

Çakı, F. (2015). Lifeskills approach in formal vocational training environments: a case study of Balıkesir university. *Turkish Journal of Sociology*, 2015/1, 3/30, 333-354.

Lifeskills Approach in Formal Vocational Training Environments: A Case Study of Balıkesir University*

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Abstract: Life Skills Education (LSE) is “an active learning process” and a specific educational approach aiming at developing psychosocial competences of children and young people (also of some other potential target groups). This paper aims to find out how LSE is perceived and what reactions it generates among students in a higher educational environment, specifically among students receiving vocational training. In line with those questions, a semi-structured interview form was used to collect data from a purposeful sampling of 100 students involved in vocational training at Balıkesir University, Turkey. The core finding of this research is the endorsement of the insight that LSE tends to generate similar results, positive impacts and challenges to the findings of previous researches even when it is applied to young people in vocational training at the tertiary level. The paper additionally makes the point that LSE should be questioned from a sociological perspective. It is concluded that developing a *sociology of LSE experiences* (a subfield of the *sociology of education*) would enrich the LSE literature while it may also change its direction of inquiry.

Keywords: Life Skills Education (LSE), Psychosocial Competences, Children and Adolescents, Young People, Sociology of LSE Experiences

Örgün Mesleki Eğitim Ortamlarında Yaşam Becerileri Yaklaşımı: Balıkesir Üniversitesi Örnek Olay Çalışması

Özet: Yaşam Becerileri Eğitimi (YBE), amacı çocukların ve gençlerin (ve daha başka hedef grupların) psiko-sosyal yetkinliklerini geliştirmek olan “aktif bir öğrenme süreci” ve spesifik bir eğitimsel yaklaşımdır. Bu makale, özellikle mesleki eğitim almakta olan üniversite öğrencileri arasında uygulandığında YBE’nin nasıl algılandığını ve ne tür tepkiler doğurduğunu araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu sorulara paralel olarak, Balıkesir Üniversitesi’nde mesleki eğitim almakta olan 100 öğrencilik amaçlı bir örneklemeden veri toplamak üzere yarı-yapılandırılmış bir mülakat formu kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın ana bulgusu, YBE’nin yükseköğrenim seviyesindeki mesleki eğitim gençlerine uygulandığında da önceki araştırmaların bulgularıyla benzer sonuçlar, olumlu etkiler ve güçlükler yaratmaya meylettği düşüncesinin onaylanmasıdır. Makale, ilaveten, YBE’nin sosyolojik bir perspektiften sorgulanması gerekliliğini savunmakta ve bir *YBE deneyimleri sosyolojisi* (eğitim sosyolojisi içinde) geliştirmenin YBE literatürünü zenginleştirebileceği gibi onun araştırma yönünü de değiştirebileceği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşam Becerileri Eğitimi (YBE), Psiko-Sosyal Yetkinlikler, Çocuklar ve Ergenler, Gençler, YBE Deneyimleri Sosyolojisi

* This research is indebted and, thus, thankful to many organizations and individuals. First of all, the project of LifeDreams4All and the research outcomes based on that project would not be possible without the financial support of the Leonardo da Vinci Program of the European Commission. Secondly, the outstanding cooperation and support of Embrace Cooperation Ltd., UK, Kids & Co, Germany and Balıkesir University, Turkey created the baseline both for the project and for its research outcomes including this paper. The author is also grateful to Kadir Canatan, Ali Egi, M. Murat Özkul and Abdurrahman Özkan for being a great research team. Furthermore, 10 Turkish and 10 German trainers and over 200 students taking role in the project and in the research process also deserve special thanks. Finally, the author deeply thanks to Barış Şentuna for his valuable proofreading help and academic suggestions.

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Introduction

In a traditional society, people learn what they need to know through experience in life. They are surrounded by a community that directs its members by certain roles, rules, rights and responsibilities. They actually do not need a particular education for life skills. Life skills are acquainted in the process of socialization, family life and community life. In up to date modern societies, however, people are almost left alone although they may still have some familial and/or community ties. They have to find their own path and learn the values of life by themselves. This is considered to be freedom. Individuals are free to build up their own values, beliefs, life styles though they are at the same time under a heavy pressure of peers, media and technology. This is true especially for children and young people whose families and teachers possess very limited impact on.

Because, in an up to date modern society, people (especially younger generations) suffer from inadequate level of support from educational, familial and communitarian institutions, they often fall under the risks of self-destructive behaviours, academic failure (including drop-outs), physical, sexual and emotional disorder. Put it differently, “the dramatic changes and challenges facing today related to growing unemployment, poverty, inequality, violence and environmental destruction demands more skills, abilities and creative problem solving potential” (Mahesh, 2011:5). Based on such assumptions, certain international organizations, mainly World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO and UNICEF, advocate to the development and implementation of what they call “life skills education” (LSE).

LSE is “an active learning process” while at the same time it includes “experiential learning, i.e. practical experience and reinforcement of the skills for each student in a supportive learning environment” (WHO, 1999:6). Its aim is to develop psychosocial competences of children and young people. The theoretical background of this approach will be outlined below. But here it is sufficient to point out that it is a specific educational approach mostly used for primary and secondary education of children and adolescents. To the best knowledge of the author, there are not many examples of LSE implementation in higher education which tends to be based on traditional lectures. In 2013, Balıkesir University, Turkey hosted for the first time a project based on life skills education. This experience provides a good opportunity to explore the reactions LSE generates in a higher educational environment. Thus, by using this opportunity, this paper aims to find out how LSE is perceived and what reactions it leads among students in a higher educational environment, specifically among students receiving vocational training.

Based on a qualitative research method, the paper will first take a look at the theoretical background of LSE, deal with research questions and methods, provide the project details and then describe the findings and discusses them in detail.

Theoretical Background

Life skills are defined by WHO as “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviours, that enable individuals to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO, 1997:1). WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF argue that LSE is a necessary process in all over the world to develop psychosocial competences of children and young people. Psychosocial competence is, according to WHO, “a person’s ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It is a person’s ability to maintain a state of mental well-being and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behaviour while interacting with others, his/her culture and environment” (WHO, 1997:1). Therefore, it can be suggested that the main goal of LSE is “to enhance young people’s ability to take responsibility for making healthier choices, resisting negative pressures, and avoiding risk behaviours” (Moya, 2002:1).

WHO is aware of the fact that life skills may differ across cultures and settings. However, WHO still argues that there is “a core set of skills that are at the heart of skills-based initiatives for the promotion of the health and well-being of children and adolescents” (WHO, 1997: 1). WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF jointly list the following as being those core skills: decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress (UNESCO, 2001:21-26, WHO, 1999:1). All those skills are considered to be “directly related to self esteem, self confidence and self esteem and overall value system” (Sengupta, M., Sinha, S. & Mukhopadhyay, M., undated: 3). Thus, LSE is expected to create positive change in one’s feelings, values and behaviours. Using the words of WHO (1997:4):

Effective acquisition and application of life skills can influence the way we feel about ourselves and others, and equally will influence the way we are perceived by others. Life skills contribute to our perceptions of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. Life skills therefore play an important role in the promotion of mental well-being. This promotion of mental well-being contributes to our motivation to look after ourselves and others, the prevention of mental disorders, and the prevention of health and behaviour problems.

LSE is based on two main lines of justification. First, LSE is necessary because it is a requirement of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. For WHO, “the need for life skills education is highlighted, directly and indirectly in the Convention of the Rights of the Child” (WHO, 1999:1). In fact, it was used in Indian secondary schools to “help the students understand the concept of human rights and upholding of them” (Sengupta, M., Sinha, S. & Mukhopadhyay, M., undated: 4).

The second, and most commonly used, justification for the need of LSE is the benefits that it assumingly generates on the target groups when applied on them. Those benefits are believed to be multi dimensional. In fact many researches were conducted to demonstrate the benefits of LSE. Vranda & Rao (2011), Hodge, K., Danish, S. & Martin, J. (2012) and University of Colorado’s Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) provides a detailed review of those researches. WHO reports that “in Zimbabwe and Thailand the impetus for initiating life skills education was the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In Mexico, it was the prevention of adolescent pregnancy. In the United Kingdom, an important life skills initiative was set up to contribute to child abuse prevention, and in the USA there are numerous life skills programmes for the prevention of substance abuse and violence” (WHO, 1999:1). Furthermore, according to a review of researches by UNICEF, “approaches relying on life skills have been effective in educating youth about health-related issues—such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; nutrition; pregnancy prevention; and preventing HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Life skills education programs can also be effective in preventing school dropout and violence among young people. Finally, these programs can lay the foundation for skills demanded in today’s job market” (Moya, 2002:1). Furthermore, according to the review of CSPV, “in addition to helping youth resist drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, LST [Life Skills Training] effectively helps to reduce violence and other high-risk behaviors.”¹

LSE has been implemented in many countries including, Armenia, Zimbabwe, Thailand, Mexico, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, UK, USA. In most of the cases, LSE targets children and adolescents in primary and secondary schools. WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF jointly argues that “life skills education needs to be developed as part of a whole school initiative designed to support the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents” (WHO, 1999:5). “Although programmes can begin on a small scale and for a targeted age group, according

¹ http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/lst_grant/forms/Application/LSTEducationalOutcomes.pdf (accesses on 03.07.2014).

to WHO, “as a longer-term goal life skills education should be developed so that it continues throughout the school years –from school entry until school leaving age” (WHO, 1999:6). Thus, introducing and integrating LSE in schools is an “optimum strategy” to follow (WHO, 1997:6). However, implementation of LSE should not be limited with schools only. It can be used in non-formal education as well as in formal education too (UNESCO, 2001: 31). When used in non-formal education, the target of LSE would include a wider range of groups such as drop-outs, housewives, prisoners, overall adults, etc.

Research Questions and Methods

The review of the literature above shows that LSE has emerged as an educational approach to deal with the current problems and needs primarily of children and adolescents but also of young and adult people facing various challenges in their everyday life. The logic of LSE appears to be quite simple: with LSE, it is possible to develop/increase psychosocial competence of people which means a higher mental health and well-being. People with higher mental health and well-being can better know themselves (strengths and weaknesses), make better choices, build better relationships, find new and creative ways to satisfy their needs, live in peace due to better communication skills (also means larger social capital) and manage their lives in a better way.

The strength of this logic is subject to discussion. However, this requires another work and thus is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, utilizing the data coming from a European Commission (EC) funded project, this paper aims to focus on what reactions LSE generates when applied to young people in vocational training at the tertiary level. Considering the core characteristics and claims of LSE, more specifically, attention will be paid on:

- 1) How the students perceive the use of LSE in their classroom,
- 2) What learning results and competences (on team-work, self-awareness, lifedreams, social interactions) are generated by the use of LSE,
- 3) What individual and environmental challenges are faced,
- 4) What suggestions can be recommended to overcome the challenges.

Focusing on the use of LSE for students in vocational training at the tertiary level is specifically important both sites of Turkey and the world partly because this is an arena LSE is rarely used and also because most of the LSE research investigates the impacts of LSE on children and adolescents mainly at primary and secondary levels.

In order to explore the above-mentioned 4 questions, a qualitative research was conducted in 2013 in Balıkesir University, Turkey. *Qualitative research* “provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance,

of the human experience” (Marvasti, 2004:7). In other words, qualitative research supplies a way of exploring complex and many-sided issues in a way that allows respondents to express in their own words about their own experiences and perceptions. These expressions of views may not perfectly reflect the pure reality; instead they may be based on incomplete or mistaken information. These views are nonetheless a mirror of the participants’ own perceptions. Both because of the quality of data and because of the small numbers of participants involved mean that while the responses may be indicative of broader opinion in the case of Balıkesir University, they are not formally representative and care should be taken when generalizing the findings contained in this paper to a wider population.

As Marvasti (2004) outlines, there are several ways of data collection within the tradition of qualitative research. Interviewing is one of the most commonly used data collection technique utilized by social scientists. In this research, a semi-structured interview form was used to collect data. This interview form was based on the following 5 open-ended core questions:

- How was the LSE training experience for you?
- What did you learn during the training sessions?
- How can you use them in your daily life?
- What was challenging for you during the training sessions?
- Any other comments/ suggestions?

Those questions were asked to the young people (students) after the implementation of three different LSE workshops in different dates. All the answers were recorded, transcribed and archived for further analysis in later times.

The interviews were conducted on 100 students (N=100) studying in various departments of 5 different schools of vocational training run by Balıkesir University, Turkey. The names and locations of those schools are listed below:

- Balıkesir Vocational School, Balıkesir (BMYO)
- Bandırma Vocational School, Bandırma (Ban.MYO)
- Susurluk Vocational School, Susurluk (SMYO)
- İvrindi Vocational School for Health, İvrindi (İMYO)
- Altınoluk Vocational School, Altınoluk (AMYO)

Students were selected for interviews among those who participated in the training activities of those trainers who got the necessary knowledge and skills for *Lifedreams4all training program*, which was part of an EC-funded project based on LSE approach. Because the research is based on the implementation of this project, it is necessary to give some details about it before presenting the findings.

Project Overview

The Project, entitled 'LifeDreams4All- Raising Achievement & Participation through Inclusive Holistic Placement Programmes for Europe' (abbreviation: *LifeDreams4All* Project), was conducted from 2011 to 2013. It was a response to a call for proposals from the European Union's (EU) Education and Culture Department in specific relation to their Lifelong Learning Programme, and evolved from previous LifeDreams initiatives developed by the Embrace Cooperation Ltd of the UK. A key part of the EU's commitment to building skills, improving educational standards and creating opportunities throughout the member countries, is the Leonardo da Vinci Programme, which provides funds to innovative and practical projects in the field of vocational education and training (VET). In keeping with the fundamental objectives of the European Union, to foster cross-country and cross-cultural cooperation, the Leonardo da Vinci Programme places a particular emphasis on projects that incorporate the transfer of practices, skills and knowledge and promote mobilization initiatives from country to country.

The LifeDreams4All project focused on improving the participation of young people in vocational education training (VET) via a mobility initiative across the UK, Germany and Turkey, and uses a holistic framework, developed through many years of experience, to furnish participants with the self awareness soft skills and the practical hard skills, to prepare them for employment or successful further training. Crucially, the project built into its framework, particular provisions for vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, often affected by issues relating to financial hardships or ethnic discrimination, with the intention of reintegrating them as valuable contributors to mainstream society. These targeted participants included those from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people, refugees, job seekers, those with learning difficulties and drug addicts and ex-offenders who are in rehabilitation. In keeping with the core philosophy of inclusivity, the project comprised of both disadvantaged and mainstream young people.

Another aspect of the LifeDreams4All project was reflected in the Train-The-Trainers (TTT) programme. Many of the team members and trainers who would be delivering the LifeDreams material had previously engaged with the programme as individual participants. As part of the 9 month TTT programme, all of the trainers and facilitators, regardless of previous experience, were required to complete workshops relating to their own personal and professional goals. Intensive seminars, individual assignments, presentations, and monthly assessments by Senior Trainers, formed the backbone of the TTT programme and prepared the trainers for their role in hosting the young people participating in various levels of vocational placement schemes.

The TTT programme also prepared staff in the practical aspects of dealing with cultural differences and behavioral issues via the issuance of advice and guidelines, but deliberately avoided providing pre-written lesson plans. The absence of lesson plans would engender an interactive and organic teaching environment, requiring the educators to engage fully with the material and deliver it in a less didactic and static way, tailored to the needs of the participants. Furthermore, this approach to the delivery of the material enabled the facilitators to devise tailor-made, person-centered and need-focused solutions, in response to the dynamics of the group they were training. This teaching method was not only effective in communicating the material to the participants, but also enabled the trainers to benefit from engaging with the personal development initiatives.

The implementation of the LifeDreams4All project incorporated a fixed formula consisting of three distinct project modules to be delivered in workshops that had been tailor-made for the recipient groups. These modules each spoke to the holistic core of the programme, developing both soft and hard skills simultaneously:

1. Potential to Achieve
2. Barriers to Overcome
3. Pathways to Success

In each of these, the focus was on the individual participant to identify the relevant factors in their lives, rather reaching conclusions through passive induction. In the first module, participants were asked to identify their own strengths and use this positivity to build self-confidence. This was particularly effective with individuals who have undergone some form of trauma that has depleted their sense of self-worth. Once this had been done, the second module prompted the participants to contemplate the factors that are preventing them from achieving their potential, such as learning difficulties, health issues, peer pressure, family circumstances, discrimination and fears and anxieties. Finally, solutions for success were offered in the last module, which provided practical guidance and hard skills for understanding the training and career options available to achieve individual goals.

Incorporating the mobility aspect of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme's original proposal, the module delivery workshops were spread over three phases, covering both the country of residence of the individuals, and the country of VET placement. The delivery process followed a Preparation Phase to international VET placement within the country of residence, the Actual Placement Phase in vocational training, and a final Placement Bridge Phase. Phase 1 provided the appropriate linguistic and communication skills for the participants to thrive in their chosen placements as well as giving them the

tools to engage in cultural activities and pursue other professional or personal interests within their country of placement.

The exact schedule for each placement varied depending on the specific industry, however the outcomes for participants were consistent: improved vocation and professional qualifications, enhanced access to labour markets and greater confidence in their own ability to pursue individual goals- *life dreams*. The Placement Bridge Phase, which either took place in the country of placement or the country of residence, incorporated continuous support, ensuring that participants progressed either into further education or into the labour market.

Whilst the project thrived on the bespoke nature of each course, and promoted the organic delivery of teaching material, the detailed framework and fixed modular formula allowed for consistency across the three participating countries, UK, Germany and Turkey. This consistent framework not only encompassed the programme requirement to include a Transfer of Innovation, as the innovative framework devised and developed in the UK was transferred to the other European countries, but the stable nature of this framework was of particular reassurance to the participating countries.

The Findings

In line with the the core characteristics and claims of LSE, the findings will be described in 5 sub-titles that are detailed d below.

General Perceptions, Feelings, Thoughts on the (New) Training Approach and Workshops

The findings show that all students are very happy with the application of experiential training techniques that their teachers used during the three workshops. Those techniques are completely new for them because they and their teachers were accustomed to traditional teaching techniques which were “not funny, instead too boring”. Students find the new educational approach “very useful and fruitful”, “much efficient and funny”, “fun as much as informative”, “leading to more indelible learning results”. For example, one student says:

I have been hearing about triage but I understood it only after my teacher used those new experiential teaching techniques” (Alime, 17, nursing student, İMYO).

It seems that some students held some doubts on the workshops but later they changed their views. This appears to be due to insufficient instructions regarding the workshops.

At first I thought those activities are meaningless, things to kill time. However, later on, seeing the results, I acknowledged their need and usefulness (Serkan, 22, BMYO).

At the beginning we didn't understand exactly what our teachers wanted to do. But later we saw how much fun and useful it was (Hilal, 20, SMYO).

Most of students agree on the point that this new approach is able to keep attention of the students alive for the whole duration of classes whereas this was not possible before. This is because, they explain, the new approach is based on active learning and participation. This is a sharp contrast to the traditional teaching approach that was based mainly on theoretical lecturing.

We are not passive listeners any more. We enjoy our classes now because we are encouraged to be active in the classroom. (Şerife, 18, nursing student, İMYO).

Before, we used to learn and then forget. But now we don't forget because we are now active learners. (Eşma, 18, nursing student, İMYO).

Another important finding is that the workshops seriously helped students to discover themselves: their strengths and weak points as a young person. This is acknowledged by almost all students. As an example, one says:

I realized that I didn't know myself before. But now it is different. I know what my strengths and weaknesses are. I am working on developing myself (Rasim, 19, BMYO).

I am happy that I learnt how to work on my weaknesses (Yaşar, 19, BMYO).

It appears that the workshops contributed to the understanding of the students not only about themselves but also about others, especially disabled ones. All the students commonly stressed that they did not pay much attention on how other people feel or how difficult their lives might be. But those workshops (especially playing the role of a blind person) made them aware of and sensitive about the difficulties of other people.

For example, through the role play of a blind person, I realized that it is us who look at life blindly (Eda, 19, BMYO).

Those workshops made me looking at the lives of other people much differently (Alkan, 19, BMYO).

Those workshops provided me the skills of empathy. Through empathy, I am better able to understand others and it is easier for me to

change my negative behaviors and thought about them (Sema, 18, İMYO).

The workshops helped the students to understand also that positions/statuses in life can be changed by factors out of our control. A young participant expresses this as the following:

Indeed, I came to think and feel that in fact all of us are candidates of becoming disabled some day (Orçun, 18, BMYO).

Another participant makes a point about respecting to the views of others:

I now better understand how important it is to respect and appreciate to the views of others as much as my own (M. Akif, 18, BMYO).

I understood that each and every difference is a richness (Elif, 19, Ban. MYO)

Furthermore, the findings indicates that the students found the workshops innovative in the sense that they led to the practice and understanding of team-work among the students. This is particularly important because Turkish students are not much accustomed to team-work.

Sharing our thoughts and works in groups was interesting for me. At the beginning I was shy but later I felt more comfortable. I now think that it is easier to find solutions when working in teams (Özkan, 21, BMYO).

Additionally, the students are quite satisfied with the fact that they practiced some exercises at the beginning and/or middle of their workshops. This made them “more interested in the class”, “more fresh and efficient”. Here is how the students state this opinion:

Before we started to our workshops we always did some exercises. Then we started the class quite fresh. Our performance increased hundred percent (Elif, 21, AMYO).

Exercises helped me to empty my mind and start the workshops with a fresh mind (Mehmet, 21, AMYO).

Some trainers started their workshops with some relaxing music instead of exercises. Like exercises, this seems to generate positive results as well.

Listening to music before the workshops increased my motivation very high (Mert, 24, SMYO).

I felt myself very calm and comfortable. It was very impressive (Hanife, 19, SMYOK).

It was fun, comforting and positive-energy providing for me (Merve, 19, SMYO).

It (starting to the workshops with music) helped us to socialize with each other. Personally, it helped me to lower my fears and concerns that I had about college education (Yağmur, 18, SMYO).

All the above-mentioned points are confirmed almost by all students not only for the first workshops but also for the second and third ones. However, reactions of the students regarding to the second workshops seem to be more focused on their lifedreams. Several impacts can be identified in this regard.

First, the workshops on lifedreams seriously helped the students to clarify what their lifedreams are. Some students point at this in the following ways:

I had never written my lifedreams on a paper and never thought about them seriously. By putting them on a paper I realized how many dreams I have (Elif, 19, BMYO).

My lifedreams were not in my agenda of daily life until now. By participating into those workshops I got a chance to think and determine my lifedreams and I begun to look at them as my road maps (Serpil, 20, SMYO).

I realized that it is up to us to develop some lifedreams and to go after them in real life (Ufuk, 26, BMYO).

Second, whereas they used to hold no real belief at them, the students begun to take their lifedreams more seriously. The students came to think that the workshops made them believe in their dreams and go after them. Statements like the followings are examples of this view.

Up until now I used to think that my lifedreams would never come true. But now, after those workshops, I think why not (Şaziye, 20, BMYO).

I used to think about my dreams as if they were impossible wishes to realize. However, my teacher made me think more positively about my dreams. Now I have more self-confidence about my dreams (Yadigar, 24, AMYO).

I used to think really impossible things. My teacher helped me to develop some reasonable and valuable goals in my life in front of me (M. Akif, 19, BMYO).

Third, the findings show that the students already started to work on the realization of their lifedreams. Statements like the followings are very common among all the students:

I've already taken some actions to realize my dreams (Mesut, 20, BMYO).

After those workshops, I've taken new decisions for my life (Serhat, 20, BMYO).

I am now focused on my future to realize my dreams. These workshops increased my motivation to go after my dreams (Yunus, 20, AMYO).

I realized that dreams are not just dreams. Dreams are who we are. Dreams are for coming true. I can do it (Cihan, 20, Ban. MYO).

Forth, the findings show that the students became aware of what they need to do in order to realize their lifedreams. The main points are expressed by some students as the followings:

Now I know that I have to be determined and make some sacrifices if I really want my dreams come true (Safiye, 19, AMYO).

Going after my lifedreams will not only make me happier but also more successful in my profession and private life. This requires serious effort and discipline (Sercan, 19, BMYO).

In order to realize my dreams, I am now aware of the fact that I have to keep not only my body but also my soul healthy (Gözde, 19, SMYO).

I learnt that I should keep a positive thinking mind even when I face serious challenges. I should not let external factors dominate me and my dreams (Emine, 20, SMYO).

Another important aspect of the findings is that the students came to think that their teachers do care about them and about their lifedreams. Close attention of the teachers in this regard touched on the hearts of the students. As one student says:

I realized that our teachers care about us. Before those workshops, I was not aware of this. Knowing that they care about us makes me feel happy (Elif, 21, AMYO).

In sum, the above-mentioned findings indicate that the students hold very positive feelings and thoughts about the new training approach and about the workshops carried by the trainers. This is due to several factors that are missing in the traditional training methods and attitudes. The new approach and workshops developed by the *lifedreams4all project*;

- are based on experiential learning techniques encouraging students to be active learners.
- allow students to express themselves freely,
- strengthen socialization, solidarity and sharing among students,

- create and reinforce team spirit and team-work skills,
- help students to discover and analyze their personal strengths and weaknesses,
- make students aware of and go after their lifedreams,

Learning Results and Competences of the Workshops

The findings show that the workshops produced many fruitful results and competences for the students. Based on students' own statements, they can be categorized in the following groups:

a) Learning results and competences about team-work: The findings show that the students developed awareness about and benefits of team-work. Working in teams encouraged them to express themselves better than before. Here are some examples of views on this:

I developed my skills of team-work (Gizem, 18, IMYO).

I learnt working in groups, sharing my thoughts with others and learning by discussion (Fatma, 18, IMYO).

I learnt sharing information in a proper way and expressing myself in groups (Şerife, 18, IMYO).

I developed my skills to be courageous and self-confident in society. I didn't have those before (Ayşe, 18, IMYO).

The workshops increased my motivation of participation (Büşra, 18, IMYO).

I got a chance to compare individual work and team work. I think team work is much more efficient and productive (M. Akif, 19, BMYO).

b) Learning results and competences about self-discovery and self-development skills: The findings show that the workshops helped the students to discover and analyze their strengths, weaknesses and emotions. All students make similar points. A few example would be the followings:

I discovered my strengths and weaknesses (Mesut, 20, BMYO).

I learnt looking at my inner world and analyzing my emotions (Nurdoğan, 20, BMYO).

I learnt why and how I should be patient (Serhat, 20, BMYO).

I learnt how to focus on something (Gözde, 20, AMYO).

The workshops helped me a lot to solve my adjustment disorder problems (Özkan, 21, BMYO).

The workshop taught me to have self-confidence, to be aware of my actions and to develop a social network (Yağmur, 18, SMYO).

The workshop taught me how to listen to myself and the nature, how to calm down, how to feel at peace and how to use my breathing (Neslihan, 20, Ban. MYO).

I learnt how I can be a positive person just by spending 5 minutes for it (Merve, 19, Ban. MYO).

I realized that everything boring like classes can be transferred to something fun (Fuldem, 20, SMYO).

I begun to look at life warmly, seriously, and positively (Mustafa, 23, AMYO).

c) Learning results and competences about lifedreams: The findings show that the workshops did help the students in thinking about, in planning of, in prioritizing of and in fighting for their lifedreams. The following citations illustrate this finding well:

I had no single reason to live, not even one! But now after the workshops I have millions of reasons! (Serhat, 20, BMYO).

I came to think that nothing in life is impossible to achieve (Serpil, 20, SMYO).

I realized that I can think limitless about my dreams (Onur, 19, BMYO).

I learnt that I have to fight for my dreams to come true (Kürşat, 20, BMYO).

The workshop made me aware of the fact that our happiness is inside our own hands (Ebru, 20, Ban. MYO).

I now know that realizing my dreams is up to me and my efforts (Gözde, 20, AMYO).

In following my lifedreams, I learnt that I never should give up no matter how difficult surrounding conditions might be (Şaziye, 20, BMYO).

I learnt first looking at life positively and then going after my dreams and never giving up (Şaziye, 20, BMYO).

I don't want to have "I wish I could..." anymore, instead I want "I will .." (Yadigar, 24, AMYO).

d) Learning results and competences about social interactions: The findings indicate that the workshops contributed to the students' understandings of disabled people and to their skills of empathy and socialization. The following quotes illustrate this:

I learnt empathizing with disabled people. After the exercise of playing the role of a blind person, I learnt how difficult life is for them (Elif, 19, BMYO).

I learnt looking at myself and others from different viewpoints and act differently (Emine, 20, SMYO).

The workshop changed my way of looking at disabled people (Büşra, 20, BMYO).

The workshop about disability made me aware of how valuable the things I have are (Fahriye, 20, BMYO).

Areas of Use for Learning Results and Competences

The findings show that the students tend to think that their learning results and competences can be used in and applied into many areas of life. Many students think that they can be used in and applied into almost all areas of life.

Some students think what they learnt can be used in work-life while others add family-life and social network as well. Still other students think they can be used in the processes of studying and preparation for exams.

Referring to different workshop activities, many students believe that what they learnt can be used in managing their emotions, in dealing with stress and in taking important decisions.

Most important of all, most of the students share the belief that what they learnt can be and should be used in different stages of their journey to their lifedreams.

When addressing to the ways of using such competences, the students tend to stress the importance of being patient, determined, calm, being tied to lifedreams, organizing life activities with realistic well planning. They also emphasize taking necessary actions for the realization of lifedreams and working devotedly.

Challenges Faced

The findings show that many of the students saw no problem in following the workshops and in implementing what they have learnt. However, there are also a number of issues raised by several students. The findings point at two different kinds of challenges that the students faced during workshop activities.

Individual Challenges

Because some students are not much used to sharing their feelings and thoughts with other people, they had difficulties in doing so at least at the beginning of the workshops. Shyness was one of the main problems.

I was shy to express my feelings and opinions in front of people. It was just difficult for me (Ayşe, 18, IMYO).

Actually there was no difficulty. It is just that I am not accustomed to such environments and activities (Merve, 18, Ban. MYO).

The workshops required participating in some activities involvement role playing. Because I am shy person, I was not feeling so comfortable in those activities (Büşra, 18, IMYO).

Some students address to the challenge of implementing their new knowledge and ideas in daily life. Those challenges seem to be based on difficulties of re-orienting oneself according to one's lifedreams. The following citation illustrates this:

It was not easy for me to withdraw myself from my habits and daily routines (Mesut, 20, BMYO).

On the other hand, it appears that a few students felt uncomfortable during the workshops due to their lack of dreams:

I didn't feel comfortable when others were sharing their lifedreams. That is because I realized that I had no clear dream at all. I was like a leaf in the wind (Cansu, 20, AMYO).

Another type of individual challenges concerns following the rules of the workshops set forward. For example:

I was challenged by the rule to express my thoughts about my friends without breaking their hearts (Betül, 18, SMYO).

Playing the role of a blind person was very nervous-breaking. It made me really aggressive (Kürşat, 20, BÖYO).

It was not pleasant to be dependent on somebody (Naciye, 18, BMYO).

It was really hard for me to exchange my private feelings and always to make interpretations (Ayşe, 18, IMYO).

In short, individual challenges do exist due to different structures of personality and personal experiences. Multicultural backgrounds also play an important role in this situation. It is normal to face with these challenges. When recognized, the trainers may/should take special actions to overcome the difficulties.

Environmental Challenges

The findings show that there are quite a number of environmental challenges faced by the students. In a sense, environmental challenges are more important because;

- They are expressed and emphasized by almost all of the students,
- They negatively affected almost all of the students.

Therefore, the environmental challenges deserve to be given serious thoughts on and require immediate and efficient solutions.

Those environmental challenges can be summarized at the following points:

- ✓ All students agree that the number of students was too crowded to implement the workshops. Connected with this problem, there were some additional ones:
 - a. There was noise pollution in the workshop environment.
 - b. It was hard to follow the workshops because of the crowded numbers and of noise.
 - c. Some students were trying to exploit the situation and they were not really participating.
- ✓ The students commonly point at the fact that the physical structure of the classrooms was not suitable for the workshops.
 - a. Especially student-desks were making the activities hard to realize.
 - b. There was no enough space to do certain activities.
 - c. It was difficult for the trainers to control the whole environment.
- ✓ Sometimes the trainers failed to give appropriate instructions for the workshops. The following citations are evidences of this point:

At the beginning we didn't understand exactly what our teachers wanted to do. But later we saw how much fun and useful it was (Hilal, 20, SMYO).

At first I thought those activities are meaningless, things to kill time. However, later on, seeing the results, I acknowledged their need and usefulness (Serkan, 22, BMYO).
- ✓ Finally the students seem to complain about the fact that duration of workshops was much longer than usual. As can be seen from the following citation, this made a few students get bored and broke their concentration.

I don't know why but at some point I got bored (Cihan, 20, Ban. MYO).

It can be inferred from the above-mentioned findings that especially environmental challenges reduces the capacity of the workshops to produce positive impacts of the project on the students. In the efforts of continuing similar workshops or of organizing them with different groups of young people, the trainers must pay special attention on the environmental conditions. Interestingly, the students are aware not only of the challenges but also of possible solutions for them. The next subtitle will illustrate the suggestions of solutions coming from the students themselves.

Suggestions of Solutions for Environmental Challenges

Because it is the students who had to face the environmental challenges, they seem to be capable of suggesting some solutions as well. It is also very productive for the researcher and teachers. These feedbacks are important for the improvement of the programme. Those suggestions are listed below with the words of the students:

- 1) The scope of the workshops should be extended:
Such workshop activities should take place more often (Esra, 18, IMYO).
All the trainers should have their teachings based on such workshops (Arzu, 18, IMYO).
The whole school should follow this training approach (Gözde, 19, SMYO).
- 2) The physical design of the workshop rooms should be changed:
There should be no desks in the workshop rooms. There should be easy-to carry-chairs instead of immobile chairs (A. Levent, 22, AMYO).
The order of sitting in the workshop rooms should be changed appropriately (Ayşe, 20, SMYO).
- 3) The number of participating students should be reduced to a lower level:
Each workshop should have a smaller number of students. I suggest dividing the whole class into two groups and have the workshops separately for each group (Emine, 20, SMYO).
Those students who are not really interested in the workshops should be excluded from workshop activities (Şahinaz, 23, SMYO).
- 4) The trainers should pay more attention on making sure that sufficient instructions are given to the students before starting their workshop activities.
I believe that students should be better informed about the aims and processes of the activities (Selçuk, 26, SMYO).

Most of those suggestions sound reasonable to take into consideration. Maybe one exception would be the one that suggests excluding those students who appear to be not interested in the workshops. Obviously this is not appropriate because such students need to be interviewed by their trainers to find out possible reasons and to be encouraged for more serious participation.

On the other hand, it can be inferred from the findings that the trainers and project managers should ask for further support from the school administrator to make the necessary adjustments regarding the physical design of the workshop places.

Conclusions

Life Skills Education (LSE) is an educational approach to overcome a major problem faced primarily by the children and adolescents of up to date modern societies. That problem is said to be the lack of life skills necessary to deal with daily life experiences including interpersonal relationships, life goals, career development and most important of, keeping a healthy life both physically and mentally. LifeDreams4All project was a EC-funded project that was based on the core characteristics of LSE approach while it targeted young people in vocational training. The findings of the research, which this paper relied upon, showed that *LifeDreams4All project* did indeed reflect, in line with the findings of other researches, several *positive impacts* on participants even when the participants are students of vocational training at the tertiary level. Most important of those positive changes are found to be increased motivation for studying, increase in self awareness, improving self-confidence, setting up life goals, developing empathy, respect and tolerance to differences, acquiring team-work skills, self-discipline, more respect for and appreciation of the teachers, skills of dealing with emotions,

The findings also reflect some challenges in the implementation of LifeDreams4All project. Those challenges can be classified in two main categories:

- a) *Environmental challenges* that include overcrowded students of classrooms, inappropriate physical structure of the classrooms, failure of the trainers to give proper instructions for the workshops, long duration of workshops. Such environmental challenges reduced the capacity of the workshops to produce positive impacts of the project on the students. To overcome such challenges, involvement and support of school directors seem to be appropriate suggestions.
- b) *Individual challenges* that include difficulties of sharing one's feelings and thoughts with others, difficulties of implementing new knowledge and ideas in daily life, lack of dreams (life goals), inability of adaptation to the rules of the workshops. In a sense, such challenges are quite normal to appear. In fact, LSE is expected to be an effective instrument to overcome such individual difficulties. When recognized, the trainers may/should take special actions to overcome such difficulties.

In short, the core finding of this research appears to be the insight that LSE (in this case, the implementation of LifeDreams4All project) tends to generate similar results, positive impacts and challenges to the findings of previous researches even when it is applied to young people in vocational training at the tertiary level.

What is said so far mainly concerns educational and psychosocial aspects of LSE. However, an important contribution of this paper to the relevant literature is the recognition of the need to question LSE from a sociological aspect too. To the best knowledge of the author, this aspect is largely neglected by the LSE literature. There are several questions that would be better investigated mainly from a sociological perspective. One of those questions concerns the identities of the LSE's target groups. Why is it that LSE almost always targets "the other", be it *the other outside the West* (children, adolescents, housewives, dropouts, etc. of African, Asian, Eastern European, Latin American countries) or *the other inside the West* (immigrant, minority, poor, underclass, etc. of West European and North American countries)?

A second question concerns the ultimate goal/function of LSE. Can LSE be evaluated as a powerful tool to integrate *the other* into the Western social and value systems? As shown before, LSE aims to change feelings, values and behaviors of target groups. If there are no universally accepted feelings, values and behaviors, then whose feelings, values and behaviors are meant to be replaced and really why?

A third, but not last, question concerns the limit of actual impacts of LSE. Can LSE be a life-jacket for target groups without changing actual economic conditions surrounding them at local, national and global levels?

All such questions doubtlessly deserve further discussions to enable everyone to see the bigger picture. Developing *a sociology of LSE experiences* (maybe within the *sociology of education*) would obviously enrich the LSE literature while it may also change its direction of inquiry.

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