



Understanding the Best Practices in Enhancing Social Sciences Curricula for Students' Life Skills Acquisition in Mbeya Region, Tanzania

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Abstract

This study investigated the best practices to enhance social science curricula for students' life skill acquisition in community secondary schools. This study aimed to understand the best practices for enhancing curricula for students' life skills acquisition in the Mbeya region. This study's curricula include geography, history, and civics. This study employed an interpretivist research philosophy with a qualitative approach and a case study research design. The study comprised 30 participants, including 20 teachers and 10 parents. The data were gathered through interviews. The study used NVivo software to analyse the data. This was done by transcribing the data acquired by the equipment, sorting and synthesizing them into categories and developing themes. The results indicate that stakeholders' involvement in curricula review is the best practice for enhancing students' life skills acquisition. The study also demonstrates theoretical curricula enhancement without students' life skills acquisition. It also encourages using participatory classroom approaches as the best practice for enhancing students' life skills acquisition. Furthermore, the study findings necessitate using the Swahili language as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. The study concluded that the best practice to enhance students' acquisition of life skills is to apply a participatory approach in the classroom.

Key terms: *life skills, social science curricula, implementation, stakeholders.*

Introduction

Globally, non-governmental organizations and international aid agencies, such as the World Bank, UNICEF, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and others, feel that education should not only prepare students academically but also provide them with skills that are referred to as "life skills," "non-cognitive skills," "character skills," and "socio-emotional skills" (Graham & Cohen, 2022). Nasheeda et al. (2019) indicated the incorporation of life skills at different grade levels in various developing countries including India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Thailand, Myanmar, and Nepal. Hoskins and Liu (2019) studied "Measuring Life Skills in the Context of Life Skills and Citizenship Education in the Middle East and North Africa." The findings indicate that teaching and learning life skills are critical for empowering people to succeed in school, at the workplace, and for personal goals. According to Ladiwal and Kanwar (2021) and DeJaeghere and Graham (2022), life skills are included in the curricula of many developed and developing nations at different stages of their educational system. UNICEF (2012) suggests that it is crucial to teach young people life skills to effectively navigate and mitigate the risks and challenges in their daily lives. Such skills make them more productive and valuable in society. This is because acquiring life skills enhances one's ability to live up to society's demands and expectations and helps find practical solutions to issues such as job insecurity and unemployment (Prajapati et al., 2017). According to Jaya et al. (2018), a life skills education program is built on instruction that teaches practical skills relevant to business prospects, the demands of the labor market, and the potential for economic growth or industry in the community. Prasertcharoensuk et al. (2015) stated that life skills are critical enough to be included in Thailand's primary education curriculum. A well-designed life skills education program must match the learners' context because different learners have different learning contexts. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015) underscores that better-educated and trained workers can perform more diverse work to a higher standard, and be more creative and innovative. Skovsgaard et al. (2018) pointed out that education can equip learners with agency, a sense of purpose, and the competencies they need to shape their own lives and contribute to those of others. They further argued that competency implies more than just acquiring knowledge and skills; it involves mobilizing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to meet complex demands that require broad and specialized knowledge.

According to Prajapati et al. (2017), life skills are behaviours or behaviour development strategies intended to address knowledge, attitudes, and skill development. They are learned abilities that allow young people to develop behavioural and social competencies that promote their growth and positive interpersonal relationships (Orji et al., 2019). Behrani (2016), Mwachande et al., Orji et al., Bisht and Joshi, and Rout and Shee (2018) identified ten related life skills: self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, interpersonal relationships, creative thinking, critical analysis, problem-solving, decision-making, emotions, and stress management. Such life skills are essential in Tanzania community secondary school education, as they enhance students' acquisition of life skills and equip them with the ability to adapt and act in ways that assist people in dealing with the demands and difficulties of daily life.

In Kenya, Ndirangu et al. (2022) established that life skills on sexuality are taught in secondary schools, but not effectively. In Rwanda, D'Angelo et al. (2022) have shown that the development of life skills is increasingly recognized in formal and non-formal education programs as critical to enabling young people to succeed in personal relationships at the workplace and in society. This study showed the significance of participatory and dialogical approaches in developing self-confidence by allowing students to make mistakes and challenge themselves in new activities and circumstances that are significant in teaching and learning. Uganda, Fidan, and Aydogdu (2018) classify life skills into three categories: knowing and living with oneself, knowing and coexisting with others, and making wise decisions.

In Tanzania, like in other countries, the government has a remarkable approach to enhancing life skills education, which has been developed and tested at different levels (Regional Education Learning Institute [RELI], 2020). However, while national-level officials were sure of their actions and intentions, this understanding was not passed down to lower-level implementers of enhancing life skills education in Tanzania (Regional Education Learning Institute [RELI], 2020). Tanzania Institute of Education ([TIE], 2023) indicates that the aims and objectives of secondary education justify the focus on learners and their learning.

Despite efforts by the government and other stakeholders to enhance the secondary school education curriculum from time to time to gear it to students' acquisition of life skills, some graduates cannot apply their knowledge and skills to master their environment (Uwezo, 2019 [OBJ]; Mgaiwa, 2021). In other words, they do not fit into society despite being educated under a competency-based curriculum. The growing

number of graduates who cannot create jobs and those who are job seekers raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the life skills education provided to learners in schools. While scholars such as Wandela (2014), Makunja (2016), Alli (2021), and Mkimbili and Kitta (2020) explain that limited instructional resources might be the primary cause of the problem, Owolabi Adedayo (2012) and Magoma (2017) argue that teachers' availability and qualifications account for the existing challenges. Even though life skills programmes are widely available in nations like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Greece, and Mexico, little is known about how well they are implemented for social sciences curricula to enhance students' acquisition of life skills, according to Nasheeda et al. (2019), life skills programmes depend on the setting. By contrast, life skills concepts are incorporated into the curriculum in developing countries of various grades. However, there are significant challenges facing social science curricula in terms of enhancing students' acquisition of life skills. Hence, students are generally prepared to pass examinations in the f(Fidan & Aydogdu, 2018). Teachers also lack in-service training on new pedagogical concerns in the curriculum and teacher preparation to enhance students' acquisition of life skills (Selemani et al., 2021). Other challenges that hinder students' acquisition of life skills include class size, poverty, technology, attitudes and behaviour, parents' involvement, funding, and family related factors, such as divorce, single parenthood, poverty, and domestic violence (Chen, 2022). Such challenges may significantly affect the students' acquisition of life skills. For example, poverty may involve the acquisition of apparatuses or materials for experiments, students' uniforms, and teaching and learning materials such as texts and exercise books.

On the other hand, teachers' in-service training on emerging pedagogical issues in implementing social sciences curricula and enhancing students' acquisition of life skills may result in practical students' acquisition of life skills. It was also expected that a student educated through a competency-based curriculum would be able to master the environment. Nonetheless, they continue to fall short of desired results (RELI, 2020). This study will be helpful to education policymakers, curriculum reviewers, and implementers. However, the best practice for implementing social sciences curricula to enhance students' life skills acquisition in community secondary schools is unclear. In 2013, Tanzania revised its curriculum from content-based to competence-based (Taasisi ya Elimu, 2013; URT, 2014; Tilya & Mafumiko, 2018). Gouëdard et al. (2020) indicated that curriculum reform is a strategy for providing students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competencies. However, determining the best and most successful approach to such

transformations remains challenging. It is a competency-based curriculum that will help students acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that will equip them with life skills that they can effectively use to serve society (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). However, little is documented about the best practices for implementing social sciences curricula to enhance students' acquisition of life skills in Tanzanian schools. The social science curriculum in this study included geography, history, and civic subjects. Thus, further research is needed to bridge the existing knowledge gap.

Methods

The study used an interpretivist research philosophy and adopted a qualitative research approach. Its selection is based on its ability to investigate what occurs in the field, that is, the actual practices of the examined phenomenon, as suggested by Berg and Lune (2017). Research design is a method for gathering, analysing, interpreting, and reporting data in research projects (Boru, 2018). This study used a case study technique to provide a qualitative examination of a single entity covering all elements (Asenahabi, 2019). This is a thorough examination of a phenomenon that includes subjective rather than objective details. The study also involved ten (10) community secondary schools from five districts of the Mbeya region. Data were collected from the sample of thirty participants. These are twenty (20) social sciences curricula teachers and ten (10) parents who were obtained through a purposive sampling technique. The researcher designed structured interview guide questions for data collection from study participants. All schools in Tanzania use one curriculum that possesses teachers with similar qualities, operating under the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. Schools were chosen based on their act of providing secondary school education using similar social science curricula. Schools were selected based on the researcher's discretion to determine the variables for the sample population. A thematic data analysis was used in this study. This type of study required three primary steps: transcribing the interview results and synthesizing the data into themes. Thick descriptions, quotes, and presentations of participants' views and attitudes toward understanding the best practices in enhancing social sciences curricula for students' life skills acquisition.

Results and Discussion

This study focused on understanding the best practices for enhancing social sciences curricula for students' acquisition of life skills in the Mbeya region of Tanzania. Twenty (20) social science teachers and ten (10) parents were asked to

identify what they considered to be the best practices to enhance social sciences curriculum implementation and students' acquisition of life skills. All participants (100%) commented that the best practice for implementing social science curricula is to involve all education stakeholders in reviewing and implementing the social sciences curricula. Some stakeholders mentioned were teachers, students, parents, and the officials from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology. The practical implementation and application of participatory teaching and learning approaches were also mentioned as the best practices for implementing social science curricula. Another approach is the use of familiar language in teaching and learning sessions. The detailed description of the best practices is presented in the ensuing section.

Including education stakeholders in the review and implementation of curricula

The interviews noted that involving stakeholders in curriculum review and implementation is inevitable for understanding the best practices for enhancing social sciences curricula and students' acquisition of life skills. Teachers and parents responded that they had never been involved in curriculum review. They found that they were told to implement things they were not involved in as implementers. Parents further reported that they had things that their children wished to learn when they were at school. The parents complained about how their children failed to develop problem-solving and decision-making skills. It was added that our children depended on our parents, who had not attended school most of the time. A parent commented that:

I do not know exactly what students are taught to acquire life skills. I do not know what happens when I discuss things with my son. You may have a situation that must be resolved, but I cannot apply my son's contribution, because it lacks weight. Sometimes you can ask him a question that is appropriate for him to answer, but you cannot challenge him critically. For me, the difficulty of social media communication has become the setting up of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other platforms in the curricula. My son was supposed to assist me in setting up these applications. Social media is essential for effective communication. I suggest that the government think critically about inserting social media into the curriculum for students to learn. Social media will help society economically, politically, socially, and culturally, if well prepared. I am ready to appear in the curriculum review.

The interviews also showed that even teachers needed to be made aware of how various stakeholders were involved in the curricula review. The teachers only attended seminars on implementing the reviewed curricula. Commenting on the conduct of the workshops, the participants believed that they needed to be organized appropriately to allow them to provide their views. A social science teacher from Rungwe District commented:

I have yet to learn how to incorporate individuals into the curriculum revision process, but I am willing to participate. Despite being a teacher for almost a decade, I have never attended any curriculum reviews. Sometimes, government directives are ignored and are not followed by people with authority. Implementers like the district and regional education officers and school quality assurance have no power to make sure that directives are followed accordingly. For example, a 2020 reviewed guide for the establishment and registration of schools shows that pre-primary class capacity is twenty-five (25), primary school class capacity is forty-five (45), ordinary level class capacity is 40 (40), and advanced level secondary school capacity is 30 (30). Our schools today have populated classes that do not adhere to Tanzania's national education standards, as stipulated in the 2020 review guide for establishing and registering schools.

According to the study's findings, teachers and parents are willing to participate in examining social science curricula for best-practice implementation, although they are not currently involved. The findings also indicate that teachers and parents had doubts about the social science curriculum implemented in community secondary schools in Tanzania. The findings suggest that some critical stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, did not review the social science curricula. Roundy (2022) provides examples of stakeholders in education, such as school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, students, the community, state representatives, and government officials, such as city councillors. Rudhumbu and Du Plessis (2020) support the idea that regulatory authorities, institutional authorities, and teachers contribute to the review and implementation of social science curricula to enhance students' acquisition of life skills. Teachers play a role in designing relevant classroom activities during teaching and learning to facilitate students' acquisition of life skills. Fidan and Aydogdu (2018) insist that teachers play a role in curriculum implementation. Seminars on the rationale for teachers' engagement should be held to promote the best practices in social science curricula.

The use of practical teaching and learning approach

The interviewed parents noted that students learned theoretically, while some skills could be learned well through practical sessions. Parents said that the students were given notes to copy and prepare for the examinations. The public is happy to see the score from the theoretical form four examinations. Students are regarded as geniuses just because they have passed theoretical examinations. Based on this assessment, it is clear that society perceives these students to be intelligent. Students learn irrelevant topics in their lives and surroundings, making it impossible to meet their everyday demands. Therefore, practical teaching and learning during the implementation of social science curricula might effectively enhance students' acquisition of life skills. A parent from the Mbarali district commented that teaching and learning must be implemented practically, as evidenced in the following quote:

We know that the lessons students learn in school do not prepare them for life in the real world. I expected students to acquire knowledge that could enhance their self-employment. Unlike parents who had not attended school, I assumed that students would be more integrated into society. Today's education has produced youth who have no value in their communities. Even a standard seven-year graduate was expected to marry in our days and age. The majority of form four graduates you encounter today return home to live with their parents after graduation. The root of the issue is the curriculum; about which we are unsure of the exact creator.

Theoretical teaching and learning cannot be regarded as one of the best social science curriculum implementation practices. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders to ensure that students learn practically with relevant content based on their context. Mokoro (2020) notes that due to a lack of laboratory facilities, teaching and learning materials in Tanzanian schools have become more theoretical than practical, resulting in poor enhancement of social science curricula for students' acquisition of life skills. However, there are significant challenges facing social science education programs that aim to teach students life skills; hence, students are generally prepared to pass examinations (Fidan & Aydogdu, 2018). Teachers also lack in-service training on new pedagogical concerns in the curriculum and teacher preparation, which might help teachers facilitate practical teaching and learning practically (Selemani et al., 2021).

Application of familiar language

The findings showed that employing a familiar language in the teaching and learning process impacts learners' ease of comprehending the lesson. Teachers indicated that students understood better when they learned in their native language. A social science teacher from the Kyela district commented on applying a familiar language for the best practices of social sciences curricula. The teacher commented:

I have over ten years of experience as a teacher. I have been watching various Hakielimu forums as well as reading their articles. The organization is attempting to question and offer an improved method of instructing students. Hakielimu showed a student how to explain globalization in Swahili, even though the student needed help to explain it in English. Upon reflection, who makes us study English? My recommendation is that students should be instructed on their native language. The Chinese government mandates that international students studying in China must first master Chinese. Those who believe that they can get by without learning English should consider taking English as an elective. The government's job is to invest in Swahili as the language of instruction. Due to inadequate investments in the Swahili language, English has become the slave language of our government and students. We occasionally speak in Swahili during staff meetings because, if we allow English, some teachers cannot communicate throughout the session.

Based on the respondent's quote, teaching and learning require language to be familiar to the students. If so, they could enhance their acquisition of life skills. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology must ensure that students learn the language they master. This finding is also supported by Mosha (2018), who indicates that Tanzania is producing graduates with inferior language skills from kindergarten to university. This may be because they are teaching and learning unfamiliar languages. Commenting on the use of languages familiar to students, Vuzo (2018) indicated that using foreign languages as the language of instruction has resulted in student dropout. Students who drop out may fail to acquire life skills because of a lack of attendance at school. Conversely, Mkonongwa and Komba (2018) showed that teachers use poor English skills to teach students. If this is the case, the government is now producing four graduates who need more foreign language skills because of the difficulties they face in the English language while teaching and learning in Tanzania. Involving teachers, parents, and students in curriculum reviews of social science courses can result in practical enhancements.

Application of participatory approach

The interviewed teachers noted that to enhance students' life skills acquisition, a participatory teaching and learning approach needs to be employed. The findings indicated that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology was responsible for making and designing appropriate participatory techniques to assist in teaching and learning processes. It was further noted that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, through the Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE), is required to invite teachers, quality assurance officers, education officers, and non-governmental organizations such as RELI, Hakielimu, and Shule Direct to participate in making and designing participatory techniques in teaching and learning social sciences curricula. This might enable teachers to engage students in practical learning activities during their teaching and learning sessions. The study findings also commented that it is better to identify the kind of human beings we want to mould through social sciences curriculum enhancement. A social science subject teacher from the Mbeya district commented on the best practice for enhancing social science curricula:

The best practice to adopt to enhance students' life skills is to apply a participatory teaching and learning approach. This approach encourages students to learn by doing so. Teachers can form small groups of students to facilitate group discussion activities depending on the class size. The learning process should also be dominated by practical activities, such as debates, experiments, workshops, field trips, and projects. Teachers should establish conducive teaching and learning environments that allow students to learn comfortably. Teachers must apply a learner-centred approach to enable learners' positive participation during teaching and learning sessions. The class should be democratic, and use a critical pedagogical approach. Therefore, I think this will be the best practice for enhancing learners' life skills through a participatory approach.

The findings of the present study imply that teachers should be provided with in-service training on participatory teaching and learning approaches. Lagat (2017) recommended initiating teachers' in-service training on teaching methodology to master practical teaching life skills. This suggests that school leadership should partner with the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology and other government organizations to run the program. A well-designed curriculum should be based on students' acquisition of life skills, which puts students at the centre of learning, as suggested by Critical Pedagogy Theory (Uddin, 2019). Furthermore,

Ornellas et al. (2019) encouraged a learner-centred, genuine, and practical learning approach, such as authentic learning, as a catalyst for bringing work experience to formal education. This may effectively enhance students' life skills through social science curricula. The learner-centred approach seems to significantly improve students' acquisition of life skills. Every responsible individual plays a role in facilitating the curriculum. Implementers should adhere to the five critical aspects of the strategies, which are timely, realistic, specific, measurable, and achievable qualities that enhance learners' life skills (Sulam et al., 2019). This might enable school graduates to face challenges effectively and meet their daily demands for life skills acquired during their schooling.

Critical Pedagogy Theory supports a learner-centred approach. The theory demands active participation of learners during learning sessions. This theory encourages activities that lead classes to practical teaching and learning. This theory emphasizes that learning sessions should be fully covered through the practical learning of class activities. Therefore, learners' engagement increases during learning sessions. How social sciences enhance life skills is not clearly understood.

Conclusion

After examining the best practices for implementing social science curricula to enhance students' acquisition of life skills in community secondary schools in the Mbeya region, the researcher concludes that the best practice is to use a participatory teaching approach in teaching life skills. Stakeholders, such as government institutions, including teachers' colleges, secondary schools, parents and students, and non-government institutions, should be involved in the program. Every stakeholder plays a role in the curriculum reform. Therefore, no stakeholders should be excluded from the activity. It also concluded that all education stakeholders should participate in curriculum revision and implementation. Furthermore, the study implies that practical teaching and learning should be conducted to improve students' acquisition of life skills.

Recommendations

Basing on the findings and conclusion made, the study recommends the following. First, the use of interactive teaching and learning methodologies. Second, the use of familiar languages throughout the teaching and learning sessions. Third, Tanzania's government must develop best practices to upgrade social science curricula to help students acquire life skills in the Mbeya region. This can be accomplished most effectively by engaging all stakeholders and soliciting

feedback. Existing social science courses are not conducive to boosting students' learning of life skills in their surroundings. The curriculum must incorporate effective participatory methodologies into teaching and learning sessions. Participatory approaches include workshops, experiments, fieldwork, and projects. Fourth, the Tanzanian government must employ familiar language as a medium for teaching community secondary schools. Fifth, there is a need to provide possibilities that inspire students to pursue careers in entrepreneurship, mining, agriculture, fishing, and marketing, to name a few. When working for themselves, they inevitably need to use their life skills. This will be the most effective way to improve social science curricula and help students acquire life skills.

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