
LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA AND BOTSWANA

Executive summary of the report on the *Growing Up* Life Skills Education programme sponsored by the International Center for Alcohol Policies from 1996-1999

The report describes and provides an evaluation of a programme of Life Skills Education for all seven grades of selected primary schools in South Africa and Botswana, during the period from 1996-1999. The development and implementation of the programme was sponsored by the International Center for Alcohol Policies¹ (ICAP), Washington DC with technical support from the Programme on Mental Health at WHO. The evaluation was funded by ICAP and carried out by two consultants (Mr J.Lee and Dr J.Orley) with extensive experience in this field. The aim was to provide a context in which the required materials could be developed, the training refined and any problems with implementation solved. The desired outcome was to have a set of materials and a described method for implementing the programme, which could be made available to any group who wished to do so.

Life Skills Education (LSE) has been introduced into the teaching programmes of both primary and secondary schools over the last 20 years or more. This has been done mainly in developed countries has been seen as a way of providing a context for promoting healthy lifestyles in children, which it was hoped would continue into adulthood. Rather than providing health education by pointing out the dangers of certain behaviours, LSE introduces children to a number of skills such as decision-making skills, communication skills and how to handle emotions. These skills should help them to choose a healthy lifestyle.

ICAP chose South Africa and Botswana for this programme because so little has so far been done to promote LSE in primary schools in developing countries. However, reports indicated that LSE was being carried out successfully for older children in Southern Africa and thus it seemed likely that a programme for younger children could also succeed. The program included, but did not focus primarily upon issues related to beverage alcohol. It is unlikely that primary school children will be applying these skills immediately to drinking alcohol beverages. Nevertheless a LSE programme at this early age will provide the necessary foundation skills in ways that will enable them, as they get older, to apply the skills in situations that do involve drinking.

¹ The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) is a not-for-profit organization funded by 12 of the leading producers of beverage alcohol. The mission of ICAP is to reduce the abuse of alcohol world-wide and to promote the understanding of the role of alcohol in society, and to encourage dialogue and promote co-operation between the beverage alcohol industry, the public health community, and others with an interest in alcohol policy.

Starting in 1996, ICAP supported the development of its LSE programme, *Growing Up*, for the first three grades of five selected primary schools in the North West Province of South Africa. The materials were based on the model set out by the World Health Organization, who also provided technical support to the program developers. The necessary materials were developed, consisting of teachers' manuals, student workbooks, resource materials and classroom posters.

The materials were pilot tested in the five selected schools in 1997. Teachers were trained from the first three grades of these schools and the piloting indicated that the materials were satisfactory. The same five schools continued with the programme in 1998, this time with a grant from South African Breweries. Also, in 1998, basically the same materials for the first three years of primary school were used in a pilot test in five schools in Botswana. During 1998, ICAP sponsored the development of the curriculum and materials for a *Growing Up* programme in the remaining four grades (4-7) of primary school. The full set of materials for grades 1-7 and the associated training, was piloted in five schools in South District V, Gauteng, South Africa in 1999. Those for grades 4-7 were also piloted in Botswana during 1999, in three of the five schools that piloted *Growing Up* in the first three grades in 1998.

Having the programme run for a year in each setting, provided the developers of the programme with the opportunity to get feedback about the materials, about the way that the programme ran and allowed a preliminary look at its effects. It also allowed the local Education Authorities to evaluate the programme for themselves and decide how they wanted to continue, if at all. ICAP did not intend to provide the materials, training and follow up visits to the schools, for longer than one year.

The *Growing Up* programme is designed to help students learn a number of skills for daily living in ways that are relevant to their lives at the moment. The idea is that each year, the curriculum will cover the same sort of skills, but in new ways that are relevant to their lives as they grow up. Each year's programme thus builds on that of the previous year. The materials cover roughly the same seven broad topics each year and each topic is broken down into several lessons. The topics are: (1) building a caring classroom; (2) learning to co-operate, working as a group, communicating and listening; making friends; (3) dealing with feelings and emotions; (4) decision making; (5) growing up healthy; (6) helping to make home and school a safer, more caring place, including service learning for the higher grades; (7) myself as a special person.

The materials for the higher grades, although covering the same topics, are divided up a bit differently. Each teacher is given a manual with clear guidance about what to teach in each lesson and how to do it. The emphasis is on active participation, encouraging plenty of interaction between the learners, as well as between learners and teachers. There is also an emphasis on co-operative learning in groups or pairs. The *Growing Up* materials provided to the teachers helped them to teach the programme. In addition, the teachers attended a three-day training workshop, and the trainer also visited each of the schools a few times in the year following the training, to provide support.

The evaluation of the programme is largely based on comments received from the teachers in the schools, either written or given verbally during visits to the schools by the two evaluators. The teachers comments referred to the programme's direct impact on the pupils, its more general impact on the school and its impact on the teachers themselves. In addition, they expressed appreciation for the materials and particularly liked having each lesson planned and prepared for them, ready to use.

Direct impact on the pupils

The pupils seemed to enjoy the *Growing Up* programme. There was more interaction in the classes and pupils were helping each other more. The *Growing Up* programme improved the learners' communication skills, active listening and concentration skills as well as English language skills. There was less bullying, fighting and abusive behaviour and children showed greater respect for others and were more friendly and caring for each other. Students seemed more confident about expressing themselves, and shy and reserved children 'opened up' as a result of the programme.

More general impact on the school

There was better discipline in class and in the school as a whole. The programme allowed teachers to spend more time with slow learners as more children can work independently or in groups. There was better teacher-pupil communication and the programme helped the teachers get to know their pupils better. The increase in helping behaviour seen in class was also seen throughout school life. Both teachers and pupils began to work and share together in ways that they had not done previously.

The impact that the programme had on the teachers themselves

The teachers found that the life skill's methods helped them to achieve objectives in other lessons. They enjoyed teaching life skills and felt relatively comfortable with the programme, despite it being a new subject with a somewhat different way of teaching. They found themselves being more active in class. Several said that it had helped them to feel better about themselves as teachers, more confident in their teaching abilities and more valuable generally as human beings.

It seems extraordinary that the often dramatic changes, as reported by the teachers and principals and confirmed by the learners, could take place with just three days of training and a few follow-up visits to the schools, together with the provision of the materials. The training obviously gave the teachers the confidence to begin a new approach, and the *Growing Up* materials gave them a very well tailored syllabus with which to practise and build upon that training. This was sufficient to give the teachers the feedback that they needed to know that they were being effective, and this encouraged them to continue. The programme thus acted as a catalyst, allowing teachers to interact with the learners in a new way which, although natural, had not been part of their repertoire of being 'teachers'. All of them seemed to delight in this new role and with only a minimum of encouragement, they will surely continue along this new path.

Next steps

The relevant Education Authorities need to decide whether they want the programme to start in other schools and if so, how this could be done. Careful thought would need to be given on how to train more teachers. 'Pyramid training' is obviously one way forward, with selected excellent trainees, for instance, being groomed and trained to start training others. The problem with this is always one of maintaining quality control. The excellent training of the teachers by Dr van der Merwe has obviously been a feature of the projects that have led to them working so well. It would be very useful if Dr van der Merwe could write out what she tells the teachers during the training, and describe the conduct of the workshop. The full report gives some suggested steps for setting up the programme in new locations.

The place of alcohol awareness in the programme

The drinking of alcohol is dealt with in a number of the *Growing Up* lessons, starting with grade one. *Growing Up* is an approach through which young people develop the ability to address the many decisions with which they will be confronted as they grow, including choices about alcohol. Research and experience has shown that providing information about alcohol is not enough to influence behaviour. It is not enough to inform young people; they need to learn how to make decisions. Life skills education should not be about proposing or imposing specific behaviour on young people. It is about giving young people the skills to use knowledge in order to make their own decisions and then to carry out those decisions, using the skills they have learned.

Conclusion

It is clear that the pilot *Growing Up* programmes in South Africa and Botswana have been a marked success. ICAP should be pleased with what has been achieved, and it needs to plan how to make the materials and training methods available to others. The relevant education authorities in South Africa and Botswana should become aware of the potential that lies in this programme and of the enthusiasm of those already working with it. It is to be hoped that they will find ways of putting it into more schools. NW Province Education Authorities have also been looking at other possible similar programmes, but are still seriously considering taking up the *Growing Up* programme for wider implementation. South District V, Gauteng are continuing with the programme in the five existing schools and introducing it into a further five schools, with extra emphasis on HIV/AIDS prevention. This extended *Growing Up* programme is also being piloted in other provinces of South Africa. This is largely funded by a grant from the Ministry of Health. The Botswana Ministry of Education is also looking into ways of continuing and extending the *Growing Up* programme. Other countries in Africa, and indeed beyond, should also be made aware of the existence of the *Growing Up* programme, with a view to trying it in their own schools, bearing in mind that it can be adapted and used without any payments of licence fees or other charges.

The full report on the project and further information about the *Growing Up* programme can be obtained from:

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