

Teacher development of counseling on life skills for vocational college students in Guangxi Province, People's Republic of China

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate and compare the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China classified by genders and parenting styles, and to study the trends in life skills counseling for vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China. The samples were 800 vocational college students, selected by using quota sampling technique with 400 males and 400 females of first and second years from four vocational colleges in Guangxi Province, China. The research instrument was a three-part questionnaire asking the 5 aspects of life skills including cognitive ability, self-awareness, effective communication - interpersonal relationships, adjusting emotions - dealing with stress, and Empathy ability with the entire reliability of 0.82. The obtained data were analyzed by frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA. The findings were as follows:

1. The overall life skills of vocational students in Guangxi Province were at a moderate level. The highest mean score was cognitive ability, followed by empathy ability, adjusting emotions-dealing with stress, effective communication-interpersonal relationships, and self-awareness.

2. There were overall statistically significant differences at .00 level of the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China classified by genders and parenting styles.

3. The trends in life skills counseling for vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China indicate that students hope that teachers genuinely care about their psychological well-being, engage in more heart-to-heart conversations, listen patiently, understand their real situations, respect individual differences, and treat all students equally. In terms of methods for life skills counseling, they suggest more diverse and flexible approaches beyond traditional lectures and recommended readings. Practical methods such as case group discussions, scenario simulations, role-playing, and more engaging and attractive activities are recommended. Opportunities for hands-on practice and detailed, individual guidance from teachers are highly desired.

Keywords: Life skills; Counseling; Vocational college students; Guangxi province

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Introduction

With the profound integration of global information technology and production technology, China is transitioning from a manufacturing powerhouse to a leader in intelligent manufacturing. This shift raises the bar for the quality of technical and skilled personnel in the manufacturing frontline. The "Core Competencies for Chinese Student Development" stipulates the essential character traits and key abilities students must possess to adapt to lifelong development and societal needs (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2016). The "National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan" emphasizes the need for vocational education to "foster well-rounded individuals" (China State Council, 2019). However, despite China's significant economic and social advancements over the past decades, the mental health of its population, particularly among adolescents, has been on a sharp decline. Recent years have seen a marked increase in adolescents with multiple mental health issues (Cheng, Tomson, Keller & Söderqvist, 2018; Feng et al., 2020; Su & Liu, 2020; Wang & Tapia, 2019; Shen et al., 2020; Wu, Wang, et al., 2021). An increasing number of scholars are recognizing the vital role of life skills in the growth of adolescents.

Life skills refer to the psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to adopt adaptive and positive behaviors, effectively managing the various demands and challenges of daily life (WHO: 1996). The level of life skills is influenced by individual factors such as educational resources, attention and communication, health status, mental health levels, academic pressure, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, parental education levels, and parental involvement. It is also significantly correlated with the life skills counseling received (Nguyen, 2014: 117–131).

The traditional exam-oriented education model has led students to overly focus on academic achievements while neglecting the cultivation of life skills. In such an educational environment, students often devote a significant amount of time and energy to exams and academic performance, relatively neglecting the learning of life skills such as social interaction, emotional management, and time management. This unbalanced developmental model results in students lacking necessary coping strategies and skills when facing real-life challenges, significantly affecting their holistic development and future societal adaptation. Firstly, the deficiency in social abilities and interpersonal skills is a notable issue. With the proliferation of the internet and mobile devices, an increasing number of students prefer socializing in virtual spaces, yet they often appear to lack essential communication and social skills in real life. This not only affects their interpersonal relationships but may also pose challenges in their future professional careers. Secondly, the lack of self-management skills is another problem. The family environment and social culture also influence the development of students' life skills to some extent. In many families, parents tend to overprotect and interfere in their children's lives, a form of "helicopter parenting" that may limit children's opportunities for independent problem-solving and self-management. Additionally, the prevalent societal notion of "valuing intelligence over character" has led to inadequate attention and cultivation of students' moral judgment and sense of responsibility. Furthermore, the lack of creative and critical thinking is also concerning. The traditional education system often focuses on the instillation of knowledge and standardized testing, with less encouragement for students' innovative thinking, personalized expression, and critical thinking about problems. This educational approach restricts the development of students' creativity and critical thinking. Moreover, issues with emotional and stress management are common among students. Faced with academic pressure,

uncertain future career prospects, and personal life challenges, many students experience anxiety and stress, often without adequate psychological health education and support from schools and society.

Current vocational education focuses on the cultivation of professional skills but lacks guidance and counseling in life skills, resulting in students mastering certain vocational techniques but often lacking the ability to effectively apply these skills to solve real-world problems. Firstly, vocational education students commonly face challenges in establishing self-awareness and self-esteem. Due to traditional perceptions of vocational education's lower social status and recognition, coupled with vocational schools' excessive focus on skill training, these students often feel marginalized by society and the education system. This feeling often leads to a lack of self-worth and self-efficacy, subsequently affecting their psychological health, social abilities, personal growth, and career adaptability. Secondly, vocational education students generally lack necessary training in social skills and interpersonal interactions. As vocational education often emphasizes skill training while neglecting the cultivation of overall qualities, students may excel in technical skills but appear clumsy or unconfident in managing interpersonal relationships and social situations. This limitation may become a significant obstacle when they enter the workforce. Furthermore, emotional management and stress coping are major issues for vocational education students. Students face multiple pressures from academics, future employment prospects, and personal life, yet they often lack effective guidance in emotional management and stress relief. This not only affects their learning outcomes but may also have long-term negative impacts on their psychological health. Lastly, vocational education students often underperform in self-directed learning and time management. In the traditional vocational education system, students are accustomed to passively receiving knowledge and skills, lacking opportunities for active exploration and self-driven learning. This situation may lead to adaptability issues in their future work, especially when they need to independently plan and manage tasks. In response to these issues, schools, colleges or universities should place more emphasis on cultivating students' overall qualities, providing not only professional skill training but also enhancing students' self-esteem and confidence, and strengthening their teaching in social, emotional management, and self-directed learning skills. This is not only beneficial for their personal growth but also lays the foundation for their smooth adaptation and development in professional society in the context of economic globalization and rapid technological advancement.

As a border and ethnic minority region in China, Guangxi Province faces challenges due to lagging economic development and insufficient educational investment, resulting in a weak educational foundation and further limiting the development of vocational students' life skills. Poverty is a common issue among local vocational students, with family separation and lack of social support resources contributing to significant problems in their life skills development, summarized as follows: Lack of self-awareness and self-esteem: Stemming from societal stereotypes about vocational education in Guangxi Province (Hao, 2020). Due to historical and cultural factors, coupled with relatively lagging economic development, vocational education in Guangxi Province is often seen as a non-mainstream educational path, negatively impacting students' sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Students may feel uncertain about their abilities and future, lacking necessary confidence. Insufficient social skills: Vocational college students in Guangxi Province generally have weaker social skills and interpersonal communication abilities (Su, 2020). Despite being a multi-ethnic region with rich

cultural diversity, the cultivation of effective interpersonal interaction and communication skills is often overlooked in vocational education, posing barriers for students to integrate into broader social and professional environments. Emotional management and stress coping issues: Faced with challenges in academics, uncertain future employment, and personal life, vocational college students in Guangxi Province often appear helpless in emotional management and stress coping, lacking effective mechanisms. Lack of self-directed learning and time management, due to the passive learning model in vocational education, students often lack experience in active exploration and self-driven learning, limiting their ability to adapt to rapidly changing work environments (Yin, 2017).

Given the context and significance of the aforementioned issues, researchers are interested in conducting a survey to understand the current state of life skills among vocational school students in Guangxi, China. This effort aims to lay the groundwork for the further development of life skills counseling programs.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China
2. To compare the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province classified by genders and parenting styles.
2. To study the trends in life skills counseling for vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China.

Research Methodology

1. Population and Samples

The population included 680,000 vocational college students who study in vocational colleges in Guangxi Province, China in academic year 2023. This study employed a quota sampling method, with a sample consisting of 800 vocational college students. The researchers selected four representative vocational middle colleges in Guangxi Province, drawing 200 students from each college. In each college, 100 students were chosen from both first and second years, with an equal distribution of 50 males and 50 females from each year.

2. Research Instrument

The primary measurement tool used in this study was a survey questionnaire on life skills of vocational college students adopted from WHO (1996). The questionnaire is divided into three parts: Part 1: Basic information; Part 2: Measurement of life skills with 5-level rating scale of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China; and Part 3: Perception and demand of vocational college students in Guangxi Province regarding the current status of life skills counseling. The questionnaire was gradually developed as follows:

(1) Reviewing literature related to life skills of vocational college students, analyzing and synthesizing issues based on relevant concepts and theories.

(2) Drafting the questionnaire questions adopted from Huang Yayang (2017) measuring the life skills levels of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China. It utilizes the "In-School Adolescents' Life Skills Scale" consisting of 21 items under five aspects: Cognitive ability (5 items), Self-awareness (5 items), Effective communication -

interpersonal relationships (5 items), Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress (3 items), and Empathy ability (3 items).

(3) Submitting the draft questionnaire to the dissertation supervisors to check the correctness and appropriateness of the questionnaire

(4) Revising and refining the survey questionnaire according to the dissertation supervisors' comments

(5) Ensuring the quality of the questionnaire by considering the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) by five experts. The IOC values should range between 0.60 to 1.00. It indicated that the IOC value equaled 0.90. Also, the questionnaire was tried out with 30 vocational college students who are not the samples in order to find out the internal consistency reliability calculated by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. It showed that the entire reliability equaled 0.82, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values of the aspects of Cognitive ability, Self-awareness, Effective communication - interpersonal relationships, Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress, and Empathy ability were 0.74, 0.74, 0.71, 0.69, and 0.77, respectively, indicating good reliability for the overall scale.

3. Data Collection

(1) In this study, strict adherence to general ethical principles was maintained. Prior to the survey, the content and objectives were fully disclosed to the colleges, teachers, and respondents to obtain their consent form. In compliance with the principle of informed consent, confidentiality of all personal information provided by the participants was ensured, and responses were collected anonymously.

(2) The survey was distributed to students using "Wenjuanxing", China's largest online survey and test platform. Students accessed the questionnaire via their mobile phones and submitted their responses anonymously online. A total of 857 questionnaires were collected during the survey period. After quality control measures, which included eliminating incomplete and passively answered questionnaires, 811 valid responses were retained. Ultimately, based on the requirement of selecting 200 students from each of the four colleges, with an equal number from first and second years and equal gender distribution, 800 questionnaires were chosen for inclusion in the study.

4. Data Analysis

(1) The quantitative data were analyzed by using frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, independent samples t-test, and one-way ANOVA. The scores reflecting opinions related to life skills counseling of vocational college students were interpreted using the following criteria as follows: Average Range 4.51-5.00 for highest; 3.51-4.50 for high; 2.51-3.50 for moderate; 1.51-2.50 for low and 1.00-1.50 for lowest.

(2) The qualitative data from the open-ended questions regarding issues and suggestions mentioned in life skills counseling for vocational college students were analyzed by using content analysis technique.

Research Results

1. Current Status of Life Skills of Vocational College Students in Guangxi Province, China.

The current states of life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Mean and standard deviation of life skills of vocational college students.

Aspects of Life Skills	Opinion Level			
	\bar{X}	S.D.	Meaning	Ranking
1. Cognitive ability	3.66	0.69	High	1
2. Self-awareness	2.78	0.83	Moderate	5
3. Effective communication - interpersonal relationships	3.30	0.76	Moderate	4
4. Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress	3.46	0.80	Moderate	3
5. Empathy ability	3.64	0.79	High	2
Total	3.33	0.52	Moderate	

As shown in Table 1, it was found that the overall life skills of vocational students in Guangxi Province were at a moderate level ($\bar{X} = 3.33$, S.D. = 0.52). When considering each aspect, it was found that the aspects of "Cognitive ability and Empathy ability were at a high level while the aspects of Self-awareness, Effective communication - interpersonal relationships, and Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress were at moderate level. The highest mean score was Cognitive ability ($\bar{X} = 3.66$, S.D. = 0.69), followed by Empathy ability ($\bar{X} = 3.64$, S.D. = 0.79), Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress ($\bar{X} = 3.46$, S.D. = 0.79), Effective communication - interpersonal relationships ($\bar{X} = 3.30$, S.D. = 0.76), and Self-awareness ($\bar{X} = 2.78$, S.D. = 0.83), respectively

2. Comparison of Life Skills of Vocational College Students in Guangxi Province, China

The differences of life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China classified by genders and parenting styles are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2 Comparison of life skills of vocational college students classified by genders.

Aspects of Life Skills	Male(n=400)		Female(n=400)		t	p-value
	\bar{X}	S.D.	\bar{X}	S.D.		
1. Cognitive ability	3.77	0.71	3.54	0.65	4.84**	0.00
2. Self-awareness	2.95	0.83	2.62	0.79	5.74**	0.00
3. Communication - interpersonal relationships	3.34	0.77	3.25	0.74	1.76	0.08
4. Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress	3.44	0.83	3.49	0.76	0.86	0.39
5. Empathy ability	3.65	0.84	3.64	0.74	0.24	0.81
Total	3.41	0.52	3.26	0.50	4.18**	0.00

* statistically significant difference at .05 level

** statistically significant difference at .01level

From Table 2, it was found that there was overall statistically significant difference at .00 level of the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China classified by genders. When considering each aspect, it was found that there were statistically significant difference at .00 level in the aspects of Cognitive ability and Self-awareness while the rest aspects were not different.

Table 3 Comparison of life skills of vocational college students classified by parenting styles.

Life skills Aspects	Most of the time accompanied by parents (n=431)		Most of the time, only one parent is present (n=192)		Most of the time, without parental company (n=177)		F	p-value
	X	S.D.	X	S.D.	X	S.D.		
1. Cognitive ability	3.71	0.66	3.62	0.73	3.57	0.70	3.05*	0.05
2. Self-awareness	2.87	0.85	2.74	0.84	2.61	0.72	6.51*	0.00
3. Communication - interpersonal relationships	3.39	0.76	3.24	0.76	3.14	0.71	7.55**	0.00
4. Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress	3.52	0.77	3.41	0.84	3.38	0.78	2.59	0.08
5. Empathy ability	3.67	0.79	3.57	0.78	3.65	0.80	0.97	0.38
Total	3.40	0.51	3.28	0.52	3.22	0.49	8.73**	0.00

* statistically significant difference at .05 level

** statistically significant difference at .01 level

Table 3 reveals there was overall statistically significant difference at .00 level of the life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi province, China classified by parenting styles. When considering each aspect, it was found that there was statistically significant difference at .05 level in the aspect of Cognitive ability and at .00 level in the aspects of Self-awareness and Communication - interpersonal relationships while the rest aspects were not different.

3. Trends in Life Skills Counseling from Vocational College Students in Guangxi, China

Through open-ended questions in the third part of the questionnaire, the researchers collected students' suggestions regarding life skills guidance. After using content analysis technique, the results are as follows:

3.1 Students hope that teachers genuinely care about their psychological well-being, engage in more heart-to-heart conversations, listen patiently, understand their real situations, respect individual differences, and treat all students equally.

3.2 In terms of methods for life skills guidance, they suggest more diverse and flexible approaches beyond traditional lectures and recommended readings. Practical methods such as case group discussions, scenario simulations, role-playing, and more engaging and attractive activities are recommended. Opportunities for hands-on practice and detailed, individual guidance from teachers are highly desired.

Discussion

1. The overall state of life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China, was at a moderate level. Cognitive ability and empathy ability were at a high level, while self-awareness, effective communication-interpersonal relationships, and emotional regulation-stress were at a moderate level. Several factors may contribute to this, including Guangxi Province being an economically underdeveloped minority region in China with limited social and educational resources. Additionally, the vocational colleges' focus on vocational training over comprehensive qualities, stereotypes about vocational education, and students primarily coming from low-income or left-behind families may hinder development in these areas. According to Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (Yuan, 2017), low economic status can impact adolescents' self-identity and self-esteem. Social Support Theory emphasizes the crucial role of social support in emotional regulation and stress coping. The lack of parental accompaniment in left-behind families may lead to difficulties in interpersonal interactions and a tendency to avoid challenges.

2. There are significant differences in life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China, classified by genders and parenting styles

(1) Male students have higher self-awareness and cognitive ability than female students. This may result from a combination of biological differences, social-cultural influences, and cognitive development characteristics. Biologically, males and females differ in brain structure and chemistry, often leading to better spatial reasoning and abstract thinking in males. From a cognitive development perspective, differences in thinking abilities between boys and girls become more pronounced during the formal operational stage (ages 11 and up). Socially and culturally, traditional Chinese views of 'valuing males over females' may contribute to males receiving more attention and resources, encouraging them to participate in competitive and strategic activities, thereby enhancing their cognitive abilities and self-awareness. Parental behavior also plays a significant role in reinforcing these gender roles and identities (Yuan, 2017).

(2) Children who are mostly without parental accompaniment have significantly lower self-awareness and effective communication-interpersonal skills than those accompanied by parents. Attachment Theory by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Yuan, 2017) suggests that parental accompaniment and response help establish a secure attachment, providing a safe foundation for children to explore the world and affecting their future interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation abilities. Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory (Yuan, 2017) emphasizes the importance of establishing basic trust and independence in children aged 0-14, with parental accompaniment being crucial for building trust and fostering autonomy. Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (Yuan, 2017) further explains how children growing up with their parents often learn social skills through observation and imitation. Those lacking parental company may experience loneliness, increased vulnerability to bullying, and doubts about their self-worth, leading to feelings of inferiority, sensitivity, and withdrawal in interpersonal interactions.

(3) Trends in life skills counseling of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China found that vocational college students in Guangxi Province recognize their deficiency in life skills and urgently seek development and enhancement in this area. They hope for more care and specific guidance from teachers, such as combining practical activities with instructional support.

In conclusion, this study on the trends of life skills of vocational college students in Guangxi Province, China, provides a theoretical basis for developing life skills counseling programs in order to help them live in their communities happily.

Suggestions

General suggestions

(1) The state should increase the living allowances for poor students in backward areas to ensure that every student has access to the necessary learning resources and basic living security. The local government should vigorously develop the local economy, create more employment opportunities and jobs, and reduce the phenomenon of left-behind families caused by labor export, and convene experienced educators to form volunteers to provide family education and guidance services for the families of vulnerable groups.

(2) According to the survey results of life skills of secondary vocational students in Guangxi, there are three aspects of intermediate skills in life: Self-awareness, Effective communication - interpersonal relationships, and Adjusting emotions - dealing with stress. Schools should design targeted life skills courses to improve students' life skills in these three aspects, and at the same time, strengthen the development of training courses for teachers, so as to improve teachers' guidance ability in these life skills.

2. Further studies suggestions

(1) In view of the deficiencies of life skills of secondary vocational students in Guangxi in self-cognition ability, effective communication and interpersonal communication skills, emotional and stress management ability, further research should focus on what course content is designed and what guidance methods can effectively improve students' life skills in these aspects.

(2) Further research should also focus on considering how to develop the curriculum, improve the teachers' ability to guide their life skills in these three aspects, and how to evaluate the training effect.

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