Tilla Olivier & Lesley Wood

Eastern Cape teachers' views on their ability to equip learners to cope with life after school

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"Life skills education" plays an important part in the preparation of school-leavers for life after school, yet it is often neglected. In the light of the problems in the South African education system, the question arises as to whether teachers themselves possess the life skills with which they are supposed to empower their learners. A research project was therefore undertaken among a group of Eastern Cape teachers with the aim of exploring their perception of their ability to actualise life skills education in the classroom, and of equipping them better for this task. A qualitative research approach was adopted, making use of individual interviews with teachers. This study gives an account of the findings of the empirical research that was undertaken as the first part of a bigger project, highlighting the importance of preparing learners for life after school, and how teachers should be equipped for such life skills teaching.

Die persepsies van Oos-Kaapse onderwysers omtrent hulle vermoë om leerders vir die naskoolse lewe toe te rus

"Lewensvaardigheidsopvoeding" speel 'n belangrike rol in die lewensvoorbereiding van skoolverlaters, tog word dit dikwels in skole nagelaat. Met die hedendaagse probleme in die Suid-Afrikaanse opvoedingstelsel ontstaan die vraag of onderwysers self oor die lewensvaardighede beskik waarmee hulle veronderstel is om hulle leerders te bemagtig. Die navorsing is derhalwe onderneem met 'n groep onderwysers van die Oos-Kaap met die doel om die persepsies van onderwysers met betrekking to die aktualisering van lewensvaardighede in die klaskamer te ondersoek, en voorts om hulle beter vir dié taak toe te rus. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering is gevolg om hierdie doel te bereik. Hierdie artikel verskaf 'n oorsig oor die bevindinge van die empiriese ondersoek van 'n groter projek. Dit beklemtoon die voorbereiding van leerders vir die naskoolse lewe asook hoe die onderwysers vir lewensvaardigheidsopvoeding toegerus behoort te word.

Prof M A J Olivier & Dr L Wood, Research Technology and Innovation Unit, Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, P O Box 77000, Port Elizabeth 6037; E-mail: tilla.olivier@nmmu.ac.za

L ife skills education is viewed by principal global role-players in education as crucial to the development of learners' wellbeing and fundamental to their meeting the requirements of life after school, whether in tertiary education or in the workforce. At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, the advancement of life skills was also singled out by governments as one of their four paramount missions (Kimberg 2002: 5).

The critical and developmental outcomes cited in the 2002 Revised Curriculum Statement of the South African Department of Education confirm this priority, sketching a profile of "the citizen the education and training system should produce" (DoE 2002: 8). The relevance and importance of life skills education as part of a balanced education, to prepare learners to cope with the life that awaits them once they leave school, is thus incontestable.

A balanced education should emphasise the importance of all academic learning areas, including Life Orientation (one of the Learning Areas of the South African school curriculum). In this regard, Asmal & James (2001: 1) argue that

> [... while] a reformed curriculum must place a greater stress on mathematics, science and technology, we must guard against a mechanistic and narrow form of education, geared only towards market requirements.

This highlights the school's important responsibility for contributing to all aspects of learner development, without neglecting the personal empowerment that will enable the learner to deal with life's demands and to cope in a healthy manner in the global society once he/she leaves school.

Today's society is dynamic and mobile, and characterised by competition, rapid change, scientific and technological development, globalisation, massification and manipulation (Pretorius 1998: 232). These factors often result in personal estrangement, inadequate socialisation, neurosis, and what Pretorius (1998: 241) calls "contact inflation", referring to the fact that, although people have more everyday social contacts in today's society, such interaction is on a superficial level and lacks authenticity. Preparing learners for life after school has thus become a challenge for schools (Mda 1995: 219).

Furthermore, the modern labour market requires highly skilled individuals who are willing to work on a contract basis. The security of permanent employment is fast becoming a luxury of the past. This means that employees have to market themselves successfully, or become successfully self-employed (Badat 2002: 15, Kirkland 2000: 49, Raijmakers 1998: 2, Rooth 1997: 2). It is thus clear that school-leavers face an immense challenge if they are to live meaningful lives, attain their full potential, or even simply cope with life in our times.

School-leavers have specific needs in terms of the life skills that can contribute to their wellbeing (Greyling 1995: 197), including problem solving, career planning, stress management and obtaining employment. A high priority should therefore be given to their empowerment for lasting wellbeing and stability (Marais 1998: 148).

According to Spierings (2002: 5), the responsibility for life skills education rests primarily on schools. However, this responsibility does not appear to be taken seriously enough by teachers in South Africa (Marais 1998: 148). Teachers do not receive adequate life skills training, whether at the pre-service or the in-service level, and they struggle to cope with the under-resourced teaching situation which is still the norm in the majority of South African schools as a result of the inequalities of the past (Wood 2004: 5).

In addition, many teachers themselves come from an under-resourced background, which has a negative impact on both their abilities and their morale (DoE 2001: 2, Snyders 2001: 228, Johnson *et al* 2000: 179). Teachers' own academic training may have been poor and their role models may have had to contend with conditions similar to their own. Their homes may be over-crowded and uncomfortable, with food and clothing in short supply. Teachers "cannot act as role models if they do not feel like role models [...] and do not have a sense of the nobility of their calling" (DoE 2001: 68).

This raises the question of whether teachers themselves in fact possess the very life skills they are supposed to teach their learners.

1. Research problem and purpose of the study

The majority of school-leavers are not adequately equipped with life skills, but this is not because of any shortage of material. Rather, there seems to be insufficient knowledge among teachers about how life skills education, as part of their task, should be accomplished. Given the often underprivileged context of teachers and the dysfunctional education system in South Africa (Mda 1995: 219), motivating learners and educating them to cope with life after school can be a daunting task, particularly when they themselves may be suffering feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence.

Against this background, the question formulated to delineate the problem and steer the research reported on in this study was: How do teachers perceive their own ability to equip school-leavers with life skills? (The second part of the research, namely theory generation and model design, are reported on in a follow-up study by the same authors.)

The purpose of the research was in line with the stated problem, namely to investigate how teachers — especially those having to face the major challenge of teaching effectively in an under-resourced school — personally perceived their ability (in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes) to contribute to the wellbeing of learners and to teach them life skills (Johnson *et al* 2000: 179). Only once we understand how teachers feel and what their perceptions are, can we attempt to address the problem. By means of this investigation, a model (to be discussed in a follow-up article) will be developed to better empower teachers to equip school-leavers with life skills.

2. Clarification of concepts

Different perspectives exist on the concept of life skills, but for the purpose of this research it may be viewed as intertwined with societal values (DoE 2001: 8), determined by societal needs (Rice 1991: 62) and able to be taught (Brooks 1984: 6). Life skills are the competences that enable a person to cope in a changing environment and to live life fully and effectively (Olivier *et al* 1997: 25, Schumacher 1980: 136). They thus contribute to the person's wellbeing.

3.   Research design and methodology

The research design of this phase of the project falls within a construc-tivist, interpretative philosophical paradigm.[1] The primary purpose of constructivism and interpretivism is to attain in-depth understanding and to transform perceptions, thus empowering people to make informed changes in order to improve their situation (Mehra 2002: 8, Rodwell 1998: 7).

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was selected in order to facilitate understanding and interpretation of the deeper meaning given to the problem, as experienced by the participant teachers in their own natural settings (cf Cresswell 1998: 17, Rossman & Rallis 1998: 15, Mouton 1986: 42). In addition, phenomenology was chosen because it is emerging, inductive, contextual, descriptive, interactive, explorative, evaluative and holistic in nature.[2]

Based on the theory-generative approach advocated by Chinn & Kramer (1995: 58-123), Straus & Corbin (1998: 143), Walker & Avant (1995: 28) and Dickhoff *et al* (1968: 422), the research followed five steps, of which this article describes the first. The main purpose of the field-work was to deal with Step 1 of the theory generative design, namely the identification, by means of data collection and analysis, of a primary concept based on the findings to serve as a foundation for the design of a model and to guide practical intervention.

3.1 Sampling

Participants for the research were selected purposively (Strydom 1998: 198) from schools with which the University had previously made con-tact for marketing purposes, in order to elicit rich information about the research question (Schurink *et al* 1998: 317). Furthermore, avail-ability sampling (Grinnell 1988: 251) was employed, to ensure that the research was not jeopardised, as school principals in some cases nominated available participants from their schools. All participants met the set criteria, namely that they were able to communicate in English,

1   Cf McFarlane 2000: 13, Rodwell 1998: 4, 18, Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 4, Schwandt 1994: 129.
2   Cf Silverman 2000: 2, Rossman & Rallis 1998: 5-10, Burns & Grove 1999: 60, Creswell 1994: 1, 145.

were teaching learners in Grades ten to twelve on a full-time basis, had had no formal training in life skills education, and were working at an under-resourced school in the local townships.

3.2 Data collection

The interview was piloted in advance to ensure that the data-gathering procedures were appropriate, as suggested by Strydom (1998). In-depth, individual interviews were then conducted with participant teachers to gather data (Kvale 1996: 27). The researcher was the main research instrument and facilitated the interviews (Mehra 2002: 9, Creswell 1994: 145). A second researcher acted as observer during the data-gathering process and wrote the field notes for the sake of triangulation (Morse & Field 1996: 91).

The data were elicited by means of vignettes (scenarios) and a guiding question which required the participant to respond to the vignettes. Vignettes are widely used in the social sciences (Hughes & Huby 2002: 382) to prompt responses to interview questions. A vignette is a short story "about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch 1987: 105). Video clips, pictures, role-plays, poems or music can be used in the same way (Barter & Renold 2002: 5, Richman & Mercer 2002: 70).

The participants in this study were shown a short video-clip of first-year students discussing what life skills they wished they had been taught at school in order to be better prepared for what they chose to do after school, as well as lecturers giving their opinion on what life skills are lacking in learners coming from school. The video-clip clearly indicated that both students and lecturers considered life skills development at school to be inadequate. The teachers were then asked one central question: "How would you respond to this video illustrating a lack of life skills development at school?"

The interviews, lasting approximately forty minutes, each were taped and transcribed *verbatim.* Data saturation was reached after eleven interviews conducted at six schools.

3.3 Data analysis

The transcriptions of the interviews were coded according to the steps suggested by Tesch (Creswell 1994: 153). A re-coder performed an independent coding and the findings were confirmed during a consensus discussion.

3.4 Literature study

A thorough literature study was done to form the conceptual framework for the study, as well as to substantiate the findings of the research (Creswell 1994: 21) by comparing it with existing findings in order to establish similarities, contradictions, or gaps.

3.5 Measures to ensure trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the research was based on the criteria for credibility (truth-value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality) (cf Guba's model in Krefting 1991: 215 and Leedy 1993: 143), as well as authenticity (Rodwell 1998: 97). It was attained by means of triangulation, including field notes; prolonged engagement; peer review; participant checking; detailed, dense descriptions; scientific distance; the re-coding procedure; consensus on the themes and categories that finally emerged; preservation of raw material as an audit trail; mastery of the enquiry method, and reference adequacy (Leedy 1993: 143).

3.6 Ethical considerations

The research adhered to ethical measures including informed consent; voluntary participation; anonymity; confidentiality; explanation of the project, and feedback to participants (Lipson 1994: 343). The teachers were given a letter explaining the purpose of the research and guaranteeing their anonymity. They were requested to sign the letter as an acknowledgement that they agreed to participate on a voluntary basis.

4. Research findings: discussion and recommendations

4.1 Theme 1: Teachers perceive preparation for life after school as important

The participating teachers generally perceived that contributing to learners' wellbeing and their preparation for life after school is an important facet of education. In this regard they expressed the unanimous opinion that learners are presently inadequately prepared for life after school, and that it is the teacher's responsibility to empower them with the necessary life skills. They said that this part of the educational task should be driven by the teacher's love for the learners:

> The preparedness for life afterwards, […] the majority of us is [*sic*] lacking in terms of preparing the kids for life […] we want to be teachers to help these kids and make a difference to the kids, but we've lost the focus somewhere along the line …

Recent research backs up the sentiment that the education system is not adequately preparing learners for life after school or sufficiently fostering their wellbeing (Harris 2001). Education can no longer be perceived as merely imparting knowledge. In order to be able to live a meaningful life after school, learners need a balanced education which focuses on all aspects of human development and contributes to their wellbeing and motivation (Kruger & Adams 1998).

In addition, Davidoff & Lazarus (1997: 66) contend that education needs to re-think the way schools function, how learners learn, how t e a c hers teach, and how people relate to one another, in order to ensure that the capacity under discussion is developed. Lethoko (2002: 240) further emphasises that the contribution of the teacher's personal qualities and his/her love for children and teaching should not be underestimated in life skills education, as they provide the foundation for positive relationships between teachers and learners.

The participants further declared that they, as teachers, were not adequately equipped to perform this kind of preparation of their learners for life. In this regard they complained about the overemphasis on academic work. They blamed the pressure to produce high marks and good pass rates, the focus on academic subjects, and the lack of extramural activities at school for this state of affairs:

Table 1: Theme 1

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories
Teachers perceive preparation for life after school as important	1.1 Learners are inadequately prepared for life after school	
	1.2 Preparation for life after school is the teacher's responsibility	1.2.1 Preparation for life is part of every teacher's job; love for learners and teaching should drive the process of life skills instruction
	1.3 Teachers are not equipped to prepare learners for life after school	1.3.1 Over-emphasis on academic subjects: - pressure to produce matriculation passes - value of academic subjects, and - lack of extramural activities 1.3.2 A teacher-centred approach to learning 1.3.3 Large classes lead to poor teacher-learner relationships 1.3.4 Teachers are not equipped to integrate life skills with academic subjects 1.3.5 The teacher's personal impact on learners: - negative feelings and attitudes, and - negative values and work ethics, resulting in negative behaviour 1.3.6 Lack of parental support in life skills teaching 1.3.7 Negative collegial relationships among teachers 1.3.8 The under-resourced situation in schools: - lack of material resources - lack of leadership - lack of personpower, and - situation in deprived communities

… because now we have to focus, like you see, there [*sic*] on the results, getting the kids through, and with all the pressure on us, all the negative publicity teachers get, […] we can't get through to some of the kids.

Participants perceived the Department of Education as blaming teachers for the fact that learners are not emotionally stable or well-equipped. Teachers saw themselves as perceived to lack a sense of professionalism and ethics, and to be poor role models for mental health. They thus felt resentful and unsupported, which in fact was an aggravating factor.

The Revised National Curriculum Statement of South Africa (DoE 2002) allocates more time than before to all aspects of Life Orientation (one of the Focus Areas for teaching), yet justice cannot be done to this learning area if teachers are insufficiently equipped to teach it. The success of the introduction of Life Orientation in the new curriculum up to Grade 12 depends on whether it is correctly taught.

All over the world educators are recognising that, in order to equip learners to cope with the rapid expansion of knowledge and the changing world they inhabit, it is necessary to empower them with life skills, embedded in a strong value system (Elias 2003). This can also be imparted during extramural activities, where learners get the opportunity to internalise the values and skills displayed by their teachers/coaches (Smith & Small 1991). In South Africa such activities are actually non-existent in most disadvantaged schools, due to a lack of resources (Wood 2004).

Participating teachers offered many excuses in defence of themselves. Their perception was that they were forced to follow a teacher-centred, instead of a learner-centred, approach because of large classes. This also resulted in poor teacher-learner relationships. Furthermore, teachers had not been equipped during their training to integrate life skills with other academic work.

Teachers' own negativity and low morale were projected onto learners, while negative collegial relationships existed among teachers. Schools were under-resourced, and the lack of materials, leadership, and person-power, as well as the poor environment, impacted negatively on teachers' ability to teach life skills. Parental non-involvement in school affairs

also contributed to the problem (Steyn & Van Wyk 1999: 41). In this regard participants expressed themselves as follows:

> We spoonfeed them. We sit with classes of about 45.
>
> … you had incorrect modelling at home, whatever, and so how do you turn that around in school?
>
> The relationships are not good in our schools. We don't talk to one another. That can have an effect on the kids, you see, and also on yourself, because suddenly you are de-motivated, you see?
>
> At our schools we don't have resources.
>
> You have to be mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually strong yourself. (to be able to empower learners).

According to the literature, many teachers still find it difficult to adopt a more learner-centred approach to teaching that will be more conducive to life skills education (Johnson *et al* 2000). Group work is recognised as a valuable method for encouraging a more learner-centred approach (Dalin 1993). However, this becomes very difficult in cases where classes are over-crowded (Hutchinson *et al* 2003).

Yet, teachers remain "one of the most powerful variables in the educational environment", referring to their enthusiasm for the work they present as well as their interest in and motivation of learners (Hutchinson *et al* 2003: 811). However, in most cases they lack the training and confidence to do a proper job of life skills education. "Teachers' own academic training may have been poor and their role models may have been people suffering in conditions similar to those they now suffer" (Johnson *et al* 2000: 183).

Elias (2003) points out that learners gain more in terms of socio-emotional learning when close collaboration takes place between parents and teachers. Furthermore, divided staff sentiments are not conducive to education, but unfortunately exist as a common problem among teachers, especially in disadvantaged schools (Steyn & Van Wyk 1999). Likewise, lack of resources in schools, in particular a lack of strong leadership (Myburgh & Poggenpoel 2002) will impact negatively on the effectiveness of teaching (Hutchinson *et al* 2003).

4.2 Theme 2: Teachers believe they should be better equipped to prepare learners for life after school by means of life skills teaching

The participants were adamant that teachers need to become better equipped to prepare school-leavers for life after school. In this regard they expected the Department of Education to provide them with material and emotional support. They suggested this could be done by offering training in the implementation of educational policies, providing adequate material resources at schools, and promoting the status of teachers in the community.

> I think we need some sort of training program in place, to equip teachers to be able to handle certain things.
>
> Teachers in fact feel very frustrated, because, especially with the introduction of OBE, they were really left to their own devices … everything that has anything to do with the Department, you don't feel as if you are getting any support.

According to a Department of Education (2002: 2) document, teachers were completely negative about the new policies and initiatives for teaching. Such training as is offered by the Department is compromised by a lack of follow-up or ongoing learning (Bradley 1996). In addition, the status of teachers in the community is not improving, as the media often report on unacceptable behaviour such as teacher absenteeism in the disadvantaged areas of South Africa (Manyisana 2003).

The participating teachers also asserted that school managements should become more involved in empowering teachers with life skills. This could be done by means of support for initiatives shown by teachers, staff development, and the involvement of teachers in school management. Furthermore, managements should encourage parental involvement in school initiatives relating to life skills. They should also offer leadership in improving the general school climate: "… if schools were to engage more closely with the community, with parental involvement perhaps, maybe that would be some source of relief for teachers."

The literature confirms that teachers have reason to complain about dysfunctional governing bodies and lack of support from district management (Manyisana 2003). McCarthy (2003) is of the opinion that more could be done by management structures to help teachers feel safe, to recognise their value, support their initiatives, include them in

Table 2: Theme 2

Theme	Sub-themes	Categories
Teachers should be better equipped to prepare learners for life after school	2.1 The Department of Education should provide material and emotional support for teachers	2.1.1 Training for implementation of educational policies 2.1.2 Provision of adequate material resources for schools 2.1.3 Improving the status of teachers in the community
	2.2 School management should become more involved in empowering teachers	2.2.1 Management should support and encourage teachers: - acknowledge their initiatives - offer staff development, and - involve them in school management 2.2.2 Management should encourage parental involvement 2.2.3 Management should provide leadership to improve the school culture, or climate
	2.3 Teachers should improve their own ability to prepare learners for life after school	2.3.1 Improvement of teachers' own life skills 2.3.2 Development of intrinsic motivation 2.3.3 Development of a strong values system

decision-making, plan staff development opportunities and empower teachers with life skills. An empowering environment would enable teachers to develop their own competence and consequently place them in a better position to pass their skills on to their learners.

Furthermore, the participants were convinced that teachers should try to improve their own capacity by means of life skills training and the development of their own intrinsic motivation and a strong value system: "Yes, if I develop myself emotionally, yes I am equipped to do that [contribute to the wellbeing of learners through life skills education], but I am not specifically trained to do that." Other comments by the participants were:

> A prime factor is the attitude of the teacher, since that is going to rub off onto the kids.
>
> There is hopelessness among the teachers […] the teacher feels powerless. Most of us are not comfortable in what we are doing, we are demoralised.

These teachers seem to have lost all pride in their profession (Wood 2004 112). This has decreased their self-motivation and confidence, which in turn has had an unhealthy impact on the school climate. Teachers are leaving the profession because of low salaries and under-resourced school settings (Wood 2004: 122). A sense of self-regard is absolutely essential if teachers are to be enthusiastic role models of life skills for learners.

5. Recommendations

It can therefore be recommended that:

- staff development should be planned to focus on life skills and the intrinsic growth of teachers, helping them to overcome the negative feelings, attitudes, values and work ethics identified in the research;
- teachers themselves should seek out growth opportunities and strive for self-development which would enable them to adopt a more learner-centred approach to learning, co-operate with colleagues, and integrate life skills into all subjects;
- the Government and the Department of Education should contribute to a working environment conducive to personal growth, in which teachers' strengths can be utilised and further developed; provide teachers with training in life skills, and provide the necessary materials and resources for life skills education;
- school managements should support and acknowledge teachers' initiatives, encourage parents to become more involved, and provide strong leadership.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The following limitations of the study are acknowledged:

- The fieldwork was conducted only in under-resourced schools all situated in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality. Therefore the findings cannot be generalised.

- The teachers who participated were all interested in being empowered with life skills, thus their perspective may differ from that of teachers who are not interested in life skills.
- The researchers sensed that not all teachers were completely open in their responses, for fear of being seen as judgemental of their colleagues. For this reason they may have painted a picture more positive than the reality.

The following suggestions for further research are offered:

- A pilot programme based on the findings should be developed, to empower teachers with life skills.
- A questionnaire based on the findings could be designed as a quantitative follow-up of the research, in order to cover a broader area.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the research clearly indicated that the participating teachers did not feel equipped to prepare learners for life after school. They thought that life skills education was not getting the attention at school that it deserves, in spite of the recognition that such preparation is vital to the future success of the learner. The teachers also believed that they should be given the opportunity to become better equipped to prepare learners for life after school. All role-players (namely the Department of Education, school managements, parents and teachers themselves) need to create a more empowering teaching environment, in which life skills education can flourish.

This poses a great challenge to education. In order to assist teachers in this regard a model, based on the findings reported in this article, was designed for the empowerment of teachers to equip school-leavers with life skills. Such empowerment would give teachers the confidence to make a significant contribution to the development of life skills by learners, thus preparing them for life after school.

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