

Structural and social constraints in the teaching of Life Skills for HIV/AIDS prevention in Malawi primary schools

Abstract

The Ministry of Education in Malawi introduced a life skills education program with the intention to empower children with appropriate information and skills to deal with social and health problems affecting the nation, including the fight against HIV infections. This study investigated factors affecting the teaching of the life skills education in four primary schools in the Zomba district, Malawi. Cornbleth's (1990) notions of the structural and social contexts and Whitaker's (1993) identification of key role players in curriculum implementation framed the study. Data was collected through interviews with teachers and principals and observations of teachers' lessons. Findings suggest that the teaching of life skills is constrained by a variety of social and structural contextual factors such as the poor conditions under which teachers are working; greater attention given to subjects such as maths and languages; the cascade model of training teachers and the short duration of training; the inaccessible language in teachers guides; hunger and poverty of learners; lack of community support for sex education; both teachers and learners being infected or affected by the AIDS/HIV pandemic; teachers felt it is inappropriate to teach sexual education to 9 and 10 year old learners. The structural and social barriers to effective life skills education within the current framework indicate the need for alternative sex HIV/AIDS education complementary to the primary school curriculum.

Keywords: Life skills education program, curriculum implementation, factors influencing curriculum implementation

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Introduction

Malawi is a country plagued by social and health problems, such as drug and substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancies and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. About 16.4% of Malawians of between the ages of 15 and 49 years are HIV positive (National AIDS Commission 2004:20). These social and health problems are on the increase among the youth who are nevertheless regarded as *a window of hope* for the poverty-stricken nation (Malawi Ministry of Education 2000:6). The social and health challenges demand that the young people be empowered with appropriate information and skills to enable them to effectively deal with these situations. According to Yankah and Aggleton (2008:465) “life skills education has been advocated as a key component of HIV and AIDS education for young people” for the last 20 years.

In 1999 Malawi’s Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture and the Malawi Institute of Education, with United Nations International Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF) support, developed a life skills curriculum that was piloted in 24 primary schools. Following the successful trial testing in 2000, the Ministry of Education directed that the subject should be implemented in all classes of the primary education cycle (standard 1–8) as a *non-examinable* subject. Life skills education was thus introduced in Malawian primary schools as a way of empowering children with appropriate information and skills in the fight against HIV infections and AIDS and for them to deal with various other everyday social and health problems affecting them.

Life skills are defined as “the skills that enable learners to understand themselves, the world and their place in it” (Malawi Ministry of Education 2000:92). Life skills education on the other hand is defined as

an interactive process of teaching and learning which enables learners to acquire knowledge and to develop attitudes and skills which enable them to cope with challenges of life (Malawi Ministry of Education 2000:92).

Life skills education aims to

continue and extend the development of the skills that the learners bring from home with a focus on the promotion of the holistic development of the learner (Malawi Ministry of Education 2000:92).

The life skills education program aims to teach learners to organise and manage their lives, to develop team spirit regardless of cultural and religious backgrounds, to avoid diseases such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS, to develop positive self-esteem, to cope with the problems of adolescence and to prepare them for the world of work (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2000). Life skills education thus aims to nurture learner development physically as well as socially, emotionally, intellectually, creatively and spiritually. Such holistic development is

essential for the learners’ healthy living as individuals, and members of families and societies which form the basis for all other learning (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2000:92).

Yankah and Aggleton (2008:466) note that

a recent review of life skills work in southern Africa concluded that life skills programs in general are too simplistic to offer any valuable solution to the complex needs of African young people.

There are, however, initial indications that the realities in primary schools make the teaching of the curriculum difficult. According to Malawi Institute of Education¹ report on the monitoring survey of the implementation of life skills education in standards 5, 6, 7 and 8 conducted in 2006, life skills education is taught for the benefit of visitors only. As the report puts it, “Teaching of life skills education on the days of data collection seems to have been prompted by our sending information about our visits” (MIE 2006:15). Other challenging circumstances which adversely affect the teaching of life skills education have been documented. They include lack of instructional materials (MIE 2006:20) and the unprofessional conduct of the teachers.

The aim of this study was to investigate life skills education at four primary schools and identify social and contextual factors that influence the teaching of life skills education program in the Zomba district of Malawi. Furthermore, this study sought to understand how different role players (including teachers, learners, principals, district officials and the community) affect curriculum implementation within this context. It addresses the following question: What are different role players’ perceptions, views and experiences with effective delivery of the life skills curriculum?

Conceptual framework

This article draws on Cornbleth’s (1990:27) conception of curriculum and Whitaker’s (1993:30) elaboration of Cornbleth’s ideas. Cornbleth (1990) distinguishes between a technocratic and critical conception of curriculum and argues for a conception of curriculum as a contextualised social process, as an ongoing social activity that is shaped by a local context. These contexts are “structural and social” (Cornbleth 1990:27). Structural context refer to the school organisation and the individual classroom environment. Whitaker (1993:30) identified key role players involved in the structural context of the school organisation as the school principals and district officials. The key role players in the structural context of the classroom environment are the teacher and the learners. Social context on the other hand refers to the school environment at large in which a curriculum is implemented. This environment includes social, political, economic and demographic conditions and demands and priorities of different groups of people who have some role to play in the education activities of an individual school (Cornbleth 1990:27). In elaborating on Cornbleth’s ideas, Whitaker (1993:30) identified key role players involved in the social context of the school environment at large as the learners and parents or the community members of a school. Learners are also role players in the social context of the school environment at large because learners come from the community. The learners bring some of the strengths and constraints to their learning situation from their homes or communities. The learners’ home background in terms of the social conditions of the communities where these learners come from is one of the major determinants of a learner’s success.

Literature review

Literature on the teaching of life skills suggest that the subject is different from other subjects in that it is particularly concerned with teaching of values. Values are however not learned as other curriculum subjects. Values are better taught by living them. For example, Krilik (2008:3) argues that “values are learned as they do not pass from parents to children in the form of DNA”. Learners learn values through observing and imitating their teachers’ behaviours (Jansen 2008:4). Teachers thus need to be role models of good behaviour if they wish their learners to develop the desired values. Thus having a subject like life skills which teach children what’s wrong or right may not be a guarantee that the children are going to behave accordingly. The teaching of values in life skills need to be reinforced by teachers’ professionally appropriate behaviour if children are to develop the desired values. This position is confirmed by Prinsloo (2007:160) who found that life orientation² programs made little impact on the learners when teachers were not exemplary role models. This means that the teacher’s conduct may undermine what they try to teach. Prinsloo (2007:160) adds that

teachers’ own self-discipline, diligence, and high moral standards are important requisites for the successful implementation of these life orientation/life skills education. programs.

[...]

morality defines a person’s behaviour as good or bad, right or wrong, and teachers whose behaviour is regarded as bad and wrong by learners are unable to be successful facilitators in the programs.

These arguments imply that some teachers who teach learners values in life skills education may be undermining the program through their conduct.

Research of life skills education in Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) countries have identified the following constraints as undermining the successful teaching of the program: Superficial training of teachers to teach the subject, the subject not being examinable in national high-stakes examinations, conflict between sexual education and culture, HIV/AIDS status of teachers and learners and poor management of curriculum implementation, including shortage of textbooks. In Zimbabwe the superficial training due to the cascade model of training teachers (Rembe 2006:10) constrained implementation of the life skills program. Life orientation is not being taken seriously by teachers in South Africa because it is not an examinable subject (Rooth 2005:60). In some cases, it was not being taught at all despite the fact that it is included on the timetable while in other schools, it was not even included on the timetable. The non-examinable status of the subject has also been noted as another factor which undermines its implementation. Whitaker (1993:40) asserts that

due to the great value given to public examination certificates by communities and schools, teachers have tended to concentrate on subjects that are examinable and are thought to promote academic excellence.

Community resistance to sexuality education in life orientation is another constraining factor. The discomfort that teachers feel about teaching safe sex practices

contributes to lack of or scant attention to its teaching. According to Rooth (2005:180), teachers omit teaching HIV/AIDS issues in the life skills program, thus avoiding the most crucial issues. Lowe (2008:75) reports the devastating effect of HIV/AIDS on schooling in Africa including Malawi. According to Lowe, large numbers of children are orphaned by HIV/AIDS in Malawi. Some of these children are also infected with HIV/AIDS themselves. The orphaned children are usually relegated to the grandparents, or to other more distant relatives, who have less interest in their education than in their *free* labour. Children exploited for their labour is a common phenomenon in Malawi. Lowe reports that lack of food and illness are the major reasons for poor attendance at school.

Similarly, Prinsloo (2007:160) found that many teachers in South Africa are not able to handle issues of HIV/AIDS and they avoid engaging pupils on the subject because they are not comfortable to teach that which affect them and their learners.

The management of curriculum implementation has been identified as an important condition for a curriculum to be effectively implemented (Mahlangu 2001). The successful implementation of a curriculum requires the more difficult task of maintenance of the curriculum, rather than just introducing it in the schools. The instructional leadership of the principal is crucial for successful implementation (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1993; Prinsloo, 2007). School principals, regarded by Ornstein and Hunkins (1993:319) as *curriculum and instructional leaders* should “spend time visiting teachers in the classroom and plan staff development programs”. Prinsloo’s (2007) study found that lack of commitment by some school principals to make life skills education a success in their schools undermined the successful implementation of the program in South Africa.

Literature has also identified shortage of textbooks and large classes as impediments to the teaching of life skills for HIV/AIDS prevention. For example, Lowe (2008:175) and Kadzamira (2006:50) speculated that lack of learning resources, especially textbooks, affects the successful implementation of the curriculum in Malawi. Lowe found that there was a high pupil to textbook ratio in the schools involved in his study. Similarly, Kadzamira noted that the primary school system in Malawi lacks teaching and learning materials, especially the rural primary schools.

Literature has further identified large class numbers as affecting the quality of teaching of curriculum subjects (Lowe, 2008; Prinsloo, 2007). Lowe argues that classes over 60 reduce the ability of teachers to teach and pupils to learn. Lowe (2008:19) further asserts that “in sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank (1998) has recommended that classes should be no larger than 40 in the primary school”. Similarly, Prinsloo (2007:161) indicates that overcrowding in the classrooms in South Africa acts as a barrier in the process of teaching life orientation. Prinsloo quotes one teacher involved in his study as arguing that

to take care of 40 or more learners at the same time in a short period is a difficult task [and] it leads to teachers failing to create an atmosphere of personal trust between themselves and individual learners.

Large classes are particularly of concern in life skills education compared with other subjects, because this subject deals with development of social skills and changing of attitudes and values in learners. Development of skills and changing of attitudes requires a teacher to give each learner individual attention to ensure that the learner develops these skills.

This study seeks to add to the literature on life skills education in the SADC region by investigating the views, perceptions and experiences of different role players in the teaching of life skills for HIV/AIDS prevention in Malawi primary schools

Methodology and data collection

A qualitative research approach and a case study method was decided on for this study. Qualitative research is interested in gaining insight into and understanding of a phenomenon. One of the assumptions of qualitative research is that multiple realities are socially constructed through individual and collective definitions of a situation (McMillan & Schumacher 1993:40). The present study assumed that the different role players contribute to the enacted curriculum. In so doing, they adapted, transformed or interpreted a curriculum to suit their situation.

This study used a collective case study approach. In a collective case study, a single case is studied in depth, which could be an individual, a group, an institution, a programme or a concept (McMillan & Schumacher 1993). The case study method enables the study of things in detail (Denscombe 2003:70). With case studies, it is possible to gain a unique perspective of a single individual or group (Denscombe 2003:70). This study is a case study because it focused on six teachers and principals in four schools. It sought to investigate life skills implementation with specific teachers within specific contexts. It used collective case study in that six teachers were studied in-depth. Stake (2000), refers to a study extending to several cases as a collective case study. Stake (2000:437) further argues that in a collective case study, individual cases are selected because it is believed that comprehending them will lead to better understanding of, and perhaps better theorising about, a still larger collection of cases. The use of multiple cases in this study created opportunities for within-case and across-case approaches of data analysis to be done.

Sampling method and sample size

The Zomba district was selected because it benefits most from many educational agencies. The local national curriculum development centre pilots its educational innovation programs in the district's schools. Also, the centre uses the district's schools to identify teachers' needs in the implementation of curriculum innovations. The centre also pilots its in-service teacher education programs in the schools of the district. Most program activities related to the improvement of the quality of education conducted by the Faculty of Education of Chancellor College, on the University of Malawi's main campus, are piloted in the schools of Zomba district. The Malawi National Examinations Board, located in the district, also pilots its related program

activities in the schools of the district. The primary school teachers of the district therefore are privileged to learn from the three educational stronghold institutions located in the area. The chances therefore are that the schools in Zomba district are likely to implement curriculum innovations more successfully than schools in other districts in the country. It is likely that if schools in Zomba district face challenges in implementing the life skills education curriculum, then challenges in schools in other districts may be worse.

The district further provides good context for evaluation of an education program, because the rural and urban schools in the district provide, to a certain extent, a picture of schools and classrooms in Malawi. It is likely that any implementation challenges or successes related to physical facilities may also apply to schools in the other remaining 27 districts.

School sample

Four state schools were selected for the study.³ Two schools referred to as Bango and Chaje are located within a rural area and are poorly resourced in terms of basic resources such as electricity, telephone access, sanitation, school infrastructure and seating facilities. Bango was chosen on the basis of being a high performing school in the national examinations compared to the other three schools in the sample. It seems likely that the high performing school has good teachers and if such a school is having challenges in teaching life skills education, then the other schools in the district which are not as high performers may have greater problems or challenges in teaching the subject.

The remaining two schools, Madzi and Ndiwo are located in the urban area and are adequately resourced in terms of basic facilities such as electricity, sanitation facilities, school infrastructure and seating facilities. Ndiwo is located at a Teacher Development Centre (TDC), where teacher professional development activities take place. It seems likely that the presence of the TDC would positively affect a teacher's knowledge, perceptions and understanding of life skills education and teaching practice of the subject.

Teacher sample

In all six teachers were studied in the research. The choice to study standard 4 was also purposeful. Standard 4 was the first targeted class for life skills education because

statistical figures showed that this was typically the terminal class for most children and it was important that children be equipped with the necessary skills for them to prevent contraction of HIV/AIDS before they drop out of school (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2000:23).

The Ministry of Education attaches a lot of value to standard 4 life skills education for the reason which has been stated above, hence the particular need for the subject to be effectively taught and achieve its objectives in this class.

At both Ndiwo and Chaje schools, two teachers are allocated to teach Standard 4 on account of the large class sizes. The teachers assist one another in class management

and do team teaching. Four Life skills teachers were interviewed and two lessons of these teachers were observed. All life skills education teachers in standard 4 were included regardless of whether they were trained in the teaching of the subject or not.

Teachers' ages ranged from 30 to 40 (two teachers withheld their ages). Five of the teachers in this study were females and only one was male. All the teachers had minimum qualifications for their positions as teachers in the primary school and were relatively experienced. Five had more than 10 years, and one less than five years, experience. Only two teachers were trained in the normal training program of the teaching of the subject. The sample teachers' biographical information is presented in table 1 below:

Table 1: Teachers of life skills education biographical data

Teacher	Gender	Age	Professional qualification	Teaching experience	School where teaching
Chimtengo	Male	40	T2*	16 years	Rural school
Nasibeko	Female	unknown	POE**	20 years	Urban school
M'thiko	Female	unknown	POE**	17 years	Urban school
Chiutsi	Female	35 years	T2*	2 years	Rural school
Wakwathu	Female	33 years	T2*	11 years	Urban school
Leka-leka	Female	35 years	T2*	15 years	Urban school

* a teaching certificate for those who entered teacher training as holders of Malawi School Certificate of Education (Form 4).

** Professional Officer Extended. A teaching certificate awarded to those who did a three year Diploma in Education course at the University of Malawi.

Two methods were used to collect data in the study, namely, interviews and classroom lesson observations. Twelve lessons were audiotaped and transcribed. In addition to tape recording, field notes were also written in shorthand. There were three types of interviews conducted in the study. These were pre-observation interviews, followed by post-observation interviews, as well as interviews with principals. Initial interviews with standard 4 teachers were used to investigate the nature of the career development of the teachers and their perceptions of their job, the goals of the life skills program, their working practices in the teaching of the program and challenges facing the teaching of the program and how they were coping in their work. Immediately after completing lesson observations, follow-up interviews with the teachers were conducted. The lessons provided a common base for further probing the teachers' views of their classroom practices. The follow-up interview data triangulated with the pre-lesson observation interview data to increase the reliability and validity of the data of the study.

Interviews were also conducted with principals to find out about the support provided to the teachers of life skills education, the status of the subject at the school

and in the community and the standard of teaching of the life skills teachers. The data from the interviews with school principals was triangulated with data from teacher interviews and lesson observations to add to the reliability of data.

Data analysis

Data were analysed both inductively and deductively. Using deductive analysis, the interview and class observation data were coded by posing questions against data in order to come up with themes. The questions which were posed against the data were:

- What is this incident about?
- What is the main concern of the participants?
- What category of Cornbleth's (1990) and Whitaker's (1993) factors affecting curriculum implementation does this incident indicate?

Inductively, data was analysed using the thematic content analysis method (Stake 1995:437). Stake describes this method of data analysis as a way of analysing data by organising it into categories on the basis of themes, concepts or similar features. Using this model of data analysis, the interview and class observation data were categorised into themes. The themes used were broadly related to the different factors that influence the implementation of a curriculum identified by Cornbleth (1990) and Whitaker (1993).

Findings

The study revealed that teacher-related, learner-related and school context shape the implementation of the life skills education for HIV/AIDS prevention in Malawi. These findings are presented in the following sub-sections.

Teacher factors

Teachers' understanding and practice of life skills program

All the teachers in the sample were able to identify the goals of life skills education. Simply knowing the goals of the program is not sufficient for teaching life skills education successfully, as evidenced by classroom observations of lessons. One of teachers taught a lesson in which she discussed ways of getting money. She linked this discussion to the prevention of HIV/AIDS, one of the goals of life skills education. She did this by asking her learners to discuss how some ways of getting money can lead one to contract HIV/AIDS. This prompted her learners to identify the risks associated with prostitution, for example contraction of HIV/AIDS. In the other lessons observed, teachers focussed more on developing language and comprehension than learners' life skills. The following excerpt from one of the lessons illustrates this:

Teacher: Please listen to this story and I will ask you questions to answer at the end.

Kwame was a prefect at Mkute school. He was in charge of social activities in the school. One day, on a Saturday, a band was hired to play music at the end of the

month. The school was near a trading centre. Some students in the school had friends at the centre.

During the dance, Kwame spotted one vendor from the trading centre who appeared to be drunk. Kwame took the responsibility of making sure that there were no intruders during the dance. He worked hard to find out who had invited the vendor to the dance...

The questions posed: “How many people are mentioned in the story? Which day of the week did this story take place? Where did the story take place?” tested learners’ comprehension skills and did not move into substantive information on the topic.

Discomfort with sex education topics

Two teachers in the sample feel that there is a mismatch between the age of learners and some content in the life skills program so they skip teaching some content in the program. For example, Chiutsi feels that the material on sexual relationships is not suited to 9–10 year olds and it is against her culture to talk of human sexual reproductive organs and sexual intercourse with young children. She has therefore chosen not to teach about sexual relationships as she remarked

it is not good for a grown up person like me to be talking about sexual relationships and sexual intercourse to small children like these. I skip the content which deals with sexual intercourse. This material is not suited to the age of the children.

Teacher’s methods in teaching life skills education

Teachers’ Guide for life skills for standard 4 advises the use of a variety of participatory methods. However in the lessons observed, teachers mainly used just group discussion. For example, Nasibeko describes the way she structures her lessons as follows:

I introduce the lesson by explaining the topic of the day. I then put learners in groups, with one of the learners as a leader in each group. I give them work to do. I tell them to report to the whole class what they have discussed. I then summarise the main points from the group reports.

The other teachers’ lessons followed a similar pattern. They started their lessons with a recap of the previous lesson. They then put learners in groups for a short discussion of some topic. While learners were still in their groups, the teachers tended to ask questions which usually called for chorus or short answers from the learners.

Teacher health status

One of the principals explained that

some teachers are infected by HIV/AIDS themselves, or they have family members or colleagues suffering from the disease. It becomes very difficult for such teachers to teach about HIV/AIDS.

This view was not corroborated by all the teachers. One of the teachers responded:

I would still teach HIV/AIDS if I was infected or affected because it is my job as a teacher to do so. I would not teach only if I fell very ill and cannot manage to come to school.

The discrepancy may arise because HIV/AIDS is an issue of confidentiality and teachers have choice to disclose their status.

Teacher absenteeism

Many teachers are absent themselves due to HIV/AIDS related illness. Investigations also revealed that this increases other teachers' workloads, resulting in some subjects, including life skills education, not being taught. This was explained by Chimtengo's principal:

Teachers who are infected tend to be absent from school for lengthy periods of time. Their colleagues find themselves having to carry the burden of teaching extra classes. The teachers who take care of their ill colleague's classes usually just take care of few subjects such as mathematics and English in their colleague's class. Sometimes it is difficult to find replacements for teachers who are unable to discharge their duties because of ill health.

Teacher development (training) in the teaching of life skills education

Only two teachers in the sample underwent a two day training program for the teaching of life skills. One of these two teachers, experienced a personality clash with the trainer and as a result admits: "I was not attentive. I did not like the training because the trainer kept swearing throughout". Lack of training of the three untrained teachers affected the way they approach the teaching of the subject. For example, Chiutsi pointed out that: "I teach the subject in the same way I teach other subjects, as I was not trained in the teaching of the subject". It has been shown that one of Chimtengo's lessons was aimed at teaching language skills rather than life skills.

In contrast to the untrained teachers, the trained teacher, Wakwathu, followed two of the key practices advocated in the life skills curriculum material. Wakwathu explicitly addressed two goals of the life skills program; to equip learners with appropriate information about the social challenges facing them, and help them develop the necessary skills for them to deal with these challenges. Wakwathu's lesson covered HIV/AIDS as a social challenge facing her learners and assertiveness as a skill.

Chiutsi's remarks and Chimtengo's practice in the teaching of Life skills show that untrained teachers in the study did not always employ appropriate approaches for the teaching life skills education. They therefore adopt the methods they use in teaching other subjects as a coping strategy in teaching Life skills. Teaching Life skills in the same manner as any other subject may result in Life skills lessons ending up as a medium for teaching and learning other academic skills more than life skills, as evidenced from Chimtengo's lesson. This results in the lessons deflecting from the goals of life skills education. This can undermine the implementation of the program.

Learner factors

Prevalence of HIV/AIDS

Teachers identified the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the community as a hindrance to the teaching of life skills. Chimtengo feels that presence of learners in class who

are affected and infected by HIV/AIDS makes the teaching of HIV/AIDS sensitive. Chimtengo explained:

there is prevalence of HIV/AIDS in this area. I have some learners in my class who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS and they look infected themselves. Other learners have sick parents and relatives suffering from the disease. It is sensitive to teach about HIV/AIDS as the affected children become uncomfortable. I therefore do not go into details on an HIV/AIDS topic.

One teacher in the sample thus omits teaching some issues in the program, such as HIV/AIDS, as he feels that it is not appropriate to teach things that may affect learners and their families directly. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS affects learners and poses a challenge to one of the teachers who chooses not to teach issues of HIV/AIDS. This results in the teacher not addressing the most crucial issues in the life skills curriculum.

School context factors

Team teaching

Initial investigations in the study revealed an enabling context for implementation of life skills in the urban schools in this study. Two teachers were allocated to a class in both urban schools. Teachers in the urban schools also utilised their pairing as class teachers to do team teaching. In the observed lessons, Wakwathu taught, while Leka-leka assisted with keeping learners quiet and listening. This may facilitate learning, as learning experiences are maximised in a well-managed class. They shared topics basing on their strengths in the content knowledge of the topics. This can contribute to the successful implementation of life skills education. The learners in urban schools were more active in their participation in the lessons. They articulated their thinking better, both in their responses to the questions posed to them by their teachers and the questions which they in turn asked their teachers. Children in urban areas are generally better socialised to schooling and more used to participation than their fellow learners in the rural schools.

While the allocation of two teachers per class eases the problems associated with large classes in the urban schools, teachers in the rural schools claim large classes undermine their effectiveness in the teaching of life skills education. Chimtengo indicated:

I had too many groups because of large number of learners. This made me to reduce the time for consolidating the feedback from the groups. I wanted all the groups to present before time was up (to mark the end of the lesson).

Large classes make teachers reduce the amount of time they spend on tasks. Spending less time on tasks affects the learning from a lesson and this undermines the implementation of life skills.

Local community's support

Our investigations revealed that the schools in the urban communities offer a more supportive context for the implementation of life skills education in the urban schools. Wakwathu's principal remarked:

Parents encourage the teaching of life skills here. They tell us in the meetings [Parent and Teacher Association meetings] that they learn a lot from their children, from what the children learn in life skills, especially about HIV/AIDS. Life skills does not only help the children. It also benefits the parents.

This suggests that urban communities check what their children learn in the program. Although it is not conclusive, these remarks also suggest that there are urban parents who support their children academically at home in the subject.

While urban communities seem to encourage the teaching of life skills, rural communities seem to negatively affect the teaching of life skills in the rural schools. Some parents and community members objected to illustrations of sexual reproductive organs. Chiutsi's principal cited his own mother as one of those parents objecting to illustrations. He explained how his mother confronted him about the illustrations:

When my mother saw some illustrations in my children's books, she confronted me as to why I could give pupils books with such obscene pictures in them. She said that she brought me up properly herself and did not allow me to be exposed to such obscene things. She told me not to allow my children to be reading such books.

This also suggests that the parents may even discourage their children or wards to read these books. The members of the community at rural schools also view life skills education as estranging children from their cultural roots. Chimtengo explained:

The chief came to enquire what we teach the children as most of them are refusing to enrol at initiation schools. The children tell their parents that they are taught not to go to initiation schools as initiation practices put their lives at risk.

Such complaints by the members of the community about life skills education may result in the parents not encouraging the teaching of the subject in their school and not supporting their children academically in the subject in their homes. This can undermine the implementation of life skills education.

Mixed classes

The teachers saw mixed classes (boys and girls) in life skills together as a challenge to the teaching and learning of the program. For example, Nasibeko explained:

Some girls and boys feel shy to express themselves openly on issues of sexual relationships. I would prefer to have boys taught on their own and girls on their own as well, so that they become free to contribute to class discussions.

Teachers feel that teaching sexual development to boys and girls together affects the quality of class discussions and consequently the quality of learning of life skills education. Teaching boys and girls separately is viewed by some teachers as a way of promoting learning in life skills lessons. This would require the Ministry of Education's permission for teachers to implement their idea of teaching boys and girls separately in life skills.

Shortage of textbooks

In observed lessons where teachers used textbooks, more than six learners shared one textbook. The shortage of textbooks resulted in many learners sitting quietly and just listening to their friends without making much contribution to what was going on in the lessons.

Two teachers in the sample consider the Teachers' Guide for life skills for standard 4 to be overloaded. They feel that there is too much content to be covered compared to the amount of time. Chimtengo remarked: "There are too many activities in a lesson. A lesson is only 30 minutes. In a lesson, there are not less than five activities. I move quickly to finish the activities".

School principals' support

School principals in the sample claimed that they provide support to the teaching of life skills by ensuring that teachers treat life skills as a subject as valuable their other subjects, ensuring availability of needed resources and assisting teachers in the areas in which they find problems in the teaching of life skills. Some of the teachers however seem not to take their principal's advice seriously. For example, Chiutsi remarked: "This subject just adds to workload. It is not examined. It is better for one to concentrate on teaching the examinable subjects". While school principals' encouragement may facilitate its successful implementation, the way teachers treat the subject can negatively affect the teaching of the subject. Some teachers of life skills are giving most attention to examinable subjects at the expense of giving similar attention to the teaching of life skills education.

Most teachers in the sample confirmed that their principals do their best to ensure that resources such as chart papers and textbooks are available at their schools for teaching life skills. For example, Chimtengo remarked that: "The principal requests for some textbooks from the curriculum development centre, the Malawi Institute of Education". Wakwathu pointed out that "the principal buys some chart paper" and Nasibeko indicated that "the principal goes to the neighbouring schools to borrow some textbooks for us".

Wakwathu's principal showed evidence of professional support he provides to the teachers of life skills education. On his office pin board was a school based in-service teacher development program for teachers of all subjects for the year 2008. In confirming her principal's claim, Wakwathu explained:

The principal is helping me in those areas in which I am finding problems in the subject. He sometimes helps me to isolate relevant social difficulties facing learners which certain topics in the curriculum materials are intended to convey. These social difficulties are sometimes not explicit. He also works out with me how best to approach some of my lessons.

Wakwathu's remarks also suggest that the program's training on its own is not enough for a life skills-trained teacher to teach the subject successfully. There is also need of school-based support to complement the knowledge from the training.

School-based principal support therefore is important for effective teaching of life skills education.

Supervision of the teaching of life skills' education by education officials

The urban schools received more frequent supervision and support for the teaching of life skills from the Primary Education Advisors than rural schools. Wakwathu's principal explained:

The advisor monitors the teaching of the teachers in all subjects and identifies the problems which the teachers are facing. He then invites the teachers to the Teacher Development Centre and helps them in the areas they are finding problems in teaching the subject.

The rural schools received less supervision and support from the district officials. Chiutsi's principal remarked:

Since January [2008] the Primary Education Advisor has only come to this school twice. Although they come to see if teachers are in class teaching, they do not advise teachers how to teach the subject [life skills].

The role of the district supervisors is perceived as coercing the teachers to be in class teaching. However, they offer limited support in teacher development and curriculum implementation.

From this sample there appears to be greater district support for urban schools compared with rural schools. Urban schools received frequent courses in the teaching of life skills education, whereas rural schools did not have these courses.

Discussion and conclusion

The different role players' perceptions, views and experiences resonate with the findings of researchers in other SADC countries. This study found that most of the teachers did not teach content on sexual practices because they felt that the content was not suitable for younger children. The teachers thought that younger children become confused when they are taught about issues of sexual relationships, as they do not understand sexual matters at that age. Older learners feel shy to express themselves openly on sexual matters in the presence of the opposite sex. This affects the quality of class discussions and undermines the implementation of the program. In this regard Rooth (2005:180) found that sexuality education in life orientation in South Africa conflicts with traditional community values. Prinsloo (2007:160) found that many teachers in South Africa are not able to handle issues of HIV/AIDS and they avoid engaging pupils on the subject because they become uncomfortable to teach that which affects their learners. Not addressing HIV/AIDS issues in life skills education undermines the implementation of the program.

Teachers who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS are reluctant to teach about an issue which influences them personally. Infected teachers get very sick from the disease, and absent themselves from work. Other teachers have to take care of their classes, so they concentrate on teaching a few (examinable) subjects such as

mathematics and English, leaving out subjects like life skills education. The findings of this study concurs with Ratsatsi (2005). Ratsatsi speculated that a curriculum's alignment to teachers' beliefs is an important condition for successful implementation of a curriculum. Ratsatsi (2005:18) argued that if a teacher feels that a curriculum's content contradicts his/her beliefs, it is quickly dropped or radically altered. Lowe (2008:21) argued that a teacher's personal social circumstances, such as personal or family health restricts that teacher's ability to implement a curriculum effectively. Lowe argues that teachers in Malawi are generally dedicated and hard-working people who do their best under extremely difficult circumstances, but many are constrained by social circumstances such as caring for sick children, personal ill-health, including HIV/AIDS.

Teachers give more attention to examinable subjects such as mathematics and languages and neglect life skills education which is not examinable. In this regard, Rooth (2005) found that life orientation is not being taken seriously by teachers in South Africa because it is not an examinable subject. In some cases, it is not being taught at all, despite the fact that it is included on the timetable. In other schools, it is not even included on the timetable. The findings further concur with Whitaker's (1993) argument. Whitaker identified non-examinable status of a subject as one of the factors which undermines its implementation. Whitaker (1993:40) asserts that

due to the great value given to public examination certificates by communities and schools, teachers have tended to concentrate on subjects that are examinable and are thought to promote academic excellence.

This study found that rural communities consider that life skills education estranges children from their cultural roots by discouraging the children to attend initiation schools. Parents in rural communities are also opposed to illustrations on sexual development in the learning material and discourage learners from reading such content. Teachers and school principals on the other hand believe that these cultural beliefs dilute school learning by reinforcing sexual relationships, the very issues which life skills education confronts. Children get opposing messages, and are confused and torn between two worlds.

The additional insights that this study uncovered relate to differences in rural and urban communities' attitudes towards teaching sexual topics to primary school children. While the urban schools in the study were more tolerant of HIV/AIDS education, and parents indicated that they also become informed of such topics through their children's work, the rural schools parents were more resistant to such topics being taught in schools. It also seems like younger teachers are more willing to teach these topics. The allocation of two teachers to larger classes seemed to be enabling better implementation of the curriculum. However, this attempt to enable the teaching of the HIV/AIDS curriculum is severely hampered by structural and social constraints such as the shortage of textbooks, the reluctance of teachers to teach some topics, the resistance from communities and high rates of HIV/AIDS infection in the district. Notwithstanding the glimmer of hope in terms of the greater tolerance of the urban school teachers and community that this study has revealed, there are

significant challenges facing the teaching of the life skills curriculum in the schools studied. Given the advantageous location of the schools in the Zomba district with reference to ongoing curriculum support from the district officials and from the MIE, one could speculate much weaker attention being given to HIV/AIDS education in other schools in Malawi. In terms of improving the effectiveness of school based life skills education in Malawi, the following recommendations are made:

- That the two day cascade model of training be reviewed and replaced by a more sustained program in which training is conducted by subject specialists and not school principals.
- That factors such as the interest of the teacher and competence in life skills education be considered before allocating it to teachers.
- That HIV/AIDS education be taught to single-sexed groups of learners.
- That a more comprehensive approach to HIV/AIDS prevention is needed, including addressing the challenging area of cultural norms and beliefs.

Attention must also be given to teachers' beliefs that it is inappropriate to teach sexual matters to children of the young age of 9–10, which results in the teachers omitting the very issues that the life skills curriculum has sought to address. Furthermore this study shows that school based HIV/AIDS education cannot be relied on. These findings add an additional component to Yankah and Aggleton (2008), who hold that brief periods of instructions, including school interventions are not very effective in changing attitudes and practices, and that programs taught by youth organisations other than the school may be more effective.

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Endnotes

1. The National Curriculum Development Centre in Malawi and the Malawi Ministry of Education's implementation arm of educational policies in primary, secondary schools and teacher training colleges.
2. A similar program to life skills in Malawi is called life orientation in South Africa.
3. Pseudonyms were used in this study