

Evaluation Study on The Women's Foundation Life Skills Program 2014-15

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Women's Foundation's (TWF) Life Skills Program was launched in 2011. The main goal of the program is to facilitate mid-late teens to initiate positive changes in their lives through enhancing their self-understanding, interpersonal relationships, and life and career planning. Furthermore, in view of the importance of family and school in the socialization of youth into adulthood, this program also provides parent and teacher seminars to promote supportive parenting and teaching which can help adolescents to cope better with their life challenges. In order to develop an evidence-based life skills program, TWF commissioned the researcher to conduct an evaluation study to assess the effectiveness of this program and to explore the essential factors affecting the feasibility of the program to tailor itself to the needs of adolescents in Hong Kong.

This evaluation study adopted a mixed methods approach which included both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative part aims to (1) assess the program in terms of its effectiveness in improving student participants' self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of meaningfulness, satisfaction with life, internal locus of control, sense of loneliness, gender stereotypes, and financial literacy; and (2) assess the student, parent, and teacher participants' satisfaction with the program. As for the qualitative part, focus group interviews were undertaken to examine students' perceptions of the program and their suggestion.

The quantitative findings indicate that the students experienced substantial improvements in most of the aspects examined after joining the program. They gained a more positive evaluation of self-worth, a greater belief in their capability, an enhanced sense of meaningfulness, a higher satisfaction with life, an improved sense of control over life events, a more flexible and critical attitude towards Chinese cultural gender stereotypes, and a greater willingness to take part in personal and family financial management. Moreover, the majority of the student, parent, and teacher participants felt satisfied with the program contents, program impacts, and performance of their trainers. Meanwhile, many focus group respondents also expressed their appreciation for the program impacts on their self-understanding, emotional management, meaning seeking, goal setting, interpersonal relationship, gender stereotype flexibility, and financial management. All in all, the program was found to be effective in achieving most of its objectives.

Results of the sub-group analysis show that the program had a greater positive impact on the sense of

meaningfulness of economically disadvantaged students and on the internal locus of control of junior secondary students. These findings support that the program should be implemented earlier in the secondary school life and TWF should maintain its great efforts in mobilizing the participation of disadvantaged youth. Furthermore, trainers' self-reflection ability and their skills in supporting young people to reflect should be strengthened in order to maximize the program impact and bring about positive behavioral changes among the participants.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the evaluation research

Life skills training is a type of non-formal education designed to nurture young people with the positive qualities needed to deal effectively with life challenges (World Health Organization, 1997). The development of life skills can also enable young people to protect themselves from a multitude of vulnerable social environments and risk-taking behaviors (UNICEF, 2012). In response to the urgent need for providing life skills training for Hong Kong adolescents, The Women's Foundation's Life Skills Program was launched in 2011. The main goal of the program is to facilitate mid-late teens to initiate positive changes in their lives through enhancing their self-understanding, interpersonal relationships, and life and career planning. Furthermore, in view of the importance of family and school in the socialization of youth into adulthood, this program also provides parent and teacher workshops to promote supportive parenting and teaching which can help adolescents to cope better with their life challenges. In order to develop an evidence-based life skills program, The Women's Foundation commissioned the researcher to conduct an evaluation study to assess the effectiveness of this program and to explore the essential factors affecting the feasibility of the program to tailor itself to the needs of adolescents in Hong Kong.

1.2. Research objectives

- To assess the effectiveness of the program in fostering students' psychosocial well-being.
- To examine the student, parent, and teacher participants' perception of the program.
- To explore the student participants' learning experiences.
- To investigate the factors conducive to the success of the program.
- To make recommendations for improvements.

2. Literature review

The significance of life skills development among adolescents has been increasingly recognized in Hong Kong since its inception in the 2000s. Life skills development is commonly regarded as courses, programs, and activities provided by life skills training practitioners to enhance young people's attitudes, knowledge, and skills for the promotion of their personal, social, academic, and career development (Agochiya, 2010; American School Counseling Association, 2003; Yuen et al., 2003). It emphasizes equipping adolescents with self-knowledge, social and emotional skills, decision-making and problem-solving skills, time-management skills, and career planning skills to foster their whole-person development and prepare them for full participation in the community and society (Faculty of Education, CUHK & Department of Educational Studies, 2007; Watkins, 1998; Yuen, 2011).

Numerous overseas and local research studies have explored the effectiveness of life skills programs. Having adopted a randomized controlled trial for program evaluation, the study conducted by Graves, Sentner, Workman, and Mackey (2011) indicated that young females who received a life skills training increased their personal/self-sexuality expectations and improved some aspects of their parent-child communication compared to control group participants. Another clinical trial conducted by Campbell-Heider, Tuttle, and Knapp (2009) found that the mental health problems for high-risk male teens significantly reduced after their participation in the life skills program.

In the past, the government and welfare organizations put much effort into reducing the antisocial behavior of young people and helping them reach the expected norms of society. In recent years, a paradigm shift from a problem-based orientation to an orientation that seeks to address adolescents' lived experiences and potentials has been promoted (Leung, 1996; To, 2007). Echoing such a paradigm shift, a transformative learning approach was used to theorize a research framework for assessing the effectiveness and applicability of the Women's Foundation Life Skills Program. According to Mezirow, learning is "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to future action" (2000, p.3), while transformative learning is "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspective, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and

opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action". Inspired by transformative learning, life skills development should try to work with the life process of awareness in order to bring to adolescents the possibilities for richer and more meaningful experiences of self-enrichment, relationship enhancement, and community participation (To, Tam, Ngai, & Sung, 2014). This approach also reminds us that life skills development programs should comprise the following components:

First, life skills training should aim to facilitate young people to foster a positive self-concept, affirm their competence, and enhance their coping capabilities (Edginton, Kowalski, & Randall, 2005). Trainers should facilitate young people to engage in self-reflection through which they could recognize their existing reservoirs of strengths and resources to draw upon and have their distinct capacity for growth (Linden & Fertman, 1998). Moreover, finding personal meaning in life and assuming responsibilities are also an essential parts of self-understanding that could help motivate and consolidate the changes in knowledge and skills (To, Tam, & Chan, 2013). Therefore, life skills training should also endeavor to facilitate young people to search for their meaning in life and strive for a healthy balance between freedom and responsibility.

Second, this approach recognizes the fact that life skills are naturally interpersonal; thus, a crucial element is to enhance young people's communicative competence and practice of the self on interpersonal relationships (Johnson, 2003). Much emphasis should be placed on building connections with other people, acknowledging that the heart of life skills lies in getting others to cooperate and in making full use of their verbal and nonverbal communication skills in resolving relationship problems (Ngai, Cheung, Ngai, & To, 2012).

Third, life skills development should go beyond the individual dimension. It should create chances for young people to express their concerns over societal issues and participate in the civic lives of school, community, and society. Besides promoting constructive psychological development of young people through cultivating a positive self-esteem, enhancing self-efficacy, and promoting the search for life purpose, it should also contribute to the cognitive development of young people through critical assessment of social-life issues and the application of knowledge to respond to these issues (Ennis, 1993). Real experiences should also be provided to improve their sense of community and prepare them for full participation in social affairs (Claus & Ogden, 1999).

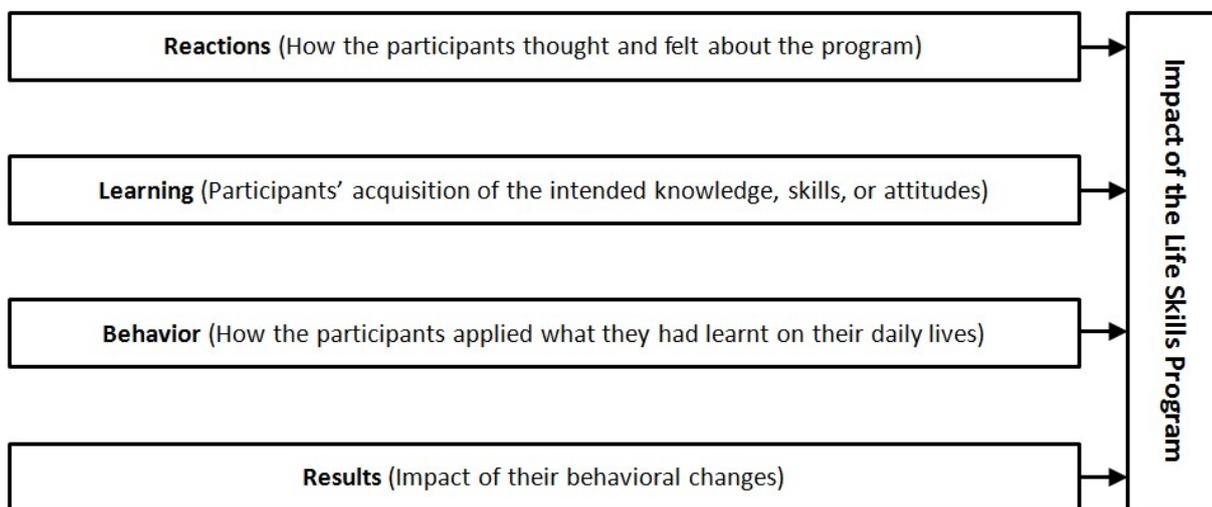
Finally, although transfer of knowledge and skills is significant, the most powerful source of influencing

young people in a positive direction is the trainers' own living examples of who they are. Besides teaching knowledge and skills, trainers can share with participants about their reflections and practice wisdom derived from their real life experiences (Walters, 2008). Trainers should also maintain a collaborative relationship with participants, sincerely hear their voices, and generate meaningful dialogues between them (To, 2009). In contrast with a technical and one-way transmission of knowledge and skills, life skills development should be perceived as a process through which participants are aligned to support each other to apply what they have learned. Gaining different perspectives from others helps the participants expand their personal narratives so that they can move forward from a powerless situation to refocus on their capabilities to make personal transformation. This is also beneficial to the sustainability of the program and its generalization to other adolescent groups.

3. Research framework

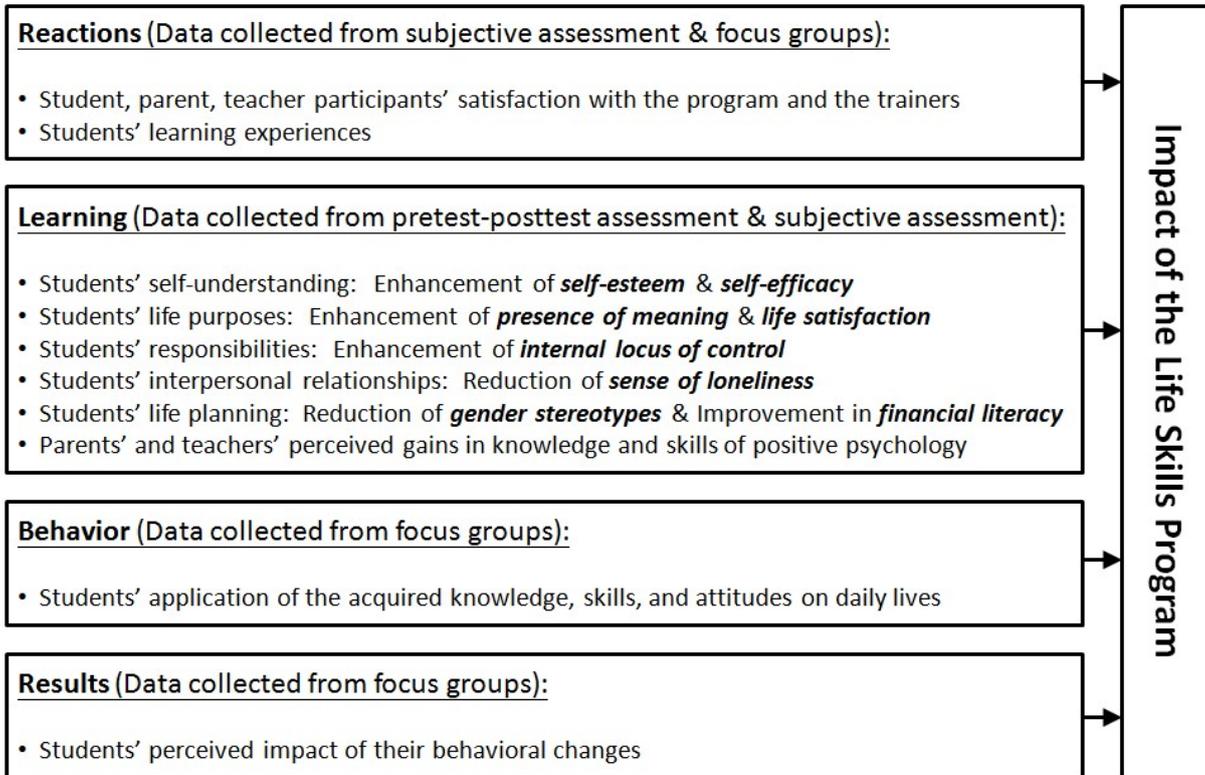
In this study, Kirkpatrick's evaluation model (1977, 1979; see Figure 1) was adopted to develop our research framework. There are four interlocking domains of evaluation to be conducted, namely reaction (how the participants thought and felt about the program), learning (participants' acquisition of the intended knowledge, skills, or attitudes), behavior (how the participants applied what they had learnt on their daily lives), and results (impact of their behavioral changes).

Figure 1: Kirkpatrick's evaluation model



Informed by the aforementioned transformative learning approach, this study examined participants' reactions through assessing their satisfaction with the program and the trainers and the interactions between students and trainers. To reflect students' learning, we assessed students' improvements in the intended outcome, including self-understanding, exploration of life purposes, assumption of responsibilities, establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships, and life and career planning. To reflect parents' and teachers' learning, their perceived gains in knowledge and skills in positive parenting and positive teaching respectively were measured. Finally, students' application of the acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes on daily lives and their perceived impact of their behavioral changes were explored to evaluate the dimensions of behavior and results. Figure 2 illustrates our research framework:

Figure 2: Research framework of this study



4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

In order to generate a comprehensive picture of the program impacts and the participants' experience, the mixed-methods approach was adopted to collect evaluation data from the following three areas:

Area 1: Objective outcome evaluation

Due to the difficulty of random assignment of the student participants in the experimental and control groups, a single-group pretest-posttest design was adopted to evaluate changes in the student participants in terms of their self-esteem, self-efficacy, loneliness, presence of meaning, life satisfaction, internal locus of control, perceptions of gender stereotypes, and financial literacy. Self-esteem and self-efficacy are the core components of self-concept which reflect the extent to which they had fulfilled their need for identity development. Presence of meaning and life satisfaction reflect the extent to which they had fulfilled their need for life purposes. Internal locus of control reflects the extent to which they had fulfilled their need for freedom and responsibility. Loneliness reflects the extent to which they had fulfilled their need for connectedness. Finally, reduction of gender stereotypes and improvement in financial literacy help better plan their future lives and careers.

Area 2: Subjective assessment

A posttest-only design was used to evaluate the student, parent, and teacher participants' satisfaction with the program and trainers in the final session. In addition, parents and teachers rated their perceived gains in knowledge and skills in positive parenting and positive teaching respectively in the final session.

Area 3: Qualitative evaluation based on focus group interviews

Four focus groups were conducted for 32 student participants. The participants were recruited by a purposive sampling method. Selection criteria included school, gender, and willingness to share their

experiences. Their learning experiences, behavioral changes, and perceived impact of the program were explored in the interviews.

4.2. Measures

Efforts were made to search for a variety of applicable scales and to develop scales according to the goals and contents of the program.

Scales used in objective outcome evaluation

- *Self-esteem*: Measured by the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1962; Shek, 1992; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a more positive global evaluation over oneself.
- *Self-efficacy*: Measured by the 7-item Self-efficacy Scale (Shek, Siu, Lee, Cheung, & Chung, 2008; Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief in one's competence in achieving goals.
- *Presence of meaning*: Measured by the 5-item Meaning in Life Questionnaire Presence of Meaning Subscale (Chan, 2014; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006; Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of meaningfulness in life.
- *Life satisfaction*: Measured by the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Shek, 1992; Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a higher satisfaction with life.
- *Internal locus of control*: Measured by the 8-item Levenson's Internal Control Scale (Levenson, 1973; Lao, 1978; Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of control over one's circumstances.
- *Loneliness*: Measured by the 6-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (De Jong Gierveld, 1987; Leung, de Jong Gierveld, & Lam, 2008; Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger sense of loneliness.

- *Perception of gender stereotypes*: Measured by the 5-item Chinese Cultural Beliefs on Sexuality Scale (To et al., 2013; Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger belief in Chinese cultural gender stereotypes.
- *Financial literacy*: Measured by the 5-item Financial Literacy Scale constructed by the researchers (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger willingness to take part in family financial management.

Scales used in subjective assessment

- *Satisfaction with the program*: Drawing references from the Client Satisfaction Scale (Larson, Attkisson, Hargreaves & Nguyen, 1979), the authors constructed three scales to measure the student, parent, and teacher participants' satisfaction with the program respectively (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90; .89; .91$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a higher satisfaction with the program.
- *Satisfaction with the trainers*: Drawing references from the Client Satisfaction Scale (Larson, Attkisson, Hargreaves & Nguyen, 1979), the authors constructed three scales to measure the student, parent, and teacher participants' satisfaction with the trainers respectively (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94; .94; .95$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a higher satisfaction with the performance of the trainers.
- *Perceived positive changes*: The authors developed two scales to measure parent and teacher participants' perceived positive changes after attending the workshop (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87; .90$). Each item was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strong agree). Higher scores indicate a stronger perceived gain in positive parenting or positive teaching.

Samples of semi-structured questions raised in focus group interviews

- What is your impression of life skills training in general?
- What was your experience in the Life Skills Program?
- Which topics or activities were helpful for you and why?
- To what extent did the learning facilitate your inspiration on personal, social, and career development?

- To what extent did the program enable you to transfer the knowledge gained to your daily lives?
- How would you comment on the implementation and effectiveness of the program?

4.3. Data collection procedures

For the quantitative evaluations, the student participants filled in the self-administered pretest questionnaire (see Appendix 1) in the first session of the training. Then, some subjective assessment items were added to the same questionnaire (see Appendix 2), which was answered in the final session. The parent and teacher participants' perception of the program was collected through a self-administered questionnaire given at the end of the workshop (see Appendix 3 and 4). Written consents had been obtained from all participants beforehand and all data and personal information was treated in the strictest confidentiality.

During the focus group interviews the student participants were encouraged to express their ideas freely. The researchers were aware of the importance of neutrality during discussion. The questions served as a general framework for the researcher which means the flow of sharing was participant-focused rather than question-focused. The discussion processes of the focus groups were tape-recorded with the participants' written consent.

4.4. Data analysis strategies

As far as the outcome evaluation is concerned, a series of Paired Sample T-tests were conducted to ascertain the positive changes of student participants after intervention. Besides, a series of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) were also performed to test for the differences among the student participants, aiming to provide more information on the unique needs of different subgroups.

Regarding the qualitative evaluation, the contents of the tapes were fully transcribed after the focus group interviews. The researcher started analyzing the data by reading and rereading every line of the transcripts in search of "meaning units", rather than relying on prior concepts to understand the data (Padgett, 1998). Codes were assigned to those meaning units and the codes were then categorized to reveal different levels of meaning produced by the narratives. Similar narratives were then sorted out to form the major themes of this study (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

5. Findings

5.1. Quantitative findings

5.1.1. Demographic background of the participants

Table 1: Demographics of student participants (*N* = 1,742)

	Percentage %
School	
China Holiness College	7.1
The HKMA K. S. Lo College	13.0
Holy Trinity College	18.5
PLK Lo Kit Sing (1983) College	13.7
Shek Lei Catholic Secondary School	13.4
St. Catharine's School For Girls (Kwun Tong)	18.7
United Christian College	15.7
Gender	
Female	69.6
Male	30.4
Age	
14 or below	40.3
15-16	54.5
17 or above	5.2
Educational level	
F.3	51.1
F.4	48.9
Parents' marital status	
Married and live together	85.0
Others	15.0
Father's educational level	
F.3 or below	37.5
F.4 to F.5	24.5
F.6 to F.7	22.1
Higher diploma / Associate degree	8.0
Bachelor degree or above	7.9
Mother's educational level	
F.3 or below	38.4
F.4 to F.5	25.2
F.6 to F.7	23.2
Diploma / Associate degree	7.2
Bachelor degree or above	6.0
Number of sibling	
No sibling	28.7
1	52.2
2	13.5
3 or above	5.6
Religion	
None	71.1

Catholic	2.3
Christian	22.4
Buddhist	2.1
Others	2.1
Type of housing	
Private property or subsidized home ownership scheme flats (self-owned)	30.1
Private property or subsidized home ownership scheme flats (rental)	10.0
Public rental housing	55.4
Subdivided apartment or others	4.4
Monthly family income	
Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)	5.7
\$10,000 or below	6.8
\$10,001 - \$20,000	32.5
\$20,001 - \$30,000	24.2
\$30,001 - \$40,000	14.4
\$40,001 - \$50,000	7.1
\$50,001 - \$60,000	2.9
\$60,001 or above	6.4

- Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the student participants.
- Around 70% were female.
- Around half of them were studying at the junior secondary level and half of them were at the senior level.
- For their parents' socioeconomic background, around 45% of the parents had received senior secondary education, 55% lived in public rental housing, and 57% had a monthly family income between HK\$10,001 and HK\$30,000.

Table 2: Demographics of parent participants (N = 279)

	Percentage %
School	
China Holiness College	3.2
Holy Trinity College	31.2
PLK Lo Kit Sing (1983) College	22.2
Shek Lei Catholic Secondary School	2.5
St. Catharine's School For Girls (Kwun Tong)	3.9
The HKMA K. S. Lo College	6.8
United Christian College	30.2
Gender	
Female	76.3
Male	18.6
Missing values	5.1
Age	
21-30	1.4
31-40	26.9
41-50	55.2
51-60	11.8
61 or above	2.2

Missing values

2.5

- Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the parent participants.
- Around 75% were female.
- Around 55% were aged between 41 and 50.

Table 3: Demographics of teacher participants (*N* = 272)

	Percentage %
School	
China Holiness College	22.4
PLK Lo Kit Sing (1983) College	14.7
St. Catharine's School For Girls (Kwun Tong)	9.6
The HKMA K. S. Lo College	22.8
United Christian College	30.5
Gender	
Female	60.7
Male	33.1
Missing values	6.3
Age	
21-30	19.9
31-40	28.3
41-50	30.1
51-60	11.0
61 or above	0.4
Missing values	10.3

- Table 3 shows the demographic characteristics of the teacher participants.
- Around 60% were female.
- Around 50% were aged under 40.

5.1.2. Objective outcome evaluation

Table 4: Comparisons between pretest and posttest scores of student participants (N =1,742)

Indicators	Range of scores	Pretest mean	Posttest mean	Changes
Self-esteem	10-60	40.6	41.0	*** Improved
Self-efficacy	7-42	27.4	27.6	* Improved
Presence of meaning	5-30	18.6	18.9	** Improved
Life satisfaction	5-30	19.2	19.4	* Improved
Internal locus of control	8-48	32.5	33.0	*** Improved
Loneliness	6-36	18.8	18.8	No significant change
Gender stereotypes	5-30	12.6	12.3	** Improved
Financial literacy	5-30	18.1	18.5	*** Improved

Note: A *p* value lower than .05 indicates a statistically significant mean difference. * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

- Table 4 shows the results of Paired Sample T-tests comparing the pretest and posttest scores of the student participants.
- The student participants showed significant improvement in most of the indicators at the post-intervention time point, including their self-esteem, self-efficacy, presence of life meaning, life satisfaction, internal locus of control, gender stereotypes, and financial literacy. In other words, they gained a more positive evaluation of self-worth, a greater belief in their capability, an enhanced sense of meaningfulness, a higher satisfaction with life, an improved sense of control over life events, a higher gender stereotype flexibility, and a greater willingness to take part in personal and family financial management.
- No significant improvement was found in their sense of loneliness.

5.1.3. Subjective assessment

Table 5. Student participants' satisfaction with the program (*N* = 1,742)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. This program reaches my expectations.	4.2 (1-6)	1.1%	2.5%	12.2%	52.2%	27.5%	4.5%
2. The program can satisfy my needs.	4.1 (1-6)	1.1%	2.8%	13.5%	52.2%	25.8%	4.6%
3. This program can help solve my problems.	4.1 (1-6)	1.4%	3.2%	14.7%	50.3%	25.5%	4.9%
4. Overall I feel satisfied with this program.	4.5 (1-6)	0.8%	1.8%	6.1%	44.6%	36.7%	10.0%
5. I would recommend this program to my friends who have similar needs.	4.1 (1-6)	1.6%	3.0%	14.3%	48.1%	26.2%	6.8%

- Table 5 shows the degree of satisfaction with the program rated by the student participants.
- All items received a high level of positive rating (ranging from 80.7% to 91.3%), which reflected that most students felt satisfied with the program.

Table 6. Student participants' satisfaction with the trainer (*N* = 1,742)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I think the instructor was well-prepared.	4.9 (1-6)	0.3%	0.3%	3.3%	23.8%	51.0%	21.3%
2. I think the instructor explained concepts clearly.	4.9 (1-6)	0.2%	0.7%	3.7%	23.4%	49.3%	22.7%
3. I think the instructor was responsive.	4.9 (1-6)	0.3%	0.9%	4.0%	22.8%	47.3%	24.7%
4. I think the instructor could arouse our involvement.	4.8 (1-6)	0.4%	1.1%	4.9%	24.2%	45.8%	23.6%
5. On the whole, I am satisfied with the performance of the instructor.	5.0 (1-6)	0.3%	0.7%	3.1%	21.6%	45.4%	28.9%

- Table 6 shows the degree of satisfaction with the trainers rated by the student participants.
- All items received an overwhelming proportion of positive ratings (ranging from 93.6% to 96.1%), which reflected their positive perception of their trainers' performance.

Table 7. Parent participants' satisfaction with the program (*N* = 279)

Items	Mean	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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	(Range)	Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Agree	
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with the workshop.	5.1 (1-6)	0.7%	0.4%	1.8%	11.5% 60.9%	24.7%
2. I would recommend this workshop to my friends.	5.0 (1-6)	0.6%	0.7%	2.2%	15.5% 59.4%	21.6%

- Table 7 shows the parent participants' satisfaction with the program.
- All items received a nearly 100% positive rating (ranging from 96.5% to 97.1%), which reflected that an overwhelming majority of them felt satisfied with the contents and impacts of the program.

Table 8. Parent participants' satisfaction with the trainers (N = 279)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I think the trainers were well-prepared.	5.1 (1-6)	1.0%	0.4%	2.5%	12.9%	49.1%	34.1%
2. I think the trainers explained concepts clearly.	5.2 (1-6)	0.6%	0.4%	1.1%	10.8%	51.6%	35.5%
3. I think the trainers were responsive.	5.1 (1-6)	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	14.0%	54.0%	29.9%
4. I think the trainers could arouse our involvement.	5.0 (1-6)	0.7%	0.7%	2.2%	15.8%	55.4%	25.2%
5. On the whole, I am satisfied with the trainers' performance.	5.2 (1-6)	0.6%	0.4%	1.1%	8.3%	54.0%	35.6%

- Table 8 shows the parent participants' satisfaction with the trainers.
- All items received a nearly 100% positive rating (ranging from 96.1% to 97.9%), which demonstrated their great satisfaction towards the performance of their trainers.

Table 9. Parent participants' perceived gains in positive parenting (N = 279)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. This workshop can increase my knowledge about positive psychology.	5.1 (1-6)	0.7%	0.4%	2.5%	10.1%	62.2%	24.1%
2. I have learned more about the importance of positive communication in parenting.	5.1 (1-6)	0.3%	0.7%	0.7%	11.6%	56.0%	30.7%
3. This workshop can inspire me on child nurturing.	5.0 (1-6)	0.3%	0.7%	2.2%	16.1%	57.0%	23.7%

- Table 9 shows the parent participants' perceived gains in positive parenting after attending the workshop.

- All items received a nearly 100% positive rating (ranging from 96.4 to 98.3%), which showed that nearly all participants perceived some positive changes in their parenting attitudes and skills after joining the seminar.

Table 10. Teacher participants' satisfaction with the program (*N* = 272)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with the workshop.	4.4 (1-6)	0.4%	3.7%	9.6%	38.0%	42.8%	5.5%
2. I would recommend this workshop to my friends.	4.2 (1-6)	0.7%	7.1%	16.0%	31.2%	39.8%	5.2%

- Table 10 shows the teacher participants' satisfaction with the program.
- All items received a moderately high level of positive rating (ranging from 76.2% to 86.3%), which showed that most participants were satisfied with the program.

Table 11. Teacher participants' satisfaction with the trainers

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I think the trainers were well-prepared.	4.8 (1-6)	0.7%	0.7%	5.2%	21.8%	50.2%	21.4%
2. I think the trainers explained concepts clearly.	4.7 (1-6)	0.4%	3.3%	5.1%	22.4%	51.8%	16.9%
3. I think the trainers were responsive.	4.6 (1-6)	1.1%	2.2%	5.5%	26.9%	53.9%	10.3%
4. I think the trainers could arouse our involvement.	4.4 (1-6)	1.5%	5.1%	9.2%	30.9%	47.4%	5.9%
5. On the whole, I am satisfied with the trainers' performance.	4.6 (1-6)	1.1%	3.7%	4.8%	27.9%	54.4%	8.1%

- Table 11 shows the teacher participants' satisfaction with the trainers.
- All items received a high level of positive rating (ranging from 92.4% to 97.8%), which demonstrated their great satisfaction towards the performance of their trainers.

Table 12. Teacher participants' perceived gains in positive teaching (*N* = 272)

Items	Mean (Range)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. This workshop can increase my knowledge about positive psychology.	4.6 (1-6)	0.3%	2.6%	4.4%	31.0%	56.5%	5.2%

2. This workshop raises my awareness about the importance of students' resilience.	4.4 (1-6)	0.4%	2.6%	10.0%	38.9%	44.4%	3.7%
3. This workshop can inspire me on how to teach my students.	4.3 (1-6)	1.5%	3.3%	13.0%	33.3%	43.0%	5.9%

- Table 12 shows the teacher participants' perceived gains in positive teaching after attending the workshop..
- All items received a high level of positive rating (ranging from 82.2% to 92.7%), which reflected that many participants perceived some positive changes in their awareness of and knowledge about students' resilience after joining the workshop.

5.1.4. Sub-group analyses

Table 13: Comparisons between Form 3 and Form 4 students

Variables with significant results	Range of scores	F.3 mean	F.4 mean	Significant differences
1. Internal locus of control	8-48	33.4	32.5	*** F.3 > F.4

Note: A *p* value lower than .05 indicates a statistically significant mean difference. * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

- Table 13 shows the results of ANCOVA comparing the posttest scores between Form 3 and Form 4 students, controlling for the effect of their pretest scores.
- After attending the trainings, the Form 3 students gained a higher sense of control over life events than the Form 4 students. In other words, the program made a stronger positive impact on junior students' assumption of responsibilities.

Table 14: Comparisons between male and female students

Variables with significant results	Range of scores	Male mean	Female mean	Significant differences
1. Self-esteem	10-60	42.0	40.6	* Male > Female
2. Self-efficacy	7-42	28.4	27.0	*** Male > Female
3. Presence of meaning	5-30	19.5	18.6	** Male > Female
4. Life satisfaction	5-30	19.7	19.3	* Male > Female
5. Internal locus of control	8-48	33.8	32.6	*** Male > Female
6. Gender stereotypes	5-30	14.4	11.4	*** Male > Female

Note: A *p* value lower than .05 indicates a statistically significant mean difference. * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

- Table 14 shows the results of ANCOVA comparing the posttest scores between male and female students, controlling for the effect of their pretest scores.
- After attending the trainings, the male students gained a significantly higher self-esteem, higher self-efficacy, stronger presence of meaning, greater life satisfaction, stronger internal locus of control than the female students. In other words, the program made a stronger positive impact on male students' self-understanding, establishment of life purposes and assumption of responsibilities.
- On the other hand, the female students gained a significantly higher flexibility in gender stereotype than the male students after attending the trainings. In other words, the program made a stronger positive impact on female students' perception of gender equality.

Table 15: Comparisons between students from low-income and non-low-income families

Variables with significant results	Range of scores	Low-income mean	Non-low-income mean	Significant differences
1. Presence of meaning	5-30	19.1	18.8	* Low-income > Non-low-income

Note: A *p* value lower than .05 indicates a statistically significant mean difference. * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

- Table 15 shows the results of ANCOVA comparing the posttest scores between students from low-income and non-low-income families, controlling for the effect of their pretest scores.
- After attending the trainings, the students from low-income families gained a significantly stronger presence of meaning than the better-off students. In other words, the program made a stronger positive impact on the establishment of life purposes among the economically disadvantaged students.

5.2. Qualitative findings

5.2.1. Background of focus group respondents

Group (Type of participants)	No. of participants	Gender	Educational level	Type of school
Group 1 (Students)	4	Female	Form 3	Single-sex
	4	Male	Form 3	Coeducational
Group 2 (Students)	4	Female	Form 4	Single-sex
	4	Male	Form 4	Coeducational
Group 3 (Students)	2	Female	Form 3	Coeducational
	2	Male	Form 3	Coeducational
	2	Female	Form 3	Coeducational
	2	Male	Form 3	Coeducational
Group 4 (Students)	2	Female	Form 4	Coeducational
	2	Male	Form 4	Coeducational
	2	Female	Form 4	Coeducational
	2	Male	Form 4	Coeducational

- Table 16 shows the respondent compositions of the four focus groups.

5.2.2. Students' learning experiences

The significance of reflection

As recalled by most of the respondents, the Life Skills Program offered them many new experiences through the use of group activities and multimedia. Yet, as Boud, Cohen, and Walker (1993, p. 9) suggested, "while experience may be the foundation of learning, it does not necessarily lead to it: there needs to be active engagement with it." The crucial element of an active engagement is reflection. According to Mezirow, reflection is "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (1991, p. 104). From the following narratives, we could see how the respondents had reflected on their beliefs and values during and after the training sessions. More importantly, their reflections had led to some positive behavioral changes. They could apply what they had learnt on their daily lives and they perceived that the program had some significant impact on their self-understanding,

emotional management, meaning seeking, goal setting, interpersonal relationship, gender stereotype flexibility, and financial management:

“The personality test results allowed me to know more about myself. It was helpful for me to choose what to study in the future... At this age I am exploring who I am. I am not quite sure about what kinds of job is suitable for me... This program has changed some of my previous thoughts about myself. I felt like ‘Oh! Is this me?!’ And ‘Oh! This path may be more suitable for me!’ I felt like being more determined about my path because I have been affirmed by others.”
(Respondent from Group 3)

“I think the program wants to help us cultivate a habit of gratitude... It is not just about writing down a few happy things every day. It is about developing the habit of gratitude so that you will stay positive for most of the time... I agree with it. Gratitude helps me adjust my emotion quickly when I am in a bad mood... The gratitude journal may look dull but it is quite helpful.”
(Respondent from Group 4)

“There was a short video which moved me deeply... At first there was a man running a marathon. It seemed like he wasn't thinking much about which way to go since a marathon usually has one way to go only. Suddenly the background music changed and all the racers started running everywhere. This represents that life is full of options. It is not that unidirectional at all... It made me reflect on why I think I must get into a university. There are actually still lots of choices apart from getting into a university.” (Respondent from Group 3)

“I was very impressed by a topic about goal, method, and motivation. The trainer taught us how to set our personal goals, how to break down the goals into several achievable objectives, and how to put them into actions. I did try to apply this learning and it worked! I had not had sport exercises for a long time but I wanted to start jogging regularly. I found it very difficult to adapt at first. So I broke down my goal, like running for just a short period of time in the first day, and then increasing the distance in the next day... I had much self-talk during the process. I kept telling myself to jog for five minutes more... another five minutes then... Finally I completed it!”
(Respondent from Group 1)

“The ‘water bucket theory’ has made some impact on how I treat others. I used to be very rude to my younger brother. I hated the way he stared at me playing computer games. I used to push him away and shouted at him. But now I won't do that. I have become more considerate. I allow him to stay next to me when I play computer games.” (Respondent from Group 1)

“I hadn't been aware of this [gender stereotypes]. Must dolls be played by girls? Must girls stay at home? Must men be firemen and be heroes? Normally we think women should stay at home while men should work outside. But that session inspired me on something that I had never thought of.. I think whether you follow the traditional gender roles depends on how much you care about others' opinions... Not minding what people say is impossible but we should try to be true to ourselves.” (Respondent from Group 3)

“The theme on financial management was quite useful... It let me know how I should plan for my spending when I had a certain amount of money. I thought deliberately during the game and I ended up winning it... I am going to buy something soon. I will compare its price from different stores before making my final decision.” (Respondent from Group 2)

Resistance to didactic teaching

While quite many respondents felt being benefited from the Life Skills Program, some showed uninterested in the program activities and gained little or no reflection:

“Don't talk about life meaning, life goal, bla bla bla... Just don't bring up these topics again. I have been told to set my life goal ever since I was very young. I just don't want to listen to it anymore. No matter how interesting the trainer can make the lesson to be, I still don't like it.” (Respondent from Group 1)

The above narrative shows a strong resistance to the top-down approach of moral education under which students are told what to do, what to think, and how to behave. This approach may generate a sense of powerlessness among the young people which in turn urges them to regain a sense of power and build their identities through resisting the forces of the dominant groups (Ungar, 2004). Although the Life Skills Program adopted an interactive approach in general, some direct teachings were still present:

“When the trainer had interactions and play games with us, it was quite interesting. But when he switched back to talk about concepts, it became very boring... Sometimes he used half of the session to recapture what messages the game could deliver and that was so boring... He spent too much time in talking about things that we have always known.” (Respondent from Group 2)

Teaching assumes that the subjects being taught are lack of knowledge. However, as told by most of the respondents, the knowledge taught in the Life Skills Program was actually quite well-known. In this case, it may be helpful for the trainers to minimize didactic teaching but engage more in joint sense making with the students to negotiate the meanings of the questions and answers. This approach affirms the capacity of each young person to think, reflect, evaluate, and learn and enables young people to seize their power. It also allows the workers to join the young people in the process of analysis and interpretation (Fitzsimons, Hope, Cooper, & Russell, 2011).

The importance of a supportive and genuine trainer

Asking young people to reflect on their deeply held values and taken-for-granted assumptions is highly challenging, especially when some difficult feelings are involved. Unprocessed emotions are barriers to reflection (Boud et al., 1993), but we are glad to hear how the supportive trainers had spent time acknowledging students' emotions before moving on to any reflection or constructive discussion:

“The trainer gave us a piece of paper at the end of every lesson... I could write down whatever I wanted to share with her... I told her lots of my personal matters and she always replied me with a long passage... She is like a pen friend... She encouraged me a lot... I could express my emotions freely.” (Respondent from Group 3)

“There was a lesson when I felt upset after having a dispute with somebody. I had a headache and stayed silent for the whole lesson. I just wrote a few words in the reflective journal. Later I received her reply. She said she saw me feeling down and asked me what had happened. Wow! It was very touching!” (Respondent from Group 3)

Apart from being supportive, being genuine to oneself and to others is also a key to facilitate reflection. The following narrative shows how the genuineness of a trainer had stimulated some deep-level reflections among her students:

“I remember that day the trainer came in with a sad face. We asked what had happened and she told us that her father had just passed away... She was willing to share with us her feeling... We saw her red and puffy eyes and we wondered how we could comfort her. We discussed about it but we just didn't know what to do... We all ended up paying full attention for the whole lesson... I guess that was empathy... We could feel her feeling.” (Respondent from Group 3)

The negative impact of the discourses of academic achievement

The Life Skills Program aims to improve students' interpersonal relationships through equipping them with the knowledge and skills of positive communication. Yet, the quantitative results show that students did not have a significant improvement in this aspect. A possible explanation was identified in the focus group interviews. It was found that some students might have been bounded by the dominant discourses of academic achievement and overemphasized the importance of studying. As a result, they strived to get good grades at the expense of their relationships with friends and parents:

“I think she [a friend of the respondent] has some kind of mental illness. She focuses too much on her academic results. She always worries about not catching up with others... But the worst thing is that she acts so weird... She seldom responds to others... She lives in her own world concerning studying only... When we are having lesson, she ignores the teacher and keeps reading English newspaper to learn vocabularies... She refuses to join any social group.” (Respondent from Group 1)

“The relationship between me and my parents is quite remote... They will give me more pocket money if I get good grades... If I can get into the university, they will even allow me to study abroad... It is a reinforcement scheme but I feel like I am working for my parents... But still, I care much about my academic results as I really want to live abroad.” (Respondent from Group 2)

Not only do the discourses of academic achievement harm their interpersonal relationships, but these discourses also confine their life purposes to passing examinations, getting into a university, and securing a job. How to support young people to reflect on these discourses and to become more flexible when making important life choices is undoubtedly a key task for any youth development program to work on:

“Since the beginning of Form 4, people around me have started estimating whether they will get enough points to enter the university... They are like, getting 3 points from this subject and 5 points from that subject... The whole environment has changed your attitude... It has become a totally different mode of studying... Actually I want to study at The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. But if I am able to enter the university, I will complete the degree first before studying Performing Arts.” (Respondent from Group 4)

“How would an employer choose between a university graduate and a secondary school graduate? We all know the answer... This is Hong Kong! In Hong Kong, all of us are devoted to the DSE [Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination] ever since primary school... All these years of studying are just for getting into the university... Society forces us to do so.” (Respondent from Group 4)

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The Life Skills Program has been running for three years and it keeps on offering students, parents, and teachers highly satisfying learning experiences. The program continues to receive much positive feedback from the participants, with an average of 90% of the participants affirming the value of the program and 95% appreciating the quality of the trainers. These results are as encouraging as those in the last two years.

The adolescent participants are at their developmental stage of identity exploration. They have a strong need to gain fuller self-understanding and to seek for meaning in life. The quantitative findings show that students had significant improvements in their self-esteem, self-efficacy, presence of meaning, and life satisfaction after attending the trainings. Focus group respondents echoed these findings and elaborated that they had learnt more about their personalities and strengths and had been inspired on the exploration of life purposes through the program activities. The reflections gained from the program had also led to some positive behavioural changes such as setting concrete life goals and being more determined to go after their goals. These findings provide evidence for the effectiveness of the program in achieving its ultimate goal of helping adolescents lead a purposeful life. In addition, sub-group analysis found that the program made a stronger positive impact on the establishment of life purposes among the economically disadvantaged students. Helping disadvantaged youth ascribe meaning to life can bring about better coping skills for stress (To et al., 2014). This is certainly one of the unique values of the program and The Women's Foundation should maintain their great effort in meeting adolescent needs for directedness.

The program impact on students' assumption of responsibility can be reflected from the change in their internal locus of control. The quantitative findings show that students perceived significantly greater control over life challenges after taking part in this program. Sub-group analysis further revealed that the program impact on internal locus of control was stronger among the junior secondary students. This may suggest that students could be benefited more from the program if they receive the trainings earlier in their secondary school life. Throughout the transitional period to adulthood, young people are, on the one hand, gaining more freedom to choose their actions and, on the other hand, learning to assume responsibility for their choices. Continued effort should be made to appreciate adolescent's determination to take charge of their lives and to encourage them not to give up when they feel powerless and hopeless (To, Ngai, Ngai, & Cheung 2007).

Students' sense of loneliness had no significant change after attending the training sessions, maintaining at a moderate level instead. Focus group findings show that although some students could gain insights from the module of positive communication attitudes and skills, some isolate themselves from friends because of an overemphasis on studying. Under the discourses of upward social mobility through academic achievement, some students confine their life purposes to passing examinations, getting into a university, and finding a well-paid job. Simply equipping them with communication skills seems not effective enough to fulfill their adolescent need for connectedness. Extra efforts should be made to encourage students to reflect on their deeply held values, taken-for-granted assumptions, and their feelings. Trainers should also beware of how peer pressure may prohibit them from critical thinking, given that they as adolescents have a desire to fit in and belong to a crowd. In addition, trainers themselves should be reflective as well so that they are able to facilitate others to do so (Fitzsimons et al., 2011).

As financial education is regarded as a promising tool for enhancing adolescents' capabilities to make well-informed financial decisions and facilitating them to reach their life goals, this program has placed much emphasis on equipping students with the knowledge and skills in financial management. The findings of the objective outcome assessment indicate that the program could enhance their financial literacy. Most of the focus group respondents found this module insightful and helpful. Some respondents suggested that the experiential activities could be even more intriguing and practical if the contents of the activities could make closer references to the reality.

Given that gender stereotypes may limit young people's career options and hinder their social mobility, much attention has been paid to how students perceive the traditional gender roles. It was found that the program could help students gain a more flexible and critical attitude towards Chinese cultural gender stereotypes. Sub-group analysis further revealed that the program could make a stronger positive impact on the flexibility of gender stereotypes among the female students. To enhance the impact on male students, it is recommended that trainers could foster deeper discussions and reflections and help male participants realize that the achievement of gender equality will not only benefit females but also males. Males also bear significant costs in terms of their stress and work pressure under the current patriarchal ideology. By eliminating gender stereotypes, males can free themselves from the dominant discourses of masculinity and fulfill more of their affective needs, which will benefit their physical and psychological well-being. It may also

expand their career options and facilitate them to realize their full human capacity (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2005).

Overall, the Life Skills Program was found to be effective in achieving most of its objectives. It is also noteworthy that an overwhelming majority of the participants positively rated the program and the performance of instructors in the subjective assessment. It is our hope that The Women's Foundation can gain insights from our findings and recommendations, make improvements, and strive for excellence.

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