

Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence Implementation During COVID-19 Challenges in Croatia

Milos Stojanovic

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),
Belgrade, Serbia

Ziad El-Khatib

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna,
Austria, and Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue
(UQAT)

Alma Rovis Brandic

Education and Teacher Training Agency, Zagreb, Croatia

Wadih Maalouf

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna,
Austria

Globally, the Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic situation has affected the education system, forcing students to start distance learning. Consequently, education of students reverted to online platforms or TV station broadcasts. Extracurricular programs have also experienced a setback given the natural prioritization of mandatory school subjects. Meanwhile, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) was implementing a teacher-led extracurricular activity for children of age 10–15 years to prevent substance use and other negative life and social consequences (Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence [LQSFA]). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, LQSFA was difficult to sustain, partly as it was considered extracurricular and partly given its interactive requirement that was difficult to apply through distance learning. Nevertheless, schools' facilitators managed to adapt the program information sharing and communication strategies with the student groups and identified essential sessions allowing continuity of program implementation and utilization of critical program skills during COVID-19 pandemic. The practical implication of the facilitators' assessment of the relevance, value, motivation and feasibility of the implementation of the LQSFA program within the current COVID-19 circumstances calls for the eminent need for adaptation of its implementation modality to meet the current educational delivery circumstances.

Keywords: online teaching, social emotional learning, COVID-19, Croatia, Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence

Lions Quest Skills for Adolescence (LQSFA) is an evidence based social emotional learning program for students of 10–15 years of age, developed by the Lions Clubs International Foundation. Since 2010, this program was implemented in South East Europe (SEE) in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reaching five countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and lastly Croatia. The program entails 40 sessions clustered around seven topics: (a) entering the teen years; (b) building self-confidence and communication skills; (c) managing emotions in positive ways; (d) improving peer relationships; (e) strengthening family relation-

ships; (f) living healthy and drug free; and (g) setting goals for healthy living. The LQSFA was initially piloted over one academic year in Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia with positive outcomes on the students' current use of substances (alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana) and intention to using these substances in the next 3 months among current users (Maalouf, 2019). Since 2019, the 1-year modality of LQSFA implementation was revised to span over two academic years in all countries. This was done to allow the facilitators to have ample time to articulate all the sessions to the students. As program sessions are structured to develop relevant skills, interactivity in implementation and direct

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Témiscamingue (UQAT) ; Alma Rovis Brandic, High School Department, Education and Teacher Training Agency, Zagreb, Croatia;  Wadih Maalouf, Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Section, Drug Prevention and Health Branch, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna, Austria.

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Milos Stojanovic, Programme Office of Serbia, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Belgrade, Serbia; Ziad El-Khatib, Drug Prevention and Health Branch, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Vienna, Austria, and World Health Programme, Université du Québec en Abitibi-

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wadih Maalouf, Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Section, Drug Prevention and Health Branch, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Room D 1419, P.O. Box 500, A-1400 Vienna, Austria. E-mail: wadih.maalouf@un.org

contact between the students are essential constructs in line with the UNODC–WHO International Standards on Drug Use Prevention (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

Since the middle of March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic situation and its direct and indirect challenges interrupted the daily life routine and affected the education system as students had to discontinue the conventional means of education. Students across the country shifted to distance learning modalities using online and TV broadcasting platforms. These customized alternative knowledge sharing modalities predominantly prioritized mandatory school subjects for all elementary and high school students. Extracurricular subjects and programs such as LQSFA are perceived of lesser priority and were left to the discretion of facilitators to potentially incorporate in their workplans whenever feasible.

In response to the identified challenges, the UNODC in collaboration with the Education and Teacher training Agency of the Government of Croatia collected data on current teaching implementation modality and its effects. This was done through a series of online meetings and surveys with facilitators from the elementary schools where LQSFA is currently implemented. The aim of the survey was to evaluate the practicality of the altered and newly imposed knowledge sharing modalities of the intervention and importance of the availed program sessions and related skills for students and their families during COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

LQFSA implementation in Croatia started in 41 elementary schools in 2019 in the cities of Osijek, Zagreb, Rijeka, Zadar and Split. A total of 90 facilitators were trained on program materials and implementation modality. Facilitators successfully passing the LQSFA training program and directly involved in its implementation in their elementary schools were contacted for a follow-up on their activities, considering the critical importance of maintaining the affinity of facilitators to the materials and ensuring proper and timely monitoring of its implementation. Follow up meetings were organized in direct contact with facilitators in three cities (Split, Zadar and Osijek) where LQFSA was initiated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the imposition of the lockdown and physical distancing policies, follow-up meetings with the facilitators from Rijeka and Zagreb were adjusted to be made using online platforms. Therefore, data collection methodology was jointly developed by the UNODC and the Teacher training Agency of the Government of Croatia. This consisted of seven open ended questions to assess further the probability of the implementation of the LQSFA program during the COVID-19 pandemic, how facilitators respond to the situation in their country in terms of knowledge sharing strategies and their perception of usefulness and benefit of the program during this situation for the students and their parents. Identified data collection tool was first tested among a subgroup of 22 facilitators (teachers and expert associates) from Zagreb ($n = 18/22$) and Rijeka ($n = 14/22$), using online follow-up meetings. Gathered information confirmed the relevance of the tool

which grounded the basis for the development of online based survey to reach all program facilitators.

Results

The total number of facilitators that provided data using the online survey was 52/90 (58%). Predominantly, the prioritization of the mandatory school subjects significantly limits the opportunity to suggest and implement extracurricular programs. Nevertheless, facilitators ($n = 34/52$; 65%) positively valued the importance of program's social emotional learning skills and practical applicability in challenging and lockdown situations. This was specifically supported by topics such as positive behavior, managing emotions, building self-confidence, and developing communication skills.

Despite the complications in pursuing with the LQSFA program, over half of the facilitators ($n = 29/52$; 56%) continued its implementation using online platforms. Over three-quarters of these 29 facilitators ($n = 22$; 76%), focused on recapping and reviewing the previous modality of sessions to students with the aim of reconsolidation. When it comes to the remaining 7/29 (24%), they decided to continue the series of the sessions (which makes it a quasi-modality).

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the COVID-19 lockdown carried a significant toll on the implementation of the LQSFA program. Nevertheless, during the outstanding challenging situation where work-life routine is profoundly disturbed and where students are connected with their teachers over online platforms, implementation of extracurricular programs as LQSFA remains feasible. More valuably, the topics covered by the program (building self-confidence, managing emotions, strengthening communication skills) are very relevant students to understand better challenges of the lockdown situation and physical isolation measures. This has motivated many motivated facilitators to decide to advance with the program or recapping and reviewing the implemented sessions. Such results, reflecting relevance, value, motivation, and feasibility, further emphasize the eminence and need for adapted versions of such life and socioemotional skills programs particularly within the current COVID-19 circumstances. UNODC is already engaged with Lions Clubs International Foundation to avail such adapted tools.

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