

# The Importance of Life Skills Education and Counselling Programme in the Namibian Schools Setting

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## **Abstract**

*Life skills is a compulsory subject in Namibia. All schools with Grades 4 to 12 are required to fully implement the life skills education and counselling programme. This subject concerns developing in learners the ability and skills which will enable them to cope with important tasks in times of change. This paper used a documentary review approach to examine the aims of life skills education and counselling programs, groups of life skills, and the role of life skills teachers/teacher-counsellors, and counselling services offered as well as the difficulties life skills teachers face with the implementation of the subject in the school settings. The review revealed that life skills education faces implementation difficulties such as little time allocation, inadequate teachers, overloaded syllabus, and shortage of textbooks. It is therefore recommended that school management ensure that life skills is an integral part of education and is implemented as per the Namibian curriculum guidelines.*

**Key words:** Life skills, School Counselling Programme, Teacher-counsellors

## INTRODUCTION

Namibia is currently faced with various social problems and schools are expected to play a significant role in finding solutions and alleviating these problems. The most common problems include teenage pregnancy, violence, passion killings, child abuse, HIV&AIDS, poverty, unemployment, school dropouts, and substance and alcohol abuse. In order to address these problems effectively, it is of great importance that the country implement both prevention and intervention strategies. Hence, well systematic proactive and reactive approaches are a necessity. In general, the most important mission of education is to influence the development of the learners' attitudes, values, intellectual and moral commitments (Lindhard, 1985). In this regard, education is considered as a strategic influence in helping each learner to realise the best of his/her potential self. This perspective on learner development shows that schools have greater roles than just providing for the academic needs of their learners. Herein lies the basis for provision of services and programmes included under life skills programme and/or counselling, all aimed at facilitating the development of all learners' full potentials in addition to alleviate or solve immediate problems facing them on a daily basis (Baker, 2000; Mbongo, Möwes & Chata, 2016). On this basis, the objectives of this paper were to examine:

- aims of life skills education and counselling programs
- groups of life skills education
- role of life skills teachers/teacher-counsellors
- counselling services offered in the Namibian school setting.
- difficulties life skills teachers face in the implementation of the subject

The paper consists of three parts. First, it presents the methodology used, followed by descriptions of life skills and counselling programme aims, groups of life skills education, role of life skills teachers, counselling services offered and challenges facing the implementation of life skills education. It concludes with recommendations for better implementation of life skills education in the Namibian school setting.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper used document analysis design to review documents presenting life skills and counselling programs from Namibia and elsewhere where necessary. Published articles from Namibian scholars, and guidance and counselling study guides and literature from non-governmental organization (NGOs) were all considered as useful information for this paper.

## **AIMS OF LIFE SKILLS AND COUNSELLING PROGRAMS**

Life skills, as a subject, is a way of making meaning out of life; hence the basic aims are to focus on the optimal and holistic development of all learners. It is therefore based on the concept of a holistic education that focuses on personal, social, vocational and educational domains of life. The life skills subject activities in the classrooms are meant for the development of the whole learner and not just for intellectual development alone (Ministry of Education, 2006). Life skills subjects are aimed at teaching learners about health care (including HIV&AIDS), society and family life, self-awareness, personal responsibilities, problem-solving, decision making, positive attitudes, personal values, assertive behaviours, motivation strategies, study skills, examination preparation, time management, and steps in career planning, that subsequently enhance the attaining of the educational goals (Ministry of Education and Culture, National Institute for Educational Development, 1996).



**Figure 1: Various skills under Life skills education programmes**

Life skills education instils various and crucial skills in learners that are useful in everyday life and can be applied to any life situation they may encounter. In addition, the aims of the counselling program are similar to the objectives of education in general, that is, to help the learner fulfil his/her basic physiological needs, understand himself/herself and accept others, develop associations with peers, find a balance between permissiveness and being in control in educational settings, realise successful achievement, and provide opportunities to gain independence (Lunenborg, 2010; Erford, 2011; Gibson 2008; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990). Some specific objectives of life skills and counselling programs are summarised as follow:

### **To develop self-knowledge**

Self-knowledge is the first requirement for learning practical life skills. Self-knowledge is therefore the basis for confidence, for the ability to make decisions and for further growth.

### **To develop attitudes and values**

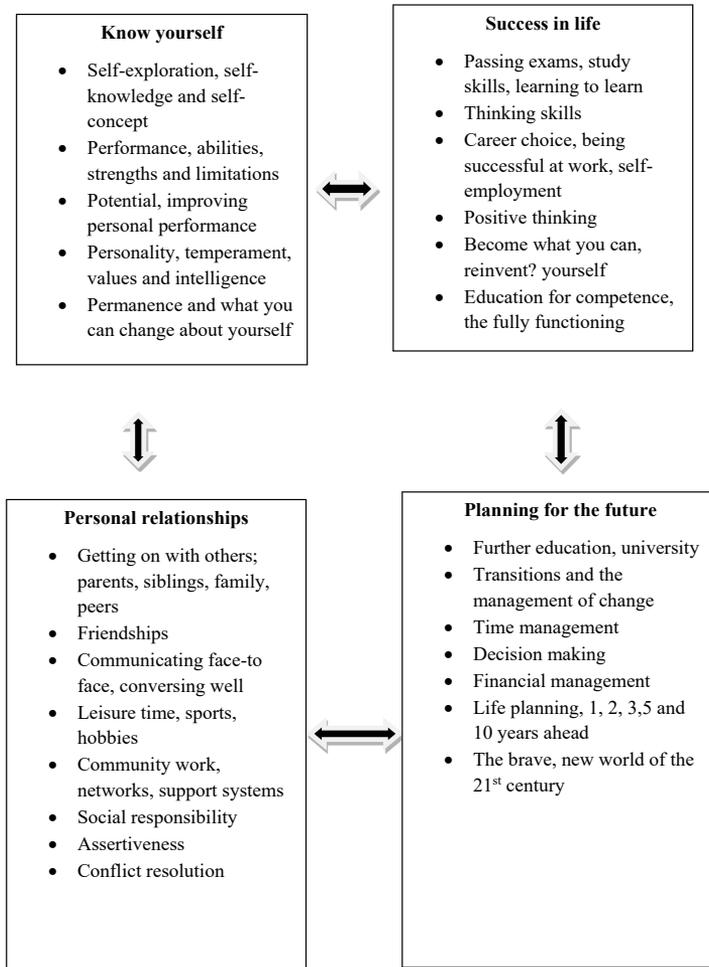
Life skills education seeks to develop positive attitudes such as confidence and belief in one's own ability to influence events. It promotes the desire to be self-reliant and responsible for one's own development and decisions. In addition, values clarification helps in the setting of personal goals and in choosing styles of personal behaviour.

### **To teach skills for life**

Life skills education seeks to develop a deeper knowledge and some practice in Life skills such as communication, personal relationships, decision making, problem solving and many more. It guides learners to achieve their full physical, intellectual, personal, emotional and social potential as well as develop skills such as self-awareness, problem-solving, interpersonal relations, leadership, decision-making, and effective communication. It further guides learners to make informed

and responsible decisions about their health and their environment (Lunenburg, 2010; Erford, 2011; Gibson 2008; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990).

## GROUPS OF LIFE SKILLS



**Figure 2: Adapted from the life skills Grade 7 syllabus (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 1996).**

## **THE ROLE OF LIFE SKILLS TEACHERS/TEACHER-COUNSELLORS**

In Namibian schools, learners experience different problems that need urgent attention from an adult. When learners have problems, they normally turn to those whom they know best, and whom they think can help the most. Research has shown that the adults to whom learners of all ages are most likely to turn after their parents are 'teachers'. Thus, all learners need the support of a friendly teacher who cares about them personally, someone they can confide in, and who can help them deal with their problems of growing up, keeping up with their studies, and planning their careers (Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990).

The life skills teacher/teacher-counsellors bring learners into contact with reality and help them discover their own strengths and weaknesses in order to be able to make appropriate decisions and wise choices in life. Furthermore, the life skills teacher has a role to play to lead individuals to find their particular place in community and that ultimately contributes towards the development of that community (Coy, 2004; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990). The scope of the life skills education comprises the following components where Life skills teachers need to play a significant role.

### **Personal/social**

Counselling in the personal field mainly focuses on helping learners to know themselves. Learners have to discover their own abilities in various fields. For example, they may have strengths or weaknesses in music, languages, sport, mathematics, spatial orientation, working with people and working with animals. Moreover, learners need to evaluate their own values in life. This means that they have to find out what things in life they consider of great importance. People have various values in life and therefore do not have similar views related to the relative importance of different issues such as education, money, religion, family, life, health, prestige and recognition (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990). Learners also need to adjust within their different roles in society. Each person belongs to a wide variety of communities or groups like family, friends, school, cultural and sport groups. In addition to providing life skills lessons

and classroom activities, life skills teachers/teacher-counsellors are expected to do personal and crisis counselling. Therefore, problems such as suicide, bullying, violence, irresponsible sexual behaviour, alcohol and substance abuse, and pregnancy must be seriously addressed (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990; Ministry of Education, 1996).

## **Educational**

Counselling within the educational field requires the life skills teachers to assist learners with learning difficulties and to guide them towards effective study methods. Life skills teachers should also highlight the relevance and importance of different school subjects for the learners to make appropriate subject choices. This should be seen in relation to the wider world of work that they are being prepared for during their school careers.

In addition, the life skills/teacher-counsellors, through classroom activities, individual and group counselling, can assist learners in setting goals, learning effectively and gaining test-taking skills. They can further assist learners on note taking, summarising, time management, memory techniques, relaxation techniques, overcoming test anxiety, and developing active listening skills (Lunenburg, 2010; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990; Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 1996).

## **Vocational**

As related to the vocational domain in life, counselling is focused to help learners to make choices for a future career. For learners to make wise choices they need information about different careers, information about the educational and other requirements for a specific career, the path that they have to follow to obtain these requirements, and the abilities and personality traits that they will need for a specific career.

Similarly, combating career stereotyping, analysing skills and interests are some of the goals learners must develop in school. Career information should be available to learners and representatives from local business and industry should work closely with the school and

life skills teachers in preparing learners for the world of work (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990; Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 1996).

## **COUNSELLING SERVICES**

The school counselling programme in Namibia is under the auspices of the Programme Quality Assurance (PQA) division in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. All counselling activities are coordinated under the sub-division Special Education Programmes by Regional School Counsellors in conjunction with Life skills teachers to ensure that the school counselling programme is implemented at school level. The main aim of the school counselling program is to provide a broad range of counselling services to the learners.

These services include information service, assessment, counselling, placement and follow-up, consultation and referrals (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Lunenburg, 2010; Lindhard & Dlamini, 1990; Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, 1996).

### **Information**

The information service is designed to provide accurate and up-to-date information in order for the learners to make an intelligent choice of an educational program, an occupation or a social activity. Importantly, the aim is that with such information, learners will make better choices and will engage in better planning in and out of the school setting. Learners must not only be exposed to such information, but must also have an opportunity to discuss it with others especially in the classroom and react to it in a meaningful way (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Gibson & Mitchell, 1995).

### **Assessment**

The assessment service is designed to collect, analyse and use a variety of objective and subjective personal, psychological, and social information about each learner. The aim is to assist the individual

(learner) to better understand herself/himself. The life skills teacher may convene a meeting with learners and parents to discuss important issues pertaining to the learning and personal development of a learner. Academic records, test scores, and personal data are very important in the assessment, as learners with special needs and abilities are clearly identified, i.e. through cumulative record cards (Gibson & Mitchell, 1995; Lindhard, 1985).

## **Counselling**

The counselling service is designed to facilitate self-understanding and development through individual or small group counselling. The focus is on the personal development and decision making that is based on self-understanding and knowledge of the environment. The teacher-counsellor helps a learner to understand and accept herself/himself through clarifying his/her ideas, perceptions, attitudes, and goals, giving personal and other information to the learners as needed, regarding his/her plans, choices, or challenges (Lunenburg, 2010; Gibson & Mitchell, 1995; Lindhard, 1985).

## **Placement and Follow-up**

The school helps the learner in selecting and using opportunities within the school and in the outside labour market. Life skills teachers/ teacher-counsellors assist learners in making appropriate subject choices, and in making transitions from one school level to another, or one school to another. Placement involves learner assessment, information services, and counselling assistance appropriate to the learner's choices of school subjects, co-curricular activities, and employment (Gibson and Mitchell, 1995).

## **Consultation**

Gibson and Mitchell (1995) highlighted that life skills teachers/ teacher-counsellors have also to work with parents or guardians of learners and collaborate with the entire community. It is very important to work hand in hand with parents as many learners in schools have special

needs and come from home circumstances that necessitate effective communication between home and school.

## **Referrals**

The referral system is very important so that life skills teachers can easily channel the learners to the office where the suitable services can be obtained. Though many of the Life skills/teacher-counsellors have gone through various counselling trainings, one may not have acquired all the necessary skills and knowledge, thus, referral is inevitable (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Gibson & Mitchell, 1995; Lindhard, 1985).

### **1. Difficulties facing life skills teachers in the implementation of the subject in schools**

In many cases, no programme is implemented without challenges; life skills subjects are no exception. In the process of implementing the life skills education in schools, teachers are also faced with numerous challenges such as little time allocation, overcrowded syllabus, inadequate teachers and insufficient teacher training, shortage of textbooks and materials, and the low status associated with the subject. For example, a survey that was conducted revealed that the textbook for grade 8 was the most widely available publication, and yet only 48% of the schools had this publication available.

*Although Life Skills as a subject is crucial to cultivate disciplined citizens to respect moral values, integrity, discipline, it is a concern that it has been seriously neglected in all schools country-wide, while Namibia has consequently become a country where Gender Based Violence continues unabated. (Veronica De Klerk, 2013).*

Furthermore, the life skills curriculum was available in only 35% of the schools and since it is a compulsory subject, one would expect that it should be available in all schools. This showed that in the event of strict school budgets, the subject of life skills became the easy target for material budget cuts (Mostert, Möwes & Chata, 2011; Mbongo, Möwes & Chata, 2016; Mushaandja, Haihambo, Vergnani, & Frank, 2013).

## **CONCLUSION**

From the review, it came out clearly that life skills education plays an integral part in the overall development of a child. This subject helps learners develop the ability to understand themselves, to solve their own problems and to make appropriate adjustment to their own environment. Therefore, effective implementation of the life skills education and counselling programme needs concerted efforts from all stakeholders if we are to achieve our national goals that we set for ourselves. As a nation, we should also guard against considering some subjects as less important because the main goal of education is to develop a child in totality. Failure to implement life skills education in the schools as required by the curriculum guidelines, will forfeit the government effort to make Namibia a knowledge-based society by 2030.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

All schools need to implement life skills subjects to expose learners to various skills that all individuals need to develop to their fullest potential. The teacher training curriculum needs to comprehensively cover all areas of life skills education at institutions of higher learning to address the issue of inadequate trained life skills teachers in the country. The Ministry of Education and Culture should also look into the issue of life skills teachers' morale and thus devise strategies to appreciate their roles and responsibilities during regional and national award ceremonies. This encouragement will serve as a motivation for them to continue taking this noble responsibility of educating and empowering learners with indispensable skills of life.

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