

Promotion of Mental Health within Life Skills as a Subject in the Foundation Phase

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ABSTRACT The study examined the promotion of mental health within Life Skills as a subject in the Foundation phase. This was a qualitative study which adopted a case study design. Twelve (12) teachers (6 males and 6 females) who participated in the study were randomly drawn from four foundation phase schools. Data were collected by conducting focus group discussions with participants. Challenges such as lack of training, inadequate teaching and learning materials, large class sizes and inadequate learning facilities were identified. The study revealed that due to the challenges mentioned above, foundation phase teachers fail to plan effectively and teach Life skills proficiently to promote mental health in learners. The study recommends that in order to promote mental health in learners within life skills as a subject, Department of Basic Education (DBE) must conduct workshops and courses for Foundation Phase teachers at regular intervals.

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to improve the quality of Foundation phase education in South Africa, the DBE reformed primary school and primary education curricula in 2011. Since then primary school learners are taught subjects and not learning programmes. These subjects include English First Additional Language, Home language, Mathematics and Life Skills. In Life Skills as a subject, teachers are expected to teach various areas of health promotion that will assist learners to become agents in the learning process. A growing body of literature has linked Life Skills with improved brain function, cognition and academic achievement (Davis et al. 2007). As part of the government of South Africa's response to lack of Life Skills amongst children, the Department of Education (DoE) introduced Life Skills as a subject in the Foundation Phase to promote the mental health of learners.

In the Foundation Phase there are 4 subjects to be taught namely Life Skills, Mathematics, English First Additional Language (EFAL) and Home Language (HL). The instructional time for Life Skills is divided into four broad areas namely, beginning of knowledge, creative arts, physical education and personal and social well-being. The instructional time per week for beginning knowledge is 1 hour in Grade R to Grade 2 and 2 hours in Grade 3. Creative arts as well as

physical education instructional time is 2 hours per week from Grade R to 3. Whereas personal and social well-being instructional time is only 1 hour per week across Grade R to 3. In accordance with international trends (Katzmarzyk et al. 2008; Sharma 2014; Abobo and Orodho 2014), studies show that urban South African children are growing increasingly sedentary, unfit and overweight (Kruger et al. 2005; Hurter and Pienaar 2007; Martin 2013; Kovess et al. 2015). Governmental concerns regarding the health promotion of South African school children played a major role in the reinstatement of Life Skills in the national school curriculum in 2002 (DoE 2002).

The Concept of Life Skills

In 1986, the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion recognized Life Skills in terms of making better health choices. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) linked Life Skills to education by stating that education should be directed towards the development of the child's fullest potential. The 1990 Jomtien Declaration on 'Education for All' took this vision further and included Life Skills among essential learning tools for survival, capacity development and quality of life. The 2000 Dakar World Education Conference took a position that all young people and adults have the human right

to benefit from “an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be”, and included Life skills.

Behrani (2016) define Life skills as “a multiplicity of psycho-social and interpersonal competencies”. Competencies, as Goleman (1998) notes, are coordinated bundles of habits. Life skills can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, develop coping and management skills that can help them lead a healthy and productive life. Life Skills is a skill which can assist learners to deal with every day challenges if well introduced. It can serve as a pillar of almost all learning processes. In essence, it is critical that every child should learn the aspects of life skills. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2003), and Ehsani et al. (2016), Life skills education refers to “a behaviour change or behaviour development approach designed to address balance of three areas: knowledge, attitude and skills”. The UNICEF definition is based on research evidence that suggests that shifts in risk behaviour are unlikely if knowledge, attitudinal and skill based competencies are not addressed.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2004), having understood the inestimable role life skills play in people’s lives, has already felt the need for inculcation of life skills in the minds of students the world over so as to equip these citizens of the future with the necessary skill. It has short-listed ten of the most fundamental life skills for this purpose. They are: 1) Self-Awareness (2) Empathy (3) Decision Making (4) Problem Solving (5) Effective Communication (6) Interpersonal relations (7) Creative Thinking (8) Critical Thinking (9) Coping with Emotions and (10) Coping with Stress (Vandra 2015; Mura et al. 2015). The researcher accepts the conceptualization (DBE 2011) that “Life Skills as a subject is central to the holistic development of learners. It is concerned with the social, personal, intellectual, emotional and physical growth of learners, and with the way in which these are integrated.”

Specific Aims of Life Skills

There is thus abundant evidence from research and reports on why Life Skills should be taught. According to WHO (1999), the aim of Life Skill education is to facilitate the development of psychosocial skill in children, promot-

ing mental health and to enable them to learn how to protect their rights. In addition, the WHO identified five basic areas of life skills that are relevant across the cultures, namely decision making and problem solving, creative thinking and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skill; self-awareness and empathy and coping with emotions.

In Zimbabwe and Thailand a Life Skills was taught to empower children about the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In Mexico, it was the prevention of adolescence pregnancy. In the United Kingdom, it was set up to contribute to child abuse prevention, whereas in the USA it was for the prevention of substance abuse and violence. In Columbia the desire was to create a curriculum for integrated education and in South Africa it was the education for life, called Life Orientation (Pauline 2012; Khera and Khosla 2012; Global Evaluation of Life Skills Programme 2012). In South Africa, according to DBE (2011: 9), Life Skills subject is aimed at guiding and preparing learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society. The teaching of Life Skills is based on the theory of Bandura (1977) of social learning which allows hearing, observation, practice and modeling of the skill. This allows that learners should be given opportunity to participate actively during teaching so that they can be able to master their own lives. The purpose of the paper is to find out how teachers facilitate Life skills in order to promote mental health in the foundation phase.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for the study. An explorative, descriptive and contextual case study design was used to explore and describe teachers’ perception on the teaching of Life Skills as a subject to promote mental health in young children. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised of all teachers who teach in the foundation phase.

Twelve participants from four schools were sampled, six of the participants were females and six were males. The four schools utilized for the study are situated in the rural setting in Vhembe district of Limpopo Province.

Sampling and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select twelve (12) participants because in South Africa, Life Skills is taught as one of the subjects from Grade R to Grade 3 in the Foundation phase. The schools were selected based on the reason that Life Skills is one of the subjects being taught. Focus group discussions with the FP teachers were used to collate data.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to data collection, written permission to conduct the study was obtained via university procedures before the study commenced. Consent for the study was obtained from the teachers. The letters outlined the nature and aims of the study, confidentiality and voluntary participation, data collection and dissemination of information. Teachers were given the opportunity to clarify their understanding, ask questions related to procedures and research activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected from four selected schools because they teach Life Skills as a subject. Arrangements for the focus group discussions were made with the participants so that they felt comfortable and at ease during the discussions. The researchers used focus group discussions to obtain rich data in an attempt to answer the research question which was conducted in one of the selected schools (May 1997). A focus group discussion is useful when insights, perceptions and explanations are more important than actual numbers (Mertens 1998). The researchers used this instrument because the research deals with the social activity of people; people are social creatures who interact with others. The researchers wanted to examine the promotion of mental health within Life Skills as a subject in FP.

Data Analysis

Analysis commenced from individual teachers focus group interviews. The actual words of

the teacher participants were analysed and interpreted. Themes and categories emerged from the teachers' responses to the research questions. The researchers suspected that there would be a repetition of certain themes. This entailed transcribing the data in verbatim form. According to Braun and Clark (2006: 81), thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality. The researchers incorporated categorised, related codes. These categories reflected themes, which the researchers used in the discussion of the topic.

RESULTS

The results showed that the objectives of the study were achieved. It was found that teachers experienced challenges in teaching Life Skills as a subject. The study revealed that participants felt that Life Skills is very important in the lives of children. They agree that indeed if taught effectively, life skills can promote mental health of learners. However, participants felt that they did not have enough time as they were expected to teach other subjects and as a result failed to attend to all the areas appropriately. Participants also suggested that they should be trained to teach Life skills. The study revealed that teachers taught learners about diseases and life in general.

'I Explained to the Learners about Life and Diseases'

This category revealed teachers' understanding of the importance of Life Skills strategies. Most of the participating teachers seemed to lack understanding of what strategies were. However, teacher 5 from school D explained what she did before the start with Life skills: (Rephrase for clarity).

FG/T5-SCH D: *"I explain to the learners what must be done, why we should protect ourselves because there are diseases; I demonstrate how to wash the hands properly and why; the strategy helps and demonstrates how they can apply the knowledge independently"*.

Apart from this single response, no other teacher mentioned this important aspect during the focus group discussions. This individual teacher seemed to understand the importance

of strategies in teaching life skills. The statement explained the role of the teacher, namely to explain to the learners what to do first and why the strategy helped in Life Skills. In addition, the teachers in this case study did not indicate if they use the policy documents in teaching Life Skills. It emerged that there were only a few teachers who concurred that strategies were indeed important and that teachers needed to know them and use them in various activities to address the needs of learners in life skills.

DISCUSSION

Twelve teachers, six males and six female were interviewed. They were all teaching Life Skill subject in FP.

Shown in Table 1 are the themes and categories which emerged from the open-ended questionnaires data.

The Following Four Themes Emerged from the Study

Theme 1: 'Have deeper knowledge about the importance of Life Skills'

The 12 participating teachers in the study indicated that Life Skills was important for assisting learners to acquire generic life skills, and therefore have a role in reducing major health and social problems in learners.

Therefore, Life Skills is designed to effect changes in environmental and social factors which influence the health and development of

young people (WHO 1999; Cossu et al. 2015; Petersen 2016). Teachers must be conversant with theories and strategies in order to equip learners to develop and apply strategies during Life Skills appropriately (World Education Forum 2000; World Development Report 2007; DBE 2011; Oliver 2016). This enhances learners' understanding of the purpose of Life Skills. The following quotes from teacher 2 from school A and teachers 5 from schools A and C serve as evidence of what most teachers indicated as the purpose of Life Skills education: Symbols such as Focus Group, Teacher 1 from School A (FGT1-SCH A) are used.

FGT1/T2-SCH A: *"To make learners aware of diseases and should be able to understand on their own how to protect themselves. They will respect the meaning of life from an early age"*

(Rephrase or re-translate, from the original statement, for clarity)

FG/T5-SCH C: *"To help learners to understand the importance of decision making and to Respect others, the development of gross and fine motor skills in their lives and how they relate to each other."*

These remarks suggested that during Life Skills education they should be able to identify the different activities and their roles as stipulated by the CAPS (DoE 2011). In Theme 1, the respondents in this case study seemed to be knowledgeable of the fact that teaching Life Skills was important.

Table 1: Related themes and categories

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>
Have deeper knowledge about the importance of Life Skills	Teachers expressed that Life Skills as a subject help them to promote mental health in schools. Teachers expressed that Life Skills education assist them to identify the different activities that can promote children mental health.
The one who is teaching Life Skills must have knowledge of theories and method; of teaching.	Teachers believed that Life Skills education require theoretical knowledge of strategies in order to make learners aware of the importance of Life Skills as a subject in the Foundation Phase.
Teaching Life Skills is a challenge	Teachers expected to teach different strategies which may help learners whenever they experience problems that can hinder the promotion of mental health. Teachers expressed that they felt stressed, confused and frustrated to have foundation phase learners who have many life challenges.
Why is promoting mental health within Like Skills important?	Teachers expressed that mental health is connected with behaviour and it is a foundation of human well-being that is why teachers need guidelines for teaching this subject.

Theme 2: ‘The one who is teaching Life Skills must have knowledge of theories and methods of teaching’

Theme 2 is about the role of teachers and learners as identified by the responding teachers. This theme helped to understand teachers’ understanding and beliefs about the way in which they taught Life Skills. The teachers seemed to be aware of their roles and that they had to be committed to their work. They seemed to know that they must be prepared and have love towards the learners.

The questions during the individual and focus group interviews that pertained to Theme 2 were: How do teachers teach Life Skills, and which strategies do teachers use to teach Life Skills education? The teachers answered differently.

FG/T3-SCH B: *“There is not only one way, but it depends on the area or topic, there are many topics, one needs to employ different strategies, there must be a combination of strategies in order to make life Skills successful’ Life skills needs time. ‘Life Skills strategies must be [taught].”*

From the above responses, it was clear that the teachers did understand that teaching strategies were vital in Life skills education. This requires theoretical knowledge of strategies and their use in order to make learners aware of the importance of life skills and accommodate every learner’s needs in the class. In this way, learners can learn to use strategies appropriately and be able to make decisions as to when and where to use a particular strategy in their daily lives. Therefore, it is critical that learners should see and hear about the strategy and see it in action by the teacher as a role model (Bandura 1977; DBE 2011; Abobo and Orodho 2014).

Theme 3: ‘Teaching Life skills is a challenge’

According to DBE (2011: 9), the life skills subject is aimed at guiding and preparing learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society. The teacher is expected to model good behaviour when teaching life skills and the learners must be taught strategies, which they may use whenever they come across difficulties. The responses from the teachers about teaching life skills showed their opinions about learners in

their classrooms (House of Commons, Education Committee, Department of Education 2015). Teachers 1 and 5 from schools A and C had this to say:

FG/T1-SCHA: *“Children have so many challenges and therefore cannot cope with things like emotional stress or abuse or (Complete this).”*

FG/T5-SCH C: *“There are many challenges especially for those children; who stay alone at home, they must understand how to manage their own lives and where to go when things are not right.”* The teachers acknowledge that there were learners in their classrooms who have social and emotional challenges. However, the most critical one was the learners who stay alone.

The remarks by teachers 2, 3, 5 and 6 from schools A, B and C are critical:

FGT2-SCH A: *“I am confused about what we need to cover in the subject life skills and how to teach it’ and FG/T3-SCH B: ‘... because these kids are facing so many life challenges at an early age, it is pathetic. I do not have enough time to cover all the areas of life skills, I sometimes get stressed.”*

FG/T5-SCH C: *“You will find educators developing a negative attitude towards teaching life skills’ ‘Like you heard from the beginning, teaching life skills is quite frustrating, to have learners who are so young but with so many challenges’ we need time and training as teachers. Also the number of learners in a class [is a challenge].”*

It is evident from the above responses that the teachers had challenges because they too have their own social and emotional problems; and they are expected to help learners to become competent. It is significant that the teachers seemed to have no solution for these challenges. During the individual focus group discussions, the teachers expressed their unhappiness about the situation.

Instead of feeling motivated, they stated that they were stressed, confused and frustrated to have foundation phase learners who have many life challenges (Martin et al. 2013; Cantone et al. 2015; Oliver 2016).

Another comment from teacher 6 is that:

“We need guidelines for teaching life skills. We have never been trained, as foundation phase teachers we are expected to teach all the

subjects. It is difficult. Where are the psychologists? (counsellors?) 'with quite a number of learners in one class for the whole day, how can one cover all the areas? Yes, 'I understand The CAPS emphasizes that there must be integration across all subject, namely Home Language, Mathematics, English First Additional language and Life Skills (DoE 2002; CAPS, 2011). Life Skills need practice and practice makes perfect. As they practice, learners learn to use the strategies correctly.'

Theme 4: "Why is promoting mental health within Life Skills important?"

The 12 participating teachers in the study indicated that it is important for teachers to promote mental health within the subject Life Skills because it enables learners to lead fulfilling lives and permeate all aspects of school life and learning. In the publication: Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, it was revealed that improving the mental health of learners which are active and healthy, with positive physical and mental well-being is vital (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014; Agabio et al. 2015)

Mental health for learners is part of their overall health and is inextricably linked with well-being. Positive mental health for children is part of their overall health and is inextricably linked with well-being. It is usually conceptualized as encompassing aspects of emotional (affect/ feeling), psychological (positive functioning), social (relations with others in society), physical (physical health) and spiritual (sense of meaning and purpose in life) well-being (Barry and Friedli 2008).

CONCLUSION

It is important to recognize that promotion of mental health should be addressed by the teachers in schools through Life Skills subject. Mental health assumes its rightful place in health promotion. Teachers and the wider school community have complementary roles, each supporting the other. Workshops will help highlight how to create a balanced curriculum to ensure a positive impact on pupil outcomes, personal development, behaviour and welfare, such as how to address the challenges of wellbeing at a pupil, practitioner and school level, developing the life skills needed for employability, and ultimately

help schools raise achievement through PE and school sport.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should have ongoing professional development. Teacher development should become an integral part of the teaching of life skills. Guidelines for the teaching of life skills are a necessity to improve the situation in the lives of learners. According to the DoE (2011), teachers should use a variety of strategies in order to meet the individual needs of learners. The teachers' theoretical, practical knowledge and their understanding of life skills should be improved. Short courses on module/course design in universities are important in ensuring that teachers have basic skills for the teaching of life skills.

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