

Life Skills Learning to cope with Life



Life skills are not explicitly addressed in education. Young people who are not good at dealing with emotions, making decisions, communicating effectively and being empathic with others, run the risk of getting stuck in their education, work, and relationships. The Creative Learning for Life project aims to train vocational teachers to creatively teach the development of these life skills.

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Trainers and teachers collaborating to design and implement Van Life Skills at the conference room of consultancy agency Forbusiness Lifeskills by Maurizio Chiappa. Maurizio Chiappa is the man with beard and blue blouse, Birgit Grimbergen is the one with a green scarf and sunglasses in her hair, Guus van Beek stands in the middle and has a blue blouse and brown shoes and Henrie Mastwijk stands at the back in the middle with blue windbreaker.

"Our students need a lot of focus on skills that will help them cope with life's challenges," says Birgit Grimbergen, senior staff member at REA College and project leader of Creative Learning for Life (CL4L). REA College focuses specifically on young people who need extra support in completing their vocational education, for example because of a disorder in the autistic spectrum.

'It's not just about knowledge, but also about what you feel in your body and in your heart'

According to Birgit Grimbergen, schools do not provide enough tools for things like dealing with emotions or coming to a decision. 'In training, we do teach them how to be a good employee or good citizen. So we do something about Life Skills at REA College, but with the aim to get a job.

We see work as the gateway to a happy life, but we would like to look wider in the future.'

Personal development

Guus van Beek, project manager of Creative Learning for Life, adds: 'This project aims to teach teachers to prepare students better for life. This also involves personal development. So-called soft skills, such as communication and emotional regulation, play a role in both your work and personal life.' These life skills should not be taught theoretically. Guus van Beek: 'One of the causes of the high school drop-out rate is that teachers at many schools teach traditionally. With Creative Learning for Life, we want to make education more attractive. The Creative Teaching concept indicates that it is not only about knowledge, but also about what you feel in your body and in your heart.' This is a significant change from current didactics. 'For example: dealing with arguments in the family. This can be addressed in a role-play where actors clarify a situation or express an emotion. Teachers learn how to work with actors.' This is all about balance, says Maurizio Chiappa, the Italian project partner of Creative Learning for Life. 'Training life skills means training adaptive skills. Life changes and it is important to learn how to adapt yourself to the (continuously changing) modern world.'

Ingrado as supporter of Creative Learning for Life

The reason that Ingrado is involved in the Creative Learning for Life project is that training in Life Skills will help prevent school drop-out, says Henrie Mastwijk. He is project leader for inclusive education, youth, and labour at Ingrado. 'We support the programme as a knowledge center by, for example, by providing feedback on project results. We also want to make Life Skills training courses available for our coaches, so that they can then train young people on the subject. We expect a lot from it. Creative teaching is a new way of teaching Life Skills.' It may be some time before the programme is available, says Henrie Mastwijk. A well-thought-out programme can ensure that students gain the right knowledge and skills that will enable them to be successful in various aspects of their lives. To develop this carefully takes time.



Everything changes

Many young people in the Netherlands have mental complaints, research in March 2023 shows. Almost half of young people experience stress, mostly due to a combination of performance pressure and the opinions of others. 45 percent feel lonely and 14 percent struggle with thoughts of suicide. There are also worries about the housing, inflation, and climate crisis. In Italy, the situation is similar. Maurizio Chiappa: 'The image of the future has changed. Many young people do not want to invest in the future, they are cynical about the situation in the world.' This is precisely why Life Skills are important. 'Life Skills trainings were first developed in clinics dealing with addiction issues. If you can handle life better, you can handle your addiction better, is the idea. This applies more broadly to all life challenges.'

'The programme will definitely help combat school dropout'

Guus van Beek: 'That gloomy view of the future started with the economic crises. There was high unemployment in Italy, Spain and Greece, a quarter of young people had no job prospects. That creates tension. And that certainly applies to young people with disabilities, physical or mental. There is a lack of social inclusion. We want these young people to live meaningful lives too.'

In Italy, there are no special schools or shelters for young people with disabilities. 'Consequently, children with special support needs often feel lonely in class,' Chiappa says. 'There is no adapted programme. The concept of Life Skills aims to teach teachers an inclusive outlook, so they can make their lessons more adaptive, feel more empathy, look more at emotions. It goes beyond having knowledge of Life Skills, you also have to live it.'

Tailor-made

The project consists of several phases. There have been meetings in the Netherlands and Italy where teachers and trainers were introduced

to the project, another meeting will take place in Estonia in the autumn. A teacher and a trainer from REA College are participating from the Netherlands. From Italy and Estonia, four teachers per country are participating, and Slovenia is participating with five teachers. Birgit Grimbergen: 'In April 2024, the training for teachers on learning to work with actors, singers, dancers, painters will start. During the training they will learn which approach suits the Life Skills you want to teach and your students. Teachers will gain experiences and apply them in their teaching. In 2025, we will present the results of the project both internationally and in the Netherlands.' When the project is completed, a set of modules will have been developed that teachers can use to teach students Life Skills. Guus van Beek: 'In addition, we are developing a tool with questions and answers, which you can use to find out what is needed for your students. For example, if students indicate that they suffer a lot from stress, you can select exercises that deal with coping with stress. This way, you can provide tailor-made learning of Life Skills.'

Society

Students at the Nijmegen location of REA College will already benefit from the project's results next year, when the participating teachers will put what they have learned into practice. Other REA College locations will follow in 2025, and after that the modules and tools will be disseminated nationwide. The programme will certainly help combat school drop-out, expects Birgit Grimbergen. 'If you can cope with life, you are not so likely to drop out. If your father or mother gets sick, or something else happens that turns your life upside down, you can deal with that better thanks to Life Skills.'

Maurizio Chiappa also sees a role for society: 'There was a report in an Italian newspaper about a study carried out by the Ministry of Youth Affairs. It made it clear that the problem is not that youngsters cannot communicate, but that adults do not understand them. 45 per cent of young people say, "Our teachers do not understand us". So not only the students need to change, but the whole society also needs to change.'

Creative Learning for Life

The Creative Learning for Life CL4L project is co-funded by the European programme Erasmus+. The project is all about teaching the ten life skills that The World Health Organization WHO has identified that everyone needs in order to cope effectively with life's challenges. The skills are taught in a creative way. Apart from education providers and experts, actors, painters, dancers, musicians, and other people with creative professions participate in this project. Erasmus+ aims to promote the quality and relevance of education and training in Europe, enhance intercultural understanding, encourage mobility both students and staff, and promote innovation and good practice in education. Besides the Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia, and Estonia are involved in the Creative Learning for Life project.

Life Skills

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), life skills are "skills for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life". In other words, they are psychosocial skills for maintaining a state of mental well-being and demonstrating this with constructive behavior during interactions with others and within one's culture and environment. WHO identifies 10 skills divided into three areas.

1. Cognitive: Decision making, Problem solving, Critical thinking
2. Emotional: Self-awareness, Dealing with emotions, Dealing with stress
3. Social: Effective communication, Relational skills, Empathy