

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Evaluation of life skills in students of Nursing: a descriptive study

**Dimitrios E. Papageorgiou**, PhD, MSc, Coordinator of Nursing Specialities, General Hospital of Athens "G. Gennimatas", Athens, Greece.

**Anna Kavga**, RN, RHV, MSc (Education), Lecturer, B' Department of Nursing, School of Health and Welfare professions, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Greece.

#### Corresponding author

Dimitrios Papageorgiou, Aroanion 12-14, Ampelokipi, p.o box 11522, Athens  
E – mail: nos\_eidik@gna-gennimatas.gr  
Tel. +302106427265, mobile +306938358890

#### Abstract

**Background:** Life skills are a set of human skills acquired via teaching or direct experience that are used to handle problems and questions commonly encountered in daily human life. The basic element of a skill is the ability to create and materialise an effective sequence of choices, so as to achieve the desirable effect. It is important that somebody allocates life skills in six broad sectors: sensitivity, experiencing emotions, realism thought, language and the internal logos, harmony in self-attribution and communication and finally, remuneration activity in finding a meaning in profession

**Aim:** The determination of nursing students' opinions with regard to the existence of life skills and to what degree they impact.

**Methodology:** The answers of 144 students of two Nursing Departments in Greece (one from Athens and one from providences) were evaluated using a questionnaire in order to determine their opinions about the non-existence or existence of life skills and if so what level of impact they had on. The questionnaire included 69 questions describing the following seven dimensions of life skills: emotion, thought, relations, study, professional settlement, leisure time, mental – bodily health. The answers were given based on the 4 point Likert scale (no need for improvement, minimal need, small need, large need). For data process we used SPSS 14 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for Windows and more concretely, the Mann –Whitney U control and Pearson' s cross-correlation parametric coefficient.

**Results:** The descriptive analysis of this questionnaire showed that the sample of students had an effectual or a large need of improvement at a percentage of 42.9% in the emotional sector, 32.2% in the sector of thought, 31% in the sector of relations, 41.3% in the sector of study, 32.7% in the sector of professional settlement, 30.7% in the sector of leisure time and 35.1% in the sector of health. Mann – Whitney U control showed statistically important differences in 23 of the 69 questions. The Pearson's cross-correlation parametric coefficient showed that they should emphasize in sectors as maintenance of balance between work, personal relations and family, as well as decision-making.

**Conclusions:** The objective of education in life skill is to help people increasing the probability of making good and no insufficient choices in targeted skills.

#### Keywords

Health – promoting behaviors, social skills, psychosocial well-being, University students, interpersonal and communication skills, critical skills, life-style

## Introduction

The significance of the word "skill" includes the most excellent knowledge in a specific sector, the ability and dexterity in an activity. Nevertheless, the basic element of a skill is the ability to create and materialise an effective sequence of choices, so as to achieve the desirable effect. For example, if somebody seeks to become a good listener, he should create and materialise the appropriate choices in order to become a good listener (Rautalinko E et al 2007). The fact that all skills include choices doesn't mean that activities should take place in a mechanical way. Approaching skills can help us release our spontaneity (Nelson Jones R 1996).

The concept of "skills" is better perceived not as a subject in which we possess or not a skill but, as if we consider that we possess sources of skills and deficits or a mix of those. For example if somebody makes the right choices in a sector of skills by either listening carefully or helping in resolving a problem, this is a source of dexterity. If he makes insufficient choices in skills regions, this is a deficit of skills. In all sectors of helping skills we possess sources and have deficits to a variable extent. For example, in the listening sector of skills, somebody can be good in understanding customers, but insufficient in showing that he understand them (Zaro JS et al 1997). The final objective of this study is to help in shifting balance of sources and deficits towards the direction of sources.

The sector of education in life skills is rapidly developing. Somebody can be educated in life skills as a part of personal help or group advisory. Nevertheless, the education in life skills often includes creating limited duration structured groups in order to educate those participating in one or more specific skills. Sometimes terms are used as "personal and social education", "psychological education" and "education in social skills" instead of "education in life skills" (Nelson Jones R 1998).

The reasons of developing education in life skills include the following:

- In an ideal world, the objective of education in life skills would be to educate everyone in those skills required in order to face every mission in each stage of their life. This education emphasises more developmentally than correctional or penitentiary (Nelson – Jones R 1998, Megel M et al 1994).

- The developmental education in life skills also has a preventive emphasis. For example, when Daws, wrote about the need of preventive work in British schools, he supports that the most powerful expression of preventive beginning is the work to be dedicated in the personal and social education of all students in

such a way, so that it fulfils their developmental needs (Daws 1973).

- The problems of life are extensive (Millar 1991, Turner R et al 2001). A clue on this ascertainment is provided by the statistics on cases of divorce. In Great Britain, one out of three marriages leads to divorce with the vast majority of involved children to be under 16 years (Zaro JS et al 1997). In Australia, the total percentage is likely 30-35% (Nelson – Jones R 1998). In the USA, almost half of all marriages almost lead to divorce and one in two children are raised in a single parent family until they reach the age of 18 (Duck 1996).

- Pressure of subordinates responsibility is increased. Certain subordinates support that their output to cost ratio is larger if they actively deal with developmental and preventive interventions, like education in life skills, as opposed to passively wait in the workplace area for patients needing correctional treatment. They search ways in order to have the largest possible impact on more individuals (Nelson – Jones R 1998).

- The influence of cognitive-behaviourism is increased. The theoretical base for the largest part of education in life skills lies in the revolution of behaviourism (based on action) in the 60s and imminent cognitive (based on thought) revolution of the 70s. The behaviouristic and cognitive approaches have been associated in a hybrid named cognitive-behaviourism. In the present day, the most education programs on life skills focus on skills of thought and action (Nelson – Jones R 1998).

As proven before, a way of regarding life skills is their correlation with developmentally duties-missions during life (Acton G & Malathum P 2000). Lists of developmental duties (focused on North-American culture) have been given by writers as Havinghurst, Blocher, Egan and Cowan. Havinghurst considers that the duties-mission are mainly based on biological maturation, as the learning how to walk, demonstrating less cultural variant, while those developed out of social needs present the largest variant (Egan G. & Cowan MA 1979, Blocker D 1994, Havighurst R 1999).

Though they are connected with developmental duties-mission, another way of regarding life skills, are the skills of effective way of living, psychological health or human functions of higher level (Walker S et al 1987, Pender N 1996). In other words, should somebody have the effective responsibility for his choices in life, then he must also discover those sectors requiring skills. At the same time, it is important that somebody allocates life skills in four broad sectors: sensitivity, experiencing emotions, realism thought, language and the

internal logos, harmony in self-attribution and communication and finally, remuneration activity in finding a meaning in profession (Nelson – Jones R 1998, Lucas J et al 2000).

**Aim**

The search of nursing student’s opinions with regard to the existence of life skills and to what degree they impact.

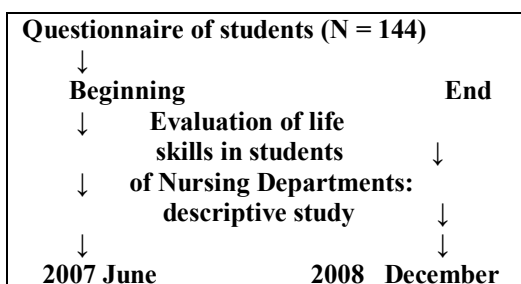
**Methodology**

The study impresses the opinions of students of two higher educations of Greece (one from Athens and one from providences), studying the Department of Nursing. It is a descriptive study where analysis of significance that students attribute in the term "dexterities of life" is made through a partially structured interview.

**Sample**

Stratified sampling was selected and the collection of samples was completed throughout a period of eighteen months (Table 1).

**Table1. Time of the study**



Questionnaires were used, distributed to students coming from all socio-economic classes, and after being informed about the objective of this research, 144 from 170 questionnaires were completely anonymously and returned to the study team.

**Instrument**

Development of the questionnaire was focused on nursing students’ life skills. The content of the measurement tool was supported based on the existence of conceptual theories with regard to terms as "individual, social, psychological education", on existing inquiring activity as well as on attendance of nursing students to open semi-structured interviews. The final questionnaire included 69 questions categorised as follows: emotion, thought, relations (friendly, erotic, professional), study, professional settlement/confrontation of unemployment, leisure time, health. These seven categories were then grouped into questions,

reflecting seven different dimensions of students, that compose or at least impress the existence or not of life abilities.

The questionnaire included two parts: one for the collection demographic and other elements and one for the collection of elements that concern the imprinting of general characteristics that students of Nursing have during their life (expression of emotions, structured frame of thought, relations, leisure time, health). The answers were given based on the 4 point Likert scale (no need for improvement, minimal need for improvement, small need for improvement, large need for improvement).

The questionnaire’s reliability was supported by the study of life skills theoretical determinations, as well as by the study of existing inquiring activity results with regard to the determination of life skills. Alpha factor was used (Cronbach’s coefficient alpha) to evaluate the reliability of the entire measurement tool. Thus, alpha factor for the total of 69 questions was 0.89.

The validity of the measurement tool content was supported in a pre testing that took place using students who were asked to judge the content and frame of the questionnaire. For example they were asked if the questions were palpable, syntactically well formulated or if other subjects should also be pointed out.

**Ethical issues**

This study was conducted according to the general principles of research ethics (Helsinki 2006). Data collection will be conducted according to national data collection and ethical standards. Before the conduct of this research a relative demand was posed to the Department Committee of two Institutions and after authorisation was given, the inquiring team collected the sample, ensuring the sample about keeping their anonymity and that their answers would by no means influence the way they are seen by the personnel of Institutions in which they studied. Students were given oral and written information and a questionnaire with an introductory letter including information on the nature and purpose of the research, the subject’s right to refuse to participate, anonymity and confidentiality of all personal information.

**Collection of data**

Informed consent was given by everyone participating in the research. Upon the participant’s approval, the researcher posted the questions and based on experiences the participant answered using one out of four choices - no need for improvement, minimal need for improvement, small need for improvement, large need for improvement.

Demographic characteristics as age, sex, year of study, origin, familial, professional status and educative level of parents, working while studying as well as the stay during studies, were all answered by the students.

### Data process/Statistical analysis

In order to process qualitative data SPSS 14 for Windows was used (Statistical package for the Social Sciences). By setting a level of importance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) we used the Mann - Whitney test statistical method so that we can reveal differences and the Pearson cross-correlation in order to discover which the most important parameters are in order to develop life skills. In all tests, a double tail interval was used. The methods selected and used in the analysis were:

- Testing research (pilot study) in a small sample and consequently a draft statistical analysis of data that rose from the particular sample.
- Evaluations of internal cohesion reliability (internal consistency reliability) based on the alpha factor (Cronbach's coefficient alpha).
- Description of variables numerically (frequency, percentage, means, standard deviation, standard fault)
- Mann – Whitney U test
- Pearson's parametric cross-correlation coefficient.

### Results

144 participated in this research, of which 30 were male (20.8%) and 114 female (79.2%). Age oscillated from 18 to 25 years. Table 2 describes the demographic and all other characteristics of nursing students. (Table 2)

The questionnaire descriptive analysis showed that students have a medium to large need for improvement in a percentage 42.9% (61 students) at the emotional sector (comprehension of emotions importance, expression of sentiments and, discovery of existence and regulation of negative emotions), 32.2% (47 students) in the sector of thought (structured frame of thought, growth of perceptions or attitudes, decision-making), 31% (45 students) in the sector of relations (facility of creating relations, confrontation of conflicts, abilities of roles reception), 41.3% ( 59 students) in the sector of study (educational choices, dispatch of work within deadline, confrontation of examinations

stress, speech in congress , attendance in team work), 32.7% (47 students) in the sector of professional settlement/confrontation of unemployment (comprehension of abilities to apply for a job, presentation of themselves in written, confrontation of transient stages at work), 30.7% (44 students) in the sector of leisure time (positive evaluation of leisure time, evaluation of personal interests, energetic attendance in activities) and 35.1% (50 students) in the sector of health (consumption of nutritious components, consumption of alcohol, narcotic substances uptake, maintenance of a fit state).

By setting a level of importance  $p \leq 0.05$ , we applied the Mann - Whitney non parametric U test in order to calculate if there are statistically important differences between the evaluations of male and female students with regard to the existence or not of life skills. Table 3 presents the mean evaluation for male and female students proving there are statistically important differences in 23 (33.3 %) out of 69 questions. More concretely, in 15 (21.7%) out of 69 questions male students present a higher mean evaluation than females. On the contrary, in 8 (11.6%) out of 23 questions, female students present a higher mean evaluation than males.

The cross-correlation of questions with their total sum (Pearson's cross-correlation) gives us a clue into which questions they are more important in developing life skills. Thus, according to the analysis, male and female Nursing students, in order to acquire life skills, they should emphasize in sectors like maintenance of balance between work, personal relations and family ( $p = 0.51$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and decision-making ( $p = 0.39$ ,  $df = 142$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Discussion

The results of this study show that a large percentage of the sample does not allocate sufficient life skills. Male and female students of the Nursing Department have a need to be improved in the sectors of emotions, thought, relations, studies, professional settlement, leisure time and health.

According to the study, female students find it difficult to understand the importance of their emotions, recognise negative emotions which overwhelm them occasionally and subsequently regulate them to their own benefit and also to the benefit of individuals they are associated with. On the other hand male students have a greater

Table 2. Demographic and other characteristics

	%	n		%	n
<b>Sex</b>			<b>Profession of parents</b>		
Males	20.8	30	Civil servants	8.3	12
Females	79.2	114	Private employees	21.5	31
			Public – Private	23.6	34
<b>Age</b>			Freelance professionals	15.3	22
18-20	41.0	59	One parent with job	16.0	23
21-22	41.7	60	One parent retired	10.4	15
> 23	17.4	25	Both retired	4.9	7
			<b>Economic Situation of parents</b>		
<b>Years of study</b>			< 10.000 € annually	24.3	35
1	35.4	51	10.000 – 15.000 €	38.2	55
2	6.3	9	16.000 – 20.000 €	16.7	24
3	36.1	52	21.000 – 30.000 €	13.9	20
4	18.8	27	> 31.000 €	6.9	10
other	3.5	5			
			<b>Working during studying</b>	53.5	77
<b>Place of birth</b>			<b>Days of work per week</b>		
Sterea Hellas	53.5	77	1-3	16.0	23
Epirus	4.9	7	4-7	37.5	54
Macedonia	7.6	11			
Peloponnesus	9.7	14	<b>Hours of work per day</b>		
Thessaly	4.9	7	1-3	2.8	4
Thrace	2.1	3	4-7	42.4	61
Islands	16.4	23	> 8	8.3	12
Cyprus	1.4	2			
			<b>Living together during the study</b>		
<b>Marital status</b>			With parents	45.8	66
I have brother/or sister	89.6	129	Alone	42.7	60
Divorced parents	14.6	21	With another person	9.7	14
			With fiancé/fiancée	1.4	2
<b>Educational status of parents</b>			With husband/wife	1.4	2
First degree	16.0	23			
Secondary	53.0	76			
Third degree	31.0	45			

need to express their emotions. In the sector of thought, it appears that female students have a bigger need to improve their judging ability while, the males are unable to develop attitudes or to stand up for their perceptions and make decisions. With regard to relationships, female students do not face any conflicts in a satisfactory way; males do not create relationships easily and do not undertake particular roles in a relationship. Contrary to the results of the study where female students were proved to be particularly capable in facing their problems and discuss all of their differences, at the same time the study showed that they encourage others to seek their objectives (Zygmunt DM & Schaefer KM 2006, Zick A et al 2007).

In the sector of studies, this study showed that educational choices of Nursing students were not well-aimed, a fact that can be attributed to insufficient professional orientation in High School. We also found that students do not seek the common projects because of a weakness of finding common interests and when undertaking an obligatory project during the semester, they

cannot meet the deadlines set by their Professor. Female students are often stressed during exams without using any technique to relax. In other research similar results were reported for female students who, at the same time, are also more down-to-earth with regard to the fact that many things in our life are not susceptible to changes, contrary to male students, who, as a method of relaxation, appeared to rest for a few minutes during a day, thus exempting themselves from stress (Duck S 1996). In the present study a few minutes rest was not reported either from male or female students, a fact that could perhaps be attributed in the time schedule of the Educational Institution they attend.

In the sector of professional settlement/confrontation of unemployment, female students could not face transient stages at the same workplace while the males could not comprehend the abilities required to get a job while at the same time, when asked, they were unable to identify a written response.

In their leisure time, the male students were possessed by a disarray with regard to their

personal interests while, females did not participate energetically in any form of activity.

**Table 3. Mean evaluation of male and female students**

Questions	Mean male student evaluations	Mean female student evaluations	2-Tailed Significance
Maintenance of balance between work, personal relations and family	73.60	72.21	0.000
Reject of narcotic substances uptake	90.93	67.65	0.000
Good speaker	91.27	67.56	0.004
Litteral description of personality	89.60	68.00	0.006
Determination of objectives	89.27	68.09	0.010
Detection of job opportunities	82.08	69.98	0.013
Confrontation of stress	62.93	75.02	0.014
Comprehension – regulation of negative emotions	63.45	74.88	0.016
Decision-making	84.00	69.47	0.018
Presentation of themselves in written form	80.62	70.36	0.020
Decision-making	80.42	70.42	0.020
Good use of body language	87.32	67.60	0.022
Comprehension of abilities about taking a job	84.02	69.47	0.029
Consumption of nutritious elements	58.42	76.21	0.030
Confrontation of transient stages at the same workplace	66.15	74.17	0.031
Precise evaluation of individual characteristics	82.17	69.96	0.040
Confrontation of conflicts	59.42	75.94	0.045
Collection of information	67.78	73.72	0.047
Transaction of jobs to do within the deadline	84.47	69.35	0.048
Existence of emotions and co-ordination	84.14	69.44	0.049
Effective study	84.53	69.33	0.049
Critical thought	84.85	89.25	0.050
Active attendance in activities	60.08	75.77	0.050

In a research that took place, male students exercise more in their leisure time than females

but not on a regular basis (Lee L. T. & Loke J.T. 2005, Loureiro E et al 2008).

In the sector of health, the study showed that the students do not have awareness of their responsibility for subjects of health issues and this shows from the irregular consumption of nutritious food and the excessive consumption of alcohol. The results of another study were similar (Felton G & Parsons M 1994, Loureiro E et al 2008). Indeed, this study showed that mainly male students are more likely to receive narcotic substances, a fact that can be attributed to bad social influences.

This study has various repercussions. Firstly, its results strengthen the necessity to configure a database about life skills of Greek Nursing students so as to officially determine those skills that need to be further improved. Secondly, the results could be used as a first step of a wider effort to find tendencies with regard to life skills of students, thus constituting a means of their continuous personality improvement. Thirdly, Professors and clinical instructors have an obligation to be acquaint with students' personality so that educational practice could be shaped proportionally. Fourthly, the results of the present study could be present to Nursing Teachers of Faculties who could subsequently report to existing personnel. Thus, positive and negative remarks of the study sample could be analysed and used as an appreciable means in order to strengthen positive behaviours on the one hand and on the other to avoid future those problems causing the negative remarks. Moreover, the sample of nursing students could determine those sectors requiring further investigation, in order to proceed to changes of the way of life and, possibly, activate everyone to the of young individuals that will be subsumed in society.

### Limitations

In this study certain restrictions exist, which should be taken into consideration so as to process and generalise the results in a better way. The size of the students sample could be considered small as far as reliability of measurement is concerned because it constituted an indicative sample from the total population of nursing students the moment the research took place. Somebody could suggest that the sample was biased. The relatively small sample of this study naturally constitutes an important problem, however it does not seem to influence the results and conclusions so much.

A second restriction is that the results of this study reflect the opinions of nursing students coming from only two Educational Institutions without essentially reflecting the opinions of all Nursing students in Greece.

Given the variety of students studying in various Educational Institutions, the students participating in the present study only came from the Department of Nursing, and this perhaps constitutes a third restriction in the generalisation of results. Comparison of nursing students opinions with students of different specialities in professions of health and welfare would be particularly interesting.

Taking into consideration the restrictions above, a similar study with a larger sample of nursing students and particularly from a more representative breadth of Educational Institutions, could lead to larger generalisation and validity of results.

### Conclusions

The main objective of this research was on the one hand to point out the importance of developing life skills, and on the other hand to discover which the life skills of nursing students are and of which them should be improved.

The results of this research constitute only a part of a greater situation in Greece. It would be useful to be repeated this study so as to prove the regularity of these results in a research environment where rapid structural and economic changes continuously take place. Taking into consideration the restrictions of the present study, certain other studies with a larger sample of students are necessary to the reproduce this one and, to redevelop and particularise it. It would be interesting to carry out a study with a student sample coming from other Departments in order that the results are compared with the opinions of the present study students. Similar studies could be conducted where students' relatives, friends or even Professors would be asked to evaluate and express their opinions with regard to the level of life skills that the students in question allocate.

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