

## Research Article

# Stakeholders' Perceptions of Improving Students' Acquisition of Life Skills Competencies through Social Science Curricula

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**Abstract:** This study assessed stakeholders' perceptions of enhancing students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula. It was guided by an objective that reads to assess stakeholders' perceptions of improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula. The study was carried out in Mbeya, Chunya, Mbarali, Rungwe and Kyela districts of the Mbeya region in Tanzania, using a case study research approach. The study sample was sixty-five (65) respondents. An interview was used as a data collection method. This study recognises Geography, History and Civics curricula as social science curricula. It indicates that the perceptions of stakeholders of improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula are theoretically applied with no life skills orientations. The application of the curricula lacks workshops, experiments and comprehensive fieldwork activities which could add value to students during the acquisition of life skills competencies. It was realised that the curricula are teacher-centred whereby teachers prepare notes for students to copy. It is a banking model where the teacher deposits notes to students while students remain as a receiver of everything from the teacher. Students are directed to copy, read and reread notes for them to pass the national examination which helps to join the next level of schooling. It was noted that the curricula prepare bookish students with no life skills competencies. The curricula do not offer an opportunity for failure and those who pass the exams but cannot proceed with further studies due to the extreme poverty of family. It is recommended that the ministry of education, science and technology is responsible for making sure that social science curricula are implemented practically.

**Keywords:** social science, curricula, stakeholders, life skills

## 1. Introduction

Life skills development has been a global concern of school curricula at different levels. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2012) shows that life skills education is an important vehicle to equip young people to negotiate and mediate challenges and risks in their lives and to enable productive participation in society. Prasertcharoensuk et al. (2015), in their study titled "Influence of teacher competency factors and students' life skills on learning achievement", noted that the core curriculum of basic education in Thailand recognizes the importance of life skills. This is also done in other parts of the world, like China, the United States of America and Canada to

mention a few. Therefore, life skills development is a major concern in students' learning process (Prasertcharoensuk et al., 2015). Hence, Life skills become the key inputs acquired during curriculum implementation for total human development. United Nations Development Programme (2015) argues that better educated and trained workers can do more diverse work to a higher standard and be more creative and innovative. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) explains that education can equip learners with agency and a sense of purpose, and the competencies they need, to shape their own lives and contribute to the lives of others.

OECD (2018) further argues that the concept of competency implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it involves the mobilization of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands that need both broad and specialized knowledge. This proves that education has a great role to prepare youth for the world of work. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015) explains that driving the transformation of work are globalization and technological revolutions, particularly the digital revolution. UNDP adds that globalization has fostered global interdependence, with major impacts on patterns of trade, investment, growth and job creation and destruction as well as on networks for creative and volunteer work.

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century, education is expected to empower learners with life skills competencies, for instance, Uganda, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, Sudan and Ethiopia. World Health Organization (1994), Behrani (2016) and Prajapati et al. (2017) explain life skills as the capacity for adaptive and positive behaviour that allow individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Prajapati et al. (2017) explain that life skills are a behaviour or behaviour development approach designed to address the balance of three areas which are knowledge, attitude and skills. Behrani (2016) and World Health Organization (1994) provide ten core life skills competencies which are decision-making, problem-solving, empathy, self-awareness, communication, interpersonal relationships, coping with emotions, coping with stress, creative thinking and critical thinking. Prajapati et al. (2017) show life skills classification into three broad categories which are thinking skills, social skills and emotional skills. In order to promote learners' life skills competencies, it is imperative that the school curriculum is well-prepared and flexible enough to promote learners' mental cognition. The mind (not to be confused with the brain) is a set of cognitive faculties including consciousness, imagination, perception, thinking, judgement, language and memory (University of Guelph, 2021). It is usually defined as the faculty of an entity's thoughts and consciousness (University of Guelph, 2021). Archana and Nair (2017) add that it holds the power of imagination, recognition and appreciation, and is responsible for processing feelings and emotions, resulting in attitudes and actions. This means that the school curricula need to provide an opportunity for teachers and learners to cultivate those learning attributes consequently by developing life skills competencies among learners.

Tanzania was chosen for this study because of its strong life skills education model, which has been tried and tested at every stage of delivery (Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI), 2020). This focus on learners and their learning is justified by the aims and objectives of the secondary education (Ministry of Education and Vocation Training-MOEVT, 2016). The aim and objectives of secondary education are well analysed in policies. However, the provision of secondary education still faces some challenges. The blame for this situation has been frequently directed to education systems that were inherited from colonial masters.

In recent years, Tanzania has revised its curriculum from a content-based paradigm to a competence-based one. Secondary education curriculum review seeks to develop an effective society expected to be creative and innovative in addressing surrounding challenges. Eller (2017) defines social science as a systematic utilisation of scientific methods to study and explain human beings and human behaviour. As disciplines, social sciences include but are not limited to geography, sociology, anthropology, economics and social psychology. In this study, social science curricula include Geography, History and Civics subject which are taught in ordinary secondary schools in Tanzania. The Tanzanian government is currently putting various methods in place to make sure that the issues of life skills are included in the curricula. These tactics include curriculum reviews, revisions, and the creation of national education policies. The curriculum was reviewed to make sure that secondary school graduates could use their gained life skills to handle diverse societal concerns including functional and community living skills. Even though the reviewed curriculum included some crucial life skills, such as communication, decision-making, problem-solving, empathy, and self-awareness, to name a few, the secondary schools lack a supportive environment for the full implementation of the curriculum to enable students to acquire the desired life skills competencies (Paulo & Tilya, 2014). However, the contribution of social science curricula to promoting students' life skills competencies is not widely known. Therefore,

it attracts research to establish knowledge that bridges the existing knowledge gap.

Besides government and other stakeholders' efforts to improve the secondary school education curricula from time to time geared to promote learners' competencies, still there are graduates who are not able to apply their education to master their environment (Uwezo, 2017). In other words, they do not fit in society despite being educated under a competence-based curriculum. The growing numbers of graduates who cannot create jobs and those who are job seekers leave us with different questions about the quality of education provided to our learners. While other people like Wandela (2014), Makunja (2016), Alli (2021) and Mkimbili and Kitta (2020) feel that limited instructional resources might be the major cause of the problem. Owolabi and Adedayo (2012) believe that teachers' availability and qualification account for the existing challenges. Scholars like Prajapati et al. (2017) investigated the importance of life skills education and the benefits of imparting life skills education in the curriculum i.e., developing social, emotional and thinking skills in students, as they are the important building blocks for a dynamic citizen, who can cope up with the future challenges, and survive well. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to respond to the research on the contribution of social science curricula to promoting students' life skills competencies. This study provides findings that enlighten educational stakeholders and the general community about the linkage between social science curricula and students' life skills competencies which can help graduates to improve their living standards.

### **1.1 Statement of the research problem**

Since its independence to date, Tanzania has reviewed four times its secondary school curriculum which includes that of 1967; 1979; 1997 and 2005 (Kopweh, 2014; Mtitu, 2014). All the reviews except that of 1979 were meant to transform the school curriculum from teacher-centred to learner-centred whereas the promotion of learning competencies and skills among learners has become the priority and emphasis of the curriculum and thus the teachers' pedagogical practice. The major aim has been to facilitate teaching and learning to link or connect theories learnt in the class and learners' real-life situations. This means that the government is cognisant of the importance of skills and competencies development among learners.

Despite many efforts from the government and other education stakeholders to improve the quality of basic education, especially by promoting learners' life skills competencies, yet, teachers are trapped in a teacher-centred chalk-and-talk system of teaching even though the curriculum requires them to use varieties of pedagogies (Lham et al., 2020). Using these approaches means that teachers focus on the subjects, not on learners. Teachers struggle to complete the syllabus and not to transform learners by promoting life skills competencies such as decision-making, communication, critical thinking and argumentation as well as problem-solving skills. Teachers' classroom domination means suppressing children's intellectual growth. Teachers teaching practices are characterised by the rare use of teaching and learning resources, limited engagement of learners in the learning process, and minimal use of ICTs. This implies teachers' lack of in-service training about emerging pedagogical issues in the school curriculum and teacher education. All this has triggered the need to undertake the proposed study.

It is not known, however, to what extent the current social science curricula improve students' acquisition of life skills competencies. This gap then resulted in the production of this study.

### **1.2 Objectives of the study**

The main objective of this study is to investigate the stakeholders' perceptions of enhancing students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula. Specifically, the study investigated the following:

- i. The perception of improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula
- ii. The possibility of secondary school graduates employing themselves based on the education acquired during their studie
- iii. To surrender employment and employ themselves depending on the secondary school education acquired during ordinary-level secondary school studies

## 2. Methods

Research methods included an interview and focus group discussions. The study employed a case study research design. The study area of this study included five districts of the Mbeya region in Tanzania. The sample size of the study was sixty-five (65) participants: five (5) secondary school education officers, ten (10) heads of secondary schools, twenty (20) social science subjects' teachers two from each secondary school, ten parents (10) from school board members each from one secondary school and twenty students (20) two from each secondary school. The findings of this study are presented in percentage.

### 2.1 Interview

The interview in social science is a method of data collection that involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers (DeCarlo, 2018). The interview guiding open-ended questions were designed by the interviewer (researcher) to elicit information from the interviewee (participants) on a given topic or set of topics (DeCarlo, 2018). The collection of data involves the presentation of oral verbal stimuli and replies in terms of oral verbal responses. The researcher prepared an interview guide comprising open-ended questions which helped in the flow of information during searching the information in the study area. The open-ended question gives study participant an opportunity to express their views in relation to the study objectives. Additionally, the researcher applied semi structured and unstructured interview guides. The interview method enables a well-trained interviewer to gather more data and more clarity.

### 2.2 Focus groups

The focus group discussion method requires a researcher to establish a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic focusing to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the respondents through a moderated interaction (Nyumba et al., 2018). It aims at collecting data through interactive and directed discussions by a researcher. In this method, the group had five participants including two students, one teacher, the head of the secondary school and the researcher. The discussion is based on the themes originating from the specific objectives of the current study to allow interaction with five (5) participants in each visited community secondary school. Focus groups allow a researcher to probe further into individual comments and emotions, resulting in a better understanding of the participants' intentions. This 'why' or personal knowledge of what makes the researcher's audience tick will be critical in influencing the research's direction and strategy. A focus group was used for triangulation.

## 3. Findings and discussion: Stakeholders' perceptions on improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula

### 3.1 Materials and method

District secondary school education officers, heads of secondary school, social science subjects' teachers and students from Mbeya, Chunya, Mbarali, Rungwe and Kyela districts of the Mbeya region were asked to explain their understanding of social science curricula. Findings indicated that a hundred percent (100%) of five (5) interviewed district secondary school education officers were requested to explain what they understand about social science curricula. They explained that they were concerned with art subjects. Their response lies in the idea that art subjects in social science curricula include geography, history and civics subjects which are taught in ordinary secondary schools. One district secondary school education officer made a comment on understanding social science curricula saying:

*“From what I understand about social science curricula, they are those which are recognized as art subjects taught in secondary schools. Those subjects are geography, history and civics subject.”*

Furthermore, findings from the study area included ten heads of secondary schools on the concept of social science

curricula. Thirty-five percent (35%) of ten (10) heads of secondary schools who were interviewed, echoed that the concept of social science curricula includes the Geography curriculum, History curriculum and civics curriculum as social science curricula. This shows that they had a clear understanding of what social science curricula meant in this study. Five percent (5%) of ten (10) heads of community secondary school responded that social science curricula are those curricula that are theoretically oriented. Fifty-five percent (55%) of ten (10) heads of the secondary school responded that refer to the curricula which are based on social studies and integrated with some experiments. Ten percent (10%) of ten (10) heads of school responded that social science curricula refer to the curricula which involve the study of social science relations and social development about life as Tanzanians. As the interview went on deeper with probing questions, we came up with one understanding that social science curricula include geography, history and civics curricula as it is presented in this study.

Moreover, the results were collected from twenty (20) social science subjects teachers in the Mbeya region. The findings from eighty percent (80%) of social science subject teachers show that the social science curricula include the Geography, History and Civics curricula. Their results match with this study because social science curricula in this study refer to the History, Geography and Civics curricula that are taught in ordinary secondary school. One of the social science subjects teachers commented on what he understands about social science curricula saying:

*“To be open I connect the concept of social science curricula with art subjects taught here in Tanzanian community secondary schools. The subjects are history, geography and civics subject.”*

Twenty percent (20%) of social science subjects teachers replied that social science curricula refer to all subjects taught in secondary schools that deal with society’s daily life and prepare students to have knowledge and skills for the present and future life. For the study to be clear to every participant, the researcher applied probing questions which automatically resulted in one understanding to all social science curricula teachers that social science curricula include Geography, History and Civics curriculum in this study. The intention was to make sure that every individual replied to the questions relating to what social science curricula mean in this study.

Over and over above that, findings also included twenty (20) students from districts of the Mbeya region. Twenty-five percent (25%) of twenty (20) students show that social science curricula include art subjects. They mention Geography, History and Civics as art subjects. Seventy-five percent (75%) of twenty (20) students were not able to explain what it means by the social science curricula. Since it was necessary to have an understanding of what social science curricula mean before proceeding with other items, the researcher clarified to them that social science curricula include geography, history and civics subject. In addition to this, there are specific issues relating to the disciplines of Geography, History, Civics, Political Science, and Economics in the teaching-learning of social sciences (University of Jammu, 2020). History, political science, anthropology, philosophy, economics, and other social science subjects are taught and learned in the social sciences (University of Jammu, 2020). According to Jorgenson et al. (2019), there are various social science subjects such as anthropology, geography, and sociology. The University of Jammu (2020) has included history, but Jorgenson et al. (2019) have included geography in social science curricula. The subject of civics is never mentioned, despite the fact that it is related to political science. Geography, History and Civics have been mentioned in the cited text although more disciplines are mentioned. For this study in Tanzania, Geography, History and Civics are recognized as social science subjects. These subjects are taught in community secondary schools of Mbeya districts in the Mbeya region.

### ***3.2 The perception of improving students’ acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula***

The stakeholder of the study was asked to explain their perceptions of improving students’ acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula in the Mbeya region. The findings from district secondary schools’ education officers and heads of school show that one hundred percent (100%) of five (5) districts’ secondary school education officers and ten (10) heads of the secondary school indicated that social science curricula lack an improvement of students’ acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula. The curricula are based on national examinations offered by the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA). It was noted that teachers are busy

preparing students to acquire tricks that can enable them to pass the national examinations. Students are encouraged to work hard in order to pass the examinations which later help students who have passed the examination to join the next level of schooling. For example, joining form five in advanced level secondary school education or joining colleges such as teachers training colleges and vocation training colleges under VETA. In addition, the authority congratulates all the schools with good grades of pass such as division one. On the other hand, the district education officer congratulates all the heads of secondary schools and teachers whose schools have good examination results which provide students the room for joining advanced level secondary school level or colleges. For example, one secondary school head comments on students employing themselves saying:

*“Normally what even I do is that, I insist on good examination performance, especially on national examinations. There are task forces such as crash programs which are accompanied by various activities which may contribute to the good performance of form four examination results. Students are advised to read their exercise books, attempt many quizzes and do several examinations. Some of the activities are like premock examinations, mock examinations and pre-national examinations. These activities are given to learners with the aim of making sure that students pass national examinations.”*

Also, findings from social science subjects teachers indicate that forty percent (40%) of twenty (20) social science subjects teachers explained that the curricula are theoretically oriented in ordinary-level secondary schools. It was further clarified that students are taught theoretically. They are encouraged to write notes which will help them to have a private study when preparing themselves for the examinations. This shows that students in Tanzanian secondary schools ordinary levels lack the necessary life skills and abilities, which are crucial in day-to-day life. It was also added that the social science curricula are too bookish. They are focusing on preparing bookish graduates who cannot employ themselves. The learning process and the curricula itself is not encouraging students to learn practical life skills in order to become competent for their future life. This causes the graduate to suffer in the street after the completion of their studies when struggling for employment i.e., government employment and/or self-employment. Sixty percent (60%) of twenty (20) social science subject teachers explained that social curricula have a little contribution but they did not mention what little contribution of social curricula is on improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies.

A similar question was given to twenty students from the Mbeya region. Findings show that forty percent (40%) of twenty (20) students replied that the curricula have no contribution to improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies. They added that the curricula are too much theoretically oriented. No practical skills are offered to students that relate to students' life skills competencies and their surroundings. They prepare students theoretically in order to pass the examinations. Even the examinations are done theoretically with no contribution to promoting students' life skills competencies. However, sixty percent (60%) of twenty (20) students who were interviewed argued that the curricula have a little contribution to improving students' life skills competencies. They explained that it is little because the largest extent the curricula are theoretical in nature and bookish-oriented. They added that teachers are busy preparing for examinations. And sometimes punishment is offered to students whose scores are below the average. They explained that teachers prepare notes for the students and students copy notes. Sometimes students read books that they borrow from teachers in order to read for preparing themselves to attempt examinations. Furthermore, they explained that the curricula help them with problem-solving although no problem was mentioned as an example and from which topics. Also, they added that the curricula help them in decision-making and becoming entrepreneurs. But they did not explain how they are prepared and which topics match problem-solving, decision-making and entrepreneurship. No workshops for decision-making, problem-solving and entrepreneurship were shown to prove the given response.

### ***3.3 Possibility of secondary school graduates to employ themselves based on the education acquired during their studies***

District secondary school education officers, heads of secondary schools, social science subjects' teachers and students from the Mbeya region were asked to respond to the possibility of the secondary school graduates employing themselves based on the education acquired during their studies. The findings show that one hundred percent (100%) of five (5) districts education officers, ten (10) heads of secondary schools and twenty (20) social science teachers argued

that the form four graduates cannot employ themselves by applying the education acquired from social science curricula during their studies. One of the district secondary school education officers made a comment about students employing themselves saying:

*“Frankly speaking, what I understand is that students can not employ themselves depending on the social science curricula implemented in secondary schools. The main focus is put to make sure that students pass national examinations. The curricula are theoretical in nature and based on examinations’ performance.”*

More clarifications were provided on that one the social science curricula are too theoretical. The curricula are full of theoretical orientations which lead to copying notes during their time for memorizing (remembering) in order to pass the examinations. Also, the curricula have no connections between the content and graduates’ real-life environment. Their students are ordered to buy counter books with reasonable volume for the students to copy notes. This requires them to buy school bags which can help them in carrying counter books for writing notes and not doing practical skills. Therefore, teachers prepare notes for the students to copy into their counter books. All these are done only for the preparation of learners to pass the national examinations but not for learners to acquire life skills for their lives.

Additionally, sixty percent (60%) of students who were interviewed echoed that social science curricula have the possibility to assist students to employ themselves in agriculture i.e., farming and livestock keeping, marketing, selling goods and conducting research. When they were told to submit the samples of research they used to learn, no sample was submitted. Also, they were told to show areas for agriculture practice and what they have practiced during their learning, no place was shown for proof. Also, they were requested to explain how social science curricula offer marketing skills, but nothing was submitted as proof. However, forty percent (40%) of the interviewed twenty (20) students commented that there is no possibility to employ themselves because the curricula are implemented theoretically. They also added that the curricula are out of their context. Their expectation was to work hard till they are employed by the government. This indicates that the curricula prepare students to pass national examinations and not employ themselves. Teachers are busy completing the syllabus as they are focusing on examination performance. It was added that students learn the curricula which are out of students’ context.

### ***3.4 Surrendering employment and employing themselves depending on the secondary school education acquired during ordinary-level secondary school studies***

District secondary school education officers, heads of secondary schools and social science subjects teachers from districts of the Mbeya region were asked to respond on surrendering their employment and employing themselves depending on the secondary school education acquired during their ordinary level secondary school. Findings from secondary school education officers, heads of secondary schools and social science subjects teachers had similar responses. The findings show that one hundred percent (100%) of five (5) secondary school education officers, ten (10) heads of secondary schools and twenty (20) social science subjects’ teachers were not ready to leave their employment and employ themselves depending on the education acquired during their studies. One social science teacher made a comment about surrendering employment saying:

*“I cannot surrender my government employment and employ myself. The curricula did not prepare me to do so. Even students that we are preparing cannot depend on the existing curricula to employ themselves. The focus is on examination performance.”*

They responded that during their studies, they were prepared to pass the examinations and they did so. Also, they responded that during their times, teachers used to teach them social science curricula theoretically. There were no life skills from the curricula which were taught during their time. The social science curricula did not give room for them to employ themselves. It was also argued that they were taught out of their context. They tried to mention the richness of the context that Tanzania has. Some of their natural resources are water bodies such as the Indian Ocean, Lake Tanganyika, Lake Victoria, Lake Nyasa, River Nile, and River Malagarasi for navigation and fishing while in minerals there are Tanzanite, gold, diamond and coal to mention a few. Furthermore, the context includes fertile soil for

agriculture and wild animals in the national parks and the rest parts of Tanzania. They expected to have social science curricula full of practical life skills competencies based on the learner's context. They had an example from other parts of the world like China where learners learn through workshops. Therefore, it was completely argued that the social science curricula do not match the learner's context. It is based on the colonial interest as it was inherited from the colonial government and it is too theoretically oriented. All these lead to difficulties for the social science curricula to develop students' life skills competencies.

## 4. Conclusion

The study conducted research on assessing stakeholders' perceptions of improving students' acquisition of life skills competencies through social science curricula in community secondary schools in the Mbeya Region, Tanzania. The study concludes that form four graduates will not be able to employ themselves due to the rationale of the social science curricula set up. District secondary school education officers and social science teachers can not surrender their employment and employ themselves depending on the social science curricula learnt during their ordinary secondary education. They were taught to pass examinations and that is what they did and today they are teachers. They learn under teacher-centred approach which encouraged them to pass national examinations. The curriculum is not valid compared to the student's environment. The curricular do not give chance in developing students' life skills competencies. It is advised that social science curricula should be improved focusing on students' acquisition of life skills and competencies. The study also comes to the conclusion that the government can only improve the learning environment by providing them with the necessary infrastructures, such as laboratories, offices, and libraries with all essential information resources for students, for graduates to acquire community and functional living skills.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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