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# The Impact and Effectiveness of Life Orientation on Six Students at The University of Cape Town

Sydney Nathan  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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# The Impact and Effectiveness of Life Orientation on Six Students at The University of Cape Town

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## Abstract

The Life Orientation program was implemented in South African high schools by The Department of Basic Education post-apartheid, to teach students about topics such as sexual and physical education, future career options, citizenship, and depending on the school, religion — a range of topics designed to prepare them to live healthy and productive adult lives. However, in practice the program is not always successful due to a lack of resources, teachers who are not trained to teach Life Orientation, and unmotivated students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact and effectiveness the Life Orientation program had on former students who now attend The University of Cape Town. I interviewed six current UCT students for this project. My participants attended high schools all over South Africa. Some went to public non-denominational schools, and others private schools affiliated with a religious institution. All of my data was collected through interviews, which I recorded on my cell phone.

The participants talked a lot about how they wished they had learned more practical life skills like doing their taxes and time management. They also talked about how beneficial it would have been to learn more about serious topics that would be applicable to their lives after they graduated university – like issues surrounding gender and sexuality. Although all of the participants said the Life Orientation curriculum needed to undergo changes in order to be more effective, it was still an important part of a high school education.

**KEYWORDS:** Life Orientation, The Department of Basic Education, Learner

### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this paper to my former Life Skills teachers at Crossroads. The lessons I learned in your classes were unparalleled.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank...

First and foremost, my participants. Your willingness and kindness made this project possible.

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## **Introduction**

At both the middle school and high school that I attended in the United States, all students were required to take a class every year called Life Skills. In Life Skills my fellow classmates and I learned about topics like sexual education, how to deal with the pressures of entering adulthood after high school, and how to exercise morally responsible judgment. But, unlike Life Orientation, which must be taught in all high schools in South Africa, Life Skills was a program unique to my school – with topics of study extremely similar to Life Orientation. When I look back on my experience in the Life Skills program, overall, I really enjoyed the classes and feel that I learned a lot from them. However, some classes were better than others because of the teachers I had – some were a lot more qualified than others, and their level of expertise had a direct impact on the quality of education that I received that year.

For my entire middle and high school career, whenever I talked about the Life Skills program, both peers and adults who were not affiliated with my school never really understood what it was – and when I explained it, people were divided on its potential value. Some thought discussing the challenges of looming adulthood was an amazing idea; others felt that spending school hours discussing non-academic subjects was a waste of time. So, when I first learned about the Life Orientation program in South Africa, I was immediately intrigued by it. I was curious to find out more about a nationwide program similar to an extremely small, unique program at my former school in another country, which was considered controversial.

Since the quality of the teachers I had directly impacted the quality of education I received in Life Skills, I became curious to know about how former Life Orientation students felt about their experience in the program. And, this interest only increased when I sat in on a Life Orientation class at Langa High School where the teacher, who later told me that he was actually trained to teach English, spent the entire class talking about how Justin Bieber, because he is so confident, was a good role model that his students should follow. This curiosity led me to eventually come up with the idea for this Independent Study Project (ISP); interview former Life Orientation students who now attend the University of Cape Town, to find out their feelings about the program, what they learned (if anything), and how (if at all) has the program helped them in the years since they graduated high school. Based on the literature I read before starting my research, I hypothesized that since the program is not always as effective in practice as The Department of Basic Education would like it to be, that former Life Orientation students would have found the program mostly disappointing.

The rest of this paper is broken up into different sections. The first is a literature review where I discuss the history of the Life Orientation program, students' and teachers' perceptions of Life Orientation, the infringement of teachers' values on the Life Orientation Curriculum, as well as the lack of sexual diversity in Life Orientation lessons. This is followed by a Methods section, which explains how I conducted my research, then a report and analysis of my findings, followed by a conclusion. The Appendix section consists of a copy of the interview questions I asked my Subjects'. The paper concludes with a Bibliography that lists all of the sources I used in my research.

The biggest limitation to this study was time. I only had a month to conduct all of my research. Therefore, I was only able to interview six participants from one university. If I had more than a month, I would like to have gone to other universities in South Africa to interview more students to have a larger pool of participants. Also regarding time, none of my participants had that much of it, so my interviews were all relatively brief. That being said, I had great conversations with all of my participants and learned so much in the short time I had for this project. The rest of the limitations of this study will be further discussed in the Methods section.

## **Literature Review**

Before going into detail about my own research, it is important to define what exactly Life Orientation is. By definition, South Africa's Department of Basic Education defines it as follows:

Life Orientation is the study of the self in relation to others and to society. It addresses skills, knowledge, and values about the self, the environment, responsible citizenship, a healthy and productive life, social engagement, recreation and physical activity, careers and career choices (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 8).

In theory, these all seem like constructive subjects to teach adolescents in order to prepare them to live successful adult lives. However, in practice, these goals are not always achieved. The following sections explain the history behind the implementation of the Life Orientation program, students' and teachers' perceptions of the program, teachers' personal values may infringe on what they teach, as well as the lack of sexual diversity in Life Orientation lessons. The

combination of these sections exemplify how, due to a variety of reasons, that overall the Life Orientation program in South Africa is not succeeding.

### **History**

With the fall of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994, many South African citizens had newfound rights and freedoms. Post-apartheid South Africa was going to be a more accepting and prosperous country. In order to make these positive changes it meant that the education system needed to be revitalized from its apartheid era systems to a more democratic one (Arendse, 2014). The new curriculum was, “based on principles such as social transformation, human rights, inclusivity and social justice” (Arendse, 2014, p. 2); principles that came from the new constitution, which intended to create a democratic society where all citizens were equal and protected under law (Arendse, 2014).

Then, in 1997, Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was introduced in an attempt to help get rid of the lingering apartheid era aspects of the curriculum taught in schools. The purpose of C2005 was to, “break down the divisions that had existed between academic and applied knowledge, between theory and practice, and between knowledge and skills. In addition, its purpose was to foster tolerant citizens who would embrace the values of reconciliation and nation building” (Wasserman, 2014, p. 1). However, efforts to implement C2005 were unsuccessful due to structural issues. The failure of C2005 led to the first revision of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2002; what came out of this revision was Life Orientation, which planned on focusing specifically on human rights and preparing students to be successful citizens. The NCS was revised

again in 2005, and then again in 2009. While there have been some minor changes to the Life Orientation curriculum over the years, the overall purpose of the program has remained unchanged (Wasserman, 2014).

### **Students and Teachers Perceptions of Life Orientation**

The following articles are all case studies conducted by scholars in South Africa, which exemplify the fact that the Life Orientation program is overall unsuccessful in South African schools. However, none of the researchers believe that Life Orientation should be discontinued from the school curriculum; if the program was improved, then it would be extremely beneficial to the students involved.

Erna Prinsloo's, *Implementation of life orientation programs in the new curriculum in South African schools: perceptions of principals and life orientation teachers*, is a qualitative study conducted to investigate the effectiveness of schools and Life Orientation teachers in achieving the goals of the program. Prinsloo, through semi-structured questionnaires, collected data from twelve secondary school principals and Life Orientation teachers across four South African Provinces (Prinsloo, 2007). The aim of Prinsloo's research project was to "determine whether schools and specifically LO teachers were empowered to successfully guide and support learners, particularly those at risk, towards positive self-concept formation, realistic self-actualization and responsible adulthood" (Prinsloo, 2007, p. 159).

Before explaining the research results, Prinsloo discusses the reasoning behind why the Department of Education created the Life Orientation program. Prinsloo states that the Life Orientation program was created as a "holistic

support system” (Prinsloo, 2007, p. 156) designed to help future generations of students succeed once they pass matriculation. However, as Prinsloo’s data suggests, this lofty goal was not adjusted for a wide range of demographic variables. The schools used in the research project ranged from urban to rural locations and had varying socio-economic backgrounds. Also, some of the schools were former Model-C schools (historically advantaged public schools), while others were public township schools (Prinsloo, 2007).

The school principles were interviewed because they are responsible for providing support to the Life Orientation teachers, so that they can do their jobs effectively. From the data collected, Prinsloo noticed six themes that emerged from the interviews with the principles. The first was a lack of value system; every single principle interviewed said, “that many and sometimes most of the learners were careless and irresponsible towards themselves and other people” (Prinsloo, 2007, p. 161), and that these learners have no respect for themselves, other people, and their greater community – they just live day to day without any real goals, ambitions, or purpose (Prinsloo, 2007). The second was a lack of parental involvement. Some parents felt they were not worthy of helping their children while others were either too preoccupied with scraping together an income or generating a fortune of money. The issue with a lack of parental involvement was more prominent in public schools, than in former Model-C schools. The third was the influence of the community:

A general refusal to obey laws of the government and municipalities was rife. Non-payment of basic services, alcoholism, drug abuse, child abuse, criminal activities, extreme violence, sexual licentiousness and a total lack of responsibility served as a daily example to learners in their formative years (Prinsloo, 2007, p. 162).

As a result of these negative community influences, students often drop out of school between grades 9-12. The fourth was a lack of proper role models among the teaching staff. The unmotivated teaching staff resulted in a lack of motivation among the student bodies. The fifth was the difficulties schools had with the Department of Education. The principals talked about how the department made them pass students who failed repeatedly, and that at three of the rural schools the principals thought that their students were not allowed to fail. And, the sixth theme was the issues of cultural diversity. Teachers oftentimes were not able to speak their student's mother tongue, or understand their culture, which made it difficult for teachers to create a successful classroom environment (Prinsloo, 2007).

Regarding the twenty teachers interviewed, they all mentioned the minimal formal training they received before they started teaching Life Orientation. The training sessions were between one and three days, and were taught by unqualified members of the Department of Education (Prinsloo, 2007). And, Prinsloo said that the teachers who did not have the proper training and skills, were the ones who lacked the motivation and confidence necessary to teach a successful Life Orientation class. This same group of teachers also recognized how little of an impact they were making on the lives of their students. However, the teachers at the former Model C schools felt that they were making a minute impact on their students lives, however they did not feel that the lessons they taught extended beyond the classroom (Prinsloo, 2007).

Prinsloo concludes that there are both positive and negative aspects in the Life Orientation program. Although the program is a terrific idea in theory, the Department of Education, overall, has not done a great job on successful

implementation. Better training, more motivated teachers, stronger personal values among the students, and a positive atmosphere in multicultural classroom could result in a significantly more successful Life Orientation program throughout South Africa (Prinsloo, 2007).

Jennifer Brown's, *Attitudes and Experiences of Teachers and Students Towards Life Orientation: A Case Study of a State-funded School in Eldorado Park, South Johannesburg*; is a case study conducted at a co-educational state school in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg. The study consisted of interviews with Life Orientation teachers and students in grade 11. Based on the data collected and classroom observation, Brown noticed that some of the Life Orientation students were closer with their teachers than with their own parents. One student went to their teacher for advice when they unexpectedly became pregnant, and did not know how to deal with the situation. Although it is good that the students have an approachably and trustworthy adult they can turn to for advice, the Life Orientation program as a whole is not achieving what it was intended to do. Brown writes, "However, whilst Life Orientation is successful on this micro level, it is arguably not achieving any widespread social change. The socio-economic issues seen in the case study school and in Eldorado Park as a whole, are echoed across the country" (Brown, 2013, p. 67).

The Life Orientation class that Brown observed, was not conducted in a way that was conducive to successful learning. There was a limited amount of Life Orientation textbooks and only a blackboard for the teacher to write notes on. Brown believes a projector or television where the teacher could have played educational videos would have helped enhance the learning experience of the students. And, because of this lack of resources, the majority of the students were

unfocused and uninterested in the subject that they were learning. The students were talking to each other about unrelated things – clearly not wanting to be there. A lot of the students in interviews expressed the belief that they already knew everything there was to know that was being taught in Life Orientation, so there was no point to paying attention in class (Brown, 2013).

Brown believes that although Life Orientation has not achieved its intended goals yet, the program should not be disregarded. Brown states, “The Life Orientation teacher that I observed and her colleagues that were interviewed were doing relevant and important work and the students that they successfully communicated with, appreciated the time that the teachers had for them, even if it may be seen from an outsiders perspective that they were engaging in benign chats” (Brown, 2013, p. 76). So, similarly to Prinsloo, Brown concludes that if Life Orientation teachers were given adequate resources to improve their teaching, then the Life Orientation program has the potential to make an incredible impact on the lives of young South Africans on the brink of adulthood (Brown, 2013).

In, *An Investigation of the Status and Practice of Life Orientation in South African Schools in Two Provinces* by Edna Rooth, the research was done in two of South Africa’s provinces, Limpopo and the Western Cape, using both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. Rooth’s research was to interview both students and teachers about the definition of Life Orientation, their understanding of the program and its importance, who teaches the class, how much time is allocated to Life Orientation, and what are the teachers problems and successes when teaching Life Orientation (Rooth, 2005).

Among the teachers, the responses to these questions were varying. Regarding the name of the program, some of the educators called it Guidance and

Life Skills. In Limpopo, more educators referred to the program by its correct name, Life Orientation, than in the Western Cape. Within some of the schools, there was not a universal definition of what the Life Orientation program actually entailed; “Life Orientation appeared to be fragmented and not wholly understood” (Rooth, 2005, p. 218). Furthermore, “Most educators did not define the learning area as a whole, but tended to look at aspects only,” meaning that they were only focusing on specific subjects like HIV/AIDS education, values, and morals (Rooth, 2005, p. 218).

The amount of time allocated to Life Orientation depended on the school; at some places it was offered every day, some just once a week, and even sometimes just every seven to ten days. The teachers, “appeared unsure of Life Orientation time allocations; this could be as a result of being unsure of what Life Orientation entails” (Rooth, 2005, p. 219). This uncertainty about what Life Orientation actually is, might have something to do with the fact that the majority of the Life Orientation teachers were not trained to teach the class. Among the teachers interviewed 30% of them taught Life Orientation because they were told by their employer to do so, because they had a free period, or because no other teacher was available at that time. The rest of the teachers said they taught Life Orientation by choice and because they had the proper qualifications (Rooth, 2005).

Overall, the students interviewed in this study recognized the importance of the Life Orientation program, and the value that it could potentially have on their lives. When asked about the name of the program, the majority said that Life Orientation was the name used at their schools – the students were noticeably less confused about the name of the program and what it entailed than

the teachers involved in the very same program. It is possible that because, “Many learners did not have the previous constituents of Life Orientation on their timetables before Life Orientation was introduced, so could perhaps more readily accept the nomenclature of a new learning area” (Rooth, 2005, p. 223). In the classroom, the fact that the student’s favorite subjects to learn about are HIV/AIDS prevention, future career paths, and human rights indicate that the Life Orientation program is relevant in their lives, and as a result the Life Orientation teachers try to go in depth about these topics (Rooth, 2005).

Based on the data collected, Rooth concurs with Brown, “that the status and practice of Life Orientation are not yet optimal. Life Orientation, as a fledgling learning area within a restorative educational transitional phase, still requires clear definition, interpretation and comprehension” (Rooth, 2005, iii). Rooth urges the Department of Education as well as the other organizations and educators involved in Life Orientation, to work on making changes to improve the program, and subsequently the education of future students (Rooth, 2005).

In Anne Jacobs’s, *Life Orientation as experienced by learners: a qualitative study in North-West Province*, the purpose of the study was to determine students perceptions of the Life Orientation program at eight schools in South Africa’s Northwest province through focus group interviews (Jacobs, 2011).

In the focus groups, some of the students expressed the fact that they thought that the Life Orientation classes at their schools are a complete waste of their time, and that they hardly do any of the required work for the class (Jacobs, 2011). And, when asked about whether not to they liked the Life Orientation program, the students thought they had to give the interviewer a positive

response, so they tried to be enthusiastic about the subject. But, while the students tried to sound positive they were, “actually making it clear that they considered the subject a waste of time” (Jacobs, 2011, p. 217). It was difficult for Jacobs to come to a conclusion about whether or not students actually liked the Life Orientation program, because the students who had come from previously disadvantaged schools liked the program a lot more than the students who were interviewed from other schools. And, when asked about whether or not Life Orientation is applicable to their daily life, which is the whole purpose of the class, the students said that exercise was the only relevant topic (Jacobs, 2011).

From the data collected, Jacobs believes there is a, “discrepancy between theory and practice” (Jacobs, 2011, p. 220). Although the intentions of Life Orientation are good, based on the responses Jacobs received, it is clear that in practice, the program is unsuccessful. Jacobs states:

The aim of this study was not to determine how effective LO is, but it is nonetheless a theme that clearly emerged. Listening to the learners in the interviews, as well as judging from observations in schools, it became clear that the authors of the Curriculum Statements (Department of Education, 2002; 2003) seemed to be overly optimistic and simplistically dismissed some of the debilitating realities in schools and among young people in general (Jacobs, 2011, p. 221).

### **Infringement of Teachers’ Values on the Life Orientation Curriculum**

Within the research conducted regarding the connection between Life Orientation teachers personal values and what they teach in the classroom, the literature only focuses on how their values impact how they teach sexual education. However, it can be generalized that teachers’ values have an impact on all of the subjects they teach, not just around topics regarding sexual education.

In a study conducted in Cape Town during 2003 and 2004, a team of researchers found that 15 Life Orientation teachers personal values and fear of community backlash had a direct impact on how they taught sexual education. Teachers in South Africa are considered to be in a good position to teach sexual education. However, “emphasis is increasingly being placed on determining educators’ attitudes and feelings towards sexual health education. Reluctance to engage in discussions about sexuality is common. The moral views of educators about teenage sexuality results in sex education being challenging to teach” (Ahmed et al., 2009, p. 49). And this reluctance means that the success of the Life Orientation program is oftentimes compromised because teachers’ personal values conflict with the curriculum (Ahmed et al., 2009).

Many of the teachers’ in this study were neither trained to teach Life Orientation nor comfortable teaching sexual education. Because of this, a consistent finding in this study was the, “conflict between educators’ personal beliefs and values and the messages that they were expected to communicate” (Ahmed et al., 2009, p. 51). Most of the teachers promoted abstinence, even though they acknowledged the need to teach their students about safe sex practices since many of the students were already sexually active. In addition, the teachers were extremely uncomfortable distributing condoms because they felt that they were promoting sexual activity among the students — an act that directly conflicted with their promotion of abstinence (Ahmed et al., 2009). Also, it was observed that the male teachers had an even more difficult time talking about sexual education than the female teachers. Furthermore, the teachers’ level of education and confidence in teaching their students about sexual education

varied based on their knowledge of HIV, biology, participation in Life Orientation workshops, relationships with HIV-positive people, and a personal belief and interest in the subject. The teachers' ability to positively engage with their students and teach the subject with confidence directly impacted what kind of sexual education lesson the students were taught (Ahmed et al., 2009).

In another study from 2013, 11 Life Orientation teachers from urban public schools near Durban, were interviewed about how they taught sexuality to their classes. The data collected from the interviews, similar to Ahmed's study, "showed that teachers perceived their role as teaching values and morals. They choose what to teach on the basis of their own values and beliefs" (Francis, 2013, p. 71).

For the teachers involved in this study, the role of religion in their lives had a direct impact on what they taught their students. One of the teachers used her religion as a reason to teach an abstinence only lifestyle until marriage. Another, asked her students to ask themselves what God would want them to do before committing any sexual acts. A third said that she would not teach her students anything that the Bible considers to be morally wrong. Overall, the subjects in this study believed their lifestyles and values were the norm, and that their students should try to emulate them (Francis, 2013). And, when their students do not apply they learned in the Life Orientation classroom to their own lives, some of the teachers consider it to be a personal failure. One teacher discussed how ashamed of herself she was after two of her students got pregnant during the school year, because as their Life Orientation teacher she felt a sense of responsibility towards their sexual education (Francis, 2013).

The Department of Basic Education Life Orientation, “curriculum statements provide a broad framework for lesson content, but do not set specific age-related limitations and, therefore, provide limited guidance for fielding questions for learners” (Francis, 2013, p. 72). This means that teachers have the ability to decide when they want to introduce the topic of sexual education to their classes. And, despite the evidence that children in South Africa begin sexual activity at a very young age, the 11 teachers in the study, on average, said that students should not start learning about sexual education until age 12. Given the young age of their students, the teachers often felt uncomfortable talking about sex in front of them. Their responses also varied on whether or not they should teach abstinence or safe sex. Only two of the teachers believed that a combination of abstinence and safe sex should be taught in schools; the remaining nine all believed that only abstinence should be taught. However, the two teachers who wanted to teach a combination of abstinence and safe sex were conflicted because they felt uncomfortable talking about sex in front of their students (Francis, 2013).

### **The Lack of Sexual Diversity in Life Orientation Lessons**

Heterosexism and heteronormative ideologies, are present not only in South African society, but in Life Orientation textbooks as well. A 2013 study proved this by examining three Grade 10 Life Orientation textbooks that were all published by highly ranked South African publishing. These textbooks are the most commonly distributed by The Department of Basic Education, yet the scholars conducting the study believe that they are inadequate in teaching students about sexual diversity (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

The study concurs that “heteronormativity and heterosexism strongly underpin the representation of sexualities in the South African LO textbooks studied” (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014, p. 335). The three textbooks normalize heterosexuality through different techniques. The first is, “the overt exclusion of reference to LGBT sexualities in the textbooks” (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014, p. 335). The second technique is the lack of acknowledgement of same sex couples when talking about dating, safe sex, and families. The third is the differentiation of LGBT sexualities from heterosexuality. And lastly, describing heterosexuality as superior to LGBT sexuality. This exclusion of LGBT sexualities from textbooks creates a “toxic” learning environment for LGBT and gender non-conforming students (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014).

Textbooks are not the only place where LGBT sexualities are excluded from the Life Orientation curriculum. In a 2014 study, 25 Life Orientation teachers were interviewed about teaching sexuality, and there was a clear exclusion of LGBT identities in their lessons. The Department of Basic Education puts in a minimal effort to make sure teachers are addressing sexual diversity in their Life Orientation classes, so many teachers feel little obligation to do so. The teachers involved in this study were all asked if they taught about homosexuality in their Life Orientation classes, and nine out of 25 said that they did not. The remaining 16 teachers, although they taught about homosexuality in their classrooms, when asked by the researchers to elaborate on how they taught the topic, gave unclear responses or started focusing on something unrelated (Depalma & Francis, 2014). Their responses to this question, “were expressed in

terms of describing children's prejudices or expressing their own beliefs about homosexuality" (Depalma & Francis, 2014, p. 1693).

## **Methods**

I conducted all of my research through interviews with current students at the University of Cape Town campus, who attended high school in South Africa. Over the course of two days, I interviewed six students about their thoughts on Life Orientation — three on the first day and three on the second. During my first interview on the first day, I approached a group of students and two members of the group requested to be interviewed together. I agreed to their request and those two group members became Subjects' 1 and 2. The rest of my subjects were interviewed individually.

I approached all of my subjects at random. The only criteria was that they looked like they weren't in a rush, and that they were not eating lunch. I conducted my interviews between the hours of 11:30am and 2:00pm, because I assumed that people would have a break in their classes and be sitting in various spots outside around campus eating lunch and hanging out – an opportune time to conduct an interview. Before I began my interviews, I spoke with all of my subjects to make sure that they had a clear understanding of what the purpose of my ISP was, as well as how my findings would be presented. In addition, I explained that their names and the name of their high school will not be used in order to protect their anonymity – and, that if they did not feel comfortable at any point during the interview, they could stop, and none of their responses would be included in my data. After explaining my methodology to my subjects, I had

them sign an interview consent form (which articulated everything I just explained to them in writing) so that they knew there was an actual contractual agreement between us.

My main method of recording my interviews was making audio recordings on my phone, so that I could focus more on engaging in conversation with my Subject's and making them feel comfortable. I always carried a notebook with me, and would occasionally write down things that really stood out to me during the interviews. And, immediately after I finished with a Subject, I would sit for a few minutes and write down some notes and initial thought about the interview before moving on to looking for my next subject. After I completed all of my interviews, before I started writing up the results and analysis, I listened to the recordings of all the data I collected and took extensive notes in order to look for similarities and anomalies among my participant's responses.

I used a relatively structured interview guide in order to collect data during the interviews. I had a set list of questions that I wrote before I began the interview process. These questions were influenced by the literature that I read in preparation for this project regarding student's perceptions of the Life Orientation program in their high schools. During the actual interviews, for most of the time, I closely followed the interview guide. Occasionally, I would ask a subject to elaborate more on something they said, but this only occurred when I got a sense that they wanted to elaborate and felt comfortable doing so.

I chose to solely do interviews for this project, because I saw no other way to acquire the type of thoughtful and articulate answers I hoped my research participants would give me. I wanted my subjects to be honest in their responses

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to my questions, and I felt that if I had them fill out a survey, their responses might have been less candid. I also thought that the quality of my participants' answers would be more thoughtful if they were spoken, as opposed to being written down.

However, there were some limitations to my methodology. The first was the location. While there was an abundance of students milling around the University of Cape Town's campus, which was extremely helpful when looking for project participants, it created a pretty chaotic environment to conduct interviews in. All of my research participants were sitting with a group of people when I interviewed them, so there were times during our conversation when something one of their friends was saying or doing would distract them. The second limitation was time. My research participants all said they did not have that long to talk to me, so the interviews were all relatively brief. I received good information, but I feel that if I had more time, I would have been able to delve into deeper conversations about Life Orientation.

Regarding my positionality, as an interviewer I am by default in the more dominant position since I am the one who is asking questions. However, I think this is where my position of dominance ends. Besides the fact that I was the one asking questions, which puts my subject in a position more vulnerable than my own, I believe that we were on an equal level; we both took a class in high school that was supposed to prepare us for the adult world, we are both current college students, and we are presumably somewhat close in age. From my interviews, I was not looking to make a generalization about how the Life Orientation program impacted and affected the lives of recent high school graduates; I just wanted to

learn more about the individual experience of my subjects. I think that the versatility of my research question is also important to note because it relates back to my previous point about how I am not making a generalization about Life Orientation or South Africa's education system; I am exclusively interested in learning about people's personal experiences and their perception of that experience's value later in life.

### **Findings**

The purpose of my study was to learn more about the impact and effectiveness of the Life Orientation program on current South African university students who are now studying at the University of Cape Town. Although it was unintentional, all of six my subjects were fourth year students who matriculated from high school in 2014. They came from a variety of backgrounds and different types of high schools across South Africa, but overall they all had similar feelings about Life Orientation. The relevant information about my subjects is as follows; Subject 1 is a black female who went to a non-denominational public school in Potchefstroom; Subject 2 is a black female who went to a private Catholic school in Johannesburg; Subject 3 is a white male who went to a private all boys Christian boarding school near Durban; Subject 4 is a coloured female who went to a public, non-denominational school in Constantia; Subject 5 is a black female who started out attending a public, non-denominational school in Johannesburg, but halfway through switched to another non-denominational public school in Pretoria; and lastly, Subject 6 is a white male who went to a private Anglican school in Grahamstown.

Before specifically talking to my subjects about their experience with Life Orientation, I asked them all briefly about their high school experiences overall. Each of my subjects, whether or not this is actually true or they just did not want to talk about the struggles of their adolescence with a stranger, said they had extremely positive high school experiences. Subjects 2, 3, and 6 all attended private schools with a religious component to them. However, only Subject 2's school enforced a Catholic ethos into every aspect of the school. At Subject 3 and 6's school, religion was encouraged but not forced onto any of the students. Subject 3 and his classmates were required to attend Chapel once a week, but that was the extent of the role of religion at his school.

The rest of this section is broken down into sub-sections based on the questions I asked my subjects about Life Orientation. On occasion, the subject would not have a response to my question, in which case their name is omitted from that specific section. And, because of a combination of repetition with some of my questions, the fact that some of my subjects would give answers to other questions when answering a different question as a result of the general flow of conversation, their responses have been condensed under section headings where their answers are the most relevant and applicable. Also, when there is a "...” used in a quote it means that the Subject paused while speaking, before changing their train of thought.

### **Topics Learned in Life Orientation**

Every single one of my participants laughed out loud when I asked them to try and remember what topics they learned about in Life Orientation, because they had not thought about the Life Orientation program in years. Some even said

they had to rack their brains to remember what, if anything, they recalled. But, after a few seconds of thinking, all of my subjects remembered at least a few of the topics they learned about in Life Orientation. Subject 1 described her Life Orientation classes as very basic and could only remember learning about self-esteem, HIV/AIDS, STD prevention, and a big emphasis on physical education. Subject 2 also described her Life Orientation classes as basic and also learned about self-esteem and HIV/AIDS. In addition, she learned about public speaking, community service, coping with depression, and how to write a proper curriculum vitae (CV). Subject 3 remembered learning about various life skills and experiences, values, constitutional rights, and the significance behind South Africa's public holidays. Subject 4 learned about sexual education, mental health, and in her final year of high school studied different labor issues that South Africa was facing. Subject 5 struggled the most to answer the question. After thinking about it for a few moments she said, "To be honest it was more Life Skills. We had PE, what causes stress. That's the topics I remember" (Subject 5, personal communication, April 10, 2018) Lastly, Subject 6 said that he learned about sports, health, sexual education, and eating well. He also remembered that a major theme that was discussed throughout his Life Orientation classes was bullying.

### **Topics that Participants Believe Should Have Been Covered in Life Orientation**

When I asked my participants' what topics they felt should have been and should not have been taught in their Life Orientation classes, Subject 1 immediately responded with the following answer:

Sex and gender. Realistically. And also because I went to an all girls school and, shame, our school was very... I know that there were just in terms of sexuality like they had policies that were very problematic. They [the students] were gay and the school was against people in same sex relationships. We were in an all girls school and they policed that. They would speak about gender and sex and they did not want to accept the fact that there were people who were not in heterosexual relationships which I found very problematic (Subject 1, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

Also, on the subject of teaching things realistically, Subject 1 was quick to say, “Sex ED. They spoke about it like nobody was having sex in high school” (Subject 1, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

Subject 2’s response echoed Subject 1’s response; that sexual education should have been taught in a practical and realistic way. In addition, Subject 2 mentioned that she wished there had been a bigger emphasis on teaching self-care — a subject she felt would have been extremely beneficial to herself and her classmates. She also wished that she had learned more about time management, goal setting, and how to deal with disappointment since she felt that everything in her Life Orientation curriculum was overly positive. Subject 3 talked a lot about how he wished he had learned more practical things in his Life Orientation classes such as how to do his taxes and change a tire. Similarly to Subject 3, Subject 4 said that she also wished she had learned how to do her own taxes. Subject 5 was the only person I interviewed who said that she wishes her Life Orientation classes had taught her how to better prepare herself for different life situations that would take place when she got to university. However, she believed that all of the subjects she learned about in Life Orientation were extremely relevant to her life and education thus far. Subject 6 said he would have liked to learn:

About being a man, about adulthood, maybe tax because no other subject in school surprisingly doesn't cover that. Other aspects of life when you're out of school, living real life with a house and a job. Aspects you might come across and how to handle it. Ways to determine what kind of person you are and what friends you should have around you. They don't really go in depth into that at all (Subject 6, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

He also mentioned that he thought it would have been useful to learn about gender equality and race issues.

Subjects 3 and 6 were the only one's who mentioned subjects that they thought should not have been taught to them in Life Orientation class. Subject 3 was adamant about how unnecessary it was to learn about sports and the role it played in peoples lives. He talked about how an interest in sports is subjective, and because he's a sports fan he did well, but that students who were not as interested in sports struggled a lot in the course. Subject 6 said that there was a topic related to bullying that he found useless. He acknowledged that bullying was extremely important to learn about, but this other topic was not.

Unfortunately, he could not remember what this topic actually was, so he was unable to elaborate about why he found it unnecessary. He also said he would eliminate the "easy stuff" from the curriculum. To him, the easy stuff was computers. He said. "If we are going to learn about computers and it's going to be info systems then it needs to be about programming and not just word and excel. Our generation, growing up, we are accustomed to it, it is quite easy" (Subject 6, personal communication, April 10, 2018).

### **Methods of Teaching**

Subject 1 said that she was taught exclusively through a textbook. Subject 2 was also taught through a textbook; however, there was also a large amount of individual projects required for the class. Subject 3 only had his Life Orientation

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class once or twice a week (depending on the year), so course material was a combination of lectures and handouts. Textbooks and group work played big roles in Subject 4's Life Orientation classes. However, Subject 4's teachers also made an effort to make the class more entertaining. She said, "When I took Life orientation throughout high school they had workshops and stuff. So they made it pretty fun. Our teachers found creative ways to implement the things they taught us" (Subject 4, personal communication, April 10, 2018). Subject 5 was also taught through textbooks as well as through physical education. And, Subject 6 had a combination of textbook learning and lectures, although the majority of the class was taught straight from the textbook.

### **Life Orientation Teacher Qualifications**

Subject 1 did not feel that her Life Orientation teachers were qualified. On the contrary, she found them all to have been very lazy. Before answering this question, Subject 2 burst out laughing and checked to make sure there were no way her former Life Orientation teachers would ever hear her response. After reassuring her that this was anonymous and her identity was protected, she said, "Not that they weren't qualified, they just could have... they did not study Life Orientation. They just took a teacher and they gave them a textbook and were like teach LO. It was very basic knowledge things that you could easily research" (Subject 2, personal communication, April 9, 2018). Subject 3 had a nearly identical response to Subject 2. When asked if his teachers were qualified he stated, "Not really. They kinda just put a teacher who did not have a subject to taught they just threw them into the Life Orientation class. It depended on what they liked and what they enjoyed. They structured the Life Orientation class around that" (Subject 3, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

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Subjects 4, 5, and 6 all thought their Life Orientation teachers were extremely qualified. At Subject 6's school, there was only one Life Orientation teacher in the whole department who the subject felt was unqualified. This was because he was not trained in Life Orientation and came from a different academic department. The teacher never actually taught anything interesting or meaningful: he just read verbatim from the lecture slides without ever engaging with the class.

### **Usefulness of Life Orientation Topics Since Matriculation**

Subject 1 found the topics she learned in Life Orientation to be useful post matriculation to a certain extent. She said, "A lot of the topics were just on surface level but I felt like obviously after matric I have had to delve into the topics deeper by myself. But to say it was completely useless would be a lie" (Subject 1, personal communication, April 9, 2018). Subject 2 also thought that Life Orientation was only somewhat useful. She stated, "I learned a lot more about LO after high school than I did in high school. I mean obviously there were like things you could pick up and be like oh okay maybe there is this, but a lot of it wasn't that useful" (Subject 2, personal communication, April 9, 2018). Subject 4 said that one of her Life Orientation teachers suggested taking at least one year of humanities at university, and now she is majoring in the humanities. Subject 5 had the most positive response to the question, although she felt that everything she learned was just surface level, she said, "I think I learned everything. I just wish they added more depth to what we learned. But I learned things that are relevant in my survival right now" (Subject 5, personal communication, April 10, 2018).

Subjects 3 and 6 had the most negative responses to this question. Subject 3 did not find anything he learned in Life Orientation to be useful to him since he graduated high school. Subject 6 found the things he learned in Life Orientation to be useful in his life when he was in high school, but now that he is in his fourth year of university the topics are second nature.

**Do you think Life Orientation should continue to be taught in schools?**

All of my subjects had the same answer to this question — yes. However, my subjects “yes’s” came with suggestions about how the curriculum needed a lot of improvement. Subject 1 said it was the teacher’s responsibility to improve the program in order for it to be more successful. Subject 2 talked about how she felt that if safer spaces were created in high school classrooms, then there would be deeper and more meaningful discussions in Life Orientation classes. Subject 3, a fan of test taking, suggested a final exam and more group work so that students would be better prepared for university. Subject 5 said that the topics learned in Life Orientation were applicable to life in general, not just life at university. And, in order to stay relevant, Life Orientation cannot be taught in such a generic way. It needs to stay up to date with society in order for students to get the best education possible. Subject 6 spoke about engaging and connecting with students. He said:

Engage more with the kids. The Life Orientation teachers should be someone who is more connected with the kids, and can understand their problems. Somebody who has had problems and has learned how to deal with them, so therefore can give better advice, topics, and solutions to the students (Subject 6, personal communication, April 10, 2018).

**Preparedness to Partake in Good Citizenship**

I received a range of answers from my subjects when I asked them if they thought that Life Orientation prepared them to be good citizens in their adults

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lives, and if it had an impact on the person they are today. Subject 1, upon reflection, felt that Life Orientation had a major impact on her life. She said:

I think it did, 'cuz shame, I'm not gunna lie. I'm studying psychology and organizational psychology, so I have always... Like even in high school. I took it seriously; just everyone else wasn't taking it seriously. I think I did make the most and did try to apply the things that I learned. I am very big on mentorship, so it definitely did have an impact on the kind of person that I am (Subject 1, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

Subject 5 also felt that Life Orientation impacted her life and made her a better, and more responsible South African citizen. Both Subject 3 and Subject 6 said that Life Orientation had absolutely no impact on the people they have become.

Subject 6 felt that all of his life lessons came from his parents and other adult role model figures that were not affiliated with his school.

### **Analysis**

The responses I received from my six participants mostly aligned with the literature I read about the topic before conducting my interviews. I am aware that these are only the responses of six former Life Orientation students, and I cannot use their answers to make generalizations about the program because there are hundreds of thousands of other former Life Orientation students out in the world who did not participate in my study. However, I can use my participants responses to make connections between their answers and draw small conclusions based on my research and existing data.

Based on Prinsloo, Brown, Rooth, and Jacobs's studies, I assumed that the location and type of school (i.e. public or private) would have an impact on the quality of education the student received. However, while my subjects came from

a variety of academic backgrounds, in a general sense, they all had relatively similar feelings about their experience with Life Orientation. Subjects 1, 4, and 5 all went to public high schools and Subjects 2, 3, and 6 all went to private schools; I assumed that the subjects who went to public school would have different feelings about Life Orientation than the subjects who went to private school. However, I was mistaken. While there were curricular differences, all six subjects said that they wished they had delved deeper into topics, because everything they learned about was surface level and very simplistic. And, because the Department of Basic Education does not update the Life Orientation curriculum that frequently, the majority of Life Orientation students learn the bare minimum of information — information not always in touch with what current generations need. Hence, that is why Subject 5 talked about how she believed in order for Life Orientation to be effective, it needs to keep up to date with South Africa's societal changes and be less generic.

Another observation that stood out to me was the amount of times my subjects mentioned how they wished they had learned actual practical life skills, like changing a tire or doing their own taxes. The Department of Basic Education intends for Life Orientation to, “encourage the development of a balanced and confident learner who can contribute to a just and democratic society, a productive economy and an improved quality of life for all” (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 8), yet the former students I interviewed, are saying that the program did not prepare them for some of the most basic things a successful adult needs to know how to do – a sentiment that was reflected in the literature I read. This clear program failure, despite the fact that all my subjects

said that Life Orientation should continue to be taught in schools, with the caveat that there needs to be a lot of improvements to the curriculum, illustrates that the program is struggling to create the “productive learner” who will make a positive contribution to society.

After reading Prinsloo’s study where the twenty teachers interviewed, who came from schools with a variety of locations and socio-economic backgrounds, all said that they received minimal training before becoming Life Orientation teachers, I expected this evidence to be echoed in my subject’s responses when I asked them if they felt that their Life Orientation teachers were qualified. Consequently, I was very surprised when there was an even split among my subjects; half thought their teachers were unqualified to teach Life Orientation (Subject’s 1, 2, and 3) and the other half thought that their teachers were qualified (Subject’s 4, 5, and 6). There was no connection among the schools the Subject’s went to and their opinion about their teacher’s qualifications. Subject 1 went to a public, non-denominational school while Subject’s 2 and 3 both went to private schools that were connected to a religious institution, yet all three Subjects felt their teachers were unqualified. And, the situation was the same for the Subjects who thought their teachers were qualified. Subjects’ 4 and 5 went to public, non-denominational schools and Subject 6 went to a private Anglican school, and they all felt their teachers were qualified.

Although, during my interviews, I did not get into the specifics about how my Subjects were taught about sexual education and if their teachers personal values infringed on their education, I did expect my Subjects who attended schools that were affiliated with religious institutions to have had a religious

ethos impact all aspects of their high school experience. However, only Subject 2 said that she and her fellow classmates had a strict Catholic ethos they had to follow at school. Subject's 3 and 6 attended schools that were much more lax about it. Because Subject 2 went to a Catholic school that enforced a strict Catholic ethos, one can make the assumption that she was taught abstinence. In the study conducted by Ahmed in 2003 and 2004, it was observed that the teacher's personal, moral views about teenage sexuality reflected in how they taught. So, it is a reasonable assumption that the teachers in Subject 2's Catholic school probably taught her and her fellow classmates abstinence because that is their personal view derived from their own Catholic faith. This infringement of personal values from a religious point of view is another factor that makes Life Orientation less effective than it has the potential to be. While teaching abstinence might align with the Life Orientation teacher's personal values, they are doing their students a disservice by teaching them a practice that is oftentimes not realistic for many high school students and young adults. This way of teaching is not helping to create future generations of responsible young adults; it is alienating and out of step with current social norms.

The literature that I read regarding the lack of sexual diversity in the Life Orientation classroom was reflected in Subject 1's response when she said:

Sex and gender. Realistically. And also because I went to an all girls school and, shame, our school was very... I know that there were just in terms of sexuality like they had policies that were very problematic. They [the students] were gay and the school was against people in same sex relationships. We were in an all girls school and they policed that. They would speak about gender and sex and they did not want to accept the fact that there were people who were not in heterosexual relationships which I found very problematic (Subject 1, personal communication, April 9, 2018).

Subject 1's former high school's lack of acceptance towards teaching about LGBT sexualities and forbidding same sex couples from being together, was possibly a result of a discriminatory textbook, Life Orientation teachers who did not want to talk about LGBT sexuality because it infringed on their own personal values, or they (the teacher) was uncomfortable talking about the topic, or a combination of the two.

These results could potentially be very different if this was a larger scale research project where I interviewed more than six people. Because of the small, even number of participants, my results were oftentimes split evenly, which I don't necessarily believe to be a good representation of former students feelings about the impact and effectiveness of Life Orientation. My Subject's, just like Prinsloo, Brown, Rooth, and Jacobs's, all believe that the Life Orientation program should continue to be taught, but in order to be effective there needs to be some major changes to its curriculum. And, after reading the literature around the topic and interviewing my six participants I have to agree with them. While Life Orientation is a good idea, in practice its significantly less effective than The Department of Basic Education intended it to be.

## **Conclusion**

Before setting out to conduct my interviews for this project, based on the literature that I read, I assumed that the Life Orientation program was a failure unless some major curricular changes were made. However, this turned out not to be true. I learned from my six participants that the Life Orientation program is hardly a lost cause. While all six participants said that some serious changes

needed to be made in order for the program to be more effective, they all believed that it should continue to be taught in schools because many of the lessons learned are extremely valuable. Even the participants who said the program had no impact on their life, still said it should not be eliminated from school's curriculums. This leads me to believe that all of my participants, even those who thought their Life Orientation experience had no impact on their life, were affected in some capacity.

In my interviews, my Subjects talked a lot about how they wished they had learned more practical life skills like how to manage their time better, change a tire or do their own taxes. They also talked about how they wished they had learned about more serious topics that would be applicable in their lives after college — like dealing with gender identity issues, sexuality, and how to make meaningful connections with people could potentially positive impact on their life. These observations only came from six former Life Orientation students, and while there are hundreds of thousands more, I have a feeling that if I interviewed more former students of the same age demographic I would receive very similar responses.

Ultimately, after collecting data for my research, I have come to the conclusion that the Life Orientation program should continue to be taught in schools, because there are some lessons in it that are valuable, regardless of the quality of instruction. However, there is also a lot of room for improvement. Although changes to the Life Orientation curriculum are infrequent, they are not impossible. Hopefully, The Department of Basic Education will once again revise the curriculum so that it becomes even more relevant and useful in the lives of

future students, as well as raise the standards for teacher training. Life Orientation has the potential to be extremely impactful and educational, and it would be shortsighted for the government not to strive to achieve maximum benefit of a program designed to maximize the social skills of young people as they enter adulthood.

## Appendix

### **Interview Questions**

- Where did you attend high school?
- Where is that school located?
- What year did you matriculate?
- What year are you in university?
- What are you studying currently? Why did you choose to study this?
- What type of high school did you go to? (i.e. religious, progressive, public, private, something else?)
- Did you have a positive or negative experience in high school? Why? Did this change over time?
- What topics did you learn about in Life Orientation?
- Are there any topics you feel should have been covered in Life Orientation, but were not? And vice versa... were there topics covered that should not have been taught?
- How were you taught? Textbooks? Lectures? Creative activities? Group work?
- Are there topics you would add or eliminate from the curriculum?
- Did you feel that your teachers were qualified to teach Life Orientation?
- Have you found the topics covered in Life Orientation to be useful to your life since you matriculated?
- Do you think Life Orientation should continue to be taught in schools?
- Is there anything you would do to improve the program to make it worthwhile? (ask if the participant does not think it should be taught in schools)
- Do you think there are ways the Life Orientation program can be improved upon? (ask if the participant does think it should continue to be taught in schools)
- Based on what you know about life now, what do you wish you had learned?
- Life Orientation is supposed to prepare you to be a good citizen in your adult life, do you think it had any impact on the person you are today?

### **Announce that we are coming to the interview...**

- Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not discussed yet?
- Is there anything missing from my interview questions that you feel should have been discussed?

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