

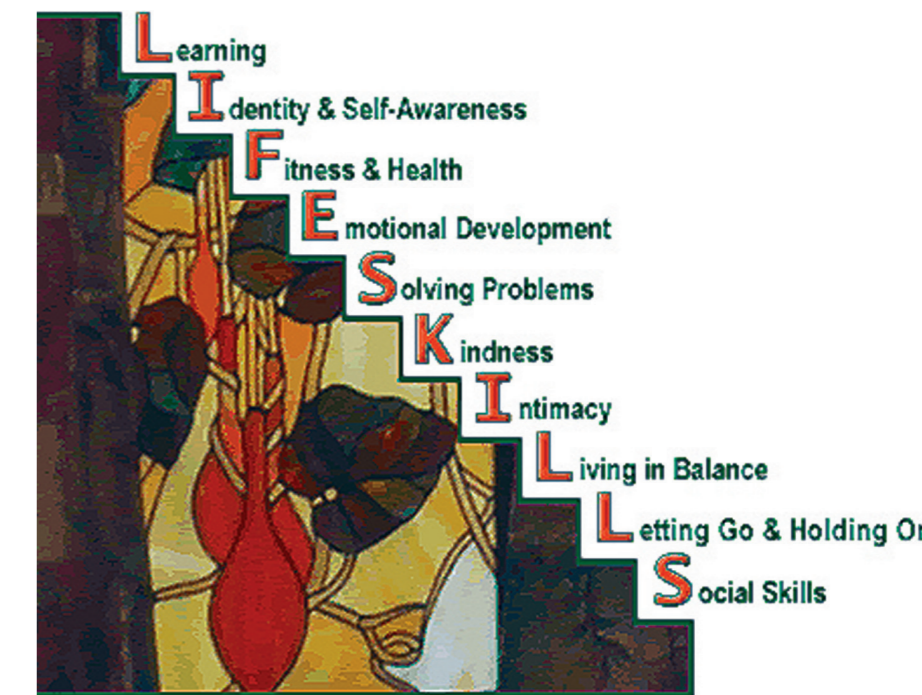
# The art of living well

Secondary schools teach useful knowledge, but the classroom leaves out some practical advice students need now and for the future. The Women's Foundation (TWF) Life Skills Programme aims to fill in the gaps

**T**HE Life Skills Programme teaches students how to analyse, question and challenge what is considered 'normal' in society. With the care and guidance of **passionate** instructors, students learn about a range of 'life topics' from replacing negative stereotypes with positive images to making life-changing decisions in the classroom, the workplace and beyond.

According to **self-reflection** exercises from participating students of the pilot programme last year, teens struggle to find their own way in a society where they are constantly bombarded with contradictory messages and expectations from people and the media around them.

Many teens feel immense pressure in conforming to social norms, especially when their own opinions or actions are different from their friends. When 'everyone' seems to be doing or agreeing with something, the need for acceptance may influence some to leave their better **judgement** behind.



## Learning through passion

WHAT sets TWF's Life Skills Programme apart from others, aside from the holistic nature of the workshops, is the passionate instructors.

Throughout the programme, instructors gave detailed feedback to each of the students after class to help foster a trusting and supportive relationship. Unresponsive individuals in the first lesson would often end up talkative and open by the end of the programme, expressing their appreciation for the instructor's efforts.

"The instructors were very nice. They were frustrated by our passiveness in class. However, what surprised me was that they were very devoted to getting to know us, since most of the time, adults expect us to change our behaviour to conform with theirs," another student commented.

Pre- and post-programme questionnaires filled out by participants confirmed this transformation, as well as by their teachers and parents. It is this **visible** growth that motivates TWF to work harder each year for a better student experience, using the latest innovative and research-supported materials. With a revised and expanded curriculum, the programme started this year at five schools and will roll out to another five in the coming school term.

Ching and her team understand that there is always room for improvement and is very responsive to feedback: "All kudos to the participating students, their teachers and parents, as well as instructors who gave us valuable comments for designing and refining the Programme. We believe this bottom-up approach is the core to successfully connecting the programme with its participants." ●



## Handling pressure

WANTING to be a part of a group is human nature, but it may become a problem when we sacrifice who we are just to fulfil that need to belong. The programme addresses such concerns through a series of workshops, teaching students to **prioritise** their own happiness and well-being – especially when faced with peer pressure.

Topics covered include **appreciation** of difference between people, the harms of gender stereotyping and understanding that 'failure is the mother of success'. Many of the workshops also focus on money management, asking students to think about responsibility, understanding 'wants' and 'needs', and the challenges of budgeting for a family. The key message throughout the programme seems to be that a successful, healthy life involves clear step-by-step planning for the future.

## Think positive

DR Jenny Yuen from the Centre for Advancement in Inclusive and Special Education at the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Education, and who is the head researcher of an evaluation of the Life Skills Programme, explained that today's students struggle with confidence, understanding of the self and interacting with others. "Our evaluation of the Life Skills Programme shows that it had a positive impact on the participating students," Dr Yuen said.

Students also found they were better able to understand adults' perspectives, in particular those of their parents, by stepping into their shoes when it came to the financial planning role-play exercises.

Rita Ching, Associate Director of The Women's Foundation and one of the principle architects of the Life Skills Programme, explained the feedback highlighted the importance of strengthening students' relationships with their parents and other adults. Hence, The Women's Foundation will also provide parent and teacher workshops this year to create a stronger support network for students.

"I used to be **pessimistic** and always thought life was hopeless when I came across obstacles. However, I have learned from these workshops that I have support from my friends and family when facing difficulties. Most importantly, difficulties can somehow be overcome if I just don't give up," commented a student on the impact that the Life Skills Programme had on her.

"I learned a lot about my future during these workshops. The instructor said that people should choose their own future. In fact, we always doubt our own choice when it's challenged by other views. However, the instructors reminded me to think it over again whether I should do as other people do," another student participant reflected.

Taking in feedback from parents, teachers and students, TWF has refined the programme this year to include elements of positive psychology and 'hope theory' to help students understand better their own strengths and what they need to do to be able to achieve their dreams.

They also introduced a series of extra-curricular activities to reinforce the knowledge they learned from lessons, including talks from successful individuals, company visits and educational games. Of particular interest is an innovative financial planning game *Praxis*, which is being introduced to Hong Kong schools for the first time.

While it took a little getting used to, students eventually warmed up to small class sizes that were no larger than 20. **Shunning** traditional teaching methods, interactive approaches were used including games and role-playing exercises to develop critical thinking. "Each workshop was very lively with lots of interactive games which inspired my thinking and understanding," praised one student.

