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Adapting a life skills training program for survivors of human trafficking

Laura Cordisco Tsai, PhD, MSSW

Harvard John F. Kennedy School of Government,
Carr Center for Human Rights Policy

Janice Ubaldo

10ThousandWindows, Cebu, Philippines

Penny Sun

Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

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Abstract

This brief reflection paper presents a case study of a life skills training program for survivors of human trafficking in the Philippines. Trauma-informed principles and Motivational Interviewing guide the development and implementation of this life skills development program to support survivors in achieving their educational and career goals. This article details the curriculum adaptation process, guiding frameworks, curriculum design, and recommendations for strengthening life skills programming for human trafficking survivors. The experiences of practitioners detailed in this paper are instructive for other stakeholders in the anti-human trafficking movement planning to implement life skills programming with survivors.

Keywords

Philippines; survivors; life skills; soft skills; trauma-informed; human trafficking

Introduction

Life skills are defined by as “a broad set of skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals” (Gates et al. 2016, 1). These skills are broadly categorized into: psychosocial and emotional skills, intra-personal skills, inter-personal skills, communication skills, cognitive and higher-order thinking skills, entrepreneurship and civic engagement skills, and employability skills (Honeyman 2018). Life skills are critical for vocational success (Puerta et al. 2016). Life skills programs can strengthen core skills necessary for employment, including

autonomy, self-care and self-management, risk reduction, relational, and communication skills (Ferrari 2016; Rafferty 2013). However, given the magnitude and complexity of trauma that survivors of human trafficking have experienced, a holistic, trauma-centered, and contextualized approach is required to ensure life skills programming is effective (Gill and Cordisco Tsai 2020; Gilmore 2008). Few models of successful life skills programs specifically developed for survivors of human trafficking exist. Little is known about what a successful curriculum looks like within an enabling learning environment tailored to survivors' needs, priorities, and experiences.

10ThousandWindows (10KW) is a nonprofit organization in the Philippines that supports survivors of violence and exploitation in achieving their career goals. 10KW primarily serves survivors of human trafficking; program participants also include people who have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV), child labor, and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV). 10KW has created a life skills program – the Soft Skills Training and Empowerment Program (STEP) – within a repertoire of survivor-support services. In addition to STEP, 10KW's services include crisis intervention, career counseling, educational scholarships and academic support, employment services, work immersion opportunities, and labor rights education. 10KW also engages in community education initiatives, such as partnering with employers in creating trauma-informed workplaces.

STEP serves as the foundational program for 10KW's services. All survivors newly enrolled at 10KW first participate in the STEP program before advancing to other services. In 2018, 10KW conducted a comprehensive program assessment, which simultaneously revealed that program participants greatly valued STEP and yet also highlighted the need to refine STEP to better match the experiences of survivors (Cordisco Tsai 2018). As a result, 10KW embarked on a systematic process for revising the STEP program in 2018 and 2019. This article outlines the curriculum adaptation process, guiding frameworks for STEP, an overview of the revised curriculum, and implications for practice. This manuscript does not present research findings; rather, it outlines the experiences of practitioners in adapting this program specifically for human trafficking survivors. This case study can nonetheless aid other organizations in the anti-human trafficking sector and the wider skills-training community in understanding the unique employment-readiness needs of human trafficking survivors and how to adapt programming to match the needs of survivors.

Guiding Frameworks

Implementation of STEP is grounded in trauma-informed principles and designed to be adherent with Motivational Interviewing (MI). Both MI and a trauma-informed lens create the safe and supportive environment necessary to allow people who have experienced considerable trauma to fully engage with learning. Traumatic events can devastate a person's sense of autonomy and underlying assumptions about safety in the world (Herman 1997). Trauma symptoms can interfere with the process of learning and embodying life skills. Key principles of

a trauma-informed approach include transparency and trustworthiness; establishing physical and emotional safety; choice/restoration of autonomy and control; mutuality and collaboration; empowerment; and sensitivity to historical, cultural, and gender issues (SAMHSA 2014). Trauma-informed principles help 10KW staff create an environment that centers survivors' needs.

MI is an evidence-based, humanistic, and person-centered approach to communication based upon four components: acceptance, compassion, partnership, and evocation of change from within the person (Miller and Rollnick 2013). MI strengthens individuals' motivation for and commitment to change. 10KW uses MI techniques adapted to the Filipino cultural context, allowing 10KW staff to better engage with survivors' priorities, values, and needs (Cordisco Tsai and Seballos-Llena 2020). Both MI and trauma-informed principles are integrated throughout STEP, including session design, facilitation of sessions, wording of all materials, establishing group norms, feedback mechanisms, and expectations for staff communication with survivors.

Adaptation Process

In revising the STEP curriculum, 10KW prioritized evidence-informed approaches and obtaining input from key stakeholders. 10KW staff first reviewed the literature on life skills training for similar populations. Secondly, 10KW developed a survey for staff and employers to identify priority soft skills based on the World Learning soft skills inventory, a research based-inventory created through a review of global literature on life skills programming (Honeyman 2018). Definitions drawn from the World Learning inventory were provided for each skill to establish common understanding. In the survey, 10KW staff and employers hiring entry-level positions were asked to rank soft skills per category in order of importance (n=40). The top five skills in each category were noted. Employers were also asked to share observations about survivors' strengths and areas for growth in the workplace. Third, 10KW elicited survivor input. 10KW conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with survivors who had completed STEP and obtained employment (n=15). Survivors were asked to assess their own readiness for the workplace, their strengths, and challenges in school and in employment. Survivors were invited to identify the behaviors, characteristics, and attitudes their peers should embody to succeed in employment. A short list of soft skills was determined through the FGDs and survivors were asked to select/rank the top five skills from this list.

10KW staff integrated stakeholder feedback by identifying priority life skills across stakeholder groups. 10KW ultimately focused on a total of nine skills in three overarching categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive/planning skills. Per input from all stakeholders, the final list of life skills included: self-confidence, coping with stress, and self-discipline/control (intrapersonal); respecting others, teamwork, and resolving conflict (interpersonal); and managing time/tasks, responsibility, and decision making (cognitive/planning). Staff balanced dual needs for comprehensiveness with feasibility of implementation.

Draft modules were initially piloted over two rounds, with ten survivors in the first batch and 18 survivors in the second batch. Feedback from these pilots was used to further simplify activities.

Additionally, the 2018 program review identified the need to expand program orientations to support survivor agency in determining whether or not to participate in STEP. The program review revealed that some human trafficking survivors joined the program because their social worker determined it would be helpful for them, but survivors themselves did not always fully own this decision (Cordisco Tsai 2018). This dynamic reflects consistent patterns in the anti-human trafficking sector in which decisions are often made on behalf of survivors (Lockyer 2020). Research has reinforced the importance of clarifying informed consent procedures with human trafficking survivors given their lack of trust in service providers (Cordisco Tsai et al. 2020). To ensure adherence with a trauma-informed approach and MI, 10KW determined the need to bolster orientations and informed consent processes accordingly.

The program review also highlighted the need to broaden the curriculum to more holistically address the career development and psychosocial needs of survivors. While the original version of STEP contained group sessions focusing on self-assessment, vision setting, and career goal development, the revised STEP significantly expanded the career counseling component of the program to also include eight individual sessions with career counselors within STEP.¹ These individualized sessions allow counselors time to develop a rapport with survivors, which is essential given the importance of building trust with survivors over time (Cordisco Tsai et al. 2020).

Further, 10KW added six psychosocial education sessions tailored to survivors' needs and experiences: understanding trauma, human trafficking, IPV, suicide, substance use, and reproductive health. The latter three topics were selected given the considerable likelihood that survivors may experience challenges with suicidality, harmful substance use, and barriers to availing of reproductive health services (Frey et al. 2019; Hopper 2017; Kelly et al. 2019; Kiss et al. 2015). Each component of the revised curriculum is described below.

Revised Curriculum

The final 17-week program integrates expanded orientations, career counseling and goal development, psychosocial education, life skills training, and culminating activities that together support survivors' self-determination (see Table 1). Four orientation sessions provide comprehensive information regarding 10KW's entire repertoire of services, the STEP program, and the career counseling services. The expanded orientations allow survivors to fully understand the program and clarify their questions before making any decisions about joining. Orientations are followed by an individual informed consent session wherein confidentiality guidelines, norms, and expectations are discussed and survivors decide whether or not they want to continue.

¹ Subsequent career counseling sessions follow completion of STEP. These 8 sessions refer to the sessions that are a part of the STEP program.

Career counseling and goal development include a combination of group and individual sessions with the STEP team and career counselors. Group sessions allow survivors to assess their strengths, motivation, and values (Evaluate); explore a variety of career options firsthand through engagement with partners and peer mentors (Explore); and develop personalized career goals and vision statements (Vision), as shown in Table 1. Group sessions provide an opportunity for peer support and building self-efficacy through peer modeling. Group sessions are, however, insufficient to help survivors develop individualized and actionable career goals.

Group sessions are supplemented with individual career counseling sessions in which counselors build rapport and trust with survivors and support survivors in understanding and articulating their hopes for their futures. Given concerns regarding trust, time is spent initially on relationship building between the counselor and survivor. Counselors use culturally-adapted MI techniques to support survivors in developing individualized career and life goals and strengthening motivation toward reaching their visions (Cordisco Tsai and Seballos-Llena 2020). The direction and pace of career planning is dictated by survivors themselves, and progress through sessions is based on survivors' readiness. When each survivor is ready, counselors support in creating action plans, starting with identifying smaller intermediate targets, challenges, skills needed to achieve those targets, and resources available. In keeping with trauma-informed principles, survivors progress through the sessions at their own pace; as such, they may not complete all eight counseling sessions by the time STEP has finished.

Six psychosocial education sessions address trauma, human trafficking, IPV, suicide, substance use, and reproductive health. These sessions teach survivors to better understand their experience and triggers, strengthen emotional self-regulation skills, understand their rights, and provide information about resources available in the community. Given the stigma associated with these topics in the Filipino cultural context, inclusion of these sessions normalizes discussion of these topics, reinforcing that 10KW staff are safe people with whom survivors can explore these subjects when they are ready (Cunanán and Yabut 2019; Hussain and Finer 2013; Redaniel et al. 2011; Shoultz et al. 2010).

Twelve life skills training sessions focus on the aforementioned nine intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive/planning skills. These sessions promote skills development through experiential learning, reflective analysis, and self-expression through art. Training methodologies include case studies, role plays, individual reflection exercises, personalized application exercises, presentations/Q&As with peer leaders, and individual portfolios. Both group and individual processing are crucial to allow survivors to understand and apply concepts to real-life experiences. Each session contains an introduction, participatory activities to assist with processing, and exercises for at-home application/practice. Review sessions are incorporated at the end of each skills cluster (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive/planning) to allow survivors to identify their successes and challenges and show appreciation and support for each other's learning. These components allow survivors to understand what each skill is, why it is helpful, and concrete ways to use the skill. Content is modified to survivors' experiences. For example, in light of participants' prior experiences of exploitation, lessons on interpersonal skills

such as respecting others and conflict resolution focus not only on adapting to another person, but also helping survivors prioritize their own safety and ensure their own needs are met.

Survivors build individual portfolios throughout STEP for reflections, feedback on their learning, and expressing their creativity. The program closes with a culminating session in which survivors share their portfolios with their peers, reinforcing peer support and learning. Career case conferences are conducted with referring social workers and 10KW staff to support each survivor in planning for next steps in his/her pathway toward achieving his/her vocational goals.

Conclusion

Research regarding survivors' experiences in life skills programming and evaluating the impact of such programs is needed. In the absence of a broader evidence base pertaining to life skills training for survivors of human trafficking, this case study illustrates key lessons for organizations interested in adapting and implementing similar programming. The STEP curriculum reinforces the importance of incorporating guiding frameworks into curriculum development, using research-based tools, contextualizing curricula to culture, and garnering a wide array of stakeholder input on program priorities, needs, and goals. By integrating clear informed consent processes, career counseling and goal development services, psychosocial education, and life skills training, STEP provides a foundation for survivors of human trafficking to continue to pursue their vocational goals.

Table 1: Overview of STEP Curriculum

		Group Session	Individual Session
Month 1	Orientation and Informed Consent	General Orientation Career Counseling Orientation STEP Orientation	CC1: Informed Consent CC2: Getting to know you
Month 2	Goal Development and Career Counseling (CC)	Evaluate 1 Evaluate 2 Explore 1 Explore 2 Vision 1 Vision 2	CC3: Exploring my track CC4: Strengthening my vision
	Psychosocial Education	<i>Trauma</i> <i>Substance use</i> <i>Reproductive health</i> <i>IPV</i> <i>Human trafficking</i> <i>Suicide</i>	CC5: Focusing on goals
Month 3	Life Skills Training	Intrapersonal: 1: Self-confidence 2: Coping with stress 3: Self-discipline 4: Review/synthesis	CC6: Action planning
Month 4		Interpersonal: 1: Respecting others 2: Teamwork 3: Resolving conflict 4: Review/synthesis Cognitive/planning: 1: Managing time/tasks 2: Responsibility 3: Decision making 4: Review/Synthesis	
	Culmination	Career Case Conference Culminating Activity	CC7: Determining readiness CC8: Next steps

Sessions facilitated by:
Plain Text – STEP Training Manager;
Bold – Career Counselors;
Italics – Social Worker

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