

## Chapter 4

# Creating a Stress-Free School Environment: Transformative Skills-Based Health Education Approach for Early Adolescents' Mental Wellbeing

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter discusses how transformative skills-based health education can be designed and implemented to create a stress-free school environment for early adolescent students (EASs). It analyzes both the process and outcome of participatory action research (PAR) on addressing EAS' stress-related problems. Building on transformative learning theory, the authors discuss how EASs can develop the necessary skills to transform their own attitudes and behaviors towards mental health issues by participating in multiple activities. The authors use a multi-phase PAR model to engage EASs in identifying stress-related problems and designing and executing relevant participatory activities to address them. They have focused on the role of two major activities—awareness-raising and classroom-based meditation—in creating a stress-free school environment. The findings of the study show that PAR-based and action-oriented skills support EASs to develop their critical awareness, new skills and knowledge, and critical agency for their mental well-being.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Skills-based health education is an approach to developing skills, knowledge, and perception for healthy personal, social, and institutional policies and practices (Benes & Alperin, 2019). While focusing on needs-based skills, this approach recognizes diverse strategies and actions to collaborate with the people, institutions, and community for addressing health-related problems (Johns et al., 2017). WHO (2002) defines skills-based health education as “an approach to creating or maintaining healthy lifestyles and conditions through the development of knowledge, attitudes, and especially skills, using a variety of learning experiences, with an emphasis on participatory methods” (p. 3). It involves various ways of teaching and learning methods to develop skills and implement them for the transformation of health education. Despite receiving increased attention from scholars around the globe, the field of skills-based health education has focused much on ‘life skills’ and ‘soft skills’ (WHO, 2003). In other words, the existing literature has not paid much emphasis on action-based approaches to creating a healthy school environment. More specifically, the existing literature on skills-based health education lacks knowledge on how early adolescent students (EASs) could be engaged in action-based participatory methods for building skills to create a school environment where they feel stress-free.

Against this background, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how transformative skills-based health education can be designed and implemented to create a stress-free school environment for early adolescent students (EASs). The focus of the chapter is to analyze both the process and outcome of participatory action research (PAR) with EASs in a public school. I draw on the theory of ‘transformative learning’ (Mezirow, 2003) to scrutinize how EASs can develop necessary skills by doing multiple actions to transform their own knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors towards mental health issues. The chapter focuses on the process and outcome of a participatory action research (PAR) study on skills-based health education. Although the entire study has focused on both menstrual hygiene and stress management, I have discussed the activities for stress management only. I particularly discuss how EASs in a public school can develop critical awareness, new skills and knowledge, and critical agency through participatory activities.

## **UNDERSTANDING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN SKILLS-BASED HEALTH EDUCATION**

Transformative learning theory focuses on how individuals learn new ideas and skills and use them to address their personal and social problems. This theory takes learning as a transformative process through which individuals, institutions, and communities build healthy and socially just environments. Mezirow (2003) defines transformative learning as an approach to addressing the “problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning, perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, [...] open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58). In this study, I use Mezirow’s (2003) transformative learning theory to discuss how EASs can transform their own assumptions, habits, and mindsets about mental health by participating in collaborative activities with teachers and parents. I focus on how EASs take agentic roles in designing, implementing, and assessing the impact of collaborative activities to create a stress-free school environment for their mental well-being. While describing the participatory process, I examine how EASs negotiate their ‘disorienting dilemmas’ (Mezirow, 2008) and develop critical awareness through dialogue that engages

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