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Life Skills as an Integral Part of a Comprehensive Education: A Research Proposal for Educational Policies in Compulsory Education in Greece, Germany, and Finland

Abstract

With individual, social, and emotional skills increasingly emerging as integral components of a comprehensive education, this scientific study aims to organize and summarize the range of different approaches found in the literature regarding the role and contribution of “life skills” to the holistic development of students and adolescents. This study serves as the theoretical background upon which extensive research will be based concerning educational policies and “life skills” in compulsory education in Europe, through a comparative analysis of three different European educational systems: Greece, Germany, and Finland.

Keywords: life skills, individual skills, emotional skills, social skills, compulsory education, Greece, Germany, Finland

Introduction

During developmental changes, students and adolescents often encounter difficulties in their communication with parents, teachers, classmates, and their social environment (Eriksson et al., 2019). These situations often lead to unnecessary anxiety, anger issues, low self-esteem, limited life satisfaction, poor academic performance, and behavioral disorders at school and at home (Cosma et al., 2023).

In this context, individual, social, and emotional skills emerge as integral components of comprehensive education (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Currie & Morgan, 2020). The ability to build and maintain social relationships, critical and creative thinking, effective communication and collaboration, skills such as self-control and self-management, decision-making, and goal setting are just some of the “life skills” that equip children and adolescents to face the challenges of adulthood (Eriksson et al., 2019; Sala et al., 2020).

The primary aim of this work is to organize and summarize the range of different approaches found in the literature, identifying the nature of life skills while concurrently providing a robust literature review regarding the positive outcomes resulting from their cultivation and development.

This study aims to serve as the theoretical background upon which extensive qualitative research on educational policies and life skills in compulsory education in Europe will be based, through a comparative analysis of three different European educational systems: Greece, Germany, and Finland.

Life skills: a theoretical approach

With its Recommendation adopted in 2018, the European Union acknowledges that the cognitive background proves to be weak when isolated from skills related to problem-solving, critical thinking, ability to cooperate, creativity, personal, social, and metacognitive skills, self-regulation of behavior, etc. (European Commission, 2019).

Through this acknowledgment, the European Union essentially urges its member states to realize that the future “well-being” of their citizens hinges on the development and cultivation of skills that will enable them to successfully navigate the inevitable pressures of life, productively and fruitfully, creating protective factors and mitigating potential risks (Due et al., 2019).

The above-mentioned individual, social, and emotional skills are identified in the literature under the term “life skills” and according to the definition of the World Health Organization, they reflect a range of skills that make individuals “capable of effectively coping with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (World Health Organization, 1999). The broad scope of this definition allows for the inclusion of countless skills, recording, in some cases, differences from country to country, depending on existing educational, social, political, and cultural conditions.

The European Council defines life skills as “positive, affirmative behaviors oriented towards problem-solving” and which are “appropriately and responsibly used in everyday life – at home, in the community, in education, in training, and in the workplace”. Essentially, these are a set of social and personal skills that can be cultivated and developed throughout a person's life span through various “socio-educational activities” embedded in the processes of education and training (European Council, 2017).

The World Health Organization identifies and records a set of significant skills that lie at the core of life skills. According to this approach, these skills are related to: a) decision-making, b) problem-solving, c) creative thinking, d) critical thinking, e) effective communication, f) development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships, g) self-awareness, h) empathy, i) emotion management, and j) stress and anxiety management (World Health Organization, 1993).

In a similar effort, the European Council (2017), in its conclusions regarding those skills that facilitate young people's successful transition to adulthood and professional life, as well as their active participation in the community, categorizes life skills into four concise bundles:

- a) Interpersonal skills: leadership skills, conflict resolution, planning and organization, teamwork, negotiation, intercultural sensitivity;
- b) Communication skills: expression and consideration of opinions, discussion and dialogue, digital literacy for media, presentation, advocacy;
- c) Cognitive skills: critical thinking, reasoned analysis, creative thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, interpretation, judgment; and
- d) Personal skills: self-confidence, self-esteem, resilience, autonomy, initiative, and empathy.

According to the above hierarchy, life skills can be identified through common points and characteristics. Regardless of category they belong to, their aim remains “holistic”, aiming for the overall development of the individual and the achievement of “positive self-actualization” (European Council, 2017).

Furthermore, the above-mentioned skills are a crucial part of personal and professional development and are important for future success and well-being, regardless of environment or professional sector in which the individual operates. In other words, they are “valuable and useful in themselves”, while remaining “complementary” and “reinforcing”, supporting the learning and development of young people in every aspect of their daily lives.

In the same vein, the above categorization confirms that life skills, having broad applicability regardless of content, can be identified as “transversal”, while they are clearly “cross-cutting” skills as they contribute to an individual’s general ability to adapt and respond to various aspects of life. Correspondingly, they can be defined as skills that provide opportunities and possibilities, strengthening behaviors and attitudes and encouraging young people to develop and express their creative, personal, and professional potential (European Council, 2017).

In this context, there seems to be an agreement on the necessity for life skills to be part of a “positive education” within the school environment, as an integral part of the educational curriculum (Seligman & Adler, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2019).

As presented in detail below, the results from longitudinal studies suggest that such interventions at an early age can facilitate a successful transition to new roles and responsibilities that may arise in adult life. The process of acquiring life skills stems from a perspective identified in the literature as a positive youth development process and is grounded in the theory of developmental systems. This theory suggests that young people have the potential for “positive change” by developing and evolving their personal and social “capital” (Seligman & Adler, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2019).

The positive impact of life skills: a literature review

From the aforementioned points, it is easily understood that the positive outcomes from cultivating and developing life skills, particularly in the developmental stage covered by compulsory education, can be highly beneficial for the personal development of students and adolescents (Kourmoussi et al., 2017; Eriksson et al., 2019; Currie & Morgan, 2020). Through shaping positive social values, attitudes, and behaviors, life skills can facilitate the smooth socialization of youth and their successful integration into the community, while also promoting democratic values that will make them active and participatory citizens in the future (European Council, 2017). Additionally, the integration of life skills into education can have significant influences on the area of healthy child development at a crucial age, by strengthening perceptions of prevention and avoidance of unhealthy habits (European Council, 2017).

In the international literature, we find a plethora of studies focusing on the positive outcomes stemming from the integration of life skills into education. Currie and Morgan (2020) identify the clear influence of life skills on the development of social and emotional skills in children. Seligman and Adler (2019) and Eriksson et al. (2019), document the contribution of life skills to self-esteem and health-related behaviors, emphasizing their influence on preventing the development of mental disorders. Kourmoussi et al. (2017) focus on the ability of life skills to promote positive social adaptation and social competence, arguing that skills-based education contributes to the development of self-control, emotional recognition, and understanding.

Furthermore, Due et al. (2019) find that the integration of life skills into education can contribute to the development of effective conflict resolution skills, emphasizing in

positive effects on violent and antisocial behaviors. Kawalekar (2017) focuses on improving academic performance, school discipline, and classroom management, arguing that research data show that children perform better in school when they develop social and emotional skills. Similarly, Yeager (2017) and Jones et al. (2017), by separating and studying a series of social and emotional learning programs, argue that teenagers' lives in school can significantly improve through these skills. Şimşek et al. (2022) highlight the contribution to combating substance abuse. Meanwhile, McGrath and Adler (2022) underline the enhancement of children's self-confidence in the school setting.

Despite the differences, most research studies and surveys agree on the importance and role of life skills in the holistic development of students, significantly influencing their subsequent progress and well-being.

The role of the educator

As the primary figure responsible for managing students, the contribution of the educator is not limited to cognitive areas alone. On the contrary, it extends to areas concerning the emotional, ethical, and social aspects of students, making their role increasingly complex within contemporary social demands (Karras & Wolhuter, 2019).

According to the findings of Humphrey et al. (2018), educators' perceptions of teaching, combined with adequate support and their belief in what they teach, significantly contribute to the success or failure of a cultivation and development program of skills. Similarly, when educators lack the environment and resources to promote social and emotional learning skills, students exhibit lower levels of behavior and performance.

In this direction, as Dyson et al. (2019) suggest, while the development of life skills can be a significant part of the formal curriculum, it is not necessarily derived solely from the school curriculum. In these cases, the integration of social and emotional skills into the teaching program is closely linked to their recognition by educators themselves of the importance these skills have in the holistic education of their students. Educators may recognize and prioritize certain skills over others, focusing their teaching on those skills that better serve their students and their environments (CASEL, 2021).

Proposed research

Research aim

The approach and understanding of the concept of life skills, as well as the broader conceptual framework that accompanies them, are prerequisites for enabling future research regarding educational policies and life skills in compulsory education in Europe. Through a comparative analysis of the national educational systems of Greece, Germany, and Finland, the proposed research aims to capture the existing situation regarding the cultivation and development of life skills. This will be achieved by examining the institutional study programs, methodologies, applied practices, official educational guidelines, as well as the experiential knowledge of educators themselves, to assess the degree of alignment of the theoretical framework with the contemporary educational reality in the three countries under examination.

Study originality and research necessity

The conduct of the proposed research is deemed significant, as a lack of similar studies regarding the development and cultivation of life skills in Greece has been identified. Comparing the institutionalized educational system of Greece with similar educational systems that incorporate and promote the development and cultivation of life skills in their philosophy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019) will allow for the extraction of valuable data and conclusions. These findings could serve as a catalyst for a series of policy reform proposals in the country, integrating best practices concerning the very structure of the educational process, including aspects related to the training of educators themselves.

Methodology

The proposed methodological design consists of two phases. In the first phase, the above organization and recording of the range of approaches found in the literature will be utilized, identifying the nature of life skills and conducting a literature review, both regarding the positive outcomes resulting from their cultivation and development, as well as regarding the role of the educator in the process of cultivating and developing these skills.

Simultaneously, relevant official documents concerning the integration of life skills into the national educational policies of Greece, Germany, and Finland will be sought, recorded, and examined, along with the role assigned to educators in this process and the institutional support provided by the state towards them in this direction.

In the second phase, a qualitative research study has been designed. The conduct of a purposive sampling study will be realized using the method of semi-structured interviews (Tsiolis, 2014), with **policymakers** and **stakeholders** from each national case. Specifically, a total of twelve (12) semi-structured interviews are expected to be conducted, four per national case, leaving open the possibility of revising the sample if necessary. If conditions permit, the research is planned to be conducted in the interviewees' workplace to achieve the best possible connection with the research purpose. Additionally, before conducting the semi-structured interviews, a pilot study has been designed to assess the effectiveness of the adopted methodological design.

Finally, the examination of the findings will be conducted through content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013), utilizing a similar coding scheme to enable the comparative analysis of the data and the secure extraction of conclusions regarding our research questions.

Conclusion

As we have already noted, the present work constitutes the theoretical background upon which extensive qualitative research on educational policies and life skills in compulsory education will be based, through a comparative analysis of three different European educational systems: Greece, Germany, and Finland.

Utilizing the existing literature review and the findings of the studies presented above, which highlight the contribution of life skills to holistic development and future well-being of students and adolescents, as well as the significance of the role that educators are called to play, we will attempt to approach national educational policies in the three examined countries, focusing on the degree of integration of the process of

developing and cultivating life skills within the three national educational programs (both formal and informal), the learning environments, and the practices adopted and implemented by educators.

As emerges from the main part of the present work, this process requires and presupposes supportive structures, opportunities, positive social norms within the educational framework and content, support, and close coordination between the family, the school, and the state.

The data analysis aims to lead us to a comprehensive critical approach to the subject, providing us with the opportunity to formulate certain policy proposals and issues for further research regarding educational policies related to the development and cultivation of life skills in the three examined countries, with an emphasis on the case of Greece, which today seems to be experiencing significant differentiation in the corresponding national rankings (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

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