
Meaning in Life and Happiness among Tertiary Education Students

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Abstract

The study investigated and analyzed the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among tertiary education students. It employed both the descriptive-survey and correlational methods. The respondents are composed of 247 junior and senior students during the AY 2017-2018. They were chosen using the convenience non-random sampling technique. Results disclosed that the respondents have both a high level of meaning in life and happiness and that the two variables are significantly correlated. Generally, the respondents are experiencing and pursuing a meaningful and a happy life. Also, a significant difference existed between the meaning in life and happiness among the respondents when grouped according to program. A parallel study may be undertaken with faculty and employees in higher education institutions as respondents. For future study, variables which influence the non-meaningfulness and unhappiness of the participants may be included. The results may be used in designing and implementing intervention programs and revisiting the policies and practices of the school guidance program for tertiary students.

Keywords:

Happiness, Presence of Meaning, Search for Meaning, Meaning in Life, Tertiary Education Students

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address global challenges critical for everybody's sustained security, peace, progress, and equity today and tomorrow. The goals include: no poverty, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and peace, justice and strong institutions, among others. The UNESCO's spearheading Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) promotes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning

opportunities to all (<http://www.iisd.org/topic/sustainable-development>). Education is certainly more accessible to all hence, concrete improvements in enrolment and graduation rates become more evident worldwide.

In support of the aforementioned, the Philippine government enjoined all educational institutions to include the ESD goals in their programs, activities and projects particularly in the curriculum. The ESD addresses differences in learning capacities, styles, and preferences. The content, outcomes, pedagogy and

learning environment are tailored to every learner to ensure productive and meaningful learning. Learners obtain significant opportunities and experiences and search the same further to capacitate themselves. These provide them happiness which impact their thoughts, emotion, health, performance, personality and relationships. A happy life is wholesome, meaningful, and purposeful.

All people desire a meaningful and a happy life. The factors which influence a meaningful and a happy life vary among individuals. To some, having the basic needs, security, acceptance and love sufficiently make them happy, but to others, power, prestige, honours and wealth make them happiest. According to Steger (2009) meaningful life is purposeful, fulfilled, and satisfying. It is linked with life gratification, delightful work, happiness, hope, and sound well-being. Meaning in life stresses that life has a sense, purpose, and direction and the person understands how situations happen. Baumeister (2013) affirmed that individuals with sense of meaning are happier and experience fewer unfavourable emotions. Furthermore, Brassai, Piko, and Steger (2011); Ho, Cheung, and Cheung, (2010); Kiang and Fuligni (2010) surmised that the young's self-concept, commitment, and satisfaction are being enhanced when they are happy. Failure to discover meaning in life may cause emptiness and purposelessness. Similarly, Morgan and Farsides (2009); Shek (2012); Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, and Lorentz (2008) claimed the importance of the pursuit of meaning in life for a sense of directedness and well-being.

Meaning in Life

According to Yanez and colleagues (2009) meaning in life, the predictor variable of this study, emphasizes order, coherence, and purpose of one's existence and the search and attainment of sensible goals. It has two dimensions: presence of meaning and search for meaning. Presence of meaning describes the person's feelings on how meaningful his or her life is. Search for meaning tells about the person's direct engagement, motivation, and purpose to understand more deeply and thoroughly the concept of meaning in life (Navarez, 2017). Awasthi and colleagues (2015) identified meaning in life as important influence in the

development of individual's life goal. Higher meaning in life was associated with less engagement in health risking behaviors and better physical health.

Various theorists have proposed their own concept and ideas about meaning in life. Hedonists believe that pleasure and happiness are inherently valuable, while pain and sadness are not valuable. They claim that life is unpredictable, that at any time of the day death would strike the individual. They also assert that resurrection is not for everyone. Therefore, they forward the idea that people should have as many pleasurable experiences as they could while still healthy and alive. On another note, the Stoics are concerned in finding inner peace because they perceive this as constant. There are things that change in life but the thing that goes on in the individual could be controlled. Stoicism relates to subduing destructive emotions and behaviours to achieve inner peace through sound thinking and clear judgment. In addition, the existentialists argue that life is a series of making choices. People make decisions which leads to the kind of persons they would be and distinct from others. The choices they make impact their essence and find their meaning and purpose in life (<https://www.toptenz.net/5-theories-meaning-life.php>).

Furthermore, Yalom's theory (1980) regarded meaning in life as the individual's creative response to the world's absolute meaninglessness. Meaning can be achieved through altruism, dedication to a cause, creativity, and hedonism. Humans primarily choose and create their own circumstances. They commit themselves to their chosen meanings and purposes to perceive that life is meaningful. A sense of meaningfulness of life is essential to mental health. A life without meaning creates distress to one's goals, values, or ideals. Yalom (1980) assumed that if meaning and purpose are attributed to external events, life has security and stability. Conversely, if life is void of meaning and purpose, disappointments and despair become evident. Lastly, Maslow's theory as cited by Tan and colleagues (2003) confirmed that the lower needs must be satisfied first prior to satisfying the higher needs. This direction drives the individual to act accordingly to achieve his desired goals in life. He is set and ready to work with passion to realize

meaning in his life. Furthermore, meaning in life comes in beauty, thoughts, and attitudes which cannot be perfected. Individuals are free to choose meanings, but their choice must bear congruency with their own nature and tendencies to be happy.

Happiness

The criterion variable of this study, happiness, is operationally defined as subjective well-being (SWB). It includes the internal and external conditions, which refer to personality, outlook and society of people correspondingly. The determinants of subjective well-being are temperament, quality of social relationships, societies of people, and ability to meet basic needs. Research disclosed that happy people are healthier and they live longer, have better social relationships, and are more productive at work.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is both cognitive and affective evaluations of a person's life. The cognitive element relates to one's life satisfaction in work and relationships (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2008). The affective component is one's emotions, moods and feelings (McGillivray & Clarke, 2009). It is the experience of relatively frequent positive emotions and relatively infrequent negative emotions (Diener et al., 2009). Lyubomirsky (2011) explains that as an individual experiences more positive emotions, the more likely that one's well-being will last. Moreover, Fredrickson and Joiner (2008) contend that positive emotion is an important component of SWB. According to them, individuals who report more frequent positive emotions experience higher subjective well-being.

Apparently, Brassai, Piko, and colleagues' (2011) findings revealed a positive connection between meaning in life and psychological well-being among adolescents. DeRoon-Cassini and colleagues (2009) disclosed that people with meaningful life adjust better to health problems. Furthermore, Sherman, Simonton, Latif, and Bracy (2010); Park, Edmondson, Fenster, and Blank (2008); and Yanez and colleagues (2009) collectively expressed that people with higher meaning in life have better quality of life, are happier, and could manage depression and fatigue better. Meaning in life consistently predicts psychological

well-being among college students and is related with satisfaction in life. People with meaningful life are happy while those whose lives are less meaningful are less happy.

Navarez's (2017) study reported that presence of meaning and search for meaning in life are both significantly related to subjective well-being. Also, meaning in life is an important component of subjective well-being. Ming Hwei Yek and colleagues' (2017) study reported that higher state of meaning in life was related with lower anxiety, while a higher level of anxiety was observed for search for meaning in life. It was also revealed that those with high search for meaning in life and high presence of meaning in life show lower anxiety than those with high search for meaning in life and low presence of meaning. Meanwhile, Baumeister and colleagues' (2013) findings affirmed that the person becomes happier when his needs and wants are satisfied, but not contributory to a meaningful life. He further expressed that happiness is present-oriented but meaning in life integrates the past, present, and future.

Furthermore, Dezutter and colleagues' (2013) study disseminated that people with high presence high search and high presence low search are happier and are more accepted by others than those with low presence high search and low presence low search. Park and colleagues' (2010) exposed that individuals with meaningful life are satisfied and happy while those whose lives are without meaning show depression and other similar emotions. The search for meaning was positively associated with well-being. Powell's (2010) study disclosed that there is little significant correlation between presence of meaning and acceptance, search for meaning and acceptance, and search for meaning and death denial. Additionally, search for meaning scale and presence of meaning scale bear no relationships.

Although there were a number of existing foreign studies on meaning in life and happiness, there has been no extensive studies conducted in the local context, which focuses adolescent students as subjects of the study in the tertiary level. Meaning in life is significant in the development of the adolescents. Adolescence is the period of rapid enhancement of

creative, critical and abstract thinking abilities and the preoccupation with self-definition. Erikson as cited by Harter (2012) claimed that adolescence is a period of questioning who they are and what they can contribute in adulthood. Adolescents have queries and doubts about their beliefs and how they could lead meaningful lives.

Damon, Menon, & Bronk (2008) surmised that the young are happy when they experience several sources of meaning from which to establish their goals and plans. Their self-concept, commitment, and satisfaction are being enhanced (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Failure to discover meaning in life may cause emptiness and purposelessness. Researches have demonstrated the importance of the pursuit of meaning in life among adolescents for a sense of directedness and well-being (Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Shek, 2012; Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Ming Hwei Yek et al's (2017) study shared that people with meaningful life experience lower anxiety, while the anxious group continuously search for a meaningful life.

The reviewed literature focused on discovering the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among adults and chronically-ill patients, relation of meaning in life to attitudes about death, relation of search for meaning to life satisfaction and investigating the two dimensions of meaning in life: presence of meaning and search for meaning. The research designs and instruments used in the reviewed literature were also used in the present study. Nonetheless, the present study differed from the reviewed literature on the participants because tertiary education students in a state university were used. Likewise, the variables reviewed varied with the current study as it dealt on gender, year and curricular program and established its bearing to education policies and practices in tertiary education institutions.

The study under investigation looked into the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among tertiary education students. It is a fact that students are unique. They have distinct capacities, skills, interests, and tendencies which social institutions need to address for proper development

and nurturance. It is in this context that the present study was advanced. The findings would generate insights and actions from the education community and the government to design and implement programs, activities and projects commensurate to the preferences and abilities of students as well as to effect intervention procedures to minimize if not to eliminate students' concerns and problems to achieve a meaningful and a happy life.

Purposes of the Research

The study investigated the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among tertiary education students during the academic year 2017-2018.

Particularly, it resolved the following queries:

1. What is the level of meaning in life of the respondents according to:
 - a. Presence of meaning; and
 - b. Search for meaning?
2. What is the level of happiness of the respondents according to:
 - a. Cognitive dimension; and
 - b. Affective dimension?
3. Is there a significant difference between the meaning in life of the respondents when grouped according to:
 - a. gender;
 - b. year; and
 - c. program?
4. Is there a significant difference between the happiness of the respondents when grouped according to:
 - a. gender;
 - b. year; and
 - c. program?
5. Is there a significant relationship between meaning in life and happiness of the respondents?

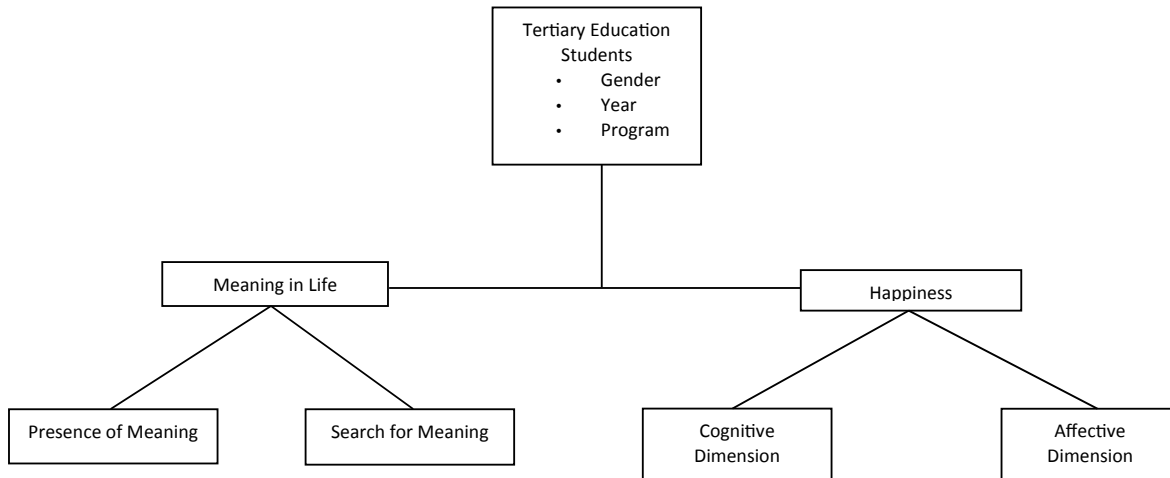


Figure 1. Framework of the Study

This study determined the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among tertiary education students. It intended to confirm previous research findings that people with higher meaning in life have better quality of life, happier and are generally satisfied with their life. It could be inferred that the person's perception of how meaningful his life is and his continuous search for a meaning in life would undoubtedly, have a meaningful life. Moreover, it could be implied that happiness or subjective well-being, the criterion variable, consists of cognitive and affective components. When the individual perceives his life as meaningful, is satisfied in work and relationships, and experiences more often the positive moods and emotions than the negative ones, it could be generalized that he is happy.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized both the descriptive-survey and correlational methods. It determined the level of meaning in life and happiness as well as the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among the respondents. Likewise, it specifically sought which among the variables considered in the study correlated with meaning in life and happiness among the respondents.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

The respondents are composed of 247 junior and senior students during the AY 2017-2018 chosen using the convenience non-random sampling technique. The participants were enrolled in the degree programs: Bachelors in Science Education, Mathematics Education, Physical and Health Education, and Social Science Education.

Instruments

There were three questionnaires used to gather data. The questionnaires dealt on meaning in life, satisfaction with life, and positive-negative affect. No revisions were made on the questionnaires.

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) was developed by Steger, Frazier, Oishi and Kaler (2006). It has two subscales: presence of meaning and search for meaning. It is a Likert type with 10 items rated on a 7-point scale from "Absolutely True to "Absolutely Untrue". The internal consistency for MLQ-P is .81 while MLQ-S is .84. The reliability coefficient is .70 and .73 for MLQ-P and MLQ-S correspondingly. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985). It measures subjective well-being or happiness. The internal consistency is .87 and reliability correlation is .82. The Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) was developed by Watson, Tellegen and Clark (1988). It consists of 10 positive and 10 negative

items. The Positive Affect Scale has Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.86 to 0.90 while the Negative Affect Scale is 0.84 to 0.87 (Santos et. al., 2012).

Data Collection Process

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Dean for Academics and Associate Dean for Faculty and Teacher Development. The consent of the participants was also sought prior to test administration. They were told that participation in the study is voluntary, and they may choose to discontinue their participation at any time. Participants were assured that the information they will provide will be handled with utmost confidentiality. The researchers personally administered the instruments to the participants. Directions were read and explained to ensure accuracy and objectivity of data to be collected. They were oriented that they would be asked to answer three questionnaires that would help them to get to know aspects about themselves better. On the average, test administration for the three instruments was around 30 minutes. During the administration, standard procedures and test instructions were followed based on the manual of both instruments. There was a 98% retrieval of instruments. After completing the questionnaires, they were thanked and debriefed about the study. The instruments were then scored and interpreted and subjected to data analysis in order to answer the purposes of the study.

Data Analysis Framework

Data gathered were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 16. The mean and Standard Deviation (SD) were used to identify the meaning in life scores and SWB scores of the participants. In order to interpret the scores for the search for meaning and presence of meaning, the highest (very high) score expected for search and presence is 35 and a low score will be 7 and below. For the cognitive dimension of happiness, a score of 31 to 35 would mean extremely satisfied and 5 to 9 would indicate extremely dissatisfied evaluation of one's life. For the affective component of happiness, scores can range from 10 – 50, with higher scores representing higher levels of positive affect and lower scores representing lower levels of negative affect.

Pearson r was used to obtain the relationship among the factors of meaning in life and happiness. The formula in computing for the SWB was: Subjective Well-being = (Satisfaction with Life + Positive Affect) – Negative Affect.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Level of meaning in life and subjective well-being or happiness among the respondents

Variables	Mean (N=247)	Interpretation	SD
Presence of Meaning	22.56	High	3.56
Search for Meaning	24.92	High	3.75
Satisfaction With Life	21.34	High	3.96
Positive Affect	36.72	High	6.68
Negative Affect	24.86	Average	7.08
Subjective Well-Being (SWB)	33.20	High	11.98

The level of meaning in life (presence of meaning and search for meaning) and subjective well-being or happiness among the respondents are both high. This indicates that the respondents have a meaningful life and are happy. They have achieved their desires and goals in life. They appreciate and are thankful of everything that happens to them, though they experience unfavourable emotions. Nevertheless, these were being controlled for them to enjoy absolute happiness.

The following represent the partial responses of the respondents on what makes their life meaningful: living a peaceful life, family, being loved and to love, purpose, studies, music, God, ministry, boyfriend, dreams, friends, health, and living fully. As regards the things which influence happiness among the respondents, the following are partly disclosed: supportive family, relatives, friends, special someone, arts, God, passion, nature, simple life, love, God's blessings, achievements, money, problems, and education.

The results of the present study corroborate with Navarez (2017) that presence of meaning and search for meaning are related to happiness; Grouden and Jose's (2015) study that family and interpersonal

relations as well as personal growth and religiosity are linked to presence of meaning and search for meaning correspondingly. Additionally, Awasthi and colleagues' (2015) findings relate to the present study that meaningfulness in life influences the individual's goal, ability to face crises and health behaviours.

Enriching the foregoing, Park and colleagues (2010) contend that life satisfaction, happiness and positive affect are related with presence of meaning. However, it is negatively associated with depression and negative affect. Overall, the search for meaning is correlated with greater life satisfaction, more happiness, and less depression.

Similarly, Navarez's (2017), Fredrickson and Joiner's (2002) study that people with positive emotions are happy and have higher subjective well-being.

From the aforementioned, the home, schools, government, organizations, and social media should work cooperatively to realize and nurture the potentials and interests of people. Sufficient opportunities and tasks to enrich the inherent tendencies and capacities should be provided for the holistic development of all. Contextually, sense of achievement and happiness become concrete. Hence, happy living prevails in the community.

Table 2. Comparing the dimensions of meaning in life and subjective well-being or happiness when grouped according to demographic profile

Demographics	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning	Subjective Well-Being (SWB)
Gender	0.42	0.91	0.61
Year	0.20	0.12	1.03
Program	1.00*	1.17*	0.95*

* $p < .05$

The presence of meaning and search for meaning reveal that program as a variable creates a significant difference on the happiness among the respondents. The other variables show no significant difference. This results connotes that generally, the respondents experience meaningful and happy lives. They engaged themselves purposely and actively with the environment to become self-actualized.

On another note, the data could also mean that the respondents are significantly different in their happiness when grouped according to program. Some are leading happy lives; others are not that much happy. Some bear traits of bliss, gaiety, and satisfaction in life. Others are going through complex situations but still have happy lives. Still, some perceive the environment pleasantly and objectively despite its many imperfections and hazards. Generally, the respondents bear positive outlook about life.

The succeeding is part of the respondents' claims on what make their life meaningful: God, achievements, peaceful life, family, friends, interests, being loved, purpose, life itself, experiences, problems, people, trials, and challenges. Similarly, the respondents enumerated the following responsible to their happiness: family, friends, and relatives, God, doing right things, failures, pets, special someone, God's blessings, sceneries, people, food, graduation day, strengths and passion.

The findings parallel with Navarez's (2017) study that happy people lead a meaningful life as well as Maslow's theory in Tan (2003) that satisfying the basic and higher needs make people satisfied and happy. In addition, the results of the present study uphold Lyubomirsky and Dickerhoof (2012); Nelson Lyubomirsky (2012) and Della, Porta and Lyubomirsky (2011) that positive activities relate to development of positive emotions.

Therefore, the government and non-government sectors should work together in designing and implementing relevant and useful programs and projects that address and support growth and development of its citizens in all areas of their lives. The society should collectively provide ample opportunities to discover, develop, and improve more the environment to ensure wholesome living conditions of its citizens. Existing programs with the involvement of the people require a comprehensive evaluation to determine their success, identify the area/s needing improvements and plan whether to cease their implementation and design a more relevant and better platform.

Table 3. Correlations of Meaning in Life and Subjective Well-Being or Happiness among the Respondents

Variables	Presence of Meaning	Search for Meaning
Satisfaction With Life	0.44*	0.11*
Positive Affect	0.30*	0.07*
Negative Affect	-0.30*	0.12*
Subjective Well-Being (SWB)	0.49*	0.07*

* $p < .05$

The correlation results are from strong to moderate relationship. All correlation coefficients are positive except for presence of meaning and negative affect ($r = -0.30$). The highest correlation coefficient is observed in the presence of meaning and SWB ($r = 0.49$) and presence of meaning and positive affect ($r = 0.30$). The correlation presents low to medium for presence of meaning and very low for search for meaning.

The results disclosed that the presence of meaning and search for meaning are significantly related to happiness among the respondents. Research findings presented that meaning in life significantly predicts happiness. Hence, meaning in life is an important component of happiness. The findings of the present study corroborate with studies of Navarez (2017), Cohen and Cairns (2011); Ho, Cheung and Cheung (2008); Morgan and Fastides (2009). Conversely, Baumeister and colleagues (2013) research revealed that happiness and a sense of meaning in life do not parallel. In a limited sense, desirable emotions do not always guarantee a happy life.

The preceding data would suggest that the respondents are enjoying a meaningful life, hence they are happy. They actualize their cognitive abilities and skills in concrete and diverse situations and are being appreciated and rewarded for such. They are able to realize the expectations and aspirations people have about them. Many life's crises challenged them in different extents but these never frustrate them from achieving their desires and purposes in life. The persistent pursuit of a meaningful life and happiness drive them much to go onward.

Consequently, the parents, teachers, and other stakeholders should cooperatively build up the self-esteem and concept of people for their sound and holistic development. Relevant and valuable activities and programs should be implemented to satisfy the personal and social needs, interests and aims of people.

Conclusions

The study determined the relationship between meaning in life and happiness among tertiary education students. The findings suggest that the education community along with the government should relentlessly collaborate in revisiting the curriculum to determine its relevance and areas needing further improvement. The curriculum has to be contextualized to the nature of the learners for them to fulfil their learning goals. Additionally, reasonable and sufficient opportunities to foster students' innate tendencies be provided. Rewards, incentives and other types of reinforcements should be offered to demand the pursuance of quality assurance or excellence in all the students' pursuits. The government has to address the requirements of the society not limiting locally but aiming for global competitiveness. In this way, learners would lead a meaningful and a happy life because they are being demanded and challenged by the proper authorities to showcase their best for them to be self-actualized which would redound to the development of the nation.

Overall, the respondents are leading a very meaningful and a happy life. Meaning in life and happiness are significantly correlated.

The preceding paragraph conveys that the respondents are leading an orderly, coherent and purposeful life. They continuously search about the meaning in life to fulfil their happiness. They continuously use their knowledge, understandings and potentials despite the crises and challenges they are facing.

It could be mentioned that the curriculum the respondents are into is relevant and carries quality and excellence. The curriculum is useful to better the lives of students notwithstanding the changing

needs and times. It has fulfilled its mandates and purposes to its clientele, the students. However, there remains an expectation for educational institutions to continuously adapt to the nature of the learners and to contribute towards the constant search for meaning in life that will ultimately play a part to the happiness of learners.

Recommendations

The size of the participants and variables of the study are limited because of time constraints. Questions on the factors which influence the non-meaningfulness and unhappiness in life should have been considered.

A parallel study may be undertaken involving the faculty and staff in public higher education institutions. The variables may include gross monthly income, civil status, position, highest educational attainment, and hobbies or interests. Likewise, the study may inquire about the factors which contribute to the non-meaningfulness and unhappiness in life of the participants for designing and implementing intervention programs.

The government and non-government institutions including media may continuously provide relevant and richer social and educational opportunities to enrich the capacities of people. Academic and non-academic programs, activities, and projects may be designed, implemented, and evaluated to cater to the natural tendencies of students. The results of evaluation would be used in curriculum improvement and in designing intervention programs.

Revisit the counselling process and practices about its relevance, effectiveness and limitations to keep boosting up the morale and dignity of individuals for a meaningful and happy life.

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