

## LIFE SKILLS AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATION OF SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

The study was undertaken to determine the relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of senior secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State. It was part of the iLEAD pilot programme undertaken in the State by the Leadership, Effectiveness, Accountability and Professionalism (LEAP) Africa project which sought to determine the feature of leadership variables among secondary school students using training and mentorship programme in five secondary schools in two senatorial districts in the state. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of the students who participated in the life skills training and mentoring programme and those who did not. Sex, age and family background of the students were also used to determine the featuring of the life skills and educational aspiration. Using researcher-developed instrument, the study compared the life skills and educational aspirations of 276 students who participated in the training programme with those of 240 students who did not participate using independent t-test test and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation statistics and tested at .05 confidence level. The findings indicated no significant relationship between life skills and educational aspiration of the students, significant difference in life skills and educational aspiration between participants and non-participants, significant difference in life skills of participants based on family background and significant difference in educational aspiration based on sex and age. Based on the findings, intensification of life skills training in secondary schools was recommended.

**Keywords** – Life skills, Educational Aspiration, Mentoring

### Introduction

The senior secondary education in Nigeria of which Akwa Ibom is a component state, constitutes the Post-Basic Education and Career Development programme designed by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013) to cover a period of three years. Besides providing graduates of the basic education programme opportunities for higher education irrespective of gender, social status, religion or ethnicity, the programme also aims at providing entrepreneurial, technical and vocational job-specific skills for

self-reliance and for agricultural, industrial, commercial and economic development. The programme also offers the learners diversified curriculum to cater for different talents, dispositions, opportunities and future roles and seeks to inspire them with a desire for self-improvement and achievement of excellence. These objectives are both laudable and relevant as they seek to help boost the development of life skills among the young learners. Given the growing need to empower the youths for global relevance, the need to build up their life skills and inspire their educational aspiration cannot be overstressed.

Over the years, the quality of senior secondary school graduates appears to indicate low possession of life skills. The capacity for skilful functioning when faced with basic life's challenges tend to be weak. Very few among them may be able to manage their health, time, social, economic and future needs without close supervision. Although mention is made of job-specific skills training in the policy objectives, in practice, secondary education appears to emphasise mainly, the equipment of the individual with cognitive skills without sufficient opportunities for the development of life skills. In practical terms, the senior secondary education curriculum appears to be short of practical opportunities for the development of skills that could assist the individual to cater for his personal needs without much dependence on care-givers. Indeed, given the importance of life skills in facilitating healthy aspirations in life, its development in the learners need to be provided for in unambiguous policy framework and functional learning activities in the curriculum. It is assumed that what an individual aspires to achieve in life may be a function of the life skills he or she possesses. This study was prompted by the need to determine the relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of senior secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

## **Related Literature**

Life skills refer to those essential abilities an individual should possess to be able to fully participate in everyday life activities. They refer to capacities that would assist an individual to cope with life's challenges so as to adjust meaningfully (Akpan & Udoh, 2022). Dey, Patra, Giri, Varghese and Idiculla (2022) refer to these skills as those fundamental abilities that help adolescents to develop the skills they will need to deal with the realities of life. According to them, life skills assist young people to learn new skills, develop control over their behaviour and make informed decisions. Although the reference here is of adolescents, it must be added that everybody needs these skills, as life's challenges vary with stage of development. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNCEF) (2019) sees life skills as "a set of abilities and socio-emotional competencies that enable individuals to learn, make informed decisions and exercise rights to lead a healthy and productive life and subsequently become agents of change" (p.7).

The United Nations Organisation (UNO) (1999), describe life skills as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands of everyday life" (p.1). The World Health Organisation (WHO, 1994) lists these skills to include decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills,

self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress. Jeyarani (2022) describes them as “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (p4). In practical terms, the skills cover capacity to adapt to challenging situations, being focussed, effective communication, self-control, appropriate use of time and money, healthy relationship with people, ensuring personal safety and healthy living, among others.

Life skills equip the individual with emotional, intellectual and social tools that will facilitate his success in life. Chalwa (2018) noted that teaching life skills as generic skills can form the foundation of life skills education for the promotion of mental well-being and healthy behaviour. This means that when dealing with the issue of peer pressure, for instance, on the use of drugs, engagement in unprotective sex, involvement in violence, participation in cultism and several other similar activities, skills like assertiveness can assist the individual to resist or overcome vulnerability. Life skills can help the child to take proactive measures when exposed to danger, to avoid or minimise susceptibility. They help the individual to be responsible for their actions, make realistic judgements and take appropriate decisions in the face of an array of options.

Many theories provide the bases for the concept of life skills. These include the development theories which emphasize need for possession of requisite skills corresponding to the various stages of human development to facilitate functional adjustment. Such development issues cover physiological, cognitive and social changes which occur as the child transits to adulthood and for which he requires skills to adjust with. Among such are the Social Learning theory with the postulation that individuals learn by observing and copying adult behaviour which serve as models to them (Bandura, 1977), Multiple Intelligences Theory which postulated that people have many different ways of thinking and learning (Gardner, 1983), Resilience Theory which articulates the individual’s characteristics, close family relationships and social support and structure outside the family (neighbourhood) as variables that help individuals to bounce back after the experience of adversity, hardship or frustration (Garmezy, 1991).

A number of studies have been carried out to justify the need for life skills education for the youth. Dey et. al. (2022) found that only 27.7 per cent of the adolescents they studied had high level of life skills, 52 per cent had medium level of life skills while 22 per cent had low level of it. They also found that the mean score in life skills of male respondents was less than that of females while there was no significant difference in the life skills of students of nuclear and joint families and that of students from urban and rural settings. Akpan and Udoh (2022) found that life skills (financial management, time management and communication skills) had significant relationship with the entrepreneurial aspirations of secondary students. Esmaeilinasab, Malek, Ghiasvend and Bahrami (2011) found that life skills training led to significant increase in the self-esteem of their subjects. The WHO (1994) noted that teaching life skills as generic skills can help to promote mental well-being and healthy interaction and behaviour of the child. Sanchez-Hernando *et.al.* (2021) found significant association between life skills and academic performance and gender difference in life skills with boys having higher mean scores in cognitive skills and girls achieving higher scores in social skills. Abdi and Davoudi (2015) found

problem-solving, decision-making and effective communication skills have significant relationship with academic achievement while life skills are factors that influence different aspects of students' life. Savoji, Ganji and Ahmadzadeh (2013) found that teaching life skills has a significant effect on motivating progress and students' academic achievement and that the effect of the training was the same in boys and girls. While Tuttle, Campbell-Heiderand and David (2006) found that teaching life skills to teenagers led to promotion of decision-making ability and increase in self-confidence, Rezayat, and Nayeri (2013) found that life skills training programme in the university did not affect self-efficacy of nursing students.

Educational aspiration refers to the mental road map of an individual's desired educational level he wishes to attain. They cover the future educational plans an individual hopes to achieve. They can also be seen as the educational dreams a person has for himself and hopes to accomplish. Chawla (2018) sees educational aspiration as reflecting the educational goals an individual sets for himself. Generally, aspirations are important to the extent that they can keep hope alive and serve as a frame of reference for the individual to measure his progress over time. Chen and Hesketh (2021) describe them as idealistic values reflecting the educational attainment one hopes and desires to achieve. In their study of rural Chinese adolescents, they found that more than half of the participants reported they were not likely to attain the level of education for which they aspired and that the main factors associated with students' educational aspiration-discrepancies were parental migration, academic performance, mother's educational aspirations for children and close friends' educational aspirations.

Much as academic aspiration would be expected of every learner, it should be noted that such aspirations would vary with individuals. Chalwa (2018) found the existence of moderate positive correlation between educational aspiration and academic scores of senior secondary school students and no significant gender and private-public school difference in the educational aspiration of the students studied. Since life skills are believed to be influencing factors on the learner's life, it would be expected that high achievers should have higher academic aspirations. Hesari and Tafreshi (2017), Lolaty, Ghahari, Tirgari and Fard (2012) found that life skills training helped in the academic achievement, and can increase students' emotional intelligence, reduce substance abuse and increase stress tolerance in the students. Othman, Nordin, Nor, Endot, Azida, Ismail and Yaakob (2013) concluded that academic factors that influence students' academic aspiration are compounded by the family, school and personal factors such as social support, academic self-concept and perception of the school environment. From studying teachers' observation, Yuen, Lee and Chung (2020), found that while the goals of high achievers tended to be for the future, low achievers appeared to have short term goals. In associating life skills therefore with academic aspiration, it is obvious that higher possession of life skills can inspire high and achievable academic aspirations. Few studies appeared to have been carried out on the association between life skills and educational aspiration, especially in the area of the present study. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the filling of this gap.

## Statement of the Problem

Low life skills can result in low academic aspirations especially where life skills training may be lacking. Many secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State do not seem to have been sufficiently exposed to life skills training. The findings of this study are expected sensitise secondary education stakeholders in the state to appreciate the need to urgently consider the introduction and intensification of life skill education so that the students can be sufficiently prepared for functional life.

## Methodology

In this study, the *ex-post facto* survey was used alongside with quasi-experimental design to obtain data for analysis. The *ex-post facto* survey involved making use of existing variables (age, sex, family background) without manipulating them while the quasi-experiment involved exposing one set of senior secondary school students to life skills training and mentoring programme for one school session while the other set of students was not so exposed. The training was actually sponsored and mounted under the iLEAD project in the state. The instrument used in data collection was designed by the researchers based on the focus of the study. Titled *Life Skills and Educational Aspiration Questionnaire* (LSEAQ), the instrument has three sections, namely, A, B and C. Section A solicited biographic information from respondents on their age, sex and family background. Information on family background was to identify respondents who were living with their biological parents and those who were living with guardians and foster or step parents. Section B was a self-report Likert type questionnaire containing clusters of items on life skills (15 items) and educational aspirations (5 items).

The summated score on each cluster of items was considered a measure of that variable and used in the analysis of the data. Based on this scaling, scores ranged between 60 (highest) and 15 (lowest) for life skills. For educational aspirations, scores ranged from 20 (highest) to 5 (lowest). Mean and standard deviation scores were then used in the analysis of the data using independent t-test and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) statistics as the case may be.

The iLEAD Fellowship programme was inaugurated in five secondary schools in Akwa Ibom State in 2019. The aim of the programme was to provide training and mentorship to participating secondary school students on leadership, life and soft skills that would help them to achieve personal success and transition into higher education. The project also aimed at equipping young dynamic university graduates who had passion for social development with skills and experience to become change agents in their communities. As change agents, these graduates were actually the personnel deployed and used in the training and mentoring of the secondary school students in the project.

Participants in the study were 276 secondary school students who participated in the iLEAD-sponsored life skills training and mentoring. They were selected from the three hundred students who were randomly selected from the five secondary schools in which the programme was mounted in two of the three senatorial districts in the state. Three hundred other students with similar characteristics, who did not take part in that life skills training programme, were also selected randomly to serve as a control

group in comparing the performance of the participating students. Participants in this study were served the questionnaire developed and validated for the study. The 'Graduate Change Agents' who had been working with them in the iLEAD programme assisted in distributing and retrieving the questionnaire from the trainees. Teachers in participating schools assisted in administering the instrument to the non-participants in the programme. In all, a total of 516 copies of the questionnaire, 276 from participants and 240 from non-participants, were found to have been correctly completed and therefore used in the data analysis. The results were tested at .05 confidence level for significance.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the:

1. Relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of the senior secondary school students.
2. Difference in life skills and educational aspiration of senior secondary school students based on exposure to life skills training and mentoring.
3. Differences in life skills based on sex, age and family background.
4. Difference in educational aspiration based on sex, age, and family background.

### **Research hypotheses**

The following null hypotheses based on the objectives of the study were raised:

1. There is no significant relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of senior secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.
2. Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in life skills and educational aspiration based on exposure to life skills training.
3. Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in possession of life skills based on gender, age and family background.
4. Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in educational aspirations based on gender, age and family background.

### **Results**

#### **Hypothesis One**

*There is no significant relationship between life skills and educational aspirations of secondary school students in Akwa Ibom State.*



This hypothesis was raised to assist the researchers to determine the relationship between life skills and educational aspiration of the participants and non-participants in the training and mentoring project. The results are as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Summary of Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) between Life Skills and Educational Aspiration of Participants and Non-Participants in Life Skills Training/Mentoring

Training	Variables	N	r	Sig.(2-tailed)	Relationship	Decision
Participants	Life Skills	276			Very Low	
	Edu. Aspiration	276	-.031	.606	Negative	NS
Non-participants	Life Skills	240			Very Low	
	Edu. Aspiration	240	.112	.083	Positive	NS

The results in Table 1 show the r-values, of -.031 for participants and .112 for non-participants, were found to be insignificant, given their significant levels of .606 and .112 respectively. The null hypotheses were not rejected because their significant levels, .606 and .083, were each greater than .05. This means that life skills and educational aspirations of both participants and non-participants had no significant relationship. Among the students, life skills did not predict their educational aspirations.

## Hypothesis Two

*Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in life skills and educational aspiration based on exposure to life skills training and mentoring.*

Data obtained were analysed to determine differences in the life skills and educational aspiration of participants and non-participants in the life skill training and mentoring programme. The independent t-test statistic was used to test significant difference in life skills and educational aspiration of the different groups. The results are contained in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of Independent t-test Analysis of Differences in Life skills and Educational Aspiration based on Participation in Life Skills Training and Mentoring

Variables	Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
<b>Life Skills</b>	Participants	276	49.13	3.71			
	Non-Participants	240	19.96	4.03	85.64	.000	Significant
<b>Educat. Aspiration</b>	Participants	276	19.32	2.06			
	Non-Participants	240	10.67	2.85	39.85	.002	Significant

$p < .05$ ;  $df = 514$

From Table 2, it is seen that the Sig. (2-tailed) values of .000 and .002 for life skills and educational aspiration respectively, are less than .05 alpha level of significance. The t-values were significant. The null hypotheses were therefore rejected. From the mean scores recorded by these two groups, it is seen that there is difference between participants and non-participants in the life skills training and mentoring. The result suggests that students who participated probably obtained more information on life skills and educational aspiration than those who did not participate.

### Hypothesis Three

*Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in possession of life skills based on gender, age and family background.*

**Table 3:** Summary of Independent t-test Analysis of Differences in Life Skills based on Sex, Age and Family Background

Variable	Category	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig. (2 tailed)	Decision
Sex	Male	132	49.33	3.58	.870	.343	NS
	Female	144	48.94	3.82			
Age	>15 years	141	49.14	3.65	.052	.610	NS
	< 15 Years	135	49.12	3.78			
Parental Backgrd.	Bio. Parents	115	49.55	3.17	1.58	.000	S
	Foster Parents	161	48.83	4.03			

$p < .05$   $df = 274$

From the Table 3, it is seen that t-values for sex and age were not significant because their significant values, .343 and .610 for sex and age respectively, were greater than .05. The null hypotheses were therefore retained for these variables. This means that life skills did not significantly depend on the sex and age of participants. The t-value for parental background, 1.58, was found to be significant because the significant level, .000 was less than .05. This means that the life skills of the participants in the training and mentoring programme depended on the type of parents they lived with. Those who lived with biological parents recorded higher mean score in their life skills than those who lived with foster parents.

### Hypothesis Four

*Senior secondary school students do not significantly differ in educational aspirations based on gender, age and family background.*



To test this hypothesis, data obtained were analysed using independent t-test. The results are contained in Table 4

**Table 4:** Summary of Independent t-test Analysis of Differences in Educational Aspirations based on Sex, Age and Family Background

Variable	Category	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Sig. (2 tailed)	Decision
<b>Sex</b>	Male	132	19.70	2.29	3.02	.000	S
	Female	144	18.97	1.76			
<b>Age</b>	>15 years	141	19.65	2.26	2.78	.000	S
	< 15 Years	135	18.97	1.77			
<b>Par. Backgrnd.</b>	Bio. Parents	115	19.13	2.14	-1.28	.355	NS
	Foster Parents	161	19.45	1.99			

$p < .05$ ;  $df = 274$

The t-values on educational aspiration based on sex, age and parental background were 3.02, 2.78 and -1.28 respectively. The t-values for sex and age were found to be significant because their significant levels, .000 was each less than .05. This means that educational aspiration appeared to depend on sex and age of participants. Male participants and those below 15 years of age recorded higher mean scores than female participants and those who were above 15 years of age. The t-value in respect of parental background, ( $t = -1.28$ , was not significant at .355 which was greater than .05. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected for sex and age and retained for parental background.

## Discussion of Findings

Life skills appeared to have no significant relationship with educational aspirations. This finding varied with that of Abdi and Davoudi (2015) who found that problem-solving, decision-making and effective communication skills have significant relationship with academic achievement. Othman, *et. al* (2013) however found that factors that influence students' academic aspiration are compounded by the family, school and personal factors such as social support, academic self-concept and perception of the school environment. Sanche-Hernando also found significant association between life skills and academic performance. The finding in this study could have resulted from the fact that the respondents, were drawn mostly from public secondary schools where aspiration for further education may not be urgent, given their apparent low socio-economic level.

The finding that participants in the life skills training and mentoring programme were significantly higher in their mean scores in life skills and educational aspiration agree with those of WHO (1994), Campbell-Heiderand (2006), Tuttle et al. (2006), Esmaeilinasab *et. al.* (2011), Lolaty *et al.* (2012), Savorji, *et. al.* (2013) and Hesari and Tafreshi (2017) that training can indeed improve life

skills. The present finding reflects the relevance of the training and mentorship programme to enhance the life skills of the participants, the readiness of the participants to receive it and provides strong impetus for the need to integrate such training in the secondary school curriculum in the state.

There was no gender and age difference in the life skills of the participants in the training and mentoring programme. This finding differs from that of Dey et al. (2022) who found that mean life skills score among male students was less than that of female students. The finding however agrees with that of Sanchez-Hemado et al. (2021) who found boys obtained higher mean scores in life skills than girls who also had higher mean scores in social skills than boys. The present finding could result from the fact that the participants in the training programme were almost of the same age and selected from the same environment and background. their family background however, indicated difference between those who lived with their biological parents and those who lived with foster parents. Participants who lived with biological parents recorded higher mean scores in life skills than those who lived with foster parents. The finding may reflect the caring influence of the biological parents who would provide more information to their wards on life skills, against those of foster parents who may not be privileged to receive such care, hence the difference in the mean score. This finding varied with that of Dey et al. (2022) who found no significant difference in life skills between students of nuclear and joint families and rural and urban settings. Owing to the apparent low standard in public schools, many parents in the area seem to have more confidence in private schools to which they send their wards leaving the public schools for leaners from low-income families and those who may be living with guardians and foster parents.

There was significant gender and age difference in educational aspirations of students in the present study. Male and younger students recorded higher means scores in educational aspiration than female and older students. This finding disagrees with that of Chalwa (2018) who found no gender and type of school (public vs private schools) difference in educational aspiration of students. The present finding may be due to fact that more male and younger than female and older students were more responsive to the mentoring process thereby getting more enthusiastic in educational aspiration. No significant difference was found in educational aspirations based on family background, probably due to low self confidence of the respondents in the possibility of furthering their education given their economic background. Most students in public schools in the area seem to come from low-income families.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that if life skills of students were developed, their mental health and capacity for higher educational performance can be expanded thereby being empowered for greater educational exploits and aspiration.

## Recommendations

Base on the findings of this study, the following measures are suggested for the improvement of the life skills of students:

1. Students should be exposed to life skills training the cover every facet of life educational administrators. This can be done by integrating these skills into the school curriculum and strengthening the school guidance and counselling programme to provide the counsellors more opportunities to interact with and mentor the students in the various life skills areas.
2. Educational policy makers should ensure that the development of life skills constitute an integral part of educational and guidance policies to guarantee robust mental well-being of the students.
3. Educational administrators should make room for regular training of school personnel on life skills to ensure that emerging issues are clearly identified and addressed to improve students' mental health.
4. Every school should be provided with a functional guidance and counselling centre so that the students can have opportunities to discuss their needs with the counsellor from time to time.
5. In providing life skills training to the students, more attention should be given to the female students.
6. Teachers and counsellors should be exposed to and empowered to provide mentoring service to the students to assist in the improvement of their life skills and aspirations.

## Limitation

The study covered only five secondary schools selected from three local government areas in two of the three senatorial districts of the state. Although the sample may be assumed to be representative of the state, a larger scope of study may be necessary for reliable generalization of the findings for the entire state.

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