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Partners in Life Skills Education

Conclusions from a
United Nations
Inter-Agency Meeting



Department of Mental Health
World Health Organization
Geneva

PARTNERS IN LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION -

CONCLUSIONS FROM A UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY MEETING

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Life skills education is designed to facilitate the practice and reinforcement of psychosocial skills in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way; it contributes to the promotion of personal and social development, the prevention of health and social problems, and the protection of human rights.

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This document is the product of a United Nations Inter-Agency Meeting held at WHO headquarters in Geneva on 6-7 April 1998. The aim of the meeting was to generate consensus among United Nations agencies as to the broad definition and objectives of life skills education and strategies for its implementation, in order to facilitate collaboration between the various organizations working to support the advancement of life skills education.

**DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH
SOCIAL CHANGE AND MENTAL HEALTH CLUSTER**

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

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PARTNERS IN LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION - CONCLUSIONS FROM A UNITED NATIONS INTER-AGENCY MEETING

I. INTRODUCTION

Organization

1. The Inter-Agency Meeting on Life Skills Education was held at WHO headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland on 6 and 7 April 1998.
2. In his opening address, Dr Li Shichuo, Assistant Director-General, WHO noted that *the Mental Health Promotion unit in WHO's Mental Health Programme had been actively working to support the advancement of life skills education in schools. Over the years, that has brought the WHO Mental Health Programme into contact with several other United Nations agencies interested in the subject. In particular, close collaboration had been established between WHO and UNICEF in that domain and information had gradually reached WHO about the activities of other United Nations agencies. Accordingly, the meeting had been arranged to enable the various organizations to learn more about each other's work, interests and objectives related to life skills education. It offered an opportunity to learn about the activities of each agency in the domain, and a chance to identify common goals and objectives. That in turn would help to identify ways in which they could work together effectively to advance those common goals.*

Background

3. Initiatives to develop and implement life skills education in schools have been undertaken in many countries around the world. The need for life skills education is highlighted, directly and indirectly in the Convention of the Rights of the Child and a number of international recommendations (see Annex 2). Life skills education is aimed at facilitating the development of psychosocial skills that are required to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It includes the application of life skills in the context of specific risk situations and in situations where children and adolescents need to be empowered to promote and protect their rights. Following the study of many different life skills programmes, the WHO Department of Mental Health identified five basic areas of life skills that are relevant across cultures:

- ! decision-making and problem-solving;
- ! creative thinking and critical thinking;
- ! communication and interpersonal skills;
- ! self-awareness and empathy;
- ! coping with emotions and coping with stress.

4. There are many different reasons why these life skills are taught. In Zimbabwe and Thailand the impetus for initiating life skills education was the prevention of HIV/AIDS. In Mexico, it was the prevention of adolescent pregnancy. In the United Kingdom, an important life skills initiative was set up to contribute to child abuse prevention, and in the USA there are numerous life skills programmes for the prevention of substance abuse and violence. In South

Africa and Colombia an important stimulus for life skills education has been the desire to create a curriculum for education for life, called “Life Orientation” education in South Africa and “Integral Education” in Colombia. There are many initiatives of this nature in which, in addition to primary prevention objectives, life skills education has been developed to promote the positive socialization of children.

5. Many countries are now considering the development of life skills education in response to the need to reform traditional education systems, which appear to be out of step with the realities of modern social and economic life. Problems such as violence in schools and student drop-out are crippling the ability of school systems to achieve their academic goals. Furthermore, in addition to its wide-ranging applications in primary prevention and the advantages that it can bring for education systems, life skills education lays the foundation for learning skills that are in great demand in today’s job markets.

Objectives

6. The purpose of the Inter-Agency Meeting was to bring together the staff of United Nations agencies that are working to support the advancement of life skills education (see Annex 3). It was planned as an opportunity for different organizations to clarify and agree upon a common conceptual basis for support from the United Nations system to facilitate the development of life skills education in schools.

7. The Meeting was designed to:

- ! generate consensus as to the broad definition and objectives of life skills education and strategies for its implementation;
- ! improve collaboration between the various agencies working to support life skills education in schools.

II. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

8. The discussions led to agreement among participants on a wide range of key issues. The Meeting’s conclusions are summarized below under five main headings relating to: concerns shared by the organizations represented; the definition of “life skills”; the reasons for teaching life skills; life skills education in schools today; and life skills outside schools.

Shared concerns

9. Shared concerns identified by participants in relation to life skills education included the need to:

- ! strengthen and improve school health;
- ! promote the development of long-term and holistic life skills curricula in schools;
- ! promote democracy, gender equality and peace;
- ! prevent health and social problems including psychoactive substance use, HIV/AIDS, adolescent pregnancy and violence.

10. The meeting also identified a shared concern for:

- ! the needs of adolescents;
- ! the importance of supporting life skills initiatives for children who do not attend school.

Defining life skills

11. The term “life skills” is open to wide interpretation. However, there was a consensus that all participants were using the term to refer to psychosocial skills. Keywords used to describe psychosocial skills were: personal, social, interpersonal, cognitive, affective, universal.

12. The following list of descriptive words and phrases was generated during a brainstorming session to identify life skills.

dealing with conflict that cannot be resolved, dealing with authority, solving problems, making and keeping friends/relationships, cooperation, self-awareness, creative thinking, decision-making, critical thinking, dealing with stress, negotiation, clarification of values, resisting pressure, coping with disappointment, planning ahead, empathy, dealing with emotions, assertiveness, active listening, respect, tolerance, trust, sharing, sympathy, compassion, sociability, self-esteem

13. Several items in this list occasioned debate as to what are and what are not life skills. The promotion of self-esteem, for example, is clearly an important goal for life skills education, but is it a skill? Not all the items listed during the brainstorming are life skills: for example, self-esteem, sociability, sharing, compassion, respect and tolerance are all desirable qualities, but, it can be argued, are not skills.

14. Skills are abilities. Hence it should be possible to practise life skills as abilities. Self-esteem, sociability and tolerance are not taught as abilities: rather, learning such qualities is facilitated by learning and practising life skills, such as self-awareness, problem-solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills.

15. Another area of debate surrounded identification of the place of physical or perceptual motor skills, such as preparing an oral rehydration solution. What are these to be called? If

“physical skills” is not accurate enough, two suggestions were to call these “health skills” or “practical skills”.

16. There was also a clear consensus that livelihood skills such as crafts, money management and entrepreneurial skills are not life skills, although the teaching of livelihood skills can be designed to be complementary to life skills education, and vice versa.

Why teach life skills?

17. The Meeting considered that life skills are essential for:

- ! the promotion of healthy child and adolescent development;
- ! primary prevention of some key causes of child and adolescent death, disease and disability;
- ! socialization;
- ! preparing young people for changing social circumstances.

18. Life skills education contributes to:

- ! basic education;
- ! gender equality;
- ! democracy;
- ! good citizenship;
- ! child care and protection;
- ! quality and efficiency of the education system;
- ! the promotion of lifelong learning;
- ! quality of life;
- ! the promotion of peace.

It was also suggested that the learning of life skills might contribute to the utilization of appropriate health services by young people.

19. Areas of primary prevention for which life skills are considered essential include:

- ! adolescent pregnancy;
- ! HIV/AIDS;
- ! violence;
- ! child abuse;
- ! suicide;
- ! problems related to the use of alcohol, tobacco and other psychoactive substances;
- ! injuries;
- ! accidents;
- ! racism;
- ! conflict;
- ! environmental issues.

20. The following reasons why life skills are essential for primary prevention were listed during a brainstorming session:

demands of modern life, poor parenting, changing family structure, dysfunctional relationships, new understanding of young people's needs, decline of religion, rapid sociocultural change

State of the art in life skills education in schools

21. The Meeting emphasized that life skills education is already happening, and that it is possible for United Nations agencies to speed up its development at country level. Many teachers are already engaging in activities related to the development of life skills, but need support to create effective approaches to life skills education for health promotion and primary prevention.

22. Life skills are generic skills, relevant to many diverse experiences throughout life. They should be taught as such, to gain maximum impact from life skills lessons. However, for an effective contribution to any particular domain of prevention, life skills should also be applied in the context of typical risk situations.

23. Facilitating the learning of life skills is a central component of programmes designed to promote healthy behaviour and mental well-being. To be effective, the teaching of life skills is coupled with the teaching of health information and the promotion of positive (health promoting and pro-social) attitudes and values. The development of life skills requires modelling of life skills by school staff and a “safe”, supportive classroom environment, that is conducive to the practice and reinforcement of skills. Furthermore, life skills education needs to be developed as part of a whole school initiative designed to support the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents, for example, through the promotion of child-friendly practices in schools.¹

24. To be effective, life skills lessons should be designed to achieve clearly stated learning objectives for each activity. Life skills learning is facilitated by the use of participatory learning methods and is based on a social learning process which includes: hearing an explanation of the skill in question; observation of the skill (modelling); practice of the skill in selected situations in a supportive learning environment; and feedback about individual performance of skills. Practice of skills is facilitated by role-playing in typical scenarios, with a focus on the application of skills and the effect that they have on the outcome of a hypothetical situation. Skills learning is also facilitated by using skills learning “tools”, e.g. by

¹ The WHO Department of Mental Health, Geneva, has prepared the Child-friendly Checklist for Schools (field test version - document MNH/PSF/98.1) to provide a tool for assessing the social environment of schools, based on the assessment of school policies and the practices of school staff.

working through steps in the decision- making process. Life skills education should be designed to enable children and adolescents to practise skills in progressively more demanding situations for example, by starting with skills learning in non-threatening, low-risk everyday situations and progressively moving on to the application of skills in threatening, high-risk situations.

25. Other important methods used to facilitate life skills learning include group work, discussion, debate, story-telling, peer-supported learning and practical community development projects. Practical advice offered during the Meeting included: be humorous, and make it relevant!

26. Life skills learning cannot be facilitated on the basis of information or discussion alone. Moreover, it is not only an active learning process, it must also include experiential learning, i.e. practical experience and reinforcement of the skills for each student in a supportive learning environment.

27. The introduction of life skills education requires teacher training to promote effective implementation of the programme. This can be provided as in-service training, but efforts should also be made to introduce it in teacher training colleges. The successful implementation of a life skills programme depends on:

- ! the development of training materials for teacher trainers;
- ! a teaching manual, to provide lesson plans and a framework for a sequential, developmentally appropriate programme;
- ! teacher training and continuing support in the use of the programme materials.

28. The scope of life skills education varies with the capacity of education systems. Although programmes can begin on a small scale and for a targeted age group, as a longer-term goal life skills education should be developed so that it continues throughout the school years – from school entry until school leaving age. Life skills education can be designed to be spread across the curriculum, to be a separate subject, to be integrated into an existing subject, or a mix of all of these.

29. The development of life skills education is a dynamic and evolving process, which should involve children, parents and the local community in making decisions about the content of the programme. Once a programme has been developed, there needs to be scope for local adaptation over time and in different contexts.

30. In the short term (after 3-6 months of implementation), the effectiveness of a life skills programme can be measured in terms of the specific learning objectives of the life skills lessons, and factors such as changes in self-esteem, perceptions of self-efficacy, and behavioural intentions. Only in the longer term (after at least a year) is it feasible to evaluate life skills education in terms of the prevention of health-damaging and antisocial behaviour, e.g. smoking and use of other psychoactive substances, or incidence of delinquent behaviour. Additional factors may be measured to assess the impact of a life skills programme, such as the effect of life skills education on school performance and school attendance.

31. Evaluation of life skills education should include a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessment. Qualitative assessment gives an indication of how well the programme is implemented and received. This is an important aspect of evaluation, which has an effect on the interpretation of quantitative research findings.

Life skills outside school

32. Current knowledge about life skills education internationally is derived chiefly from the school setting. There is a need for greater understanding of the nature of life skills education for young people who are not attending school, in order to identify the best strategies for supporting effective life skills initiatives to reach out-of-school children and adolescents. There was a consensus among participants that the development of life skills initiatives out of school requires special attention from United Nations agencies.

33. Different types of life skills intervention to reach out-of-school children and adolescents were identified:

(1) *Life skills in action.* This involves the modelling of life skills using methods such as video films, puppet shows and cartoons (in magazines, newspapers and on television). Such initiatives can be coupled with support materials to introduce discussion about the scenarios presented. The support materials can be developed for implementation by peer or other educators in settings such as youth clubs. UNICEF's Sara and Meena projects are of this type.²

(2) *Life skills training workshops.* Short courses of life skills training can be carried out with children and adolescents who participate in sports and recreational clubs. Life skills training workshops can also be integrated into existing courses offering training in livelihood or vocational skills.

(3) *Life skills for vulnerable children and adolescents.* There is a need for life skills interventions to reach vulnerable children such as street children, sexually exploited and working children, and orphans. Little is known about life skills interventions with vulnerable young people, although there are many indications that life skills play an important role in determining which children cope in difficult circumstances. One suggestion made during the Meeting was to start from what the children are interested in and experiencing and to use that as a basis for building life skills sessions with them. However, that would mean a less structured approach, implying an additional need for well trained educators.

35. All these three approaches to life skills learning are most likely to rely on short-term interventions. Given the limitations on access to out-of-school children and adolescents over an extended period, an important consideration in the development of life skills interventions will be to identify what is the minimum intervention required to have a positive impact.

III. OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

² UNICEF's Sara project in Eastern and Southern Africa and Meena project in South Asia are both multimedia communication initiatives which seek to promote the status of girls. In each case, a young female character has been created to model the application of life skills in different situations. These scenarios from the lives of Sara and Meena are widely disseminated through popular media, including animated film, radio drama, story books and newspaper cartoon strips.

36. Instances of existing collaboration between United Nations organizations were described, including joint work by UNFPA and UNICEF regional offices to develop life skills training guidelines in West Africa, and opportunities for future collaboration were identified.

37. The Meeting agreed that there is a need for inter-agency collaboration to accelerate programming, monitoring and evaluation for life skills education in and out of schools. In particular, it suggested collaboration in the design of life skills curricula in schools; the development of tools for the monitoring and evaluation of life skills education initiatives; the development of guidelines and training materials to support life skills initiatives for out-of-school children and adolescents; and an e-mail network to facilitate exchange of information between agencies.

38. Efforts will be made to extend this collaboration to include other United Nations and partner agencies.

**INTER-AGENCY MEETING ON LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION
WHO HEADQUARTERS, GENEVA, 6-7 APRIL 1998**

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EXTRACTS FROM UNITED NATIONS CONVENTIONS AND EXAMPLES OF RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

Convention on the Rights of the Child

A major force behind United Nations agencies' support for the advancement of life skills education in schools is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which makes clear statements about the role of education systems in support of the healthy psychosocial development of children:

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse...

Article 28

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and shall...: (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. 3. States Parties shall promote and encourage international co-operation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to.....facilitating access tomodern teaching methods.

Article 29

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
(b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;...
(d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin....

Article 33

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, includingeducational measures, to protect children from the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychoactive substances....

From: Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations General Assembly, 20 November 1989.

WHO Expert Committee

Every school should enable children and adolescents at all levels to learn critical health and life skills:Such education includes:comprehensive, integrated life-skills education that can enable young people to make healthy choices and adopt healthy behaviour throughout their lives.

From: *Promoting Health Through Schools. Report of a WHO Expert Committee on Comprehensive School Health Education and Promotion.* Geneva, World Health Organization, 1997 (WHO Technical Report Series, No. 870).

WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF Study Group

Programmes must provide the support and opportunities for adolescents to: ...build skills;... Meeting basic needs for safety, belonging and self-esteem as well as mastering key skills for living improves the overall development of adolescents.

From: *Action for adolescent health: towards a common agenda. Recommendations from a Joint Study Group (WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF).* Geneva, World Health Organization, 1997 (document WHO/FRH/ADH/97.9).

Consensus Statement on AIDS in Schools

Teachers' representative organizations should also be involved in fostering comprehensive health promotion programmes for schools, which include AIDS/STD education. These programmes should provide young people with accurate knowledge and encourage them to develop skills which will help them to make mature decisions and act on them.

From: *Consensus Statement on AIDS and Schools.* Paris, International Federation of Free Teachers' Unions, World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession, World Confederation of Teachers, and Fédération Internationale Syndicale de l'Enseignement, in association with: WHO, UNESCO and ILO, 1990.

Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion

Health promotion supports personal and social development through providing information, education for health and enhancing life skills. By so doing, it increases the options available to people to exercise more control over their own health and over their environments, and to make choices conducive to health.

From: *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. Charter adopted at an International Conference on Health Promotion: The move towards a new public health, November 17-21, 1986, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.* Canadian Public Health Association, Health and Welfare Canada, and the World Health Organization. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1995 (document WHO/HPR/HEP/95.1).

Annex 3

LIFE SKILLS PROJECTS IN ORGANIZATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM:

Summary notes

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

Department of Policy, Strategy and Research, Geneva. Advocates life skills education in schools for HIV/AIDS prevention and to promote care and empathy for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Promotes life skills learning in peace education programmes for conflict resolution and in AIDS education programmes for adolescents. Provides technical assistance and training to support field based development of such initiatives.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

New York (headquarters), Thailand, Uganda. Advocates life skills education as a central element of programming for children and adolescents, for the promotion of health and development. Provides technical assistance, training, funding, programme support and coordination to support the advancement of life skills education for promotion and primary prevention, to improve the quality of teaching, to promote child-friendly schools, and to promote the rights of the child.

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

New York (headquarters) and West African Regional Office. Promotes life skills learning in population education curricula, with a focus on sexual and reproductive health. Provides training of trainers at the country level.

World Health Organization

Department of Mental Health, Geneva. Advocates the development of holistic, long term and integrated curricula for life skills education in schools. Provides technical assistance and training to support the advancement of life skills education for the promotion of the healthy psychosocial development of children and adolescents.

Department on Substance Abuse, Geneva. Promotes life skills learning as part of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of health and social problems related to psychoactive substance use, by incorporated information about life skills approaches

into technical documents and training programmes. Advocates research related to life skills approaches to preventing psychoactive substance use related problems.

Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development, Geneva. Advocates life skills learning as part of effective programming for adolescent health, to promote positive health behaviour.

Department of Health Promotion, Geneva and WHO regional offices. Advocates the development of life skills education as an essential component of health-promoting schools. Promotes life skills education through the channels of the WHO's Global School Health Initiative.