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# Bridging the Gap: School-Based Interventions for Adolescent Life Skill Development in Kosovo

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of a school-based intervention on life skills and personal development among adolescents in Kosovo. It responds to the educational shift toward competence-based learning outlined in the new Kosovo curriculum. The research adopts a quasi-experimental design with pre-and post-tests to examine changes in students' self-perceived competencies across five life skills: interpersonal communication, conflict management, problem-solving, initiative-taking, and following instructions. The intervention was implemented in three schools using the FACE and PEACOCK programs, which were integrated into daily teaching practices. A total of 1,018 students (pre-test), aged 8 to 16, and 1,245 students (post-test) participated, along with 50 teachers trained in the program. Results show significant improvements in students' self-perception of competencies, especially in interpersonal communication and conflict management, with moderate gains in problem-solving and initiative-taking. Teacher feedback, gathered through surveys and observations, highlights positive changes in student's adaptability and classroom engagement. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating life skills into educational curricula to enhance holistic student development and bridge the gap between academic knowledge and personal competence. The authors recommend future research that includes longitudinal studies and examines the potential for expanding such interventions throughout pre-university education.

***Keywords:*** *Adolescents, life skills, personal development, school-based intervention, teacher education.*

## Introduction

The new Kosovo curriculum for pre-university education, revised in 2016, shifted the focus from knowledge acquisition to competence-based teaching and learning (Shehu, 2019). This curriculum emphasizes six core competencies, including personal and social competencies (MEST, 2016), which aim to prepare students for academic, social, and personal success. As described by Shehu

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(2019), personal competencies include understanding oneself and others, building self-confidence, managing emotions, and demonstrating empathy. However, Kosovo still lacks direct interventions to support the development of these competencies in students (Shehu, 2019, p. 4). Despite reforms and policy changes, previous research has not systematically examined how life skills education is integrated into Kosovo's schools. According to the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (2022), no large-scale empirical study has yet measured life skills development in students since the curriculum reform. While some studies have broadly examined teacher professional development, there is limited data on teachers' perceptions and implementation of life skills education. Although international research (OECD, 2018; Kirshhoff & Keller, 2021) shows that structured interventions can improve interpersonal skills, similar studies in Kosovo remain scarce. This study contributes by offering evidence-based insights on incorporating life skills into Kosovo's schools through teacher training and school-based interventions, ensuring that competence-based curricula lead to measurable student outcomes.

Student academic performance is often considered a key indicator of future academic and life opportunities. During their school years, students face a range of academic and everyday challenges. Kirchhoff and Keller (2021) claim that life skills—also known as transferable skills—are essential for helping students manage these demands while supporting their well-being and healthy development, both individually and socially (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; Lee et al., 2020). Life skills are broadly defined as the strengths, abilities, and knowledge that enable individuals to navigate daily challenges with effective thinking and responsible action (Aulian & Utami, 2023; Djibun, 2020; Saravanakumar, 2020). These skills include emotional, psychosocial, and cognitive competencies that enhance self-regulation, support informed decision-making, and foster positive social relationships (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; WHO, 1994; WHO, 2003; UNICEF, 2012; UNICEF, 2019). West et al. (2014) describe life skills as non-cognitive, socio-emotional traits that traditional academic assessments often overlook. The United Nations defines life skills as interpersonal abilities that empower individuals to make thoughtful decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management strategies that promote a productive and healthy life (Bettman, 2020; Madhusudanan & Nalini, 2015; United Nations Children's Fund, 2012). According to WHO (2001), life skills consist of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that help individuals think critically and creatively, solve problems, communicate effectively, build

healthy relationships, empathize with others, and manage their lives in a balanced and responsible way.

Quality education involves not only the transmission of knowledge but also the development of skills, along with the modeling and reinforcement of values, behaviors, and attitudes necessary for responsible citizenship. As a result, schools are expected to design educational programs that foster active and responsible citizen competencies (OECD, 2018). Recent research suggests that incorporating these elements into pre-university curricula is an effective strategy for supporting adolescents' life skills development (West et al., 2014). Life skills education addresses students' individual needs, enhances motivation, and equips them with practical, self-regulatory tools for adapting to life's challenges (Sharma, 2022). Therefore, educational models that prioritize life skills learning are essential for promoting students' overall well-being, holistic development, and preparation for success across various areas of life. The World Health Organization (WHO, 1994; WHO, 2003) emphasizes that life skills education entails social, cognitive, and emotional competencies, fostering communication and interpersonal abilities, decision-making and critical thinking, as well as coping and self-management skills (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021). These dimensions are interrelated and are most effectively developed through a holistic educational approach. The OECD Learning Framework 2030 (2020) highlights "fundamental skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values" as essential for building learner autonomy and transformative capabilities. Building on this knowledge, the Zurich University of Teacher Education in Switzerland developed two educational programs—Families and Students in Education (FACE) and Peace through Co-operation, Competences and Knowledge (PEACOCK)—which include teacher and student training modules and student books aimed at fostering life skills and personal development. Developed by the Centre for International Projects in Education (IPE), the FACE program provides teaching materials to help students improve their life skills and competencies. Drawing inspiration from the WHO's life skills model, FACE focuses on boosting students' self-esteem by leveraging existing strengths and expanding their personal competencies (Marruncheddu & Weidinger, 2016). Designed for children aged four to 12, FACE particularly targets students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The PEACOCK program builds on FACE's foundation by incorporating elements of Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC), Human Rights Education (HRE), and media literacy, aiming to advance life skills through task-based, competence-oriented learning. Materials for personal development were created for

students in grades five through nine, and in collaboration with the Faculty of Education in Prishtina and the Kosovo Education Centre, a series of teacher and student trainings were held. These programs were integrated into existing subjects, with teachers trained to implement them in their classrooms. They were selected based on the proven effectiveness of similar competence-based interventions internationally and their strong alignment with the competencies identified in the Kosovar curriculum, making them appropriate tools for evaluating life skills development.

This study employed teacher training and a school-based intervention to evaluate life skills development before and after the implementation of the aforementioned educational programs in primary and lower-secondary schools in Kosovo. It assessed changes in students' self-perceptions and self-assessments of life skills both prior to and following the intervention, alongside evaluating teacher perceptions and satisfaction with the alternative program introduced.

*Research Questions*

This study addresses the following four research questions:

1. How are life skills and personal development associated with individual factors such as gender, age, and place of living?
2. Are there significant differences in students' self-reported pre- and post-test results related to life skills and personal development?
3. Are there significant differences in teachers' observations of students' life skills and personal development in pre- and post-test assessments?
4. To what extent are teachers satisfied with the content of the FACE and PEACOCK life skills programs as alternative approaches to fostering life skills and personal development?

## Theoretical Background

*Life Skills and Personal Development in School Curriculum*

There is increasing recognition of the need to incorporate life skills into school curricula, supported by numerous studies and international development agencies emphasizing that education should prepare students not only academically but also through comprehensive skill development (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022, p. 14). According to Smith (2018) and Jones et al. (2020), skills education supports students' holistic development and equips them for success across different areas of life. However, current school practices in Kosovo show that areas such as decision-making, critical and creative thinking, communication, self-awareness, emotional

resilience, problem-solving, and empathy are only marginally and selectively addressed. Several studies highlighted the positive outcomes of integrating life skills and personal development into education. Students involved in such programs exhibit improved communication abilities, greater emotional intelligence, and better conflict resolution skills (Johnson et al., 2019; Turner & Johnson, 2020). In addition, the development of these skills contributes to increased school engagement and higher academic performance (García et al., 2018). The new Kosovo curriculum framework identifies life skills development as one of the six key competencies and one of the seven core curricular areas (MESTI, 2011). Life skills are formally introduced at the pre-university level, beginning with a dedicated subject from pre-primary to fifth grade and continuing within the ICT subject from sixth to twelfth grade. However, the integration of personal development and life skills as a cross-curricular theme remains insufficient. A study by the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (2022) reported that these areas are among the least represented across subjects in both primary and secondary education. The study recommended several improvements to the curriculum, including a more diverse curriculum, more flexible learning activities, and improved assessment methods.

Through various professional development programs, teachers in Kosovo are being trained to incorporate life skills and personal development into their subject curricula. These efforts include the implementation of the PEACOCK and FACE programs, developed by the Faculty of Education in Zurich and introduced to teachers in Kosovo. As a project partner, the Faculty of Education at the University of Prishtina contributed by integrating life skills concepts into course syllabi aimed at preparing future teachers.

Both programs align with the learning outcomes outlined in Kosovo's pre-university education curriculum, which emphasizes student awareness of individual diversity in the classroom, school, and broader society. The goal is to improve students' understanding of others, support their ability to manage various situations, and promote peaceful conflict resolution (Kosovo Pedagogical Institute, 2022; MESTI Core Curriculum Framework, 2016). IPE collaborates with global partners to develop multilingual, modular teaching materials and training programs for educators, university lecturers, parents, and NGO professionals.

*Life Skills Training in Teacher Education Programs*

Teachers play an important role in developing students' life skills and personal development. A teacher's positive attitude can significantly affect students' motivation, attitudes toward school and

schoolwork, self-confidence, and, in turn, their overall personality development (Ozden & Eryilmaz, 2011). Studies have shown that interactive learning methods—such as problem-based learning, simulations, discussions, and experiential learning—enhance students' motivation and support the development of life skills (Sook & Suk, 2015; Patton et al., 1997; Nurbatra et al., 2022). Encouraging student communication, offering engaging activities and resources, listening to their ideas, and involving them in variouslearning experiences have all been found to contribute to the development of social and life competencies (Shehu, 2019).

Kosovo has undergone frequent reforms in teacher education programs over the past decade, significantly affecting student learning outcomes. These changes have affected teacher professionalism and competence development (Shehu et al., 2023). The focus of teacher education has shifted from simply delivering knowledge to preparing future teachers to foster competence development, enabling students to acquire knowledge independently and develop creative thinking skills (Neesipbayeva, 2012). According to Fullan (2007), teachers' roles and responsibilities continue to evolve. Today, they are expected to teach in growingly diverse classrooms, support students with specific needs, integrate ICT into teaching practices, participate in evaluation and accountability processes, and actively involve parents in school activities (Fullan, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010; Day, 2017).

Many reforms in teacher education programs aim to develop the practical competencies required in real classroom settings. A study by Shehu and colleagues (2023), which analyzed Kosovo's teacher education programs using the European Union's framework of knowledge and understanding, skills, and dispositions, found that these programs predominantly emphasize subject matter knowledge. Courses tend to focus more on knowledge acquisition than on developing practical teaching skills. While the importance of teacher education in preparing candidates for complex classroom realities is widely acknowledged (Simon, 2013), the shift toward competence-based education in Kosovo has not been fully reflected in teacher preparation programs. These programs continue to prioritize subject content and lack sufficient practical components, limiting opportunities for skill assessment. Additionally, efforts are more concentrated on planning, managing, and coordinating lessons than on adapting objectives, conducting research, or applying research-based knowledge.

Day (2017) emphasized that teachers should provide students with more than just measurable skills, encouraging the development of higher-order cognitive abilities such as creativity, critical

thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, and lifelong learning. Similarly, Koutsibeli (2023) highlights the importance of fostering collaboration, communication, personal and social responsibility, and citizenship to prepare students for success in modern democratic societies. Despite these goals, research shows that communication and interpersonal skills receive limited attention in current programs. Additionally, the formation of values and attitudes is insufficiently addressed, with critical thinking often receiving minimal emphasis across courses (Shehu et al., 2023). To create effective learning environments, teachers must develop the necessary competencies to support students' cognitive, emotional, and social growth (Peklaj, 2015).

## Method

### Research Design

The study adopted a quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design to examine the development of life skills in students aged eight to 16, both before and after the implementation of a life skills education program. It employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to triangulate the findings. This method is particularly valuable in educational studies (Johnson et al., 2007), as it allows for a quantitative analysis of skill development over a nine-month period, a qualitative exploration of teacher and student perceptions, and the integration of diverse data sources to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the results.

### Population and Sample/ Study Group/Participants

The study was conducted in three mixed public schools in Kosovo: one large school located in an urban area and two in rural areas. Schools were selected randomly, and all enrolled students in those schools were eligible to participate. A total of 50 teachers were selected through convenience sampling, consisting of those who had participated in the intervention-related training. The sampling approach ensured diverse representation across urban and rural settings, as well as gender and grade levels, from third to ninth grade. Additionally, 175 students were randomly selected from various demographic backgrounds for teacher observations. More than 2,000 students in grades three through nine participated in classes where teachers applied different strategies from the FACE and PEACOCK programs to promote life skills and personal development through a whole-school intervention approach. These strategies were integrated into various subjects

following the teacher training. A total of 1,018 students aged eight to 16 participated in the pre-test survey. Table 1 presents demographic data for the participants.

**Table 1**

*Student Participants 'Demographic Data*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| School | Urban school | 60.5% |
| | Rural school | 22.1% |
| | Rural school | 17.4.% |
| Gender | F | 48.7% |
| | M | 50.0% |
| Age | 7-9 | 46% |
| | 10-12 | 33.1% |
| | 13-16 | 20.8% |
| School level | Primary school | 58.3% |
| | Lower secondary school | 41.7% |

A total of 48.6% of the participating students were male, 50.7% were female, and 0.76% did not declare their gender. The majority of them (60.5%) attended an urban school, while 39.5% were enrolled in rural schools. Additionally, 58.3% of respondents were in primary education (third to fifth grade), and 41.7% were in lower secondary education (sixth to ninth grade).

The second group of respondents consisted of a sample of 50 teachers from all three schools who were trained or regularly coached in integrating life skills and personal development approaches into their teaching. Table 2 presents the demographic data of the teacher participants.

**Table 2**

*Teacher Participants' Demographic Data*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Age | 20-30 | 18% |
| | 31-40 | 24% |
| | 41-50 | 38% |
| | 51-60 | 20% |
| Gender | F | 86% |
| | M | 14% |
| Work placement | Primary school | 68.8% |
| | Lower secondary school | 29.2% |
| | Preschool | 2% |
| Working experience | 1-3 years | 6.3% |
| | 4-6 years | 12.8% |
| | More than 6 | 80.9% |
| Attended PEACOCK and FACE training | Yes | 54.9% |
| | No | 45.1% |

A total of 86% of the participating teachers were female and 14% were male, representing a range of ages from 20 to 60 years old and varying levels of teaching experience, from one year to over six years. They worked across different school levels, including primary (68.8%), lower secondary (39.2%), and preschool (2%). These teachers completed a questionnaire regarding their perspectives on the FACE and PEACOCK training programs, including the impact on their teaching methods and their own development of personal and life skills. In addition to the questionnaire, they were assigned to observe randomly selected students throughout the intervention phase of the study. The analysis processes related to the semi-experimental model of the research were carried out with 182 students who participated in the pretest and posttest.

**Intervention design**

A carefully developed intervention design was considered essential to this research. The study applied a comparison group pre/post-test design using a basic quasi-experimental approach to assess differences in outcomes before and after the intervention. The same variables were measured at both time points to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

Baseline data were collected from a sample of 1,018 students using questionnaires designed to capture their self-assessment of specific life skills. The intervention was implemented in the three selected schools as a whole-school intervention, with the participation of all students from Grades 1 to 9. However, only students from Grades 3 to 9 completed the pretest and posttest surveys, as students in Grades 1 and 2 were considered too young for objective self-reporting. The student questionnaire, titled Self-perceived Life Skills Assessment, was adapted from the Life Skills Questionnaire for Students (LSQC) (Kennedy et al., 2014). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Unable to do yet) to 5 (Able to do it often and well), with students rating their proficiency across five key life skills. The questionnaire provided a standardized means of assessing students' self-perceived abilities using 20 statements, each representing a different dimension of life skills.

Teachers who completed the FACE and PEACOCK training revised their course plans and implemented them over the nine-month intervention period. At the end of the school year, 1,245 students completed the post-intervention questionnaire, responding to the same set of questions as in the pre-test.

In addition to student self-assessment, structured teacher observations were conducted to provide an external measure of students' life skills development. A total of 50 teachers participated in this process, each observing and rating a randomly selected group of 175 students. Observations were guided by a standardized rubric assessing three key domains: student engagement, peer interaction, and behavioral change over time. Teachers used the original LSAS tool to conduct observations, rating each student on a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1 (does not yet do), 2 (does with a lot of help), 3 (does with some help), 4 (does with a little help), and 5 (does independently). Observations were conducted periodically during routine classroom activities, allowing for naturalistic and context-rich assessments. Teachers documented their ratings using a structured scale and followed detailed instructions to ensure objectivity and minimize bias. An overall score was calculated as the mean of all five skills. Teachers also provided examples to support their ratings and gave clarifications when needed. This observation process allowed for a comprehensive comparison between students' self-perceived and teacher-observed changes in life skills resulting from the intervention.

*Development of the Life Skills curriculum*

Within the framework of the PEACOCK and FACE projects, teachers from Kosovo participated in a training program focused on competence-based teaching and learning, as well as the implementation of the FACE and PEACOCK educational programs. Teachers who completed the training served as school-based trainers, sharing the skills and knowledge gained with their peers through school-based professional development sessions. The PEACOCK program covered key topics such as self-awareness and understanding others, quality of life, healthy lifestyles, career development and entrepreneurial thinking, and personal safety. Meanwhile, the FACE program addressed various cross-curricular themes, including emotions, family dynamics, health, friendship, conflict resolution, play, and media education. The intervention was implemented across the three selected schools over the course of one year, reaching and benefiting more than 2,000 students.

**Data Collection Tools**

The Life Skills student questionnaire (Self-perceived Life Skills Assessment) was adapted from the Life Skills Questionnaire for Students (LSQC) (Kennedy et al., 2014). Students responded using a 5-point Likert scale, rating their abilities across five key life skills: interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, problem-solving, initiative-taking, and following instructions.

The questionnaire included 20 statements, each addressing one of the five skill areas. Data were collected at both the beginning and end of the school year.

To ensure alignment with the Kosovo Curriculum Framework (MESTI, 2016), three specialists in education and child development reviewed the questionnaire. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to improve clarity and comprehension. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.771 for the 20 items, indicating good internal consistency (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Reliability Statistics*

| Cronbach's Alpha | No of items |
|---|---|
| .771 | 20 |

In addition, a Structured Rating of Student Behaviour was completed by 50 teachers who observed and rated 175 randomly selected students. Using a standardized rubric, teachers recorded observations of student engagement, peer interactions, and behavioral changes over time. Each student was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Teachers also responded to open-ended questions regarding observed changes in students, as well as the challenges and successes they experienced while implementing the intervention. Observations focused on specific classroom behaviors, including social interactions during group activities, student engagement and participation in discussions, willingness to solve problems independently, and the ability to manage emotions during disagreements or conflict situations. Lastly, teachers completed a written survey designed to assess the quality of the program materials and whether the intervention had also contributed to the development of their own skills and competencies.

**Data Analysis**

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods to assess the intervention. Prior to conducting statistical analyses, the dataset was examined for missing values and the distribution of the data was tested for normality. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to assess normality, and both tests showed statistically significant results ($p < .001$) for the pre-test and post-test, suggesting that the data deviated significantly from a normal distribution at both time points. However, the Central Limit Theorem (CLT) states that as the

sample size increases, the sampling distribution of the sample mean will approach a normal distribution, regardless of the shape of the original data—assuming the observations are independent (Ross, 2014). This means that even if the population is skewed or not normally distributed, the distribution of sample means will tend to be normal when the sample size is large enough (Kwak & Kim, 2017). This supports the reliability of the t-test, as its accuracy is based on the sampling distribution of the mean rather than the distribution of the raw data (Field, 2017). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize student and teacher demographic characteristics and responses. Independent sample t-tests were conducted to assess differences in student scores before and after the intervention, as well as to examine differences by gender, school location, and age group.

The number of students who completed the pretest (n = 1,018) was lower than those who completed the posttest (n = 1,245). Although students were instructed to enter a unique anonymous code to link their surveys, many entered the codes inconsistently or incorrectly, making it impossible to reliably match individual responses. Furthermore, students appeared more motivated to complete the questionnaire after the intervention, which likely contributed to the higher posttest participation rate. Given the inconsistency in code identifiers, a total of 182 participants were selected for the paired-sample t-test analysis. These were students who were confirmed to have completed both the pretest and posttest and had correctly entered their unique identifier codes. A semi-experimental pretest-posttest model was applied with this smaller, validated subset. In addition to the paired sample t-test, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare group-level differences in scores before and after the intervention. This approach was deemed valid due to the large sample sizes and the whole-school implementation. The assumption of independence between the two samples aligns with the analytical framework used, and the independent samples t-test is considered reliable for large and unequal group sizes (Field, 2017).

The qualitative component of the study focused on exploring teacher experiences and student engagement during the intervention. All teacher observation responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized to identify recurring themes. These themes were then analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and compared with the quantitative findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact.

## Findings

*Relationship between Life Skills and Personal Development and personal factors such as gender, age, and place of living*

Students aged eight to sixteen completed the same Life Skills Questionnaire for Students (LSQS) before and after the intervention. A t-test was conducted at both stages to compare the mean scores of boys and girls in terms of life skills and personal development competencies. Post-test data revealed notable differences in self-perceptions between genders. Girls reported significantly higher confidence in their ability to communicate with others ($p = .001$), manage conflict ($p = .009$), and understand and follow instructions ($p = .000$) compared to boys, as presented in Table 4. However, no significant gender differences were observed in self-perceptions related to problem-solving ($p = .573$) or taking initiative ($p = .719$).

**Table 4**

*Mean comparison between boys and girls and significance test regarding the development of Life Skills as observed by students.*

| | Independent sample t-test | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent variables | Gender | Mean | t | p |
| Interacting with others | M | 4.28 | -3.98 | .001 |
| | F | 4.41 | | |
| Overcoming problems and finding solutions | M | 3.99 | .66 | .573 |
| | F | 3.95 | | |
| Taking Initiative | M | 3.90 | -1.49 | .719 |
| | F | 3.92 | | |
| Managing conflicts | M | 3.77 | -1.58 | .009 |
| | F | 3.92 | | |
| Understanding and following instructions | M | 4.26 | -3.41 | .000 |
| | F | 4.40 | | |

In contrast, teacher observations ($n = 175$) indicated a more consistent and significant gender difference across all five measured areas of life skills. According to teachers, girls outperformed boys in every skill category. The most significant difference was observed in taking initiative ($t = -3.964$, $p = .000$). The negative t-values across all categories suggest a consistent pattern of higher life skills scores among girls, as presented in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Mean comparison between boys and girls regarding their Life Skills as observed by teachers.*

| Independent sample t-test | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Gender | N | Mean | t | p |
| Overall score | M | 83 | 3.81 | -3.87 | .000 |
| | F | 89 | 4.34 | | |
| Interacting with others | M | 83 | 3.92 | -3.54 | .001 |
| | F | 89 | 4.42 | | |
| Overcoming difficulties and solving problems | M | 83 | 3.78 | -2.93 | .004 |
| | F | 89 | 4.28 | | |
| Taking Initiative | M | 83 | 3.68 | -3.96 | .000 |
| | F | 89 | 4.35 | | |
| Managing problems | M | 83 | 3.86 | -3.34 | .001 |
| | F | 89 | 4.35 | | |
| Understanding and following instructions | M | 83 | 3.83 | -3.10 | .002 |
| | F | 89 | 4.31 | | |

A t-test was also conducted to compare students' life skills based on their place of residence. In both the pre-test and post-test phases, the results revealed significant differences between students living in urban and rural areas. At the pre-test stage, urban students scored significantly higher in all five measured Life skills components, including interacting with others, problem-solving, taking initiative, and managing conflict ($p < .005$) (see Table 6). However, in the post-test phase, the difference in managing conflict was no longer statistically significant, suggesting that students from rural areas showed improvement in their ability to manage conflict.

**Table 6**

*Mean comparison between urban and rural areas regarding the development of Life Skills as observed by students.*

| | Independent sample t-test | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre-test mean | Sig. | T | Post-test mean | t | p |
| Interacting with others | 4.31 | .000 | 4.00 | 4.40 | 4.11 | .000 |
| | 4.13 | | | 4.24 | | |
| Overcoming problems and finding solutions | 3.96 | .005 | 2.80 | 4.03 | 3.05 | .002 |
| | 3.81 | | | 3.84 | | |
| Taking Initiative | 3.94 | .000 | 3.54 | 3.97 | 3.21 | .001 |
| | 3.74 | | | 3.79 | | |
| Managing conflicts | 3.69 | .000 | 9.20 | 3.88 | 1.77 | .076 |
| | 3.16 | | | 3.77 | | |
| Understanding and following instructions | 4.27 | .055 | 1.91 | 4.39 | 4.02 | .000 |
| | 4.17 | | | 4.22 | | |

*Comparing students' perceptions before and after a Life Skills and Personal Development Program*

The results showed a significant increase in students' self-assessed life skills in the post-test, particularly in areas such as communicating with others, managing conflicts, and understanding instructions, compared to the pre-test scores. However, problem-solving and initiative-taking remained areas where students continued to face challenges, showing less improvement over time (Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Pre-post domain differences according to groups*

| Pre-post domain differences | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre and post | N | Mean | t | p |
| Overall Score | Pre-test group | 182 | 3.94 | -3.05 | .003 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 4.11 | | |
| Interacting with others | Pre-test group | 182 | 4.19 | -3.33 | .001 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 4.41 | | |
| Overcoming problems and finding solutions | Pre-test group | 182 | 3.89 | -1.66 | .868 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 3.90 | | |
| Taking Initiative | Pre-test group | 182 | 3.98 | -5.23 | .602 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 4.02 | | |
| Managing conflicts | Pre-test group | 182 | 3.41 | -5.12 | .000 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 3.86 | | |
| Understanding and following instructions | Pre-test group | 182 | 4.23 | -3.59 | .000 |
| | Post-test group | 182 | 4.49 | | |

*Teacher Observations of Life Skills Development*

In addition to the pre- and post-tests, teachers conducted structured observations of 175 randomly selected students at the beginning of the school year using a standardized observation protocol based on the original Life Skills Assessment Scale (LSAS). This protocol was designed to assess students' initial abilities in five key life skills domains: interacting with others, overcoming difficulties and solving problems, taking initiative and managing problems, and understanding and following instructions. Teachers rated each student's performance on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 ("does not do it yet") to 5 ("does it independently").

At the beginning of the school year, teachers observed that all life skills domains required further development, noting that many students struggled to apply these skills independently in everyday classroom situations. After the intervention program was implemented, teachers re-assessed student performance using the same observation protocol. While modest improvements were noted, a significant portion of students continued to face challenges in independently applying the skills. Specifically, 50.6% of students regularly interacted with others independently, 48.3% could solve problems without assistance, and 48.9% demonstrated initiative on their own. For managing problems, the percentage dropped slightly to 47.2%, and the lowest independent performance was

observed in understanding and following instructions, at 45.5%. These findings suggest that although the program led to some improvement, fewer than half of the students consistently demonstrated independence in these areas, highlighting the need for continued, targeted support to further develop essential life skills.

*Teachers' perceptions of school-based professional development programs (FACE and PEACOCK)*

Teachers (n = 50) from the three schools that implemented the FACE and PEACOCK programs participated in a written survey to share their views on the materials used with students, the most important topics addressed in the programs, and their own professional development needs. These teachers worked primarily in primary and lower secondary schools, with a small portion (2%) teaching in preschool classes. They ranged in age from 22 to 60 and had between 1 and 35 years of teaching experience. While not all had attended the formal training sessions, all used the FACE and PEACOCK materials in their teaching. The results showed that 55.1% of teachers agreed and 42.9% strongly agreed that the materials were helpful in their classrooms, while only 2% did not provide feedback. All teachers (100%) stated they would recommend the materials to other teachers. When asked to rate the importance of topics on a scale from 1 to 10, teachers identified feelings and emotions, conflict resolution, and friendship as the most important. Many noted that PEACOCK program topics were particularly useful for sixth-grade students, while the FACE program was better suited for younger students in lower grades.

Regarding professional development, 46% of teachers agreed and 52% strongly agreed that using the FACE and PEACOCK materials contributed to their own life skills development. Teachers expressed a desire to learn more about how to positively affect students' lives and promote transversal skills. They also indicated interest in learning strategies for coping with stress and emotions, as well as in developing students' critical thinking and decision-making abilities. These findings indicate the importance of ongoing professional development opportunities tailored to the evolving needs of teachers.

## Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to examine the impact of the FACE and PEACOCK school-based interventions on life skills and personal development among students in Kosovo. The data indicate that the use of FACE and PEACOCK materials by teachers over a nine-month period had a significant positive

effect on students' life skills and personal development. Notable improvements were observed in students' social and emotional skills, particularly in their ability to interact with others, manage conflict, and follow instructions. These findings align with the conclusions of Kirchhoff and Keller (2021), who reported enhanced socio-emotional competencies following school-based life skills interventions. Similar outcomes were observed by Barry et al. (2017), who found that integrating social and emotional learning into the standard curriculum improved classroom behavior, reduced emotional distress, and enhanced peer relationships. Similarly, Durlak et al. (2011) concluded that school-based socio-emotional learning programs significantly improve students' social behavior and attitudes toward themselves and others.

However, the results show that students' progress in taking initiative and problem-solving was lower compared to other life skills domains, suggesting the need for deeper analysis. Several factors may explain this outcome. First, initiative-taking and problem-solving are complex cognitive and behavioral skills that, unlike basic social interactions, require higher-level thinking, metacognitive awareness, and resilience in the face of challenges. As such, they may demand more individualized support and extended time to develop fully. Second, the relatively short duration of the intervention (nine months) may not have been sufficient for significant growth in these areas. This finding is consistent with findings from West et al. (2016) and Durlak et al. (2011), who suggest that while short-term programs often yield quick gains in interpersonal skills, cognitive skills such as initiative and problem-solving typically require longer or repeated exposure to produce measurable improvement.

The findings of this study also support Taylor et al. (2017), who found that while improvements in interpersonal skills often happen fast, cognitive regulation skills such as goal-setting, initiative, and strategic thinking take more time to develop. Similarly, OECD (2018) reported that in the early phases of life skills programs in other countries, higher-order cognitive competencies were usually the last to show measurable improvements.

The findings align with social-emotional learning theories that emphasize the critical role of schools in developing self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2013). The observed progress in students' interpersonal abilities and emotional regulation reflects Bandura's social learning theory, which suggests that behavior is acquired through observation and reinforcement within social environments. In contrast, the slower development in initiative-taking

and problem-solving aligns with Vygotsky's developmental theory (1978), which posits that higher-order cognitive skills emerge gradually through scaffolded, guided interactions over time.

The study also revealed notable gender differences in students' self-perceptions of socio-emotional skills. Girls reported significantly higher self-perceptions in managing conflict and in understanding and following instructions compared to boys. These results are consistent with the findings of Roy and Garcia (2018), who reported that girls often develop stronger socio-emotional skills due to differing socialization practices. Elias and Haynes (2008) similarly found that girls tend to show greater improvements in empathy and emotional regulation during skills-based interventions, often supported by their stronger verbal communication abilities and more frequent positive reinforcement from teachers. Moreover, Guerra and Bradshaw (2008) noted that differences in socialization patterns and teacher expectations may further contribute to gender-based disparities in life skills development.

The results also show that while urban students had higher initial scores, rural students showed greater improvement over time. This finding supports the conclusions of DeJaeghere and Murphy-Graham (2022), who emphasized that life skills interventions are particularly effective for students in under-resourced or marginalized contexts, where opportunities for such development are often limited. Similarly, Jukes et al. (2018) found that students in under-resourced settings showed significant gains in non-cognitive skills when given access to structured life skills programs—often surpassing their urban counterparts. These results highlight the untapped potential of rural learners and underscore the importance of providing equitable access to quality education for all students.

When examining teachers' perspectives, participants in this study expressed strong support for integrating life skills education into the curriculum. They also noted that working with the FACE and PEACOCK materials contributed to their own personal development and life skills growth. These findings align with Peklaj (2015), who argued that participatory and interactive teaching methods not only support student development but also enhance metacognitive processes and promote motivational self-regulation. The results are also consistent with the conclusions of Jones and Bouffard (2012), who stressed the importance of teacher training and reflective practice in successfully embedding life skills and socio-emotional learning into academic instruction. Moreover, Taylor et al. (2017) found that professional development programs focusing on

emotional competence building for teachers are associated with improved student outcomes, reinforcing the value of such training in educational settings.

Teachers also expressed a desire for more professional development opportunities, particularly in areas related to coping with stress and managing emotions. However, they raised concerns about being overwhelmed by the demands of curriculum implementation and ongoing professional development initiatives. This issue was also highlighted by the Kosovo Pedagogical Institute (2022), which reported that in-service teachers often view professional development as an additional burden and emphasized the need to balance teacher workload with the introduction of new instructional approaches and curriculum reforms. Similarly, the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) identified lack of time and heavy workloads as major barriers to implementing new practices, including SEL and life skills education.

Despite these challenges, a key finding of this study was that teachers perceived the FACE and PEACOCK programs as very beneficial. However, many reported challenges due to the lack of previous training in life skills development. This aligns with Peklaj (2015), who concluded that teacher training plays a vital role in fostering students' self-regulated learning and the development of metacognitive processes. Likewise, Schonert-Reichl (2017) emphasized that the success of SEL programs depends greatly on teacher preparedness, noting that prior training and opportunities for reflective practice are essential for teachers to effectively implement and sustain life skills-focused pedagogy.

In conclusion, the study supports the understanding that life skills are not innate traits but competencies that can be developed through intentional teaching and modeling. It emphasizes the importance of systematic teacher training focused on life skills pedagogy, alongside curriculum reforms that promote skills-based learning. The study also confirmed gender differences in self-perceived life skills development and highlighted urban–rural disparities. Notably, the stronger improvements observed among rural students suggest that targeted implementation in under-resourced schools could help reduce educational equity gaps. These findings support the importance of context-specific implementation, echoing UNESCO's (2015) recommendation to adapt life skills education to local environments, especially in low-resource areas where students may face unique challenges requiring tailored solutions. The selected FACE and PEACOCK programs were chosen for their close alignment with the competencies outlined in the Kosovar curriculum, making them appropriate for direct intervention in local schools.

Furthermore, the study's overall findings align with previous research advocating for the integration of life skills education into regular school subjects rather than offering it as a standalone program. This approach enables the continuous and contextualized development of student competencies. While the study demonstrated the effectiveness of embedding life skills instruction within existing curricula, the authors underscore the need for future longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term sustainability of these interventions and the retention of life skills over time. The study findings contribute to the growing body of research on life skills education and provide initial empirical evidence on the effectiveness of structured interventions in Kosovo. The results offer valuable insights for curriculum reform, teacher professional development, and future education policy initiatives. At the policy level, the study highlights the need to introduce guidelines that incorporate life skills education into pre-service teacher training, ensuring that future educators are adequately prepared. It also supports the integration of mandatory professional development for in-service teachers as critical to the success of such programs. Additionally, the findings suggest incorporating life skills into daily lessons across multiple subjects and equipping schools with curriculum guides and activity toolkits to help standardize life skills education across the country.

While this study was based on a short-term intervention, the authors recommend addressing the long-term sustainability of its outcomes through continued reinforcement. Life skills programs should extend beyond a single academic year and be scaled nationally, with adaptations to meet specific local contexts. Future research should examine the retention of life skills post-intervention using more advanced methodologies and research designs, with a focus on understanding how teacher facilitation affects student engagement and outcomes. Moreover, comparative research into life skills education models used in other countries could help identify best practices for maintaining and expanding successful programs.

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