HFLE 010

NEW: LIFE SKILLS QUALITY STANDARDS (2010)

The terms "life skills" and "life skills education" have been variously defined and this has caused some confusion about what life skills are and what life skills education can achieve. In part, the problem arises because there is no definitive, numbered set of what anyone using the term means by life skills. **Life skills learning and teaching: Principles, concepts and standards** *is intended both as revised programme guidance and as an expression of UNICEF's continued commitment to the right of all children and adolescents to quality life skills education. The document covers key elements of common understanding, new evidence of what life skills education can achieve, how life skills education needs to be planned and implemented in order to achieve results, and finally how learning outcomes could be assessed and monitored.*

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Life skills are psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. They can be grouped under three broad interrelated categories: *cognitive life skills* for analyzing and using information, *personal life skills* for developing personal agency and managing oneself (also referred to as emotional skills), and *inter-personal life skills* for communicating and interacting effeh actively with others (also referred to as social skills). Life skills can be both *generic* (e.g., decision making, goal setting, or communication skills) or *content-specific* (e.g., in relation to specific content areas such as health, citizenship, and the environment). Being equipped with generic life skills can be seen as an end in itself, as improvements in children's cognitive, emotional and social abilities are related to improvements in educational performance, including school and classroom behaviour and academic achievement. However, it is often their content application and contribution to specific areas that have justified efforts to address life skills in curricula.

Life skills education is a structured program of needs- and outcomes-based participatory learning that addresses a broad spectrum of content areas in a continuum *from crisis preparedness to sustainable development*. It aims to influence positive and adaptive behaviour, now and in the future, by assisting learners to develop psycho-social abilities that minimize risk and maximize protective factors. Life skills education is theory- and evidence-based, learner-focused, and delivered by competent facilitators in enabling and protective learning environments. It is monitored for full implementation and assessed and evaluated to ensure relevant learning and improvement of effectiveness.

Life skills education is a crosscutting issue under Focus Area 2 on Basic Education and Gender Equality (Quality of Education). Alongside with education for literacy and numeracy, life skills education is the pedagogical arm of the child-friendly schools model and integral to a human-rights-based framework for quality Education for All.

Priorities for 2010-2011:

- **Scaling-up evidence-based quality interventions —** Organizational Target 7: Increase by 60% the number of programme countries with national quality standards for primary education

based on 'child-friendly schools' (CFS) or similar models

- **Monitor life skills education quality standards, curricula and assessments, with a particular focus on national examinations** – Organizational Target 7: Promote locally based assessment services and support development of national standards for numeracy, literacy and life skills-based education (SIC Code 27737 Monitor life skills education quality standards, curricula and assessments)

Guiding principles for life skills education - Standards and Benchmarks

Life skills education can help children develop analytical thinking abilities, positive self esteem and self-management skills, and constructive inter-personal skills, which in turn can help them to become adults who are more effective in their relationships, more active as citizens, more productive workers, and more compassionate, tolerant and peaceful human beings.

Life skills are developed throughout life. There is no guarantee, however, that children learn the essential life skills needed for adaptive and positive behaviour – they are just as likely to adopt unproductive and negative behaviour. Also, life skills learning does not occur in a vacuum, and the ultimate expression of life skills learning – adaptive and positive behaviour – is greatly influenced by the environment in which individuals live, learn and act.

Life skills development through education is neither a simple or finite process - to be effective it must be based on what can produce positive results. In developing effective programs, the impact of factors that contribute to risk (external hazards and vulnerabilities), and to risk reduction (external opportunities and resilience), must be both carefully assessed and purposefully addressed.

STANDARD 1. LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IS THEORY AND EVIDENCE BASED (Click here for background information)	
BENCHMARK 1.1	Valid research evidence of effectiveness form the basis of life skills education at all stages of planning
BENCHMARK 1.2	Valid cognitive and social learning theories form the basis of life skills education programming
BENCHMARK 1.3	Recent formative research has been conducted to identify risk and protective factors that influence the needs and assets of learners
BENCHMARK 1.4	Relevant gatekeepers and stakeholders, including learners, participate in the development and support of life skills programs
STANDARD 2. LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IS NEEDS AND RESULTS BASED (Click here for background information)	
BENCHMARK 2.1	Learning content reflects learning needs in a continuum from crisis preparedness to sustainable development: disaster risk reduction to environmental protection; conflict resolution to peace building; disease prevention to health promotion; and/or human rights violations to social cohesion
BENCHMARK 2.2	Behavioural goals are identified that increase opportunities, minimize risk and maximize protection in learners' lives in the priority learning areas.
BENCHMARK 2.3	For each behavioural goal, specific learning outcomes in the form of knowledge, attitudes and skills that reduce risk and increase protection and opportunities are developed

BENCHMARK 2.4	For each learning outcome, assessment indicators are established to measure learning progress

STANDARD 3. LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IS SKILLS BASED (Click here for background information)

BENCHMARK 3.1	Teaching activities are developed to reflect established learning outcomes
BENCHMARK 3.2	Learners are informed about intended learning outcomes
BENCHMARK 3.3	Teaching activities are appropriate to learners' age, gender, and experience
BENCHMARK 3.4	Teaching activities make use of participatory and skills-building methods allowing sufficient opportunities to practice skills development
BENCHMARK 3.5	Multiple teaching activities are structured in a logical and cumulative sequence to support reinforcement and internalization of identified learning outcomes
BENCHMARK 3.6	Teachers are trained to use participatory, experiential methods in order to construct learning based on what the learner brings
BENCHMARK 3.7	Teachers are trained with regard to psychosocial support, to allow their own internalization of content and to better support learners with their needs

STANDARD 4. LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IS PROVIDED IN A PROTECTIVE AND ENABLING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT WITH ACCESS TO COMMUNITY SERVICES (Click here for background information)

BENCHMARK 4.1	The learning environment is one in which all learners and staff, including those with specific or additional needs, feel safe, protected, connected, and valued as contributors to, and participants in, learning
BENCHMARK 4.2	The learning environment looks at legislative and structural measures alongside behavioural life skills interventions
BENCHMARK 4.3	Access to community services are encouraged both for planning and for supporting interventions
BENCHMARK 4.4	Life skills interventions are coordinated with other consistent efforts to minimize risk and maximize protection in learners' lives

STANDARD 5. LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION IS MONITORED FOR FULL IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATED FOR ACHIEVED LEARNING OUTCOMES (Click here for background information)

BENCHMARK 5.1	Assessment instruments and mechanisms that reflect the agreed learning outcomes and their indicators are used at regular intervals to determine individual progress toward achievement of the learning outcomes
BENCHMARK 5.2	Information is collected and analyzed to determine the extent to which learners, teachers/educators, parents and other stakeholders are satisfied with learning outcomes
BENCHMARK 5.3	Aggregate assessment measures (individual scores and other measures of programme effects) are analyzed to determine the extent to which the program is helping to minimize risk and maximize protection in learners' lives
BENCHMARK 5.4	Process monitoring mechanisms and instruments are developed and consistently used to collect data needed to measure program implementation and coverage

| **BENCHMARK 5.5** | Information is collected and analysed to determine how characteristics of the learning environment are helping or hindering the goals of the LSE program |

LSE is strategically embedded in national education sector policies and coordinated with national (and international) plans for emergency preparedness, sustainable development and the specific content areas dealt with in the LSE program.

LSE planning is needs and results–based, and implemented based on theory and evidence of effectiveness.

LSE interventions constructively align:
1. learning outcomes designated in the formal school curriculum in line with emergency preparedness and sustainable development);
2. assessment strategies for knowledge, attitudes, skills and behavioural intent (incorporated in national examinations);
3. learning and teaching activities and methods (developed in pre-service and in-service teacher training emphasising: a. participatory methods needed for skills-building; b. comprehensive content matter in line with emergency preparedness and ESD; and c. issues of psychosocial support for both students and staff).

LSE is provided within whole school models for quality education that recognize the added value of protective policies, enabling learning environments, and linkages to community services.

Extra-curricular and non-formal interventions complement the formal school curricula, with a particular focus on children and adolescents especially vulnerable or at greater risk with regard to specific content areas.

School and community interventions are coordinated with an aim to influence social norms and practises that enable, or disable, individuals' use of life skills to choose and manifest positive and adaptive behaviour.

Life skills theory and evidence

Theory and Evidence

The contribution of life skills development to adaptive and positive behaviour stems from **theories in education, health and psychology** describing how individuals learn; adopt new attitudes, beliefs and ideas; and implement new practises. These theories have been applied to behaviour change efforts in health and education, and in advertising and marketing.

Another important source of guidance for the design and implementation of effective life skills education comes from **evaluations of past programs**. Positive impact on learners' knowledge; attitudes and beliefs; abilities; and behavioural intentions from well designed and well implemented life skills-based interventions has been shown in a number of areas. Life skills-based health education has been shown to result in positive change in a wide variety of content areas, including hygiene, nutrition, violence,

sexual and reproductive health, HIV & AIDS and drug misuse. Similar sexuality and HIV education programs have been shown to result in positive effects with regard to sexual risk-taking behaviours. Broader social and emotional skills learning has been shown to result in improvements in educational performance, including school and classroom behaviour and achievement. These evaluations have suggested a number of characteristics for effective programming, which have contributed to the development of the UNICEF standards and benchmarks for life skills education.

Theories supporting life skills education

- **Behaviourism** is a foundational theory according to which all behaviour is shaped through positive or negative reinforcement.
- **Cognitivism** focuses on the inner mental processes such as thinking, memory, knowing, and problem-solving, and views people as rational beings that need active participation in order to learn, and whose actions are a consequence of thinking.
- **Constructivism** argues that social interaction and the active engagement of the child in problem-solving with peers and adults is the foundation of the developing mind.
- **Humanism** is a paradigm that focuses on human freedom, dignity, and potential, with learning viewed as a personal act to fulfil one's potential.
- **Social learning theory** focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It posits that people learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modelling.
- **Problem-behaviour theory** emerged from social learning theory, and views behaviour as the result of: the personality system (e.g., values, expectations, beliefs, attitudes); the perceived environmental system (e.g., perceptions of peers' and parents' attitudes toward behaviour); and the behavioural system (e.g., social norms).
- **The Theory of Reasoned Action** is derived from the social psychology setting, and views an individual's intention to perform a behaviour as a combination of his/her attitude toward performing the behaviour and subjective normative beliefs about what others think he/she should do.
- **Social Influence and Social Inoculation theories** anticipate pressure to engage in risk behaviours, and stress the importance of learning about pressures and ways to resist them before being exposed.
- **Resilience theory** argues that there are internal factors (e.g., problem-solving skills, a sense of purpose, social competence) and external factors (e.g., family and community support) to help overcome adversity.
- **The Health Belief Model** maintains that health behaviour can be explained and predicted by individuals' attitudes and beliefs. It asserts that perceptions - rather than actual facts - are important to weighing up benefits and barriers to adopting or changing health behaviour.
- **The Capability Approach** is an …
- **Social Convention Theory** is an application of a formal mathematical and economical modeling approach to social situations influencing individual decision making processes (Game Theory). It is based on the assumptions that individuals cannot change on their own - a critical mass of people is needed to leverage collective change. Past the "tipping point", change of social norms is rapid, organised and irreversible.
- **Outcomes-based learning** asserts that education planning and delivery should be driven by learning as opposed to teaching. It is a results-based approach that calls for articulation of specific and measurable intended learning outcomes as a first step in the planning process.

Teachers and learners have a clear and early understanding of the goal of the learning process, and assessments support mastery of the defined knowledge, attitudes and skills.

- **Constructive alignment** is based on the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching. It stresses the importance of linking ('aligning') learning and teaching activities and learning assessment with pre-established learning outcomes in order to ensure coherence and reinforcement in learning and teaching.

Evidenced quality characteristics of effective programs

Effective approaches to life skills-based health education in schools

- Gaining commitment: Intense advocacy is required from the earliest planning stages to influence national leadership, to mobilise the community to place skills-based health education on its agenda, and to hold the community accountable for implementing national and international agreements.
- Theoretical underpinnings: "Effective programs are based upon theoretical approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective in influencing health-related risky behaviours."
- Content of programs: The information, attitudes, and skills that comprise the program content should be selected for their relevance to specific health-related behaviours that reduce risk and increase protection in individuals' lives; for example, resisting peer pressure to smoke or use drugs, delaying initiation of intercourse or using contraception, or identifying a trusted adult for support during depression.
- Methods: Effective programs utilise a variety of participatory teaching methods, address social pressures and modelling of skills, and provide basic, accurate information.
- Timing and sequence: Effective education programs are intensive and begin prior to the onset of risk behaviours.
- Multi-strategy for maximum outcomes - Programs need to be coordinated with other consistent strategies over time, such as policies, health and community services, community development, and media approaches.
- Teacher training and professional development: Teachers or peer leaders of effective programs believe in the program and receive adequate training.
- Relevance: Programs must be relevant to the reality and developmental levels of young people and must address risks that have the potential to cause most harm to the individual and society.
- Participation: Develop mechanisms to allow involvement of learners, parents, and the wider community in the program at all stages.

Standards for curriculum-based reproductive health and HIV education programs

- Involve professionals, stakeholders, and those with relevant experience in the development process.
- Conduct assessments of the target group(s)' needs and assets.
- Use a planning framework that relates health goals, desired behaviour change, and activities.
- Consider community values and norms in designing activities
- Consider availability of resources.
- Pilot test curriculum and revise as needed.
- Incorporate a means to assure a safe environment for participating and learning.
- Focus on clear health goals in determining curriculum content, approach, and activities.

- Focus on specific behaviors that lead to or prevent unintended pregnancy, STIs, and HIV.
- Address multiple risk and protective factors affecting sexual behaviors.
- Include multiple activities to change each of the targeted risk and protective factors.
- Incorporate instructionally sound and participatory approaches.
- Use activities, messages, and methods that are appropriate to the culture, age, and sexual experience of targeted populations.
- Address gender issues and sensitivities in both the content and teaching approach.
- Cover topics in a logical sequence.
- Present information that is scientifically accurate.
- Make relevant authorities and gatekeepers aware of the program's content and timetable, keep them informed of significant developments, and encourage them to support the program.
- Establish a process resulting in the selection of appropriate and motivated educators.
- Provide quality training to educators.
- Have in place management and supervision needed for implementation and oversight.
- Implement activities to recruit youth participants.
- Implement activities to retain youth participants.
- Establish monitoring and assessment systems to improve program effectiveness on a continual basis.
- Include activities to address all key topics designated by the curriculum and implement the activities in the order presented.

Guidelines for Social and Emotional Learning
- Grounded in theory and research
- Teaches children to apply SEL skills and ethical values in daily life
- Builds connection to school through caring, engaging classroom and school practices
- Provides developmentally and culturally appropriate instruction
- Helps schools coordinate and unify programs that are often fragmented
- Enhances school performance by addressing the affective and social dimensions of academic learning
- Involves families and communities as partners
- Establishes organizational supports and policies that foster success
- Provides high-quality staff development and support
- Incorporates continuing evaluation and improvement

Life skills teaching - Activities and training of teachers

Aligning learning and teaching

The importance of a good set of relevant, specific and measurable learning outcomes early in the planning process cannot be enough stressed. Once that is done, however, almost everything else depends upon what learners and teachers bring to the learning.

1. Firstly, activities should be selected to support achievement of pre-determined learning

outcomes. The learning outcomes should be made known to the learners, encouraging them to apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills in their personal lives. This is more likely to occur when learners fully participate in relevant, experiential learning activities, and when the process of teaching life skills mirror the process of using life skills. This is why active and participatory methods are essential for successful life skills learning (see Table 6.).

2. Secondly, learning and teaching activities can best support the achievement of learning when they are presented in a logical, ordered and cumulative sequence. In ideal situations, life skills education is a structured and sustained intervention that takes place over time. For these reasons, the inclusion of life skills education in formal school programs is strongly encouraged.

3. Thirdly, skills acquisition requires practice in safe and supportive simulations of the real life situations for which they are being prepared. In the best examples of life skills education, learners interact with one another and the teacher in ways that mimic the effective interaction and healthy behaviour we seek to enable them to exhibit when they confront real life opportunities and challenges.

The process of delivering life skills education must be carefully monitored. At a minimum, data should be collected about the learning and teaching materials developed or used; whether activities were delivered as planned; the number, sequencing and duration of learning and teaching sessions; the number and demographic characteristics of participating learners; qualifications of, or results of training provided to, teachers and other presenters; obstacles encountered; and the reasons for any modifications to the original program plan. Information should also be collected and analysed to determine the extent to which learners, teachers, parents and other stakeholders are satisfied with program delivery and results.

Training of teachers

In life skills education, teachers are not so much imparters of knowledge, as they are facilitators of learning. They must recognize the tremendous influence they have as role models on their learners. In this regard, desirable qualities in teachers include respect, empathy and authenticity, plus an orientation toward positive living and self improvement. Above all, teachers must be open to learning from, and with, program participants. They must recognize that every learner comes to them with unique needs, experiences, strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers who are not familiar with the concepts and methods used in life skills education may initially feel challenged by the participatory learning approach required. Ensuring adequate training for teachers and other educators is therefore a key factor contributing to the effectiveness of life skills education. This training should include opportunities for teachers to evaluate their own attitudes, values, and life skills "proficiency," as these may influence their ability to teach in some content areas. Most importantly, in addition to helping teachers acquire necessary mastery of life skills-related content area, it must particularly ensure that they acquire an equal level of mastery and comfort with student-centred, participatory learning and teaching methods.

Pre-service training of teachers is necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, preparation for quality life skills education teaching. As the content of life skills education is linked to prevailing conditions in society and learners' lives – conditions which can change and evolve – teachers must have access to relevant and current learning and teaching materials and they must have opportunities for continuing education and professional development. Finally, because life skills education addresses the risks and opportunities in learners' lives, teachers should know where, in the local community, various health and

welfare services are provided and be prepared to make appropriate referrals.

Enabling and protective learning environments

Environmental influences on what individuals can, and do, do can be both disabling or enabling" (see Figure 1):

- Risk factors are threats and hazards that increase individuals' potential risk of harm or loss, and vulnerabilities that increase individuals' susceptibilities to hazards.
- Protective factors include aspects that protect people and/or provide positive opportunities for development and success. Resilience – traits like motivation, optimism, faith, perseverance, and resourcefulness that help individuals thrive and overcome obstacles – is also part of enabling factors.

Clearly, life skills education efforts that succeed in reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors in learners' lives have a greater chance of success, and pre-set learning outcomes and the specific content of life skills education programs should be developed with this in mind. But efforts to improve the society in which individuals live, learn, and act should not be limited to the classroom. Anything that influences the physical, legal and social conditions that contribute to risk or enhance protection, and circumscribe or facilitate freedom of action, is an appropriate target for efforts to support and reinforce the impact of life skills education.

As part of LSE evaluation efforts, some attempt to understand how characteristics of the external environment are helping or hindering achievement of the goals of the LSE program should be made. This includes both the immediate learning environment – a school or other facility – and the broader community environment. Some of this information can be obtained through simple surveys of learners, family members and others who live in the community.

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Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring learning and teaching

A reminder of why life skills education efforts should be monitored and evaluated is a good introduction to what needs to be evaluated and how this should be done.

1. First, assessment of individual learning motivates, and provides useful feedback to both teachers and learners. Teachers and learners naturally pay more attention to what will be measured in tests or examinations, and the results of these can inspire both parties to target improvement efforts to where they are needed most.
2. Next, process monitoring provides valuable information about how implementation strategies, materials and methods can be improved, and may explain unexpected or disappointing results.
3. Finally, the collection and analysis of aggregate program results (learning achievement plus

associated effects) permits judgments to be made about the contribution of a specific program to the achievement of longer-term objectives and broad social goals.

Decisions about when and how often to conduct assessment should be made during program planning, as there should be a logical relationship between short and long-term program goals, the selection and sequencing of program content, and the timing of assessments. In all cases, assessment of learning outcomes will be more meaningful if some kind of pre-test, or baseline study, is conducted prior to program implementation. Without this, especially if there is no comparison group of learners who do not receive the LSE intervention, it is difficult to attribute any results to the intervention. Continuous assessment, which includes pre-testing and repeated post-testing at logical intervals, is the ideal for longer-term LSE programs, but may not make sense for short duration efforts to achieve specific or limited purposes, e.g., an intensive, one-time offering of life skills-based trauma management education following an act of extreme violence or destruction at school. In such cases, the pre/post-test model of assessment is generally sufficient to evaluate learning outcomes.

Program evaluation is a term generally applied to efforts to judge the effectiveness beyond the immediate-term assessment of individual learning outcomes. It is an attempt to understand not only what is learned but, also, how learning is applied and what happens then. In life skills education, this is usually linked to expectations of behaviour and typically expressed in program goals that describe how society at large will be changed as a result. Program evaluation activities might try to answer questions such as, "What percentage of learners takes (specifically-defined) action(s) to reduce their risk of HIV infection?" and, "What is the impact of this finding on rates of HIV infection in the (local/general) population?"

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are tools for improving programs and program results that all LSE providers should use. Decisions about the types and levels of M&E that is appropriate and feasible for a given program must be made on a case by case basis during the process of planning LSE interventions. Learning assessment and process monitoring can be done by just about any implementer and, therefore, should be done in all cases. Some attempt to take stock of the broader and more lasting results of LSE interventions should also be made, so that scarce resources can be dedicated to the most effective programs.

Life Skills Learning - Outcomes and Assessments

In any education effort, it is important to first consider children's learning needs, assets and risks in their environment to which they are most vulnerable. Ideally, a needs assessment involves the participation of the children targeted to place them at the centre of the process, and of other key stakeholders such as teachers, parents and community representatives. The results of the needs assessment should play a key role in determining the long-term goals, medium-term behavioural objectives and shorter-term learning outcomes. The assessment should also serve as a baseline against which evaluation of interventions are measured.

In life skills education programs, goals are typically related to impact on a specific content area – such as reduction of incidence of infections, acts of violence, etc. Objectives are typically related to behaviours we want learners to adopt, modify or avoid. Once the programme goals and objectives have been agreed upon they must be translated into specific learning outcomes, e.g. those cognitive, personal and inter-personal life skills that will help learners choose and express these desired behaviours. These learning outcomes are typically planned in terms of how they can be measured, e.g. through changes in:

- **Knowledge**, which is the acquisition and application of relevant factual information, the ability to integrate new information with existing understanding and to synthesize new concepts and/or change misconceptions;
- **Attitudes**, which reflect the feelings, values and beliefs an individual holds about his/herself, others, issues and situations;
- **Skills**, which can include both life skills and other skills necessary to perform the desired behaviours taught and practiced;
- **Behavioural intent**, which is an expression of planning or desire to perform an act.

The process of defining learning outcomes should be coordinated with the development of assessment tools to measure those outcomes and of appropriate learning and teaching methods. This requires a significant degree of collaboration among professionals with different areas of expertise and responsibility, e.g. curriculum developers, examination councils and inspectors, teacher training institutes and teachers.

Assessing learning outcomes

Behaviour – what learners do – is often considered the ultimate goal of life skills education: we want learners refrain from being perpetrators, victims or bystanders of violence; to abstain from predatory or risky sexual interactions; to make sustainable choices; to contribute to improving their environments, communities and the nation; and to be ethical, compassionate and tolerant in their personal and work relationships. But behavioural objectives, especially those not immediately or practically observable, are not the most appropriate measure of a particular program's success. Complex behaviours are not constructed rapidly, and it takes time, expertise and resources to conduct randomized, controlled trials on successive cohorts of learners at multiple post-intervention points in time.

Fortunately, positive changes in factors that enable or predispose individuals to act in certain ways –

factors like knowledge and critical thinking ability; personal attitudes, values and beliefs; and the ability to use a variety of interpersonal skills – are valid both as learning outcomes and as indicators that life skills learning is achieved. The establishment of programs around a pre-determined set of knowledge-, attitude-, and skill-related learning outcomes also helps to make sure that LSE programs are not judged by a "failure" to achieve unrealistic behavioural objectives or development goals.