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## Constructing the Life Skills Education Experiences of Maldivian Adolescents: Exploring Personal Narratives of Transition, Challenge, and Becoming

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### Abstract

Life skills have been shown to help young people cope with challenges and facilitate their transition into adulthood. Few studies have explored life skills programs from the lived experiences of youth themselves. Using a retrospective narrative analysis approach, this study uses social construction and social learning theories to investigate how young people construct their experiences of life skills education in the context of their embedded social environments, including their relationships with family, school, and peers. The study incorporates a series of in-depth, face-to-face, and social media-based interviews with two young adults from the Maldives who had very different experiences in life skills programs. Capturing the participants' subjective experiences of life skills over time, and in the context of their transition to adulthood, allowed us to make situated connections between program experiences and the participants' everyday lives. The findings point to the importance of program duration and directly link program content to adolescents' real-world experiences including critical life incidents, the need to provide more structure in the delivery of programs, and the importance of ensuring that program experiences align with relevant skills and competencies. Potential implications for life skills education programs are outlined.

### Keywords

life skills education, adolescence, narrative analysis, experiential learning, Maldives

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# Constructing the Life Skills Education Experiences of Maldivian Adolescents: Exploring Personal Narratives of Transition, Challenge, and Becoming

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Life skills have been shown to help young people cope with challenges and facilitate their transition into adulthood. Few studies have explored life skills programs from the lived experiences of youth themselves. Using a retrospective narrative analysis approach, this study uses social construction and social learning theories to investigate how young people construct their experiences of life skills education in the context of their embedded social environments, including their relationships with family, school, and peers. The study incorporates a series of in-depth, face-to-face, and social media-based interviews with two young adults from the Maldives who had very different experiences in life skills programs. Capturing the participants' subjective experiences of life skills over time, and in the context of their transition to adulthood, allowed us to make situated connections between program experiences and the participants' everyday lives. The findings point to the importance of program duration and directly link program content to adolescents' real-world experiences including critical life incidents, the need to provide more structure in the delivery of programs, and the importance of ensuring that program experiences align with relevant skills and competencies. Potential implications for life skills education programs are outlined.

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## Introduction

“Life skills” comprises cognitive, psychosocial, and interpersonal competencies that help young people cope with difficult situations and facilitate their transition into adulthood (UNICEF, 2003). Through life skills education, adolescents discover their self-worth and learn to resolve conflicts, make decisions, establish relationships, and work collaboratively to capitalize on constructive behavior (Munsi & Guha, 2014; Prajina, 2014). Research on the effectiveness of life skills education programs for adolescents reveals that life skills programs are effective in reducing problem behaviors such as drug use (Botvin & Griffin, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Teyhan et al., 2016; Weichold & Blumenthal, 2016) and smoking (Menrath et al., 2012). Life skills education programs have also been reported to enhance adolescent self-esteem (Kazemi et al., 2014; Maryam et al., 2011) and improve goal setting (Goudas et al., 2006; O’Hearn & Gatz, 1999). When life skills are taught interactively, adolescents develop self-efficacy (Chaudhary & Mehta, 2008; Pick et al., 2007). Reports on life skills training with aggressive adolescent males indicate that physical and verbal aggression are significantly

reduced as a result of the development of decision-making skills, improved communication, problem solving, learning to deal with stress, and anger management (Parvathy & Pillai, 2015). In recent years, life skills education programs have become part of many interventions aimed at reducing at-risk behaviors such as smoking, alcohol, drug abuse (Griffin & Botvin, 2014; Weichold et al., 2016), delinquency, aggression, and bullying (Farrington et al., 2016), and to promote adaptive behaviors such as refusal skills and reproductive health (Minnis et al., 2014; Svanemyr et al., 2015).

The popularity of life skills education continues to grow around the world. Life skills have become an essential component of international declarations such as the Dakar Framework for Action Education for All (EFA), United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS), and the Convention for Rights of the Child (Okech & Role, 2011; Onrust et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2000; World Health Organization, 1994). These policy trends have helped fuel the implementation of life skills education programs in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including those in the South Asian region (Sirohi & Singh, 2012; UNICEF, 2005). Life skills education programs in South Asia and other LMICs have emphasized the development of skills and attitudes among adolescents engaging in at-risk behaviors. However, studies in these countries have been mostly limited to the reporting of short-term results and program effectiveness outcomes (Nasheeda et al., 2019a).

While life skills education programs continue to proliferate, few studies have attempted to capture young people's experiences in life skills education programs to learn how the programs support behavioral and attitude change later in life (Newman, 2020; Newman et al., 2022). How adolescents acquire knowledge and skills through life skills programs and subsequently adopt positive attitudes and behaviors as a result are not well understood. The current study addresses this need by drawing on in-depth personal narratives from two Maldivian young adults to explore how they construct their experiences of life skills education. The main study purpose was to explore the acquisition of life skills through the process of experiential learning within the social environment of the participants. The retrospective narrative analysis approach allowed us to make situated connections between the participants' everyday lives and their program experiences, leading to insights into how life skills program knowledge is constructed and translated into subsequent behavior and attitude change.

## **Study Context**

The United Nations categorizes the Maldives as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS). SIDS is a grouping given to distinct countries with specific characteristics, such as isolation due to geographic distribution and location that makes these countries vulnerable to economic, social, and environmental risks that can negatively impact the health and wellbeing of the people (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The total population of the Maldives is estimated at 407,660 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014), and it is considered the smallest nation state in Asia with over 1190 islands scattered across the Indian Ocean. The capital city, Male', with its two square kilometers of land area, is the most developed island in the country (Asian Development Bank, 2015). The problem of unequal population dispersal among the islands has created huge challenges such as unemployment, underemployment, crime, violence and abuse, and lack of access to high-quality education and reproductive/sexual health services for young people (Asian Development Bank, 2015; Family Protection Authority, 2014; World Bank, 2014). Youth migration to Male' has made the city one of the most densely populated cities in the world with a population of 153,904 living in an estimated two square kilometers (Ministry of Health, 2015; National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). One of the main reasons for the dense population in the capital is quality education; many parents send their children as

young as seven years old to Male' in the hope of giving them opportunities of a better future (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The internal migration phenomenon in the Maldives has contributed to several health and social problems. Scarcity of land has led to congestion and poor living conditions, and high rates of health and social risk-taking behaviors among children and youth such as smoking, substance abuse, drugs, violence, and mental health problems (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2016; Ministry of Health, 2015). Additionally, according to the World Bank (2014), the highest proportion of drug users in the Maldives are between 15 and 19 years old and reside in the capital city. Other indicators of adolescent well-being point to rises in violent and criminal activity as well. A study conducted on bullying and mental health among 460 adolescents aged eleven to 16 years old revealed that 80% were targets of physical, verbal, and relational/social bullying (Nasheeda et al., 2016). Among the adolescents in the study, mental health issues such as depression, loss of emotional control, and low positive affect were prominent. Furthermore, in recent years, crime has steadily increased. According to recent statistics, there were 986 reported drug cases, 942 reported thefts, robberies and burglaries between September and December of 2022 (Maldives Police Services, 2022). Inadequate rehabilitation services and stigma associated with these issues make it more challenging for affected adolescents to integrate into society, placing their psychological wellbeing at risk (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2016; Naaz, 2012).

### *Life Skills Education Programs in the Maldives*

Due to inadequate rehabilitation services, the Maldives places a strong emphasis on skill-building and behavioral change programs for different target groups. These include programs for adolescents on violence, reproductive health, drug abuse and mental health, and life skills education through schools and community organizations (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2016). In 2003, the Ministry of Education of the Maldives initiated the life skills education program with the help of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (UNICEF, 2015). The program focused on topics relating to adolescent health and well-being. As a result, four different age-appropriate life skills manuals (known as life skills packs) were developed, and teachers were trained to deliver the program (Munsi & Guha, 2014). The program was divided into fifteen 60-minute sessions (UNICEF, 2015). Since then, life skills education programs have been conducted in several schools in the Maldives, particularly in Male'.

### *Theoretical Background*

This study aims to explore the acquisition of life skills education by integrating the perspectives of social constructionism and social learning theory. Social constructionism posits that reality is dynamically constructed through the interpretation, representation, and interaction of individuals within their social environment (Thomas et al., 2014). Gergen (1996) suggests that the world is socially constructed, and individuals' experiences are influenced by the process of learning. Social constructionists are particularly interested in how individuals make sense of and describe their world (Gergen, 1985). They propose that the self is situation-dependent, meaning that individuals form their understanding of themselves within their own minds, but this perception can be modified by situational factors. Consequently, knowledge is acquired through ongoing interactions in everyday life, leading to the co-creation of shared knowledge. Within this process, learning occurs through active engagement and participation (Nasheeda, 2020).

Social learning theory recognizes that individual behavior is situation-dependent, influenced by personal, cognitive, and environmental factors, and the reinforcements present in specific situations (Burr, 2003). In alignment with the social constructionist view, social learning theory suggests that behavior varies depending on with whom individuals spend time, what they are doing, and why they are doing it (Bandura, 1971). Throughout the learning process, individuals not only acquire behavioral patterns through direct exposure but also learn about the consequences associated with those actions. Positive behavior is learned through reinforcement, observation, and active participation, rather than just receiving instructions for corrective behavior. Bandura's work demonstrated that behavior modeling occurs as a result of active learning on the individual's part. The interactive experiences individuals have within society, as well as their interactions with others, shape their thinking, attitude, and provide a sense of purpose in life (Throop, 2009).

The primary focus of the current study was to explore how life skills learning occurs through social interactions. These interactions shape and influence the knowledge that is constructed, underscoring the active role individuals play in acquiring life skills education. Life skills are acquired through a combination of social learning processes such as imitation, modeling, and observation (Bandura, 1971), along with experiential learning techniques (Brown, 2015; Kolb et al., 2001). However, in order to effectively apply these skills to daily life challenges, individuals need to interpret and understand them, which is the focus of this study.

Past studies on life skills programs that have employed mostly quantitative designs fail to capture how this social learning process occurs, and how it affects the efficacy of life skills programs in the context of young people's everyday lives as they transition to adulthood and overcome challenges. The retrospective narrative approach employed in the current study provides a lens for better understanding participants' awareness of skills learned, how the skills were applied in the context of the participants' interactions with family, peers, and school, how the acquired skills helped the participants (or did not) adapt to life challenges, and how social support systems augmented or hindered the application of acquired skills. Narratives also help document attitude formation and their relationship to behavior change resulting from life skills education.

#### *Authors' Positionality and Reflexivity*

The first author is a trainer in the LSE program conducted in the Maldives, has conducted more than 50 life skills sessions and has trained around 30 facilitators for the program. Having undergone training in Life Skills Education (LSE) and become a trainer of trainers, the first author recognized the crucial importance of being equipped with life skills. Being trained in life skills education early in life placed the first author in a better position to view the program as crucial element for dealing with challenging issues as she kept a journal to record feedback from the participants on the sessions she conducted. These experiences gave the first author valuable insights into the challenges that adolescents and youth encounter on a daily basis. Through her training in life skills, the first author witnessed how equipping young individuals with these skills enabled them to effectively address and overcome many of these everyday problems. Thus, the researcher's assumption that life skills education can be a transformative process that facilitates adolescents' transition into healthy adulthood became more convincing. The other authors all have extensive experience in dealing with youth issues and were aware of potential biases related to the efficacy of life skills programs.

As a life skills facilitator and trainer, the first author did not approach the study from a position of neutrality; she carried her passions, beliefs, and experiences with her to the study. To compensate for this potential bias, the researcher made significant efforts to maintain

reflexivity throughout the study. For example, during the interview process the researcher was careful not to voice her opinions, and on occasion when the researcher voiced her thoughts, she encouraged the participants to talk more while the researcher engaged in active listening. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were verified by the participants for accuracy. Only when the participants approved the transcripts did the analysis process begin. The analysis of data was then reviewed by the other research team members at different points during the study. The whole process of the study was a collaborative effort between the researchers and the participants. The first author also maintained a journal to record any thoughts and feelings during field work and to monitor the data to minimize bias.

## Methods

### *Study Design*

Few studies of life skills education programs have incorporated the voices of youth to retell stories of life skills education program experience (Nasheeda et al., 2019a). Inquiry into adolescents' life experiences, emotions, cognition, and behavioral change in the specific social contexts that shape life skills education experiences can provide a comprehensive understanding of how they construct their knowledge of life skills education in the real world. In this study, the participants recounted (retrospectively reflected on) their experiences of being part of a life skills education program during their adolescence. A narrative method was employed to allow for the exploration of first-person accounts in the program. Narrative research is an effective approach for developing a rich understanding of lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is grounded in the belief that stories give meaning to individual experiences through cognitive, affective, and motivational elements (Mendieta, 2013; Singer & Blagov, 2004). A retrospective approach allows participants to reflect on their involvement to understand the process of the experience and its perceived outcomes. Retrospective narratives have been used to study past experiences in a number of studies (Korsvold, 2017; Meretoja, 2011; Watson, 2014). In this study, we asked participants to recollect on their experiences from their pre-adolescence to late adolescence years.

### *Participants and Procedures*

For our study, we specifically targeted young adults who had participated in life skills education programs during their adolescence. It was crucial for us to select participants who were willing to share their experiences in order to obtain rich and meaningful data (Joyce, 2015). Following an in-depth narrative approach, we limited our sample to two participants (Mason, 2010) from different geographic locations, namely Addu City and Male'. In qualitative research, the size of the sample is not always the primary consideration. The key factor is that the chosen sample can provide sufficiently in-depth and textually rich data relevant to the study's purpose, involving participants who can offer diverse and pertinent information on the issue at hand (Joyce, 2015). This decision revolves around the integrity, composition, and depth of the data (Roy et al., 2015). Qualitative research aims to delve into the specific details of the phenomenon under study rather than generalizing information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, sample size is determined based on the focus and content of the analysis to be explored (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Similarly, for our study, the emphasis was not on sample size but rather on giving meaning to individual stories. In narrative research, samples are often limited to one or a few participants to concentrate on giving meaning to individual stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), unless a larger group is selected to develop a collective story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The selected participants were chosen intentionally based on the

study's objectives. At the time of the study, the participants were aged 20 and 22. Our sampling choices were further refined using the following criteria: (1) participants had been enrolled in their respective life skills education program for at least one year between the ages of ten and 18, with Shau being involved from middle school (eleven years old) to higher secondary school (18 years old), and Al participating during secondary school (17-18 years old); and (2) at the time of data collection, participants were above 18 years old and had been out of the life skills education program for at least one year. This ensured sufficient time for reflection on their program experiences.

Data were collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic for a period of five to six weeks for each participant. The lead author spent over four months analyzing interview transcripts and conversation field notes for each participant. Prior to the interviews, text messages and phone calls were exchanged to screen the participants to ensure their appropriateness for the study and to build an initial rapport with them. It was crucial to inform the participants about the topic and goals of the study so that they would be able to recall detailed information about their past experiences.

Interviews were semi-structured to elicit a range of stories to understand the benefits and challenges participants faced in the life skills education program. Initial interviews with both participants, and two follow-up interviews with Shau, took place in person (as Shau was residing in the same city as the researcher). Due to time, geographical, and cost constraints, it was not viable for the researcher to conduct numerous face-to-face interviews with Al as he lived in the southern part of the Maldives. Therefore, the researcher opted for other sources of communication such as texting and online chat as a means to carry out follow-up conversations as alternatives to formal interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher utilized multiple sources for follow-up including Viber conversations and Facebook instant messaging. The initial face-to-face interviews with both Shau and Al ran between 45 to 60 minutes in length, and were audio recorded and immediately transcribed following the sessions. Following each interview, participants were emailed a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. All interviews were followed up by a series of shorter, more targeted communications using Facebook chat, Viber, and email.

Data analysis began by emplotting the participants' stories. Emplotting entailed first analyzing the narrative texts from the interview transcripts. Kurtz (2014) suggests that to unfold narrated dialogue, researchers need to identify its form, function, and phenomenon. Story form deals with communicative structure and sense-making from concepts such as character roles, setting, and plot (Vannini, 2012; Kurtz, 2014; Tomai & Forbus, 2007). Following Kurtz's approach, we first analyzed the transcripts for the narrative process such as language, stories within stories, descriptions, argumentation, and opinions. Story function serves as the cognitive, affective, and motivational connections that bring coherence and meaning to the told story (Singer & Blagov, 2004). In the participants' stories, their values, thoughts, and emotions were brought into consciousness, which facilitated an understanding of the role of the life skills education programs. To progress to stories from transcripts, the transcripts were examined from various perspectives including the use of direct and indirect speech, evaluative sentences, and shifts in pronouns, to convey the meanings attached to the participants' narratives. This helped to understand the participants' narratives as the participants were recalling their experiences in the LSE programs.

Narratives of personal experience are a powerful form of discourse. They allow agency by the speaker to tell their story and what is most salient to them. However, narratives about past events are constructed, and by their nature, can be tainted by present views and the imperfection of memory retrieval (Patterson & Monroe, 1998), thereby bringing the accuracy of retrospective narratives into question. Psychologists point out that the challenges of recalling past events due to long retention intervals, one's degree of firsthand experience being recalled,



and the emotional state of the individual during the recalled experience can affect retrieval accuracy (Yaylacı, 2020). Furthermore, memories are often filtered through new information that can be unconsciously integrated and reconstructed in the telling of narratives (Loftus, 2017). To address these concerns, we focused on staple events and multiple follow-up communications with the participants to take them back in time to the most salient moments and have their narratives be pivoted around these events (Yaylacı, 2020). Multiple follow-up sessions allowed the first author to query the participants' experiences of events from multiple perspectives, allowing for exposition of detail and verification.

A re-storying framework was then developed to craft the participants' stories. The framework of the story included chronologically organizing the transcripts according to the dimensions of narrative analysis such as form, function, and phenomenon, and collaboratively creating a story using language through structural analysis. Each of the phases in the re-storying framework is a progression towards crafting a story from the transcripts. This resulted in a comprehensive narrative that described the individuals' lived experiences (see Nasheeda et al., 2019b for a more complete description of the methods employed).

### *Compliance with Ethical Standards*

Approval to carry out the study was granted by the ethics review committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia. Informed consent was obtained from the study participants prior to data collection. All data were kept confidential and saved in a secure location by the lead author. The names used in the manuscript are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

## **Results**

This section focuses on the retrospect narratives of two young adults – Shau and Al – who participated in the life skills education program conducted by the Ministry of Education, Maldives, for middle school, secondary, and higher secondary school students. As the participants chronicled their experiences in the program, the stories were situated within their school, home, and community lives. We present the data accordingly, in the context of the larger narratives of their own life stories. This allowed for explanations to causal sequences and reflects the way the participants structure knowledge and provide explanations to their own life events (Fiske, 1993). Individual behavior cannot be understood without understanding the social setting in which the individual is embedded (Czarniawska, 2004). The interplay between the individual's micro and macro level interactions and the meanings that were attached to the individual's emotions, thoughts and behaviors within the environment helped in the construction of the participants' expressions of their lived reality. Moreover, the structures in which the participants interacted with others shaped their development as representations of their reality.

The vignettes presented in the following section describe events that revolved around the two youths' everyday struggles, achievements, and skills acquired within and outside of the program. The narratives are structured chronologically, beginning with the youths' experiences in primary school up to their secondary and post-secondary experiences.

### **Narrative 1: Shau's Story**

Shau was selected because she was from the capital city Male'. She was 21 years old at the time of the interview. Shau was in grade six when her school conducted the life skills education program. She then continued to participate in the program from secondary to higher

secondary school. As a person, Shau always believed that her ideas cannot be forced onto her by somebody else. She is stubborn, confident, does not comply to peer pressure, and is not afraid to speak her mind. In describing her formative years at home and her family background, Shau emphasized the importance of her parents' commitment to education, particularly the role of her mother. She said:

It's just us; my mum, dad, my brother, and me. My brother is four years younger than me. My mum gave up her job to raise me and my brother. She is my biggest supporter. I am very close to my mum and I share everything with her. I believe my first mentor is my mum. I have learnt a lot from her. My parents were very determined to give us a good education because both of them didn't have the privilege to earn a good education. So, they did everything in their capacity to provide a good education.

Reflecting on her formative experiences with her family, Shau emphasized how much she valued her family, most importantly the role of her mother as a role model and mentor, and as the most trusted person in her life. Shau also highlighted the importance of education in her family and her parents' determination in providing a good education to their children. From her early years at home, Shau then spoke about her early educational experiences in primary school, her activities, and her seriousness as a student. During these early years, whenever she faced challenges, such as being bullied, she always turned to her mother for support. She explains:

I participated in netball and basketball. I participated in oratory competitions. I was always among the top three students in my class. I was given a lot of opportunities to shine. To me, it was my whole life. Even though I was bullied for being big in size, it didn't matter, at least I thought it didn't matter. Whenever something bothered me, I always confided in my mum. My parents always told me that everything wouldn't go as I wished. I would have to face criticism. People wouldn't always say things that would please me. So, I refused to become a victim to these acts. I put all my energy into my studies. I remember, one day my mum came to pick me up from school. I was talking to a girl in my class, whom I didn't really like. She was asking me too many questions and I got frustrated and annoyed and I snapped at her, "It's none of your business..." My mum was horrified. She was like, "That's not how you deal with something."

Shau was a well-rounded young person who excelled in many different areas. However, with this success came setbacks in her life. By emphasizing early experiences with bullying, it was clear that she was trying to push past the incidents, but it was difficult for her. Her mother's role is highlighted as someone who tries to help Shau cope with her challenges by normalizing the situation and trying to build resilience. Shau developed coping mechanisms by shifting her focus to studying. However, it was evident that she had anger issues and needed more effective communication skills. In middle school, Shau had her first experience with life skills education. In the following excerpt, she explains how she initially perceived the program and its impact on her.

Each week the 6th graders would be taken into the school hall. Our teacher would talk on different topics and show video clips related to the topic. It was something like a mass talk, where they showed us video clips and gave

information on being compassionate towards others and dealing with issues through communication, peer pressure and many other sessions. We were told that it was a program called life skills. The teacher would go on and on and we would have to just listen or watch something. Although there were some important and useful contents such as compassion, communication skills and peer pressure, I was impatient to go home as these sessions were usually held during the last periods. I felt hungry and bored. I never thought it [the lessons] would come in handy. Not until I faced bullying again and this time it bothered me. That's actually when my mom started telling me that people will not always say things that please me. So I tried to say nice things and not be rude to people. I guess with my mum's support and from the life skills sessions, I was able to think differently. So, when someone said anything, I would just brush it off because I know I'm better than that.

In this excerpt Shau describes how her first life skills program was conducted. It was a large class based mostly on video presentation and lecture format with little quality interaction with the facilitator. Shau highlights on the inappropriate timing of the program and how she perceived the program as something not worth sacrificing her lunchtime for. This was until she faced bullying again, however, where she was able to associate the incident with the content of the program. She explains how the program, in combination with her mother's advice, helped her respond more positively to challenging social interactions like bullying.

The next phase of Shau's story takes place in secondary school. She starts by providing context of how she became increasingly motivated toward success in school and in her personal activities, along with changes taking place at home. She shared:

I was becoming a teenager and my interest was shifting. I think part of it was that I was *very* determined to do well. Maybe to compensate for not having friends and becoming a victim to bullying again. Perhaps all of it. So, I put all my energy and focus into my education. My aim was to get good marks and excel in everything in school. I spent all my time in school, extra co-curricular activities, and sports. I became good at what I put my heart into. I started getting a lot of opportunities in schools. I became the House Activity Captain. I kept on striving to be perfect in whatever I did. I became good at everything I did.

It all changed when I was fifteen years old. My brother was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and major depression disorder. My parents' focus completely changed towards him. They gave more attention to him. I was pretty much left alone at home. I craved for their attention. I also felt that he [her brother] had more leniency than me, as he was given permission to do things while I had restrictions. This inconsistent disciplinary rule made me mad and frustrated. I became rebellious, disobedient and at times misbehaved. I was totally a different person at home. At home, I became vocal about things. I would say things that came into my mind and I spoke rudely. I felt confused, sad, and lonely. I was desperately in need of a friend but had none. I realized I had issues in making friends. All I had were my parents and my brother. I couldn't form a close relationship with him [her brother]. We constantly fought. I hid all my sorrows and worries behind my laughter. I laughed a lot when I was uncomfortable, sad, or unhappy. I never wanted to retaliate while I was in public, so I resorted to being quiet and withdrawn from conversations in which I felt uncomfortable. Being in public and socialization was becoming an

agonizing and difficult endeavor. I realized that I could not initiate a random conversation, let alone put on a smile. By the end of my final year in secondary school I was exhausted. I was feeling like I had enough of this.

Shau was a determined and focused student in secondary school but was deeply affected by the challenges that were occurring at home in relation to her brother's diagnosis. When her mother's attention and focus was diverted to her younger brother, Shau felt lost and disconnected. She experienced confusion, loneliness, and sadness, and used humor as a coping mechanism. She also developed social anxiety and withdrawn behavior. In the midst of these major changes in her personal development and family life, she reflected on how her life skills experiences in higher secondary school helped her get through those tumultuous years. She said:

The (life skills) sessions were very different from the ones I attended during primary and secondary school, which I could barely remember. The set up for the sessions was very different. It was very interactive. I became interested in these sessions. There was a glimpse of hope for me. I knew I had to make use of it. I was dealing with teenage issues, which was new to me. My mum never spoke about boys and sex. Mainly because it's not something we talk about with our parents or it's not something our parents talk about with us. So, when I went to the life skills program, the life skills teacher was very open. For the first time we felt we were treated as teenagers. The other thing that was discussed in life skills that caught my attention was not giving away information and learning to say "No". I started understanding the concept of "No" especially when we feel that something is not the way we want it to be. This was really important information to me, as my mother would never tell me something like this... I was able to be more careful. So, I don't give my contact out or tell where I live. I don't accept friend requests on social media platforms. I have never met someone that interests me. So, when I found someone, it didn't quite turn out the way I expected it to be. For the first time in my life, I felt good, standing up for myself. When I was put into the life skills program, I was able to relate to lot of the things that they taught and what was happening around me. I realized I was not alone, like me, most of my peers were figuring out their future. But everyone's path is different. I guess the life skills program taught me not to take everything personally, like to let go of things that don't actually have value. For I knew I was doing ok. Because in the life skills program, we were taught to say "No", we were educated to be cautious about certain things and that we don't need to comply to something because somebody told us to.

...A levels were challenging. I was required to sit for exams every now and then. It was not something I was used to. One reason for me to have done well in my O levels was because it was a one-time exam where I studied the same thing for three years. But it was very different in higher secondary. I ended up not doing well in my A levels. It was not what I expected. I also felt bad because I think my dad blamed me for not doing well. He said, "You know why you don't succeed?" and then he told me I am always late. His words made me ponder, "Maybe I am doing something wrong." In the life skills program, they taught us time management but I cannot remember learning any techniques. So, it's not really there in my mind. So, I was like, "Ok, now I have to do something

with my life”. I have to work hard. I was desperate to find a job and be on my own.

At this point Shau describes how her higher secondary school years helped her in dealing with social anxiety. There were other people apart from her mother with whom she found acceptance and developed trust. Since Shau had a high level of self-awareness, she also knew that she needed assistance and was looking for opportunities to help herself. For Shau, this was the first time in her life that life skills education became meaningful to her. She focused on improving other aspects of herself rather than her academic performance alone.

### *Pre-University*

At first, I was anxious about moving to a new place, and to be on my own. I was not sure if I could handle it. Being alone in a foreign country felt different and strange, but I guess a good strange. I understood living alone had its thrills but never contemplated on the challenges it would put me through; not until I was all alone, living in a foreign country. The truth was that I was not prepared for anything. I guess I was not ready to be on my own. I hate to admit it. To do everything on my own was too overwhelming. I had to get a grip on my life during my pre-university life. I had to do everything on my own including waking up, preparing meals, and going places. My parents were always there. My mum would wake me up and my food was always ready. I never had to make an effort to do anything. And then my dad would be there to pick me up before I could get ready to go to school and later when I went to work. It was at these times that I realized the importance of time management as I had to do everything for myself. I had to be more organized and divide my time. To do all these things and not having anyone to talk to, I was feeling lonely and I missed home terribly. My mum would call me every day and my dad would text me to check on me. They were always checking on me. I had a good support system. I was very glad for the support system I had. When I talk to my mum, she would say “the type of friends defines who you are.” I always think that up until now, I have made good decisions in making friends. When I make friends, I try to find friends who share similar sentiments, like sharing things with their mothers. Because I believe that if we are close to your parents the chances of doing something wrong is very slim. Because our conscience will not allow us to hurt our parents.

During her pre-university days, Shau found that being alone and moving away from home, while challenging, helped her acquire a more mature perspective about life. Being alone in a foreign country helped her realize how much she relied on her parents when she was younger and how much they provided for her. She was able to see how supportive her parents were, while also realizing that she had become somewhat over-reliant on them; that she lacked basic life skills and being on her own helped her to develop them. The close relationship she shared with her parents influenced who she had become as a young adult, and even helped her select friends.

### *Transitioning to Adult Roles*

Looking back at my life and my experiences, I would say that life skills taught me not to take everything really personally. I was able to let go of the things

that don't actually have value. Things like taking criticism or negativity. Instead, I learnt how to channel all negativity out and not be too hard on myself. I think part of my struggles I would attribute to procrastination, being late and not being able to manage my time. Had I not made my fair share of mistakes while growing up I don't think I would have been able to see things differently. I think it made me strong. I had to face different kinds of people and this experience taught me a lot about life. I think most of the things I learnt are from my parents and the life skills program. Some of the significant lessons taught in life skills were also emphasized by my mum. She was the first one to point out my mistakes. Looking back at my life, I think life skills played a huge part in everything I did. Including choosing friends, maintaining friendships, and communicating with people. I feel that my communication skills and listening skills have improved because of the program.

As a young adult, Shau comes to the realization that the life skills program had a significant impact on her young life in terms of helping her to be more resilient and self-accepting, helping her to manage her time, and learning from her mistakes. Perhaps most importantly, between her mother's support and the life skills program, Shau learned how to navigate relationships through being a strong communicator and good listener.

## **Narrative 2: Al's Story**

Al is from the southernmost part of the Maldives. He spent his entire childhood in the city of Addu with his family. He was 20 years old during the time of the interview. He has four siblings and is the second oldest in his family after his sister, who is four years older than him. Al always felt that he was the special one in the family as he was the only boy. He grew up in a loving and supportive environment. Al is a soft-spoken person, with a fun-loving personality. He is friendly and speaks in a polite manner. During the interviews, he made eye contact and was highly engaging.

Al described the life skills education program he was involved in as interactive and practical. However, Al was not able to recall as much from his life skills education program experiences as Shau, as he was not enrolled in the program for as long as she was. The narrative of Al's experience with the life skills program begins with a background description of his early family life.

### *Family*

My dad worked hard to provide for us. We were not rich, but my dad made sure that we were provided with the best he could afford. My mom, her focus was to take care of us. She made sure we were taken care of, and she wanted us to do well in school. She had high hopes for all of us. At times I tended to be playful and often got into small fights with my siblings. Mainly these fights were limited to who gets to watch TV on which channel. Usually, I would get my way because I'm the oldest boy in my family. Despite this, I love my family. I liked to help my mum by cleaning my room and doing other little chores around the house. I helped my younger siblings with their homework and studies.

In the above excerpt, Al's humble family background is emphasized, particularly the value placed on education within his family. It highlights the close-knit bond shared among family members and the playful interactions they engaged in while he was growing up.

Furthermore, it underscores the significance of being the first-born, particularly the first-born male, and the responsibilities that come with this role in Maldivian culture. These early life experiences significantly contributed to the development of Al's leadership qualities and his sense of responsibility towards his younger siblings. This theme of leadership would continue to be prominent throughout his formative years, shaping his childhood and adolescence.

### *Primary Schooling*

I was an average student in primary school. I didn't like school. School was such a bore for me. I was more engaged in sports activities than academics. This bothered my parents. I was constantly reminded to behave and perform well. In 7th grade, I started to change. The school went through a huge transformation. I was so excited about it. I found that the school management was very supportive and encouraged students to fit in. I was able to fit in well. I was enjoying school, learning new things, and making new friends. My grades began to improve. Most importantly, I began to see that the school rewarded students with good grades. Students who were able to obtain and maintain good grades were generously rewarded. I saw some of my seniors in leadership posts. I liked it. I wanted to be part of this elite group. This motivated me to study hard and become a member of this group. Soon I found myself in the middle of everything that was happening in school. I was working hard in school. This made my parents very happy. So, my first goal was to be selected as a junior prefect. I knew I had a good chance. I was hopeful. I worked harder to score well in my exams and was able to score good marks. But to my dismay I wasn't selected. I was very disappointed. But I didn't want my parents to know I was disappointed. At this point it became clearer to me what I wanted in life. I knew I was very attracted to leadership posts. I aspired to become a leader. I wanted to inspire others and be a good role model to others, especially to my younger siblings. I started believing in myself. I began to realize that with hard work we can achieve our goals.

Al was ambitious from a young age. He had a strong drive to make his family proud and was extremely goal-oriented. Al was not afraid to try new things and was determined to be an exemplary role model. He developed a strong work ethic, and he was willing to put in the necessary effort to achieve his goals. Despite facing setbacks, Al demonstrated resilience and a positive attitude. He overcame obstacles and challenges with a determined mindset, keeping a positive outlook on life. This positive attitude likely played a significant role in his ability to overcome difficulties and continue striving towards his goals.

### *Secondary Schooling*

I knew I had to stay focused. I had to maintain good discipline in class. By this time, I was pretty much accustomed to my study schedule. At the end of the first semester, it was again time for the selection of prefects. I didn't want to be too hopeful. My fears were real. I didn't make the cut this time either. By now, I was getting a bit depressed. Both my parents were always very supportive. I was determined to become a prefect. At this point, working towards becoming a prefect became my main objective apart from getting good grades. It was when I was in grade 9, I became a prefect. I was elated. I can still remember how proud I felt to be part of this elite group. My self-esteem boosted. School

became a profound place for me. I was feeling very accomplished. However, I knew I wanted more. I wanted to be among the school leaders. I wanted to be in a school post. School senior posts were usually reserved for final year students. However, I knew I was eligible as I had a clean record. My grades were good, my discipline was good. I was aware that many of my peers who were eligible applied. I wasn't the favorite as many of them were prefects before I became one. Despite this, I felt hopeful. I applied for school post. To my delight, I was selected as the deputy school captain. Being in a school post taught me to lead by example. I knew I had to be a role model for others and take up new responsibilities in helping the school management in maintaining discipline in school.

By the time Al reached secondary school, he was determined to become a school leader. Becoming a prefect was not enough for him; his goal became focused on becoming a school leader. He also displayed a high level of self-awareness at this stage in his development, confessing his fears and even feelings of dejection at not being able to fulfill his aspirations. However, with the support of his parents, he was able to set aside negative feelings and maintain hope that he could achieve his dreams.

### *Higher Secondary School*

I felt that we were more independent in high school and treated as mature young people. It was easy for me to understand the school dynamics. I remember meeting some of my seniors who were in grade 12. I basically copied how they behaved, which made it easier for me to adjust. I had confidence in the teachers whenever I faced an issue. It was when I was in grade 12, the school held its first life skills program. I found it quite interesting. The experience was good. We learnt many new things I remember, like the importance of communication, and we did some activities. Many of the life skills sessions had activities. Through that, we were able to understand it easily. Because the activities helped us in understanding the intended message rather than it being explained on the board. The sessions were fun with lots of interactions, but we had very minimal opportunity to practice it outside of the school. Then, just a few months before my final exam, my dad fell ill. Suddenly, his time in this world became numbered. The doctors said he was in his last stage of cancer and that he only had few months left. I couldn't concentrate on my studies. I knew that my final exams were around the corner. However, I knew I had to choose between being there for my dad and my studies. He passed away after a few days. We were devastated. I was shattered. Losing my dad was the hardest thing I had to go through during my adolescence. My family had to go through both emotional and financial loss. I was surprised by the generosity of my community. My higher secondary school, my secondary school, my neighbors, my friends, and many of my extended family came to our assistance. The school management, friends and loved ones raised funds for us. Studies were the last thing on my mind. I was confused, lost, and emotionally drained. It showed in my results. I couldn't obtain the results I wanted to. This made me feel even worse. I was drowning in an ocean of sorrow. It was the love and support from my community that helped me pull out of this psychological trauma. I was glad for each and every one of them. Even though life skills education was something I learnt a few months back, I could not remember any of it. Especially during



those times. It didn't help me in any way. I have never used any skills that I learnt in life skills education.

By the time he reached upper secondary school, Al had learned to fully appreciate his independence. Early on he found school to be enriching. He learned much from his fellow students, especially his seniors, and even found himself emulating them. It was at this point that he attended his first life skills program. While he found the activities interesting and engaging, especially those pertaining to communication, he lamented that he never had an opportunity to apply them outside of the classroom. This reality hit him the hardest after his father was diagnosed with cancer. Following his father's death, Al struggled. The demise of his father left his family in need of support, and Al's life had been suddenly turned upside down. The difficulties he had coping made him realize that he did not benefit much from the life skills program.

### *Transition to Adult Roles*

We had to make lots of changes to our lives to get up on our feet. My sister had already moved to Male' for work while I was still in secondary school. Being the eldest in the family who had completed her studies, she stepped into the role of the bread winner. I was desperate to finish school and find work. Our family had to grow up. I was forced to grow up. My whole life changed. With my sister moving to the capital, which is 1000 kilometers away, I found myself as the head of my household. I had taken up the responsibility to help my mum and my family. I found work in the printing business. It was while at this job I started recalling some aspects of media influence that was taught in life skills education. Working in the shop helped me relate to the topic. I could easily recall the activities and what was taught in it. For example, the power of influence and peer pressure. But I hardly remember any other topic. I could not recall a specific skill I used in it. By now, I was pretty much taking up adult responsibility. Between my sister working in Male' and me working here saving for my higher education. I began to understand the responsibilities of an adult. I realized I was slowly stepping into the shoes of an adult.

The major changes that Al's family experienced following his father's death led Al to grow up and take on new roles. He understood the events that were happening in his life were beyond his control. However, through shared sacrifice, Al and his family were able to adapt to the situation; his sister became the main breadwinner and Al went to work to also help provide. It was his experience working for a printing company that Al began to see connections with what he was doing to what he had learned in the life skills program. While he was unable to reference a particular skill or skill set that he employed in his work from the life skills program, he was able to connect his work to the general information covered in the class.

## **Discussion**

Past research on life skills development has focused on outcome evaluation of program effectiveness and factors that contribute to the transfer of skills (Newman & Anderson-Butcher, 2021). Much of this work has been carried out in the context of sport-based programs (Ronkainen et al., 2021). A dearth of research has explored young people's experiences in school and community-based life skills programs from the perspective of personal narratives, which are more apt to present life skills programs as ambiguous experiences of existential

meaning that result in self-transformation over time, rather than specific, practical skills that are easily identified, transferred, and quantified. Viewed from this perspective, life skills education as existential learning speaks to the process of how individuals become attuned to the world, find meaning and value in life, and make life choices (Ronkainen et al., 2021). The narrative approach employed in the current study allowed us to understand life skills education and participants' transition to adulthood against the backdrop of their everyday constellation of relationships. The findings indicate that learning was socially driven, situated, and embedded within important life events and key relationships. The narrative approach employed also demonstrated the stark differences in the life skills program experiences between Shau and Al, an oft-overlooked aspect of conventional, quantitative evaluations of life skills programs (Newman et al., 2022).

The way Shau and Al perceived their life skills education programs played a significant role in the choices they made in their lives, highlighting the theoretical underpinnings of their experiences. Both individuals were driven by goals, but their ability to achieve those goals often relied on the support they received from friends and family members. The interactions between the participants and their respective life contexts had a profound impact on the outcomes of their experiences. Shau and Al's narratives illustrate how life skills education experiences are shaped through the assimilation and accommodation of both life and programmatic learning experiences. Learning involves adjusting individual schemas to incorporate new experiences (Kowalski & Taylor, 2004). Social learning is not limited to understanding or recalling program content; it is a personal and social construction of meaning, driven by individuals' subjective explanations (Gibson, 2019). Therefore, the way life skills education programs shape participants' transition into adulthood is influenced by various factors, such as the participants' environments, their observations, their willingness to imitate and learn from others, their social interactions, and the kinds of experiences in which they engage. This was evident in the narratives shared by both Shau and Al, highlighting the significance of these factors in their own journeys.

While Shau's experiences in life skills played an important role in her transition to adulthood, she did not acquire skills exclusively from the life skills program. Shau attributed her learning to the combination of her mother's support and her experiences in the program. For example, support from her mother in the form of frequent discussions about Shau's social struggles was important for Shau to learn how to trust herself and develop healthy interpersonal relationships with friends. When adolescents effectively communicate with parents, they are more likely to develop a clear sense of self, learn how to form interpersonal relationships and role expectations, and develop empathy toward others (Bijstra et al., 1994). Likewise, in effective life skills programs, individuals learn communication skills to deal with their day-to-day challenges. Effective communication also facilitates an understanding of the barriers to communication and how to reduce communication gaps so that young people are better able to express their opinions, desires, and concerns (Gerami et al., 2015). Such was the case for Shau. The relationship she shared with her mother facilitated meaning making in what she was learning in the life skills education program. The combination of these experiences helped Shau acquire a clearer understanding of how to navigate socially challenging situations. Effective life skills programs are designed to utilize a social learning approach by building on how individuals learn from their interactions with the environment. In so doing, the pedagogy of life skills is based on active, participative, and experiential learning (Vranda & Rao, 2011; World Health Organization, 1993). Past research further reports the importance of various delivery approaches such as modelling, imitation, and reinforcement (Nasheeda et al., 2019a), particularly for adolescents.

Like Shau, Al struggled to find his identity during his teenage years, facing multiple hurdles and setbacks along the way. Al's ability to maintain resilience in the face of several

very challenging situations indicates that he had many positive influences from his community, school, and home. He, too, paved his own path with the help of his parents, and he remarked that he was able to learn from his environment by observing others, especially his seniors. Unlike Shau, however, Al was not involved in the life skills program for most of his adolescence. When he finally got a chance to participate in the program, he found it useful, but since his exposure came at a later stage in his adolescence, he did not get adequate time to practice what he learned outside of the program. As a result, unlike Shau, Al was not clear on what role his life skills program experiences played in his transition to adulthood. Al's experiences have been noted by researchers investigating life skills in developing countries. Murphy-Graham and Cohen (2022) observe that in many developing contexts, regardless of the focus of the program, outcomes are less compelling due to the limited time frame allotted for the programs. How life skills are taught, including program duration, matters as much as what is being taught (Schmidt, 2022).

The type of experiences that both participants had in the life skills program differed in several ways including age of first exposure, duration of program participation, delivery methods encountered, and the social environment in which the respective programs were carried out. It took a while for Shau to appreciate the usefulness of her life skills program. Nevertheless, life skills helped her manage and cope with many challenges in the course of transition such as bullying, puberty, family issues, and forming interpersonal relationships. For Al, it was a constant struggle of ups and downs without having the benefit of a formal program for much of his adolescence. Instead, he developed most of his skills solely from his experiences with school, parents, and peers. The process of constructing life skills education experiences is shaped by assimilation and accommodation of learning experiences, both in life and in the context of programs (Dejaeghere, 2022). Learning is a process of adjusting individual schemas to accommodate new experiences. It is not about mere understanding, nor remembering the contents that are taught, but is a personal and social construction of meaning out of experiences that do not have a structure beyond the individual's subjective explanations (Kwauk et al., 2017).

The knowledge and skills Shau acquired in the program helped her make informed decisions, become a better person, and establish healthy relationships with her peers. As Shau made her transition, she was confident and eager to step into adult roles. However, Al had to make his own adjustments and learn from trial and error. His experiences in the program did not significantly prepare him for adult roles. Through resilience, social support, and the strength of his personality, Al was able to step into adult roles. Having been introduced to life skills earlier might have helped Al better cope with the challenges he faced in his personal and social lives. How a life skills program shapes participants' transition to adulthood is predicated on participants' environment, internalized observations, social interactions, and how they make meaning from their experiences within and outside of life skills programs (Schmidt, 2022).

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

In line with past studies, the findings suggest that life skills programs can play an important role in buttressing adolescents' real-world developmental experiences. Several limitations must be noted, however. The current study utilized narrative inquiry to address a critical gap in previous life skills-related research; that is, the lack of in-depth studies on adolescents' experiences in life skills programs, particularly those from non-Western, non-sports-based cultural contexts. The study highlighted the stories of two Maldivian youth who had very different life skills program experiences. This approach allowed us to explore the inherent diversity of experiences that exist within life skills program design and delivery, while

pointing to possible conclusions about the efficacy of the programs insofar as they relate adolescents' transition to adulthood.

As qualitative studies are not typically aimed at generalizing findings across populations, the study findings cannot be applied to the general population of youth in the Maldives. The findings may help in generating hypotheses for future research, however. To start, the nature of life skills education precludes it from being studied in a vacuum. Life skills should be delivered and evaluated against the context of adolescents' everyday lives. Toward this end, elements of program delivery such as structure, delivery methods, cultural context, and program duration must be considered. Future research should extend the current findings by implementing more robust qualitative designs to meet these goals. Other potential directions for future research include studies that utilize narratives of life skills experiences from adolescents engaged in health-compromising behaviors. A narrative approach can be employed to better understand the unique challenges these youth face in terms of life skills transfer. Such approaches, which may also be helpful in aligning life skills-related interventions for adolescents included group therapy and other rehabilitation and intervention programs. Additionally, findings may be yielded through interviews with parents and teachers on the effects of life skills on adolescents. Mixed method studies can be conducted to evaluate program effectiveness and to better understand which skills are most relevant at different stages of individuals' lives.

While the current study helps to identify gaps in the delivery of life skills programs in the Maldives, it also signals that there is a need for more active roles by stakeholders and policy makers in designing, implementing, and delivering age-appropriate programs. For one, the findings point to the need for life skills to be introduced earlier in the lives of Maldivian youth. Also, with proper evaluation and monitoring, future programs can ensure transfer of skills into other areas of adolescents' lives.

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