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Parte Monografica

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Monographic Section

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Comments, Reflections, Presentations,
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The Impact
of Communication Skills Training
on Social Empowerment
and Social Adjustment
of Slow-paced Adolescents

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L'IMPATTO DELLA FORMAZIONE DELLE ABILITÀ COMUNICATIVE SULL'EMPOWERMENT E L'ADATTAMENTO SOCIALE DEGLI ADOLESCENTI «A RITMO LENTO»

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of communication skills training on social empowerment and social adjustment of so-called «slow-paced» adolescents (ie those whoo need psychological, physical and emotional drivers to actualize their potential abilities). The research method was a control-Group Pretest-Posttest Quasi-

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Experimental design. The population of the study consisted of all slow-paced female students aged 13-15 years in Ghaenat city (South Khorasan Province) during 2019. 24 samples selected from the population through convenient sampling were randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups (12 individuals in each group). Teachers or parents of both subject groups were asked to fill the questionnaires (pre-test). In the next step, the experimental group was presented with ten 45-minute sessions on communication skills, and the control group did not receive any training. In the end, both groups responded to the research instrument (post-test). Vineland social maturity scale was used as the data collection instrument. The collected data were analyzed through covariance analysis using SPSS software version 22. The results showed that communication skills training has a significant impact on social empowerment (F = 15.47, p = 0.001) and social adjustment (F = 49.64, p = 0.001). In other words, it can be argued that the experimental and control groups significantly differ from each other in terms of the communication skills training impacts on social empowerment and its components as well as social maturity. In conclusion, communication skills training significantly improves the social empowerment and social maturity of slow-paced female adolescents in the experimental group.

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Introduction

Intellectual disability is a universal problem in any country. This phenomenon is not only a medical problem but also an educational, psychological and social problem (Jadal, 2012). Currently, the term «mental retardation» is obsolete and the term «intellectual disability» has been approved by all scientific centers, organizations and scientific associations, including American Association of Psychiatric (APA) in the fifth revised edition of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) and the World Health Organization (WHO) in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th revision (ICD-11) (American Psychiatric Association, 2014; Kalantari *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, the term «slow pace» is a better equivalent with better motivational load in line with Iranian human values and culture. This term that views mental retardation from a more positive viewpoint, replaced the term «mental retardation» in the Islamic Republic of Iran and was finally approved by the WHO in 2007 (Afrooz, Ashouri, & Ghasemzadeh, 2016). According to the American Association on Intel-

lectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before the age of 18 (AAIDD, 2011).

The studies conducted by Sadock *et al.* (2015), Angold, Costello and Erkanli (1999) indicate that other mental disorders are associated with intellectual disability. Prakash, Sudarsanan and Prabhu (2007) showed that behavioral problems are more prevalent in slow-paced individuals. The estimated prevalence of social-adjustment disorders in slow-paced individuals is 13-75 percent (Farisabadi, Khosravi, & Sabahi, 2015). Slow-paced children may have reduced motor, communication, and social skills and have lower cognitive functioning than their typically developing peers. This may lead to fewer opportunities to participate in recreation, leisure and sporting activities. Lower levels of participation in activities among these children may encourage sedentary behavior, social isolation, anxiety, and shyness that are commonly reported in this group. (King *et al.*, 2013).

Slow-paced adolescents need psychological, physical and emotional drivers to actualize their potential abilities and become an active and acceptable member of their community. To achieve this goal, they need more opportunities and specific training techniques. On the other hand, the communication problems of these children, as well as their other problems with the actualization of educational methods, play a vital role in this field. Therefore, the training courses considered for these children are mainly meant to help them acquire a level of skill that enables them to communicate effectively with others and their environment. Lack of social adjustability is one of the problems that slow-paced adolescents are facing. Considering the increase in social communications with peers and reduced dependency on parents during adolescence, social adjustability is of vital importance in this period. Social adjustability is the recognition of self and others' rights and responsibilities, making friends, teamwork, moral judgment, and gaining independence (Kafi *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, one of the main objectives of slow-paced student training courses is to promote social adjustment, development of useful and effective relationships with others, and assumption of social responsibility. Most psychologists believe that social skills are a set of accepted and acquired behaviors that enable one to effectively communicate with others and avoid unreasonable social reactions (BehPajouh *et al.*, 2010). lack of social competence (social empowerment) is another problem slow-paced students usually face. To successfully pass through the adolescence stage, one needs to be socially competent in four components of

competence and ability (behavioral skill, cognitive skill, emotional competence, and motivational competence). The lack of these skills is the major cause of adjustment and adaptation problems (Motamedi, Babaei, & Biglarian, 2012).

Empowerment is associated with normal performance and the enhancement of living standards. Therefore, to achieve empowerment and social adjustment, slow-paced adolescents are required to acquire a variety of skills, including communication skills. On the other hand, different studies have shown that recognition of slow-paced adolescents and employment of appropriate strategies can contribute to the improvement of their skills and reduction of their problems. The relevant literature in this field have proven the impact of social skills training on adjustment improvements in students with intellectual disability (Estler & Goldbeck, 2011). The impact of communication skills training on improvements in adjustment behavior and academic performance of female students with intellectual disability (Farisabadi, Khosravi, & Sabahi, 2015); the impact of communication skills training on impulsivity of adolescent girls with conduct disorder (Hatami, Sadeghiarad, & Hassani, 2015); the impact of communication skills training on social adjustment, aggression and academic achievement (Hosseinian *et al.*, 2016) is effective. The training courses considered for slow-paced students are meant to prepare them for social life and help them acquire the skills that are necessary for leading an independent life with the least dependence on others. Fully-applied programs are required to achieve this goal (Seif Naraghi *et al.*, 2009). These programs include communication skills training. Communication skills are part of life skills that help individuals engage in interpersonal interactions and communication processes (Hossein-Chari & Agha Dellavarpour, 2006).

Communicative skills are of much more importance for slow-paced children because their success in social and occupational life is dependent on communicational and social skills. Unfortunately, a large number of slow-paced children are dealing with communication and interaction challenges that are mostly associated with their skills. Aside from their limited verbal communication skills, they are mostly plagued with a lack of non-verbal communication skills. They usually have problems with the initiation of positive and effective social communications and the continuation of them. Their interactions and communications with peers and family members are associated with aggression (Oluwaseun & Tahan, 2018). They usually show inappropriate behaviors and are ultimately shunned by their peers. Considering the communication problems the slow-paced children are plagued with and the impact on these problems on the social and occupational aspects of their lives, attempts should be made to employ

some techniques to improve and enhance communication skills in these students (Shahi, Afrooz, & Mir Zamani, 2009).

Communication is an interaction between at least two individuals sending and receiving messages to achieve a goal. Adequate communication is one of the basic skills of social life. Communication skills are behaviors that help one correctly express their emotions and needs and achieve interpersonal goals. These skills are so important that their deficiency could lead to a sense of loneliness, social anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and academic and professional failures (Williams & Zadiro, 2001). In other words, communication skills are the abilities that lead to positive and adjustment behaviors and are necessary for having a sense of success, ability, and happiness in everyday life (Adib & Fardanesh, 2003).

Sticker *et al.* (2003) concluded that communication skills can effectively reduce social anxiety, increase problem-solving skills, and improve self-esteem and social interaction among students. In a study titled «the effectiveness of life skills training on self-empowerment of male students with math disorder» Pour-Mohammadreza Tajrishi *et al.* (2013) found that life skills training can improve the social self-empowerment of male students with math disorder. In a research titled «The effect of social skills training on social adjustment and academic performance of late students», Behpajouh *et al.* (2010) found that interventional programs can significantly improve the social adjustment of unapt male students in the experimental group.

The success of adolescents in social life, occupation, and academic fields is dependent on their social and communicational skills (Soleimani Nejad & Shaetrola, 2008). Moreover, almost all psychologists and education experts believe that adolescence is the most sensitive, critical and important period of every person's life. In this period, individuals reach maturity, try to discover their identity, seek independence and wish to put an end to their childhood dependencies. That's why adolescents mostly have no stable mental status, and usually face the most severe behavioral problem (Asadi, 2012). Aside from changes in adolescence, this period is characterized by challenges and disabilities such as intellectual disability that could cause or even aggravate behavioral problems for adolescents. In other words, adolescents' disability to adjust themselves to new conditions leads to more behavioral problems in this period (Helstela & Sourander, 2001). Thus, considering the effectiveness of the communication skills training program in social empowerment and adjustment of slow-paced adolescents and the lack of relevant domestic literature in this field, in the present study attempts are made to evaluate the impact of communication skills training on social empowerment and social adjustment of the slow-paced adolescents.

1. Method

1.1. *Study design*

The present study is a control-Group Pretest-Posttest Quasi-Experimental study. The population of the study consisted of all slow-paced female students aged between 13-15-years who were studying at the exceptional schools in the city of Ghaen during 2019. 24 students selected from the population through convenience sampling (census) were randomly assigned to control (12 individuals) and experimental (12 individuals) groups.

   The inclusion criteria were: lack of familial damages induced by divorce or death of parents, 13-15 years age limit, willingness to participate in research, slow-paced girls (IQ: 50-70), informed consent of parents. The exclusion criteria included: reluctance to participate in the study and acute physical or psychological diseases.

1.2. *Data collection instruments*

The following instruments were used to collect data:

A. *Social competence scale*. The social competence scale was used to assess the social empowerment of students. The scale was developed based on Fellner's social adequacy scale (1990) to investigate the capacity profile of children and adolescents and was used to evaluate social empowerment in the experimental and control groups (Laktarash, 2019). This scale consisted of 47 items and four scales used to measure cognitive skills, behavioral skill, emotional competence, and motivational set. Subjects responded the test questions based on a 7-point scale covering completely disagree (1), I disagree (2), fairly disagree (3) I have no idea (4), fairly agree (5), agree (6), and totally agree (7) Questions 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 21, 25, 26, 28, 32, 36, 37, 38, 43, 44 and were scored in reverse order. In the present study, the correlation between each question and the total score of the questions associated with the same subscale was calculated to determine the validity of the questions. The results showed that the correlation coefficient was significant for all questions. Parandin and Karami (2012) reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.88 for this questionnaire, and the reliability coefficient of 0.94 was obtained for the questionnaire in the present study.

B. *Vineland's social maturity scale*: This scale was developed by Edgar in 1953 and was later revised in 1965 (Sparrow, 2011). This scale is one of the evolutionary scales that measure the ability of an individual to meet his practical needs and assumption of responsibilities. The scale is applicable for different ages ranging from newborns up to 25 years of age. Nevertheless, it's proven that the scale is most effective for lower age ranges, especially in the intellectual disability groups. This scale consisted of 117 items that are divided into eight classes: general self-help items, self-help in eating, self-help in dressing, self-direction, occupation, verbal communication, locomotion, and socialization. In each item, the information needed to determine the individual's maturity rate in each of the eight classes was obtained directly through the tester observations, participation in the test, or interviewing individuals that are acquainted with the subject. The scale is meant to determine the things one could do in everyday life. The individual scores could be used to measure social age (SA) and social quotient (SQ) of the subjects (Zadashir, Estaki, & Emami Pour, 2009). Of the eight domains of social maturity, only the socialization domain was studied and analyzed in the present study. The socialization domain consisted of 17 items. To evaluate the validity of the questions, the correlation of each item with the total score of the items associated with the same scale (socialization) was calculated. The results showed that the correlation coefficient is significant for all the items. Jalilvand and Ghobari Bonab (2004), Zadashir (2009), Karami (2011), reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.73, 0.68, and 0.92 for this scale respectively. The reliability coefficient obtained for the scale in the present study was 0/89.

1.3. *Procedure*

After the selection of samples, subjects' teachers or parents filled the social competence scale (social empowerment) and Vineland's social maturity scale. The experimental group was presented with ten 45-minute communication skills training sessions. The control group did not receive any training though. Afterwards, the participants filled out the questionnaires once more (posttest). Regarding ethical consideration, the control group will receive education after final tests. The study was registered with the Clinical Trial Number ISRCTN51125209.

SPSS 22 was used to analyze the collected data. The mean and standard deviation were used in the descriptive level and the covariance analysis was used to compare the mean score of groups in the post-test (*Tab. 1*).

Table 1. – Communication skill training package based on the communication skills training guide presented by Kayvand, Shafi Abadi and Sudani (2009).

Session	
Session 1	An introduction to the goals, elaboration of some social communication techniques, statement of goals
Session 2	Starting and termination a useful communication, barriers to effective communication, elaboration of the communication model.
Session 3	Non-verbal language and interpretation of that, physical characteristics and environmental factors in non-verbal communication
Session 4	Different types of listening, barriers to listening, mastery of listening skills during a communication
Session 5	Reflection of emotions and concepts, verbal sympathy and presentation of decisive but flexible responses.
Session 6	Different types of Self-Assertiveness, their benefits and functions, social communication techniques.
Session 7	Having the courage to say «No». the six stages of self- Assertiveness, power enhancement
Session 8	Conflict and its different types, personal and group conflict prevention and inhibition.
Session 9	Collaborative Problem solving technique and its applications problem solving traps.
Session 10	Honesty, sympathy and love, formulation and implementation of a commitment letter for employment of communication skills

2. Results

According to the descriptive statistics, a total of subjects was 24 were selected. 12 out of the 24 subjects were assigned the experimental group and the other 12 were assigned to the control group. The mean score of social empowerment and social maturity variables was almost equal in the pre-test of the experimental and control groups. The mean score, however, increased in the experimental groups post-test. Pretest score obtained for social empowerment and social maturity in the experimental and control groups were 250.25 (SD 8.91) and 241.50 (SD 8.83) respectively. After the communication skills training, the post-test scores obtained for social empowerment and social maturity were reportedly equal to 294.41, and 12.33 in the experimental group and 237, 33 and 9.8 in the control groups respectively.

Covariance analysis was used to analyze the effect of communication skills training on social empowerment and social maturity of subjects.

First, the normal distribution of data was analyzed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistical test.

Table 2. – The results obtained from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test
(normal distribution of variables).

VARIABLES	t	DF	P-VALUE
Cognitive skills	-1.87	23	0.04
Behavioral skills	-3.63	23	0.001
Emotional competence	-2.04	23	0.04
Motivational	-.245	23	0.02
Social empowerment	-3.23	23	0.004

According to the results presented in T*able 2*, the significance of social empowerment and social maturity variables is greater than 0.05; thus, it can be argued that the variables' scores are normally distributed.

The results presented in *Table 3* indicate that the pre-test scores associated with social empowerment and its components are significant (the slope of the regression line is not the same). Thaw results also show that communication skills training has a significant impact on social empowerment and its components. In other words, it can be argued that the two experimental and control groups are significantly different in terms of the impact of communication skills training on social empowerment and its components. The adjusted means are presented in *Table 4*.

Table 4 shows that the adjusted mean of the experimental group is significantly lower than that of the control group. This means that communication skills training has had a significant impact on social empowerment and its components among slow-paced female adolescents.

Table 5 shows that the scores obtained from social maturity pre-test (F = 136.86 and p = 0.001) are significant (the slope of the regression line is not the same). The results also show that communication skills training can significantly affect social maturity (F = 49.64, p = 0.001). In other words, it can be argued that the experimental and control groups significantly differ from each other in terms of the impact of communication skills training on social maturity. The adjusted means are presented in *Table 6*.

The results presented in *Table 6* show that the adjusted mean of the experimental group is significantly lower than that of the control group. Thus, it can be argued that communication skills training has had a significant impact on social empowerment and its components among slow-paced female adolescents.

Table 3. – The covariance analysis results obtained for the effect of communication skills training on social empowerment and its components.

Source of changes	Variables	Total square	DF	Mean square	F	P-Value	Squared eta breakdown	Power
Modified model	Cognitive skills	51.45	2	25.72	3.34	0.05	6.69	0.56
	Behavioral skills	5471.18	2	2735.59	20.09	0.001	40.18	1
	Emotional competence	46.96	2	23.48	4.44	0.02	8.88	0.69
	Motivational	164.04	2	82.02	7.34	0.001	14.68	0.90
	Social empowerment	8339.240	2	426.92	12.63	0.001	25.55	0.99
Associated variable (pre-test scores)	Cognitive skills	51.07	1	51.07	6.64	0.01	6.64	0.69
	Behavioral skills	5054.51	1	5054.1	37.12	0.001	37.12	1
	Emotional competence	37.58	1	3758	7.11	0.01	7.11	0.72
	Motivational	162	1	162	14.50	0.001	14.50	0.95
	Social empowerment	8079.86	1	8079.86	23.90	0.001	23.90	0.99
Training Effect (Experimental-Control)	Cognitive skills	21.05	1	21.05	2.73	0.01	2.73	0.68
	Behavioral skills	2120.87	1	2120.87	15.57	0.001	15.57	0.96
	Emotional competence	7.20	1	7.20	1.36	0.02	1.36	0.69
	Motivational	120.39	1	120.39	10.77	0.001	10.77	0.87
	Social empowerment	4304.26	1	4304.26	12.73	0.001	12.73	0.92
Error	Cognitive skills	161.50	21	7.69				
	Behavioral skills	2859.31	21	136.15				
	Emotional competence	110.99	21	5.28				
	Motivational	234.58	21	11.17				
	Social empowerment	7099.38	21	338.06				
Total corrected sum	Cognitive skills	212.95	23					
	Behavioral skills	8330.50	23					
	Emotional competence	157.95	23					
	Motivational	398.62	23					
	Social empowerment	15638.62	23					

Table 4. – Adjusted means of social empowerment and its components in covariance analysis.

Group	Variables	Means	SD
EXPERIMENTAL	Cognitive skills	13.90	0.89
	Behavioral skills	164.55	4.74
	Emotional competence	14.36	0.86
	Motivational	31.19	1.31
	Social empowerment	220.13	8.131
CONTROL	Cognitive skills	16.18	0.89
	Behavioral skills	196.94	4.74
	Emotional competence	16.05	0.86
	Motivational	38.55	1.31
	Social empowerment	271.61	8.13

Table 5. – The covariance analysis results associated with the impact of communication skills training on social maturity.

SOURCE OF CHANGES	Total square	DF	Mean square	F	P-Value	Squared eta breakdown	Power
MODIFIED MODEL	82.91	2	41.45	68.46	0.001	136.93	1
ASSOCIATED VARIABLE (PRE-TEST SCORES)	82.86	1	82.86	13.86	0.001	136.86	1
TRAINING EFFECT (EXPERIMENTAL-CONTROL)	30.05	1	30.05	49.64	0.001	49.64	1
ERROR	12.71	21	0.06				
TOTAL CORRECTED SUM	95.63	21					

Table 6. – The adjusted mean of social maturity in covariance analysis.

GROUP	Means	SD
EXPERIMENTAL	33.10	0.25
CONTROL	44.7	0.25

3. Discussion and conclusion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the impact of communication skills training on social empowerment and adjustment of slow-paced adolescents. The results showed that communication skills training improves social empowerment and social maturity in slow-paced female adolescents. The results are consistent with sticker *et al.* (2003), Pour-Mohammadreza Tajrishi *et al.* (2013), Kalantari and Tahan (2017), Behpajouh (2010), Tahan (2018). Farisabadi *et al.* (2015) showed that the interpersonal communication skills and social problem-solving training can improve social adjustment and academic achievement of students with intellectual disability. This study is also consistent with the present study. Except that, in the present study, social maturity and empowerment variables are taken into consideration.

Slow-paced Adolescents suffer from major limitations in intellectual functioning; adjustment behavior; conceptual, social and practical adjustment skills during their development (Afrooz, Ashouri, & Ghasemzadeh, 2016). In recent decades, many experts and psychologists investigating the children and adolescents problems have concluded that many of the problems adolescents and children are dealing with originate from the wrong analysis of their own and others' emotions, their perception of their position, lack of a sense of control over communications, appropriate attitude in the face of difficult situations, and lack of readiness to solve life problems in an appropriate manner (Ashouri & Jalil Abkenar, 2016). The slow-paced individuals suffer from social failure in their communications with others since childhood up to adulthood. Lack of appropriate communication skills and limited opportunities for making friends prevent social adjustment and even academic progress (Dodge, 2008).

Communication skill training can enhance social adjustment and mental health and also decrease stress and anxiety in individuals (Farisabadi *et al.*, 2015). Communication skills training improves children's adjustment and helps them control their emotions. In other words, increased adjustment can help them adequately control their behavior and emotions at the same time (Homayie, Kajbaf, & Siyadat, 2009). Communication skills training helped adolescents improve their behavior in terms of showing respect for others, participation in teamwork, effective social communication, anger management, showing respect for others' rights and expressions of interest, and prepare them for adjustment in life (Soleimani, 2011).

To make successful and fruitful adolescence, students with intellectual disabilities need to receive communication skills training to achieve

social empowerment and adjustment. Lack of these skills could be regarded as the main cause of maladjustment and adaptation problems. Thus, communication skills training programs can be used to improve the communication skills of adolescents in general, and slow-paced students in particular (Ahangari & Tahan, 2019).

The results of the present study can provide psychologists, consultants, Parents and instructors of normal and slow-paced students, as well as all the education experts with insights into the social problems of adolescents. Therefore, raising coaches, teachers and parents' awareness of the impacts of social empowerment and lack of social maturity on the individual and social life of individuals is of vital importance. The limitations of the studio include small sample size, specific age groups (adolescence) and specific geographic regions. Moreover, in the present study, self-report instruments such as social competence and social maturity scales were used. These scales were filled by slow-paced students' instructors. In this method, the responses given to the questions may be biased and consequently lead to a decline in the accuracy of the results. Thus, the generalization of these results should be made with care. Consideration of larger sample sizes, individuals in different age groups and different regions or provinces and finally comparison of the results obtained from different groups can be put forward as a suggestion for further studies. Aside from the questionnaire, authors are required to use, interviews and observations in data collection.

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Riassunto

Il presente studio ha rappresentato un tentativo di studiare l'effetto della formazione delle abilità comunicative sull'empowerment e l'adattamento sociale degli adolescenti cosiddetti «a ritmo lento» (cioè coloro che hanno bisogno di driver psicologici, fisici ed emotivi per attualizzare le loro capacità potenziali). È stato adottato il metodo di ricerca quasi sperimentale Pre-test / Post-test con gruppo di controllo. La popolazione partecipante allo studio era composta da tutte le studentesse dal cosiddetto «ritmo lento» di età compresa tra 13 e 15 anni, abitanti nel 2019 nella città di Ghaenat (Provincia del Khorasan meridionale). 24 campioni selezionati dall'intera popolazione attraverso un campionamento sono stati assegnati in modo casuale a due gruppi: sperimentale e di controllo (12 partecipanti in ciascun gruppo). A insegnanti o genitori di entrambi i gruppi di studentesse è stato chiesto di compilare alcuni questionari (pre-test). Nella fase successiva, al gruppo sperimentale sono state offerte dieci sessioni di 45 minuti centrate sulle abilità comunicative mentre il gruppo di controllo non ha ricevuto alcuna formazione a tal proposito. Alla fine, entrambi i gruppi hanno compilato (post-test) la scala di Maturità Sociale di Vineland. I dati raccolti sono stati analizzati attraverso l'analisi della covarianza utilizzando il software SPSS versione 22. I risultati hanno mostrato che la formazione delle abilità comunicative ha un impatto significativo sull'empowerment sociale (F = 15,47, p = 0,001) e sull'adeguamento sociale (F = 49,64, p = 0,001). In altre parole, si può sostenere che i gruppi sperimentali e di controllo differiscono in modo significativo l'uno dall'altro in termini di impatto delle competenze comunicative sulla formazione dell'empowerment sociale e delle sue componenti, nonché sulla maturità sociale. In conclusione, la formazione delle abilità comunicative migliora significativamente l'empowerment sociale e la maturità sociale delle adolescenti dal ritmo lento nel gruppo sperimentale.