

EVALUATING NEEDS AND ENHANCING LIFE SKILLS FOR VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: The dynamics of the developmental environment of modern adolescents demonstrate an increase in adolescence and a shift in age boundaries. The new life landscape determines the importance of developing life skills in adolescence. The concept of life design today is positioned as a continuous comprehensive process of personality formation through the development of life skills. The study aims to analyse the processes of life skills development of modern adolescents in the context of vulnerable categories of the population in Ukraine to assess their priority needs. The article highlights the main trends in understanding the essence of life skills, such as social, communication, and adaptation concepts. It is established that the basic life skills manifest in overcoming difficulties by showing personal initiative or leadership, communicating and working in a team, adhering to ethics, and using time management skills in practice. It is proved that the modern landscape of life is changing, and modern adolescents need to be prepared for the new pace of life in an uncertain and dynamic social environment. It is established that adolescents will be able to achieve their goals more quickly if they develop priority life skills. It is substantiated that activating personal resources stimulates adolescents to develop independence, self-regulation, and research behaviour. This allows them to master difficult life situations and interact in social groups, promote creative problem-solving, and generate creative ideas. It has been established that in difficult life situations, it is essential for adolescents to receive support from adults and advice on how to respond to external stimuli (overcome fears, reduce anxiety, and make the right decision). The study pays considerable attention to soft skills in demand in modern society. The definition of resilience is characterised by allowing one to adapt to extreme conditions and respond effectively to external stimuli, internal reflections and experiences. It is proved that resilience helps people understand themselves and their desires and teaches them to develop themselves and strive for the best, which is especially important in adolescence.

Keywords: Adolescents, Resilience, Life skills, Adaptation, Communication, Population category, Vulnerability

1 Introduction

Today, uncertainty is positioned as an integral element of modern culture, actively influencing the formation of the emotional and volitional sphere, the development of personal qualities, and the self-regulation skills of the younger generation. In this context, the problem of searching for and developing personal characteristics that contribute to successful adaptation and mastery of life difficulties by modern adolescents is actualised.

Given this, the trait of resilience is of paramount importance in modern society. Resilience is a complex and multifaceted definition that characterises an individual's potential to withstand challenges. It is based on the concepts of inclusion, influence, and challenge that determine how an individual interacts with the world. Resilience helps adolescents to understand themselves and their desires and allows them to master the skills of self-development and self-improvement. In addition, developed resilience allows adolescents to adapt to extreme conditions and respond quickly to external stimuli, internal reflections and experiences.

This context is of particular relevance for adolescents from vulnerable groups in Ukraine. Activating personal resources in the context of the life skills of vulnerable adolescents stimulates them to research behaviour, independence, and self-regulation, which contributes to mastering difficult life situations, effective social interaction, creative problem-solving, and critical thinking. Readiness for independent living also enables them to cope with situations of uncertainty during the transition to adulthood. Given the above, it is of particular importance to study and assess the life skills and needs of vulnerable adolescents in Ukraine.

2 Analysis of recent studies and publications

Issues related to resilience as an essential life skill have been addressed in the works of such scholars as Nechereda and

Kyrychenko (2019), Predko (2020), Shcherban and Ternovai (2016), Arkatova (2020), and others. According to the authors, resilience enables adolescents to simultaneously develop, enrich their potential and cope with the stresses that arise. This concept emphasises the importance of emotional experience in interacting with the environment. Several leading scientists have significantly contributed to studying adolescents' life skills (Kondratiuk, 2022; Basenko, 2019; Prabhu, 2023; Pinto et al., 2021). The concept of personality resilience, according to scientists, is of great practical importance, as it protects the individual from disintegration personality disorders, creates the basis for inner harmony, good mental health, high performance, regulation of behaviour and activities, and preservation of the hierarchy of life values, motives, and goals.

Foreign psychology has developed a theory of a unique personal quality called "hardiness", which transforms the changes that occur to a person into his or her capabilities. In particular, Ungar (2020) and Dray (2021) identify resilience as "a system of beliefs about oneself, the world, and relationships with the world, which contains three relatively autonomous components: engagement, control, and risk-taking". In continuation, scientists Anderson and Priebe (2021) emphasised that these components of resilience prevent tension in stressful situations through sustainable coping behaviour.

Considerable attention is paid to the development of soft skills. An analysis of publications (Andreoni et al., 2020) reveals that flexible skills mean a set of knowledge, skills, and characteristics that allow a person to be successful, regardless of the vector of actions performed. First, they include socio-psychological, socio-emotional, cognitive, organisational, and managerial skills. The components of these skills are convergent with essential life skills.

Some scientists (Tang et al., 2021) understand soft skills as a set of skills, abilities, and abilities that are formed based on "life" skills accumulated at the previous stage of development. Soft skills are the basis of supra-professional competences that allow a person to realise themselves in professional activities and intercultural and interpersonal communication. Soft skills ensure a person's high adaptive potential, mobility, self-employment, and success in all spheres of life and influence the quality and satisfaction of life.

The social services commissioning focuses modern socialisation institutions on developing adolescents who can set goals, make decisions, take responsibility, engage in personal development, combine resilience to external circumstances and flexible responses to changes in external and internal situations. This is confirmed by numerous studies by modern scholars (Sagone et al., 2020). However, despite significant scientific work assessing adolescents' needs for life skills development, there is no single definition of these skills and the specifics of their management in modern conditions in scientific circles, making the research topic relevant.

The study aims to analyse the processes of developing the life skills of modern adolescents in the context of vulnerable categories of the Ukrainian population and assess their priority needs.

3 Research methods

The methodological and theoretical basis of the work was formed, considering the priority principles of systemic research based on an integrated approach. Analysis and synthesis were used to identify the significant aspects and main elements of the object under study. The comparison method was used during the study to determine the specifics of adolescents' current life skills, particularly in the context of vulnerable categories of the Ukrainian population. Deduction and induction were used to develop proposals to optimise the life skills development system

and meet adolescents' needs. The abstract-logical and dialectical methods of scientific cognition were used to clarify the conceptual apparatus, identify the main concepts and categories, and formulate theoretical generalisations and conclusions of the study. The formalisation method was employed to identify priority vectors for optimising adolescents' life skills and structuring their implementation's principles, functions, and tasks.

The life skills assessment was performed using the Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment methodology. From 29 April to 8 May 2021, an empirical study was conducted on developing life skills of vulnerable adolescents aged 15-16. For this purpose, a questionnaire for adolescents was developed, including several scales. Each scale includes 15 statements for a total of 90 questions. Each statement has four response categories: "Strongly agree", "Rather agree", "Rather disagree", and "Disagree".

The survey was completed using the online service Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was distributed with the involvement of regional departments of education and science and institutes of postgraduate pedagogical education, which, in turn, sent them to educational institutions. The questionnaire was administered by psychologists, social workers or educators of particular educational institutions and general secondary education institutions where vulnerable adolescents study. The study lasted one meeting (1 – 1 hour 20 minutes).

Table 1. List of educational institutions where students were interviewed

Luhansk region 18 educational institutions 150 students	
1.	Severodonetsk Regional Sanatorium School
2.	Shchastia Regional Sanatorium School
3.	Novoaidar Regional Sanatorium School
4.	Rubizhne Regional Sanatorium School
5.	Svativska Regional Special School
6.	Rubizhne Regional Special School "Kryshtalyk"
7.	Mountain Regional Special School
8.	Popasna Secondary School No. 21 of Popasna District Council
9.	Rubizhne Secondary School No. 3 of Rubizhne City Council
10.	Nyzhnya Vilkhova Institution of Stanytsia-Luhanska District
11.	Demianivka Gymnasium of Bilokurakyn Village Council
12.	Starobilsk Lyceum №2 of Starobilsk City Council
13.	Stanytsia-Luhanska Secondary School No. 1
14.	Kuriachivka Secondary School of the I-II Grades of Markivka Village Council
15.	Markivka Secondary School No. 1 of Markivka Village Council
16.	Trokhizbenka Secondary School of I-III grades of Novoaidar District Council
17.	Sharivska Secondary School of Bilokurakyn Village Council
18.	Lysychansk Secondary School No. 4 of Lysychansk City Council
Zaporizhzhia region 24 educational institutions 152 students	
1.	Zaporizhzhia specialised boarding school of the II-III level "Kozatskyi Lyceum"
2.	Zaporizhzhia Special Boarding School "Oberig"
3.	Zaporizhzhia Educational Complex No. 64
4.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School №49
5.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School No. 76
6.	Berdiansk General Education Sanatorium Boarding School
7.	Khortytsia Academy General Education Sanatorium Boarding School of I-III Grades
8.	Melitopol Secondary School No. 3
9.	Zaporizhzhia Educational Complex No. 111
10.	Zaporizhzhia Gymnasium №3
11.	National University "Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic"
12.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School No. 80

13.	Zaporizhzhia Machine-Building Higher Vocational School
14.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School No. 92
15.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School No. 66
16.	Zaporizhzhia Specialised Boarding School "Sich Collegium"
17.	Small Academy of Humanities
18.	Zaporizhzhia Electrotechnical College
19.	Zaporizhzhia Collegium №98
20.	Zaporizhzhia Secondary School No. 101
21.	Melitopol Professional Agricultural Lyceum
22.	Berdiansk Machine-Building Professional Lyceum
23.	Primorsky Professional Agricultural Lyceum
24.	Yakymivka Professional Agricultural Lyceum

4 Results

Modern adolescents' socialisation occurs in conditions of social transitivity when several variants of the social world exist simultaneously. At the same time, the content of the stages of growing up, the nature of adolescent development, and the specifics of intergenerational relations are radically transformed. This age period is characterised by an active search for self, assimilation of social values, formation of worldview, adaptation to different social roles, and the process of sexual polarisation in behaviour.

The adolescent period determines the main vectors of an individual's future life path and how he/she develops socially, professionally, and familyly. In general, positive and negative factors have a decisive impact on an individual's resilience development. Positive factors include harmonious parent-child relationships, a positive sense of life purpose, building confidence, and maintaining high standards. Negative factors include lack of support from loved ones, alienation from significant adults, stress in early childhood, serious illness, financial difficulties, and parental divorce (Shcherban & Ternovai, 2016).

One of the priority psychological tasks of older adolescents is understanding one's uniqueness and forming one's identity, which involves building one's world model. The adolescent seeks to stand out from peers, to prove himself or herself initially, and to declare his or her uniqueness. If the task of identification is not successfully solved, inadequate identity is often formed in specific destructive ways: avoidance of close interpersonal relationships, inability to make life plans, fear of growing up and change; levelling of productive and creative abilities, inability to mobilise internal resources; formation of a "negative identity", choice of negative role models (deviant, antisocial behaviour). Different variants of inadequate identification lead to different degrees of confusion and role confusion. Adolescents cannot connect their past and present perceptions of themselves, so they have no plans for the future.

All the processes of adolescence are interconnected with adolescents' ideas about their future. Self-determination is the process of forming individual values, capabilities, needs, ways and norms of behaviour, as well as the criteria by which a person evaluates himself or herself and his or her achievements. Modern society increases the opportunities for adolescents to find identity groups, allows them to expand the boundaries of self-determination, and provides additional opportunities for activity and independence (Tang et al., 2021; Honchar et al., 2021). However, increased variability in the choice of socialisation groups is simultaneously associated with increased responsibility for the choice made. This can lead to increased anxiety and fear of new, unfamiliar situations. The uncertainty and volatility of the current social situation lead to a decrease in adolescents' optimism about their future and a decrease in confidence in their ability to control and plan their lives.

Attitudes towards others and the world in general are becoming more rigid and partly aggressive, which is closely linked to high levels of anxiety in almost all adolescents. Adolescents are particularly anxious and concerned about their future regarding

material well-being and achieving the desired role identity. Vulnerable adolescents are a group that is more susceptible to adverse environmental factors and the immediate social environment and is distinguished from other adolescents by more pronounced conflict, aggression, isolation and detachment. Scientists consider the concept of vulnerability as a state of family insecurity caused by the presence of internal and/or external risk factors or the emergence of new ones that upset the balance and negatively affect the state of meeting the child's needs (Nechereda & Kyrychenko, 2019; Predko, 2020; Voropayeva et al., 2022).

In the current conditions of development of Ukrainian society, the most vulnerable categories of the population are families with children, huge families; single-parent families; underage parents; refugees or internally displaced persons/families; families affected by disasters and war; families with incapacitated persons; persons with disabilities; and orphans. Many vulnerable adolescents are characterised by increased suggestibility, lack of reflection, uncritical imitation, self-doubt, and a tendency to overdramatise. Egocentrism, anxiety, extreme self-esteem, and the priority of defence mechanisms are also observed. At the same time, some vulnerable adolescents are well-developed, and negative behavioural manifestations demonstrate independence and maturity and raise their authority among peers.

A significant problem for these adolescents is their psychological unpreparedness for life in the existing system of social relations. They start life with an already low threshold of adaptive and integrative abilities. The lack of self-control, self-care, and self-development throughout their lives is due to the fundamental limitations of their childhood life. The development of life skills expanding the boundaries of life competencies of adolescents from vulnerable populations involves assistance in understanding what is happening to them and around them, in processing life experience; developing various forms of communication and formation of social behaviour skills in conditions of maximally expanded social contacts; activation of cognitive interest in the surrounding social world; formation of the ability to consciously regulate behaviour (Ungar, 2020; Tang et al., 2021).

The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment (ACLSA) helps identify the development of skills for independent living among adolescents (Prabhu, 2023). The ACLSA methodology includes life skills such as career planning, communication, daily living, family life, social relationships, and work and study skills. This assessment was chosen as a priority for the study because it is culturally sensitive and applicable to all adolescents, regardless of their circumstances.

The assessment aimed to collect and analyse data to prioritise the life skills needs of vulnerable adolescents. The survey was

conducted among vulnerable adolescents in Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk oblasts. The total number of respondents was 301, including 151 girls (50.2%) and 150 boys (49.8%), 151 respondents in Zaporizhzhia oblast and 150 in Luhansk oblast. The respondents include adolescents aged 15-16 with disabilities (hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy), IDP children, orphans and children deprived of parental care who are placed in boarding schools and family-based care (foster families, family-type children's homes, guardianship, custody).

Based on the results of the assessment within the experiment conducted in the study, representative graphical scales were formed that reflect trends in the formation of the leading life skills of adolescents that are relevant in society and that relate to the most significant crisis problems of youth society. In particular, the answers to the question about having a person to talk to about sexual relations and unplanned pregnancy showed that 40.2% have such an opportunity, 25.9% also know a person they trust, 21.3% find it challenging to identify, and 12.6% have no one to talk to about these issues. Analysis of the answers to the last three questions allows us to conclude that approximately one-third of respondents do not have knowledge of comprehensive sex education and do not discuss such issues with trusted adults (Figure 1).

When asked what determines the respondents' ability to explain their feelings (e.g., anger, joy, happiness, or concern), we received the following answers (Figure 2): 20% find it challenging to explain their feelings, 36.9% can often understand them, 43.2% of respondents believe that they are entirely able to explain them.

Questions about the ability to manage their emotions (Figure 3): 38.9% of children can manage their anger without harming others; 33.2% can often manage their anger safely, 20.9% only occasionally, and 7% admit they cannot.

The respondents' opinions on gender issues are important. 27.5% of adolescents support the statement that a man is more important than a woman in society, while 72.4% do not. In addition, 77% of respondents said that boys and girls get along well with each other, while 23% disagreed (Figure 4).

Most respondents (78.7%) said that they believe they have the power to influence how their lives turn out, but 21.3% said they do not believe in their influence (Figure 5).

Respondents' answers about the risks of online dating: 79.9% believe they are aware of the risks, but 20.3% said they were not; 27.6% said they were unaware of online safety (Figure 6).

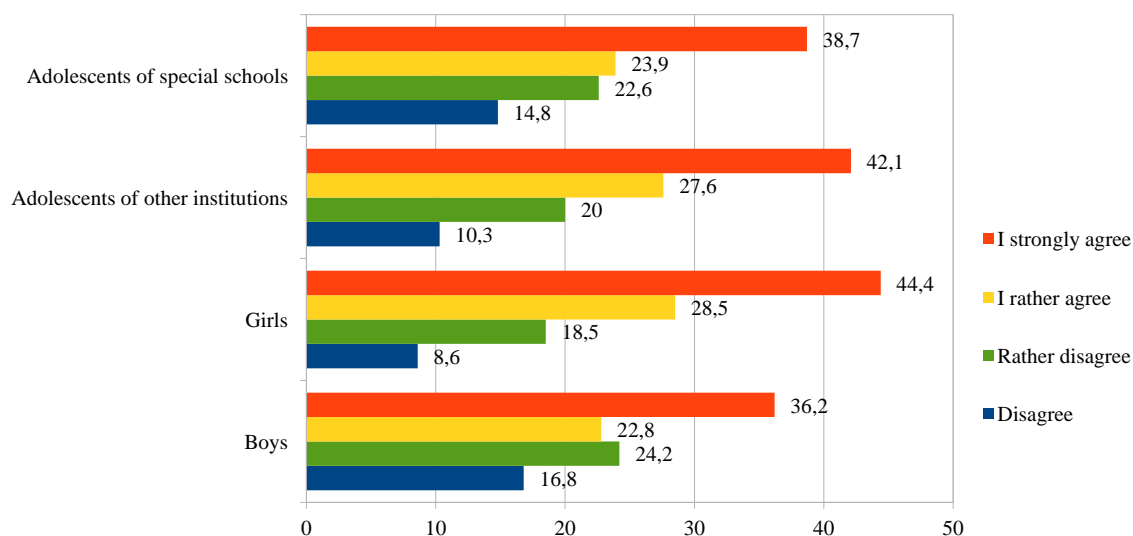


Figure 1. Question: I have someone I trust and can talk to about sexual relations and unplanned pregnancy (in %)

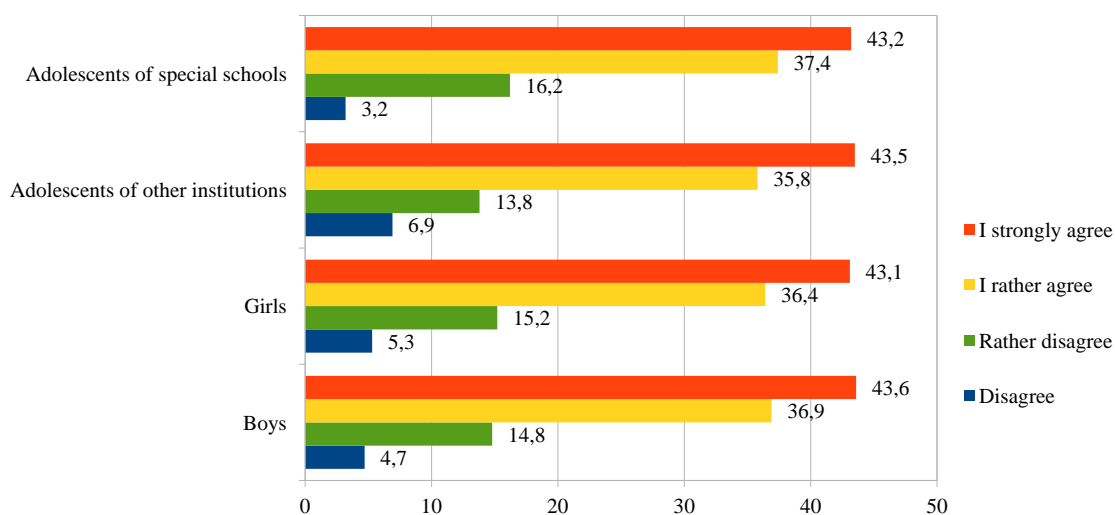


Figure 2. Question: I can explain how I feel (e.g. angry, happy, happy or worried) (in %)

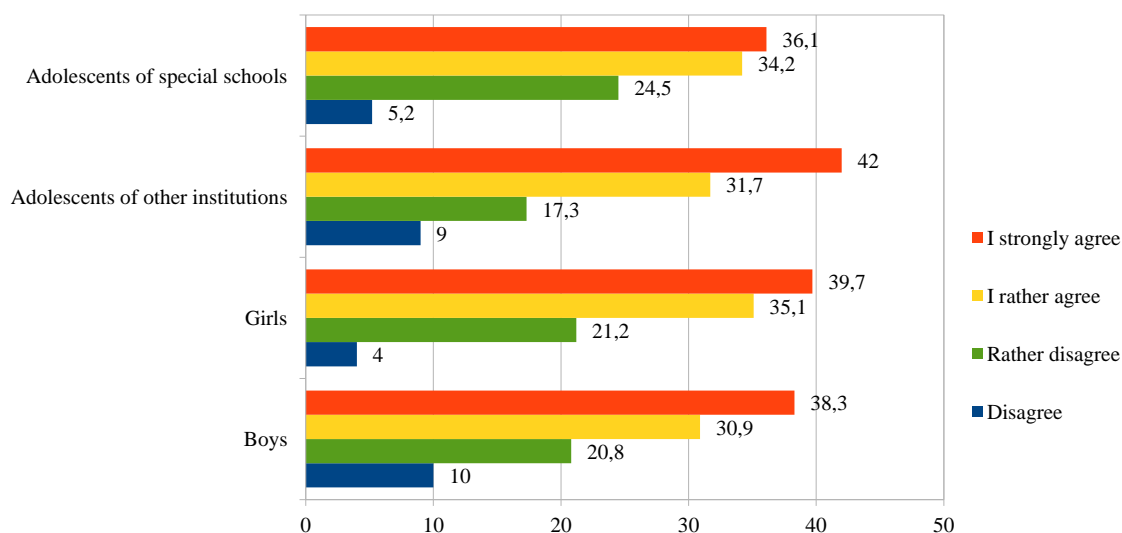


Figure 3. Question: I can cope with anger without hurting other people or things (in %)

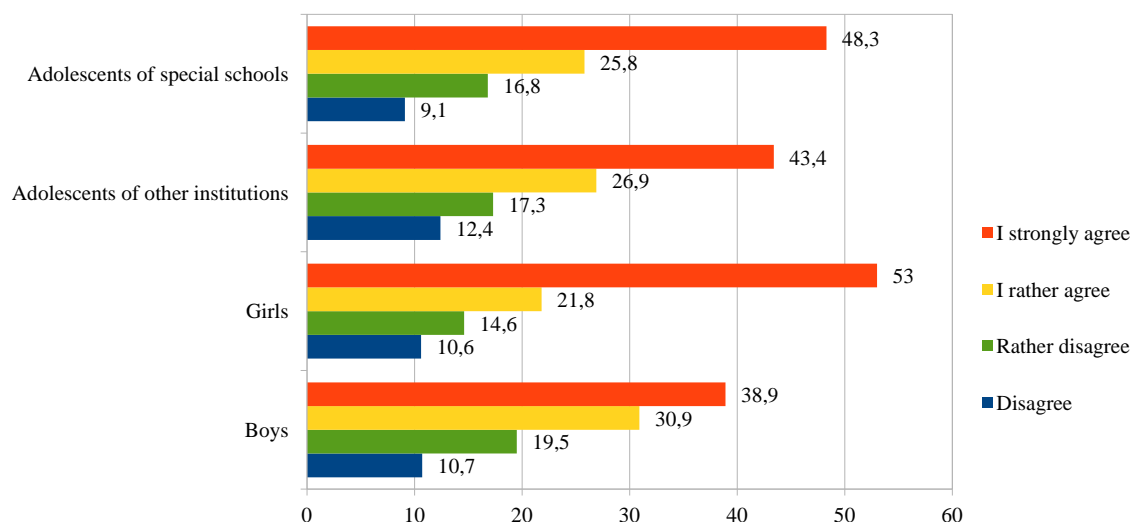


Figure 4. Question: I believe that men are not more important than women (in %)

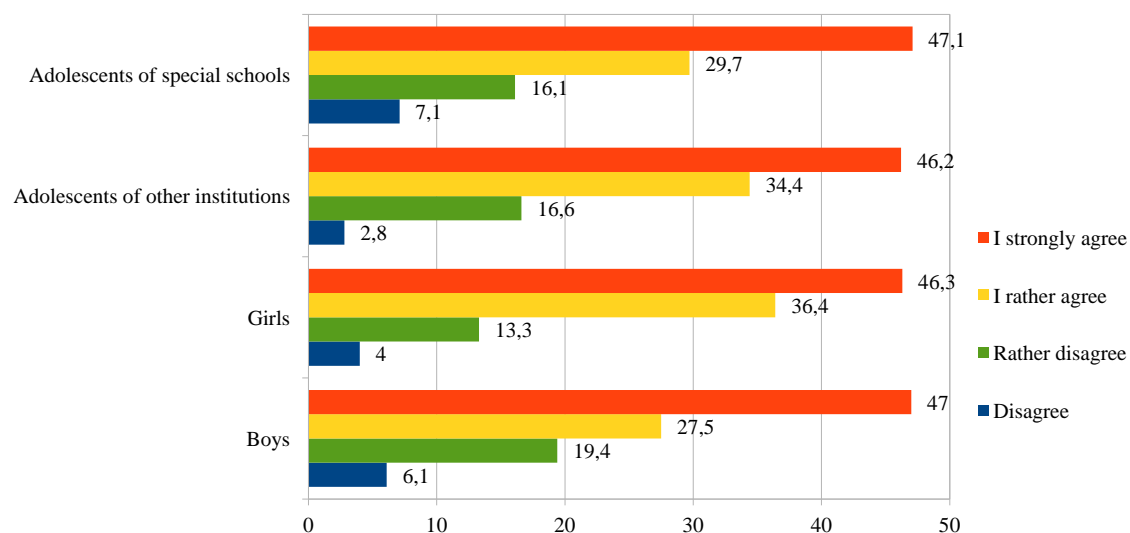


Figure 5. Question: I believe that I can influence how my life will turn out (in %)

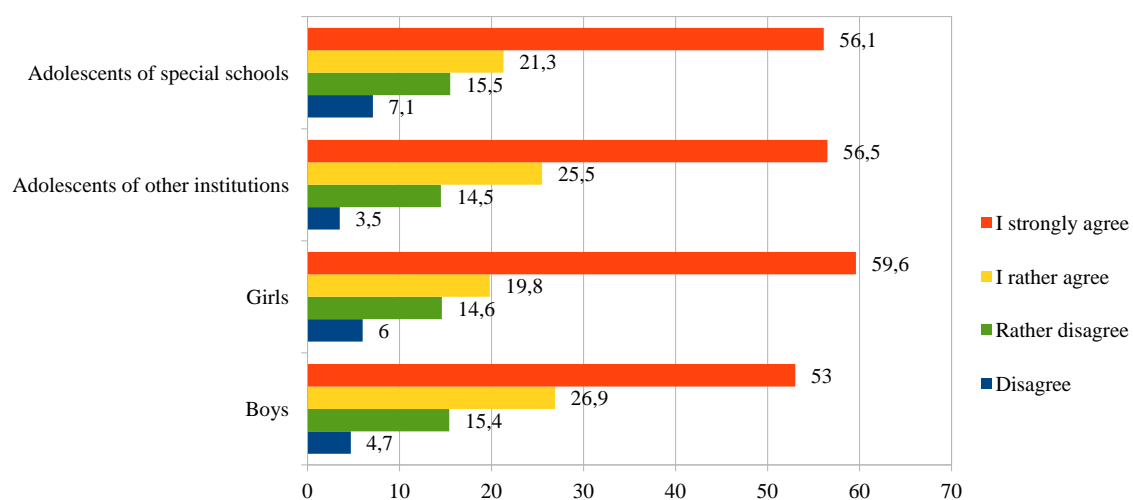


Figure 6. Question: I know the risks of dating on the Internet (in %)

After assessing vulnerable adolescents' needs and life skills, we determined the statistical dependence of respondents' answers on gender and type of educational institution (particular school and other educational institution). To do this, we used K. Pearson's

coefficient of correlation, which was calculated using the formula.

In particular, an examination of the correlation between boys' and girls' answers to the questions about their readiness for the

next stage of life and their belief in their ability to positively influence their future confirmed that both girls (significance level close to zero) and boys (significance level close to zero) have this trait. This means that there are no significant gender differences in the answers. Both girls and boys consider themselves ready for a new stage of life and are confident in their abilities to improve their future.

The next pair of questions allowed us to determine the relationship between having a close person to talk to about sexual relations/unplanned pregnancy and awareness of the symptoms and ways of HIV/AIDS transmission. We found that girls are more likely to have someone they trust and can talk to about sexual relations and unplanned pregnancy and are more aware of the symptoms and ways of HIV/AIDS transmission (their significance level is 0.001) than boys (significance level is 0.045). This indicates that it is easier for girls than for boys to discuss topics related to sexuality. At the same time, adolescents from special schools are more likely to have a trusted person to talk to about sexual relations and unplanned pregnancy. They are more aware of the symptoms and ways of HIV/AIDS transmission (significance level 0.001) than adolescents from other educational institutions (significance level 0.029). This indicates that adolescents with disabilities have a closer relationship with their parents and teachers and perhaps even hyper-parenting compared to adolescents studying in other educational institutions. However, the extent to which this discussion relates to sexuality education must be clarified.

Checking the correlation between boys' and girls' answers to the questions "I can explain how I feel (e.g., angry, happy, or worried)" and "I can handle anger without hurting other people or things" allowed us to draw certain conclusions. We found out that boys, unlike girls, can better understand their emotions and feelings and manage them without harming others. In addition, only adolescents from other educational institutions have a manifest significance level of the trait (tends to zero). This means adolescents studying in general education institutions can better understand their emotions and feelings and manage them without harming others. As for adolescents with special educational needs, they do not have characteristics related to understanding and managing their feelings and emotions.

A critical analysis of the results obtained allows us to propose a conceptual framework for a programme aimed at enhancing the development of life skills among adolescents from vulnerable groups in Ukraine. In particular, the programme should:

- The life skills curriculum for vulnerable adolescents should integrate modern technologies for the development of social and personal competences of adolescents;
- Special programmes should be introduced into the work of special schools, as well as general secondary education institutions where vulnerable adolescents, including adolescents with special educational needs, are integrated;
- The content of special programmes can be based on the content of diagnostic scales tested during the survey, each of which can become the content of a programme for the development of adolescents' life skills;
- Life skills development should be based on management functions and the synergy of a person's social, emotional, and cognitive capabilities to solve problems and achieve goals.

Priority life skills allow us to see alternative perspectives, respond to changing circumstances, resist automatic impulsive behaviour, think purposefully, and solve problems. Summarising the respondents' answers, we can identify the skills adolescents seek to develop: communication, leadership, self-confidence, ability to control emotions, choice of profession, and development of skills in their hobbies. Analysing the survey results allows us to detail vulnerable adolescents' primary life skills and abilities that need to be developed and shaped. These include understanding emotions, self-regulation skills, leadership development and the ability to accept challenges, reflection,

communication, cognitive flexibility, self-control and self-organisation skills. The formation of life goals, the development of self-confidence, the elimination of gender stereotypes, knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education, the ability to resolve conflict situations with adults and peers, tolerance and empathy, and the desire for cooperation and mutual assistance are also considered necessary.

5 Discussion

Research by modern scholars shows that the prerequisites for the effective development of life skills of adolescents, including vulnerable groups, are ensuring an adequate level of realisation of the right to full-fledged educational and upbringing support, its quality and compliance with the challenges of crisis periods of social development. In some scientific works (Finklestein et al., 2022; Rachmawati et al., 2021), the essential content of adolescents' life skills is based on socio-philosophical, psychological and sociological approaches. At the same time, according to scientists' research, adolescents with higher self-differentiation demonstrated higher individual resilience, and self-efficacy is positioned as the main factor influencing the formation of youth resilience.

Researchers (Wang & Kong, 2020; Ma et al., 2020) emphasise that the problems of developing adolescents' resilience skills require special attention. In this context, the influence of scientific recommendations on the development of communication competence, critical thinking and tolerance is gaining importance. This will intensify the expected results of educational achievements and motivate the need for further research into life resilience to increase its impact on the quality of life skills development processes for adolescents from vulnerable groups.

Hatamizadeh et al. (2020), and Zinn et al. (2020) study adolescents' life skills as complex multidisciplinary socio-psychological formations. The critical determinant of their development is prioritising self-determination, self-worth, and a human-centred humanistic concept of social progress. This happens through unique mechanisms for implementing relationships, ensuring rights, meeting needs, and achieving the common interests of adolescents and the social environment.

Most authors argue that adolescents' development of life skills from vulnerable groups is closely linked to the strategic management of educational processes. At the same time, scientists' conclusions regarding the practical tools for implementing the functions of such dependency are inconsistent.

6 Conclusions

The concept of life design – a continuous process of comprehensive personality development through the formation of life skills – contributes to the actualisation of modern adolescents' quality development of life skills. The identification of the main trends in understanding the essence of life skills as social, communication and adaptation concepts allow us to assert that the basic life skills are manifested in the ability to overcome difficulties, show personal initiative or leadership, communicate and work in a team, adhere to ethics, and use time management skills in practice.

The dynamics of the modern landscape of social life require adolescents to be ready for a new pace of life in an uncertain and dynamic social environment. Adolescents can achieve their goals more quickly if they develop priority life skills. At the same time, activating personal resources stimulates adolescents to develop independence, self-regulation, and research behaviour, which allows them to cope with difficult life situations and promotes creative problem-solving and generates creative ideas during interaction in social groups. The definition of resilience, which allows for adaptation in extreme conditions and effective response to external stimuli, internal reflections and experiences, helps individuals to understand themselves and their desires,

teaches them to develop themselves and strive for the best, which is especially important in adolescence.

The study's results convincingly demonstrate the need to modernise the traditional educational process for adolescents from vulnerable groups in Ukraine. This issue is especially relevant in times of full-scale war. Integrating modern psychological and pedagogical technologies, increasing trust in society, and stimulating psychological practices in this context will significantly increase the resilience of modern adolescents and promote the active development of their life skills.

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Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: AN, AO