

Handbook

**Curriculum Infusion of
Real Life Issues**



*Northeastern Illinois University
Network for Dissemination of Curriculum Infusion*

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Background

This handbook is part of the work of a 3 year grant that The Network for Dissemination of Curriculum Infusion (NDCI) at Northeastern Illinois University received in 2003 from the U. S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE). The goal of NDCI's work is to prepare future and in-service teachers to integrate real life issues into classes across the k-12 curriculum. The NDCI has a substantial track record of success in the area of prevention Curriculum Infusion. From 1993 to 2000 the NDCI received a series of grants from the U. S. Department of Education to serve as the national dissemination agent for substance abuse prevention Curriculum Infusion in higher education. For the past 7 years, grants from the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois Department of Human Services and Prevention First, Illinois have enabled the NDCI to prepare in-service and future teachers in Illinois to integrate substance abuse and violence prevention into classes across the k-12 curriculum. The FIPSE grant extended Curriculum Infusion training to other pressing real life issues and provided funds to begin national dissemination of the Real Life Issues Curriculum Infusion strategy.

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Handbook

Curriculum Infusion of Real Life Issues

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Curriculum Infusion of Real Life Issues Model Overview

Every generation of school aged students has confronted real life issues. The term “real life issues” is meant to describe pressing life problems and concerns affecting students’ daily lives. Examples of real life issues include substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, and tobacco), violence and bullying, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. The impact of life issues on students is often profound. Life issues can be difficult to resolve, consequential, enduring, and life altering. The Curriculum Infusion of Real Life Issues Model (CI) provides a method for teachers to integrate prevention content that responds to these issues into classes across the K-12 curriculum. Real Life Issues CI can help students resolve these problems in a positive manner. It makes classes more relevant to students by addressing their real world concerns and connects teachers more closely to the students and communities where they work. K-12 administrators may encourage development of Real Life Issues CI programs in their schools; school counselors may support implementation of this curriculum innovation and base school wide prevention programming on the CI model. The model is applicable to all real life issues that students confront and incorporates consideration of environmental influences, cultural diversity, social justice, and evidence based prevention strategies into the design and delivery of innovative curriculum. The Curriculum Infusion of Real Life Issues Model (CI) may be envisioned as the area formed within the overlap of three concentric circles (Figure 1).

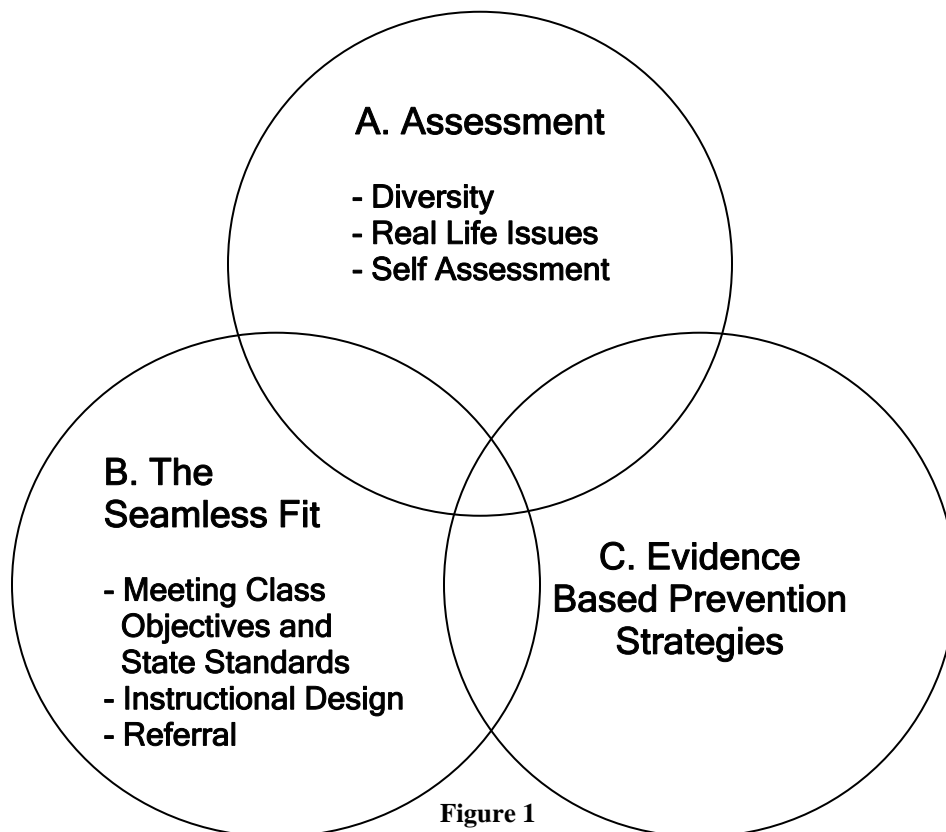


Figure 1

The first of the circles represents the teacher's active role of **Assessment** including assessment of:

- 1) **Classroom Diversity**: Knowledge of diversity provides necessary context for understanding the real life issues students confront and for developing effective instructional strategies to address life issues. The Real Life Issues CI Method requires each teacher to analyze the diversity of his/her class by race, ethnicity (including language and religion), socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, age and developmental status, exceptionality, and other diversity factors (geography, student subcultures, etc.). Real life issues CI recognizes and helps make teachers aware of the intersection and complexity of diversity in today's classrooms.
- 2) **The Real Life Issues Affecting Students**: The CI model asks that teachers understand the prevalence and importance of the real life issues affecting their students. They should understand social and environmental factors that contribute to real life issues and social injustices in the society that impact K-12 populations.
- 3) **Self Assessment**: The Real Life Issues CI method calls on teachers to examine their own attitudes and perceptions of students and communities and their attitudes and behaviors related to the real life issues addressed.

The second circle represents the pedagogy of **Seamless Fit**. Seamless Fit is the teacher's ability to achieve the normal curriculum goals set forth by the school and the state with components of instruction skillfully woven in and adjusted to include relevant information regarding a specific real life issue. A teacher might offer examples, illustrate concepts, or provide curriculum activities including thematic units relevant to a real life issue. This circle also includes important instructional design considerations such as diversity and active learning methodologies. In addition, the circle includes a working knowledge of school and community resources to effect appropriate referrals for intervention and treatment if necessary.

Evidence Based Strategies, the third circle which appears in Figure 1, represents five evidence based strategies that will most effectively guide students toward prevention and positive resolutions of real life issues. These five strategies are: 1) Engaging students in community prevention; 2) Promoting pro-social norms; 3) Correcting misperceptions of norms; 4) Increasing perceptions of personal risk, and, 5) Developing or enhancing life skills. Each strategy is explained in Section C of this **Handbook**.

A. Assessment

1. Classroom diversity

The CI Method emphasizes that candidates and teachers acquire knowledge of diversity in the school where they teach. As indicated, the Real Life Issues CI method requires each teacher to analyze the diversity of his/her class by:

- Race
- Ethnicity (including language and religion)
- Socio-economic status
- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Age and Developmental Status
- Exceptionality
- Other (geography, student subcultures, etc.)

The CI Method also asks that candidates and teachers:

- Understand the real life issues their k-12 students confront in the context of social and environmental factors including social injustices that impact diverse groups
- Incorporate knowledge of diversity into Real Life Issues CI instructional strategies (see section B below), and,
- Incorporate understanding of diversity into the choice of evidence based prevention strategies that are part of Real Life Issues CI (see section C below).

Knowledge and understanding of diversity is an expectation for prospective and practicing teachers. Accreditation by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires that knowledge and skills related to diversity be effectively taught. The Real Life Issues CI Method can be an excellent way to acquire knowledge and skills related to diversity, contributing to a school, department or College of Education's meeting the NCATE Standard Six.

There is a growing literature on diversity. The Real Life Issues CI website (www.neiu.edu/~k12pac/) includes articles describing how knowledge of diversity (e.g., exceptionality, gender, etc.) provides understanding of the real life issues students confront and affects the design and implementation of Real Life Issues curriculum.

Study of diversity provides meaningful generalizations about groups that support effective teaching and prevention. In understanding what is thematic about group life care must be taken not to stereotype; there are always variations and individual differences.

2. Assessment of the real life issues affecting students

Some pressing issues are present in a high percentage of schools throughout the United States. These include problems of bullying, social ostracism and substance abuse (nationally, approximately 30 percent of high school seniors binge drink, that is have had five or more drinks in a row within the last two weeks). Other real life issues are critical problems for students in some communities. Real life issues curriculum infusion asks teachers to identify problems students confront and assess the prevalence and relative importance of these issues in impacting student lives. These issues may be identified in a variety of ways including:

- Talking with students and observing their interaction
- Discussions with parents about issues affecting students
- Discussions with school counselors and teachers who are close to students
- Reviewing the number and distribution of school disciplinary cases
- Reviewing results of available community or school based surveys of drug and alcohol use and other school and community problems
- Contacting personnel in community agencies, organizations, hospitals, health departments, police departments, and religious institutions including organizations that provide services in problem areas like substance abuse.

Understanding the real life issues that affect students includes assessing the social and environmental influences that contribute to these issues. We live in a society where individuals are held responsible for their own behavior, including problem behavior like substance abuse, bullying, social ostracism, sexually transmitted diseases and violence. Individual responsibility is important. But individuals exist in communities and wider cultures that strongly influence them. The Real Life Issues CI method calls for understanding these social influences and seeing their effects on students. Both social influences and individual decision making may be addressed through the Real Life Issues curriculum.

The problems of adolescent alcohol and tobacco use illustrate the importance of social influences at the national level. National alcohol advertising has long been directed at

youth in the effort to create brand loyalty. One cannot fully understand the problem of binge drinking by high school seniors without examining the advertising campaigns of the alcohol industry which associate drinking with the glamour of professional athletes and other celebrities. The cigarette industry through its history has also targeted youth.

Problems and attitudes of young people are also strongly affected by community norms. A few examples follow: communities with high levels of adult drinking are very likely to have high drinking levels among youth; prevailing community attitudes toward women and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/questioning (LGBTQ) or other minority populations may exert either a strong positive or negative influence on youth behavior; and an unchecked community emphasis on individualism, achievement, and competition might lead to higher incidence of bullying and social ostracism. Teachers need to be aware of the strength and impact of these or other influences on their students. In designing Real Life Issues curriculum and strategies to encourage student prevention and resilience these social influences may be addressed. For example, as part of a social science class students may critically examine the role of alcohol advertising directed at youth and develop a school wide anti-alcohol media campaign. The Real Life Issues curriculum can also provide opportunities for students to consider the negative effects of heavy drinking, violence, bullying, social ostracism, sexually transmitted diseases and other real life issues in their own community and encourage healthy choices.

Understanding real life issues that students confront also includes understanding how social injustices in the society have impacted diverse populations by virtue of their identities. There are many examples of unjust treatment based on differences that apply to diverse populations. For example:

- Students with exceptionalities are stigmatized because of their disabilities
- Gay and lesbian students are bullied and victims of violence at far higher rates than other students because of their sexual orientation
- Sexual assault of female students (most often after heavy drinking) occurs in the context of the continuing unequal treatment of women in the society
- People of color experience consequences of the historic and continuing effects of the injustice of racism in U. S. society, including the all too frequent stigma of reduced expectations for learning
- Low income children experience ostracism and shame on the basis of the low socio-economic position they are born into in U. S. society

Unjust treatment of diverse groups is demoralizing and interferes with learning. Real Life Issues Curriculum Infusion provides the opportunity for teachers, counselors and administrators to examine classroom and school environments and take leadership in providing environments of care and just treatment for all students. It also provides the opportunity to develop curriculum that acknowledges the realities of injustice towards diverse groups as real life issues prevention, student resilience and positive decision making are encouraged.

3. Self Assessment: the teacher's own attitudes and dispositions

An assessment of classroom diversity begins with a teacher's ability to examine his or her own attitudes and dispositions. Students are adept at picking up both verbal and non-verbal cues that indicate how teachers really feel about them, their capacity to learn, and the subject that is being taught. Teachers need to reflect upon and challenge personal attitudes and beliefs, a process that may encourage similar behaviors among students. Below are a few examples of how Real Life Issues CI might provide an opportunity for critical reflection on one's own experience and attitudes towards real life issues and towards teaching diverse student populations.

- Candidates and teachers may reflect on their own experience with issues like bullying, social ostracism or substance abuse. They can recall the behavior of significant adults in relationship to these life problems and think about the kinds of responses from important adults, including teachers, that were (or would have been) most helpful when they were students.
- Bullying and social ostracism by definition involve power. An imbalance of power is inherent in the student/teacher relationship. Candidates and teachers can reflect upon memories or literature in which teachers bullied or ostracized students (or created an environment where this could occur) and ways that they can safeguard against this in their teaching.
- Future and current teachers may assess their attitudes towards students who display problem behaviors. Are such students "written off" or is there a belief that they can learn? How is the belief demonstrated and expressed? What memories or reading can be drawn upon to support the belief that individuals can and do overcome problem behaviors or situations?
- Candidates and teachers may also reflect on their attitudes towards communities that are different from those to which they are accustomed, including

- communities that are different by race, ethnicity and SES. Are they comfortable with such differences? Do they regard diversity as the opportunity to learn about other cultures and teach in the context of respect for such differences? (Gollnick and Chinn, 2002). Does their teaching include minority or alternative perspectives regarding history and current events, real life issues, or other controversial topics?
- A working knowledge of the diversity of the classroom is critical if the design of Real Life Issues CI is to command the student's attention and be perceived as relevant. Candidates and teachers might begin by reflecting upon their own cultural identity and values and how those values have informed personal perspectives and choices. They may then reflect upon significant adults who were sensitive or insensitive to their culture, gender, values, or perspectives and how those adults impacted their learning and attitudes about self. They may consider the implications that these reflections might have upon their future teaching. Are their interactions with students of different races, ethnicities, languages, religions, genders, sexual orientations, ages, exceptionalities, or other backgrounds supportive or discouraging?
 - Effective teachers understand that every student is an individual with the capacity to learn and grow in ways that are unique and creative. Real Life Issues CI provides the opportunity to consider strong social and environmental influences that discourage individuals from reaching their potential and that help produce the problem behaviors that Real Life Issues CI addresses.
 - Future and in-service teachers may also consider the unjust treatment that has been experienced by many diverse populations, resulting in problems that Real Life Issues CI addresses.

B. The Seamless Fit

1. Learning objectives, goals, and standards

Seamless fit refers to incorporating real life issues into k-12 classes consistent with class learning objectives and state learning standards. There are many ways that this can be done. For example:

- Studying the physiology of drugs or of HIV/AIDS can be readily incorporated into high school and middle school science classes.

- Learning about the destructive impact of bullying, social ostracism and substance abuse can be integrated into middle and high school social science classes.
- Computing, analyzing, or graphing survey data on bullying and substance abuse can be easily infused into the curriculum of middle and high school math courses.
- Reading about and discussing the negative effects of substance abuse, violence, bullying and social ostracism, strengthening decision making skills in relation to these problems and role playing mediation, disengagement and resistance skills can be readily integrated into the curriculum of elementary and middle school language arts, health and social studies classes.

Incorporating social/emotional learning standards is also recommended. These include:

- Assisting children to develop awareness and management of their emotions;
- Setting and achieving important personal and academic goals;
- Using social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; and,
- Demonstrating decision making and responsible behaviors to achieve school and life success.

Examples of lessons and lesson plans that seamlessly fit real life issues into k-12 classes are available on the project website (www.neiu.edu/~k12pac).

2. Instructional design considerations

Effective integration of Real Life Issues content into k-12 classes includes involving students as active learners engaged in critically analyzing problems. Instructional methodologies that promote active student learning are widely recommended by educators for general k-12 education but are essential for effective prevention education (Botvin, et. al., 1995). Examples of active learning methodologies include brainstorming, debates, discussion, games, panels, role play, simulation and skits

In addition, effective integration of real life issues involves adopting instructional strategies that consider diversity and differences. For example:

- Some students with exceptionalities require instructional practices that are explicit, systematic and incorporate frequent opportunities for review.
- High achievers do especially well on individual projects, research papers/essays but may need assistance to work effectively in groups, including groups with peers who are not at the same academic level.
- Students from cultures where the individual sees him/herself as part of the group and weighs his behavior in terms of its effect on the group may learn best through group projects and assignments. They may need assistance in completing individual assignments.
- Individuals from cultures where students are expected to show deference to authority and not confront others may do badly in exercises that call for assertiveness. Students from cultures that value confrontation as openness and honesty may do very well with such exercises/instructional methods.
- Minority populations, female students and students with exceptionalities - like all students - should always be equitably treated and, as appropriate, included in projects and leadership positions in class projects and presentations.

3. Referral

When real life issues are integrated into classes, students may disclose personal and family issues in the context of class discussion or privately confide to teachers about these issues. A disclosure by a student may imply both a significant level of need and a significant level of trust in the teacher. In such cases, teachers need to honor this trust by taking care to empathically support the student. A disclosure made during class provides the opportunity for a teacher to model a supportive response to students.

Sometimes the problems that a student might disclose are beyond a teacher's area of expertise. Teachers should be prepared to refer students who would benefit from professional support or from a more objective appraisal of the problem. Teachers need to know the school or district counselor, social workers, or psychologist and should have contact information for community agencies that address common youth problems like substance abuse and mental health, emotional, or behavioral problems. The project website (www.neiu.edu/~k12pac) provides more detailed discussion of responses to students who self disclose.

C. Evidence Based Prevention Strategies

Real Life Issues CI seeks to encourage student resilience and healthy decisions. Current research demonstrates prevention strategies that are most likely to have a positive impact on students.*(see foot note page 16). **In developing prevention curricula it is critically important to incorporate one or more of five research based strategies. These five strategies are:**

1. Engaging students in community prevention efforts

- Students may be encouraged to participate in community anti-drug or anti-violence coalitions.
- Students may be encouraged to participate in national campaigns/programs to provide more resources and justice to low income areas and communities of color.
- Students may engage in anti-smoking and anti-drug campaigns at the national, local and school-wide levels.
- Through service learning students may volunteer to work with community agencies and organizations engaged in treatment and prevention of drugs, violence or high risk sexual behavior. Through such participation they will address real life issues at the community level. In the process students may question and challenge at-risk behavior. They will align themselves with “pro-social” groups and individuals, associations that research indicates reduce the risk that individuals will engage in problem behavior.

2. Promoting pro-social norms

- Students may be encouraged to align with pro-social norms through participation in school based conflict resolution and peer mediation activities.
- They may be encouraged to be involved in school wide prevention campaigns targeting drugs, violence, bullying, social ostracism or at risk sexual behavior.
- In language arts and social science classes they may read, discuss, write about and role play pro-social alternatives to problem behavior.
- Teachers can provide positive role models and reinforce pro-social behavior (Biglan et. al., 2004).

- School administrators can provide clear and enforced anti-drug policies that promote lower levels of substance use by students.

3. Correcting misperceptions of norms

- Research shows that students generally exaggerate the use of drugs by peers, and, in their drinking and drug using behavior conform to the overestimated levels (Perkins and Wechsler, 1996). Affected by the media, students also exaggerate the extent of violence in the society.
- Because behavior of young people is significantly affected by the desire to fit the expectations of their age group (Cosaro and Elder, 1990), research indicates that correcting the misperceived (exaggerated) norm reduces the problem behavior.
- In math classes students can create graphs and tables comparing (mis)perceptions of norms to actual levels of at risk behavior; in social science classes they may examine and probe the harmful effects of the misperceptions.

4. Increasing perceptions of personal risk

- Young people often believe that harm can only come to others. As they are shown that they are at personal risk from use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, from group and individual violence and from at risk sexual practices, research indicates that they many will alter their behavior (Bachman, Johnston and O'Malley, 1998).
- Effective use of this strategy involves linking personal risks with student aspirations. For example, student athletes could learn about the negative impact of smoking and drinking on athletic performance; students with aspirations to higher education could learn about the negative correlation between drinking and grades; young women could learn about the increased risks of sexual assault if they are intoxicated or associating with intoxicated individuals.

5. Developing or enhancing life skills

- Students who have weak decision making skills and have difficulty standing up to peers are more likely to engage in at risk behavior.
- In language arts and social science classes, students may be encouraged to develop social skills including interpersonal communication and refusal skills; this strategy includes role playing as students learn effective ways to handle peers.
- Students may also learn to disengage from and attempt to resolve conflict.

- Students can be taught how to avoid situations involving high risk sexual behavior.
- Students can learn methods to deflate, stand in opposition to, and seek support in the context of bullying and social ostracism.

While all five evidence based prevention strategies can be effectively adapted for use with all populations, classroom diversity should be taken into account in selecting strategies that may be especially appropriate for some classrooms. For example:

- A class with high achieving students may respond especially well to the research based strategy of increasing perceptions of personal risk. These students need to be shown that behaviors like substance abuse put their future achievement in jeopardy.
- If the students' culture emphasizes the value of belonging to the group - to family and peers - an especially promising evidence-based strategy may be to engage groups of students in "pro-social" activity and align individual students with pro-social groups.
- Where the community has a strong history of engagement in social movements opposing injustice, teaching strategies that stress damage to the community – for example the oppressive effects of drugs and violence and HIV/AIDS - and that attempt to engage students in community prevention may be especially effective.

Real Life Issues Curriculum Infusion makes classes more relevant to students and can connect teachers more closely to the lives of the students they teach. It enables teachers to positively impact students' lives by addressing problems that adversely affect students and can damage the learning environment. Real Life Issues CI can also be a very effective way to learn and incorporate knowledge of the social environment, cultural diversity and issues of social justice. How real life issues CI is implemented - the kinds of class curriculum designed or school wide programs developed - is, of course, left to the creativity of engaged educators.

* Footnote: These five prevention strategies respond to three levels of influence on problems of children and adolescents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Flay and Petraitis, 1994).

The first level of influence is the wider **Community**. There are many ways in which the wider community helps produce the problem behavior of young people. For example:

- Research (Currie, 1993) indicates that pressing problems in low income communities may include drug dealing, heavy use of illegal drugs, and gang violence and are largely responses to poverty - to the failure of society to provide sufficient legal opportunity for young people in these neighborhoods.
- A community where there is heavy drinking by adults and parental tolerance of adolescent drinking provides examples and permission that will almost certainly result in high levels of binge drinking by high school students.
- Communities where there is a very heavy focus on achievement, competitive success and status are likely to promote especially high levels of youth competition, cliques and social ostracism.

The second level of influence is **Social Interaction** with significant others including families and peers. Evidence based strategies 2 and 3, building pro-social norms and correcting misperceptions of norms respond to this level of influence. There are many examples of this level of influence.

- A family where a parent has an alcohol or other drug problem is more likely to have children with substance abuse problems than a family without a parent who is abusing drugs.
- Families that lack clear standards against drugs and violence will raise youngsters with more of these problems than families where standards are clear
- Perhaps the greatest single indicator of the likelihood that a youngster will engage in problem behavior is the behavior of the youngster's peers. A strong protective factor against high risk behavior is close association with peers and significant adults, including teachers, who reflect "pro-social norms", that is, they do not engage in and oppose such behavior.
- Most young people want very much to fit in with the expectations of their peers. If they perceive widespread substance use, violence, bullying, cliquishness and high risk sexual behavior they are far more likely to engage in these practices than if they do not perceive such behavior as normative for their age.

The third level of influence is the **Individual**. Evidence based strategies 4 and 5, increasing perception of personal risk and enhancing life skills respond to this level of influence..

- Students who crave approval, have difficulty and lack skills and practice in resisting peer pressure are more likely to be talked into engaging in problem behavior than students who have developed these social skills
- These students also have trouble making decisions and are more likely to decide to engage in problem behavior than students who have developed decision making skills
- Young people who see themselves as personally invulnerable to the negative effects of high risk behavior are more likely to experience the negative consequences of such behavior than students with a more accurate assessment of personal risks.

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