

# Relevance of Life Skills Education in Preparing Kenyan Youth for National Development

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## Abstract

Life skills have been described as a variety of psychosocial and interpersonal skills which can help young people face the realities of everyday life. This is important given the dynamism of the contemporary world with its complex challenges that the young people have to deal with. Life skills enable young people to be responsible citizens who contribute positively to society. This is essential in Kenya given the many emerging social problems in the society and the fact that the employers desire employees that have technical as well as life skills. Life skills education (LSE) refers to education interventions that seek to inculcate the necessary psychosocial and interpersonal skills in students as they go through the school curriculum. Kenya has embraced LSE in the proposed curriculum but for it to succeed; the government needs to re-tool the teachers with appropriate teaching approaches, empower the schools with the requisite materials, and re-align the teacher training programmes with the proposed school curriculum. This is a theoretical paper aimed at making an appeal to the stakeholders in education to take LSE with the seriousness it deserves given the long-term implications of life skills.

**Key words:** Life skills, Life skills education, Education for sustainable development

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## INTRODUCTION

The young people are expected to be productive members of the society due to their physical and intellectual capabilities (Prajapati, Sharma & Sharma, 2017) yet there are myriad challenges that prevent them from being as productive as they ought to be. Some of the challenges they face include social problems like alcoholism, drug, sexual recommends the use of play activities as a teaching method for other learning areas (Essa, 2011; Follari; 2011; Jackman, 2009; KIE, 2003; KIE, 2004; Syomwene, 2017).

abuse and juvenile delinquency which have a serious effect on academic performance among others.

In Kenya, there has been an increase in violence within families and the community, intolerance, lack of integrity and other anti-social behaviours. Among the young people, this has played out in form of burning schools, drugs and substance abuse, teenage pregnancies among other observations. Besides, employers have complained that the graduates are not employable simply because they lack the soft skills to augment the technical skills gained through schooling. If society is a reflection of the education system of a country, then there is need to interrogate the education system with a view to providing solutions to the society. Education ought to lead to positive change of behaviour. One effective way of inculcating positive change in behaviour among the young people is by providing life skill education (LSE).

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

This study is based on secondary data. A desk review of published work on life skills and life skills education as well as literature on current curriculum reforms in Kenya was conducted. In particular, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) document written by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) of 2017 was a point of focus in addition to literature review and authors' personal experiences in teaching at

both secondary and tertiary levels of education in Kenya. There are several theories that guide the LSE practice within the school curriculum.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to Paquette and Ryan (2001), the theory of ecological systems for human development posited by Bronfenbrenner describes several concentric layers that make up the environment around an individual. The proponent of this theory referred the most immediate layer as the micro-system that comprise of the family, school, peers, neighbors and religious institutions that one affiliates to (Harkonen, 2007). This theory comprises of relationships and interactions that a child has with the immediate environment. The proponent of this theory further explains the importance of a child to have long-term mutual interaction with adults who have a stake in the development of the child. The circle of adults who would be part of a child's environment are, the parents or guardians, teachers, neighbors and friends. As the child begins his or her academic journey, the teacher may be the adult that spends the most time with the young people. Paquette and Ryan (2001) describe the family as increasingly becoming unstable and unpredictable, thus, the teacher and the school may come in to give the young learner an environment where the holistic development of the individual takes place.

The theory of ecological systems for human development is also supported by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). The proponents of this theory indicate that young people

learn behaviour through observation and social interactions rather than verbal instructions alone (Abobo & Orodho, 2014). This means that life skills should be taught through a process of instruction, rehearsal or practice and feedback to back up verbal instructions. In view of SLT, teachers should create appropriate environments at school such that LSE can allow the young people to learn positive behaviour through role-modeling, observation, and social interactions. Teachers have an important role in modeling, setting standards and being influencers of young people and therefore they need to be adequately trained to enable them to handle LSE appropriately. Jaeger, Dunstan, Thornton et al. (2013) argue that theory helps to configure action or practice. Therefore, teaching of life skills should be informed by theory.

## **LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION**

According to UNICEF (2012), all young people must be exposed to learning situations that will provide them with knowledge and allow them to develop skills, attitudes, and values that will enable them to cultivate the abilities to work, participate fully in their society, to take control of their own lives and to continue learning. This recommendation by UNICEF was as a result of the Dakar Framework for Action whose goal 3 sought to “ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills” (World Education Forum, 2000, p 16). The realization that life skills are important as enablers for one to utilize the technical skills at the workplace has led to many countries initiating educational reforms that infuse LSE

into their school curriculum. UNESCO (2017) has also emphasized the importance of LSE through the school curriculum in order to accomplish the sustainable development goals. UNESCO (2005) reveals that one key importance of basic education is “to offer relevant learning and life skills with an intention of having an impact on the quality of life”, p 11. Such quality education should foster values, attitudes and skills like problem solving and critical thinking that may be relevant in addressing problems and challenges in society. Having been identified as one of the significant adults in the lives of the youth, the teacher should endeavor to teach life skills purposively so that schools can graduate responsible citizens ready to take up their roles in national development. As far as the school curriculum is concerned, UNICEF (2012) advocates for LSE to begin at early childhood development (ECD) stage, but there should be a continuous support through primary and secondary education. LSE as part of the school curriculum is a formal intervention that should aim at having continued LSE throughout the school life of a learner. This ensures that the benefits of early interventions especially at home and ECD can be sustained into later life.

According to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) (2017), the Government of Kenya should take advantage of the fact that the young people spend most of their time in schools to provide LSE. The school is an appropriate place for providing LSE because it is the most important agency for socializing the child; it has the capacity to provide a wide range of learning experiences to the learners in their formative

years; and schools remain in constant contact with the parents and the communities (Dinesh & Belinda, 2014). Moreover, schools have access to the youth on large scale and LSE can utilize the existing infrastructure. Shapiro (2004) strengthens this argument by indicating that “life skills are best learnt in a social environment” (p vii).

## **LIFE SKILLS AND LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION**

According to World Health Organization (WHO) (in Murthy, 2016, p 57) life skills are “the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviours that enable the individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life”. As explained further by WHO (1999) “adaptive” means that a person should have the capacity to adjust to different situations while “positive behaviour” means that a person needs to possess positive thinking and seek out for opportunities even in difficult situations with a goal of coping with the situation. Little, Swangler, and Akin-Little (2017) describes life skills as those “skills that allow a person to act appropriately in a given social context” (p 9). Amman (2015) notes that WHO’s definition of life skills has been considered as a key orientation for the conceptualization of education and learning worldwide.

Life skills are many but WHO (1999) gives the ten most important which are applicable across societies. These ten life skills are: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress. The significance of life skills is that they are

transferable from one domain of life to another, unlike the technical skills which can only be used in limited activities.

According to Delors (2013), these ten core life skills cut across the four key pillars underlying education and life which are: “learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be” (p 321-323). Amman (2015), Tawil and Cougoureux, (2013) and Nan-Zhao (2005) expounds on these four pillars whereby, ‘learning to know’ includes more than the basic learning skills of literacy and numeracy but also foundational skills that are important for learning such as, analytical skills, critical thinking and problem-solving. ‘Learning to know’ has a strong relation to skills supporting academic outcomes. ‘Learning to do’ emphasizes the acquisition of skills necessary to practice a profession and thus can be said to refer to but not confined to the attainment of skills for employability. Such skills include teamwork, resilience, communication, negotiation skills, and creativity. The third pillar, ‘learning to live together’ refers to the need to develop an understanding of others, respect for human dignity and diversity and also a responsible and active citizen. Requirements for this social dimension include tolerance, responsibility, participation, acceptance and integrity. The last pillar being, ‘learning to be’ is an individual dimension related to all-round development of each individual and it focuses on the development of human potential. Declors (2013) declares that “a treasure lies within us and continuing education must enable everyone to improve their self-knowledge while recognizing their self-

esteem” (p 323). This calls for skills such as self-awareness, self-control, self-confidence, decision-making, creativity, empathy and adaptability (Amman, 2015).

Life skills education (LSE) refers to educational interventions that seek to inculcate the necessary psychosocial and interpersonal skills in the lives of the youth as they go through the school curriculum (UNESCO, 2012). A report provided by Inter-Agency Working Group for Education for All on life skills reads, “LSE is a process to be applied to various learning areas covering four dimensions: the cognitive, the individual, the social and the instrumental” (UNESCO, 2004, p 12). Life skills are thus regarded as a cross-cutting, interconnected and overlapping knowledge, values, attitudes and skills which are fundamental to quality of education and are transferable.

In a report by UNICEF (2012) on Global Evaluation of Life Skills Education programme, it is noted that the home and family environment is key in laying a foundation for skills, attitudes, and values relating to society. Children grow within social structures through which they observe, experience, test and therefore adopt social norms. It is therefore important to note that acquiring of life skills is a continuous process throughout life, and the school curriculum should, therefore, offer a continuation of the LSE young people receive at home. Consequently, the development of appropriate life skills and behaviours is influenced by social and cultural influences both inside and outside the classroom.



In Kenya, the Government recognizes the important role of education in society and to this end, there has been several reviews and reforms of the school curriculum. Since independence, the Government has established a number of education commissions which have occasioned major transformations within the education sector. Before the year 2008, LSE in Kenya was not emphasized in the school curriculum. The recognition that psychosocial skills and not just the academic knowledge are pertinent in preparing the youth to face the complex challenges in life led to discussions by stakeholders in Kenya in 2006 who supported and recommended the teaching of life skills as a stand-alone non-examinable subject in both primary and secondary schools. Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) (2008) developed curriculum for the new subject that was to be taught in one session per week in both primary and secondary schools. This notwithstanding, an inherent challenge lingers on in the 8-4-4 system in that since LSE is a non-examinable subject and the teachers do not take LSE seriously. The outcomes are therefore below expectations of the curriculum developers (KIE, 2011).

According to KIE (2008), education is a means by which learners are transformed into productive citizens who are ready to participate in development activities. Education, therefore, is pertinent in the development of both the individual and the nation. The desire to improve on the 8-4-4 education system and make education responsive to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges prompted the Government Kenya to form a task force to recommend reforms. The school curriculum reforms were then based on the 2012 'Report

of the task force on the re-alignment of the education sector to the Constitution of Kenya' (2010) and Kenya Vision 2030 and Beyond (Ministry of Education, 2012). From the recommendations given by the task force, the Government Kenya developed Sessional Paper No. 2 of 2015 on "Reforming education and training in Kenya". One of the recommendations of the Sessional Paper No. 2 is to provide education for the development of intellectually, emotionally and physically balanced citizens who are able to handle the challenges of life. The outcomes of the task force and the Sessional Paper culminated in the decision to have major school curriculum reforms in Kenya.

Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) developed a school curriculum to address the concerns that were raised. One of the concerns was that the life skills the young people received from home and the society was not adequate and therefore the school should offer a more structured LSE to all learners as captured in Basic Education Curriculum Framework compiled by KICD (2017). Besides, over time the traditional education structures that imparted life skills to the youth have been eroded and this could have led to the social problems in the society. This breakdown of the societal norms has emerged into increased crime, broken families, increased suicide cases even among very young children as well as lack of integrity (Chagema, 2018; Kibicho, 2018) and rampant cases of students burning schools which according to National Crime Research Centre (2017), some of the causes can be linked to inadequate life skills. The increased social ills is an indication that a critical number of Kenyans lack values, positive attitudes and other

psychosocial competencies needed to function as responsible citizens (Kibicho, 2018). Due to the perceived importance of life skills, the proposed 2-6-6-3 education system in Kenya has sought to integrate LSE in all learning areas at all levels of the basic education offered (KICD, 2017). Age 0-19 years are the critical formative stage for the development of behaviours and skills in an individual and coupled with the fact that the young people spend most of their time in school, then providing LSE within the school curriculum becomes a perfect set up. Integrating LSE in all learning areas in the proposed 2-6-3-3 education system will be a departure from having life skills taught as a stand-alone subject. Amman (2015) posits that LSE cannot be adequately achieved through small-scale interventions but instead coordinated efforts within a systems approach to life skills. The implication for this approach is that all teachers should be competent to teach life skills to the learners.

In Kenya, LSE in the proposed 2-6-6-3 education system embraces core competencies or life skills that are to be integrated into the various learning areas. These life skills are: communication, collaboration, self-efficacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy and learning to learn (KICD, 2017, p 21).

## **IMPORTANCE OF LIFE SKILLS**

One of the Incheon declarations of 2015 focused on quality of learning. The declaration states that “quality education includes development of those skills, values attitudes and

knowledge that enables citizens to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, make informed decisions and respond to local and global challenges” (World Education Forum, 2015, p8-9). LSE has long-term benefits to society that include educational, social, health, cultural and economic benefits. It enables the individual to develop full potential, a positive attitude towards self and others, promote risk-free behaviour, improve self-perception and translate knowledge, attitude, skills, and values into action. In addition, life skills have been linked to employment potential and workforce development.

Twenty First Century, employers have realized that in addition to technical skills, life skills are also important in making an employee productive at the workplace. Notably, employers are seeking employees who will serve the workplace best and such are likely to be people who have acquired life skills. This persuasion has been corroborated by a study done by The Master Card Foundation (2017) among Kenyan youth.

The Dakar Framework for Action claims that LSE has attracted the interest of economists who have been trying to get ways of reducing the poverty levels in the society (UNICEF, 2012). It has been argued that life skills such as resilience, decision-making, creativity, critical thinking can help an individual to move up and out of poverty. If the youth would be adequately equipped with indispensable life skills, many of them could be engaged in meaningful economic activities. This would, in turn, reduce the social ills that are experienced in the society and lead to unleashing the youth’s potential towards national

development. Can the educators enhance the employability of the young people? The response to that question is, mostly likely yes.

## **LIVE SKILLS EDUCATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES**

The Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) introduces a competency-based curriculum where values are one of the pillars of the education system (KICD, 2017). The vision of this competency-based curriculum is to enable each learner to be an 'engaged, empowered and ethical' citizen (p 10). The learners are thus expected to be independent, confident, cooperative and inspired. This vision necessitates the inclusion of LSE in a more structured and consistent manner. In the 2-6-3-3 education system, LSE is thus integrated into all learning areas and all teachers are expected to exhibit the requisite life skills both in their character and through their teaching (p 10). According to KICD (2017), teaching in the basic education levels which are considered to be the primary and secondary levels of education, will require highly professional teachers who are qualified and have the competencies to dispense the life skills to the learners. From the Basic Education Curriculum Framework, the teachers should have "enhanced skills in a range of modern pedagogical tools such as coaching, facilitating and mentoring" (KICD, 2017, p 10). This suggests the use of blended learning and other innovative teaching approaches as a major shift in the way teachers deliver the curriculum. This will be a real paradigm shift for teachers in Kenya.

Integrating LSE within the school curricula is a noble idea, however, a curriculum design no matter how good, its success is determined during the implementation stage. Teachers are the key players in the implementation of any school curriculum since they act as an interphase between the curriculum and the recipients who are the learners. In the 8-4-4 education system in Kenya, LSE was being delivered using face-to-face teaching techniques with the limited use of innovative, participatory methods of delivery. This coupled with the fact that LSE has been a non-examinable subject, it was not taken with the seriousness it deserves in an examination-oriented 8-4-4 education system. The question to ask is what needs to be done to make the 2-6-3-3 education system to achieve its mandate as outlined in its mission of “nurturing every learner’s potential” (KICD, 2017,p 10).

One of the critical areas that are emerging is the re-orientation of the teacher to new teaching approaches. A study done by Lagat (2017) found out that in Kenya, teachers use inappropriate teaching approaches for LSE. Teachers ought to realize that LSE requires the use of interactive and participatory teaching and learning methods that allow the young people to be actively involved in a dynamic teaching and learning process. Dinesh and Belinda (2014) suggest methods that can be used to facilitate active learning to include working in small groups and pairs, debates, role-playing, brainstorming, as well as games and simulations. Other suitable teaching approaches may include case studies, use of resource persons and storytelling. In the 8-4-4 education system, the teachers have

largely been using teaching approaches that are teacher-centered which encourage passivity of learners instead of participatory approach, rote learning and spoon-feeding knowledge to the learners rather than promoting exploration, imagination, and creativity to construct knowledge. If Kenya is to achieve the noble vision and mission of the 2-6-3-3 education system, then the education reforms should embrace the professional development of teachers and the empowerment of schools (KICD, 2017; African Union, 2006). A professional, qualified and motivated teaching community is central to providing quality education which is heavily supported by LSE (Amman, 2015).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

LSE has a role in connecting the curriculum with the life that the learners live, thereby helping them to become self -empowered and become active citizens of a knowledgeable society. Therefore, recent education reforms that led to the formation of 2-6-3-3 education system gives Kenya an opportunity to use LSE in improving the quality of education offered to the young people.

As Kenya goes through the educational transformation, the implementers of the curriculum should not only pursue achievement of good grades but also purposely integrate learner's acquisition of life skills competencies in all the learning processes. This will not only prepare the young people for self-reliance but will also empower them productively to participate in national development. The success of LSE will depend on

the commitment of the stakeholders and especially the teachers who spend a lot of time with the young people in school.

More specifically, now that Kenya has embraced LSE, it is prudent for Government to focus on the following:

- Professional development for all teachers to ensure that they are empowered to play their role in LSE. The success of LSE cannot be achieved without changing the attitudes and practices of the teachers.
- Improving the teacher: pupil ratio to the required world standards. This can be achieved by recruiting more teachers.
- Development of teacher training materials for teacher trainers to ensure that the pre-service teacher trainees are adequately equipped with skills for LSE
- Equip schools with necessary curriculum materials that will make LSE to be taught effectively.
- Involve all stakeholders such as learners, teachers, parents, and guardians as well as the local community in LSE within the school curriculum. For the learner to acquire the life skills successfully, LSE should be a concerted effort among all stakeholders.

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