Studies in Life Skills: Two Unlike Groups

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Life-skills projects carried out in the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission during the last year have been designed to meet the needs of two groups: refugees and non-job-ready Employment Center clients. One contains many decisive superachievers, the other, underachievers who avoid choosing altogether or who make impulsive, ill-considered choices. In a comparison of the differences and similarities between the two groups, the writer examines the goals of life-skills teaching with reference to values, problem solving, and choice. Arguments are made based upon the views of life-skills specialists and their perceptions of student needs. The writer concludes that values are inevitably taught but that the major goal of life skills is to enable students to make choices.

During the past year the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission has undertaken to design life-skills lessons for two very different groups. One of them, non-job-ready Canada Employment Center clients, falls easily within the traditional target population for life skills; but the other, refugees in Canada, does not. All experience is useful, however, and studying the needs of refugees has proved exceptionally so, because working out the goals and objectives for these unusual subjects has thrown a good deal of light on the sorts of goals and objectives which are possible for non-job-ready clients, employment-disadvantaged youth, welfare mothers, or any of the more customary target populations. The purpose of this article is to share some of the observations and conclusions formed as a result of working

on behalf of these two groups, in which insights achieved with one helped to illuminate the other.

Refugees come to Canada from all over the world and Canadians are proud that this is the case. When counselors attempt to estimate the needs of this target population, however, there are significant problems. There is no immediately apparent way of uniting people whose cultural and background differences are literally as wide as the world. Newness in Canada is the one experience they share. Canadian values and a few of the behaviors that reflect them become the inevitable focus of effort.

Focusing efforts on uniformity of values caused some uneasiness. In the first place, Canada's official policy is one of multiculturalism. Article 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (*The Canadian Constitution 1981*, p. 10) states: "This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." There is not now, and there never has been, any anticipation that new Canadians will participate in some kind of misty or mystical national ideal. The fundamental idea is that they have a lot to offer just the way they are. Probably most Canadians support this idea. The differences add richness to national life and, often, to individual lives. Without undertaking to speak for the entire country, a good guess would be that if there is one value Canadians share, it is, "Thou shalt not shove values down someone else's throat."

Over against this is the more or less incontrovertible fact that there are, in Canada, certain kinds of things that are done, ways of behaving in public, ways of dealing with difficulties and problems, that are a reflection of values that are widely held in this country. It seems only decent to describe these to newcomers. It seems fair to try to protect refugees from indulging in behaviors which might provoke the open hostility of already established Canadians. Canadians are not perfect people, a fact the lessons emphasize, and these kinds of incidents cannot be other than degrading. It seems legitimate to want to prevent newcomers from getting into difficulty with the police and their neighbors because, again, these sorts of incidents breed hatred and anxiety and paranoia. It seems necessary for refugees to understand some of the principles of working in Canada because these may be different from those in their country of origin. The decision to explain Canadian principles was taken in order to make life more predictable for the newcomers.

In the end, the justification for choosing to explain Canadian values came from inferences about the needs of the refugees themselves. There is a sense in which refugees are extremely successful people, but

for this success the price is very high. Refugees are not immigrants in the usual sense of the word. Immigrants choose Canada, they plan to come here; if they really hate it, they can go back. Even if they love it, they can make reassuring visits to their country of origin. In the case of refugees—particularly South East Asian refugees—it was by no means clear that Canada was ever their first choice, and given their situation one might assume an any-port-in-the-storm attitude. Their mental state on reaching our country is not ideal. Dr. San Duy Nguyen, a psychiatrist at the Royal Ottawa Hospital, states that refugees most often make a good adjustment, but points out:

> A significant number of them are experiencing considerable emotional distress due to the traumas of the war, the lack of preparation before leaving their homelands, the perilous escape, the protracted stay in over-crowded, unsanitary refugee camps, and the transplantation into an alien culture and environment. The most frequent mental health problems among those refugees are: depression, anxiety, marital conflict, intergenerational conflict, psychosomatic illness and psychosis. (Nguyen, 1980, p. 26)

These particular refugees were welcomed—more often than not—by warm-hearted Canadians whose desire was to make friends. These are precisely the qualities that the refugees have frequently learned to distrust, and it is often the case that many of our values, such as friendliness, openness, and being neighborly which, one might argue, spring directly from the rigors of our pioneer background, are simply not survival values in the cultures from which they came. So whatever the hesitations, it seemed that teaching refugees about Canadian values would be one way of lowering the less than tolerable levels of anxiety, a way in which the alien culture might be rendered less alien.

The Difficulties of Making Choices

The biggest concern was about forcing or foisting these values. It is important to reflect that while refugees arrive in our country in pathetic condition—usually penniless, often in a state of severe physical exhaustion, and burdened with intolerable anxiety—given the conditions they have survived, they are highly successful people. The choices they have made along the way have been made on the basis of survival and escape. Others of them may have had other criteria but it is arguable whether these people ever arrive in Canada; possibly they did not make it through immigration procedures, possibly they have ended up in re-education projects or concentration camps or, very possibly, they are dead. The people who have reached this country have chosen and they

have chosen right and they have received powerful reinforcement for having chosen the way they did. As Winston Churchill once remarked: "There is nothing so exhilarating as having been shot at and missed!" They are a group defined by their choices and the choices have been made on the basis of harsh criteria. Under the circumstances, it seems a little over-genteel to worry about forcing Canadian values upon them. It is possible to describe Canadian ideals and principles, but these students are well able to choose whether or not they wish to subscribe to them.

In some ways, it is reasonable to think of refugees as suffering from anxiety and depression arising, in part, from ignorance of the Canadian value system. In many cases they can be characterized as survivors—with the understanding that one does not always survive by paying faultless attention to what is written in the small print. And so while they are choosers par excellence, they do not always possess an acceptable basis for making a choice once they are in Canada.

And in this way, of course, they resemble many traditional life-skills students who do not choose—or anyway prefer to think they are not choosing—and whose outstanding deficit appears to be an inability to link cause with effect. In other words, it is an inability to foresee the outcomes of their actions. Ralph Himsl (1973) gives a very apt description of the disabilities of Canadian life-skills students:

> Study of the literature, and direct observation reveal that many disadvantaged have a complex, interlocking set of inadequate behaviors. Some lack the skills needed to identify problems, to recognize and organize relevant information, to describe reasonable courses of action and to foresee the consequences. They often fail to act on a rationally identified course of action, submitting rather to actions based on emotion or authority. Often they do not benefit from experience since they do not evaluate the results of their actions once taken, and display fatalistic rationalizations of their consequences. (p. 13)

Both groups are alike, therefore, in appearing to lack any rational basis for making a choice. Dana Mullen (1982) adds the *mot juste* with the well-founded observation: "To paraphrase Shakespeare, when problems come they come not single spies but in battalions" (p. 5)

A Comparison with Criminal Offenders

A clarification is necessary at this point to explain that in order to flesh out this idea, the discussion that follows will concentrate on the

characteristics of criminal offenders. In selecting them for purposes of illustration, no slander is intended to the vast majority of life-skills students who would not think of committing a dishonest act. Yet they still suffer anxiety and depression and indulge in equally pointless, if less reprehensible, behaviors because they see themselves as helpless. Discussion of this group suggests itself because the actions of criminals define them—or perhaps it would be more honest to say that their convictions define them—as failing to function acceptably in our society, in contrast to the manner in which the choices refugees have made define them as having functioned very successfully.

To state that the behavior of many offenders shows clearly that they are not able to foresee the consequences of their actions is to state a commonplace. In a report, Wright, Coombs, La Bar, and Lloyd (1980) hypothesize:

> Prisoners will tend not to gather relevant information and weigh the pros and cons of a course of action. They think they have all the information they need. . . . Prisoners will tend to be closed-minded. They will not listen to evidence which contradicts what they already believe. (p. 12)

Ross and Fabiano (1983) concern themselves with the same deficit when they suggest that offenders "fail to consider the consequences of their behavior before they act" (pp. 8–9). In brief: They have no way of associating cause with effect, they are unable to predict the outcomes of their actions, and this is particularly the case in their relations with other people and with society as a whole.

The same characteristics can be noted in many other life-skills students, and coaches will recognize them: the failure to understand, the failure to realize there is an alternative to what they do, and the unrealistic expectations of themselves and other people.

Factors Governing Outcomes in Social Relations

An important basis for prediction of outcomes in social relations is an ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of other people, to put one's self in their shoes. People new to this country are unable to understand our thoughts and feelings simply because our values are different. Canada and Canadians mystify them. It has been noted at length that offenders also are unable to make the transition where they put themselves in someone else's shoes, and this is a serious deficit precisely because it is the basis of moral judgments. It is also the basis for choosing any course of action which involves other people. This

deficit, therefore, does not result only in criminal prosecution and does not confine itself to people who break the law. Workers in life skills daily confront the difficulties of people who do not or cannot imagine what is in the mind of the manager who interviews them for a job, of the supervisor who corrects their work, or of loan companies who are willing (or unwilling) to extend them credit. Once again, neither group has any rational basis for making a choice.

Passive and defeatist attitudes have been noted in Canadian life-skills students (Himsl, 1973, p. 13). Not surprisingly, this attitude results in a conglomeration of unproductive emotions: high levels of anxiety and more or less chronic depression, for example. This is a tendency also documented by Lefcourt (1976). It is sensible to assume the existence of the usual concomitants: irritability and anger. Concurrent with feelings of helplessness is a tendency to indulge in highly impulsive behavior. This tendency has been established by E. J. Phares (Lefcourt, 1976), who carried out a number of studies involving persons for whom the results of performance are perceived as predictable, in contrast to persons for whom they are perceived as merely random occurrences. These latter are more likely to make ''unusual shifts,'' or to put it another way: they are more likely to behave in a manner similar to that of a gambler. This behavior may vary from impulse buying to irrational acts of violence. The results are such societal mishaps as debt, addiction, broken relationships, and prison.

Loneliness and Helplessness of Refugees

Refugees, in contrast, are active rather than passive and, far from being defeatist, are indomitable. And yet, to be a refugee is one of the greatest societal mishaps that can occur in a human life. The act of fleeing from one's own country may be realistic, but usually it is made under conditions of terror or panic that preclude thought. These are the people who take the last train or escape across the roof tops, who swim the Mekong, cling to the wings of airplanes, or pay gold for passage in a leaky boat. Liu, Lamanna, and Murata (1979) quote several refugees from Vietnam: ''I saw everyone running to the harbor, so I decided to go along'' (p. 19); ''Did not know I was leaving Vietnam but boarded ship with the thought only of running away from the shelling'' (p. 33); or, quintessentially, ''We did not plan on making this trip'' (p. 19). Even if there is a sense in which they have made a right decision, they must pay a price they had not anticipated.

> The pain that hurts the most and will not be conquered easily or very soon, the biggest obstacle to joy or happiness or just to nor-

> mal life, is the feeling of fear and strangeness, of loneliness and helplessness when one is lost in an alien, unfamiliar world in which one has to live and adjust from now on. This had been, of course, something they tacitly submitted to since the first day they left the homeland, a nominal price to pay although they did not realize how high this price would be. And now, beyond the point of no return and for the sake of survival, they will have to see it through. (Tung, cited in Liu et al., 1979, p. 40)

So here are two disparate groups who share some important characteristics: they are prone to anxiety and depression, an evidence, in both cases, of impulsive behavior; they are without the ability to understand or put themselves in the position of the people around them; and they lack any realistic criteria for making choices. Now it is possible to ask: Why not use the same lessons for both groups? The reason this is not done is that the shared characteristics are functions of different needs, and it is these needs that life skills seeks, in some measure, to supply.

In the case of refugees, the gap is due largely to ignorance and can be filled with information which may be provided in a straight forward way; they can choose to take it or leave it. In the case of the all-Canadian life-skills students, often the substance of what is taught to them is not different, but it is important for the students to understand these skills as a function of choices they make. Choice is an abstract, of course, with little meaning apart from situations in which it is necessary. And so the aim is to encourage the development of choosing by giving practice with specific, manageable, interpersonal behaviors, in short: by means of life-skills lessons.

Teaching Moral Values

And this is where the study of the first group raises serious questions about what is being taught to the second. Does life skills, in fact, also teach values to Canadians? Probably. There are people who insist that values are what life skills should be teaching.

Ken Auletta's book *The Underclass* is, amongst other things, an inquiry into the proper role of government with respect to disadvantaged groups in American society. Auletta quotes the coach of a life-skills group in stating that his first priority would be a program to teach morals or ethics.

> I see that as far more effective than dumping millions of dollars. That's what Johnson's Great Society did by dumping all that

> money into teaching marketable skills. A lot of those people got those marketable skills and they're still out there. Skills are important. An ability to read and write is important. But ethics is key. (Auletta, 1982, p. 294).

But, as someone once said of the writings of Saint Paul, this is after all only one man's opinion. The fact remains that life skills are largely interpersonal skills and that interpersonal skills by definition must be based on the recognition of a shared humanity. They are skills which cannot reasonably be taught from a unilateral point of view—they do imply a knowledge of how other people think and feel and may choose. Life skills are not and cannot be simply a series of mindless tricks for getting ahead and outwitting other people. Neat tricks vitiate choice and therefore they dehumanize the person who practices them and the person upon whom they are practiced. Life skills are problem-solving behaviors, the practice of a reasoned and reasonable choice, but the database for solving interpersonal problems is a knowledge of the needs and emotions of other people, co-existing with one's own, and a recognition that everyone, including oneself, is a unique and valuable individual. If these sentences sound moralistic and value-laden—and they are certainly open to this accusation—then so be it. On the other hand, if one avoids value judgments, it is difficult to imagine any other reasonable and enduring database upon which to teach interpersonal, problem-solving skills.

The next serious question is: If the discipline of life skills is encouraging students to make choices, is it asking them to make middle class choices? Do life skills teach middle class values?

Years ago, people in counseling and social work were taught that middle class values were a kind of disgraceful part of their personalities, to be kept decently hidden from the poorer clients. This was likely because the middle class has been associated with a dour and joyless puritanism whereas the attitude of the lower classes is associated—at least by sentimentalists—with simple, uncomplicated happiness and *joie de vivre*. Anyone who has worked with the poor knows that this is, to say the least, not the case.

It is true that our society, which is essentially middle class, has been accused of being obsessed with money although there is little evidence that people who do not have it or people who have a lot of it, worry or dream about it less than do the middle class.

But to approach this question differently, consider the options. On the one hand, it seems quixotic to teach people how to be poor, and in any case, this is not a lesson most life-skills students need. On the other

hand, if there are people who know how to teach other people to be rich, Wall Street would present more fertile ground than life skills. It would appear that the only alternative is to teach people how to be middle class, and given North American love/hate feelings about money, this is worrisome to contemplate.

Reflection suggests that if it were possible to factor out all the guilty financial preoccupations, then attitudes and values would emerge which do occur frequently, attended by success and without guilt, in societies where the accumulation of wealth is not a primary goal. Even in socalled primitive societies, the prize goes most often to the hunters who take the most care in preparing their weapons, who track their prey most assiduously, who plan and cooperate with each other in the hunt. In other contemporary societies, alike in not being dedicated to the profit motive, success may depend on a certain competence in dealing with the bureaucracy. The strong suggestion is that this know-how is the great middle class virtue which cuts across all societies—including those which prefer to lay up treasures on earth rather than in heaven. This competence is practical everyday problem-solving to be put at the service of whatever goals or morality people may have in mind. In this sense, it is as desirable for a Canadian life-skills student to learn how to behave in a job interview, as it is for an Amazonian tribesman to learn how to poison a dart, or for a yoûng Kazak to understand how to become a member of the Communist party.

It is possible to say life skills teaches values and, indeed, it is arguable that, whatever one's intentions, it is not possible to avoid teaching values of some kind. Let us hope that the values of a life-skills session are based on a sane view of our common human nature, a rational view of problem solving, and a responsible view of choice. But even if someone should criticize these values, claiming that they are in some way undesirable, reprehensible, or downright immoral, they are still justifiable on the grounds that they are the means by which balanced self-determinism might be achieved.

Experiential Lessons

Put this way, the goals are inoffensive but they are difficult to teach. Life-skills lessons should be experiential and this means, of course, more than that the students should not be unconscious at the time the lesson is given. There must be a high rate of active student involvement whether this is in the form of discussion, role playing, practice, or application.

The concern is that the lesson experience, especially the part where the students test out the specific skill, is a very second-rate substitute

for the real thing. The vexation is that it is not possible to bring little slices of real life into the classroom for students to work on—and possibly mess up—the way pieces of wood are used in woodwork or old motors in auto mechanics. People involved in life skills have this worry even though experience teaches that random slices of life cannot be guaranteed to be typical or, anyway, not typical of the kinds of situations needed that day for practice. Even so, it has always been a matter for regret that lessons, like art, merely imitate life.

But it is at once the advantage and the disadvantage of the lesson situation that it is not real life. The advantage is that these contrived activities and exercises do permit that an evaluation take place of how well the skills were performed. This step is even more important if everything went wrong than if it went right because it is important to know that if you did not do it right, you can try again; in other words, that you can learn.

This stage of problem solving and of the life-skills lessons assumes true value when the experience arranged for all-Canadian students is compared with the experience of the other group, the refugees. Life has not offered them the opportunity to evaluate; life has only offered success or failure. No particular gift is required to perceive that for the many of them, who have ended up in prison and in concentration camps or who have died, the experience has not been with life, where there are possibilities for success or failure, but with death.

What is it, after all, that life-skills coaches hope for their students? Balanced self-determinism? Of course; that is one of those things it is hard to be against. It is an ideal in which every virtue resides, so that is probably why—even though it is good—it does not sound very appealing. The importance of self-determinism is that it makes clear that responsibility for choosing rests with every one of us and we do have input into what happens to us. The difficulty with this expression—and certainly this difficulty did also occur to the originators—is that it skims over the possibility that one may choose wrongly. That possibility, of course, is implicit in the act of choosing. So it is not some technique for making unfailingly correct choices which life skills tries to teach—surely a great relief to everyone in the field. It is the daunting and dangerous area where human beings encounter choice that is the proper focus of life skills.

There is a very appropriate passage from the Book of Deuteronomy in which God is recorded as speaking to the children of Israel. God says: "I have set before you life and death . . . therefore choose life." (Deut.30:19). To live is to choose. And it is surely living that life skills teaches.

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