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## The specific Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners in the Vaal Triangle region

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*We report on a study aimed at understanding adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability, and investigate Life Orientation as a possible means of addressing the risk associated with adolescence. However, if Life Orientation is to be an effective solution to the problem, it needs to respond to Life Orientation needs as perceived by adolescents. An empirical study (n = 445) was conducted to survey the specific Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners in the Vaal Triangle region. The study aimed to consult with Grade 9 learners in order to determine and rank their specific Life Orientation needs, thus providing insight as to whether the Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners differ according to gender and race, and to examine whether these needs are met by the current Life Orientation programme.*

### Introduction

Adolescence is one of the most challenging and complex phases of life, equally so in terms of experiencing it, describing it, and studying it. It is characterised by gradual biological, physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes that effect the transition from childhood to adulthood (Berger, 2003:430; Frydenberg, 1997:6). All adolescents confront the same developmental tasks and successfully accomplishing these developmental tasks, while coping with the changes associated with the various domains of development, can be both difficult and stressful for the adolescent (Gouws, Kruger & Berger, 2000:2; Mwamwenda, 1996:96; Adams, Gullotta & Markstrom-Adams, 1994:6). Adolescence can therefore be described as a period of heightened vulnerability, as the significant changes and complexities that characterise adolescence in each domain of development may sabotage adolescent wellness (Gouws *et al.*, 2000:5).

It is therefore important to educate and empower the adolescent to moderate the risk factors associated with and experienced during adolescence. The adolescent should be equipped with life skills that will empower her/him to lead a meaningful life despite the stress and challenges endemic to this period of transition. Life Skills education is an effective vehicle to equip adolescents with the life skills needed to reduce the risks associated with the challenges of adolescence. In this article we report on a study that surveyed the specific Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners in the Vaal Triangle region.

### Adolescence as a period of heightened vulnerability

Adolescence is recognised as a difficult developmental stage because it is characterised by the complexities and diversities of the adolescent's extensive physical, cognitive, social and psychological development (Berger, 2003:431; Gouws *et al.*, 2000:2; Mwamwenda, 1996:63; Frydenberg, 1997:6; Adams *et al.*, 1994:6). The child is developing psychologically and in ways that define intellectual, social, spiritual and emotional characteristics. Therefore it is understood that the adolescent will face changes that will in all likelihood cause difficulties and stress, as well as excitement and growth, in all the aforementioned domains of development.

Physically, the adolescent's development is considerable, and may be associated with various risks (Berger, 2003; Gouws *et al.*, 2000). Such risks include:

- negative emotional response to physical growth;
- poor body image and a concomitant negative self-concept;
- accelerated physical maturation with related (inappropriate) sexual demands;
- slow physical maturation with correlated poor self-esteem;
- premature and/or irresponsible sexual activity;
- eating disorders;
- substance abuse.

Cognitively, the adolescent moves from the concrete thought processes of childhood towards the abstract reasoning of adulthood. In the process independent thinking is initiated, which may lead to the questioning of and subsequent rebellion against figures of authority, including parents and educators (Berger, 2003). The risks associated with independent and critical thinking are buffered when the adolescent develops the ability to demonstrate responsible decision-making and accountability for decisions made.

Affectively, the adolescent needs to develop a positive identity, sense of self, self-esteem and self-concept (Gouws *et al.*, 2000). These are important developmental tasks for the individual, as a negative self-concept can result in negative and self-destructive behaviour. The time during which the adolescent's identity is in the process of development is therefore a period of heightened vulnerability. In addition, extreme emotional lability and an inability to cope with stress may lead to emotional disorders and/or difficulties with socialisation.

The social development of the adolescent similarly has the potential for risk. The adolescent is tasked with developing positive relationships with peers, members of the opposite sex and authority figures (Gouws *et al.*, 2000). According to Mash and Wolfe (2005) the social risks associated with adolescence include:

- parent-adolescent conflict;
- negative reaction to autocratic parenting;
- negative reaction to *laissez-faire* parenting;
- peer-group rejection;
- excessive conformity to the peer group;
- negative peer pressure.

Inadequate and unstable social relationships will increase the adolescent's vulnerability to inappropriate attitudes and behaviours. Vulnerability is exacerbated when the adolescent does not define and live out healthy sexual attitudes and does not avoid destructive and delinquent behaviour.

All of the above contribute to the heightened vulnerability associated with adolescence. Consequently, the adolescent needs guidance and empowerment in order to meet the challenges associated with adolescence. The acquisition of appropriate life skills during this phase of development could significantly reduce the risks involved and allow the adolescent to achieve optimal functioning (Bender & Lombard, 2004:101; Junge, Manglallan & Raskauskas, 2003:166; Kadish, Glaser, Calhoun & Ginter, 2001:2; Rooth, 2000:2; Du Toit, Nienaber, Hammes-Kirsten, Kirsten, Claasens, Du Plessis & Wissing, 1997:6; Anon, 1994:8).

### **Life skills as an answer to risk**

Life skills are the non-academic abilities, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours necessary for successful living and learning and enhance the quality of life and prevent dysfunctional behaviour (Junge *et al.*, 2003:166; Rooth, 2000:6; Du Toit *et al.*, 1997:2). Furthermore, life skills refer to any skills that enable a person to adapt to and master life situations at home,

school and in any other context in which they may find themselves (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002:96). Although life skills are described as non-academic in nature, these skills can be taught and learnt in a formal educational setting, such as the classroom. Life Skills education is therefore an important aspect of any learner's holistic education. For this reason, Life Skills education has become an integral component of the learning area Life Orientation, which aims to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values for successful and meaningful living. Life Skills education includes skills that:

- enhance self-empowerment (e.g. developing self-esteem, self-concept, identity, critical-thinking skills and assertiveness);
- promote personal health (e.g. HIV/Aids prevention and health education);
- are future-oriented (e.g. career education and goal-setting skills) (Bender & Lombard, 2004:88; Kadish *et al.*, 2001:2; Du Toit *et al.*, 1997:7; Rooth, 2000:2).

An effective Life Skills education programme will empower learners to cope with the associated vulnerabilities of adolescence and, furthermore, equip learners with the life skills needed for a meaningful life.

### **Life skills in South Africa**

The education system, by means of an effective Life Orientation curriculum, can be instrumental in addressing the needs and risks associated with adolescent development. Curriculum 2005, in particular, aims to teach South African learners the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to cope with the challenges of life (Department of Education, 2002:1-3). In South Africa, Life Skills education has become an integral component of the learning area Life Orientation. Life Orientation is concerned with the social, physical, personal, emotional and intellectual development of learners. More specifically, the learning area Life Orientation aims to equip learners with life skills that focus on health promotion and on social, personal, physical and career development.

Another aim of Life Orientation is to develop programmes to support and reinforce skills and competencies for adulthood (Bender & Lombard, 2004:88; Ngobobo, 2002:96). Furthermore, this learning area can provide the opportunity for young people to talk about their experiences of, and the fears and myths they harbour about, the challenges of adolescence.

### **Rationale for this research project**

Life Orientation, as a learning area in the Senior Phase, is indispensable and its importance in the holistic approach to education indisputable. This is especially true for Grade 9 learners, as Grade 9 forms a possible exit year. In order for this learning area to be valued by learners, they should be consulted to determine their specific Life Orientation needs. Bender and Lombard (2004:101) expressly advocate that adolescents be asked to identify their life-skills preferences. As Muuss (1996:82) points out, the adolescent has relatively little to say about the curriculum. If the curriculum were to become more closely aligned to the adolescent's specific needs (by means of learners' input), it would encourage learners to assume personal ownership of the curriculum and their work. The nature of Life Orientation lends itself to the practice of consultation and collaboration, and cognisance of adolescent opinion can, and should, therefore be taken.

Grade 9 learners have not previously been consulted with regard to their specific Life Orientation needs. Marais (1998) surveyed the guidance needs of Grade 12 learners, but the preferences of Grade 9 learners with regard to life skills have not been attended to. Consulting

with Grade 9 adolescents in order to ascertain their specific needs and subsequently providing a Life Orientation curriculum that is relevant and practical for the age group is of the essence.

### **Research methodology**

#### **Aims of the research project**

The primary aim of this study was to survey the specific Life Orientation preferences of Grade 9 learners. This survey had the following secondary aims:

- to rank the specific Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners according to preference and indifference;
- to identify whether the current curriculum reflects learner preferences and indifferences;
- to determine whether the Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners vary according to gender and race.

#### **Research design**

An empirical investigation was conducted and a survey research method was employed. A closed questionnaire, based on a thorough study of the literature on adolescence and life skills, was compiled to determine the Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners. The questionnaire consisted of 51 statements to be rated by respondents as Very Important, Important, Quite Important and Not Important. By ranking the 15 most and 15 least popular Life Orientation needs and comparing these with the current Life Orientation curriculum, it could be determined whether the current curriculum reflects adolescents' preferences.

#### **Validity and reliability**

The content of the items in this questionnaire represents the constructs being measured, namely, the importance of Life Orientation skills and themes for Grade 9 learners, thereby rendering the questionnaire valid.

The Cronbach alpha correlation formula was used to calculate the reliability of the measuring instrument. The Cronbach alpha value obtained for this questionnaire was 0.92, which indicated that the reliability of the instrument was satisfactory. Furthermore, the inter-item correlation value (0.19) obtained for the questionnaire suggested that the inter-item reliability of the measuring instrument was also satisfactory.

#### **The research group**

For logistical reasons, the sample for the study was a non-probability, purposive sample done without randomisation.

The population from which the sample was drawn were all Grade 9 learners in the Vaal Triangle region. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:221) suggest that when a population exceeds 5 000 a sample size of 400 is representative. There were in excess of 5 000 Grade 9 learners in the Vaal Triangle. A sample of 445 Grade 9 learners (all Grade 9 learners from two English-medium public schools in the Vaal Triangle) was used in this study, as it approximated Leedy and Ormrod's (2001) recommendation.

Not all the learners indicated their gender. For male learners  $n=202$ , and for female learners  $n=201$ . The differentiation of respondents according to race was as follows:

- 299 black respondents;
- 121 white respondents;
- 20 coloured respondents;
- 4 Indian respondents.

### **Data collection**

The survey was group-administered to the multiracial sample of Grade 9 learners after official permission had been obtained from the principals concerned. After the purpose of the questionnaire had been explained to the principals and confidentiality ensured, no resistance was encountered. The researcher undertook to share the results of the study with the schools involved.

The researcher and the schools' Life Orientation educators were present during the administration of the questionnaire. Learners were assured of anonymity and invited to complete the questionnaire. Respondents did not discuss the questions with one another, thereby ensuring individual responses. Because learners understood the aim of the questionnaire, they co-operated well.

### **Data analysis**

The following statistical techniques were employed to determine the Life Orientation needs of the respondents:

- *t* tests were employed to establish differences between the needs of learners on the basis of gender and race;
- the Cohen *d* value was used to determine the practical effect of the data where statistical differences between gender and race groups were observed.

The results per statement were converted to percentages and subsequently ranked from most important to least important.

### **Findings**

The findings of the study listing the results per statement are provided in Table 1.

Using Table 1, learners' preferences were subsequently ranked from most important to least important. The mean of each question was statistically determined and the questions were ranked in accordance with these results. The findings are discussed as life skills prioritised by Grade 9 learners and life skills not prioritised by Grade 9 learners, using the 15 highest and 15 lowest rankings.

#### **Life skills prioritised by Grade 9 learners**

The 15 most important preferences and the distribution of the Grade 9 learners' responses are summarised in Figure 1. The preferences suggested the social, economic and personal needs of adolescents living in contemporary South Africa. The learners' prioritised skills could be categorised into three groups, namely, future-oriented skills, self-empowerment skills, and personal-health skills.

*Future-oriented skills* (first group) included:

- career choice;
- study methods;
- decision-making skills;

**Table 1** Representation of the Grade 9 learners' Life Orientation preferences in percentages per question

Skills	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important
1. Assertiveness (skills that teach you to stand up for your rights).	65	30	4	1
2. HIV/Aids prevention (skills that teach you how to avoid contracting HIV/Aids).	79	14	6	1
3. Coping with HIV/Aids (skills that teach you how to cope when you or someone close to you has HIV/Aids).	60	30	9	1
4. Building social support systems (skills that teach you to establish reliable social support networks to help you cope with problems).	30	51	17	2
5. Career choices (skills that enable you to make wise career choices and help you to seek and find employment).	80	16	3	1
6. Co-operation (skills that teach you to have meaningful partnerships with people).	31	51	17	1
7. Communication (skills that teach you to get your message across effectively).	35	44	19	2
8. Conflict resolution (skills that teach you to solve disagreements effectively).	26	46	24	4
9. Constructive coping strategies (skills that teach you to deal with difficult situations effectively).	41	42	14	3
10. Coping with change (skills that teach you how to handle change positively).	31	41	25	3
11. Coping with depression (skills that help you to identify the symptoms of depression and teach you how to deal with it).	38	42	18	2
12. Coping with diversity (skills that teach you how to deal with people who are culturally and physically different from yourself).	34	42	21	3
13. Coping with divorce (skills that help you to deal with the effects of a divorce or parental separation).	36	35	19	10
14. Coping with failure (skills that teach you to deal with lack of success).	51	32	12	5
15. Coping with grief (skills that help you to handle the loss or death of a loved one).	59	27	11	3
16. Coping with loneliness (skills that teach you to become more sociable).	29	40	22	9
17. Coping with loss (skills that help you to deal with the loss of valuable people or possessions).	32	44	19	5
18. Coping with peer pressure (skills that help you to manage peer pressure in a positive manner).	40	39	18	3
19. Coping with rejection (skills that help you to deal with negative responses from people).	35	38	20	7

**Table 1** Continued

Skills	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important
20. Coping with retirement (skills that teach you to plan ahead for the future).	61	24	11	4
21. Coping with trauma (skills that teach you to deal with violence, crime and disasters).	44	33	18	5
22. Countering exploitation (skills that teach you not to be taken advantage of).	45	37	14	4
23. Countering prejudice and sexism (skills that teach you not to judge people based on their race or gender).	54	29	14	3
24. Creativity (skills that teach you to think and act creatively).	40	39	18	3
25. Democracy (skills that teach you to be independent).	51	31	14	4
26. Decision-making (skills that teach you to make the best and most sensible decisions).	58	32	9	1
27. Drug and alcohol education (skills that help you to identify the risks and hazards associated with the use of drugs and alcohol).	56	27	12	5
28. Entrepreneurship (skills that teach you to become self-employed).	55	32	10	3
29. Environmental Education (skills that teach you to appreciate and care for the environment).	37	39	20	4
30. Financial-planning skills (skills that teach you to manage money effectively and how to save it).	60	27	11	2
31. Goal-setting (skills that teach you to set realistic short- and long-term goals).	53	33	11	3
32. Group skills (skills that teach you to be an accepted and effective team member).	28	45	23	4
33. Health education (skills that teach you to be physically and mentally healthy).	59	31	9	1
34. Human rights (skills that that teach you about your basic human rights).	53	32	12	3
35. Legal rights (skills that teach you about your basic legal rights).	52	36	11	1
36. Parenting skills (skills that will empower you for future parenthood).	49	35	11	5
37. Positive relationship formation with peers (skills that teach you to have positive relationships with people of your own age).	45	36	4	5
38. Positive relationship formation with the opposite sex (skills that teach you to have positive male/female relationships).	54	28	12	6
39. Positive relationship formation with adults (skills that teach you to have positive relationships with adults).	50	35	11	4

**Table 1** Continued

Skills	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important
40. Problem-solving (skills that teach you to solve problems effectively).	45	40	12	3
41. Religious education (skills that teach you to understand and appreciate various religions).	39	38	18	5
42. Self-awareness (skills that help you to discover who you are).	61	28	8	3
43. Self-esteem (skills that teach you to value yourself).	61	31	6	2
44. Sexuality education (skills that teach you about the physical and emotional aspects of and the health risks involved in sexual activity).	49	34	13	4
45. Socialisation (skills that teach you how to socialise appropriately with different people in different situations).	33	45	19	3
46. Stress management (skills that teach you to cope with and manage stress).	42	38	16	4
47. Study methods (skills that teach you to study effectively, producing good results).	70	22	6	2
48. Thinking skills (skills that teach you to think critically and plan sensibly before acting).	51	40	8	1
49. Time management (skills that teach you to plan your time effectively).	42	43	13	2
50. Value and interest clarification (skills that help you to identify your values and interests).	37	42	19	2
51. Violence and abuse education (skills that empower you to identify abuse and how to deal effectively with it).	53	30	13	4

- financial-planning skills;
- thinking skills;
- coping with retirement;
- entrepreneurship.

The need to have thinking and decision-making skills inculcated suggested that modern-day learners are familiar with situations that necessitate critical decisions with regard to their future, health and education. The above skills were strongly linked to financial expertise and decision-making, both of which can be linked to survival. Survival is of paramount importance to individuals, and in a country where jobs are scarce and fiscal resources limited, career choice and financial competence are pivotal to survival. Future-oriented skills are supported by research (Theron, 2004:320) as contributing to psychological hardiness among adolescents confronted with risk.

*Personal health skills* (second group) included:

- HIV/Aids prevention;
- health education.



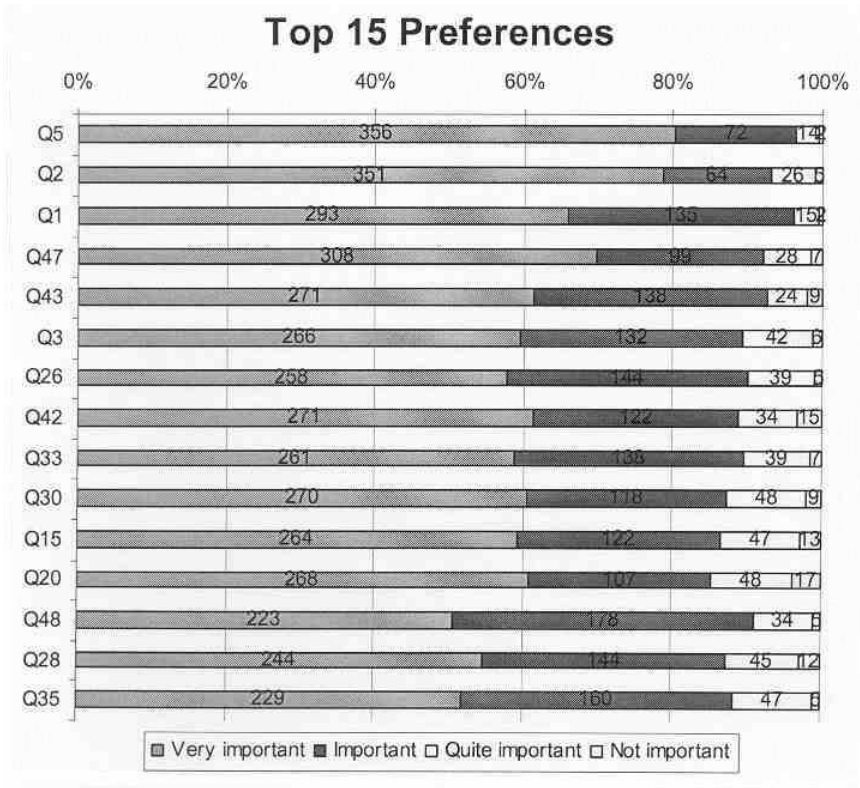


Figure 1 Life skills prioritised by Grade 9 learners

The inimical impact of the HIV/Aids pandemic in South Africa is well documented (Theron, 2005) and learners are not exempt from this impact. The survey indicated that these learners desire to be equipped with the relevant skills to prevent HIV-infection, as well as skills and knowledge that promote a healthy lifestyle. In other words, Grade 9 learners also want to acquire skills that will empower them physically in the present.

*Skills related to self-empowerment* (third group) included:

- assertiveness;
- self-esteem;
- self-awareness;
- coping with grief;
- coping with HIV/Aids;
- legal rights.

Grade 9 learners in this sample clearly sought to be empowered in terms of competencies that aid personal dominance. Such competencies can be divided into skills that can be used preventatively (e.g., assertiveness, self-awareness and legal rights) and skills used to cope retrospectively (e.g., coping with grief and coping with HIV/Aids). These preferred skills support international resilience research which suggests that if young people are to be empowered, then "[a]s a culture, we need to do a better job supporting the developing young person as he or she strives towards self-sufficiency ..." (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005:413).

These three groups of prioritised skills suggested that learners in this sample were in touch with the complex reality of their daily lives and in need of practical, empowering skills which would make a difference to their daily realities. The socio-economic realities of South Africa are reflected in the ranking of the learners' needs, and reflect the skills required for adolescents to cope with the challenges associated with the present-day South African lifestyle. The three groups of skills are interrelated and co-dependent, and fundamental to promoting the holistic adolescent development necessary to achieve a thriving, meaningful life.

### Life skills not prioritised by Grade 9 learners

The 15 least important preferences and the distribution of the Grade 9 learners' responses are summarised in Figure 2.

The 15 skills designated least important by learners in this sample can be divided into three groups, namely, skills acquired from the peer group, skills acquired in lower grades, and skills acquired from systems outside the school.

*Skills acquired from the peer group* (first group) included:

- co-operation;
- communication;
- socialisation;
- coping with change;
- coping with rejection;
- coping with loneliness;
- coping with divorce;
- building social support systems.

A number of life skills that are addressed in the current curriculum are such that learners may acquire them informally (by means of experience and the peer group), and have therefore been ranked as least important by the learners. Generally, for adolescents the peer group is regarded as a source of support that obviates the need to formally acquire skills to deal with matters such as the above. The low prioritisation of these skills suggested that the respondents in this sample had positive peer-group experiences. However, isolated adolescents may well require formal acquisition of the listed skills.

The least important preference identified by this survey was coping with loneliness. It is possible that during this stage of adolescence many adolescents have developed friendships and coping mechanisms which help them to deal with loneliness.

*Skills acquired in lower grades* (second group) included:

- Religious Education;
- Environmental Education;
- coping with diversity;
- conflict resolution.

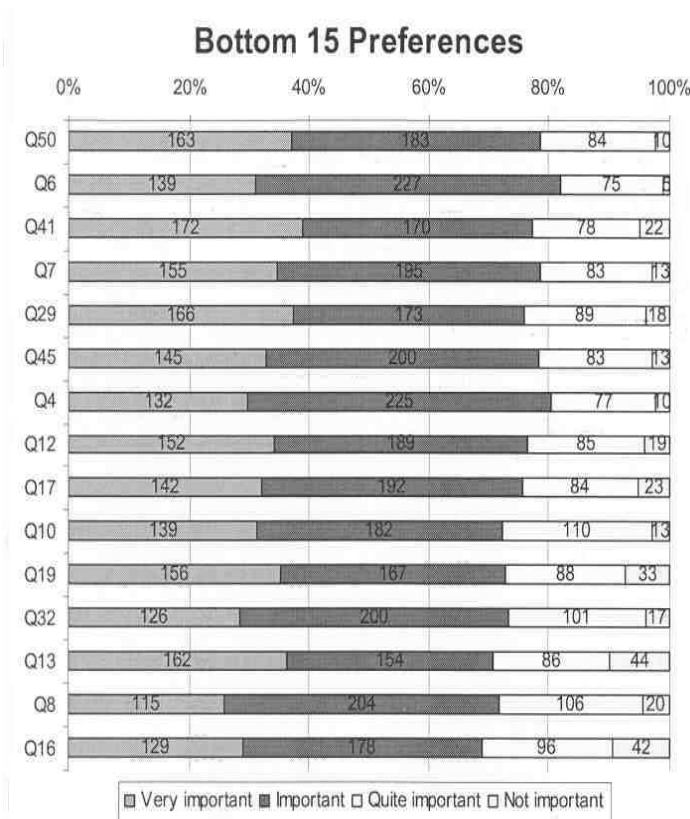


Figure 2 Life skills not prioritised by Grade 9 learners

When the Life Orientation curriculum is scrutinised it is clear that the aforementioned are dealt with in lower grades. This fact may explain the sample's lack of enthusiasm for these skills. Effective Life Orientation programmes presented in earlier grades and phases have addressed a number of the Life Orientation themes and life skills that the learners in this survey now ranked as least important. Some life skills may also have been addressed in other learning areas due to the integration of themes across the learning areas. As a result, they may have accordingly declined in importance.

*Skills which could be acquired from systems outside the school* (third group) included:

- value and interest clarification.

The lack of support for the inculcation of the above skill might be related to the fact that value and interest clarification happens naturally as part of adolescence and is supported by the

adolescent's interaction with the environment (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2005:408), thus minimising the need for this skill to be taught formally.

### Are learner priorities reflected by the current Life Orientation curriculum?

In order to establish the extent to which the Life Orientation themes in the current curriculum correlate with learners' Life Orientation needs as identified by the survey, each Life Orientation theme was first subdivided into the Assessment Standards specified by the Revised national curriculum statement Grades R-9 (schools) policy (Department of Education, 2002). Secondly, the Life Orientation skills that are taught in order to attain the Assessment Standards were identified. These skills were then correlated with the 15 most important and 15 least important learner preferences set out above.

Overall it appeared that the most important needs of the learners in this sample are addressed by the current curriculum. However, there are skills in the curriculum that the learners did not wish to have emphasised. All 15 least important preferences, with the exception of coping with change, are addressed in the current Grade 9 Life Orientation curriculum. These Life Orientation themes and skills are taught and developed in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6) and are reinforced in the first year of the Senior Phase (Grade 7). This repetition could possibly create the idea among learners that Life Orientation is not a dynamic and relevant learning area.

According to the survey informing this study, there were also curriculum deficiencies. The Life Orientation needs that learners ranked within the top 15 preferences but are not addressed in the current curriculum included:

- coping with HIV/Aids;
- coping with grief;
- coping with retirement;
- financial planning;
- study methods.

### Gender and race differences

In this sample, the findings suggested no significant gender or racial differences with regard to the prioritised Life Orientation needs of Grade 9 learners.

Table 2 represents the statistically significant differences between the responses of the male and female respondents.

The differences were so insignificant as to suggest that the Life Orientation curriculum need not differentiate between the genders.

The *t* test was administered for the different racial groups in order to determine significant differences between the Life Orientation preferences of racial groups within the sample of Grade 9 learners. Three *t* tests were administered:

- the first test evaluated differences between the black and white respondents;
- the second test grouped the Indian and coloured respondents together as one group and evaluated the differences between this group of respondents and the white respondents;
- the third test evaluated the differences between the responses of the combined coloured and Indian group of respondents and the black respondents.

Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) were found in all three tests. However, according to Cohen's *d* test the differences were less than 0.5 and therefore of small or medium practical effect. The significant differences for all three tests are represented in Tables 3, 4, and 5:

**Table 2** Gender differences

Question	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>d</i> value	Effect size
Q1 Assertiveness	3.07	0.00	0.26	Small
Q4 Building social support systems	2.13	0.03	0.20	Small
Q10 Coping with change	2.14	0.03	0.20	Small
Q 11 Coping with depression	2.79	0.01	0.26	Small
Q13 Coping with divorce	2.13	0.03	0.19	Small
Q14 Coping with failure	2.63	0.01	0.23	Small
Q19 Coping with rejection	2.76	0.01	0.25	Small
Q25 Democracy	2.00	0.05	0.18	Small
Q26 Decision-making	2.94	0.00	0.25	Small
Q36 Parenting skills	-3.30	0.00	0.28	Small
Q38 Positive relationship formation	-2.02	0.04	0.18	Small
Q42 Self-awareness skills	2.40	0.02	0.21	Small
Q43 Self-esteem skills	2.69	0.01	0.24	Small
Q44 Sexuality education	2.09	0.04	0.18	Small

**Table 3** Significant differences between race groups: Test 1, between black and white respondents

Question	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>d</i> value	Effect size
Q3 Coping with HIV/Aids	-3.09	0.00	0.30	Small
Q25 Democracy	-4.33	0.00	0.45	Small
Q36 Parenting skills	2.97	0.00	0.30	Small
Q38 Positive relationship formation with the opposite sex	2.49	0.01	0.27	Small
Q39 Positive relationship formation with adults	2.65	0.01	0.27	Small
Q40 Problem-solving	2.24	0.03	0.24	Small
Q43 Self-esteem	-2.80	0.01	0.28	Small
Q49 Time management	1.97	0.05	0.21	Small

**Table 4** Significant differences between race groups: Test 2, between white and coloured/Indian respondents

Question	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>d</i> value	Effect size
Q14 Coping with failure	2.11	0.04	0.45	Small
Q15 Coping with grief	2.48	0.01	0.53	Medium
Q39 Positive relationship formation with adults	-2.89	0.00	0.45	Small

**Table 5** Significant differences between race groups: Test 3, between black and coloured/Indian respondents

Question	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>d</i> value	Effect size
Q15 Coping with grief	2.22	0.03	0.46	Small
Q26 Decision-making skills	-2.08	0.04	0.39	Small

The differences found in all three tests are so insignificant as to suggest that the Life Orientation curriculum need not differentiate among the racial groups.

### **Recommendations**

From the findings of this study it is clear that the current curriculum should be adapted to reflect topical learner priorities as reflected in this survey. Policymakers and curriculum developers should carefully consider the top 15 Life Orientation needs of the learners in this sample and note that the curriculum is not sensitive enough to learner needs. Specifically, the following topics need to be addressed:

- coping with HIV/Aids;
- coping with grief;
- coping with retirement;
- financial planning;
- study methods.

A limitation of this study was that the sample was restricted to the Vaal Triangle region. In order to adapt the national curriculum meaningfully, a nation-wide survey should be considered to ascertain whether other South African learners have similar needs not met by the current Life Orientation curriculum. A further limitation was the lack of an open-ended question to determine whether learners would like other life skills (not covered by the questionnaire) to be included in the curriculum in order to address specific problems they might be facing.

This survey proved that the curriculum may not be relevant enough to adolescents in Grade 9, and that learners need to be consulted. Future Life Orientation programmes should be more sensitive and relevant to the needs of adolescents. Learners' needs should be surveyed at regular intervals in order to assess the relevance of the Life Orientation themes and the associated Assessment Standards.

Life Orientation programmes should reflect the indigenous character of South Africa. South Africans should therefore develop the content of the programmes for the South African learner, in accordance with relevant, current South African challenges. The developmental challenges faced by the South African adolescent correlate with the challenges that adolescents in other parts of the world face. However, the South African adolescent will also face unique challenges associated with the lifestyle of our society, and Life Orientation programmes should equip the adolescent with the skills required to meet and resolve these challenges successfully. The results of this survey indicated that it is not necessary to differentiate the curriculum according to race and/or gender. This would, however, need to be verified by a national survey.

The Life Orientation curriculum for Grade 9 could become less theoretical and more practical, by allowing learners to become involved in hands-on projects. In so doing, learners would be afforded the opportunity to practise the skills that they have acquired so far, and by practising these skills, learners would continue to develop their life skills.

Educators, counsellors and others with the necessary expertise (e.g. representatives from churches, non-governmental organisations and government educational support personnel) should be consulted and co-opted in developing and presenting Life Orientation programmes. A multidisciplinary, team-based approach to Life Orientation programmes will benefit the adolescent, the school and the community as a whole, and will help to cover the prioritised spectrum of needs indicated by this survey, namely, those Life Orientation needs aimed at equipping adolescents with future-oriented skills, personal-health skills, and self-empowerment skills.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that for this sample the Life Orientation curriculum is not perfectly tailored to the needs of Grade 9 learners. Additional topical life skills need to be included, and life skills in which adolescents express disinterest should be re-evaluated for inclusion in the Grade 9 curriculum. In order for this learning area to be valued by and valuable to learners, learners need to be consulted regularly and provided with the opportunity to express their specific Life Orientation needs. To ensure survival in modern society, a degree of flexibility has become mandatory. The Life Orientation curriculum needs to reflect such flexibility if Grade 9 learners are to be truly empowered.

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