

Understanding Life Skills Development in Indonesian Primary Education: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges Among Teachers and Pre-Service Teachers

Tb. Moh. Irma Ari Irawan^{1*}, Nandang Rusmana¹, Ahman¹, Ilfiandra¹, Yusi Riksa Yustina¹, Eka Sakti Yudha¹, Sheva Anela Tanu Praditha², Renata Nur Aziizah²

¹Guidance and Counseling, Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, West Java, Indonesia

²Elementary School Teacher Education Study Program, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Tasikmalaya Campus, West Java, Indonesia

*Corresponding author email: tubagusirma@upi.edu

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ABSTRACT - Life skills education plays a crucial role in supporting students' holistic development in primary education; however, its implementation remains insufficiently understood in the Indonesian context. This study aims to explore teachers' and pre-service teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges in developing life skills in Indonesian primary schools. A qualitative approach was employed using focus group discussions as the primary data collection method. The study involved 20 participants, including ten pre-service teachers, three early-career teachers, and seven experienced teachers from various districts in West Java, Indonesia. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes. The findings reveal several important insights. First, participants demonstrated varying understandings of life skills, ranging from basic academic competencies among pre-service teachers to more holistic, character-integrated perspectives among experienced teachers. Second, life skills were generally implemented implicitly through classroom practices such as collaborative learning, habituation of positive behaviors, and extracurricular activities, rather than through structured and explicitly designed instructional strategies. Third, multiple challenges were identified, including limited conceptual clarity, the absence of practical guidelines, time constraints, and the predominance of academically oriented curriculum demands. In addition, participants highlighted both opportunities and concerns related to technology integration, particularly regarding its role in enhancing learning while potentially affecting students' social behavior. Overall, the findings indicate that life skills education in Indonesian primary schools is not yet systematically integrated into teaching practices. The study underscores the need for more structured pedagogical approaches, targeted teacher training, and supportive school policies to strengthen the development of life skills in a more consistent and sustainable manner.

INTRODUCTION

The development of life skills has become a central focus in 21st-century education in response to the increasing complexity of global challenges, including social change, technological advancement, and evolving labor market demands. Various studies highlight that skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and the effective use of technology are essential competencies that need to be fostered from the primary education level (Padmadewi et al., 2020; Irwandani et al., 2024; Badeni et al., 2025). In this context, primary schools are not only responsible for strengthening literacy and numeracy but also serve as a foundation for shaping students' character, independence, and readiness to face future life challenges.

However, the developmental dynamics of students in the digital era indicate that the challenges they face extend beyond academic demands to include social and emotional dimensions. Students encounter issues such as low learning motivation, limited self-regulation abilities, and the emergence of negative social behaviors within school environments. These conditions underscore the importance of strengthening life skills, including coping abilities, resilience, and social interaction skills from an early age. At the same time, the implementation of life skills education in primary schools continues to vary depending on local contexts, including socio-economic conditions, cultural diversity, and the availability of educational resources (Kurniawati, 2021; Sari et al., 2022). This suggests that life skills development requires a more systematic and context-sensitive approach.

A number of international studies indicate that life skills education can be developed through both formal and informal learning approaches. Tan (2018) emphasizes that the implementation of life skills in primary education is influenced by cultural contexts as well as the role of teachers in integrating these skills, both explicitly and implicitly. Furthermore, Cronin et al. (2023) demonstrate that teachers play a strategic role in facilitating the transfer of life skills across different areas of students' lives. Nevertheless, across various contexts, teachers' and pre-service teachers' understanding of life skills tends to vary and, in some cases, remains limited, often being interpreted as basic self-care skills (Yildirim, 2019). Other studies also show that pre-service teachers experience difficulties in effectively implementing life skills-based instruction in classroom practice (Arasomwan & Mashiya, 2021), indicating the need for stronger teacher education and training.

In the Indonesian context, several studies reveal a gap between perceptions and practices in the development of 21st-century skills. Padmadewi et al. (2020) found that teachers perceive themselves as ready to integrate these skills; however, their actual classroom implementation remains suboptimal. This finding is supported by Suyatno et al. (2023), who highlight that while teaching practice experiences can enhance pre-service teachers' professionalism, there remains a need for continuous strengthening of pedagogical competencies. In addition, Miranda et al. (2021) indicate that teachers' understanding of life skills education, particularly in the context of entrepreneurship-based and general life skills, remains limited and not yet optimally implemented in classroom practices. Contextual factors such as limited resources, conditions in remote schools, and low student motivation also pose significant challenges to effective implementation (Sari et al., 2022; Kurniawati, 2021).

Taken together, these findings suggest that although life skills are widely recognized as a critical component of primary education, their implementation still faces challenges at conceptual, pedagogical, and contextual levels. However, most previous studies tend to focus on specific aspects in isolation, such as perceptions, instructional interventions, or teacher readiness. Studies that simultaneously examine perceptions, practices, and challenges among both teachers and pre-service teachers within the real context of Indonesian primary education remain limited. Such comprehensive understanding is essential to bridge the gap

between educational policy and classroom practice. Therefore, this study aims to explore teachers' and pre-service teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges in developing life skills in Indonesian primary education. By employing a qualitative approach through focus group discussions, this study seeks to provide in-depth insights into current practices and contribute to the development of more structured, contextually relevant, and sustainable life skills learning strategies.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a qualitative research design using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as the primary method of data collection. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate to explore participants' perspectives and experiences in depth, particularly in understanding how life skills are perceived and implemented in primary education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). FGDs were selected because they allow interaction among participants, enabling the emergence of shared meanings as well as diverse viewpoints within a social context (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The total of 20 participants were purposively selected to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases and diverse perspectives. The participants were divided into three groups: ten pre-service teachers (students in their seventh semester) who had completed teaching practice in Tasikmalaya and Ciamis; three early-career teachers with 5–10 months of teaching experience from Cirebon, Ciamis, and Tasikmalaya; and seven senior teachers with more than 10 years of experience from various regions, including Tasikmalaya, Ciamis, Banjar, and Pangandaran. This grouping allowed for a comparative understanding of perspectives across different stages of teaching experience.

Data were collected through three FGD sessions guided by a semi-structured protocol developed by the researchers. The discussions focused on six key areas: participants' understanding of life skills, the perceived importance of life skills for primary school students, challenges encountered in practice, instructional strategies used in the classroom, the role of technology in supporting life skills development, and participants' professional development needs. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, using both face-to-face and online formats. All discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves coding the data, identifying patterns, and developing themes. The analysis considered both similarities and differences across participant groups. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of the results with selected participants for validation, and coding consistency was strengthened through independent coding by two researchers followed by discussion to reach agreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the FGD data yielded six major themes: (1) conceptual understanding of life skills, (2) prioritised life skills for primary students, (3) student challenges and contributing factors, (4) life skills instructional practices, (5) technology integration in life skills learning, and (6) professional development needs. The findings are presented comparatively across the three participant groups and discussed in relation to existing literature. A more detailed description of these themes is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of FGD Findings Across Participant Groups

Theme	Pre-Service Teachers	Early-Career Teachers	Senior Teachers
Understanding of Life Skills	Perceived life skills as basic academic competencies: reading, writing, arithmetic, motor skills, and everyday independence. Understanding was limited to observable phenomena without broader theoretical framing.	Recognised life skills as involving academic, social, and independence dimensions; however, acknowledged that school implementation remained unsystematic.	Demonstrated a holistic conceptualisation encompassing effective communication, critical thinking, collaboration, ethics, responsibility, and independence, as integral to character formation.
Key Life Skills for Primary Students	Emphasised foundational literacy and numeracy (calistung), independence, motor skills, and social adaptation as essential daily-life competencies.	Added self-regulated learning, empathy, communication, self-management, and problem-solving as crucial for early character development.	Advocated a comprehensive set including independence, responsibility, leadership, teamwork, digital literacy, ethics, and career orientation from an early age.
Common Student Challenges	Observed verbal and physical bullying, intolerance, low learning motivation, lack of confidence, and minimal career awareness. Career choices among upper-grade students tended to follow peers without clear understanding.	Reported bullying, low literacy, reduced motivation, and minimal career orientation. Career awareness was mostly absent and began to emerge only in upper grades.	Identified complex issues: bullying, unhealthy peer dynamics, attention-seeking behaviours, motivational deficits, and very limited career orientation, with student potential largely unexplored.
Root Causes	Cited the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic, insufficient parental attention, parental absence due to labour migration, diverse student characteristics, and limited pedagogical strategies.	Attributed to the absence of a clear life skills curriculum, inadequate habituation practices, environmental influences, and a lack of instructional guidelines for teachers.	Pointed to unsupportive social environments, insufficient life skills habituation at both school and home, and inconsistent parental involvement.
Life Skills Instruction Observed	Found instruction unstructured, relying on routine activities (prayer, class duties, literacy). One exception was UPI Labschool Tasikmalaya, which offered a dedicated Life Skills extracurricular activity.	Noted the presence of habituation-based programmes, though life skills had yet to be formally integrated into the curriculum. Methods included lecture, demonstration, PjBL, and discussion.	Acknowledged that no dedicated life skills curriculum existed; schools primarily relied on habitual routines and religious programmes. Advocated integration into co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
Barriers to Implementation	Identified limited pedagogical knowledge of life skills, restricted experience, and difficulty adapting to diverse student needs.	Noted inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, scarce instructional resources, environmental influences, and time constraints.	Highlighted dual roles as class teachers and counsellors, time pressure, the absence of clear curricular guidelines, diverse learner profiles, and

Technology in Learning	Experienced both permissive and restrictive policies across schools. Devices were generally allowed for Grades 5–6 for specific purposes (e.g., AKM simulation, game-based learning). Saw potential but worried about over-reliance and reduced face-to-face interaction.	Supported technology use if properly regulated; some teachers prohibited devices to maintain focus and social interaction.	suboptimal instructional adaptation. Expressed cautious support, emphasising the need for clear school policies. Some schools prohibited personal devices entirely; others provided limited school-owned devices for educational tasks.
Professional Development Aspirations	Requested training in student guidance and conflict management, and hoped for programmes that integrate life skills into regular instruction.	Desired training in student guidance, dedicated life skills frameworks, and practical support materials to avoid over-reliance on improvisation.	Expressed concern over excessive workload. Recommended integration of life skills into co-curricular or extracurricular settings. Suggested establishing dedicated guidance counsellors in primary schools.

The findings from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Table 1. indicate that the understanding of life skills among participants varies across different groups. Pre-service teachers tend to define life skills primarily as basic academic competencies such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Early-career teachers expand this view by incorporating elements of social skills and independence. Meanwhile, senior teachers demonstrate a more comprehensive perspective, perceiving life skills as holistic competencies that should be integrated across the entire curriculum. This variation suggests the absence of a unified conceptual framework of life skills among educators, which may ultimately influence how these skills are implemented in educational practice.

Despite these differences, there is a shared understanding that life skills encompass a broad and multidimensional set of competencies. These include academic skills (literacy and numeracy), personal competencies such as self-management and independence, social skills such as empathy and communication, as well as broader capacities including collaboration, leadership, digital literacy, ethical awareness, and early career orientation. This indicates that life skills are not limited to functional abilities, but also play a critical role in shaping students' character and preparing them to face future challenges.

However, the current condition of elementary school students reveals various developmental and social challenges. Students experience issues such as verbal and physical bullying, intolerance, social exclusion, low learning motivation, and limited independence. In addition, students' career awareness remains very limited. Most students do not yet have a clear understanding of their aspirations, and their career choices are often influenced by popular trends rather than informed self-awareness.

Another critical issue that emerges is the suboptimal development of students' interests and talents. Although interests and potentials begin to emerge in the upper grades, the processes of identification and development have not been carried out systematically. Students are not provided with sufficient opportunities to explore themselves, recognize their strengths, or

connect these with possible future pathways. As a result, the development of students' identity and life direction becomes less structured.

This condition indicates that career development at the elementary school level is still perceived as a secondary aspect, rather than an integral part of the learning process. In fact, early self-exploration, identification of interests and talents, and career orientation play a crucial role in building students' confidence, learning motivation, and readiness to plan their future. Without proper guidance, students may develop academically but lack a clear direction in their life pathways.

When compared with these challenges, the implementation of life skills education in schools remains insufficient and unsystematic. In practice, life skills are often taught through routine habituation activities such as classroom duties, personal hygiene practices, and religious routines. Although instructional methods such as lectures, demonstrations, Project-Based Learning (PjBL), and discussions are employed, these approaches are not consistently designed to integrate life skills development. Furthermore, extracurricular activities are limited and have not fully supported the comprehensive development of life skills. This highlights a clear gap between the intended goals of life skills education and its actual implementation in schools.

This gap is further reinforced by several systemic constraints. One of the primary challenges is the absence of structured guidelines or a clearly defined life skills curriculum. Teachers face diverse student characteristics that require differentiated approaches, while instructional time is limited and teachers carry multiple responsibilities. In addition, many teachers have not received sufficient training in life skills education, particularly in integrating guidance into the learning process. Limited facilities and infrastructure also present additional barriers. These challenges affect not only in-service teachers but also pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum, who often feel unprepared to address students' personal and social development.

As a result, life skills education in elementary schools tends to be implemented in a fragmented and ad hoc manner, relying heavily on individual teacher initiatives rather than being systematically embedded within the educational process. This condition reflects a lack of alignment among policy, curriculum, and classroom practices. Therefore, these findings highlight the importance of developing a comprehensive, integrated, and contextual life skills education model. Such a model should connect three key components—curriculum, guidance, and technology—into a unified learning ecosystem. The integration of guidance into learning is particularly essential to ensure that educational processes not only focus on knowledge acquisition but also support self-exploration, the development of interests and talents, and the formation of students' career orientation from an early stage.

Furthermore, strengthening the competencies of both in-service and pre-service teachers is crucial. This can be achieved through continuous professional development, structured training programs, mentoring, and the provision of practical guidelines that can be directly implemented in classroom practice. Institutional support also plays a vital role. Clear and consistent school policies can assist teachers in integrating life skills into daily learning without adding excessive administrative burdens. On the other hand, the role of technology must be managed wisely. Technology has the potential to enhance learning quality, increase student engagement, and develop digital literacy. However, it also presents challenges, such as reduced social interaction and the risk of overuse. Therefore, the use of technology must be guided by clear policies and pedagogical considerations to ensure that it supports, rather than hinders, the development of students' life skills. Overall, the main issue identified in this study is the lack of integration among policy, curriculum, and instructional practices in life skills education. Without comprehensive and systemic interventions that connect these elements,

the development of life skills in elementary schools will remain fragmented and unsustainable. Therefore, a strategic approach is needed that integrates guidance into learning, supported by teacher capacity building and the appropriate use of technology, in order to create meaningful, directed, and holistic learning experiences for students.

The findings of this study, which reveal variations in the understanding of life skills, fragmented implementation, and the need for an integrated model, are consistent with a growing body of research in primary education. Existing literature indicates that although primary school curricula already incorporate various life skills components—such as communication, collaboration, empathy, and leadership—their implementation remains limited. This is largely due to insufficient teacher training, inappropriate pedagogical approaches, an overemphasis on academic achievement, and rigid examination systems (Hasrat et al., 2024; Muzaini et al., 2023; Ahmad et al., 2024; Linh, 2024). These findings reinforce the present study's conclusion that a gap persists between conceptual understanding and practical implementation of life skills education. Furthermore, prior studies confirm that teachers generally recognize the importance of life skills but encounter significant constraints in implementing them. These constraints include rigid curricular structures, limited instructional time, and assessment systems that prioritize academic outcomes over non-academic competencies (Hasrat et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024). This aligns with the FGD findings, which indicate that life skills education is often conducted in an ad hoc manner and depends heavily on individual teacher initiatives.

In terms of student conditions, the findings related to bullying, low motivation, and social challenges are also supported by empirical evidence. Bullying, particularly in verbal forms, has been shown to negatively affect students' learning motivation, self-confidence, engagement, and academic performance (Ramadhanti et al., 2025; Nirwana, 2024; Jihan et al., 2024). Additionally, students with special educational needs are more vulnerable to social exclusion and emotional distress (Carmona & Montanero, 2025). Other studies highlight that structured anti-bullying programs can significantly improve students' learning motivation (Jihan et al., 2024; Varlık, 2024). These findings emphasize that life skills development must be closely linked to the creation of safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.

Regarding career development and talent exploration, this study is further supported by literature emphasizing the importance of early intervention. Career awareness among primary school students can develop more effectively when supported by structured activities such as exposure to various professions, social skill development, and guided exploration of interests and talents (Irmayanti et al., 2025). In addition, psychological assessments of students' interests, intelligence, and personality can provide a strong foundation for designing learning strategies aligned with their potential and future career pathways (Zamralita et al., 2025). Effective career exploration requires a balance between self-exploration and environmental exploration, facilitated through structured guidance services and school programs (Susilo et al., 2024; Ayriza et al., 2020; Elliott et al., 2024). These findings strengthen the argument that career development and talent identification should be integrated into primary education from an early stage.

Moreover, the literature highlights that effective life skills development requires an integrated approach that connects curriculum, instruction, and school activities. An integrated life skills-based curriculum has been shown to enhance students' independence, responsibility, and social competencies through its implementation in subjects, extracurricular activities, and religious programs (Muzaini et al., 2023; Linh, 2024; Mastoah et al., 2023). In addition, experiential learning approaches are considered highly effective in developing life skills, as they provide students with meaningful, hands-on experiences rather than relying solely on routine habituation (Linh, 2024).

Another crucial aspect is teacher competence. A substantial body of research indicates that strengthening teacher competencies—both through pre-service education and continuous professional development—significantly enhances teachers' ability to integrate life skills into classroom practice (Zhang et al., 2024; Yulita et al., 2025; Kurgambekov et al., 2025). Contextual, continuous, and technology-supported training programs have also been shown to improve teachers' global competence, soft skills, and professional readiness (Bamrungsin & Khampirat, 2022; Romijn et al., 2021). These findings support the present study's conclusion that limited teacher competence remains a major barrier to effective life skills implementation in primary schools.

Overall, the existing body of research strongly supports the findings of this study, indicating that life skills education in primary schools continues to face conceptual, practical, and systemic challenges. Therefore, there is a clear need for an integrated model that connects curriculum, guidance and counseling services, technology utilization, and teacher professional development. Such a model is expected to bridge the gap between policy, curriculum, and classroom practice, enabling a more structured, systematic, and sustainable development of students' life skills.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the perceptions, practices, and challenges of life skills education in Indonesian primary schools through the lens of pre-service teachers, early-career teachers, and senior teachers. The findings reveal a clear developmental gradient in conceptual understanding—from basic academic competency frameworks among pre-service teachers to holistic, character-integrated conceptualisations among senior teachers—highlighting the inadequacy of current pre-service teacher education in preparing graduates with a comprehensive understanding of life skills.

Life skills instruction in Indonesian primary schools remains predominantly ad hoc, relying on habitual routines and extracurricular activities in the absence of a structured curriculum or national policy framework. Student challenges—including bullying, motivational deficits, and limited career orientation—are multiply determined and require integrated school, family, and community responses. Technology represents a contested terrain: while its pedagogical potential is acknowledged, its implementation is constrained by inconsistent policies and legitimate concerns about social disruption.

The study concludes that a comprehensive, integrated model for life skills education is urgently needed—one that unifies curriculum, guidance, and technology within a humanistic and adaptive learning ecosystem. Key recommendations include: the development of a national life skills curriculum framework for primary education; the integration of structured life skills training into pre-service and in-service teacher education; the establishment of guidance counselors in primary schools; and the development of clear, evidence-based policies for educational technology use. Future research should explore the design and evaluation of such an integrated model, with attention to cultural responsiveness and contextual diversity across Indonesian primary school settings.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Tb. Moh. Irma Ari Irawan: Conceptualization, Collecting data, Writing, Reviewing, and Editing. **Nandang Rusmana, Ahman, Ilfiandra, Yusi Riksa Yustina, Eka Sakti Yudha:** Supervision and Validation. **Sheva Anela Tanu Praditha and Renata Nur Aziizah:** Reviewing.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The qualitative data (FGD transcripts) contain potentially identifiable information and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative AI tools: ChatGPT for improving academic language and clarity, Scopus AI for identifying relevant literature, and Consensus for supporting evidence-based understanding of research findings. All outputs were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

ETHIC STATEMENTS

This study involved human participants (teachers and pre-service teachers) who provided voluntary informed consent prior to their participation. All participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and the principles.

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