

# Under-preparedness of Teachers to Teach Life Skills Education in the National Curriculum

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## Abstract

Modernisation and urbanisation has come at a cost to Maldivian children, making them more vulnerable to social ills and psychological diseases. Life Skills Education (LSE) has been integrated into the 2014 Maldives National Curriculum as a way to avert the emotional and psychological crises of children growing up in a rapidly changing society. Rather than questioning how this new initiative is introduced within the curriculum and the possible outcomes of the initiative, this paper aims to explore how knowledgeable and prepared the teachers believe they are to teach Life Skills to children.

A cross sectional survey was completed by 186 teachers of two schools of Male', Maldives. Life Skills Education has been taught in some form in both schools since 2004. Four factors linked to teacher preparedness were analysed, namely: (1) teachers' attitude to LSE; (2) teachers' motivation to implement LSE; (3) teachers' perceived professional mastery; and (4) participation in ongoing professional development, all of which have direct impact on successful implementation of Life Skills Education. All four factors have strong correlation to successful implementation of Life Skills Education. Only 13% of the teachers in this study indicated that they believed they had the capacity to deliver Life Skills Education in the curriculum fully.

This study identified the urgent need for LSE to be incorporated into initial teacher training and for policy makers and school leaders to ensure that teachers have ongoing effective support to develop life skills of vulnerable children who live in challenging home environments.

**Keywords:** life skills, factors, implementation, curriculum, training

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## 1. Introduction

Maldives is an upper middle income country with a resident population of just over 400,000 and a per capita income of over US\$6000 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In the past 40 years, the Maldivian society has undergone major socio-cultural change. Disruptions to Maldivian family and community structures and support systems, as well as livelihood practices, include: intense migration of men from remote islands to resorts near the capital city in search of tourism sector employment opportunities; migration of rural poor families to the capital city, Male', for better life chances; erosion of traditional livelihood practices in the islands; continuing disparities in access to education and employment opportunities between Male', the capital city, and the rural islands.

Ongoing migration from the outer atolls to the capital has led to a situation of increasing urban poverty and squalid living conditions in Male' while weakening the socio-economic structures in the rural islands. Loss of income and social connection through traditional livelihood practices, and environmental degradation, exacerbate the issue. The destruction of social fabric has opened up spaces for social ills such as illicit drug abuse, drug related violence, robbery, theft, vandalism, sexual offences, and domestic violence, as well as increasing gang violence (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014; National Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

The cost of disruption to traditional ways of living and family structures has been borne not only by adults, but also by children. Children spend more time indoors and online, as streets and outdoor spaces are perceived as unsafe for children without adult supervision. Young children are frequently cared for by grandparents (either at the children's home, or in grandparents' homes in remote islands, while parents are in Male'); older children are left with other tenants in mid-rise sublet apartments in Male', or left locked inside their homes, while parents are at work. Increasing rates of divorce among young parents leave children with limited nurturing and care opportunities.

The vulnerability of Maldivian children to psycho-social risk has only begun to emerge in the last decade. Evidence suggests that children are increasingly engaging in criminal activities related to drug use and drug trade. One in every three Maldivian children is at risk of neglect, abuse and or exploitation (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2013, 2015a; Shifa, 2009, National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Increasing frequency of drugs and alcohol consumption, mental health conditions, hopelessness, engagement in violent and aggressive behaviours, and ideation of suicide, indicate that life skills development should be a priority for all children from preschool to adulthood.

Children have self-reported that they would like to be able to cope with violence in the society,

in the community, and in the family, as well as violence among children. Similarly, they have identified the need to deal with bullying and peer pressure, including cyber bullying and cyber pressure (UNICEF, 2015b).

Maldives, as a low lying island nation, is at serious risk of adverse effects of climate change and disruption to existing subsistence livelihoods due to beach erosion, infrastructural damage, loss of biodiversity, flooding, drought and associated impact on human health and food security (UNDP, 2014), increased migration, urbanization, socio cultural and economic poverty. Developing children's resilience to thrive in extremely adverse circumstances is a necessity.

Since Maldives has a ratio of one teacher to every fifty citizens, teachers can play a crucial role in mitigating the negative influences of increased urbanization, violence, aggression, abuse, neglect, socio-economic poverty, and environmental degradation experienced by children. However, all school staff, including teachers, must have the know-how to provide the interventions required to meet not only children's academic needs, but also children's social, emotional, and spiritual needs. While Life Skills Programs have been introduced in Maldivian schools as an extra-curricular intervention, and Life Skills have been integrated into the 2014 National Curriculum, there have been no studies done up till now to identify teacher preparedness for Life Skills Education, or of the capacity of Maldivian teachers to deliver Life Skills Education.

## **2. Review of Key Concepts and Trends in Life Skills and Life Skills Education**

Delors Commission Report to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (1996), "Learning: The Treasure Within" articulates education as learning throughout life and as having four pillars; learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together. Life Skills Education in this paper is focusing on the learning to be, and learning to live together aspects of education, rather than general, technical, or vocational education which fall under learning to know, and learning to do, aspects of Life Skills Education.

Life Skills are defined by World Health Organisation (WHO) as psychosocial abilities and attitudes that enable people to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (WHO, 1997, 2009). Life Skills are not a domain, or a subject, but cross-cutting applications of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills, which are important in the process of individual development and lifelong learning. Life Skills can play an important role in promoting the mental wellbeing of an individual through development of self and social awareness, through gaining personal and social skills to develop healthy relationships, and to become personally and socially responsible (WHO, 1997, 2009; Parry & Nomikou, 2014).

Life Skills Education aims to develop psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help children and adults to make informed decisions, solve problems, recognise and appreciate individual and group differences, cooperate and empathise with others, think creatively and communicate effectively to cope with negative emotions and stressors, and to deal with inevitable conflicts encountered in life, and prevent aggressive behaviours (WHO, 2009).

Development of personal agency through self-regulation skills such as impulse controlling, relaxation, self-monitoring, goal setting, time management, and self-evaluation are considered as self-awareness and self-management skills which lead to resilience and efficacy to resist adverse effects on life, boost academic achievement and job prospects (WHO, 2009).

There is evidence that LSE contributes to development of self-worth and self-esteem, confidence, assertiveness, ability to negotiate, resolve conflicts, think critically, evaluate consequences of actions, develop healthy relationships and to protect against bullying and peer pressure (Swisher, Smith, & Vicory, 2004; WHO, 2009; UNICEF, 2012). LSE can enable children and young adults to identify risky situations and respond appropriately to mitigate the risks. Research evidence indicates the positive influence of LSE on drug abuse reduction among University students (Moshki, Hassanzade, & Taymoori, 2014); suicide prevention in secondary school students (Laframboise & Lewis, 2008); and improving mental health conditions among middle school children (Jamali et al., 2016). Life Skills Training can have a preventive effect on youth taking up smoking and drinking (Zollinger et al., 2003; Bühler, Schröder, & Silbereisen, 2008)

More importantly, Life Skills Education (LSE) is a set of key skills which are as important as literacy, numeracy, reasoning skills, and vocational skills, especially for young people growing up in families with socio-economic disadvantages. Life Skills Education enables young people to function as individuals, as members of a family and a community, and enables them to participate as active citizens within societies (Li, Ahmed, Khan, & Hongwei, 2016).

Life Skills can be acquired through outcome oriented school based training, or through direct life experiences which enable young people to solve problems appropriately and responsibly in managing their own lives, or dealing with issues encountered in their everyday lives. Young people are taught how to use these skills simultaneously in real life situations, and to recognise the relationship between different Life Skills (UNICEF, 1997, Parry & Nomikou, 2014). Hence, Life Skills Education (LSE) can enable children to have self-efficacy and agency to achieve success in their academic and personal lives (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Srikala & Kishore, 2010)

### 3. Review of Life Skills Education in Maldives

Life Skills Education (LSE) as a distinct aspect of children's education was first introduced in the Maldives in 2004. This program aimed to provide a set of skills for adolescent sexual and reproductive health, to enhance students' personal and social competence to resist risky behaviours and situations such as HIV/AIDS, promiscuity, sexually transmitted infections, adolescent pregnancy, and sexual abuse. The LSE program was introduced as an extra-curricular activity for secondary school students by the Ministry of Education, and for out of school youth by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It was conducted with financial support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (UNICEF, 2015b). At this stage, other aspects of Life Skills training for prevention of aggression, bullying, and substance abuse was included in the Social Studies Curriculum. Moral education was considered to be the domain of the Islamic Studies curriculum. However, curriculum provision to meet the psychosocial and spiritual needs of children was fragmented and piecemeal. Impact of delivery was dependent on individual teachers' knowledge, skills, motivation, and attitude towards meeting children's needs.

Taking into consideration that Life Skills was a new concept in the country, 86 Life Skill facilitators were trained in two areas- conceptual understanding of Life Skills, and facilitation of Life Skills training for adolescents and youth. Following the training, Life Skills sessions were conducted as a pilot project in five schools: three government schools in the capital city, Male', one atoll based government school, and one private school in Male'. Initially, the program was introduced only to Grade Seven and Grade Nine students. Based on teachers' high perception of benefits of LSE on the behaviour of children, the program was expanded to include all grades from Grade Six to Grade Ten. By 2009, 1140 facilitators had been trained, 3 Life Skills packages were developed, and the Program was introduced in additional primary and secondary schools of Male', as well as in the atolls. By 2014, sixty schools had begun to offer an extra-curricular Life Skills intervention to focused groups of students. (UNICEF, 2015b)

Life Skills packages continued to have a reproductive and sexual health theme which consisted of core general Life Skills (assertiveness, self-esteem, communication etc.), as well as topic specific Life Skills (child abuse, gender, sex, HIV AIDS, responsible parenting, etc.). Life Skills sessions have been promoted as learner-centred, participatory, one hour sessions to be led by trained facilitators. However, most of the initially trained facilitators are no longer working as LSE facilitators, indicating that there were no inbuilt strategies to promote continuous professional development and incentives to continue to work as LSE facilitators.

Commitment by those in educational leadership to make Life Skills Education mandatory for all students is evident in government documentation. Education for All (Ministry of Education,

2008), National Development Priorities, the Millennium Development Goals, the Sixth National Development Plan, the current Education Sector Master Plan, and the Vision 2020, give emphasis to ensuring that young people's learning needs are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and Life Skills programs. Though most aspects of Life Skills Education are integrated in the 2014 National Curriculum, and intervention packages exist for some extra-curricular interventions, impact of these interventions will depend on teacher capacity and preparedness to deliver the required interventions.

#### **4. Methodology and Research Design**

For this study, a quantitative research approach was used as it required identification of trends and a deeper understanding of the relationships among variables (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2014). Data was gathered through a multi-layered descriptive survey. The survey items were developed based on findings from literature review and focus group discussions with experienced local Life Skills teachers. The final questionnaire was developed using a Delphi approach to surveying, where the survey questions were adapted based on findings of an initial questionnaire to ensure reliability and validity of the findings.

The survey questionnaire was a Likert-type questionnaire designed in a tick box format with a 5-point scale. It had 24 questions which were distributed according to the four factors selected as challenges in implementing Life Skills Education: Teachers' Attitude (6 items), LSE Teaching Pedagogies (6 items), Adequacy of Training (6 items) and Teachers' motivation (6 items).

The survey participants were chosen using purposive sampling. All the teachers in the only two schools of Male' where LSE has been taught continuously since 2004 were invited to participate in the study. Altogether 90 teachers worked in one school and 96 in the other school. The questionnaires were sent to the principals of both schools, with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a request to identify a focal staff member who would distribute and collect the questionnaires. 106 teachers out of the 186 teachers working in the two schools completed the survey.

#### **5. Results and Discussion**

Background demographics are presented first, followed by teachers' responses to the questions on participation in professional development activities in LSE, perceptions of professional mastery, teachers' attitudes towards LSE, and motivation to teach LSE. The findings from this study are compared to research findings by researchers in other countries, and research on best practice in LSE.

## 5.1 Background Information

Student population in both schools were between 1500 and 2500, with classes from Year One to Year 10 in both schools. Of the 106 teachers who completed the survey, 63% were female. 19% were in the age group 18 to 24 years, 49% in the 25 to 34 year age group, 31% in the 35 to 44 year age group, and 7% in the 45 to 54 year age group. All the participants were qualified teachers. 30% of the teachers had 0-5 years of experience, while 29% of the teachers' had 5-10 years of teaching experience, and another 26% of the teachers had 10-15 years of teaching experience. Nine percent of the teachers had 15-20 years of teaching experience, while 4% of the teachers had above 20 years of teaching experience. Thus, the participants in this study were mostly teachers with adequate levels of teaching experience.

## 5.2 Professional Development

Curriculum implementation relies on well-trained teachers and on-going capacity building to ensure commitment and internalisation of the curriculum (Orodho, Waweru, Ndichu, & Nthinguri, 2013). Capacity building of teachers which is led by coaching, support and supervision at all levels, leads to acquisition of knowledge and skills which improves teacher quality and confidence to implement LSE successfully (Gager & Elias, 1997).

In the Maldivian context, in initial teacher training programmes, 8 hours of Life Skills Education training is given in the first year of training. Though there is a Life Skills module available in the teacher training program at Maldives National University, this is included in the fourth year of training. As students currently complete only three years of training, students no longer take the Life Skills module.

More than half of the teachers in this study (54.7%) confirmed that they rarely had opportunities for further training in LSE. Only 43.4% of the teachers stated that they had any opportunity for further professional development in LSE.

## 5.3 Perceptions of Professional Mastery

Life skills education requires students to be given opportunities to construct meaning for themselves individually and collaboratively, through discussion and debate with peers, as well as through learning in one to one situations with teachers and other experts. To teach LSE, teachers must use teaching strategies which will involve children in activities such as real case discussions, brainstorming, field visits, panel discussions, oral and digital storytelling, songs, group discussions, debates, poster presentations, role plays, games, projects, poetry recitals and drama (WHO, 2009).

Only 13.2% of the teachers who participated in this study self-reported to be skilled in participatory and experiential learning. 55.7 % of the teachers reported that they were not confident to use experiential and participatory learning to teach Life Skills Education. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3).

Findings from this study revealed the urgent need for teachers to acquire active learning methodologies, and to include problem-based learning, experiential learning, and service learning strategies in their repertoire for more meaningful teaching in LSE. Since there are no opportunities for peer observation or mentoring by experts in the field, teachers have no opportunities to develop their perceptions of their own capacities to use experiential learning to teach life skills.

#### **5.4 Teacher Attitude**

Out of the sample, 94 % of the teachers agreed that positive attitude of LSE teachers eliminate the barriers that impede LSE Implementation. However, only 30% of the teachers demonstrated a positive attitude to using LSE teaching methods to teach LSE. Teachers believed their attitude to LSE was affected by the availability of resources to teach LSE. The Life Skills resources they have are outdated and do not cover all areas of life skills in the curriculum. There have been no new resources or guidelines made available with the curriculum.

Lack of appropriate resources, and other incentives such as lack of opportunity for promotion, and lack of recognition of teachers’ efforts to teach LSE, negatively affected their attitude. This was indicated by the unwillingness of newly qualified teachers to do the existing initial training for life skills facilitators as this can put them in a situation where they can be made to teach life skills to the children without adequate knowledge, skills or support.

#### **5.5 Teacher Motivation**

All of the teachers in the study agreed that motivation of the teacher is essential to carry out LSE lessons effectively. Since most of the initially trained LSE facilitators are no longer teaching in the LSE programs, it is evident that motivation to teach Life Skills is limited in the two schools where this study was done. Teachers identified lack of recognition, lack of supervision of LSE, low status of LSE at school level, and lack of support by school management, as factors which discouraged them from teaching LSE. It is worth noting again that the sample for this study came from the only two schools in Male’ that have had ongoing Life Skills Programs since 2004, indicating a somewhat stronger commitment to Life Skills Education than in other schools.

In the two schools in this study, though Life Skills is integrated in the curriculum, it is not time tabled. They also identified that classrooms were too small for children to engage in movement based activities which are an essential element of Life Skills lessons. Life Skills sessions are taught randomly by teachers as the school has to report to the Ministry of Education Ufaa Program that they are teaching Life Skills sessions. Since the teachers do not receive any feedback on the reports they send, teachers do not value teaching the sessions or sending the reports to the Ministry of Education.

Life Skills facilitators did not believe they had sufficient training on Life Skills and Life Skills Teaching Methods. Teachers identified lack of adequate resources, lack of commitment from teachers and coordinators, low morale, and insufficient time, as factors which hindered Life Skills Education. Allocation of time for LSE in school time tables, professional and personal support of head teachers, collaborative, collegial environments, teacher participation in continuous professional development, and familiarity with classroom management for collaborative learning, are extrinsic motivational factors which can contribute to successful implementation of LSE by teachers (Mihalic, Fagan, & Argamaso, 2008).

Deci and Ryan (1985) pointed out that the teachers who have a natural tendency to pursue personal interests and exercise capabilities, tend to seek out and conquer challenges. An 80% response rate for the survey questionnaire completed in absentia of the researcher indicates interest in finding out about life skills education, and an intrinsic willingness to engage with discussion and debate on LSE. However, due to lack of resources, training, support and recognition, as well as the additional burden of reporting on Life Skills teaching to the Ministry of Education, teachers avoid teaching Life Skills lessons.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overcrowded curricula; overcrowded, small size classrooms; focus on traditional high-stake subject examinations; short, superficial, cascade model of training for teachers; high workload of teachers; inadequacy of teaching approaches; poor conceptualization of Life Skills; lack of supervision; unavailability of instructional resources; lack of mentoring, feedback and support, as well as inability to get recognition or promotions based on teaching of life skills, hinder LSE implementation in the two schools in this study, similar to other schools in developing countries (UNICEF, 2012; Mugambi & Muthui, 2013; Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014).

Life Skills Education provides students with self-awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and the skills to make informed decisions, solve problems, empathise with others, cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner, and to cooperate with others to achieve life

goals. Through Life Skills Education, children from preschool to adulthood can be empowered to reach their full potential and contribute positively to the development of self, family, community and society as autonomous citizens.

Since components of Life Skills Education had been integrated in the previous curriculum and implemented piecemeal or not at all, certain considerations will have to be met to ensure successful implementation of Life Skills Education in a new curriculum. Hord (1998) recommended that successful implementation of new curriculum requires consultation and advice from resource personnel, teacher training that is concrete, specific and ongoing, support for school management to lead innovation, and coaching and mentoring support to teachers to identify needs and solve problems.

The results of the present study support previous findings by others that effective implementation of LSE is influenced by training received by teachers in LSE, teachers' positive attitude, and teachers' motivation (Mugambi & Muthui, 2013; Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014).

The results of the present study show that when teachers are enthusiastic about Life Skills Education, they are more positive in eliminating the barriers that impede successful implementation of LSE. Teachers who are keen are more willing to use participatory experiential learning in Life Skills Education. Even though, only 13% of the teachers believed that they had the skills required to deliver LSE Programs, 40% more were positive about trying out these methods by themselves.

The teachers in this study perceived professional development as something provided to them by the Ministry of Education rather than as something which they seek as autonomous learners. Teachers need to be encouraged to develop motivational characteristics such as goal setting, a sense of self-efficacy, and volition as responsible agents of change. As Fullan (1993) suggests, "It is only by individuals taking action to alter their own environments that there is any chance for deep change" (p.40).

Since Life Skills Education has been integrated into the National Curriculum, policy makers need to be vigilant that Life Skills are taught effectively. LSE teachers in this study highlighted that ongoing training is essential in both content of LSE and LSE teaching methods.

When teachers are knowledgeable and confident of their ability, they persist through challenging circumstances, and can be innovative in their practices to overcome the obstacles that impede successful implementation of LSE. If teachers believe they have the capacity to implement Life Skills education, they are more likely to engage in effective implementation of LSE (Korkmaz, 2011). This will increase the possibility of more teachers being positively

motivated to incorporate LSE in their teaching.

For Life Skills Education to be successful in the examination driven culture of Maldivian schools, schools and communities need to be made aware of the importance of Life Skills in children's development and active citizenship. Inclusion of Life Skills in internal school supervisions, external school inspections, in Individual Education Plans, in formative assessments for all children, in end of term examinations, and in extracurricular activities and school games and sports activities, can also boost LSE implementation.

Sharing short video films of best practice of teachers in Life Skills Education on the National Institute of Education (NIE) website could help less experienced teachers to use them as benchmarks for standards of practice by themselves, as well as promote Life Skills Education. This could also develop teacher agency in taking the initiative to develop curriculum content further to fit the context and lesson planning within different key stages. Schemes of work with time allocation, lesson plans, records of work, teaching and learning resources, need to be shared on the NIE website to stimulate discussion and innovation.

LSE requires recognition and development of teachers' own psychosocial competencies and awareness of children's vulnerabilities, risk behaviours, and ways of sensitively supporting all children's psychosocial development. Implementation of Life Skills Education depends on teachers' attitude; and teachers' attitude to LSE is related to their understanding of the subject, and what they personally feel competent in teaching (Abobo & Oredho, 2014). Thus, initial teacher training is essential to enable pre-service teachers to be aware of strategies to plan for psychosocial competency development and assessment of competencies. In the supportive environment of initial teacher training, pre-service teachers can begin to develop mastery of psychosocial skills and begin to recognise importance of learning through vicarious experiences of observing and reflecting on skilled teachers teaching of Life Skills. This can be the foundation on which ongoing professional development by teachers for teachers is built.

Research indicates that teachers require adequate training to master new teaching techniques and content before they are expected to implement new curriculum content in the classroom. When teachers are challenged to use the new learning in the training, they are more likely to develop stronger self-efficacy, and use the learning to innovate and adapt the new learning to suit the children in their classrooms. When teachers are pushed to use the new skills immediately in the class setting, together with expectations for peer observation and instructor observation as well as reflection on their experiences, they are more likely to adopt the new learning. It is only through participation in professional development activities which engage teachers in participatory, student based enquiry, that teachers can develop self-efficacy to bring about change in difficult situations such as negative home influences and give voice to children to

develop personal and social awareness and develop interpersonal skills.

When school heads set high expectations for LSE in their staff performance appraisal, and foster a supportive culture with positive written feedback and clear and compelling improvement targets with time allocated for collaboration, support and feedback, this can play a key role in successful implementation of LSE.

Teachers as Participatory Action Researchers (PAR) of Life Skills Education can empower teachers to be agents of change in delivering creative and innovative pedagogy in LSE, as well as to develop their own resilience to work in adverse conditions. This can extend to participatory action research working with community Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and families, to support with inter-family, inter-community communication and engagement, creating healthy relationships, as well as in developing working relationships. A research led innovative practice can ensure that children are consulted as important and valid sources of information about their needs. Collaboration between families, communities, government bodies, and teachers can increase through participation in research activities. Life Skills can be successfully implemented as a collaborative process by children, teachers, families and communities working together. Participatory Action Research by teachers of their own psychosocial skills and with their own students, in what Freire (1972) called “conscientização” (raising critical consciousness), can be a way forward to recognise and implement psychosocial skills, attitudes and concepts in the National Curriculum.

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