

## **Art in Enhancing Life Skills and Preventing Addictive Behavior. Introducing an innovative school-based program**

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### **Abstract**

Life Skills are a resource from which it is possible to develop psychosocial, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and resilience skills with which individuals can negotiate the difficulties they face and be productive members of society. Training in emotional, cognitive, and social skills helps pupils transition from childhood to adulthood in a balanced way. Life Skills training programs within the school can help pupils who live in disadvantaged environments and have reduced opportunities to develop such skills. Social competitiveness and problem-solving are key elements that characterize a mentally resilient child as well as their ability to manage their emotions and interpersonal relationships. The aim of this paper is to present the effectiveness of an innovative psychosocial support program for pupils in learning Life Skills, aiming at the prevention of the occurrence of addictive behaviors. The innovation of the program is the use of art as a tool to strengthen personal and social skills. The results of the research are positive, as it seems that pupils involved managed to enhance the degree of their social skills after the implementation of the program.

**Key – Words:** prevention, art, life skills, addictive behaviors

### **Introduction**

At a time of increasing complexity, young people are expected to be able to respond adequately to a multitude of requirements that include all areas of their life such as professional, interpersonal, educational, etc. Thus, psychosocial adequacy is essential so that one can effectively meet the demands of modern life and the challenges of everyday life. Essentially, it is one's ability to think more globally, to make better use of the knowledge provided, to interact more actively and creatively with their social surroundings, and to maintain their mental and physical health levels at a level that is able to behave in a healthy way in the living environment. Many of the psychosocial problems faced by modern men can be linked to the lack of skills that help them to deal with life's difficulties in an effective way (Lam et al., 2014). The strengthening of psychosocial adequacy, especially at young ages when the formation of their personality occurs, is crucial for their overall well-being and life course. This can be achieved through education in life skills, which will be an asset to the human quiver to deal with everyday life as well as managing all the situations that it will encounter.

### **Life skills**

The involvement of the scientific community in the concept of Life Skills begins about three decades ago with the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986) stating that health promotion is through the support of the individual for personal and social development through the provision of information, education on health issues and the enhancement of life skills. These actions allow individuals to have more choices in being able to control their environment and health more and to make choices that will ensure their well-being. Thus, the concept of life skills is linked to responsible decision-making and the ability of the individual to make responsible choices for a healthy life. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1997), Life Skills are those abilities that enable a person to effectively handle the demands and challenges of everyday life.

Accordingly, UNICEF (UNICEF, 2012) with the term Life Skills refers to the set of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that help the individual make responsible decisions,

communicate effectively with others, and develop self-management skills that will help him live a healthy and productive life. Life Skills can be characterized as a source where there is potential to develop psychosocial, emotional, cognitive, behavioral skills and resilience skills with which a person can negotiate the difficulties he faces and be a productive member of society (Gelagali, 2011; Hopson & Scally, 1986).

From the above definitions, one can see that by talking about life skills we can refer to countless skills, whose definitions can vary from culture to culture and from place to place (WHO, 1997). Nevertheless, life skills can be classified into categories that are the core of the skills of those who promote a healthy lifestyle.

The World Health Organization (ibid) gives five key areas as the basic skills one needs to have in order to work effectively and meet life requirements. The areas it describes are:

a. Decision-making - problem-solving. Decision-making helps the individual to deal constructively with life by making these decisions that help him to have safe results in his health and not negative consequences. Problem-solving after proper decision-making can help the person to solve issues that if left unsolved can create anxiety and negative health consequences.

b. Creative - critical thinking. Creative thinking helps the individual to make proper decisions in order to solve problems he faces and to operate in an adaptive and flexible way on issues of everyday life. Critical thinking enables the individual to think objectively and analyze experiences and information through the process of critical thinking. Thus, through the process of critical thinking, the individual is able to effectively process those factors that affect him in relation to his behavior, his values, peer pressure, etc.

c. Communication - interpersonal relationships. Effective communication refers to the skill of being able to communicate both verbally and non-verbally with others in ways that are acceptable to the society in which they live. Good interpersonal relationships help to allow the person to interact in positive ways with others.

d. Self-awareness - empathy. Self-awareness as a skill means that one can recognize the characteristics of one's personality, strengths, weaknesses, his desires. The skill of self-awareness helps the person to recognize when they are stressed or pressed. It can also be a prerequisite skill so that one can have good interpersonal relationships with others and feel empathy. Empathy is the ability to feel how one's fellow human being can feel and the state in which one lives, even if it is a state in which one has never been.

Hopson & Scally (1986) classified Life Skills into four categories: a. Educational - Academic skills including study, reading, and empirical learning skills. b. Skills in interpersonal relationships including communication, entering into, maintaining, and ending relationships, and conflict management. c. Skills related to work and leisure management such as managing time and money, and concluding a professional plan. d. Developmental and other skills such as creative problem-solving, decision-making, negative emotion management, and physical and mental well-being preservation.

The Life Skills for Europe program (n.d.) presented eight types of skills in its work based on the definition of Life Skills. These are a. literacy b. the Numbering c. digital competencies d. personal and interpersonal skills e. communication skills f. public participation g. financial skills; and h. physical and psychological health perception skills.

### **Life skills and school**

Life Skills training helps the young person to develop and increase the degree of self-confidence and self-esteem in order to address the daily changes and challenges of life, giving him a voice in the environment he lives in and preparing him for his life as an adult and worker. It helps him to know and understand issues that affect his life in general, develop skills such as critical thinking, expressing opinions, and forming his personality based on principles and values such as respect, justice, and democracy. The role of education in the development of

Life Skills is very important as it can contribute in such a way that the student can be strengthened as much as possible with the aim of reaping all the benefits it will have if he holds all the skills that have been reported. World organizations such as UNICEF (2012) and WHO (1997) have recognized the value of implementing educational programs on Life Skills within schools as it has been seen in recent decades how it helps students to develop psychosocial in a large extent.

Training in emotional, cognitive, and social skills helps pupils to transition smoothly from the phase of childhood to the phase of adulthood. Life Skills education programs within schools can help pupils who live in underprivileged environments and have reduced opportunities to develop such right-wing skills. Social competitiveness, as well as problem-solving, are key elements that characterize a mentally resistant child as well as their ability to manage his feelings and interpersonal relationships. Life Skills Development programs help schools to implement more integrated and integrated approaches to issues concerning the prevention of dangerous behavior of students. Finally, programs implemented within schools promote positive social standards that can greatly affect the environment in which a teenager grows, such as health services, school, and their families (Pan American Health Organization, 2001).

In addition, Life Skills programs can delay the start of a psychoactive substance, prevent risky sexual behaviors, transgressive and criminal behavior, promote the development of self-esteem of the learner and make healthy choices about his life, improve academic performance, and prevent peer rejection (Hansen et al., 1988; Mize & Ladd, 1990). The school environment is considered more suitable for education in Life Skills as the very purpose of education embodies the cultivation of those skills and abilities of students that will help them to progress smoothly into adulthood, forming a personality with such elements that will help them have a smooth life afterward.

School as an environment that brings together a large number of children and adolescents is an ideal environment for the implementation of education programs in Life Skills. After all, it is the most powerful institution in the life of the child after the family, an institution that helps a lot in his socialization. The implementation of programs within schools is considered very economical as the cost is minimal and there are already experienced teachers who can implement them. In school, there is the possibility to implement short and long-term programs. Also, through school, there can be interconnection with family and society so that there is even greater efficiency after education in Life Skills (WHO, 1997).

#### **Life skills and addictive behaviors**

Life Skills programs are aimed at the general population with the aim of developing the psychological skills that will enable individuals to be productive, participate in society and manage effectively the difficulties they face in life. However, specific life skills learning programs have also been developed which focus on specific issues, in particular on issues related to high-risk behaviors such as substance use, addictive behaviors in general, HIV and risky sexual behavior. Some of the life skills such as resilience, decision-making, self-control and social interaction seem to be related to how a child or adolescent will deal with issues and problems such as the above. Thus, life skills programs aimed at supporting young people in relation to high-risk behaviors combine providing information and knowledge about psychoactive substances, risky behaviors and other addictions with learning these skills to help them cope (UNICEF, 2012).

Global organizations such as WHO (1997) and UNICEF (2012) having recognized the importance of developing and implementing Life Skills learning programs focused on preventing the occurrence of high-risk behaviors have developed comprehensive textbooks for implementing such actions emphasizing the promotion of a healthy life model and education around issues related to substance use, HIV, unwanted pregnancies, nutrition,

violence. Already in the late 1970s, actions to learn life skills and focus on peer pressure, self-management, and interpersonal relationships have been planned and implemented. Through participation in Life Skills programs, children and adolescents have the ability and opportunity to learn to make decisions that will lead them to positive outcomes and to establish positive attitudes, views, and knowledge about their lives. Thus, they will have managed to shape their personality in such a way as to be resistant to challenges such as drugs or other dangerous behaviors (Gazioglu & Canel, 2015).

Life Skills programs focus on preventing dangerous and addictive behaviors relying on specific content such as students' attitudes to substance use, social stereotypes that exist for example in relation to gender, and the provision of information and knowledge related to health promotion (Mangrulkar et al., 2001). Botvin and his partners (1990) argue that life skills programs seem effective and can positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of young people in relation to issues concerning their health. Such issues are the use of psychoactive substances, sexual behavior, and other dangerous behaviors such as dependence on the internet or gambling.

### **Art and life skills**

Art as a means of communication and expression exists in all societies from the very beginning of their existence. Art, as a result of man's intellect and culture, evolves along with him, adapting, changing and differentiating itself (Pappa, 2020). Its purpose is to stimulate the senses, activating the mind and emotion. Art was born together with social life (Diamantopoulos, 1988) and expresses the most important aspects of social life, namely religion, war, work, relationship with nature, love.

The use of expressive means at our disposal then activates our inner world in many ways. Dealing with trauma through art externalizes the feelings of fear, anger, and internal conflict we struggle with while allowing a traumatic story to be told in a different way, within a safe environment. It leads to the processing of emotions, the emergence of reflective situations, communication, and the building of relationships. Through art, we have the opportunity to challenge different behaviors, test our limits and endurance, and negotiate a different outcome: to take control, again.

Pupils through arts such as literature, painting, cinema, theater etc. have the opportunity to develop, to understand themselves and the world they live in in a creative and beneficial way as well as to acquire critical thinking, sensitivity, and capacity for creative learning in more holistic ways (Lawrence, 2008).

Integrating art into the education system should not simply aim to provide information to students on arts-related issues. The use of art in school has as its primary objective to mobilize pupils to observe more effectively the world around them, to process in a critical way the information they receive, to discover, to compare, to create, and thus to be in a position to create their own value system and worldview (Trilianos, 2009).

Fowler (1996) recognizes the value of art in education as it helps to develop a pupil's personal skills in various ways through the formation of his mentality and personality. Art contributes to the development of thinking processes and abilities and to the strengthening of skills that will make him more capable of dealing with the world in which he lives and grows up. In his book *Strong Arts, Strong Schools* (1996), Fowler highlights the relationship between art and critical thinking. In addition, through engaging in the arts, the pupil cultivates self-awareness, and the ability to be able to interpret the world he lives in through different perspectives without being trapped in stereotypes and prejudices.

### **"pArt of you" program**

"pArt of you" is a program of psychosocial support and primary prevention that aims to empower elementary school students aged 10-12 years in matters related to dangerous and

addictive behaviors. It consists of 8 weekly meetings of an experiential nature. The originality of the "pArt of you" program lies in the fact that it utilizes art, as a tool to strengthen the skills that will help pupils develop a high degree of mental resilience, thereby removing them from the possibility of exhibiting high-risk behaviors risk and other addictive behaviors.

The design of the integrated psychosocial support program was based on theoretical approaches related to the prevention of dangerous addictive behaviors and promoting the individual's well-being. The Life Skills approach seems to be the most effective intervention at the level of prevention programs in schools (Buhler & Heppekausen, 2006) and especially in Primary classes. Other research data (Botvin, 1996; Gazioglu & Canel, 2015) show that the implementation of Life Skills learning programs with an emphasis on the prevention of dangerous and addictive behaviors has positive results, in the short and long term, with an obvious reduction in substance use both in the early stage of use as well as in advanced.

### **Materials and Methods**

#### ***Objective of the study***

From the literature review, it is clear that the implementation of school-based prevention programs can benefit pupils, strengthening skills that will act as a protection network against the manifestation of addictive behaviors. The use of art can act as reinforcement in the above condition.

Aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of an innovative psychosocial support program, which utilizes art as a tool to strengthen pupils' social skills and prevent the manifestation of addictive behaviors.

Based on the existing evidence, we hypothesized that the psychosocial program «pArt of you» will have a positive impact on pupils' social skills.

#### ***Methodology and Process***

Action research was chosen as the most appropriate methodology to answer the research hypothesis of this study. Action research in the context of education is a form of self-reflective exploration of social situations with the aim, by its participants, of improving the rationale underlying (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of those practices, (c) the situations in which those practices are applied (Kemmis, 1980 in Hopkins, 1985). Action research is an excellent tool for achieving change and improvement in the education system (Altrichter et al., 2001). It emphasizes the reflective investigation of existing practices in the school with the aim of changing and improving them.

The occurrence of risky addictive behaviors and the role of the school in terms of prevention is clearly most effectively investigated by utilizing action research. Through this research methodology, the researcher and the trainees will be equally involved in an experiential process, trying to understand the phenomenon, how school can act as a protective factor and the usefulness of the educational tool in which they will be trained.

The present research was carried out during an extremely difficult period, as the pandemic of Covid-19 had greatly affected the functioning of the whole society and, by extension, of schools. The project «pArt of you» was planned to be implemented in the second half of the 2020-2021 school year but as there was a general lockdown and schools were closed this was not possible.

When schools finally opened in the spring of 2021 the research process began. Indeed, in early September school teachers were contacted as it was felt that the implementation of the program should begin immediately through the fear of further school closures. A meeting was held with the teachers where they were informed precisely and in detail about the process, the program and its implementation and duration. A meeting was also held with the principals of the schools where the implementation of the program would take place so that they themselves would be aware of it.



About a week before the start of the program, teachers gave parents information sheets with details of the program and a consent form for their participation in the program. It should be noted here that there were parents who did not agree and did not give consent for their child to participate. These students did not complete the questionnaires or participate in the procedures during the program.

After agreeing on dates and times to go to the schools, the teachers informed the students about the activity that was to be implemented. In the first meeting with each school class, there was a hands-on introduction to the students and a detailed description of the project. The questionnaire (SSRS-C) was then completed. A total of 8 meetings were held and the implementation of the project lasted 2 months (October-November 2021). The meetings were two hours long. At the last meeting and after the intervention was completed, the students completed the same questionnaire (SSRS-C). After three months there was a follow-up where the researcher visited the classes again and asked the students to complete the same questionnaire again in order to check the effectiveness of the program over time.

**Participants**

«pArt of you» program was implemented in 3 elementary schools in Patras, Greece. 109 primary school pupils took part in this study, specifically, pupils who attended the last two grades of primary school, fifth and sixth grade. Approximately half of the pupils were girls (N=54) and the rest were boys (N=55) at the age of 11-12 years (Mean = 11.3, SD = 0.486).

**Results**

In order to analyze the data of our research we used SPSS v.28. Repeated Measures ANOVA was used to define the effect of “pArt of you” program. Results show a high level of statistical significance while measuring the impact of the program before its implantation, right after, and 3 months later.

In table 1. we can see the results of Repeated Measures ANOVA. Specifically, after the overall analysis of the SSRS-C questionnaire, it was found that the difference of the means before (M=51.64, S.D.=8.390), immediately after (M=55.53, S.D.=6.66) and three months later (M.=55.75, S.D.=6.631), the intervention is statistically significant (p=0.000). The F criterion shows that the results of the implementation of the program are related to the increase in the degree of mental resilience of the students (F=9.088). Eta square is ,145, showing the effect of the program, and  $\Lambda$  of Wilks’ is ,855.

**Table 1. Repeated Measures ANOVA**

Time	Pupils (N=109)				
	Mean S.D.	$\Lambda$ Wilks	F	$\eta^2$	p
Before	51,64 (8,390)	,855	9,088	,145	,000
After	55,53 (6,666)				
3 months later	55,75 (6,631)				

**Discussion**

The present study focused on investigating the effectiveness of a program to strengthen the social skills of elementary school pupils with the aim to prevent the occurrence of addictive behaviors. It is an innovative school-based program as it utilizes the processing of works of art as a tool to empower and cultivate pupils' skills on an individual, psychological, and social level. The findings of the study show that the "pArt of you" program has positive results in terms of strengthening pupils' Life Skills.

The students, through their participation in the "pArt of you" program, were able to improve their social skills such as cooperation, participation, taking initiative, and strengthening self-esteem. The scores collected by pupils before, right after, and three months after the implementation of the program were higher than before the implementation of the program, which shows its effectiveness.

The findings of the research come to confirm the results of similar research where it seems that the implementation of psychosocial support programs in the school environment brings positive results and can help support students through the cultivation of life skills (Throuvala et al., 2019; Malinauskas & Malinauskiene, 2019).

Through their participation in such programs, students are trained in management techniques and better social adaptation (Psilou, 2014; Pincus & Friedman, 2004). Students cultivate skills such as decision-making, conflict resolution, emotion management, and stress reduction and thus can have a stronger personality and characteristics that will help them reduce the likelihood of developing addictive or risky behavior (Schmidt, 2022).

The results of research that have been done in relation to the effectiveness of the implementation of Life Skills learning programs in the school area have shown that these can have positive results in terms of the non-manifestation of some dangerous behavior, the initiation or reduction of the use of some psychoactive substance (Buhler et al., 2008).

Life Skills help adolescents' transition smoothly into adulthood by establishing skills that are essential elements for healthy personal growth and the development of a resilient child. The research results show that the Life Skills approach promotes the strengthening of the adolescent's personal, social, cognitive, and emotional competence, characteristics that act as a protection net against aggravating factors that may threaten the adolescent's life and lead him to dangerous situations or addictive behaviors (Kibret, 2016). Through his participation in Life Skills training programs, the student appears to develop resilience, and competence on a personal and social level adapts smoothly to the social conditions he lives in and has better academic performance (ibid.).

It is indisputable that contact with art can benefit man on many levels and in the whole range of his life. Art is able to contribute to the empowerment and development of skills and personality traits of the individual that will help him function in a way freed from shackles and lead him on a path of healthy choices for his life. Enhancing the creative power of human existence is one of the benefits that one can derive from coming into contact with a work of art. It offers him supplies that will help him develop positive attitudes, behaviors, and a corresponding worldview that will act as a wall of protection and prevention against situations that may lead him to make dangerous decisions for his life, such as addictions.

In the prevention of addictive behaviors, the strengthening of pupils' creativity, the expression of their feelings as well as the development of their abilities and talents, is a key point. As long as the student has the opportunity to express his feelings and thoughts in a creative way, he can move away from choosing to resort to self-destructive behaviors.

The use of art in education is not just a means of expression. It is about the possibility of creative expression that has educational value at all levels. Students through contact with arts such as literature, painting, cinema, theater, etc. have the opportunity to develop across the spectrum of their lives. They understand themselves and the world they live in in a creative and beneficial way as well as acquire critical thinking, sensitivity, and capacity for creative learning in more holistic ways (Lawrence, 2008). Art can help pupils develop skills that may prevent the onset of addictive behaviors and contributes to the promotion of a healthy lifestyle (Farrington et al., 2019; Stride & Cutcher, 2015).

Although the sample of the research is small and the results cannot be generalized, nevertheless it seems that pupils' response to "pArt of you" program is positive. This research can be a motive for further application of the program to a larger number of pupils, in order to establish its positive results in the prevention of the manifestation of addictive behaviors.

The integration of «pArt of you» program as a Health Promotion school-based program, should have positive outcomes in the prevention of addictive behaviors in adolescents.

### **Conclusion**

It is undeniable that contact with art can benefit people on many levels and across the whole spectrum of their lives. Art is capable of helping to empower and develop skills and personality traits that will help an individual to function in a way that is free of attachments and lead them on a path of healthy choices for their lives. The empowerment of the creative power of the human being is one of the benefits one can gain when coming into contact with a work of art. It provides him with tools that will help him to develop positive attitudes, behaviours and a similar worldview that will act as a wall of protection and prevention against situations that may lead him to make dangerous decisions for his life, such as addictions (Pappa & Dritsas, 2022).

School, as the second most important social institution after the family in a child's life, plays an extremely important role in shaping his character and personality (Papanis et al., 2010). After all, the aim of the school is not only the sterile transmission of knowledge and information but also pupils' all-around development. The implementation of universal prevention programs in schools comes to strengthen and supports students to have a greater degree of self-awareness, to be able to assess their value as individuals, and to deal effectively with life's adversities. Pupils, through their participation in such programs, have the opportunity to acquire important skills and resources that will keep them in their life toolbox and protect them from future risks and dangerous behaviors. Life skills programs can offer important opportunities for pupils but also allow teachers to train and acquire more skills to support their pupils in better ways.

«pArt of you» is an innovative proposal for a psychosocial support program. It is designed according to the principles that prevention programs are based on. It seems to have positive results in strengthening personal, social, and psychological skills. It also offers pupils those supplies that will protect them from the manifestation of some addictive behavior. The use of art, as an innovative tool to strengthen life skills, comes to give additional support to the program, giving it a special character and diversity. Art in all its forms can help pupils to express themselves freely, develop their imagination, become creative, and be collaborative. Through art, pupils open their horizons, learn new things in a creative way and finally they develop in a spiritual and integrated way into strong, autonomous personalities avoiding addictive behaviors.

the "pArt of you" psychosocial support program for pupils can enhance the promotion of children's physical and mental well-being through active experiential learning and the use of tools that promote creativity and critical thinking, such as art. The integration of the program within the wider Health Education programming will actively contribute to the development of improving students' self-confidence, strengthening social skills and increasing their mental resilience, skills that will help students throughout their lives to be able to negotiate, think critically and make good choices.

The school is proposed as the ideal place to implement psychosocial support programs for pupils, as children spend a large part of their day there and have the opportunity not only to learn but also to shape their personality, making use of the stimuli they receive during the educational process. Thus, the program proposed in this article can also be implemented within the school context and can bring positive results in enhancing students' skills such as communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, decision-making, etc.

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