

Exploring high school teachers experiences in teaching Life Orientation Education in rural South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Life Orientation (LO) education aims to promote social justice, human rights, and holistic learner development. However, implementation challenges in rural South African schools undermine its effectiveness.

Purpose

This study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with LO education implementation in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Methods

A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 16 purposively selected LO educators. Data were analyzed thematically.

Results

The findings reveal that while teachers acknowledge the significance of LO, learners often perceive it as non-essential. Key challenges include inadequate teacher training, rigid learner attitudes, and resource constraints.

Conclusion

The study underscores the urgency of policy interventions that provide clear guidance, enhanced training, and increased funding to support LO instruction in rural schools.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, Life Orientation (LO) education, often referred to as life skills education, is recognised as a critical

component of holistic education. Various countries have implemented similar programmes under different names, focusing on equipping students with practical skills to

manage their lives effectively. For instance, the [World Health Organization \(WHO, 2019\)](#) has emphasised the importance of life skills education in promoting health and well-being, reducing risky behaviours, and enhancing students' ability to cope with stress and challenges. In the United States, social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes aim to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making ([Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \[CASEL\], 2019](#)). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education provides students with the knowledge, skills, and attributes needed to manage their lives both now and in the future ([PSHE Association, 2020](#)).

The incorporation of LO as a subject in the South African curriculum plays a vital role in ensuring the equal treatment of all learners and fostering their self-worth. The primary objective of LO is to promote social justice, human rights, inclusivity, and a healthy environment ([Carey, 2018](#)). This objective is pursued by equipping learners with essential skills to address various aspects of life, including personal, psychological, neuro-cognitive, motor, physical, moral, spiritual, cultural, socio-economic, and constitutional dimensions. As a result, learners can respond positively to life's challenges, take responsibility, and seize opportunities ([Thani, 2019](#)). LO education aims to empower students with critical life skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making, which are crucial for navigating the complexities of contemporary society. Studies have shown that well-implemented life skills education leads to significant improvements in students' overall well-being, academic performance, and social interactions ([Mangrulkar, Whitman, & Posner, 2019](#)).

However, the implementation of LO in South African schools, particularly in Limpopo Province, has faced numerous challenges. Research indicates that the programme's execution has been inadequate, consistent with findings from other regions of South Africa ([Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016](#)). This inadequate implementation has contributed to several negative outcomes, including an increase in adolescent pregnancies, drug and substance abuse, poor academic performance, violence, high dropout rates, and a high prevalence of

HIV/AIDS among secondary school students. Studies by [Prinsloo \(2017\)](#) and [Rooth \(2018\)](#) have identified key factors contributing to the suboptimal implementation of LO. These factors include a lack of properly trained teachers, insufficient resources, and cultural resistance to discussing sensitive topics such as sexuality and HIV/AIDS. [Prinsloo \(2017\)](#) further emphasised the need for comprehensive training programmes to ensure that LO teachers are well-equipped to deliver the curriculum effectively. [Matshidiso \(2019\)](#) highlighted the socio-economic barriers that hinder effective LO education in rural areas. Limited access to educational materials, combined with high levels of poverty and unemployment, exacerbates the challenges faced by both teachers and students in these regions. This issue is particularly relevant in Limpopo Province, where many schools struggle with inadequate infrastructure and resources. The present study aims to conduct a needs assessment in schools and develop strategies to facilitate life skills programmes in Limpopo Province. By identifying the specific challenges faced by schools in this region, the research seeks to propose targeted interventions that can enhance the effectiveness of LO education. This approach aligns with international recommendations by [UNESCO \(2022\)](#), which advocate for context-specific strategies in life skills education to address local challenges and optimise available resources.

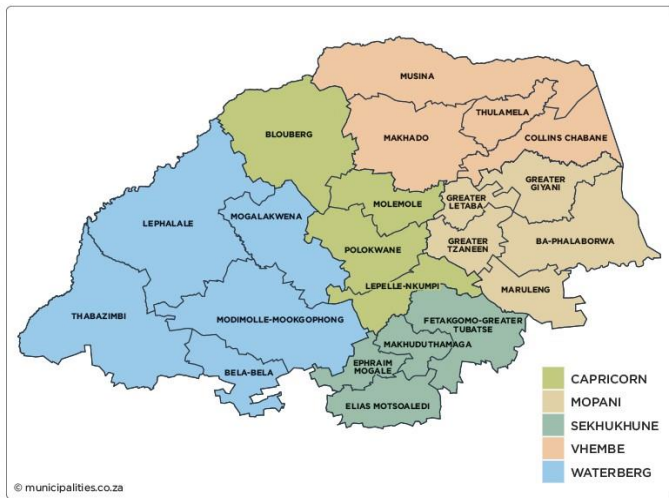
The effective implementation of Life Orientation in South African schools is crucial for promoting social justice, human rights, and holistic development among learners. However, the current inadequacies in its execution, particularly in Limpopo Province, highlight the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address these challenges. By drawing on existing literature and conducting a thorough needs assessment, this research aims to contribute valuable insights and practical solutions to improve LO education and foster the comprehensive development of learners.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and challenges associated with the Life Orientation (LO) programme in schools within Limpopo Province, South Africa. A qualitative approach was selected as it allowed for an in-depth understanding

of LO educators' perspectives and facilitated a rich exploration of their experiences.

Figure 1:
Map of districts in Limpopo Province, South Africa



Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised LO educators teaching Grades 10, 11, and 12 in selected schools within the Vhembe and Mopani districts. A total of 16 LO educators were purposively selected based on their teaching experience in LO for Grades 10–12. The selection criteria ensured that participants had substantial teaching experience and could provide valuable insights into the challenges and effectiveness of the LO programme. The sample size was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, which suggests that data collection can cease when no new themes emerge.

Data Collection

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted at participants' respective schools, in classrooms designated for the interviews. Open-ended questions guided the discussions, ensuring that key themes were covered while allowing flexibility to explore topics in greater depth.

Interview Process

Before each interview, the researcher followed a standardised protocol to ensure consistency and build trust with participants:

- Each participant was briefed about the study's aims and objectives, the procedures to be followed,

and their rights as participants, including the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were then invited to sign a consent form.

- The researcher sought verbal consent for audio recording the interviews, clarifying that recordings would be used solely for transcription purposes. This transparency helped in maintaining trust.
- To establish rapport and encourage a relaxed atmosphere, the researcher engaged in informal conversations with participants before beginning the formal interview.

During the interviews, the researcher asked each question in a consistent order while allowing for adjustments to maintain a natural conversational flow. Each session lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. At the end of each interview, participants were given the opportunity to add any additional information they deemed relevant but had not been covered in the interview guide.

Field Note Documentation

To ensure comprehensive and accurate data collection, the researcher adhered to the following best practices when writing field notes:

- The researcher refrained from discussing observations before they were recorded to minimise data loss.
- Notes were written in a quiet environment to avoid distractions.
- Sufficient time was allocated to ensure thorough documentation.
- Events and conversations were recorded in the order they occurred to maintain contextual accuracy.
- The researcher relied on memory recall to document events in detail, ensuring that rich descriptions were (Richardson & Koller, 1996).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data while ensuring a detailed description of the findings. The analysis followed these steps:

1. **Transcription:** Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

2. **Data Familiarisation:** Transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify units of meaning.
3. **Theme Development:** Units of meaning were clustered into themes and categories, supported by direct quotations from respondents.
4. **Coding:** A list of topics from the interviews was compiled, and similar topics were grouped into major and unique themes.
5. **Theme Refinement:** Topics were refined into descriptive themes and sub-themes, with related themes grouped together to reduce redundancy.
6. **Integration of Data:** Data from the four sub-groups (educators from different schools) were combined by clustering similar responses, treating them as a single group to ensure comparability.

Ethical Considerations

The study was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

RESULTS

A total of 16 LO teachers participated in the study. The average teaching experience was 10 years (SD = 2 years). There was an equal gender distribution among the participants, and half of them had an LO-related qualification (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1:
Summary of Participants' Information

| Participant ID | Years of Experience | Gender | Training Background |
|----------------|---------------------|--------|---------------------|
| P1 | 10 | Female | Education Degree |
| P2 | 8 | Male | LO Certification |
| P3 | 12 | Female | General Teaching |
| P4 | 5 | Male | LO Training |
| P5 | 15 | Female | Psychology |
| P6 | 7 | Male | LO Certification |
| P7 | 11 | Female | Education Degree |
| P8 | 9 | Male | LO Training |
| P9 | 14 | Female | General Teaching |
| P10 | 6 | Male | LO Certification |
| P11 | 13 | Female | Psychology |
| P12 | 10 | Male | LO Training |
| P13 | 9 | Female | General Teaching |
| P14 | 11 | Male | LO Certification |
| P15 | 7 | Female | Education Degree |

| Participant ID | Years of Experience | Gender | Training Background |
|----------------|---------------------|--------|---------------------|
| P16 | 8 | Male | LO Training |

Implementation of LO

Most teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of LO's objectives, but the lack of learner interest hindered its effectiveness. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers viewed LO as a crucial subject, yet many learners failed to recognize its importance in shaping their academic and personal development.

- **Teacher 1:** "LO equips learners for meaningful and successful living."
- **Teacher 5:** "Many learners see LO as an additional, non-essential subject."

Challenges Faced by Teachers

Teachers encountered multiple challenges, including:

- **Inadequate Training** - Many educators lacked specialized LO training. Some had no formal LO qualifications and were assigned to teach the subject without prior experience.
- **Rigid Learner Attitudes** - Cultural beliefs made it difficult to discuss sensitive topics such as sexuality, leading to reluctance among students to engage meaningfully.
- **Resource Constraints** - Limited funding restricted curriculum implementation, resulting in outdated or inadequate teaching materials.

Learner Engagement

The study found **inconsistent engagement** among learners. While **some students acknowledged the relevance of LO**, others dismissed it as a **non-essential filler subject**.

- **Teacher 2:** "Some learners enjoy LO, but many view it as an easy subject that does not require effort."
- **Teacher 4:** "Students often prioritize other subjects over LO, which affects their participation and retention of key concepts."

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore high school teachers' experiences in teaching LO in rural South Africa. The findings highlight significant challenges and opportunities in the implementation of LO in rural schools. These results

align with broader trends in education and underscore the need for systemic reforms (Durlak et al., 2021).

The study's findings are consistent with literature emphasizing that teacher preparation is crucial for effective LO delivery (Ladson-Billings, 2020). Culturally responsive curricula and institutional support are essential in enhancing LO's impact (Epstein, 2018). However, the persistent perception of LO as a secondary subject calls for awareness campaigns to highlight its significance.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Insufficient training emerged as a major challenge. Specialized training programs tailored to equip educators with LO-specific skills could enhance curriculum delivery. Studies suggest that effective life skills education requires teachers to be proficient in participatory and student-centred teaching methods (UNESCO, 2023). Addressing this professional development gap is critical for overcoming implementation barriers.

Cultural Relevance in the LO Curriculum

Some teachers criticized the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum, advocating for more relevant and decolonized content. This aligns with global discussions on the need for culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2020). The demand for decolonized textbooks and instruction in African languages reflects broader educational reforms aimed at creating inclusive, context-specific curricula (Sleeter, 2021).

Parental and Institutional Support

The study also identified a lack of support from parents, the education department, and school management, posing a significant barrier to effective LO implementation. Stakeholder engagement, including parental involvement and institutional backing, is essential for the sustainability of LO programs (Fullan, 2019; Epstein, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the challenges of implementing LO in Limpopo schools and highlighted the importance of systemic reforms. The success of LO depends on effective teacher training, adequate resources, culturally responsive curricula, and strong institutional support. These findings contribute substantially to the ongoing discourse on enhancing life skills education and underscore the need

for a holistic approach that addresses local contexts and the needs of both educators and learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to support LO education in rural South Africa.

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Enhancing Teacher Training** – Develop structured training programs to improve teachers' expertise and confidence in delivering LO.
2. **Curriculum Reform** – Incorporate culturally relevant materials to align content with learners' backgrounds and immediate environments.
3. **Increased Resource Allocation** – Ensure adequate provision of LO materials, including textbooks and technology, to improve instruction quality.
4. **Stakeholder Engagement** – Strengthen collaboration with parents, schools, and policymakers to reaffirm LO's value in learners' academic and personal development.
5. **Future Research** – Conduct comparative studies across provinces to examine regional variations and explore the long-term impact of LO on students' academic and personal growth.

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Conflicts of Interest: None declared.

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