

Life skills education as a marginalized piece in Social studies textbooks

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Abstract

This study examined the status of life skills components in second cycle primary school Social studies textbooks. It also assessed to what extent the learning objectives in the textbooks focused on a higher order thinking. For this purpose, a content analysis design was employed. The results of the study showed that a total coverage of life skills components in the textbooks was about 6%. It was also found out that majority of the learning objectives in the textbooks place a great deal of emphasis on knowledge and comprehension levels, while paying less attention to the higher order cognitive skills. Based on the study findings, practical implications were discussed and suggestions for future actions were made.

Keywords: Content analysis, learning objective, life skills, Social studies, textbook

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1. Introduction

Education has an overarching role in grooming learners' thoughts in a way that prepare them to be a self-reliant and responsible member of the society. Hence, during their school life, they need to acquire skills, values, attitudes, and knowledge essential to develop understanding of equity, equality, acceptance of pluralism and respect for diversity (UNESCO, 2001). The skills of effective communication, problem solving, critical thinking and self-awareness are also imperative to be imparted to students. However, this can be better

addressed through integration of life skills in school curriculum (Monteiro & Shetty, 2016; Yadav & Iqbal, 2009).

According to WHO (1997, p. 1), life skills are “abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.” Likewise, Wiedemann (2013), explicated life skills as a set of aptitudes, which designed to empower emotional, cognitive, personal and interpersonal capacities. Intrinsically, these skills have capabilities to foster mental and social well-being in one’s course of life. In general, life skills are a group of psycho-social and interpersonal skills which can help individuals to think critically, communicate effectively, solve problems, and make informed decisions (UNICEF, 2003).

Life skills education promotes learners’ social and mental well-being and enable them to face life challenges. It equips youngsters with a tool, which help them to take more responsibility in the society (UNICEF, 2012). According to Wiedemann (2013), life skills education inculcates into students nonviolent and cooperative ways of solving problems. It helps them to improve their personal value and self-respect as an individual, member of a family, community, and nation. For UNICEF (2012), life skills have a pivotal role in enriching learners’ ability to lead meaningful, productive, and fulfilling lives. Also, the skills are crucial in enabling children to protect themselves from a multitude of risky incidents and behaviors. By the same token, Belay and Seleshi (2016), elucidated that life skills education is effective in preventing a wide range of problems such as substance use, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS, violence, negative peer pressure and to promote negotiation skill, self-awareness, and positive thinking among adolescents.

Although life skills have a plethora of virtues that involve personal and social proficiencies to confront the usual challenges in life, there is no real consensus on what specific skills are to be incorporated in it (UNICEF, 2012). Accordingly, as part of an effort to develop a guiding framework, UNICEF (2003) grouped life skills into three broad categories: cognitive skills for data analysis and usage, personal skills for self-management and personal development, and inter-personal skills for effective communication and interaction with others. On the other hand, WHO (1997), identified five basic areas of life skills. These entail decision-making and problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, and coping with emotions and stress. This was further substantiated by Nurkamto, Saleh, and Sultan (2013). Reviewing an array of scholarly works, they pinpointed the following life skills as frequently mentioned in literatures: communication skills, interpersonal skills, life-long learning, problem solving, creative thinking, leadership, and empathy.

1.1 Problem statement

Youngsters are considered as important building blocks and the most productive members of the society. Nonetheless in real scenario, most of them are unable to utilize their potential in an appropriate way. Studies indicate that these days children in Ethiopia are facing such social problems as anti-social behaviors, streetism, substance abuse, suicide, early sexual exposure and HIV/AIDS (Belay, 2016); carrying weapons in the school premises hiddenly (Hailu, 2018); robbery and theft (Sisay, 2016). Another scholar shows that deterioration of basic principles of citizenship development to the extent that ethnocentrism, violence, and disrespectfulness becoming a social norm (Habtamu, 2016). According to Belay (2016),

though these problems have familial, extra familial, and societal origins, it was absence of basic life skills that exacerbated the issue.

Therefore, the aforementioned social glitches require a timely and effective antidote from the concerned body. Imparting life skills as integral part of the school curriculum is the one among various strategic solutions. Research indicates the positive role of integrating life skills into the school curriculum in bringing change to students' attitude, thoughts, and behaviors (Monteiro & Shetty, 2016; Yadav & Iqbal, 2009). It provides learners with the proficiencies of problem solving, critical and creative thinking, effective communication, and healthy interpersonal relations, which commonly lack among youths (Abobo, 2012). Similarly, UNESCO (2000), explicated the rationale for including life skills into the school curriculum asserting that all youngsters must have the opportunity to acquisition of knowledge and develop values, attitudes and skills. So as to enable them develop their capacities of full participation in their respective society and to manage their own lives. The government of Ethiopia has also shown interest to life skills education, with its inclusion in the list of key competencies in *Curriculum framework for Ethiopian education* (MOE, 2009). However, this can be viable only if the school curriculum is appropriately designed and incorporated the necessary ingredients (Dawit & Haftu, 2012). Thus, assessment of the contents in the school curriculum is critical.

In spite of all these facts, research works which investigate contents of Ethiopian school curriculum in the past two decades have been quite few in number. For instance, Meskerem (2017), reviewed seventy-four studies on Ethiopian primary school education and found that only three studies directly dealt with curriculum contents and called for educators to do more researches on the area. The aim of this study is therefore, to assess the inclusion level of

topics pertinent to life skills in the second cycle primary school (grades 5 to 8) Social studies textbooks and to examine level of learning objectives in the textbooks. The following research questions are directed in accordance with this purpose:

1. What life skills related components are included in the second cycle elementary school social studies text books?
2. To what extent do the learning objectives in the textbooks focused on students' higher order thinking?
3. What can be done to improve the textbooks for a better coverage of life skills education elements?

2. Method

2.1 Research design

A research design for this study was content analysis, which deals with recorded contents of human communications, such as textbooks, essays, newspapers, songs, speeches, pictures, and the like. Using this technique, a researcher can study anything from trends to types of preferences, to the extent of a certain phenomenon (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Content analysis is particularly well suited to answering research question of “Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?” (Babbie, 2014, p. 341).

2.2 Population and sample

The purpose of this study was assessing the extent to which life skills education contents have been addressed and examining level of learning objectives in the textbooks. To this end,

second cycle primary school (grades 5 to 8) social studies textbooks were analyzed. Social studies textbooks were selected owing to their primary location in schools for inquiry into social issues. They provide facts, ideas, and frameworks for understanding and critically thinking about social knowledge, within the context of civic responsibility (MOE, 2009; Nelson & Pang, 2014). All the textbooks were published by Federal Ministry of Education (Berhanu & Wondimagegn, 2003; Mekuriya & Wondu, 2003; Wondimagegn & Berhanu, 2003; Wondu & Mekuriya, 2003). Since the publication date (2003 E.C) to time of review (i.e. 2019) the textbooks have been in use.

The study population includes all contents of the Social studies textbooks in second cycle primary school. Accordingly, all major topics, subtopics, headings, pictures and learning objectives of the textbooks were critically scrutinized.

2.3 Data collection

The data were collected utilizing a checklist, which comprises contents of the textbooks (major topics, subtopics, and pictures) categorized into five areas. Each topic, subtopic, and picture were recorded and listed under one of the categories (historical events & heritages, the earth & its surroundings, population & settlement, human right & good governance/globalization, or life skills).

2.4 Reliability of a research tool

In order to establish its reliability, the research tool was presented to two PhD candidates in College of Education and Behavioral Studies at Addis Ababa University. They categorized the learning objectives in accordance with the cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). The average agreement among the researcher and the two raters was then computed

and the reliability coefficient was determined employing Holsti's (1969) method. The obtained reliability coefficient for the research tool was then found to be 95.3%, which is in the acceptable range for use in this study.

2.5 Data analysis

In the analysis, both manifest (the overt message) and latent contents (the covert message) were examined. The basic units of analysis manipulated in this study were words, pictures, topics, and subtopics in the textbooks. The study reckoned the number of headings in the textbooks vis-à-vis the number of pages covered by the same. In the same way, the learning objectives in the entire textbooks were categorized into the applicable cognitive domains. Finally, frequencies and percentages were utilized to summarize the data.

2.6 Analytical frame

In order to assess the extent of inclusion of life skills components in the social studies textbooks, a *guideline for life skills education for children and adolescents in schools*, produced by WHO (1997) was used. According to the guideline, there are core set of skills that are at the heart of life skill education for the promotion of the health and well-being of children and adolescents. This entails decision-making and problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, and coping with emotions and stress.

On the other hand, analysis of the learning objectives in the textbooks was conducted contingent upon the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy. The cognitive domain consists of six levels: The three lower order thinking skills (knowledge, comprehension, and

application) and higher-order thinking skills of: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956).

3. Results

The results of the content analysis revealed that there are some *decision-making and problem-solving* components of life skill education in the second cycle primary school Social studies textbooks. However, the degree of inclusion slightly varied with each grade level. Accordingly, as table 1 clearly demonstrated, only one chapter on grade five textbook had issues related to the life skills (9 pages long [8.3%]). In the sixth-grade text book, a single chapter (10 pages [7.6%]) as well had a subtopic related to life skills (table 2). The chapter discussed HIV/AIDS, escaping strategies of child rights' violation, accident prone practices and safety measures. In the same vein, of 131 pages of grade seven textbook 5 (3.8%) devoted to life skill (table 3); whereas, it shared 6 (4.7%) pages of grade eight (table 4).

Table 1: Issues covered by grade five Social studies textbook

Textbook Components	Major topics	Subtopics	Pictures	No. of Pages	Percentage
					of Pages
Historical events and heritages	1	4	17	19	17.6
The earth and its surroundings	1	8	60	60	55.6
Population and settlement	1	2	2	14	13
Good governance and child right	1	2	0	6	5.6
Life skills (HIV/AIDS, accident and safety)	0	2	3	9	8.3
Total	4	18	82	108	100

Table 2: Issues covered by grade six Social studies textbook

Textbook Components	Major topics	Subtopics	Pictures	No. of Pages	Percentage of
					Pages
Historical events and heritages	1	2	8	11	8.4
The earth and its surroundings	1	12	66	73	55.7
Population and settlement	1	3	5	22	16.8
Child right and regional partnership	1	2	5	15	11.5
Life skills (HIV/AIDS, escaping strategies and safety measures)	0	3	2	10	7.6
Total	4	22	86	131	100

Table 3: Issues covered by grade seven Social studies textbook

Textbook Components	Major topics	Subtopics	Pictures	No. of Pages	Percentage of
					Pages
Historical events and heritages	1	4	6	15	11.5
The earth and its surroundings	1	8	33	62	47.3
Population and settlement	1	2	10	24	18.3
Child right and good governance	1	4	11	25	19.1
Life skills (HIV/AIDS)	0	1	1	5	3.8
Total	4	19	61	131	100

Table 4: Issues covered by grade eight Social studies textbook

Textbook Components	Major topics	Subtopics	Pictures	No. of Pages	Percentage
					of Pages
Historical events and heritages	1	3	10	30	23.6
The earth and its surroundings	1	6	32	56	44.1
Population and settlement	1	2	6	14	11
Human right and globalization	1	3	5	21	16.5
Life skills (HIV/AIDS, delinquency)	0	2	1	6	4.7
Total	4	16	54	127	100

In general, the average share of topics directly related to life skills education was only about 6% of the pages. Of the overall coverage of life skills in the textbooks, it was issues related to HIV/AIDS (Decision-making and problem-solving skills) that has taken the lion's share. This coverage of life skills components revealed no substantial differences from one grade level to the other.

On the other hand, action verbs used to list out the learning objectives entailed: Identify, explain, describe, appreciate, recognize, understand, analyze, name, realize, discuss, relate, distinguish, know, list, compare, etc. Out of the 256 learning objectives listed in the textbooks, more than 85% were in the lower order thinking with identifying (16%) and explaining (11%) taking the lead. Whereas, such higher order thinking objectives as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation collectively had about 14% share only, which was quite less than

those devoted to comprehension alone. Among higher-order cognitive skills, synthesis is almost absent from the textbooks. On the other hand, higher order cognitive skills decreased from the fifth to sixth grade, increased in grade seven, and again decreased from grade seven to eight. Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of the six levels of cognitive domain in Bloom's taxonomy for the textbooks under review.

Table 5: *Distribution of Learning objectives vis-à-vis the Bloom's taxonomy*

Category of Objectives	Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Sum	
	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
Knowledge	25	42.3	40	57.1	30	44.1	34	57.6	129	50.4
Comprehension	24	40.7	20	28.6	21	30.9	16	27.1	81	31.6
Application	2	3.4	5	7.1	1	1.5	2	3.4	10	3.9
Analysis	5	8.5	3	4.3	6	8.8	5	8.5	19	7.4
Synthesis	0	0	1	1.4	1	1.5	1	1.7	3	1.2
Evaluation	3	5.1	1	1.4	9	13.2	1	1.7	14	5.5
Total	59	100	70	100	68	100	59	100	256	100

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess second cycle primary level (grade 5 to 8) Social studies textbooks from perspectives of life skills education. This was specifically done in accordance with the core set of skills that are at the heart of life skills education (WHO, 1997). It chiefly incorporated decision-making and problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, communication and interpersonal skills, self-awareness and empathy, and coping with emotions and stress.

A critical finding of this study was that despite the presence of fundamental scenarios and concerns that justify the importance of life skills for youngsters in Ethiopia (Belay, 2016), in the second cycle social studies textbooks little consideration was given to life skills components with about a 6% coverage of total pages. This miniscule coverage of life skills by itself was predominantly limited to a single subtopic (HIV/AIDS) and focus area (decision making and problem solving). According to WHO's (1997) explanation, decision-making and problem-solving skills are skills which, help us to deal constructively with decisions about and problems in our lives. These can entail individuals' skill of evaluating future consequences of their present actions and actions of others. In view of this, all the textbooks under review incorporated issues pertinent to HIV/AIDS and the role of children in combating its adverse effects. This was consistent with the notion of National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2003), that encourages students not only to have content knowledge but at the same time have the opportunity to learn and practice pertinent skills to the needs and problems outside the classroom.

Another finding of the study was related to the learning outcomes listed throughout the textbooks. Although the curricular framework supports the value of higher order thinking

(MOE, 2009), a large quantity of the learning objectives in the textbooks encourage rote learning and memorization of facts. Of the learning objectives delineated in the textbooks, more than 85% were in the knowledge and comprehension domains with descriptor words like identifying and explaining held the lions share. Whereas, such objectives as analyzing, justifying, and evaluating collectively had a 5% share only. Among higher-order cognitive skills, synthesis was almost absent from the textbooks. Conversely, higher order cognitive skills decreased from the fifth to sixth grade, increased in grade seven, and again decreased from grade seven to eight, indicating absence of logical order in designing the learning objectives. Similarly, the frequency of knowledge and comprehension didn't decrease as one moves from lower to upper grade levels.

This study affirmed that most of the learning objectives stated in the textbooks focused on a lower level of cognitive skill, rather than constructing knowledge through higher-order thinking. According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), listing, naming, recognizing, identifying, describing, and explaining are in the *Remembering* (Knowledge) and *Understanding* (Comprehension) categories. Whereas, differentiating, interrogating, organizing, experimenting, justifying, critiquing, constructing, designing, and planning are in the higher order thinking of *Analyzing*, *Evaluating*, and *Creating* (synthesis) categories. The objectives which describe changes in interest, attitudes, and values, and the development of appreciations and adequate adjustment can be classified as affective domain (Bloom, 1956). Nonetheless, the author found quite a few number of learning objectives pertinent to affective and psychomotor domains in the text books. In this regard, the results of the study go along with findings from a previous study, which scrutinized environmental science textbooks for grade one and two students (Habtamu, 2018).

The findings of this study have significant implications for practitioners who work on curriculum development and revision. It is vital for practitioners to acknowledge the status of life skills education in the Social studies textbooks and the need for better coverage. Also, they need to realize the importance of rethinking about the learning objectives while revising the curricula for grade five to eight social studies. According to Osler (2006), textbooks should be future-oriented, with a central goal of fostering critical and responsible nation that will accommodate the development and respect for universal human rights. Consequently, help students to have a good psychological well-being and become a socially responsible citizen.

Life skills education is proposed in schools to serve several purposes vital to enhance learners' personal capacities for problem solving, aptitude to interact and work with others, and the competence to become a responsible member of their respective society. It was assumed that provision of life skills education to youngsters could help prevent possible occurrences of social maladjustment and enhance their capacity (UNESCO, 2012). With regard to the types of topics to be included, in view of specific demands currently growing up in Ethiopia and the fundamental developmental needs of youngsters, Belay (2016), proposed the following components of life skills. These involve such skills as critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, socio-emotional, personal resources management, assertiveness, negotiation, conflict management, empathy, team work, situation management, and societal skills.

On the other hand, the life skills inculcation process requires sufficient time and goes beyond a mere provision of information. It involves interactive methods such as role play, drama, debates, games, music, and group discussions inter alia. Execution of life skills, therefore,

means that exposing learners to activities that prepare them to deal with issues of the daily life (Belay, 2016; KICD, 2008). As King (2007), further elucidated that effective implementation involves continuous sensitization of stakeholders about life skills education, facilitation of proper and adequate resources, utilization of multiple methods, advanced training for teachers, and better coordination among partners.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The Federal Ministry of Education (MOE, 2009), argued that students should learn to understand the world they live in and have communication skills to interact effectively with a diverse range of people. They should have the ability to think critically, appreciate different points of view on local, national and international issues, able to organize their own lives, make thoughtful and wise choices, and be responsible for their own actions. In this regard, textbooks as educational tools can do much more than a mere provision of facts. They need to provide reference points for students (UNESCO, 2010). Thus, the textbook content that consists of knowledge, attitudes, and skills has to be planned and acclimatized to the grade level and age of learners (Tiendrebéogo, Meijer & Engleberg, 2003).

The Social studies textbooks for grades five to eight students have inadequate coverage of life skills education components. The most frequent learning objectives pursued in the textbooks were lower-order cognitive skills, which involve, knowledge, comprehension, and application. There was even a lack of consistency from the lowest (knowledge) to the highest (evaluation) cognitive levels as one moves from grade five to eight textbooks. As life skills education mainly focuses on imparting such skills as problem solving, communication, critical thinking, life-long learning, leadership, and empathy (Nurkamto, et al., 2013), it

should get better coverage in the second cycle Social studies textbooks. The learning objectives and methods of teaching-learning as well should be appropriate to the grade level and the subject matter, which need to emphasize higher order cognitive skills as well to the knowledge and comprehension aspects.

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