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The Effectiveness of Life Skills Training on Character-Development and Academic Achievement of Primary School Students in Bam and Safiabad Counties

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of life skills training on the character-development and academic achievement of female primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties.

Methods: Methodologically, the study was quasi-experimental, with a pretest–posttest design and a control group. The statistical population consisted of female primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties, from whom 30 students were selected by convenience sampling and assigned equally to an experimental group (15) and a control group (15). Data were collected with the Pham and Taylor Academic Achievement Questionnaire (1999) and the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (1984). The experimental group received 10 sessions of life skills training based on the World Health Organization protocol, whereas the control group received no intervention during this period. Data were analyzed with multivariate and univariate analysis of covariance.

Results: The results showed a significant overall effect of group on the linear combination of academic achievement and character-development achievement ($p < .001$). In addition, after controlling for pretest scores, the effect of group was significant for both academic achievement ($F = 7.20$, $p < .001$) and character-development achievement ($F = 8.91$, $p < .001$).

Conclusions: Accordingly, life skills training strengthens students' individual, social, and behavioral abilities and thereby simultaneously promotes their academic and personality development; moreover, including life skills training in the curricula and educational programs of primary schools can be regarded as an effective approach to the all-round development of students.

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Introduction

In modern educational approaches, the aim of education is not merely to increase knowledge and earn academic grades; the student's all-round development, the ability to adapt to different situations, to build healthy relationships, to make responsible decisions, and to manage emotions effectively are also important components of students' growth and success (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021; Corcoran et al., 2018). In today's world, character-development and academic achievement are among the most important outcomes of the educational process and indicate the extent to which students attain educational goals (Cipriano et al., 2023). In the upstream documents of the Islamic Republic of Iran's education system, particularly the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (2011), the words "instruction" and "upbringing" are mentioned together, which shows the importance of teaching and assessing progress in non-cognitive competencies as much as academic skills, and the overall approach of the documents emphasizes the all-round development of students (Yadollahi & Ebrahimi, 2024).

A review of recent research on academic achievement also shows that academic achievement is related to important outcomes such as psychosocial adjustment, life satisfaction, mental health, future job performance, and socioeconomic status; academic achievement is therefore not merely a narrow educational outcome but can be related to the student's path of character development (Costa et al., 2024). On this basis, desirable character-development and academic achievement can be regarded as a state in which the student, while attaining desirable levels of learning and academic performance, also develops appropriately in behavioral, social, and emotional terms. Such a student not only learns the educational material but is also able to apply what has been learned in different situations, set goals for their own learning, follow up on educational activities, interact constructively with the teacher and peers, and use appropriate strategies in the face of academic problems (Fong et al., 2023).

Various approaches have been proposed to improve students' character-development and academic achievement (Vahidi et al., 2018). One of these approaches is life skills training (Ndetei et al., 2022; Khasawneh, 2024). Life skills training as a program was first proposed by Botvin and Griffin in 1980–1984, and in 1993 the World Health Organization (WHO) developed this educational program in order to prevent problems and raise the level of mental health in society (Foroutanbagha et al., 2015). The term life skills refers to a large group of psychosocial and

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interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, have good communication, cognitive, and emotional skills, and lead healthy and productive lives (UNICEF, 2005, as cited in Brandt & Klein, 2016). These skills are divided into five main groups: decision-making and problem solving, creative and critical thinking, self-awareness and empathy, communication and interpersonal skills, and coping with stress and managing emotions (Abbasi et al., 2025).

A review of research on life skills in compulsory education shows that although the definition of life skills is not the same across studies, these skills generally relate to abilities that prepare the student for adjustment, participation, and effective engagement with different life situations (Hvalby et al., 2024). The studies of Wang and Yu (2023), Yuen and Datu (2021), Park and Peterson (2016), and Abbasi et al. (2025) showed that life skills training has a significant effect on improving academic self-efficacy, increasing academic self-concept, and increasing self-confidence and social interaction. On the other hand, the studies of Durlak et al. (2011) and Pourghorban Gourabi et al. (2021) have shown that the absence of life-skills-related training can lead to problems such as academic decline, weak decision-making, reduced self-confidence, increased anxiety, emotional problems, and even the emergence of high-risk behaviors in the future.

In stating the importance and necessity of the present study on life skills training in primary schools, it can be said that life skills training for students is a vital tool and helps them manage individual, social, and academic challenges (Abbasi et al., 2025). In an extensive meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2011) showed that implementing life skills training programs in schools led to an 11 percent improvement in academic performance, a 25 percent increase in social skills, and a marked reduction in students' behavioral problems. In view of this evidence, it is clear that addressing life skills training in primary schools is necessary from various educational, upbringing, psychological, and social perspectives, and that teaching these skills, especially in childhood, can form the basis of a healthy and successful personality in adulthood and prevent many psychological and social problems. Despite the growing evidence on the role of life skills training in promoting students' individual, social, and emotional abilities and the relationship of these skills with some positive school outcomes, a considerable gap remains in the research literature. A considerable part of earlier studies has examined the outcomes of life skills training separately and mainly in terms of social-emotional skills, mental health, behavior, school engagement, or academic achievement,

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and few have examined character-development and academic achievement simultaneously as a comprehensive outcome. On the other hand, although recent meta-analyses and intervention studies support the relationship of social-emotional skills and school-based programs with academic achievement and some character-education outcomes, it is still not clear to what extent coherent life skills training in the educational context studied can improve students' character-development and academic achievement. The main gap of the present study is therefore the lack of sufficient and coherent evidence on the relationship and effect of life skills training as the independent variable on character-development and academic achievement as the dependent variable in a specific educational and cultural context. Addressing this gap can, while clarifying the role of life skills training in achieving upbringing and academic goals at the same time, provide the empirical evidence needed to design and implement evidence-based educational programs in primary schools. The present study was therefore conducted to determine the effectiveness of life skills training on the character-development and academic achievement of primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties.

Material and Methods

The present study was applied in purpose and quasi-experimental in method, with a pretest–posttest design and a control group. The statistical population consisted of all primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties who were enrolled in the 2024–2025 academic year (1403–1404). Sampling was done by multistage random cluster sampling. To this end, after obtaining the necessary permits from the Islamic Azad University, Sabzevar Branch, and coordinating with the relevant educational authorities, a list of primary schools in Bam and Safiabad counties was prepared. The schools were then classified by different educational and geographic districts, and, observing proportion and equality among the districts, a number of schools were selected at random. In the next stage, from among the students of the selected schools, those who were willing to take part in the study and who, after initial screening, had the lowest scores on character-development and academic achievement were identified. After checking the inclusion criteria and obtaining parents' informed consent, 30 students were selected as the final sample. The participants were then randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group of 15 each. The inclusion criteria were being a primary school student, being enrolled at the time of the study, and

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willingness to take part and cooperate in the training sessions. The exclusion criteria were absence from more than 2 training sessions of this study and unwillingness to continue cooperating. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, preservation of human dignity, no physical or psychological harm, and confidentiality of participants throughout the study, were observed by the researchers. Participants were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study whenever they no longer wished to continue. In addition, during the training period the control group was on a waiting list, and after the study the control group also received "life skills training."

After the sample was selected and the groups formed, the pretest of the academic achievement and character-development achievement variables was administered to both groups. The experimental group then took part in the life skills training program, whereas the control group did not receive this training during the intervention. The training program was delivered in 10 sessions of 60 to 90 minutes, suited to the cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics of primary school students. In developing and delivering the sessions, effort was made to conduct the training in an active and participatory way, so that, in addition to receiving theoretical material, students had the opportunity to practice and apply the skills in real or simulated situations. For this purpose, methods such as group discussion, role-play, educational games, situation simulation, brainstorming, problem solving, situation analysis, practical exercises, watching short films, and feedback were used. After the tenth session, the posttest was administered to both groups, and the pretest and posttest data were used to analyze the effectiveness of the intervention. The content of the World Health Organization (1997) life skills training sessions is as follows:

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Table 1. Content of the Life Skills Training Sessions

Session	Content
First	Introduction to life skills: The aim of this session was to familiarize students with the concept of life skills and its importance in individual and social life.
Second	Self-awareness: The aim of the session was to increase students' knowledge of their individual characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, thoughts, and feelings.
Third	Empathy: The aim of this session was to strengthen the ability to understand others' feelings and perspectives.
Fourth	Effective communication: The aim of the session was to improve active listening, appropriate speaking, turn-taking in conversation, and attention to body language.
Fifth	Interpersonal relationships: The aim of this session was to strengthen the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with others.
Sixth	Decision-making: The aim of the session was to familiarize students with the process of informed decision-making and the examination of the consequences of different choices.
Seventh	Problem solving: The aim of this session was to teach logical and creative methods for solving problems.
Eighth	Critical and creative thinking: The aim of the session was to strengthen the ability to analyze and evaluate information and to generate creative solutions.
Ninth	Stress management and emotion control: The aim of this session was to identify sources of stress, recognize emotions, and learn appropriate strategies for managing them.
Tenth	Summary and feedback: The aim of the session was to review and consolidate the skills taught and to examine how they are applied in everyday life.

Instruments

To collect the research data, the standard Pham and Taylor academic achievement questionnaire and the Vineland scale for assessing social and character development were used. The instruments were administered to both groups before the intervention at pretest and after the intervention at posttest.

Pham and Taylor Academic Achievement Questionnaire: The Pham and Taylor (1999) questionnaire was used to measure academic achievement. It contains 48 items scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much); on this basis a score below 120 indicates weak academic performance, a score above 175 indicates strong academic performance, and a score between 121 and 174 indicates average academic performance (Taylor & Pham, 1999). In the study of Hesampour and Rezaei (2024), the content and face validity (content validity index and content validity ratio) of this questionnaire were examined and confirmed quantitatively and

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qualitatively by experts. In the study of Gholtash et al. (2010), the content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by professors and its reliability, by Cronbach's alpha, was reported as .84. In the study of Askari et al. (2020), the reliability of the questionnaire by Cronbach's alpha for the total academic performance score was .83. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .77.

Vineland Social Maturity Scale: This scale was first devised by Edgar Doll in 1935 and published in April of that year, and it was revised in 1965. The Vineland Social Maturity Scale is one of the scales for measuring developing abilities and measures a person's responsibility and ability to meet practical needs. Vineland believed that the quality of social competence can be measured by summing up the tasks performed at various ages. The scale covers the age range from birth to 25 years. Tavakoli et al. (2000) standardized the survey form of the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale in Iran. Test–retest coefficients were found to be satisfactory in that study. In a study with a sample of 123, a test–retest reliability of .92 was reported (Parastar, 2009). In the study of Zadshir (2008), the internal reliability of the test, by internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha, was .68. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .84.

Data Analysis

After the questionnaires were collected, the data were coded and analyzed with SPSS version 26. In descriptive statistics, indices including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to describe the data. In inferential statistics, given the pretest–posttest design with a control group, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to examine the effectiveness of life skills training on students' character-development and academic achievement. In this analysis, posttest scores were treated as the dependent variable, membership in the experimental or control group as the independent variable, and pretest scores as the covariate. Before running the multivariate analysis of covariance, the necessary statistical assumptions, including normality of the data distribution, homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of regression slopes, were checked. The significance level of the tests was set at .05, and in addition to statistical significance, the effect size of the intervention was also reported.

Results

In the present study, the means of the study variables at pretest and posttest were as follows:

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Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Pretest and Posttest Scores of the Study Variables in the Experimental and Control Groups

Variable	Stage	Experimental		Control	
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Academic achievement	Pretest	121.40	8.10	122.10	7.95
	Posttest	136.85	7.95	123.40	8.20
Character-development achievement	Pretest	148.20	9.05	147.80	8.75
	Posttest	162.50	8.15	148.60	9.10

Before testing the research hypothesis and carrying out the multivariate and univariate analyses of covariance, the relevant assumptions were first examined. The results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for the normality of the distribution of the character-development and academic achievement variables in the experimental and control groups and at the pretest and posttest stages are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Normality Tests for the Study Variables

Variable	Groups	Kolmogorov–Smirnov (Sig)					
		Pretest			Posttest		
		N	Statistic	*p*	*N*	Statistic	*p*
Academic achievement	Experimental	15	.34	.14	15	1.12	.13
	Control	15	.57	.15	15	.19	.12
Character-development achievement	Experimental	15	.87	.24	15	.61	.15
	Control	15	.71	.82	15	.42	.17

Because the significance levels in both the experimental and control groups before and after the educational intervention are greater than the assumed error level of .05, the assumption of normality of the data for the academic achievement and character-development achievement variables is confirmed. The use of a parametric statistical test (analysis of covariance) to analyze the research hypotheses is therefore permissible. Levene's test was also used to check the homogeneity of variances, and its results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variances of the Posttest Variables

Variable	*F* statistic	Between-group degrees of freedom	Within-group degrees of freedom	Significance level
Academic achievement – posttest	.14	1	27	.70
Character-development achievement – posttest	.18	1	27	.66

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Given that the significance level of Levene's test is greater than the assumed error level of .05, the assumption of equality of variances is accepted for the academic achievement and character-development achievement variables. Box's *M* test was also used to check the homogeneity of the variance–covariance matrices, and its results are presented in Table 5:

Table 5. Box's M Test of Homogeneity of the Variance–covariance Matrices

Box's *M* statistic	*F* statistic	Between-group degrees of freedom	Within-group degrees of freedom	P
2.74	.41	6	58	.87

The probability value from Box's M test (p = .87) is greater than .05, so there is no reason to reject the hypothesis of homogeneity of the variance–covariance matrices between the control and experimental groups. The assumption of multivariate analysis of covariance is met. In this study, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to test the research hypothesis, because there is more than one dependent variable and the effect of the pretests has to be controlled. The results are presented in Tables 6 and 7:

Table 6. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance Based on Wilks's Lambda

Variable	Wilks's lambda	*F* statistic	Group degrees of freedom	Error degrees of freedom	Significance level	Effect size
Academic achievement – pretest	.51	8.02	3	28	.001	.48
Character-development achievement – pretest	.49	7.65	3	28	.001	.50
Group (control/experimental)	.53	6.88	3	28	.001	.46

The effect of group (control/experimental) on academic achievement and character-development achievement is significant at the .05 level at posttest. The pretest of the variables also has a significant effect on posttest values. The life skills training intervention therefore has a considerable effect on the academic and character-development achievement of primary school students.

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Table 7. Effects of Pretest and Group on the Posttest of the Variables

Dependent variable (posttest)	Independent variable	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	*F* statistic	Significance level	Effect size
Academic achievement	Pretest	12.45	1	12.45	24.12	< .001	.47
	Character-development achievement – pretest	1.32	1	1.32	2.55	.11	.08
	Group	3.72	1	3.72	7.20	.001	.20
Character-development achievement	Pretest	11.85	1	11.85	20.48	< .001	.42
	Academic achievement – pretest	0.05	1	0.05	0.09	.76	.004
	Group	5.15	1	5.15	8.91	.001	.24

The effect of the pretest on the posttest values of each variable is significant at the .05 level. The effect of group (control/experimental) on academic achievement and character-development achievement is also significant at the .05 level. The results in Table 7 show that 20 percent of the covariance of the posttest scores of academic achievement of primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties is due to the effect of life skills training. In addition, given the significance level of .001, which is below .05, there is a significant difference between the estimated means of character-development achievement scores of the experimental and control group participants, and the size of the differences indicates that 24 percent of the covariance of the posttest scores of character-development achievement of primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties is due to the effect of life skills training.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of life skills training on the character-development and academic achievement of primary school students in Bam and Safiabad counties. The results of the multivariate analysis of covariance showed that life skills training has a significant effect on students' character-development and academic achievement, so that 46 percent of the difference between the experimental and control groups on the dependent variables was attributed to the experimental intervention. The results of the univariate analysis of covariance also showed that 20 percent of the variance of posttest academic achievement scores and 24 percent of the variance of character-development achievement were affected by life skills training. These

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findings indicate that life skills training does not merely change a set of students' individual and social abilities but, by bringing about change in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes, can also have important educational and upbringing outcomes.

In comparing the findings of the present study with earlier studies, no study was found that simultaneously examined the effectiveness of life skills training on both academic achievement and character-development achievement in primary school students. Nevertheless, the present finding on academic achievement is consistent with the results of Mohammadikarkani et al. (2019), Park and Peterson (2016), and Ndetei et al. (2022). The findings of the present study on the effect on upbringing and behavioral outcomes are also consistent with the results of Khasawneh (2024), Kirchhoff and Keller (2021), Hvalby et al. (2024), and Taylor et al. (2017). Evidence from extensive meta-analytic studies has likewise shown that school-based social-emotional learning programs can, in addition to improving social-emotional skills and attitudes, improve behavior, peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement.

In explaining the effectiveness of life skills training on academic achievement, it can be said that teaching skills such as self-awareness, decision-making, problem solving, emotion control, stress management, and effective communication, directly or indirectly, increases the student's capacity to manage the learning process. From this perspective, the academic improvement observed in the experimental group can be regarded as the result of a multistage chain of influence. Life skills training can therefore be regarded as a kind of strengthening of the student's inner resources for facing academic tasks. In fact, this training does not directly increase the course content; it improves the student's capacity to use the educational content effectively. In other words, two students may be similar in cognitive ability and amount of formal instruction, but the student who has more self-control, emotion management, perseverance, problem solving, and communication skills may manage their time and energy better and make more effective use of learning opportunities.

Regarding character-development achievement, the findings of the present study showed that life skills training significantly improved this variable. This finding can be explained by the multidimensional nature of life skills, because a considerable part of the skills taught relate directly to individual behavior, responsibility, self-control, rule-following, empathy, relations with others, and ways of dealing with conflicts. One of the most important mechanisms of this effect is the

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strengthening of self-control and the internalization of behavioral rules. In primary school, a considerable part of students' upbringing-related behavior is influenced by the external control of parents and teachers. The basic aim of upbringing is for this external control to gradually become internal control; that is, the student follows appropriate rules and norms not merely out of fear of punishment or for reward but because they understand the consequences of their behavior and accept responsibility. Life skills training can facilitate this process, because through practicing real situations the student learns to evaluate their behavior, predict its consequences, and take responsibility for their choices. Extensive evidence shows that school-based social-emotional learning programs can improve behavior, social-emotional skills, peer relationships, school functioning, and school climate. Evidence on self-regulation interventions also shows that improved self-regulation can, in addition to academic outcomes, be accompanied by improved social skills and reduced behavioral problems.

From another perspective, life skills training increases the student's responsibility and behavioral independence. When a child learns to consider the consequences of their decisions, to admit their mistakes, to act to correct their behavior, and to take their share in group activities, components of upbringing-related competence are in fact formed in them. The increase in character-development achievement scores in the experimental group can therefore be taken as a sign of the transfer of the theoretical teaching of life skills to students' everyday behavior. In explaining these findings, it can be said that life skills play a decisive role in strengthening self-awareness, self-control, emotion management, empathy, decision-making, problem solving, and communication skills, and teaching these skills to students helps them regulate their behavior better, consider the consequences of their decisions, accept responsibility for their behavior, and use more constructive ways in their interaction with others. From this perspective, life skills training is not merely the transfer of a set of individual skills but an upbringing process that can provide the ground for the formation of responsible behavior, cooperation, empathy, and observance of social norms (Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021). It can therefore be concluded that life skills training, as a comprehensive and purposeful educational intervention, in addition to affecting cognitive and academic skills, has a direct positive and significant effect on children's character development.

One of the limitations of the present study is the use of self-report instruments, since students' physical and mental condition can affect their responses. The specific population studied (primary

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school students) and the restriction to Bam and Safiabad counties should also be mentioned; caution should therefore be exercised in generalizing the results. One of the important mechanisms of the effect of life skills training is the strengthening of self-regulation and emotion management skills, which enables students to cope better with academic stress and social problems and to act with more motivation and success in the school environment (Life, 2010). The increase in character-development achievement scores in the experimental group shows that, after the training, students had a greater ability to observe rules, to be responsible, and to engage in positive social interactions.

Finally, on the basis of what was obtained in this study, it is suggested that the Education Department of Bam and Safiabad counties plan workshops aimed at improving life skills, run by experienced instructors, and that the ten skills be taught to children practically, step by step, in order to improve the academic and character-development achievement of primary school students. Teaching life skills in the primary school curriculum can also be adopted as an effective path. On the other hand, because teachers have continuous and direct contact with students, holding training workshops for teachers and parents can improve their life skills in the school and home environments and thereby indirectly increase students' life skills.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Hakim Sabzevari University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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