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**The Impact of a School-based Life Skills Intervention in Ugandan
Secondary Schools: Perspectives of Teachers and Students**

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Abstract

The evaluation of psychosocial interventions in low income countries requires focus on cultural appropriateness, implementation, and the experiences of participants. This nested qualitative study follows a previous controlled trial that reported positive outcomes for students participating in the Living Well life skills intervention. The current study investigated how participants experienced and perceived the intervention, through semi-structured interviews with 6 students and 5 teachers, from 3 schools in different regions of Uganda. The themes that emerged supported previous findings regarding the social, emotional and behavioural benefits of the intervention. In addition, all of the teachers and some students also spoke positively about the implementation of new pedagogical approaches. A number of socio-cultural challenges remain and further research is required to inform the development of school-based interventions that are culturally-appropriate, context-specific and focussed on capacity building and partnership.

Keywords

Uganda, life skills, teachers, pedagogy, intervention

Introduction

Life skills

Life skills are the psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (UNICEF, 2003). Life skills education programmes are designed to facilitate the practice and reinforcement of psychosocial skills in a culturally and developmentally appropriate way, contributing to social, emotional and behavioural development (WHO, 1999).

Psychosocial interventions that include creative and participatory methods are an effective way for children to acquire emotional and social life skills, helping them to express emotions, communicate better and build relationships (Claessens, Graaff, Jordans, Boer & Yperen, 2012). Life skills include decision-making, effective communication, interpersonal relations, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, conflict resolution and assertiveness. Schools are an ideal location in which to deliver life skills interventions that have a focus on mental health, particularly in low and middle income countries (LMICs). It is the primary facility where young people can be reached in a cost-effective manner through mobilising existing resources. For young people living with difficult circumstances, school provides structure and stability. School can also shape relationships and behaviour, and hence the necessary context is present in which social, emotional and behavioural issues can be addressed (Patel, Flisher, Nikapota, & Malhotra, 2008). In addition, teachers have already developed relationships with children and parents and are well-placed to provide support (Yule, 2002). The development of life skills requires modelling of life skills by school staff and a safe, supportive classroom environment that is conducive to the practice and reinforcement of those skills (WHO, 1999).

School-based social and emotional learning interventions have demonstrated significant improvement in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic

achievement in numerous studies from around the world including in LMICs (Barry et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; McMullen and McMullen, 2018; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). However, there are both opportunities and challenges in implementing school-based, teacher-led life skills interventions in LMICs. A particular challenge for a Life Skills programme, as in the current study, is the need for a participatory, active learning approach, with open discussion between students and teacher/facilitator.

Pedagogy

A policy advice paper to UNESCO (Livingston, Schweisfurth, Brace & Nash, 2017) highlights the vital role of pedagogy in achieving ‘Quality Education’, which is the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda. It defines pedagogy as ‘the dynamic relationship between learning, teaching and culture’. This includes teachers’ beliefs about these aspects and consideration of the context in which learning and teaching takes place. Pedagogy is often shaped by a teacher’s own experience of learning and therefore it is vital to consider the socio-cultural context. For many teachers in LMICs this was a didactic transmission of knowledge, received without question or other interaction. Livingston et al (2017) assert that, while it is important to acknowledge that a ‘one size fits all’ vision of quality pedagogy is not appropriate, there are some principles that may be shared and be adaptable. These include learner engagement; mutual respect; meaningful classroom interactions and the development of skills and attitudes as well as knowledge.

A study of 144 video-recorded lessons in Kenya (Hardman et al., 2009) referenced a baseline of lessons that were dominated by lecturing, copying, individual written exercises, closed questions (98%), choral answers, limited pair or group work (3%) and desks-in-rows classroom layout (96%). The authors asserted that this is typical of much of Sub-Saharan Africa and indeed it is our experience in many Ugandan schools. The Hardman et al study found that school-based training offered the most potential for changing pedagogic practices,

particularly in LMICs, where many teachers lack training or are underprepared because of the quality of their pre-service training.

A number of suggestions have been made as to why implementing more learner-centred, participatory pedagogy is challenging in LMICs. For example: a perceived challenge to the authority of the teacher (Livingston et al, 2017); intense focus on exams by teachers, students and parents resulting in ‘teaching to the test’; material resource shortages and class sizes; working conditions, salaries and a lack of respect for the teaching profession; teaching in a language (usually English) in which they are not comfortably fluent (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Despite these challenges, it is important to promote culturally sensitive, learner-centred, interactive practices in these contexts. A large-scale literature review on pedagogy and teacher education in developing countries claimed that teachers’ use of communicative strategies encourages pedagogic practices that are interactive in nature and is more likely to impact on student learning outcomes and hence be effective (Westbrook et al, 2013).

Uganda

Despite economic growth Uganda remains one of the poorest countries in the world and is ranked 163 out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index (UN, 2017). 37.8% of the population live on less than \$1.25 a day (World Bank, 2015). As 48% of Uganda’s population is under the age of 15 (the joint second youngest population in the world (World Bank, 2017)), a well-functioning education system is vital. The Ugandan government introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007 and these have resulted in huge increases in the numbers of students and teachers. However, up to 80% of children who enter rural primary schools do not complete this level and, of those who do finish, only 40% continue on to secondary education. Even with USE the cost of a good

secondary education in Uganda is beyond the means of Uganda's subsistence farmers who make up 85% of the population (National Population Council; NPE, 2015).

In subscribing to the SDG 4, the Government of Uganda has committed to a shift from ensuring access to education to an emphasis on the quality of the education and learning the children receive. Unfortunately, this is not reflected in the commitment of finance and other resources to the provision of education. Whilst there has been a number of improvements made to teacher education in Uganda in recent years, initial teacher education may not be providing prospective teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful in the classroom (World Bank, 2012). Officially, the average teacher pupil ratio in Uganda is 1:57 (Teachers Initiative in Sub-Saharan Africa; TISSA, 2014). However, in some of rural Ugandan schools, there can be 100 or more students in the classroom with one teacher, with a range of age and ability in each class. In this context applying good teaching and learning methods is a challenge even for well-qualified and highly-skilled teachers. While there are many examples of these, unfortunately many teachers in Uganda do not have the resources to obtain more than a basic training qualification. In the period 2006 to 2010, approximately 35% of private primary school teachers were found to be under-qualified. Teacher dissatisfaction, retention and professional development are also major concerns (TISSA, 2014). Most significant of all, teacher absenteeism is a massive challenge in Ugandan schools. A recent World Bank report (Bold et al, 2017) measured teacher absenteeism from class at 56% and from school at 28%, the highest rates of any of the countries surveyed in the study.

Altinyelken (2010b) considers how a 'pedagogical renewal' in sub-Saharan Africa has not had the expected impact in classrooms in Uganda. He suggests that the implementation of a more student-centred pedagogy in Ugandan primary school classrooms has not occurred in the ways intended by policy-makers and that teachers continue to employ didactic,

authoritarian teaching styles. As in many developing countries, Uganda learners are driven by the need to succeed in a high-stakes examination and the transfer of knowledge from teacher to pupil is often abstract, fact-centred, decontextualised and irrelevant (NPE, 2015). The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoESTS) and the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) have proposed reform of the lower secondary education curriculum. This aims to develop critical thinking and to ensure students develop the generic skills to be successful in their personal and social lives and employability (NPE, 2015). At the time of writing it is our understanding that this curriculum will be rolled out in all schools from 2020.

Aims

It is into this context that the Living Well intervention (described in Methods section) was designed, delivered and evaluated by the lead researcher and colleagues from 2015-2017. The programme was designed to support the social, emotional and behavioural development of Ugandan youth through learning life skills to help in their present and future lives. The secondary aims focused on enhancing the teaching skills of educators and improving teacher-pupil relationships through modelling a student-centred interactive style of delivery using discussion and problem solving as main methods of teaching. The paper by McMullen and McMullen (2018) describes a cluster controlled evaluation that found the Living Well intervention to be effective in increasing self-efficacy, reducing internalising problems (depression/anxiety-like symptoms), and developing a sense of connectedness among secondary students in Uganda.

Following the controlled trial, it was important to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of teachers and students who had delivered and received this intervention. This would help us adapt and improve the manual to best meet the needs of schools in Uganda. As emphasised by Claessens et al (2012), when evaluating psychosocial

interventions in LMICs, it is important not just to focus on intervention outcomes but also on the process and the cultural reality in the field, and to provide a framework to reflect the views of the participants. Qualitative assessment gives an indication of how well the programme is implemented and received (WHO, 1999). In teacher-led interventions, participant teachers require opportunities to reflect on the ways their experiences and perceptions influence teaching approaches and impact on students' learning (Livingston et al, 2017). Therefore, the objective of the current study was not to further demonstrate change but instead to consider how teachers and students experienced and perceived the intervention, with particular focus on:

- i) the social, emotional and behavioural well-being of the students; and
- ii) the skills and approaches of the teachers.

Methods

Design

This was a nested qualitative study following the cluster-controlled trial of the Living Well intervention (McMullen and McMullen, 2018). The intervention involved experiential learning for both students and teachers and hence this study considers their understanding and perspectives. A generic phenomenological approach to gathering data was adopted in order to consider the lived experience of the teachers and students who completed the Living Well intervention and to consider any experiences they had in common.

The Living Well Intervention

Prior to designing this programme, the lead researcher sent questionnaires to a number of students and teachers in a Ugandan secondary school to identify areas of need in relation to

life skills and mental health. This information was used in the development of the Living Well manual, a document tailored to the needs of the target schools. It includes content from three previous manualised interventions developed in Uganda, Kenya and the DRC, that were adapted for this specific context with support from Ugandan colleagues to ensure cultural appropriateness and sensitivity.

Living Well incorporates 24 lessons plans with each lesson lasting approximately 45-60 minutes - the length of a single lesson in Ugandan secondary schools. There are 6 lessons in each of four overarching themes: 1. Living Well with Ourselves and Others; 2. Living Well with Worry and Stress; 3. Living Well with Life's Issues; 4. Living Well in the Future. Teachers delivering the Living Well programme attended at least 3 training days before they commenced delivery. The manual and training programme provided teacher guidance notes on pedagogical approaches, classroom management and on evaluating progress. During training each lesson was discussed in turn and the presentation of the lesson was modelled by the researchers. This provided experiential learning for the teachers and subsequent discussion about each chapter.

Following positive pilot results (McMullen & McMullen, 2018) the manual was submitted to the Ugandan National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) for review. In 2019 the NCDC formally certified that the Living Well programme had been evaluated and deemed appropriate for use in all Ugandan secondary schools.

Participants and setting

The teachers and students who participated in the current study had all been involved with the Living Well programme for the previous year. They were from 3 schools supported by Fields of Life (FOL), an international development charity that has been working in East Africa for 20 years in partnership with government and local communities. The 3 schools are located in

particularly deprived areas of north, east and central Uganda respectively (McMullen and McMullen, 2018).

Interviews were requested with 2 teachers from each school. Due to time constraints for the lead researcher, who interviewed all of the participants, the interviews took place in FOL offices in Kampala. Some of the participants therefore had to travel long distances to participate and a total of 5 teachers made themselves available. In addition, each school selected 2 students for interview with 1 male and 1 female representative. The criteria for student selection was that they had completed every session of the intervention, were willing to be interviewed, and were good communicators in English. FOL provided transport costs and 2 nights' accommodation in the FOL guesthouse for teachers and students. No other financial incentives were offered or requested.

Participants were from different districts and various ethnic groups. The official language in secondary schools in Uganda is English and all lessons are taught in English. Therefore interviews were completed in English without interpretation. Participant information and codes are outlined in Table 1.

Ethical approval and consent

Ethical approval had been provided at the outset of the Living Well study by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of Queen's University Belfast. Additional approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast to complete the interviews described in the current study. The project was approved by Fields of Life's Chief Executive Officer and their East African Executive Director after review by their International Board of Trustees and their Education Committee.

All participants provided written consent to be interviewed. An attached information sheet stated that they gave permission for the interview to be recorded and transcribed. It stated that any information gathered from this interview would be kept confidential and anonymous, and only be used for the purpose of this study. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Participants were interviewed in a private FOL office. The students could be seen, but not heard, by others in adjoining offices.

Since the interviewer was also the designer of the intervention, there was a chance that participants could provide socially desirable responses. To avoid this it was stated clearly that this study was not aimed at proving effectiveness but rather about hearing their experiences and improving the intervention for future use. It was emphasised to participants that their honesty was important as their views were being genuinely sought to use to make adaptations for another edition of the manual.

Data gathering and analysis

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with a similar structure for both teachers and students. Participants were asked open questions about the content of the programme, their experiences and perspectives, and their views on how it may have impacted themselves and others. The student and teacher interviews were transcribed and analysed separately by two team members with no involvement in the Living Well intervention and no prior knowledge of its content. The teacher and student transcripts were analysed for common themes under each of the broad interview question headings of impact on teachers, impact on students and structure of Living Well manual, and each researcher independently identified emerging themes. The qualitative data was subject to thematic analysis based on that described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both deductive and inductive analyses were applied in that the analysis for themes was informed by the research questions and indeed dependent on

the interview questions thus reflecting a deductive approach. However during analysis an inductive approach was also taken in that coding took place without trying to fit a pre-defined coding frame. For this reason, the results in each section (teacher, pupil) are presented under the research headings (deductive) while sub themes below these are identified inductively. While most theme identification was based on a quantitative approach (that is themes were identified as such when they were re-iterated by a number of respondents), room was also left for identification of key responses to the research questions which were highlighted by a smaller number of individuals.

Results

Teacher Interviews

Impact on the social, emotional and behavioural well-being of the pupils

All of the teachers spoke very positively of the overall impact of the Living Well (LW) programme on their pupils. When asked to specify, the most common response was an impact on the emotional health and well-being of the students.

They liked describing and talking about their feelings...it caused an awakening in their lives.

... It reaches something deep in them ... and we find it has made a change in their lives

(Teacher B).

One was thinking about suicide, but through the programme, and then follow up...he opened up and he shared his challenges with me...His life has changed (Teacher E).

Three teachers described how students were now better able to describe how they were feeling.

...now they say, 'sometimes I feel so stressed and depressed for no reason, what is wrong with me?' (Teacher B).

Two of the teachers reflected on how behavioural difficulties are often the result of underlying social or emotional issues, stating that this was not previously considered by school and communities.

Some of the issues are psychological, are social, are political, physical but they are never being addressed by the school because parents have left all these problems to the school, but the schools have not thought deeper to address some of these challenges (Teacher E).

All of the teachers reported that students enjoyed the programme and that it had a positive impact on their attitudes and behaviour in school, especially on students who previously presented with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Even the bad students we see at school, if someone gives them attention, to understand them, which Living Well emphasises, to know people. Big, big changes. These particular students who were very bad, they did not even respect teachers, always fighting and causing a lot of conflicts in school, but after talking to them, and showing them love, you find them coming down (Teacher A).

All of the teachers indicated that the LW programme had improved relationships among students and between students and staff. Two teachers described how LW had helped students who were previously withdrawn to begin to communicate more with staff and peers.

They are holding their heads high. They are able to talk to people openly, before they would shy away about issues...like, students talking about the topic of conflict resolution. Many before would resort to fighting, and arguing and exchanging words (Teacher B)..

They call us 'Living Well'! *laughs* So every time they see us, Living Well! Because they are proud of the programme and they love it (Teacher E).

Three teachers indicated that they would like more content in the area of relationships, though there were differing views on how this should be conveyed.

The only thing missing from the topics is sex...Let's present this issue to them and talk it out in a Christian way and a better way (Teacher A).

I want specifically an area that talks about relationship and friendship between boys and girls, without bringing in the sex aspect (Teacher B).

Personal and professional impact on teachers

Personal Growth. Three teachers talked about how they had developed personally through teaching the programme and used the lessons learned in other aspects of their lives.

So it is a good guide and it helps one to understand, first of all, himself. Many times we live life and we don't understand who we are. Whereas...you get to understand yourself and you get to understand the needs of your life (Teacher E).

Pedagogy. All of the teachers interviewed stated that teaching the Living Well programme had had a positive impact on their teaching style. They acknowledged that the programme encouraged a more activity-based approach to teaching and that it required more participation from the pupils. Group discussions, in particular were highlighted as a positive aspect.

It was interactive teaching compared to where a teacher talks and then someone leaves a class without understanding anything (Teacher E).

They highlighted the importance of training and how a life skills intervention like LW required a different approach than they would traditionally have implemented in their other classes. They spoke of the positive aspects of this as well as the challenges, sometimes in the same sentence.

It is totally different from what we have. Many times because of the big numbers we usually have the teacher talking. That is what they are used to in geography, used to in history. The teacher talks and you write down notes. But this was all encompassing. It is more child centred and that made them very, very active (Teacher B).

Challenges

The following exchange highlights both the challenges and opportunities:

Interviewer (I): Can you tell me about your experience of delivering LW?

Teacher C (C): I felt good but, with those challenges, I did not feel that I was delivering a message.

I: You didn't feel you were delivering the message?

C: ...I am a teacher of history who teaches things that happened a long time ago. But this time around I came to teach people things that are within them.

I: So what is different is about the way you teach history and the way you teach Living Well?

C: Here it is practical in the way you teach students...interaction and...student centred.

I: Did it take the students some time to get used to the new way of teaching?

C: In fact, it didn't. But at first they used to ask, 'Madame, what do you want from us? Why are you asking such questions?'

Later she spoke about wishing to use this more interactive approach to teaching in other subjects but of not being able to make the transfer effectively.

I was thinking about how to do that (activity based teaching) in History but I failed.

The main challenge that all teachers highlighted was adopting an interactive teaching approach with very large classes.

The class was too big...Sometimes 90, and you are alone with groups and the classroom was too small. So, sometimes I don't have the opportunity to go to every student to discuss (Teacher C).

We have 100 in each class. So everybody would love to participate and say something but the numbers are so large and we have one hour so that was a great challenge. Many hands would be up to say something but you pick 3 or 4 for the interest of time (Teacher B).

Although the LW programme was intentionally designed to be delivered with limited resources, 3 teachers also stated that they lacked suitable materials with which to properly teach the lessons.

Some of the materials we really needed...and the challenge of writing on a chalk board.

...provide each group with a flip board (Teacher A).

Three teachers also identified a lack of support for this programme among other teachers, head teachers and/or directors of the school. Teachers who had not been trained in LW did not see the value of it and perceived it to be conflicting with other lessons.

We have been doing it without the support of the Directors and the Head teacher (Teacher E). Two of the teachers asked for a certificate of completion or a short assessment at the end of the course so pupils would see a value in it alongside other academic subjects.

Another challenge that I thought was that these things are not examined. What are you going to get after? They are used to it, their reports. What I suggest is a means of rewarding those according to how they perform (Teacher C).

Others stated that they were able to explain to students the value of this programme beyond exam results.

They were asking, 'Is this subject examinable?' Then we say no, even if it is not examinable, it is to change your lives. For you to live well instead of living in your problems (Teacher D).

Pupil Interviews

Impact on social, emotional and behavioural well-being

Self-worth and Self-awareness. All six students reported that these had altered positively as a result of studying Living Well.

It has helped me know who I am and what I can achieve (Student C)

Living well means you understand yourself, you learn how to control yourself, making friendship, your dreams and goals, who you are (Student E).

Two of the students interviewed indicated that they had contemplated suicide before embarking on Living Well but had come to realise the value of their own life.

I had been planning to commit suicide but I have started living well (Student E).

Three of the students indicated that family members had seen positive changes in them since undertaking Living Well.

Facing Challenges. Five students reported a greater ability to face life's challenges after having undertaken the Living Well programme.

If any problems come I know how to handle it. If anything happens in my life, my family, I know how to handle them because of Living Well (Student F).

If I face any hardship I don't feel like life has ended (Student D).

Helping Others. All of the students described how the programme helped them develop better communication skills and friendships, and also how they applied their learning to helping those around them.

Nowadays I can advise and I can help the needy like the old. I can go for water and clean for them' (Student C).

Students face a lot of hardships. Like those newcomers in the schools. So when I learnt about bullying, most times now when I see a newcomer in the school and she is not feeling at ease, I can go and make that person my friend. I make her feel relaxed and so she is not feeling regret (Student D).

Study Skills

One particular practical skill that three of the six students reported an improvement in as a result of Living Well was the ability to study and undertake exam revision.

I adopted those study skills so that this time round I performed a little bit better than the other time (Student A).

The skills and approaches of the teachers

While there was a clear self-reported impact on pupils themselves, the pupils' awareness of any impact on their teachers was more limited. Two students did not comment on this question but of the four who did, two did not describe any change in teachers' approaches. One said that the teachers engaged with Living Well were 'more open to us' and 'they can advise us' (Student G). The remaining student said that students had more opportunity for engagement than in other lessons.

...she would sometimes just teach and leave and now she could teach, give examples, give opportunity to each and everybody (Student D).

Challenges

When asked about challenges or suggested improvements to the Living Well manual the only issue, described by two students, was related to the fact that there was no summative assessment.

...at times students are not motivated in the LW...They say this is not examined...at times they were feeling why should we attend the classes? (Student D).

She recommended, 'making competition' or 'completing essays so some people win prizes they would also be encouraged'.

Discussion

The positive impact of the Living Well intervention on self-efficacy, internalising problems (depression/anxiety-like symptoms) and connectedness, reported in a quantitative study (McMullen and McMullen, 2018), was corroborated by the personal accounts of both teachers and students in these interviews. All teachers and some students also spoke positively about the experience of new teaching skills and approaches, affirming the second aim of the study. Opportunities for the Living Well programme and similar programmes, as well as the challenges, nuances and limitations of these findings are discussed below.

As Claessens et al (2012) state, psychosocial interventions require practice-driven, participatory research, especially in the early phases. Employing qualitative research allowed us to consider how teachers and students experienced and perceived the intervention. This helped develop understanding of how the programme was implemented and received in schools (WHO, 1999); to explore socio-cultural meaning and give some insight into the processes of change (Claessens et al, 2012); and to help teachers reflect on the ways their approach impacts on students' learning (Livingston et al, 2017). Responses also enabled us to adapt and improve the manual to provide a more culturally-appropriate, effective programme that best meets the needs of schools in Uganda.

Social, Emotional and Behavioural Development of Pupils

The students' descriptions of how the programme had helped them as individuals, socially, emotionally and behaviourally, is supported by teacher observations of change in their students. This adds to previous research that demonstrated the positive impact of school-based life skills/social and emotional learning interventions in LMICs (Barry et al., 2013; Claessens et al, 2012; Patel et al, 2008; Tol et al, 2011). Students also commented on change they had witnessed in some of their peers and also the change that peers and family had seen

in them. While various elements of the intervention were highlighted as being more (or less) helpful, the key aspect, highlighted by all participants, appeared to be the improvement in relationships and communication. Staff commented on how students gradually ‘opened up’ about difficulties and could see how this was of benefit emotionally and socially. Delivering the intervention also appeared to ‘humanise’ the teachers from the students’ perspectives. Helping students to understand themselves and others, and to describe their feelings, were key elements of the intervention, as was supporting teachers to provide a more student-centred, communicative approach.

A finding that became evident through the data analysis was the personal emotional impact on the teachers. All of them discussed how they had employed some of the lessons and the psychological techniques in their own lives and also within their families, churches and communities. They discussed how being trained and then teaching others encouraged them to understand themselves and others better.

Pedagogy

Many of the challenges highlighted in previous research were reflected in the teacher reports of their experience of being trained in and implementing new teaching approaches. All of the teachers asserted that the teaching style and classroom management in Living Well lessons were appreciably different to other lessons. Many positive aspects of the student-centred, participatory, active learning approach were affirmed by the teachers. Providing a short enjoyable activity at the beginning to engage pupils, and group discussions were the main changes that teachers found most beneficial. The teachers were so impressed with the impact on pupils that they attempted a more student-centred, communicative approach in other lessons, with mixed results. The student responses provide some limited evidence that the teachers were indeed attempting this new pedagogy, despite the challenges, and

that they were benefitting from this. It appeared to be more enjoyable and productive both to teach and to be taught in this manner than a dictatorial transfer of knowledge with choral responses (Hardman et al, 2009).

Previous research with primary school teachers in Uganda had similar findings, with students becoming much more involved in their learning, and both teachers and students finding more enjoyment and interest in the classroom (Altinyelken, 2010b). Teachers in Altinyelken's study also asserted that participatory pedagogies improved life-skills, emphasising self-esteem, assertiveness, confidence and effective communication.

As in previous research, the enthusiasm of teachers towards the intervention and new teaching approaches was curbed by some challenges and frustrations. Large class sizes and lack of physical resources were the main obstacles outlined by all teachers and some of the students. Large class sizes in African classrooms and the subsequent difficulty implementing active learning and other student-centred pedagogy in this context is a common theme in previous literature. Westbrook et al's (2013) review of pedagogy and teaching practices in developing countries found that having large numbers of children in small classrooms mitigated against group work, with even pair work creating unacceptable and unworkable noise levels. Teachers in the current study and previous studies (e.g. Altinyelken, 2010b) highlighted how limited space restricts teacher and student movement, and that it is impossible to interact individually with every student in a class of 70-100 students during a one hour lesson.

Uganda is likely to have large classes for some time to come due to the vast government investment that would be required to bring the pupil-teacher ratio to 35:1 and below. Therefore, future interventions and research should consider forms of pedagogy and classroom organisation that are suitable for promoting learning in large classes (Nakabugo et al, 2007). Indigenous approaches are likely to be the most appropriate and sustainable.

Nakabugo et al's review found that Ugandan teachers had successfully developed some novel strategies for teaching large classes. They concluded that these could facilitate meaningful learning but they needed nurtured and developed further through reflective practice.

Several of the teachers and students mentioned a lack of support from senior management and other staff. This was mainly related to pressure of tests and exams in other subjects. As in many LMICs (and 'developed' countries), the education system in Uganda is strongly examination-oriented and there are major implications and resultant pressures for schools and students. Previous research has indicated that a drive for more learner-centred pedagogy alongside the old examination system is confusing and frustrating for teachers, and that teacher concerns about a potential impact on student results may hold them back from implementing new methods (Livingston et al, 2017). The teacher and student interviews in this study indicate a clear mind-set of 'teach to the test' to receive accreditation. Despite strong emphasis in the manual and in training that the life skills developed through the intervention could not be assessed in written exams, both staff and students asserted that a short assessment and certificate of completion would encourage both pupils and other staff to see a value in it alongside other academic subjects. Previous research has also contended that teaching strategies that are perceived to have little impact on student achievement in national examinations are unlikely to be fully implemented and sustained (Altinyelken, 2010b).

Socio-cultural Considerations

The UNESCO policy paper (Livingston et al, 2017) stresses that a single 'one size fits all' vision of quality pedagogy is not appropriate because pedagogy cannot be separated from the social and resource contexts in which it exists. It recognises that change takes time and it is especially challenging within large classes of pupils. However, despite the clear challenges, the current study concurs with Livingston et al's assertion that teachers can take small steps

towards new approaches and learning opportunities for their pupils. Understanding of teachers as learners and of the practices required to support and challenge their learning is necessary to enable change.

It was of paramount importance to the research team that the Living Well intervention was culturally-sensitive, appropriate and context-specific. Otherwise, it was highly unlikely to be replicable and sustainable. This is not possible without capacity-building, partnership, combined expertise and providing ‘ownership’ to indigenous people at all stages of the study. It is vital that we learn from different culturally-bound ways of teaching and learning and foster a collaborative approach (Livingston et al, 2017). Throughout all stages of the study, FOL staff and the school teachers were involved in advising how the manual could be improved to make it as practical, useful, sustainable and culturally appropriate as possible. Four of the teachers who were interviewed in the current study provided training to the wait-list control school and 7 other schools, alongside the researchers. They are now responsible for the continued delivery of this training in other schools.

Similar to the current study, Altinyelken (2010a and 2010b) found that the majority of teachers were enthusiastic about new approaches to teaching, but, felt constrained by a multitude of challenges. He asks whether a child-centred pedagogy is appropriate and/or realistic within the structural realities of Ugandan classrooms, referring again to overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and low teacher motivation. Importantly, Altinyelken (2010a) asserts that successful implementation of any educational innovation will depend on the extent to which planners take school realities into account, considering both the current level of classroom practice, and the current capacity to support innovation.

None of the teachers or students in the current study questioned whether the actual techniques and approaches that they were encouraged to implement were culturally appropriate. All could see the benefit, notwithstanding the practical and structural obstacles. However, it is

important to consider previous research which suggests that some student-centred approaches may directly contradict the cultural context of African societies. For example, the development of critical thinking skills and encouraging children or adolescents to question adults may not be considered appropriate in Ugandan culture where they are brought up to respect those in authority without question (Altinyelken, 2010b).

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this small-scale, qualitative study. The participants were not selected randomly. The teachers volunteered to come for interview and students were selected by teachers because they had completed all of the intervention and were willing to be interviewed. We received monthly reports from each school and, as in Altinyelken's (2010b) study, there was consistent enthusiasm and approval, but varying degrees to which teachers embraced the new pedagogical approaches. Due to the small sample we did not consider potential gender differences in responses nor at for example years of experience in teaching for teacher participants.

All interviews were completed by the lead researcher and designer of intervention. Therefore, despite our requests for honesty, there remained some potential for response bias from the participants. In addition, the interviews were self-reported and cross-sectional at the end of the intervention. The robustness of the findings would have been improved by multiple interviews over the course of the intervention and by observations of teaching. Altinyelken (2010b) found that Ugandan teachers demonstrated great enthusiasm for student-centred pedagogy during interviews and claimed to practise it. However, lesson observations only partly substantiated their accounts, suggesting limitations in relying on teacher self-report to analyse changes in practice.

There were also a number of systemic factors that were beyond the scope of the current study but could have impacted both research aims. Many of the students, and some of

the teachers, lived in poverty and faced a range of challenges in their families and communities. Low teacher morale, related to low salaries, inadequate working conditions etc., has been discussed in numerous previous studies (Altinyelken (2010b; Schweisfurth, 2013; TISSA, 2014). The SABER Report (World Bank, 2012) stated that entry requirements, teacher pay, and working conditions may not be appealing for talented candidates, signalling teaching as a low-status profession. These issues were not highlighted by teachers in the current study. It should be noted that the staff that were chosen to implement the Living well programme were particularly enthusiastic and saw teaching, and the life skills programme in particular, as vocational. As such, their views could not be generalised to all Ugandan secondary school teachers.

The LW programme was intentionally designed to be available to all secondary school students regardless of the current level of need or resource in their school. The manual and training emphasised that the only requirements were a LW manual, a blackboard and a note book for students. However, teachers still stated that they were limited by lack of resources. A recent report stated that only 3.3% of GDP was being allocated to the education sector, which is below the average level of funding that is provided in other Low Income Countries (TISSA, 2014). These macro-level problems mean that, even if deployed in a large number of schools, it will be a challenging for the Living Well intervention to make a major difference to pedagogical approaches at scale. Teacher recruitment, preparation, deployment, incentives, along with continued professional development are key to large-scale change (Bold et al, 2017).

Conclusion

The qualitative data from this study supported previous findings of the impact of the Living Well intervention and provided a better understanding of this impact. In addition, it

considered perspectives of new pedagogical approaches required to deliver a life skills intervention. These research aims were not exclusive of each other. As found in previous interventions in Uganda, life skills were strengthened by the participatory, student-centred approach. The new pedagogy resulted in more open interaction between staff and students and between the students themselves. This was key in promoting social, emotional and behavioural development. There remains a number of challenges in implementing and scaling similar interventions and approaches in Uganda and other LMICs. Further research is required into feasible, culturally-appropriate, context-specific approaches that combine evidence-based knowledge with indigenous capacity and partnership.

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Table 1. Participant information and codes

Teacher	School*	Sex	Teaching experience
Teacher A	1	Male	6 years
Teacher B	2	Female	20 years
Teacher C	2	Female	10 years
Teacher D	3	Male	11 years
Teacher E	3	Male	9 Years
Student	School	Sex	Age
Student A	3	Male	14
Student B	1	Female	15
Student C	3	Female	12
Student D	2	Female	13
Student E	2	Male	12
Student G	1	Male	14

**School Region in Uganda- 1- North, 2- Central, 3- East*