



Beyond the classroom: Integrating family and community into life skills education for young people

Introduction

Education is supposed to equip young people with knowledge, skills and critical thinking abilities which will serve them throughout their lives within society. This view of education means that it should go beyond academic achievement and instead contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals who can actively participate in their communities. Life skills help people to manage themselves throughout the course of their lives and make appropriate choices for an active, safe and productive life. They help the individual develop the flexibility to adjust to different life circumstances and strengthen their ability to develop solutions in the face of challenges.

Helping young people acquire life skills should therefore be integrated into the formal education system. This is confirmed by the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All which presents life skills as a critical element to quality education (UNICEF, 2012). Adolescence is characterized by significant physical, mental and psychological changes that accompany the transition to adulthood. During this time, adolescents are vulnerable to behavior-related health problems that can impact the rest of their lives. “Lack of social and emotional competence among young people can create discipline problems such as the risk of dropping out of school, substance abuse, delinquency and violent behavior, all of which pose a hindrance to achieving academic success” (Bwayo, 2014). Young people need the tools that life skills education can provide to navigate this turbulent life period.

Definition

“Life skills refer to a group of psychosocial and interpersonal skills that can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively and develop coping and self-management skills that would help lead to a healthy and productive life.” (UNICEF, 2012)

Youth in urban informal settlements are exposed to numerous social and economic stresses that arise from living in these marginalized areas. Adolescent girls in these impoverished neighborhoods are forced to engage in transactional sex with older men in return for basic necessities. This often results in poor academic performance and may even lead to cessation of schooling (Okigbo et al., 2015). During a study conducted by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), adolescents were alleged to be the principal perpetrators of crime in informal settlements as they were the most vulnerable to negative influences such as drug abuse and peer pressure (Abuya et al., 2015). These young people need to be equipped with the tools that life skills can provide. While life skills cannot cure the socio-economic deprivation experienced in slums, they can help young people make sound decisions and manage challenges which they encounter that may compromise their school attendance and hinder their ability to lead full, productive lives.

Acquisition of life skills

APHRC considers a solid foundation in critical thinking, decision-making and self-management should form part of the basic curriculum offered to all students. Indeed, more and more formal education systems have begun to integrate a life skills module into their academic curricula. For instance, Kenya's Ministry of Education recommends that life skills be taught as part of basic education. This prompted the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) to develop curriculum guidelines for life skills education. In line with these guidelines, adolescents are taught in classroom settings about topics such as sexuality, reproductive health, self-awareness and self-esteem, drug and substance abuse, effective communication and decision-making. These topics broadly align with the categorization by the World Health Organization of the five core elements in life skills education (WHO, 1997).

Five core elements of life skills education

1. Decision-making and problem-solving
2. Creative and critical thinking
3. Communication and inter-personal skills
4. Self-awareness and empathy
5. Coping with emotions and stress

APHRC research has shown that the school setting is just one environment that is conducive to teaching life skills. Home and family play an important role in shaping the skills, attitudes and values that young people adopt. For instance,

research has shown that parental communication with a child of the opposite gender (father to daughter and mother to son) significantly delays sexual activity and reduces risky behavior among adolescents (Okigbo et al., 2015).

The community too has a crucial role in acquisition of life skills as young people internalize the norms and behavior that they see around them. Our research shows that further integration of the community holds a lot of promise for effective life skills education, as it removes the responsibility from a single cohort of people -- parents or teachers -- who may feel overburdened or poorly-equipped. Taking a community-based approach to life skills can balance out some of the gaps in parental experience found among the urban poor arising from low levels of education, household poverty, unstable relationships and so on. This community-based approach also acknowledges the oft-stated saying "it takes a village to raise a child."

A student's perspective

"Some time back, it was very difficult for me to approach my father, even to just request him for anything, or to open up to him about issues that may have been disturbing me. (The project) is really assisting a lot of girls. And the more it assists girls, the more the parents also receive knowledge..."
(Grade 8 student)



"To assess just how vital the role of family and community can be in life skills education, APHRC implemented an intervention from 2013 to 2016 in two of Nairobi's informal settlements -- Korogocho and Viwandani."

Towards an inclusive approach to life skills education

A parent's perspective

“(Now) I have realized that she is a good role model in the home. She is trying to show her siblings in the house what they need to do in all ways...therefore for me as I see that, I am so pleased.... I am expecting her to be a good leader in society one day...”
(Parent, Korogocho)

To assess just how vital the role of family and community can be in life skills education, APHRC implemented an intervention in two of Nairobi's informal settlements -- Korogocho and Viwandani. The intervention provided training and support to community-based mentors who in turn were given responsibility for sharing information with the students participating in the intervention -- adolescent girls in grades six, seven and eight. The topics covered during the monthly mentor-student sessions included: self-awareness and self-esteem; sexuality; reproductive health; drugs and substance abuse; effective communication and decision-making. Parents of students in the intervention were also able to interact with the wider 'community of parents' as we established a series of counselling sessions for them. These provided the parents with an open forum to share their feelings, frustrations and ambitions for their children. This particular intervention only involved girls, but it has since been scaled up to include boys.

The mentoring and counselling worked -- not just for the students and their families, but also for the community as a whole. Students self-reported higher educational aspirations, increased self-confidence and greater interest in schooling, even announcing ambitions to not only continue with secondary school but daring to dream bigger (Abuya et al, 2015).

A mentor's perspective

“When we started, there were some girls who could not talk, even if they were sharing something. They had low self-esteem, but now they can raise up their hands, they can give their opinions on something they are discussing ...”
(Mentor, Korogocho)

They also made more deliberate choices about their behavior, choosing to avoid risky sexual activity and displayed significantly less aggressive behavior. These behavior changes were thought to arise from a new approach to parenting learned by the families involved in the peer discussions, which also encouraged a renewed interest in their children's schooling (Abuya et al, 2015).

In recognizing the value of including parents and community members in the upbringing of young people, the intervention also demonstrated awareness and empathy toward the challenges confronting teachers within the public school system, many of whom are forced to play myriad roles as part of their daily work. Teachers, whose performance is often measured against the test-taking skills of their students, repeatedly raise concerns about the additional burden that educating students on life skills places on them. Their contentions that raising good citizens who make smart choices should be the responsibility of parents have some merit, even as they themselves acknowledge that many parents do not have the skills to do so. An approach that involves parents, the community and schools would help address teachers' concerns and enhance the effectiveness of life skills education for adolescents.

Considerations for integration of life skills into basic education

The Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All asserts that “all young people and adults must be given the opportunity to gain the knowledge and develop the values, attitudes and skills that will enable them to develop their capacities to work, to participate fully in their society, to take control of their own lives and to continue learning.” Life skills, according to this framework, are a critical element of quality education (UNICEF, 2012).

For countries in sub-Saharan Africa seeking to integrate life skills into their curriculum -- without sacrificing the quest for academic excellence or overburdening already hard-working teachers -- a number of conditions must be met. APHRC is presenting the following recommendations as considerations for national ministries of education that are looking to formally integrate life skills into their students' schedules:

1. How to contextualize life skills education?

Context plays a critical role in the acquisition of life skills. It not only shapes HOW they are transferred to young people, it also influences WHAT is transferred. If life skills are to be effectively absorbed by students, it is necessary that they are relatable and relevant. Standardized content is necessary for formal integration into a national curriculum, as is addressing the five elements at the core of life skills education -- decision-making and problem-solving; creative and critical thinking; communication and interpersonal skills; self-awareness and empathy; and, the ability to cope with emotions and stress. However it is also necessary to develop a flexible framework to life skills education that responds to various traditional, social and cultural environments.

2. How to effectively involve teachers, parents and community?

APHRC research has demonstrated that effective life skills education is a collaborative effort that involves parents and the community. Teachers rightly point out that they cannot help students absorb these critical skills without the engagement of parents and the community. Efforts to integrate life skills education into school curricula need to recognize this. Life skills education does not have to be restricted to the classroom; rather there is value in exploring ways to bring it to communities where students live, learn and grow. The APHRC approach is one such model, care should be taken to examine others.

3. How to finance the integration of life skills into basic education curriculum?

Integration of life skills training into the basic education curriculum will require considerable investment. From curriculum design to teacher-training to implementation in schools and communities, each step requires the commitment of financial resources. As provision of education is primarily the government's responsibility in many African countries, the public sector would be the natural source for financing. However, given the constraints in public finances that many African governments face, they may have to collaborate with donors and development partners to ensure adequate resources for integration of life skills education.

Conclusion

Life skills should be an integral component of any education system that seeks to develop well-rounded, productive members of society. This would help instill qualities such as confident decision making, creative problem solving, effective communication skills as well as resilience to life's challenges. A community-based approach to life skills education, which APHRC advocates, can help young people cope with the turbulence of adolescence and prepare them for a wholesome adult life. Now is the time for countries in sub-Saharan Africa to rethink the place of life skills in their basic education curricula.

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