

## **The status and practice of Life Orientation(LO)is critical in assisting studentsto perform well in other courses.**

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*This research investigated the important role played by the fundamental Life Orientation course which is undertaken by all students in teacher education in assisting them to perform well in other courses that they undertake in the institution of Higher learning. The study enquired into the attitudes of students towards Life Orientation. How anything is approached has a bearing on its success and sustainability. Educators of teachers need to be mindful of the fact that whilst students are expected to apply knowledge, skills and values in a way that is meaningful to their own lives, who they are in terms of the way they perceive themselves has a bearing on the successful completion of the task. Cognitive Theory as well as theories of psychosocial development appear to shed light on this assertion. Furthermore, it is important for educators of teachers to take into consideration local context while being sensitive to global imperatives. Results revealed that students have a strong sense of self and anything that relates to themselves as individuals when they are still young and before they take into consideration the things that occur in their immediate environment when they are older. It is advisable that policy implementers and stakeholders who interact with students should be mindful of such issues in facilitating the transition of students from university life to the world of work. This implies transitioning learners from "who" to "what" in the learning process which is a means to an end and not an end in itself as educators try to engage learners in teaching and learning.*

**Key terms:** Competencies of an educator, self-image, self-esteem, self-concept, cognitive development, psychosocial-developmental issues, meaningful learning, community engagement, student involvement and support, personal development, interpersonal issues.

### **Introduction**

Globalisation and Internationalisation has led to increasing international mobility of students. This has placed a new emphasis on the quality, standards and benchmarking of qualifications (Fourie, 2000) The most significant change that occurred after 1994 in teacher education in South Africa, which was in line with the global trend, was to move teacher education to the higher education sector. This placed a great responsibility on curriculum designers in the sense that within the South African policy framework educators of teachers needed to refine knowledge and practices for teacher education and to re-insert discipline and disciplinary enquiry into teacher education programmes (Parker & Adler, 2005). Educators of teachers are faced with an enormous responsibility. The Centre for Higher Education (CHE) only pays attention to best practices as well as to minimum standards and refrains from setting up explicit models of good teaching practices for a number of reasons (Hugo, 2005) Educators of teachers are left with a challenge of defining and designing the curriculum to the extent that if they become aware of the such issues may well lack spontaneity in their reactions. This claim is therefore questionable.

Students in teacher education were trained to teach one or two school subjects only depending on the level and the focus was only in intellectual understanding. The current policy has incorporated seven roles and competences of an

educator. The design of the Curriculum has shifted from a centralised system to a point as close as possible to the client (Lategan,1999).

In the institutions of Higher education, Life Orientation (LO) is a new course that was introduced in South Africa as part of curriculum transformation attendant upon the institution of the new South African democracy. The purpose of LO is to assist students to live a meaningful life in a society that is rapidly changing. The teaching of LO has a dual function in the sense that while students are expected to be equipped with skills, knowledge and values to cope in their profession,they are expected to convey what they learn to the learnersthat they will teach in their professional practice. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that there are no trained educators in this area whilst at the same time they are expected to play a pastoral role with regard to their learners.

In the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme of Teacher Education, the Norms and Standards (2000) policy document stipulates that students are expected to be competent in seven roles and competences. In the programme, courses that are offered are divided into fundamental, core and elective and they cover both professional and academic development. The qualification is made up of 480 credits which are accumulated over a period of four years. This study focuses on the fundamental course called Life Orientation which is mandatory for all students in teacher education.

LO has six sub-disciplines such as Life Skills, Health Education, Human Rights education, Guidance, Religious Education and Physical Education. Themes that are covered in each year level are; personal development, citizenship education, recreation and physical wellbeing and career and career choices. This study will focus on the theme called personal development to find out if the practice of LO assist students to do well in other courses.

Personal development's main focus is on the whole issue of self in relation to others and to society (DoE,2010) ; such as; self-image, self-esteem, and self –concept. The development of self is informed by the way an individual thinks (cognition) as well as who they are in society as social agents (psycho-social).

The purpose of the course is to equip students with knowledge, skills, and values to deal with the following two dimensions of development in the students' life:

1. Cognitive development focuses on personal development in the sense that students' development involves aspects such as social, cognitive,and emotional aspects which all work together in complex ways. If the students are empowered to deal with the above issues, they should be able to do well in other courses. This should contribute to enhancing the way in which a student's self-image and perceptions of themselves are socially and cognitively developed.

2. With reference to the psychosocial dimension, the family is the sub-unit of society in the social development aspect of the student life. It contributes to the development of interpersonal relationships which are required by the institution in working on tasks such as group work. Institutions are supposed to enhance and continue where the schools, families and communities have ended their influence. The tragedy is that students often grow up in areas where this is not nurtured or developed.

A discussion now follows concerning the research that was carried out into student educators to ascertain the extent to which the practice of Life Orientation assisted students to do well in other courses.

### **Research design and methodology**

This study collected standardised information from the B.Ed students by means of a questionnaire which was designed to ascertain how many students possess a particular attribute or opinion (Robson, 1995:49) with reference to the status and practice of LO in the programme. The study was conducted on a sample of 300 students which were randomly selected with fair distribution of gender and race and questionnaires were equally divided among 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup>

and 3<sup>rd</sup> year students. The timing of administering the questionnaire was critical because students were expected to reflect upon the status and practice of LO in the current year. The instrument was administered towards the end of the year. Students were homogenous in the sense that they all undertook the same mandatory course.

The researcher employed both interpretive and descriptive research strategies in the analyses of data collected. The interpretive strategy assisted in generating concepts and theories which arose from the enquiry rather than being tested by it (Robson, 1995). The methodology used in this study favoured a form of data analysis that starts with content analysis. Robson (1995) argues that content analysis is a refinement of ways that are used by lay people to describe aspects of the world about them. The effective way of working with this process is to start with the research question and that is the strategy that the researcher adopted.

The content of the data was collected by means of a questionnaire and was coded and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The discourse in analysing qualitative data culminated in a global analysis, which revealed whether or not the status and practice of LO assisted students to do well in the courses that are offered in the B. Ed programme.

## **Results**

Results revealed that most students (95%) in 1<sup>st</sup> year focus more on the self and issues that relate to them as individuals as compared to 65% in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 49% in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year student group. Most 3<sup>rd</sup> year students did not focus on issues that relate to themselves as individuals but they also see themselves as people who must reach out to the community.

The scale of 1-10 in the questionnaire was perceived as relevant in terms of ascertaining whether students feel empowered or not by the course. Respondents said they feel they are conscientised and empowered and they view LO as a course that has practical value to them as individuals.

Few students (3%) who gave a low rating to the learning area generally, made comments that were appropriate to their rating. The low rating from the students and related comments implied that they felt they needed to know more about the learning area. Almost all responses corresponded with the reasons provided by the students in terms of the value of the rating. The responses given by the students revealed that they are aware, of the contribution of LO to them as individuals.

The researcher observed that although the low rating of the course might be perceived in a negative way, one can point to the following positive factors:

- Students had an understanding of the rating scales in assessment which is needed for professional practice.
- The low rating was in accordance with the comments provided.
- The low rating implied the possibility that students have knowledge of assessment techniques, which is a requirement for peer assessment in the new approach to teaching and learning.

The response pattern generated by the questionnaire revealed a positive inclination towards the course in the sense that they view the course as critical in assisting them as individuals to perform well in other courses. The overall finding was that students' attitudes towards the course were positive because the learning area is concerned with issues that relate to self. Furthermore, it was evident that younger students were more concerned about issues related to themselves as individuals as compared to older learners despite the year level but the correlation was not strong. The fact that older students (mostly 3<sup>rd</sup> years) perceived themselves as helping in the community reflects growth in wisdom.

## Discussion

### Curriculum Design

In this study a case is made for the importance of LO in conscientising teacher educators on how its status and practice assists students to do well in other courses. An argument is presented for the importance of LO and a plea is made for LO to be given the recognition that one feels it deserves. The theories which inform both social and cognitive development will be used to underpin the argument. Concepts that are used in teacher education will be limited to educators as classroom practitioners (*Norms and Standards*, 2000).

Students' perception of themselves is fundamental in assisting them to do well in other courses and it should therefore form part of students' priorities in planning a programme for them. The content and context is equally important in assisting students to succeed. By 'content', is meant how the student views himself/herself internally in teaching and learning and by 'context' is meant an attempt by the lecturer to create conditions that will enhance students' perception, which will have a bearing on their performance. In education, teacher educators often concentrate on their own techniques or processes in planning the learning programme and ignore or overlook what is going on with the students. Astin (1999) argues for an 'involvement approach' in the design and delivery of the course in order to focus more on what students are actually doing. This requires teacher educators to work more with counsellors and student personnel workers because these work closely with students. Teacher educators need to understand that no single approach to subject matter teaching or resource allocation is adequate for all students. Rather it identifies curriculum content and instructional methods that can best meet the needs of individual students. It borrows what is most useful from other pedagogical approaches. This flexible approach could also be termed 'eclectic' in an attempt to bring about a desired learning outcome in the student's teaching and learning. The focus should shift from making students' passive recipients of knowledge to an emphasis on active involvement and participation in the student's learning process. Furthermore, the creation of an environment that is conducive to meaningful teaching and learning will assist students in their professional development. Rosenshine, (1982) argues that the success in learning will be greatest when the learning environment is structured to encourage active participation by the student. The focus is shifted from what lectures do to what students do in terms of how motivated they are and how much time they devote to the learning process, which will assist them to perform well in other courses.

The success and failure of students is related to how they perceive themselves and who they are on the inside. If they perceive themselves to be dull or not doing well in the courses it becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Meighan, 1997) and that is manifested in the performance. Rotter, (1966) suggests that the effectiveness of any attempt to increase student involvement is highly contingent on the students' perceived locus of control and attributional inclinations. This means that the success or failure of students depends on effort (controllable) and ability (uncontrollable).

The aspects of the questionnaire which made the most significant contribution to the individuals' personal development revolved around the issues which are related to self-empowerment, self-image and self-concept. Students said the image that they have about who they are, empowered them to perform well in other courses. Aspects of LO that are considered later by the students are aspects that are peripheral to them such as community development.

In a study done by Njozela, (2011) on the high school learners' attitudes towards LO, with reference to the new approach to teaching and learning, it was revealed that educators influence the attitudes of learners. This means that if we want to work with learners, we need to work with educators who teach them. The same should be applicable to educators of teachers. If the institution of higher learning wants to impact positively on students' views of themselves, they need to work on the lecturers who teach them.

Whilst attempts have been made to improve the status and practice of LO, a study done of High School learners undertaken by Ntshangase(1995) revealed that the Learning Area (LA) is used either as a free period or time to catch up for educators. This is an indication of a narrow and superficial understanding of the LA in schools. A research study (Rooth, 2005) revealed that educators feel uncomfortable in teaching certain aspects of the syllabus such as sexuality because they say it is against their belief system. Even the Department of Education does not take this seriously in the sense that it forms part of continuous assessment in schools. This exposes the LA to abuse and devaluation, with many Institutions of Higher Learning (HEI) not regarding it as an important LA. The Central admissions Office (CAO) of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa, which is responsible for admitting learners into institutions of Higher learning in the region, does not count it as points accumulated by a student seeking admission to higher education.

### **Cognitive developmental issues**

A well-known theorist who deals with cognitive issues is Jean Piaget. He argues that the environment (context) has a bearing on the children's affective and cognitive development. This can be applied to the classroom situation in the sense that teacher educators, in their interaction with students can play a critical role in enhancing their engagement which will make them experience success which in turn contributes to success in other courses.

How anything is handled has a bearing and is a reflection on its success and sustainability. If an educator handles chalk roughly, the chances of it being broken are very high because of its fragile nature. This is supported by (D. Perkins 1992) where he talks about "fragile knowledge" issues. Students at the stage of higher education have reached the formal operational stage; they are better able to think about what they could be in future. Kruger and Adams (1998) argue that those who go to higher education tend to question for a much longer period of time and identity achievement is resolved much later. Educators who are warm [supportive and democratic \(allowing students to make their own decision whilst still providing guidelines\)](#) can promote students identity achievement. Educators who are harsh and controlling may cause students to be in a foreclosed position because they accept the decision their educators make for them without thinking through their decisions. Culture can have an adverse effect on some students, especially in Africa, in the sense that they tend to accept as appropriate the paths decided upon by their teachers without soul-searching. Students who belong to the marginalized groups often lag behind other students. They realize that prejudice and discrimination can limit their educational prospects and can limit them achieving what they wish. It is argued that in South Africa and in many African states, identity formation is influenced to a great extent by society, parents and teachers. These have an important role to play in assisting students to achieve a positive sense of identity (Kruger and Adams, 1998).

[Higher educational life affects students' conception of themselves in the sense that those that have a high conception of themselves have a positive attitude and therefore have a higher self-esteem. The reverse is true in that a lack of achievement leads to poor self-esteem \(Woolfolk, 1996\). Educators can assist students to develop competencies that define who they are \(self\). In that way self-esteem, interpersonal competencies, social problem-solving and leadership becomes important determinants of success in academic learning \(Good and Weinstein in Woolfolk, 1996\). Students can develop academic self-concepts. How they feel about their academic achievements depends on what they think their good or poor marks are due to. Sometimes they think that when they do well it is because of internal factors such as ability and when they do poorly it is because of external unstable factors \(such as little effort\).](#)

### **Egocentrism**

The student at this stage is concerned with analysis of his/her own beliefs and ideas and this is characterized by formal operations in cognitive development. Students believe that everyone is watching and analysing them. This

indicates that they are not yet comfortable being in the broader social world. They believe that their singularity and individuality are reflective of their experiences, talents, perspectives and values. Their egocentrism manifests itself in the conviction that they cannot be conquered or harmed by anything (Berger, Gouws, et al., cited in Dalzell, 2005). The fact that students are positively disposed towards the course is strength on its own. This is an indication that learners are aware of the learning area and its value to them as individuals.

### **Psychosocial- developmental issues**

With reference to the [interrelationship between the developmental task and psychosocial crisis](#), the success in mastering developmental tasks is influenced by the individual's ability to resolve the psychosocial crisis of the previous stage and this [facilitates the development of new social competences](#). With these competences a student can face the challenges of the new stage with greater confidence and enhanced feelings of self-worth.

The developmental task of [a first year students revolves around the attempts to discover his /her identity and to identify the things about him/her that are unique and different](#). They will do so by addressing the following questions:

- “Who am I”?- (Their qualities and characteristics).
- “Who do I belong to”? – (their friends, family, beliefs).
- “What do I want to achieve”? (Their wishes, plans, goals).

One believes that the students at this stage [question everything in an attempt to find certainty about who they are and what they want to achieve in life](#). Students who do not have answers to such questions have a tendency of not knowing where they are heading in life. Furthermore, [in an attempt to find an image about himself/herself, he/she attempts to form a self-image in accordance with what society expects](#). Peers and people around the student are critical in assisting the individual to develop either a positive or negative sense of self. Students have shown in this study that [people who have low self-esteem find it difficult to become successful and they are likely to misbehave because they have not resolved identity conflicts](#). Identity diffusion cannot be ruled out, this may be characterised by impulsivity and by being disorganized. Good role models can influence the learner in a positive way.

At this stage students venture into relationships with others. They can succeed in that venture if their identity is established; otherwise they can become isolated. People who have a strong sense of identity are likely to build good relationships, which can lead to good marriages, good friendships, and permanent relationships.

At each stage there are critical issues that need to be resolved otherwise the individual will become fixated and subsequent stages of development will be affected. The stage that is most appropriate in this study is Identity versus Role Confusion (14-20 Years). Certain attitudes are developed in students at this stage as a result of direct experiences with his /her physical environment. It is argued (Mamwenda, 2004) that this stage is full of stress in the life of the individual and caution needs to be exercised to help the learner to develop a positive attitude which feeds their self-image, self-concept and self-esteem. If teacher educators are well-equipped with a capacity to provide a pastoral role, they will find it easy to be agents of change and they can work towards equipping the students where there is a need.

### **Recommendations**

From the above study it is evident that educators of teachers need to prioritize issues that revolve around self (self-image self-concept and self-esteem) in the design of the learning programme of LO. It could also be a recommendation to start with an easy aspect in the design of the curriculum and course to create a sense of

achievement and allow students experience success because success breeds success. Furthermore, one feels strongly that since the course is offered a fundamental, it should play a critical role in impacting on other disciplines by entrenching a strong sense of self in students, which in turn will have a bearing on students' performance.

Community outreach which is one of the roles and competences of an educator should be undertaken towards the end of the course when students have resolved the issue of the way they view themselves as individuals.

It is also important to establish a context in which students are free to learn. Dolber, (2011) suggests tips to improve self-esteem of students:

- One must do an inventory, i.e. ask yourself what you want to improve or change. Try to make one change at a time. Always check progress before you make another change.
- Celebrate your journey and not your destination. Always learn to feel good about where you are.
- Set goals for yourself before every interaction. Know what you want.
- Be proactive. Take the initiative. Be decisive. Proactive people tend to be more successful in their careers.
- Listen! Listen! Listen! Teach yourself to develop good listening skills.
- Visibly respond to the other person. Smile, nod and address him or her by name. Apply all your listening skills to visibly respond.
- Pay more attention to the other person rather than to yourself. Be caring.
- Don't mentally cut the other person off. Don't 'reload' while he/she is still speaking. You need to focus on the other person during a conversation, anything less is considered rude.

## Conclusion

It is important to note that students of higher education are self-conscious individuals who are interested in being empowered as individuals before they take care of things which are outside of themselves, such as the role of reaching out to the community. Taking care of this latter attempt is an indication of the growth in wisdom and it is the students at a 3<sup>rd</sup> year level who were more inclined to take care of the things that happen around them. The ongoing discussion on the status and practice of LO is going to assist in helping not only teacher educators but also stakeholders, people in other Departments in the institutions of higher learning as well as curriculum planners to have an understanding of the importance of this area of learning.

The study of status and practice of LO does not provide simple explanations and answers to the present research problem. One of the reasons is that the issue of self in an individual is not explicit, there are many factors that inform and affect who the individual is in other than the psycho-social, cognitive, and affective dimensions, just to mention a few. This is but one of the many studies that needs to be conducted in our Region since we are in a new democratic order. It is part of life-long learning, an international trend as well as a crucial dimension for the transformation of South African higher education (Blunt, 2005). It has become a fundamental goal of education policies both at national and international level. It is advocated as a way to promote an "information" or "knowledge" society (Kokosalakis, 2000). Furthermore, the status and practice of LO in assisting students to do well in other courses is part of the demand of the knowledge economy for soft skills, learning skills and personal development.

This study can be developed and improved by, among other things, adequate channels of two-way communication, conferences, workshops where people are brought together to exchange and interchange their ideas in order to make sense of their environment. Katz (2007) states that although one may consider a particular stream of thinking to be desirable, this has its own shortcoming in that subjects see the world in terms of their own needs and they are therefore not objective in their judgements. If programmes of higher education need to fulfill their responsibility of being knowledge-producing entities, they need to take seriously the need for students to develop cognitive and psychosocial skills which can enable them not only to perform well in other courses but also to develop an

integrated sense of identity which enables them to engage as life-long learners in the world of work and to operate as democratic citizens.

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