

Life Skills for National Development in Lesotho: Can ODL Do it?

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of their diversity in culture, economic conditions and social and political structures, developing countries share a set of common and well defined goals. The introduction of Life skills education at both basic and tertiary education was meant among other things to improve all aspects of the quality education, ensuring equitable access to appropriate learning and facilitating Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDG) initiatives. The purpose of the paper was to explore the main components of life skills programmes in place at Lesotho education system to address development problems such as poverty reduction, preventing spread of HIV/AIDS and alcohol and drug abuse. The study examined how the programmes were implemented and evaluated at Primary schools, Secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. Qualitative data was collected through document review and analysis; interviews of policy-makers in the Ministry of Education and Training, Deans of the Faculty of Education in the institutions of higher learning, principals, education officers and curriculum developers. The findings highlight a number of issues and potentials emanating from assessment and evaluation, quality and teacher capacity in the delivery of the programmes. In order to fully address equity and access of essential life skills, the study recommends that the government of Lesotho should also consider delivering the programmes through Open and Distance learning mode and to learners participating in ODL.

Background and Introduction

As children grow from infancy to adolescence and young adulthood, they need to learn many kinds of skills. Language, reading, writing and mathematics are considered the most basic of the skills children must master. In addition, they must learn a great variety of practical skills, like tooth brushing, how to drive a car or use public transportation, food preparation, and basic safety and survival skills. They also need to learn skills associated with work, income generation and money management. Last but not least, experience in the field of health education has demonstrated that children need another group of skills that are now generally referred to as "*life skills*." The challenges children and young people regularly face are many, and require more than even the best numeracy and literacy skills. That is why the 164 nations committed to Education For All have included "life skills" as a basic learning need for all young people (UNICEF, 2006). Around the world, Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE) is being adopted as a means to empower young people in challenging situations. LSBE refers to an interactive process of

teaching and learning which enables learners to acquire knowledge and to develop attitudes and skills which support the adoption of healthy behaviours. It is also a critical element in UNICEF's definition of quality education.

Lifeskills education in Lesotho aims at equipping learners with various life skills in an attempt to promote acceptable attitudes and behaviors. In ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes; and improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills (MOET, 2005), Life skills education was introduced in Lesotho primary and high schools in 2008. Similarly, the life skills programme was also introduced in one of the teacher training colleges and the National University in 2006. The Lesotho government has afforded to education including life skills, priority status a therefore, supported it with substantial funding because of the significant role education contributes in the national development and alleviation of poverty.

UNICEF defines life skills as "a behavior change or behavior development approach designed to address a balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills. The UNICEF definition is based on research evidence that suggests that shifts in risk behaviors are unlikely if knowledge, attitudinal and skills based competency are not addressed. Life skills are essentially those abilities that help promote mental well-being and competence in young people as they face the realities of life. Most development professionals agree that life skills are generally applied in the context of health and social events. They can be utilized in many content areas such as: prevention of drug use, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS prevention and suicide prevention. The definition extends into consumer education, environmental education, peace education or education for development, livelihood and income generation, among others. Primarily,, life skills empower young people in terms of making informed decisions as well as promotes health and positive relationships.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines **life skills** as "abilities for adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life." In primary and secondary education, *life skills* may refer to a skill set that accommodates more specific needs of modern industrialized life; for instance examples include, money management, food preparation, hygiene, basic literacy and numeracy, and organizational skills. Life skills in some exceptional instances are distinguished from occupational skills.

Although life skills have been closely linked to health related topics in essence life skills are not confined to a domain or subject, but instead they represent cross-cutting applications of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills which are vital in psychological development and in

lifelong learning. The World Health Organization has defined life skills as “abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” In essence, life skills are a combination of cognitive, personal and interpersonal abilities that assists individuals make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with as well as manage lives in a healthy and productive manner.

Main Components of Life Skills

The skills referred to in the skills-based approach to health education include both the practical skills associated with specific health behaviours and life skills. A suggested framework for skills-based programmes could therefore aim at developing competencies in the four following areas: knowledge and critical thinking skills (learning to know), practical skills (learning to do), personal skills (learning to be) and social skills (learning to live together). The practical skills are the manual skills under learning to do, and the psycho-social life skills are the skills under learning to know, to be and to live together. A life skills approach to education is one that teaches an essential combination of skills needed in a particular and specific context, both practical and life skills.

UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO list ten core life skill strategies and techniques as: problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication skills, decision-making, creative thinking, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness building skills, empathy, and coping with stress and emotions. However, individual nations and countries have the flexibility and opportunity to prepare and develop priority curriculum that address the particular social behavior problem in their own country.

Life Skills Education and national development

World Bank (1991) in Nnadozie (2005) describes development as a sustainable increase in the standards of living of one's country that includes a large number of things: material consumption, education, health and environmental protection. Matlosa et al (2007) accepted that there are as many definitions of development as there are writers on the subject. In extrapolation to that, development is conceived by Todaro (1992) as a multidimensional process encompassing major changes in social structures, people's thinking, national institutions, an increase of economic growth, reduction of inequality, and eradication of absolute poverty. Development in all societies must have at least three objectives. The first objective relates to the improvement in the quality of life: improvement in the availability and distribution of basic life-sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health and protection. The second objective is in connection with the economic progress and includes raise in the levels of living, higher incomes, provision of more jobs, better education, and more attention to

cultural and humanistic values all of which will not only enhance material well-being but also create high individual and national self-esteem. The third objective is concerned with the expansion of economic and social choices to individuals and nations: choices of freedom from servitude and dependence to other people and nation-states and other forces of ignorance and human misery.

Literature reveals that the expansion of educational opportunities at all levels contribute to aggregate economic growth by creating a more productive labour force and supporting it with increased knowledge and skills; providing widespread employment and income-earning opportunities; and providing the kind of education and training that would promote literacy and basic skills (Chenery, et al., 1976; Todaro, 1992; Cook and Healey, 1995; Nnadozie, 2005; UNDP, 2003; UNDP, 2006; Adedeji, 2007). The key role of education and training is to improve the quality of the workforce, the many of whom are in continuous employment. Adedeji (2007) argues that education being so important for development, for human rights and for the improvement of the standards of living in a society, requires for governments to predominantly reposition education at all levels. Without relocating education, scientific and technological developments will remain underdeveloped. Education should generate the knowledge and technology needed for development through undergoing scientific research and as agents of learning (knowledge and technology) for acquisition, adaptation and dissemination of scientific and technical skills

Primarily, Life Skills education focuses on equipping individuals with skills relevant and appropriate which can prepare them to be successful at the world of work. For instance, in developing life skills assists adolescents translate knowledge, attitudes and values into healthy behaviour. For example, facilitates the ability to reduce special health risks and adopt healthy behaviour that improve adolescents, as well as promotes critical thinking in activities such as planning ahead, career planning, decision-making as well as developing and maintaining positive relationships. Currently, youth grows up in an environment in which different messages are provided regarding early engaging in sexual activities, drug and alcohol as well as adolescent pregnancy. However, parents and teachers attempt to discourage promiscuous behaviour, adolescent pregnancy, drugs and alcohol abuse. But adolescents are in a dilemma since media in most instances promotes some of the behaviours which parents and teacher describe as inappropriate.

In essence equipping adolescents with life skills is an attempt to empower girls to avoid pregnancy. In addition, life skills education attempts to develop in both boys and girls responsible and safe sexual behaviour. In addition life skills education also aim at promoting sensitivity and raising awareness in equity in gender relations, as well as to prepare boys and young men to be responsible fathers and friends. Equally, life skills education approach is also to encourage adults, especially parents, to listen and respond to young people, help

young avoid risks and hardships and involve them in decisions that affect their lives. It is through life skills that teenagers can cope with challenges and also be able to make informed decisions.

Purpose and the objectives of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore the main Components of life skills programmes adopted in the Education system in Lesotho to address development problems such as poverty reduction, preventing HIV and AIDS spread, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. The study also examined how the programmes were implemented and evaluated at Primary schools, Secondary schools and institutions of higher learning focus was on the on the following identified areas:

- Assessment and Evaluation;
- Programme quality; and
- Teacher Capacity

Methodology and Procedures

The study used qualitative approach through document review and analysis; interviews of policy-makers in the Ministry of Education and Training, Deans of the Faculty of Education in the institutions of higher learning, principals of the pilot schools and curriculum developers.

Findings

Implementation of Lifeskills education

The life skills programme was launched in selected primary and secondary schools. The study findings revealed that the life skills education was introduced without consultation with relevant stakeholders and majority of the teachers in the schools implementing the curriculum have very little information about the programme. The programme was also introduced at Lesotho's only teacher training college and the National University in 2006 to support and build capacity of the graduating teachers. It was reported that the first cohort trained in delivering life skills in schools graduated in 2009. At the teacher training college the course is taken only during the first year of enrollment and it's offered as a semester course for pre-service learners. At the university level the course is delivered to student teachers only in a two-day workshop at the end of their final year of study.

Lifeskills curriculum

The study findings indicate that the Lifeskills education syllabus which was introduced in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Lesotho is different in scope and coverage. At Primary school level the curriculum covers almost all the core strategies and techniques recommended by UNICEF, UNESCO and WHO. The curriculum is taught at grade 4 to 7. In the secondary schools the syllabus is offered in the lower levels of the secondary schools which from Form A to C. Whereas in the teacher training college the emphasis is mainly on Population and Family Life education during the first of the diploma programme. Contrary to practices adopted by secondary and primary school as well as the teacher training college, university learners are only exposed to basic life skills education in a period of two days workshop.

Assessment and Evaluation

The study findings report that the launched primary and secondary Lifeskills curriculum is not examined. However, it is indicated that the practice is different at the teacher training college, because there is continuous assessment to determine the ability of learners though the marks do not contribute to the overall performance of the learner at the college.

Teacher Capacity

Prior to the introduction of Life skills education in Schools, there was no provision of training to teachers expected to teach the course, in addition there is also no in-service training to equip teachers with relevant and appropriate skills which could facilitate quality teaching and learning.

Issues and challenges

Other than lack of capacity among teachers in schools, the programme is faced with challenges emanating from schools and institutions not complying with the usual expected and recommended quality education practices. For instance, not introducing any assessment and evaluation measures at the end of Primary School Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate may lower the status and recognition that life skills education deserves. Since the practice in most instances is that teachers put more effort on the courses that are examinable and add value to the passing of the learners. Similarly, learners also do not take courses which are not assessed seriously; therefore they do not give them the attention they deserve.

In addition Basotho cultural practices do not encourage adults and youngsters to engage in discussions pertaining to sexual and reproductive health topics. Therefore, this creates some conflict and confusion in both learners and teachers; as a result if the discussions take place

what ever is deliberated on would not encourage expected contributions from learners, since learners may feel uncomfortable and may also be reluctant as well as shy to discuss sexual and reproductive health topics with individuals older than them.

Discussions and Recommendations

This paper outlines the role of life skills education in fostering sustainable development. The purpose of this paper was to explore the main components of life skills programmes in place at Lesotho education system to address development problems such as poverty reduction, preventing spread of HIV and AIDS, alcohol and drug abuse. The paper reviewed literature on the definition of development and the role of education in sustainable development. The paper explored the views of educational practitioners on the life skills education put in place in Lesotho schools. The study examined how the programmes were implemented and evaluated at Primary schools, secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. The study highlighted a number of issues and potentials emanating from assessment and evaluation, quality and teacher capacity in the delivery of the programmes in institutions.

There are issues and challenges that hinder effective implementation of Life skills education in the Lesotho education system that it may efficiently address development. The programme was only introduced in pre-service or face to face mode of learning and distance education or open and distance learning delivery (ODL) mode was never considered as option to cater for teachers and learners who attended training before life skills education was introduced. That implicated that only section of the teaching force and teacher training colleges could not effectively deliver courses in life skills education.

According to Peters (2001), distance education is characterised by firstly, structured study materials developed in accordance with educational technology. Secondly, autonomous learning whereby learners themselves take over and exercise the functions of the teacher – recognise their learning needs; formulate learning objectives; select content; draw up learning strategies; and evaluate their learning. The third characteristic of distance learning is the presence of pedagogical dialogue or rather direct or indirect interaction between instructors and learners. This interactivity with the learning materials is the key element of the learning environment of the distance learner – it increases the sense of isolation among learners; it decreases the learners' flexibility to adapt to new situations; and increases the variety of experiences that individual learners are exposed to (Belanger & Jordan, 2000).

The paper recommended total decentralization of educational services as a measure that could be put in place to ensure quality educational system that facilitates sustainable development in terms of an increase to access to learning; economic growth; eradication of absolute poverty; overall improvement in the quality of life; and improvement in the availability

and distribution of basic life-sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health and protection to the future generations. Decentralisation improves delivery of basic services and often reduces absenteeism among government employees in local schools and education department because elected local officials receive complaints from their constituencies and can impose discipline. Decentralisation has worked in Botswana, Brazil, Colombia, Jordan, South Africa and many states in India. In order to fully address equity and access of essential life skills, the study recommended that the government of Lesotho should also consider delivering the life skills programmes through open and distance learning mode and to learners participating in ODL programmes.

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