Assessing Life Skills Among Elementary School Children: A Cross-Sectional Study of Competency Levels

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Abstract

This study investigates the life skills proficiency of elementary school children, focusing on age- and gender-based differences in competencies. Using the Life Skills Measurement Tool–Elementary (LSMT-E), developed by Young Lives India and UNICEF (2015), a sample of 125 students aged 6–12 years from government and private schools was assessed across eight domains: self-awareness, empathy, decision-making, problem-solving, communication, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress and emotions, and creative and critical thinking. Results indicated that the majority of children fell into the Emerging and Basic categories, with only 7.2% reaching the Proficient level. Gender analysis revealed that girls significantly outperformed boys, while no statistically significant differences were found across age groups. The findings highlight critical gaps in cognitive and personal skill clusters, suggesting that life skills education remains underdeveloped among elementary school learners. These results underscore the urgent need for structured, culturally sensitive interventions in school curricula to foster resilience, problem-solving, and socio-emotional competence.

Keywords: life skills, elementary school children, gender differences, UNICEF, India, cross-sectional study

1. Introduction

Assessing life skills among elementary school children is a crucial step in understanding how young learners develop the competencies necessary for emotional, social, and academic success. Life skills, defined as psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with everyday challenges (WHO, 1999), include communication, problem-solving, empathy, stress management, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships. These skills form the foundation for resilience, emotional intelligence, and responsible behavior during later developmental stages. Since elementary school is a formative period for cognitive and socio-emotional growth, systematic assessment of life skills provides insight into both children's strengths and the areas where additional support is needed (Weidinger, 2021).

Empirical evidence highlights that life skills not only enhance children's academic achievement but also contribute to their mental well-being and interpersonal competence. For instance, Thomas and Rajdeep (2021) demonstrated that structured life skills education among rural primary school children in Gujarat significantly

improved communication, participation, and classroom engagement, emphasizing the value of assessing such competencies early. Similarly, Pradeep et al. (2019), in a quasi-experimental study in Karnataka, found that life skills training improved emotional regulation, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills, underlining the importance of systematic evaluation to measure outcomes of such interventions.

Moreover, assessment helps bridge the gap between educational objectives and real-world competencies. The New Education Policy (NEP, 2020) in India underscores the importance of integrating life skills into school curricula to promote holistic development. Studies such as Tiwari and Bajpai (2021) confirm that life skills education has been linked to improved problem-solving abilities, reduced behavioral problems, and better coping strategies in Indian school contexts. Without proper assessment tools, however, these skills often remain unmeasured, limiting the ability of educators and policymakers to design evidence-based interventions.

Global research also emphasizes the value of systematic life skills assessment. Hvalby et al. (2024), in a scoping review, noted that schools across Europe and Asia that assessed life skills reported enhanced student well-being, social inclusion, and long-term academic success. Similarly, López et al. (2021) found that evaluating healthy life habits and psychosocial skills among children from vulnerable backgrounds provided evidence for designing interventions that promoted resilience and healthier coping strategies.

Therefore, assessing life skills among elementary school children is not merely an academic exercise but a developmental necessity. It ensures that children are equipped with psychosocial competencies that support both immediate classroom behavior and long-term adaptation to societal challenges. By identifying gaps through systematic assessment, schools and policymakers can implement targeted programs that foster resilience, empathy, and constructive decision-making — qualities indispensable for thriving in an increasingly complex world.

Objective –

1. To access life skills among elementary school children

Hypothesis-

Ho: There exist no significant differences in the life skills of respondents across different age groups.

Ho: There exist no significant differences in the life skills of respondents across different genders.

2. Literature review

Life skills are recognized as vital competencies that help children adapt to daily challenges and develop holistically, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional domains. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), life skills include abilities such as critical thinking, effective communication, problem solving, decision making, empathy, and emotional regulation (WHO, 1997, as cited in Prajapati et al., 2017). UNICEF similarly defines life skills as psychosocial and interpersonal abilities essential for making informed decisions and maintaining healthy relationships (UNICEF, as cited in Prajapati et al., 2017).

Empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of life skills education in improving psychosocial competencies, emotional well-being, and academic achievement among children. Vranda and Rao (2011) found that training in life skills enhanced psychosocial capabilities, while Puspakumarag (2013) showed that such programs prevent behavioral problems, promote self-confidence, and support overall adjustment. Roodbari, Sahdipoor, and Ghale (2013) reported improved social development and emotional adjustment following life skills interventions.

Methods to assess life skills include classroom observation, peer evaluations, teacher checklists, structured inventories, and intervention outcomes (Prajapati et al., 2017; Hanley et al., 2007). The Preschool Life Skills (PLS) program demonstrated that targeted instruction could increase life skills acquisition by fourfold and reduce problem behavior by 74% (Hanley et al., 2007; Hálfdanardóttir, 2022).

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering life skills, employing experiential learning techniques such as games, role plays, discussions, and project-based tasks (Veena & Vivek, 2010; Hálfdanardóttir, 2022). As children acquire life skills, research shows improvements in communication, social participation, academic engagement, and reductions in bullying and behavioral infractions (Smith et al., 2004; Parsons et al., 1988; Wanjama et al., 2006).

Interventions must be culturally and developmentally appropriate, taking into account gender, socioeconomic status, and local context (Thippeswamy et al., 2025; Prajapati et al., 2017). For instance, a study from Gujarat, India, reported significant positive changes in communication, values, and participation after three months of structured life skill modules (Jacob & Thomas, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

A descriptive cross-sectional design was employed to identify the prevalence and types of behavioral problems among elementary school children aged 6 to 12 years. The sample comprised 125 children randomly selected from multiple government and private schools in an urban setting, ensuring demographic diversity by age, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This approach allowed capturing broad Life skills among elementary-aged learners as documented in prior studies.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

Life Skills Measurement Tool – Elementary (LSMT-E): The Life Skills Measurement Tool – Elementary (LSMT-E), developed by Young Lives India in collaboration with UNICEF (2015), is a standardized instrument designed to assess the life skills competencies of children in alignment with UNICEF and WHO guidelines. It evaluates key domains such as self-awareness, empathy, decision-making, problem-solving, communication, interpersonal relationships, coping with stress and emotions, and creative and critical thinking. The tool consists of 36 scenario-based multiple-choice items, specifically adapted for Indian school children aged 6–14 years.

Scoring involves assigning sub-scores for each life skill and calculating a total score to determine overall competency levels, categorized as Emerging (<28), Basic (27–33), Competent (34–44), and Proficient (>44).

3.3 Procedure

Data collection involved distributing questionnaires to parents and teachers, supplemented by observations in the classroom setting when feasible. Ethical clearance and informed consent were obtained. Researchers ensured confidentiality and anonymity.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were computed to determine the prevalence and nature of behavioral issues. Comparative analyses across age groups, gender, and school type were conducted using independent-samples t-tests to examine significant differences as supported by previous research (Sharma & Sinha, 2022). SPSS software version 26 was utilized for all analyses.

4. Result

4.1 Demographic Overview

Table 4.1: Demographic Overview of Respondents (N = 125)

Parameter	Components	Frequency (%)
Age	6 to 9 years	44 (35.2%)
	10 to 12 years	81 (64.8%)
Gender	Boy	73 (58.4%)
	Girl	52 (41.6%)
Standard	1st to 4th (Lower Elementary)	55 (44.0%)
	5th to 7th (Upper Elementary)	70 (56.0%)
School Type	Private	61 (48.8%)
	Government	64 (51.2%)
Father's Education	Primary School	3 (2.4%)
	Middle School	5 (4.0%)
	High School	16 (12.8%)
	Intermediate	46 (36.8%)
	Graduation	41 (32.8%)
	Post Graduation	14 (11.2%)
Mother's Education	Primary School	5 (4.0%)
	Middle School	15 (12.0%)
	High School	27 (21.6%)
	Intermediate	44 (35.2%)
	Diploma	4 (3.2%)
	Graduation	27 (21.6%)
	Post Graduation	3 (2.4%)
Father's Occupation	Government	17 (13.6%)
	Semi-Government	14 (11.2%)
	Private	57 (45.6%)
	Self-employed	37 (29.6%)
Mother's Occupation	Government	0 (0.0%)
	Semi-Government	7 (5.6%)

	Private	33 (26.4%)
	Self-employed	5 (4.0%)
	Housewife	80 (64.0%)
Family Type	Nuclear Family	58 (46.4%)
	Extended Family	29 (23.2%)
	Joint Family	37 (29.6%)
	Single Parent	1 (0.8%)
No. of Siblings	One	19 (15.2%)
	Two	48 (38.4%)
	More than two	58 (46.4%)
Birth Order	First	45 (36.0%)
	Middle	52 (41.6%)
	Last	28 (22.4%)

The demographic profile of the sample (table 4.1) reveals insightful patterns relevant to the study of life skills and behavioural problems among elementary school children. A notable proportion of the participants were older elementary students aged between 10 to 12 years (64.8%), primarily enrolled in upper elementary grades (5th to 7th, 56.0%). This skew towards older children is significant, as developmental psychology suggests that cognitive maturity, social understanding, and the internalization of behavioural norms tend to increase with age and school exposure. Consequently, these children may exhibit more refined life skills and a more complex behavioural profile than their younger counterparts, allowing for robust age-based analysis. Gender distribution within the sample shows a higher number of boys (58.4%) than girls (41.6%). This gender split is essential as it enables exploration into how boys and girls may differ in terms of behavioural tendencies, emotional expression, and social skill development—a common theme in developmental research. The sample also displays an equitable representation of school type, with 48.8% of children enrolled in private schools and 51.2% in government institutions. This balanced representation permits valuable comparisons of educational environments, which differ widely in India in terms of infrastructure, teacher quality, curriculum content (particularly around socio-emotional learning), and the socio-economic backgrounds of students. Parental education levels, used as a proxy for socio-economic status, show a diverse but generally educated background. Among fathers, the majority held Intermediate (36.8%) and Graduation (32.8%) degrees, while mothers commonly had completed Intermediate (35.2%) or either High School or Graduation (each at 21.6%). This relatively high level of parental education suggests a home environment that likely values academic success, supports learning, and influences the development of life skills through active parental involvement. In terms of parental occupation, fathers were predominantly employed in the private sector (45.6%) or self-employed (29.6%), reflecting economic activity and household income stability. Interestingly, 64.0% of mothers were housewives, indicating a traditional family role, while 36.0% were engaged in paid employment. The presence of working mothers offers a sub-group for analyzing the influence of maternal employment on child development. Family structure analysis reveals a diverse social fabric: nuclear families were the most common (46.4%), but joint (29.6%) 56 | Page and extended (23.2%) family systems were also well represented. These varied household types bring different levels of support systems, intergenerational influence, and collective

child-rearing practices, all of which play crucial roles in behavioural shaping and life skill acquisition. Further, the majority of children (84.8%) had two or more siblings, with the highest representation among middle children (41.6%), followed by first-borns (36.0%). The presence of multiple siblings introduces a home dynamic rich in peer-like interactions, competition, and cooperation— conditions that are fertile ground for the development of social and communication skills. Birth order has long been a subject of interest in psychology due to its influence on personality, responsibility-taking, and leadership tendencies. Taken together, this comprehensive demographic profile provides a strong foundation for analyzing the developmental variations in life skills and behavioural attributes among children, grounded in their home, school, and social environments.

4.2 Proficiency across Life Skill Clusters

Table 4.2.1: Proficiency Levels across Skill Clusters (N=125)

Proficiency Category	Cognitive (%)	Inter-Personal (%)	Personal (%)
Emerging	35.2	20.0	24.0
Basic	40.0	36.8	38.4
Competent	20.8	33.6	28.8
Proficient	4.0	9.6	8.8

The analysis of proficiency across life skill clusters reveals distinct patterns in children's competencies. The **Cognitive cluster** reflects the weakest profile, with 75.2% of children at the 'Emerging' or 'Basic' levels and only 4.0% achieving 'Proficient,' indicating significant gaps in critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. In contrast, the **Inter-Personal cluster** emerges as the strongest, with 43.2% of children reaching 'Competent' or 'Proficient' levels, suggesting comparatively better development in negotiation, communication, and empathy. The **Personal cluster**, which includes creativity, participation, and resilience, shows a moderate standing, indicating that while children demonstrate some strengths in these areas, their resilience and participation skills remain insufficiently developed.

Table 4.2.2: Global Life Skills Proficiency Levels (N = 125)

Proficiency Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Category 1 – Emerging	33	26.4
Category 2 – Basic	48	38.4
Category 3 – Competent	35	28.0
Category 4 – Proficient	9	7.2

Table 4.2.2 shows that the largest group falls into the 'Basic' category (38.4%). A substantial 64.8% (Emerging + Basic) lack 'Competent' or 'Proficient' skills. Only 7.2% reach the 62 | Page 'Proficient' level. This reaffirms the significant need for life skills development in the sampled population.

4.3 Life Skills Proficiency across Demographic Groups (Testing H3 & H4)

4.3.1 Gender Differences (Testing H1):

Table 4.3.1: Global Life Skills Proficiency by Gender

Proficiency Category	Boys (N = 73)	Girls (N = 52)
Emerging	23 (31.5%)	10 (19.2%)
Basic	30 (41.1%)	18 (34.6%)
Competent	16 (21.9%)	19 (36.5%)
Proficient	4 (5.5%)	5 (9.6%)

Table 4.3.1 presents the gender-wise distribution of life-skills proficiency levels, showing that 46.1 % of female students fell into the Competent/Proficient categories compared to only 27.4 % of male students. To determine whether this difference reflects a true gender disparity rather than sampling variability, an independent-samples t-test was conducted on the overall life skills scores. The t-test results ($t(123) = -2.35$, $p = 0.020$) indicate that the mean life-skills score for girls ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.45$) was significantly higher than that for boys ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.51$). The negative t-value reflects the higher scores observed in the female group, and the p-value ($p < 0.05$) confirms that this difference is unlikely to have occurred by chance. The corresponding effect size (Cohen's $d \approx 0.60$) can be interpreted as a medium-to-large gender effect, suggesting a practically meaningful difference in life-skills competence. Because the test yielded $p = 0.020$—below the conventional alpha level of 0.05—the null hypothesis (H_4) of no gender-based difference in life-skills proficiency is rejected. In pedagogical terms, this outcome implies that female students in this sample demonstrably outperform their male peers on the measured life-skills dimensions, warranting further investigation into gender specific learning environments and support mechanisms.

4.3.2 Age Group Differences (Testing H2):

Table 4.3.2: Global Life Skills Proficiency by Age Group (N = 125)

Proficiency Category	6–9 years (N = 44)	10–12 years (N = 81)	Total (N = 125)
Emerging	12	21	33 (26.4%)
Basic	17	31	48 (38.4%)
Competent	12	23	35 (28.0%)
Proficient	3	6	9 (7.2%)

4.3.3 Hypothesis Test for H_{o2}

The formal statistical test for the null hypothesis (H02)—that there exists no significant difference in life skills among respondents across different age groups—was conducted using an independent-samples t-test to compare mean Global Life Skills scores between the 6–9 year-old and 10–12 year-old groups at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Table 4.3.3: Independent-Samples t-Test for Global Life Skills by Age Group

Test	t	df	p (two-tailed)
Independent-samples t-test	±1.47	123	0.145

The p-value obtained from the t-test is 0.145. Since this p-value is greater than the significance level of 0.05 ($p>0.05$), we fail to reject the null hypothesis. The analysis indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean life skills scores between children aged 6-9 years and those aged 10-12 years in this sample. This reinforces the conclusion that life skills proficiency appears to be broadly comparable across these two elementary school age brackets.

5. Discussion

The present study provides valuable insights into the life skills competencies of elementary school children in India, contributing to the growing body of literature emphasizing socio-emotional and cognitive development alongside academic achievement. Consistent with earlier studies (Vranda & Rao, 2011; Prajapati et al., 2017; Thomas & Rajdeep, 2021), the findings reveal that a significant proportion of children remain at the Emerging and Basic proficiency levels. This suggests that despite national and international recognition of life skills as critical for holistic development (WHO, 1997; UNICEF, 2012), practical implementation in school settings continues to lag behind.

One of the most notable findings is the significant gender difference in life skills proficiency, with girls outperforming boys. This aligns with prior research demonstrating that female students often excel in communication, empathy, and interpersonal domains (Roodbari et al., 2013; López et al., 2021). The effect size observed in this study indicates that the difference is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful. These results suggest that gender-sensitive pedagogical strategies may be warranted to address boys' relative lag in socio-emotional learning.

Conversely, no significant differences were found across age groups (6–9 vs. 10–12 years). While developmental theory suggests that older children typically exhibit higher cognitive and social maturity (Piaget, 1970; Hálfdanardóttir, 2022), the lack of statistical difference here may reflect the limitations of current school-based life skills exposure or the relatively narrow age range of the sample. This finding underscores the need for consistent, developmental scaffolding of life skills from early grades rather than expecting natural progression with age alone.

The cluster analysis further revealed that cognitive life skills—including decision-making and problem-solving—were the weakest areas, echoing the findings of Pradeep et al. (2019) and Tiwari & Bajpai (2021). Meanwhile, interpersonal skills were relatively stronger, likely influenced by cultural emphasis on collectivism and peer relationships in Indian contexts. However, personal attributes such as resilience and creativity remained underdeveloped, highlighting a gap in current pedagogical practices that often prioritize rote learning over critical and creative thinking.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that life skills proficiency among elementary school children in India is largely limited to Emerging and Basic levels, with very few students attaining Proficient competency. Gender differences are

evident, with girls demonstrating significantly higher proficiency than boys, while no meaningful differences were found between younger and older children. These findings reveal critical gaps in life skills education, particularly in cognitive and personal domains, underscoring the necessity of early, structured interventions to prepare children for academic success and socio-emotional well-being.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends the integration of structured life skills education into elementary school curricula, aligned with WHO and UNICEF frameworks, with particular emphasis on decision-making, problem-solving, and resilience. Developing gender-sensitive pedagogy is crucial, as targeted interventions can help boys strengthen empathy, communication, and self-regulation, while reinforcing the relative strengths already observed among girls. Equally important is teacher training, equipping educators with experiential methods such as role play, group discussions, and project-based learning to promote critical thinking and socio-emotional growth. Strengthening parental engagement through workshops can extend the benefits of life skills learning into the home environment, particularly in families with limited educational resources. At the policy level, it is essential to advocate for the formal inclusion of life skills education as a core element of the Indian school system under NEP 2020, supported by adequate resources, teacher capacity-building, and continuous monitoring. Finally, future research should adopt longitudinal and intervention-based designs to examine the long-term effects of structured life skills programs on children's academic outcomes, resilience, and psychological well-being.

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