

EQ Review

Educational Quality in the Developing World



EQ Review is a bimonthly newsletter published by USAID's EQUIP1 to share knowledge about issues fundamental to improving educational quality and to communicate the successes, challenges, and lessons learned by USAID Missions.

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Life Skills Curricula

While life skills curricula generally include a variety of topics designed to improve the abilities of young people to grow into healthy adults able to participate in their socioeconomic environment, we are focusing on HIV/AIDS education for this issue's lead article. The importance of teaching youth around the world about HIV/AIDS cannot be understated as the disease takes its toll on students, parents, teachers, and others involved in education programs. For those working on life skills, we encourage inclusion of this topic into the curricula when it is not already covered.

Life Skills for HIV/AIDS Education in Africa

The HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to devastate societies throughout eastern and southern Africa. The primary response has been to get accurate information to people. However, this has failed to bring about the behavior change necessary to curtail the pandemic. Many are now looking towards the education sector as an effective way to reach young people, a key target group. There is also hope that messages can move beyond the school and permeate surrounding communities.

While learners, teachers, and communities need accurate information to effectively prevent HIV infection, that alone is not sufficient. Evidence shows that prevention information must be coupled with everyday skills to increase the likelihood that individuals will translate their knowledge into action. Life Skills for HIV/AIDS Education curricula (referred to here as "Life Skills") are designed to do this by developing in young people abilities such as negotiation, assertiveness, and coping with peer pressure; attitudes such as compassion, self-esteem, and tolerance; and knowledge about HIV transmission. These are best learned through experiential and learner-centered methodologies designed to help young people examine attitudes and practice skills. Interactive teaching techniques foster discussion of social pressures relating to relationships and opportunities to practice negotiation, communication, and refusal skills.

There are great advantages to school-based Life Skills education. There is a "captive audience" of young people, especially in the lower grades. Young people can be reached before they become sexually active, which is important because it is easier to encourage the formation of healthy attitudes and practices before the initiation of sexual activity than it is to change established unhealthy behaviors.

Additionally, young people may be more receptive than older

community members to learning about how to live with, support and care for people with HIV/AIDS. Stigma and discrimination are huge barriers to addressing the pandemic. Through Life Skills, children can learn to address their own grief, fear and biases and openly accept those living with and impacted by HIV/AIDS.

Unfortunately, Life Skills curricula have not brought about expected widespread behavior change. This is due to a number of challenges that generally have not been well addressed. These include inadequate teacher preparation and support, strongly held views of students as passive recipients of information, lack of community support, and isolated programs.

But there is evidence that school-based Life Skills programs can be effective in bringing about behavior change. Some emerging lessons about implementing a successful Life Skills program are online at: <http://www.equip123.net/webarticles/anmviewer.asp?a=354&z=7>.

Two factors deserve special mention. The first is teacher professional development. It is absolutely clear the teachers require sustained guidance and support in order to teach this sensitive subject. The cascade model of teacher training has proven inadequate and has been replaced by direct teacher education in both Zimbabwe and Uganda.

The second factor is context. Schools do not operate in isolation from the broader community. Even children fortunate enough to attend safe schools with positive and comprehensive HIV/AIDS education may face very different situations and messages when they leave school. Life skills programs have far greater likelihood of success if they are implemented in the context of cross-sectoral interventions which stress broad social dialogue around issues of sexuality and gender.

For more information, contact Joan Woods at jowoods@usaid.gov.

Life Skills Curricula

Life Skills Curricula for Girls and Boys Works to Improve Girls' Education

The New Horizons life skills curriculum program was initiated by CEDPA in 1997 to support USAID/Egypt's basic education strategic objective, which focuses on closing the education gender gap. The pilot phase began working in 5 of Egypt's 26 governorates. The program then reached 17 governorates and is now present in 21. At the time, the education status of girls in Egypt was poor and a global shift in development from a focus on demographics to an emphasis on the empowerment of women through access to education was emerging. More broadly, USAID and CEDPA recognized that attitudinal and behavioral changes—for girls and young women, as well as for the broader society—were required if women were to reach their own potential and to contribute to Egypt's development.

The key to these changes was the empowerment of girls and women to make decisions for themselves using newly acquired information, knowledge, and skills. To achieve these goals, the New Horizons curriculum uses trained community facilitators to deliver 102 lessons over the course of nine months. Topics covered include girl's identity, rights and responsibilities, health and nutrition, environment, adolescence, violence against women, marriage, pregnancy and delivery, family planning, and sexually transmitted and dangerous diseases

Girls graduate from the nine-month program once they meet a set session attendance criteria. These lessons develop communication, negotiation, decision-making, critical thinking/problem solving and self-management abilities.

The programs are implemented by more than 230 Egyptian NGO partners who coordinate cadres of volunteer trainer-facilitators to carry out training in local centers. These local NGO representatives are best positioned to address sensitive issues in the conservative and traditional society. Another key aspect of the programs is that the curriculum development teams were comprised of local field workers from the communities being served.

The program was initially aimed at illiterate, out-of-school girls but eventually expanded to include girls in school. Later, New Visions was developed to bring similar skills and knowledge to boys, thus enhancing the enabling environment for girls. More than 63,000

Egyptian girls and 16,000 boys have completed life skills education courses through CEDPA's New Horizons for girls and New Visions for boys programs.

Findings from a 2002 qualitative impact study of the New Horizons Program found that participants had more positive attitudes and behaviors toward the education, health and status of girls and women as well as girls' life options, compared with a control group. In addition, it found that program participants had a better understanding of reproductive health issues and a greater determination to share in reproductive health decisions.

For more information, please contact Adele Abadir at aabadir@usaid.gov.



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To contribute to *EQ Review* please contact:
Kim Bolyard, kbolyard@air.org, or John Hatch, jhatch@usaid.gov.

Life Skills Curricula

Integrating Life Skills into the Curriculum of Basic Education in Mali

One of the core activities of Mali's current education reform is the development of a new curriculum for grades one through nine. The curriculum development process started in 1999 with an assessment of the needs as perceived by communities, parents, and diverse civil society actors at the regional and local levels. Results showed that a wide majority wanted children to learn skills more relevant to their social, cultural and economic environment. In 2002, a policy framework (cadre général d'orientation) defined the principles and goals of the basic education curriculum. This framework adopted a competency-based approach, which led to a curriculum built around three types of competencies:

- >Discipline-related competencies,
- >General Academic Skills, and
- >Life Skills

The national Ministry of Education (MEN) and its donor partners have worked in a coordinated fashion since 1999 to create an innovative curriculum. With the assistance of USAID (through John Snow International and World Education), the Curriculum Division of MEN has identified and worked on integrating five areas of life skills into basic education:

- >Leadership,
- >Socio-economic related skills,
- >Health, Nutrition and Well-Being,
- >Culture of Peace and Human Rights, and
- >Environment.

In 2003, UNICEF supported a workshop where Gender, Child protection, and HIV/AIDS education were added into the Life Skills program. Following this workshop, a forum was organized in Dakar in 2003 to develop a common understanding of the "Life Skills" issue within the West African context.

"Life Skills" as defined in Mali:

- Aim to improve living conditions of students and communities,
- Aim to link all discipline related competencies and transversal skills to the socio-economic context,
- Aim to make learning more relevant to the lives of students,
- Aim to develop positive values, attitudes and behavior to help students integrate into adult society as productive, socially conscious citizens, and
- Are linked to real life experiences.

Since reflection on life skills began with the development of the new curriculum, it provided an exceptional opportunity for a genuine integration of the life skills program into the curriculum. With USAID financed technical support, grades one and two of the curriculum are now completed, and life skills have been integrated within the content of different disciplines for these grades. Several competencies reflect the priority given to life skills such as "managing one's environment" (in Sciences) and "protecting one's health" (in the Personal Development domain, with a focus on hygiene). These life skills are often developed through "integrative tasks" during which students mobilize knowledge acquired in different domains and disciplines, and apply them during learning activities and tasks directly linked to their own daily life and environment.

In grade 1, several life skills' related "integrative tasks" are proposed in the teacher guide. One of them consists of preparing for international HIV/AIDS day in the school: children prepare short plays, draw posters and pictures, imagine slogans and learn songs forwarding anti-stigmatization and anti-discrimination messages. They apply knowledge and skills from different domains such as language and communication, arts, sciences and personal development in an activity linked to a real problem in their community.

In another "integrative task," students create and manage a school garden; the garden then becomes a field for observation and experimentation for sciences (description of plants, germination, growth ...). Through these activities, children develop skills linked to their actual economic context, discuss health and nutrition issues, and learn to manage scarce resources, such as water.

The precise definition of the subject matter of each life skills area is still being developed. Recently, the School Health unit has further developed the HIV/AIDS education program to be integrated in the curriculum. Learning objectives were translated in terms of knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes, and principles for HIV/AIDS education were defined. As with all other life skills, these principles assert that HIV/AIDS education will use an interdisciplinary approach, will be integrated with health and reproductive health education and other life skills areas, and will take into consideration the socio-cultural environment in which it takes place. A large emphasis is placed on the learning process and on

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Life Skills Curricula

Malawi Develops New Life Skills for HIV/AIDS Education Curricula

The HIV/AIDS pandemic greatly exacerbates existing problems in education systems in the hardest hit countries of southern and east Africa. Malawi has an adult HIV prevalence rate of 16%. While accurate data are hard to come by, we know that teachers are becoming ill and dying at an alarming rate. Many young people are left in extreme financial and psychological hardship when they must care for sick family members and watch them die. And resources that would otherwise be spent on strengthening the education sector are used to pay for funerals and other HIV-related expenses. All of this leads to a downward spiral in educational quality at the classroom level.

As part of its response to the impact of the pandemic, the Malawi Ministry of Education began working with partners several years ago to develop and implement a Life Skills for HIV/AIDS Education curriculum for primary schools. This has been a slow process and teachers have only begun implementing the curriculum in the classroom in the past year.

The program requires intensive interaction and coordination between the Ministry, the Malawi Institute of Education (which developed the curricula and is responsible for teacher education), donors, and other stakeholders. In order to avoid gaps or overlaps in programming, the Ministry and donors formed a Life Skills Steering Committee that meets on a bimonthly basis to ensure coordination and information sharing.

The Malawi education sector is also in the midst of a multi-year Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) process. The Life Skills curricula will be developed in harmony with PCAR so that they can be seamlessly integrated.



For more information, please contact Joan Woods at jowoods@usaid.gov. Joan is supported by an American Association for the Advancement of Science Overseas Fellowship from USAID and works within Malawi's Ministry of Education.

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the importance of using approaches where students develop the wide range of skills and qualities required to protect their health and life.

Resource persons from communities are already mobilized in the schools applying the curriculum (e.g. health workers to facilitate health education activities). Resource people from the community may also be called upon to assist in upper grades to teach basic manual labor skills and/or pre-vocational skills to better prepare youth for a smooth integration into their economic milieu. USAID continues to support the curriculum division in its curriculum development process through the program "Support for the Quality and Equity of Education," under which World Education provides technical assistance. Curriculum grades three through nine are still under development and pilot testing. USAID and World Education support will continue to focus on the integration of life skills within all disciplines.

"The life skills approach has been the answer to parents' preoccupations", says Yousouf Konandji, head of the MEN's Curriculum Division. "They were telling us that their children did not learn anything useful at school! Life skills were the way to connect school with the reality and life of the children. They also have a major impact on teaching methodologies. Life skills activities usually start from a real problem identified in the community; they put both teachers and children in situations where they have to solve problems and where they develop and use a wide range of knowledge and skills. In life-skills related activities, teachers integrate different subject matters. This is one of the basic principles of our curricular approach."

For further information on this program, please contact Jo Lesser at jlesser@usaid.gov.

