation and express themselves effectively. As a strategy that links academic learning to the real world, the incorporation of life skills into the core curriculum, as opposed to co-curriculum or extra-curriculum, is gaining increasing prominence.

Studies around various contexts mention the advantages of implementing life skills education as well as the challenges of establishing it as an ongoing practice. Kumar (2020) argues that life skills education is essential to develop creative and productive citizens, coping with the social changes for the better, while the works of Lee (2020) on mental health show that life skills like flexibility, awareness of emotion, and coping reduce the risk factors such as social pressure and academic stress. Meanwhile, studies report that teachers sometimes face conceptual and practical difficulties, such as focusing

solely on life skills as moral values, considering it a social or cognitive competence, or not being guided by others on how to translate life skills into lesson planning and assessment (Ahmad et al., 2024; Hasrat et al., 2024).

A few studies in Pakistan have specifically looked at the discovery of life skills in basic schools and teachers' attitudes towards it. Based on a phenomenological study on eight federal schools, Ahmad et al. (2024) found that while teachers in these schools strongly acknowledged the importance of life skills training, they faced hurdles in its implementation in examination-oriented environments, despite robust knowledge about them, such as the appropriateness of the old 12 core skills of UNICEF. Hasrat et al. (2024) evaluated the incorporated elementary curriculum and concluded that, though formally integrated, there is a lack of support in formulating pedagogical guidance and training for teachers, and these become more superficial in this context as the delivery instruction points towards content coverage and test preparation instead of student-oriented and experiential learning. Despite the political statements made, these studies converge in pointing to structural issues that hinder the implementation of LSE, including the overload of the curriculum, time constraints, and fears of assessment pressure.

International qualitative research adds further information about teachers' conceptions and practices of integrating life skills. Similarly, Kurtdede and Aydogdu's (2018) study in Turkey found positive attitudes for classroom and science teachers towards life skills education such as communication, decision-making, and problem solving, but they were experiencing the problem of an overloaded curriculum and training, as in Pakistan. Other studies have highlighted that teacher education and in-service teachers' training play a pivotal role in developing effective teachers who can instil regular subjects with youth-friendly methods, including collaborative learning, role-playing, problem-based tasks, reflective discussion, etc. (Prajapati et al., 2017; Singh & Agarwal, 2024). In sum, literature indicates that teachers' experiences and innovations at the classroom level play an important role in determining the lived reality of life skills development, which points to the importance of a phenomenological approach for gaining insight into the teachers' perspectives.

### **Research Methodology**

It was a qualitative study with a phenomenological research design, as the researchers wanted to explore the lived experiences of the elementary teachers in using life skills in their classrooms. The study chose this research design as it allows for comprehending how life skills are understood, used, and experienced by teachers in their schools (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). There were eight elementary school teachers selected as a sample using purposive sampling, as they were information-rich. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument for collecting data, which was based on a self-developed interview protocol based on the literature and the objectives of the study. The interview guide was validated by three relevant educational experts. Interviews lasted for 30–40 minutes, held in a private and comfortable location and audio-recorded with the informed consent. All recordings were transcribed. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, defining and naming the themes, and report writing. Throughout the research process, the ethical considerations of doing what is in the best interests of the research, keeping confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respecting participants' rights and well-being were considered.

## Results and Discussion

### Instructional Strategies and Classroom Practices for Integrating Life Skills

This theme explores the specific pedagogical approaches through which participants sought to integrate life skills into their daily classroom practice. All eight participants described deliberate, creative efforts to move beyond transmission teaching toward interactive, participatory, and experience-centred approaches that simultaneously developed academic content and life skills competencies. Their pedagogical repertoire was broad and resourceful, encompassing peer teaching, group projects, role-play, storytelling, classroom presentations, open-ended questioning, real-life contextualization, and formative feedback. Four sub-themes are presented: (1) peer teaching, group work, and collaborative learning; (2) activity-based learning, role-play, and storytelling; (3) questioning, classroom discussion, and communication development; and (4) life skills-oriented lesson planning.

#### *Sub-Theme 1: Peer Teaching, Group Work, and Collaborative Learning*

Peer teaching, group work, and collaborative learning were described by participants as the most used strategies for developing life skills. According to Participant 1, it was described as follows.

*Group work and peer teaching are the best. If you have a thirty-student class in thirty minutes, if you make a group, and a child who reads well is sitting with three other children, then they will listen to his reading very well. And if there is a competition between them – I will give you a topic, find questions from this – so all three or four children will be able to collaborate with each other, communicate with each other, and each child will have a different way of thinking. So, they will come up with different questions and then compete with each other. Apart from collaboration, their communication skills will develop enormously.*

In the view of participant 4, it is stated as follows:

*Yes, one time, I managed a group activity. I divided the students into groups, and I gave one group to write about themselves and another group to write about my favourite teacher. In this way, the children had different ideas and different sentences – each child contributing something, saying something. So they also developed communication skills, they had the skills of sharing ideas, and they developed creative thinking. Apart from this, different ideas were also shared, so they developed collaboration skills, which are also very important for them in their learning and in their lives.*

Participant 4 was of the view in the following words:

*Collaboration and teamwork help students work together, share ideas, and produce better work. Peer interaction is very important in developing life skills because it boosts self-confidence and communication skills. When students are given a group task and told that only their collective product matters, they quickly learn that they must listen to each other, negotiate, distribute responsibilities, and support the weakest member of the group – all of which are essential life skills that no textbook lesson can teach as effectively.*

#### *Sub-Theme 2: Activity-Based Learning, Role-Play, and Storytelling*

Activity-based learning, role-play, and storytelling were identified by participants as particularly effective vehicles for developing life skills in elementary

students because they engage learners physically, emotionally, and creatively – not just cognitively – and create contexts in which students must apply, rather than merely remember, the skills being developed. The following was the narration of participant 3:

*I use role-play, group discussion, storytelling, and problem-solving tasks. These approaches give students a chance to step outside their own perspective and inhabit the viewpoint of a character, a historical figure, or a peer facing a dilemma. That experience of perspective-taking is itself a fundamental life skill. Activity-based learning is the most effective because it is when children are doing something – not just listening to something – that genuine skill development occurs.*

Participant 1 was of the view in the following words:

*I once taught life skills through a topic called means of transport. The children were told to tell one thing each that they can travel. Each child told a different thing – cars, trains, bikes, cycles. The next day, the children brought the vehicles. We drew things on the board. We made four portions in which we presented the vehicles in the air, on the ground, and on the water. We put the toys on the board and presented the class as a presentation. The whole class was in collaboration, which helped the students a lot in learning and cleared the concept through a creative, life-connected activity.*

In the view of participant 5, it is stated as follows:

*Yes, once I gave students a group project where they had to solve a small problem – for example, how to keep the school clean. Through this activity, they learned teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. The beauty of using real problems that students actually care about is that they cannot approach them passively. They have to think, plan, discuss, disagree, negotiate, and act – and all of those processes are simultaneously developing their life skills and their understanding of the topic.*

### **Sub-Theme 3: Questioning, Classroom Discussion, and Communication Development**

Classroom conversation and an open-ended question framework were depicted by participants. Some of the participants also described the classroom presentation format as a particularly powerful strategy for building communicative confidence and overcoming the pervasive problem of student shyness and passive participation. According to participant 1, it was described as follows:

*The most important thing is questioning – the kind of assessment or feedback where, when you ask a child individually, they have to stand up and tell their story. If I have told a story, I will say: stand up, and tell me what story I told, in your own language. You do not have to hold a book and read it. You have to stand up and tell it as if I had told you the story by closing the book. When he tells the whole story, his language will improve. He will also have to represent it in class. His communication skills will also improve, and the rest of the kids will listen better because they know there will be critical questioning.*

Participant 2 narrated her perspective in the following words:

*In the classroom, there is a discussion, question, and answer session. It creates critical thinking in the students. Some students click randomly in their minds, and they go towards critical thinking. They have the skill to communicate. If they know a question, even if they have heard a little, they can answer it. They try to communicate. They develop critical thinking and communication skills. It is very beneficial for them because it builds confidence progressively – each small contribution builds the confidence for the next, larger contribution.*

In the view of Participant 4, it is stated as follows:

*Classroom discussions and Q&A sessions help students improve their communication skills. When students express their ideas and listen to others, they build confidence, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities. It also teaches them teamwork, respect, and how to handle different opinions. The classroom is a model of public communication. If a learner learns to listen attentively and take issues effectively in classroom conversation, they are directly developing communication and soft skills. They will require their lives from beginning to end.*

#### **Sub-Theme 4: Life Skills-Oriented Lesson Planning**

Participants depicted lesson preparation as the major place inside life skills integration where there was consistency, embedded or unintentionally neglected. In the view of Participant 6, it is stated as follows:

*I design lesson plans by integrating life skills into regular subjects through activities like group work, discussions, and real-life examples. I set objectives that focus not only on academic content but also on skills like communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. This helps students learn both subject knowledge and practical life skills at the same time. When life skills objectives are written into the lesson plan from the beginning, they are far more likely to actually be taught – rather than being left out when time runs short.*

Participant 2 was of the view in the following words:

*I try to have more discussions and group activities. If I start a first lesson, I try to have a discussion class first. I try to have a group activity so that life skills can be developed along with academic learning. In my planning, I always think: what skill will the children practice in this lesson, not just what knowledge will they acquire? Both focus on skills as well as knowledge – the difference between them is what makes a lesson that teaches students and a lesson that only provides material.*

According to Participant 4, it was described as follows:

*I get my lecture in advance and acquire full information about the subject. Then I think about how to connect the topic with activities. I ask students whether they have read, seen, or heard about the topic before, so that they speak and gain confidence. In this way, I plan my lessons and deliver them according to this plan. The advance preparation is what gives me the flexibility to actually carry out the life skills component in the lesson – it cannot be improvised under time pressure.*

#### **Discussion**

The results show that the elementary teachers in this study are equipped with a variety of pedagogy for integrating life skills like peer teaching, group work, activity, role play, storytelling, open-ended questioning, and structured classroom discussion. They focus on collaborative learning and on learning as an interaction between peers and reflect the sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky, who sees higher psychological functions like communication, self-regulation, and problem solving developing within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through socially mediated activity (Vygotsky et al., 1978). Similarly, teachers' insistent use of role play, real-life projects, and the use of concrete and contextually related activities are aligned to Kolb (2014) notion that learning is most often deep and sustained within cycles of concrete experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. They ask questions and engage in discussion to

which students reply, retell stories, and share their opinions, echoing Teachers also indicated that the integration of life skills is largely dependent on individual initiative, careful lesson planning, and is limited by the lack of curriculum space, students' class sizes and assessment systems which do not explicitly value life skills integration, which is also noted in national and international literature (Hasrat et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Kurtdede-Fidan & Aydogdu, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The current study reveals that in this context, elementary school teachers are aware that life skills are a key factor in effective learning in the school environment, and are themselves striving to promote integration of life skills through life skills-based lesson planning, cooperative learning activities, experiential learning, and through the use of dialogic questioning. They indicate that life skills integration can be achieved, even in a resource-challenged, exam-oriented culture, if teachers are motivated, working with them helps build communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, and confidence. To improve the integration of life skills at the elementary level, coordinated action through classroom, school, and policy levels may be needed through clearer guidance within the curriculum, targeted professional development, supportive leadership, and assessment reforms where life skills are explicitly valued alongside academic achievement.

## **Recommendations**

The following are recommendations based on the study findings.

- Specific professional development programs should be designed to help elementary teachers find concrete ideas on how to incorporate life skills into current topics and time limits.
- Curriculum and assessment guidelines should be reviewed to support teachers in structured planning, teaching, and assessment of life skills.
- School leaders should be facilitated for the provision of life skills education, such as minimising class sizes, provision of basic teaching materials and flexible space for group work as far as possible and rewarding teachers who innovate in life skills integration.
- There should be collaboration between teachers, including joint lesson planning time, peer observation, and thought partnering, to share successful life skills activities, co-create materials, and identify solutions together to address implementation challenges.
- Parent-teacher meetings and dialogues should be included in the school community, where parents are made aware of the concept of life skills.

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