

## **Executive Summary: Life skills education for adolescents in developing countries: What are they and why do they matter?**

Erin Murphy-Graham (University of California Berkeley, Graduate School of Education) & Alison K. Cohen (University of San Francisco, School of Management, Department of Public and Nonprofit Administration)<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview:**

Drawing from a review of theoretical, methodological, and empirical literature on life skills from the fields of education, public health, psychology, economics, and international development, this paper attempts to clarify basic definitional and conceptual issues that relate to life skills education. It addresses the questions:

- What are life skills, and how should they be conceptualized as a component of educational quality?
- What bodies of practice and research evidence converge in the rise of "life skills" programming and increased interest in "life skills" among thought leaders and donors in the field of international development education?

The paper identifies implications from this analysis to be considered in research and interventions that focus on life skills for adolescents, particularly in light of global efforts to improve the quality of education.

### **Findings:**

We identify distinct but overlapping discourse communities that use the term "life skills" that have converged in the field of international development education. A discourse community is a group of people who share a set of basic values, assumptions and goals, and use communication to achieve these goals (Swales, 2009).<sup>1</sup> While there is some overlap in how these discourse communities conceptualize life skills, the goals of each of these are somewhat distinct, and therefore the *ways in which they invoke "life skills" varies*. These discourse communities include the community in which we situate ourselves (and likely many of the readers of this journal), that we call "quality education in developing countries." Two more longstanding discourse communities, which indeed spill into the quality education community, include: a) "prevention and protection," and includes the fields of Public Health and Social Work, and b) "labor market outcomes," that draws from the discipline of Economics.

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Echidna Giving for financial support, Fernanda Chacon for research assistance and Cynthia Lloyd for helpful feedback.

**Table 1. Summary of three discourse communities working in Life Skills for Adolescents**

Discourse community & related disciplines	Goals	Life skills emphasized as...	Examples organizations/ interventions aligned with this discourse community
Prevention and protection (Public Health/Social Work)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life skills for healthy choices</li> <li>• Protection from risky behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision-making</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Resist peer pressure</li> <li>• Self-knowledge and care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life Skills Training program</li> <li>• 10 programs reviewed in “Sexuality Education: a ten country review of school curricula in East and Southern Africa” (UNESCO/UNFPA, 2012)</li> </ul>
Labor market outcomes (Economics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life skills for labor market outcomes including employment, productivity, job quality, entrepreneurship, earnings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Big five” personality domains (conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability)</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Problem-solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Ganar Program (Sports-based life skills training program for youth in 21 countries)</li> <li>• <i>Juventud y Empleo</i> (Youth and Employment program in the Dominican Republic)</li> <li>• Programs reviewed in “Skills Training Programs” (JPAL, 2017)</li> </ul>
Quality education in developing countries (Education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life skills for range of well-being outcomes &amp; meeting day to day challenges and making informed decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Critical thinking</li> <li>• Social and emotional competencies</li> <li>• 21<sup>st</sup> century skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education for girls in five African countries)</li> <li>• Room to Read</li> <li>• Brookings Institution (see Kwauk and Braga, 2018; Winthrop and McGivney, 2016)</li> </ul>

The three discourse communities have different areas of emphasis for their work in life skills, albeit there is some overlap. While these three discourse communities conceptualize and have different outcome targets, there is also convergence around the idea that adolescents need to: 1) **master certain tasks, knowledge and/or information, 2) develop a group of psychosocial competencies, and; 3) have ways of thinking we consider to fall within the category of “critical thinking.”** These are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. Core ideas and areas of overlap in the three discourse communities on life skills for adolescents**

<b>Areas of overlap:</b>	<b>Prevention and protection</b>	<b>Labor market outcomes</b>	<b>Quality education</b>
<b>Mastery of certain tasks/knowledge/information</b>	-HIV/STD prevention -knowledge and proper use of birth control methods -drug/alcohol harm reduction and knowledge -legal information (e.g. legal drinking age)	-specific information or performance tasks related to jobs or entrepreneurship (e.g. carpentry, computer technician, social outreach, sales and marketing)	-range of academic subjects -identification of life goals -ability to identify power structures in society - familiarity with the concepts of gender norms, equality vs. equity
<b>Group of psychosocial competencies</b>	-self-control -communication -assertiveness/refusal -empathy -negotiation -self-confidence/esteem	-regulating emotions -communication -teamwork -perseverance/grit -personal awareness & management	-negotiation -self-confidence -relationships (mentors) -perseverance -empathy -self-reliance -communication (facilitation, presentation skills, “voice”)
<b>Critical thinking/ways of thinking</b>	- critical examination of power structures in society related to gender and social class	-problem solving -decision making -critical creative thinking	- critical thinking and problem solving -need to analyze context and power -goal-orientation -decision making

At a general level, this “common ground” across the three discourse communities (mastery of certain tasks/knowledge/information; group of psychosocial competencies; critical thinking/ways of thinking), might help to create a better starting place for identifying common programmatic goals and assessments.

## Discussion/Implications

Given the limitations in research to date, rigorous evaluations of interventions that work with adolescent girls to build life skills are of critical importance. And while these interventions and evaluations are underway, research on school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) from the United States, Europe, Australia, Latin America and other world regions that have been implementing SEL in schools, may be a very informative body of knowledge to inform best practices in life skills education, given the overlap between SEL and the psychosocial competencies emphasized in life skills education.

Life skills should be part of how quality education is conceptualized, and woven throughout the formal primary and secondary education curriculum, just as is the case with literacy and numeracy. The focus on life skills education, from a capability perspective, should be to develop the capabilities societies and individuals have reason to value, as well as to examine whether or not an individual is “being put in the conditions in which she can pursue her ultimate ends” (Robeyns, 2017:49). Such a perspective will focus not only on the individual acquisition of skills, but on the broader ecological context as enabling or inhibiting individuals to improve their well-being. Those of us who work in quality education community have the opportunity to broaden how life skills are conceptualized and incorporated into education (both in the curriculum and in assessment) as well as to set realistic expectations for what is possible through education.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the term “discourse community” rather than “field” or “discipline” because it also allows to capture the various actors working in educational settings, including non-governmental organizations, local education stakeholders, and the youth, facilitators, and community members that are engaged in life skills education programming around the world.

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### **Introduction: Clarifying the muddy waters of life skills education**

“Life skills” is a popular concept in the field of international development education. A recent review of the literature on “life skills” education found that “there are as many definitions of life skills as there are global education actors and thought leaders” (Dupuy and Halvorsen 2016). Non-governmental organizations and international aid agencies such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and UNICEF embrace the idea that education should prepare individuals both academically and with “skills,” also referred to as “life skills,” “non-cognitive skills,” “character skills” and/or “socio-emotional skills.”<sup>1</sup> Acquiring “skills” is commonly mentioned as a characteristic of quality education (e.g. Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.4; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Sayed and Ahmed, 2015). The meanings and terminologies associated with the concept of life skills vary, and methods for systematically measuring and tracking changes in life skills are not well defined. While “life skills” might be a catchy phrase, specification of the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral learning outcomes is needed, particularly for researchers interested in examining how and if interventions can lead to improvements in people’s lives.

Drawing from a review of theoretical, methodological, and empirical literature on life skills from the fields of education, public health, psychology, economics, and international development, this paper attempts to clarify basic definitional and conceptual issues that relate to life skills education. It addresses the questions:

- What are life skills, and how should they be conceptualized as a component of educational quality?
- What bodies of practice and research evidence converge in the rise of “life skills” programming and increased interest in “life skills” among thought leaders and donors in the field of international development education?

The paper identifies implications from this analysis to be considered in research and interventions that focus on life skills for adolescents, particularly in light of global efforts to improve the quality of education.

Based on our review of existing research and program/institutional documents, we identify distinct but overlapping discourse communities that use the term “life skills” that have converged in the field of international development education. A discourse community is a group of people who share a set of basic values, assumptions and goals, and use communication to

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achieve these goals (Swales, 2009).<sup>i</sup> While there is some overlap in how these discourse communities conceptualize life skills, the goals of each of these are somewhat distinct, and therefore the *ways in which they invoke “life skills” varies*. These discourse communities include the community in which we situate ourselves (and likely many of the readers of this journal), that we call “quality education in developing countries.” Two more longstanding discourse communities, which indeed spill into the quality education community, include: a) “prevention and protection,” and includes the fields of Public Health and Social Work, and b) “labor market outcomes,” that draws from the discipline of Economics. We describe each of these discourse communities in greater detail, as well as the areas of overlap in how they use the term life skills in their interventions and publications.

Figure 1 below illustrates one goal of this paper: to identify areas of convergence that will allow for greater clarity and coherence in how the field of international development education sees life skills as a component of quality education. We do this through a closer examination of “life skills” within the distinct discourse communities that have shaped our understanding of what life skills are and why they matter.



After discussing the findings from our examination of “life skills” in these discourse communities, we conclude by returning to the question of how life skills relates to conceptualizations of quality education, particularly from a capability approach, which explicitly links education with a social justice perspective (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Walker, 2012).

**Conceptual Framework: Life Skills and the Elusive Quality Imperative**

*“A poor quality education is almost like no education. Great progress has been achieved in enrolling children in school around the world. But it is not enough to get children in school. We*

*also need to ensure they learn to read, count and acquire the necessary life skills.*" This message, which appears on the front page of the Global Partnership for Education website<sup>2</sup>, exemplifies how life skills are a key component of the "bottom line" message about educational quality that is currently circulating among key policy actors in the field of international development education. In addition to basic literacy and numeracy, life skills are a key component of education quality. In short, there is consensus that improving the quality of education is a key international goal, but there are many different notions of what constitutes quality education. Among these different conceptualizations of quality education, there is consensus that students should develop life skills. However, there is a great deal of variation in how life skills are conceptualized, defined, and measured.

### *Improving educational quality: A key goal of the international education community*

Improving education quality in developing country contexts has been a longstanding goal. As Alexander (2015) explains, the 2000 Dakar Framework declared quality to be the 'heart of education' and a fundamental determinant of student enrollment, retention, and achievement. Fifteen years later, quality remains a key component of international goals related to education. The Sustainable Development Goals include quality education in Goal 4: "Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All." There are number of accompanying targets/indicators for this goal<sup>ii</sup>, but quality is never clearly defined within the language of the SDGs. Quality indicators for this SDG include learning outcomes measured by assessments of literacy and numeracy, participation rates, completion rates, and characteristics of teachers.<sup>iii</sup> Despite an emphasis on quality in international agreements such as the SDGs, Education for All (EFA), and the Dakar Framework, quality remains elusive (see Alexander, 2015).

International organizations that attempt to influence the international development education discourse have proposed their own conceptual frameworks of quality education (see Barrett et al., 2006 for a review of international literature on the concept of quality in education). For example, UNICEF identifies five key elements of quality education that provide a baseline for monitoring quality: what students bring to learning, environments, content, processes and outcomes (UNICEF, 2010).<sup>iv</sup> The notion of quality as multi-dimensional is consistent with the findings of a research consortium funded by the UK Department for International Development between 2005-2010, which involved a partnership between the University of Bristol and partners in the UK, Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda and South Africa. Researchers from this initiative developed two frameworks that help capture the different dimensions of educational quality. In the framework developed by Tikly and Barrett (2011), quality education is inclusive, relevant and democratic. In Nickel and Lowe's (2010) framework, the "fabric" of education quality is conceptualized as interwoven threads of efficiency, effectiveness, equity, sustainability, responsiveness, relevance and reflexivity (p. 595). While stakeholders continue to debate and refine the components of quality education, there is widespread consensus that quality education extends beyond basic literacy and numeracy. Again, "life skills" are commonly listed as

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.globalpartnership.org/education>

a key component of quality education (Nikel and Lowe, 2010; UNICEF, 2010; Tikly and Barrett, 2011).

*Quality education and life skills: What is the purpose of education from a Capabilities Approach*

One reason why there is a great deal of variability in how life skills are conceived has to do with the underlying conceptual frameworks that inform how different researchers and institutions think about the purpose and role of education in fostering well-being. Walker (2012) and Tikly and Barrett (2010) advance theoretical approaches that are informed by the capability approach, building upon and extending human capital and human rights approaches. From a human capital approach, the rationale for investing in education and improving educational quality lies in contributing to economic growth and poverty alleviation (Walker, 2012; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). This approach, drawing upon the work of labor economists such as Schultz (1970) and particularly present in the policy discourse of the World Bank (Klees et al., 2012) has provided policy makers with the central rationale for investing in education since the 1970s. The human rights approach to quality education emphasizes the need to secure rights to education, rights in education, and rights through education (Unterhalter, 2007; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). One shortcoming of both of these approaches, according to scholars who write from a capability approach, is that they do not adequately provide a basis for analyzing the social and economic forces that shape the experiences and characteristics of learners. In recent decades, a new approach has emerged, referred to as the capability approach.

The capability approach is a new “theoretical framework about wellbeing, freedom to achieve wellbeing, and all the public values in which either of these can play a role, such as development and social justice” (Robeyns, 2017). The focus of the capability approach is not on economic wealth as a measure of well-being, but rather on what people are able to be and do. It allows for 1) “the assessment of individual levels of achieved wellbeing and wellbeing freedom; 2) the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements or institutions, and 3) the design of policies and other forms of social change in society” (Robeyns, 2017:24). Writing from this perspective, Tikly and Barrett (2011) define good quality education as:

Education that provides all learners with the capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context but at the end of the basic education cycle must include at least threshold levels of literacy and numeracy as well as **life skills...** (p.9, emphasis ours).

The notion of quality education that Tikly and Barrett articulate goes beyond a basic definition to identify broad categories associated with well-being (economic productivity, democratic participation, sustainability).

From a capabilities perspective, the purpose of education is to enhance well-being in many domains of life which include physical, mental, and emotional health, economic productivity, democratic participation, and having close relationships and social ties. This framing of the purpose of education allows for a more comprehensive and multi-faceted concept of what “life

skills” are and why they matter. As discussed in greater detail below, the two discourse communities that have a longer history of working with life skills education (life skills for labor market outcomes and life skills for prevention and protection) have a narrower focus on specific domains of well-being (including employment and prevention of disease). In the international development education community, we have the opportunity to draw upon the knowledge base that these discourse communities have established, as well as to advocate for a notion of “life skills” that captures the broader purpose of education in promoting various dimensions of well-being, including social and emotional outcomes and civic participation.

*Basic definitions: Skill as the ability to do something well*

Before proceeding, we explain what we mean by “skill” and “life skills,” although there is a great deal of variability in how these concepts are defined in the studies we review below. The terms “skill” and “competency” are commonly collapsed, but in the past the word “skill” referred to the capabilities to undertake a task in the context of work and the skilled worker was trained (Taylor 2005, 201-18). Skill often focused on manual skills that involved both physical psychomotor abilities and mental cognitive abilities (Winterton et al. 2006). Very briefly defined, “skill” refers to the ability, coming from one’s knowledge, practice, and aptitude, to do something well.

The term “cognitive skills” has traditionally been used to refer to processes that occur in the brain. Cognitive skills are associated with activities such as problem solving, reasoning, thinking, assessing, concluding and include the mental processes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Westera 2011, 77). More recent research has introduced the idea of “embodied cognition” – that the brain is actually part of a broader system that involves perception and action as well (Shapiro, 2007). Performing tasks therefore requires a complex synergy between cognitive and bodily functions. Driving is an example that helps explain this synergy:

In skills training, substantial repetition, which allows learners to gradually improve their performance levels in terms of speed, precision and fluency, is usually involved. As a consequence, skills performance becomes more and more automated: experienced drivers, for example, are hardly aware of the complex cognitive tasks they perform, while their inexperienced counterparts must consciously think about almost any operation they carry out (Westera 2001:77).

Skills are connected with the accomplishment of specific tasks (driving, solving problems) and repetition is often required to improve performance. A combination of perceptual, cognitive and motor skills are involved in the demonstration of skilled performance. Training programs can provide opportunities to gain the knowledge and practice in specific domains that lead to skill mastery.

If we take the idea that a skill is the ability to do something well, then “life skills,” in its broadest and most simplistic definition is ***to be able to do life well***. But more commonly, it refers to skills that help you through everyday tasks and to be active and productive members of a community.

## **Methodology: Review of life skills education**

To better understand how various actors in the field of international development education are engaging with the term “life skills,” we conducted a review to become acquainted with the organizations and scholars that are doing work related to life skills education. The methodology used for this analysis included the following key components:

- Systematic online searches using key words (life skills, non-cognitive skills, skills, adolescent girls) to identify key stakeholders and initiatives in the field at global, regional and national levels;
- Detailed desk review of key global initiatives using websites and other available resources, particularly policy or project documents;
- Rapid desk review of regional or country “life skill” initiatives in specific countries of interest;
- Phone and in-person semi-structured interviews with stakeholders engaged in “life skills” programming and research. A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted across a variety of research/practice contexts.

We also conducted a review of the empirical literature on life skills, using Google Scholar, and reviewed the studies identified. We chose Google Scholar since it draws upon articles from all disciplines, as opposed to other databases that are discipline-specific (e.g., PsycInfo, PubMed). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the literature on life skills, this seemed particularly important. We first searched for all systematic reviews that were published and related to life skills. We found only 2 systematic reviews, both of which were on more constrained subsets of articles that were adjacent to but not comprehensive of our interests.

As a next step, we conducted our own review of all articles that mentioned “life skills,” adolescent, and girls in the title, with variations in the vocabulary (e.g., adolescence, girl, female) and identified 28 unique results in Google Scholar. We focused just on those with these words in the title to get an illustration of the studies most focused on this topic in this population. (This search was conducted on March 19, 2018.). Finally, we also did a purposive search of articles that reported on empirical studies of life skills to get a broader sense of the diversity of the field. This search used similar terms to the more constrained search but less restricted (e.g., just “life skills” without also requiring mentions of adolescent girls) and also took advantage of Google Scholar features such as “related articles” to more deeply explore the different dimensions of the body of literature.

## **Findings: What are skills and why do they matter for adolescent girls’ education?**

Our review and analysis suggests three converging bodies of research and practice that have resulted in the rise of “life skills” education programming. The first two have a longer

history, and draw upon the discipline of psychology. The first includes work in the field of prevention science, which broadly sees life skills as important for preventing drug and alcohol use, as well as preventing sexually transmitted diseases (particularly HIV), early pregnancy, and other risky behaviors. The second is the discourse community that has been influenced by the work of Nobel-prize winning economist James Heckman, who with co-authors, has argued that the predictive power of “skills” rivals that of cognitive skills, and so interventions should focus on fostering such skills. Life skills are *instrumental* to “promoting lifetime success” particularly in the labor market (Kautz et. al 2014). This perspective is consistent with the human capital theory, discussed earlier. Finally, a third community focuses on life skills because they see getting youth into school as an insufficient step in transforming lives and communities – they point to the low quality of formal schooling in developing countries (the “learning crisis”), and argue that particularly for girls, schooling is inadequate for ensuring that youth will have lives characterized by choice and empowerment. Table 1 below summarizes these three discourse communities, and each are described in greater detail below.

**Table 1. Summary of three discourse communities working in Life Skills**

Discourse community & related disciplines	Goals	Life skills emphasized as...	Examples organizations/ interventions aligned with this discourse community
Prevention and protection (Public Health/Social Work)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life skills for healthy choices</li> <li>• Protection from risky behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision-making</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Resist peer pressure</li> <li>• Self-knowledge and care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life Skills Training program</li> <li>• 10 programs reviewed in “Sexuality Education: a ten country review of school curricula in East and Southern Africa” (UNESCO/UNFPA, 2012)</li> </ul>
Labor market outcomes (Economics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life skills for labor market outcomes including employment, productivity, job quality, entrepreneurship, earnings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Big five” personality domains (conscientiousness, openness, extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability)</li> <li>• Teamwork</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Problem-solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Ganar Program (Sports-based life skills training program for youth in 21 countries)</li> <li>• <i>Juventud y Empleo</i> (Youth and Employment program in the Dominican Republic)</li> <li>• Programs reviewed in “Skills Training</li> </ul>

			Programs” (JPAL, 2017)
Quality education (Education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life skills for range of well-being outcomes &amp; meeting day to day challenges and making informed decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership</li> <li>Communication</li> <li>Critical thinking</li> <li>Social and emotional competencies</li> <li>21<sup>st</sup> century skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education for girls in five African countries)</li> <li>Room to Read</li> <li>Brookings Institution (see Kwauk and Braga, 2018; Winthrop and McGivney, 2016)</li> </ul>

The three discourse communities have different areas of emphasis for their work in life skills, albeit there is some overlap. While these three discourse communities conceptualize and have different outcome targets, there is also convergence around the idea that adolescents need to: **1) master certain tasks, knowledge and/or information, 2) develop a group of psychosocial competencies, and; 3) have ways of thinking we consider to fall within the category of “critical thinking.”** Table 2 summarizes these areas of convergence, and each of these discourse communities is described in greater detail in the sections that follow.

**Table 2. Core ideas and areas of overlap in the three discourse communities**

Areas of overlap:	Prevention and protection	Labor market outcomes	Quality education
<b>Mastery of certain tasks/knowledge/information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-HIV/STD prevention</li> <li>-knowledge and proper use of birth control methods</li> <li>-drug/alcohol harm reduction and knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-specific information or performance tasks related to jobs or entrepreneurship (e.g. carpentry, computer technician, social outreach, sales and marketing)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-range of academic subjects</li> <li>-identification of life goals</li> <li>-ability to identify power structures in society</li> <li>- familiarity with the concepts of gender norms, equality vs. equity</li> </ul>

	-legal information (e.g. legal drinking age)		
<b>Group of psychosocial competencies</b>	-self-control -communication -assertiveness/refusal -empathy -negotiation -self-confidence/esteem	-regulating emotions -communication -teamwork -perseverance/grit -personal awareness & management	-negotiation -self-confidence -relationships (mentors) -perseverance -empathy -self-reliance -communication (facilitation, presentation skills, "voice")
<b>Critical thinking/ways of thinking</b>	- critical examination of power structures in society related to gender and social class	-problem solving -decision making -critical creative thinking	- critical thinking and problem solving -need to analyze context and power -goal-orientation -decision making

At a general level, this “common ground” across the three discourse communities (mastery of certain tasks/knowledge/information; group of psychosocial competencies; critical thinking/ways of thinking), might help to create a better starting place for identifying common programmatic goals and assessments. What follows is a more detailed description of each of these discourse communities including a brief discussion of how life skills are conceptualized and the evidence of the effectiveness of education programs that emphasize life skills.

### 1. Prevention science and life skills

In “prevention” education programs (drugs, tobacco, alcohol, violence, teenage sex, pregnancy, other risky behavior), life skills have a long history of prominent placement. One of the leading “life skills” programs in this field, called “Life Skills Training,” (LST) began in the 1970s under the leadership of Dr. Gilbert Botvin. Botvin was trained as a clinical and developmental psychologist at Columbia University, and his first job was with the American Health Foundation, which was at the cutting edge of the field that eventually became known as preventative medicine. He became interested in risk reduction and behavioral interventions that might modify or enrich the development or risk factors. Convinced that major social and psychological factors promote the initiation of substance use and other risky behaviors, he developed a program he eventually called “life skills” that had to do with promoting overall competency and more effective adolescent development, a “more comprehensive approach targeting individual risk

factors” (Interview with Gilbert Botvin). LST is perhaps the best known drug prevention program, and has been used with youth in all 50 states and territories of the USA, and it has been used in 39 countries across all six habited continents. LST has also demonstrated beneficial outcomes in over 35 rigorous evaluation studies (see <http://lifeskillstraining.com/evaluation.php>).

The LST program consists of three major components that “cover the critical domains found to promote drug use...Research has shown that students who develop skills in these three domains are far less likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors” (Life Skills Training Program Overview, 2018). The three components are drug resistance skills, personal self-management skills, and general social skills. Given the goals of this program, the empirical work on LST emphasizes outcomes of drinking, cigarette, and drug use, rather than measuring the “life skills” as outcome variables. Different variations of the curriculum have been tested (the standard curriculum lasts 15 weeks and is implemented in schools). Adaptations to different contexts have also been created.

Prevention programs that targeted the HIV/AIDS epidemic followed this model, often linking “life skills” training with content knowledge about how to prevent disease transmission (similar to linking content knowledge about tobacco, alcohol and drugs in LST). As Boler and Aggleton (2005) explain, in the early 1990s, “when it became apparent that many young people (and adults) were not going to change their sexual behavior merely because they were told that they should, the international development community – particularly UNICEF- rallied around the idea of teaching life skills as part of HIV/AIDS education” (p.1). The idea had its roots in the same body of scholarship from North America and European psychology, but not necessarily referencing prevention, but rather to include the qualities of successful leadership. Over time, and in an attempt to make the skills more appealing to governments and communities, the term life skills began to encompass an “ever-increasing level of generic skills,” including communicating, listening carefully, empathy-building, and income-generation. In 2005, Boler and Aggleton argued that claims regarding the role of these life skills in preventing HIV were made largely with no evidence (particularly with regards to sexual behavior).

A review of the effects and effectiveness of Life Skills Education for HIV prevention in young people published in 2008 (Yankah and Aggleton, 2008) found that most interventions to prevent HIV included a life skills component, and that programs worked best to positively influence knowledge, attitudes, intentions, skills and abilities. However, life skills programs rarely produced consistent effects on sexual behavior or biological outcomes (the contraction of STDs). (This finding appears to remain true for more recent studies, such as Dunbar et al., 2010.) Similar to the LST studies, these evaluations focus on behavioral outcomes and so we can learn little about the ways in which the programs impact life skills (as outcomes in and of themselves) and if changes in life skills are associated with any beneficial long-term outcomes (such as egalitarian intimate relationships) over time.

Despite a lack of documented impact of life skills training programs to prevent HIV, a “regional curriculum scan” conducted in 2011 (commissioned by UNESCO and UNFPA and authored by the Population Council) found that some form of “skills” was included in the curricula of 10 African countries. However, the content was often deemed “weak”, particularly in terms of fostering critical thinking skills and advocacy skills. A subsequent review (Haberland, 2015) of rigorous evaluations of sexuality and HIV education programs reveals that most of the programs that met the review criteria had “skills” as a component of their curricula. However, what the

review found was that the programs that addressed gender and power were five times more likely to be effective than those that did not. This points to the idea that the skill of “critical thinking about gender and power” might be among the most important life skills for the prevention of HIV and changing sexual behavior.

**2. Skills as an instrument to labor market productivity and other beneficial outcomes:  
Economics literature on skills**

In a recently published paper “Does education strengthen the life skills of adolescents?” the “elevator pitch” is “life skills, sometimes referred to as noncognitive skills or personality traits (e.g. conscientiousness or locus of control – the belief to influence events and their outcomes), affect labor market productivity” (Schurer, 2017). This paper is consistent with the discourse community of economists, who, drawing upon the work of personality psychologists, explore the relationship between “skills” and later life outcomes. They also seek to understand which traits are malleable through educational interventions.

The work of James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in economics and Professor at the University of Chicago, and his coauthors on skills has allowed the concept to gain heft but unfortunately has not helped provide conceptual clarity. This is in part because Heckman’s own use of the term has evolved over time. In earlier publications, Heckman referred to “non-cognitive” skills (Heckman et al. 2006, 411-82). In a much-cited paper published by the National Bureau of Economics Research, Heckman and his co-author Tim Kautz use the term “character skills” (2013). In an OECD report that draws upon this 2013 paper, the authors revert to the term “non-cognitive” (Kautz et al. 2014). In his 2016 paper published in the journal *Human Development and Capabilities*, he and his co-author Chase Corbin use the term “skills” without a modifier (Heckman and Corbin, 2016). While the specific wording of his argument has evolved, the crux of Heckman’s message is that the notion of “skill” is a useful one because “skill suggests that these attributes can be learned...all attributes can be shaped” (Heckman and Kautz 2013; emphasis added). Heckman has also been consistent in his message regarding the inadequacy of outdated modes of measuring what might predict long-term life outcomes, namely IQ and other achievement tests.<sup>3</sup> Interventions must also target “character skills” valued in the labor market, in school and other domains (Heckman and Kautz 2013).

Given the widespread popularity and diffusion of these ideas, a closer examination of how Heckman and his coauthors conceptualize “skills” is warranted. Table 3 below lists ways in which Heckman and coauthors have explained and written about skills.

**Table 3: Heckman and coauthors’ conceptualizations of “skills”**

	<b>Skills are:</b>
Heckman and Kautz (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Character skills are universally valued across all cultures and societies (p. 4)</li> <li>• Skills enable people. They are capacities to function. Greater levels of skill foster social inclusion and create social well-being. Skills give agency to people to shape their lives in the present and to create future skills (p. 5).</li> <li>• Character skills include perseverance (“grit”), self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem and self-efficacy, resilience to adversity, openness to new experience,</li> </ul>

	empathy, humility, tolerance of diverse opinions and the ability to engage productively in society (p. 6).
Heckman and Corbin (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills – broadly defined – are major sources of well-being and flourishing in society (p. 344).</li> <li>• The current literature on the economics of human development recognizes the multiplicity of skills that characterize human diversity and contribute to creating flourishing lives (343).</li> <li>• Personality skills – that is “soft skills” such as trust, altruism, reciprocity, perseverance, attention, motivation, self-confidence, and personal health – are also important (p. 345).</li> <li>• Health and mental health are essential skills (p.345).</li> </ul>

Heckman and his coauthors use “skill” as the broadest possible category – essentially to capture anything important for personal and social well-being. In Heckman and Kautz (2013), greater attention is given to the field of psychology and its “relatively well-accepted” taxonomy of descriptors or temperament attributes of personality. These are the “Big Five” domains including conscientiousness, openness to new experience, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism/emotional stability.<sup>4</sup> From these traits, Heckman and Kautz (drawing upon a table adapted from psychologists John and Srivastava) list a number of facets, related skills, and “analogous childhood temperament skills” (2013, 12). However, they are careful not to use the label “traits” as they believe that this term signifies a sense of “permanence and possibly also of heritability” (Heckman and Kautz 2013, 10).

Heckman and Kautz explain that they use the term skills rather than traits because “skills suggests that these attributes can be learned, both cognitive and character skills can change and *be changed* over the course of the lifecycle” (2013, 10; emphasis added). While research in psychology does indicate that personality traits change throughout the lifecycle,<sup>5</sup> the claim Heckman and Kautz make regarding how traits can “be changed” (through interventions) is debatable. How and why personality traits change and the degree to which they can change through interventions over time is an active research area in the field of psychology.

Heckman’s work is cited by a number of donor agencies that work in the “life skills” area – including the World Bank – who published a brief entitled, “Life skills: What are they, why do they matter, and how are they taught?” in 2013. In this brief, they draw heavily from Heckman’s work as well as other economists who write from a human capital perspective. In short, life skills matter because they have positive implications for health, education, and labor market outcomes.

A recent review of interventions to strengthen the life skills of adolescents found that there is a small evidence base, and so “general conclusions” are not possible. Measurement of life skills has also proven very difficult, which raises concerns regarding the validity of the findings (Schurer, 2017). Despite these findings, there is some consensus that adolescence offers a window of opportunity to teach life skills through educational interventions, however, compared with early-childhood programs, the evidence on adolescent programs is less abundant (Heckman and Kautz, 2013).

### 3. Quality education and life skills (especially for girls)

The third discourse community identified, and again where we situate ourselves, has emphasized life skills education in part due to growing recognition that children and adolescents in developing countries do not always benefit from extended years of schooling in terms of what they are learning. Referred to as the “learning crisis” – the critique is that the curriculum is highly academic and that it is disconnected from what adolescents need to learn to do everyday tasks and engage in community life. Furthermore, what the curriculum does include an emphasis on, namely basic literacy and numeracy, also have abysmal outcomes. This recognition and its perceived importance spurred the publication of a World Bank World Development Report that is entitled “Learning to Realize Education’s Promise” and that begins with an overview of the dimensions of the learning crisis (World Bank, 2018).

Policy statements and documents from the World Bank, blogs by Washington think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, and commissioned research programs such as DFID’s EdQual or the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (RLO) attempt to grapple with how to improve teaching and learning in formal schools. Against this backdrop, international education actors including philanthropic foundations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and local and international non-governmental organizations have launched what is likely to be thousands of non-formal education programs that focus on life skills (a review of programs in just three countries identified 103 programs for adolescent girls) (Dupuy et al, 2018). These programs are intended to fill the void that is left by poor quality schools by serving children and adolescents who are enrolled in school with afterschool or summer programs. Additionally, they serve children and adolescents who never attended or have dropped out of school (potentially, at least in part, due to low quality).

*Life skills are an especially important component of quality education for adolescent girls*

A key priority that has emerged for international donors and institutions in the field of international development education is life skills for adolescent girls. Along with improving educational quality, expanding access to education for girls and promoting gender equality within education are other key development priorities, as evidenced by SDG 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Quality education, particularly life skills education, has been touted as a mechanism to achieve the empowerment of girls and women. While some progress has been made in terms of increasing girls’ enrollment in primary and secondary school, a review of data from 43 countries finds that while some countries evidence gender parity in enrollment, overall enrollment in secondary education is low for girls in many poor countries (Psaki et al, 2018). Additionally, girls have fewer opportunities to participate in the labor market once they complete their schooling. Cultural norms may limit their mobility once they reach puberty. In short, while life skills are important for both boys and girls, they do not begin life at the same “starting line” – girls are at a disadvantage and have more constraints on their choice set. For these reasons, programs have targeted girls in communities in where formal schools are weak or non-existent and patriarchal norms disadvantage girls. Greater clarity regarding life skills education may be particularly important for adolescent girls because they are the intended beneficiaries of these interventions.

Another reason why life skills education for adolescent girls has gained prominence is because advocates for girls' access to education have increasingly come to realize that the "get them into school and all will be well" was a faulty assumption (as discussed by Sahni, 2017, in her account of creating an innovative school for girls in India). For many years, scholars and international organizations such as CARE and Plan International emphasized girls and women's empowerment through education. Getting girls into school, through expanded access that often involved scholarships and cash transfers, was just the first step of the empowerment process. The hope was, and continues to be, that education can be a site to challenge the gender norms that have caused girls' under representation in the system. However, empowering educational experiences for girls within the formal system are rare (see Murphy-Graham and Lloyd, 2016 for a review of empowering education for adolescent girls).

Some organizations that emphasize life skills education for girls often simultaneously emphasize girls' empowerment. However, a discursive shift seems to have taken place whereby "life skills" has become the focal point for organizations working with girls. These include organizations such as Advancing Girls' Education, BRAC, CAMFED, CARE, Plan International, Room to Read, and Save the Children. It is possible that "life skills" is a more palatable term for interventions because they do not explicitly include the word "power" and may therefore seem less radical or politically motivated. Engaging the term "life skills" may allow these organizations to more effectively engage ministries of education, who may be familiar and supportive of life skills programming because it is already a part of their HIV/AIDS prevention or technical and vocational training curriculum (mentioned in our discussion of the first and second discourse communities). Likewise, using the term "life skills" for girls rather than empowerment may enable NGOs to better forge allegiances with stakeholders familiar with labor market training programs (such as the business community).

An earlier review of programs to empower adolescent girls identified four competencies for empowerment that appeared across interventions. These included developing critical ways of thinking and learning, personal competencies, social competencies, and productive competencies (Murphy-Graham and Lloyd, 2016). These same categories are often included in conceptualizations of life skills for adolescent girls. In addition to our Table 1 above, Kwauk and Braga (2017) and Dupuy et al. (2018) list organizations and their life skills definitions – common are an emphasis on critical thinking (sometimes called cognitive skills), personal skills, and interpersonal skills (including community living). However, as Kwauk and Braga (2017) point out, at the level of life skills education programming for girls, practitioners have often limited their scope to quite specific outcomes, such as sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, or labor market outcomes (and our identification of these as distinct discourse communities clarifies why this is the case). As such, life skills programming and its focus on communication, negotiation, self-efficacy, and self-esteem focuses on imparting technical knowledge and does not enable girls to act differently in her everyday life in her home and community (Kwauk and Braga, 2017):

A narrow focus on skills, together with conflating knowledge as skills, can lead to problems in program, curriculum, and policy design, implementation, and assessment. In particular: misaligned interventions and outcomes; misidentified target skills; overlooked building blocks and/or strategic knowledge; ineffective

pedagogy or program delivery; problems with measurement; and overstated claims about an intervention or the importance of specific skills (p.6).

Kwauk and Braga further point out that life skills programs focus on impacts including risk for substance abuse, reduced risky sexual behavior, and mindset change, there is too little attention to whether or not life skills education leads to “*transformative* change between the individual girl and her social, political, and economic environment. It also does not address whether or how such change for a girl might combine into broader collective action that transforms existing social norms, behaviors, and power relations that have systematically placed girls and women at a disadvantage” (Kwauk and Braga, 2017:7). They propose a reconceptualization of life skills as competencies that are a mix of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive skills. Coupled with knowledge, and attitudes, these constitute a set of competencies (life skills) that enable youth to function, thrive, and adapt in their everyday lives (p.5). Their proposal is to more explicitly link or to “translate” girls’ life skills education to social change. What Kwauk and Braga (2017) are in part responding to is the disjuncture in the three discourse communities identified. The first two discourse communities are invoking “life skills” with a narrower set of outcome measures in mind. Kwauk and Braga, however, are connected with the discourse community concerned with quality education and they advocate for a much broader conceptualization that is linked to social transformation.

### **The evidence regarding life skills education**

Overall there is very little convincing evidence to date that interventions have positive effects on life skills conceptualized as a *combination of* knowledge and information, psychosocial competencies, and critical ways of thinking. This is again a reflection of the nature of the discourse communities that have focused on life skills to date, particularly the prevention and labor market outcomes discourse communities. Because their outcomes of interest are not *life skills* per se, but rather they have employed life skills-based interventions as a means to ultimate ends or outcomes (labor market outcomes, HIV/STD/substance use prevention). We therefore have a great deal to learn about life skills as an outcome of interest in and of themselves, as a way to conceptualize and assess the quality of education. A review of life skills education programs found that, while there are a very small number of rigorous evaluations of life skills programs benefitting young women, they “generally positively influence psycho-social and attitudinal outcomes, health and relationships. They can help to prevent early marriage and they help to develop important economic and cognitive skills” (Dupuy et al, 2018).

Our review of empirical findings suggests that programs often target very specific outcomes, rather than a comprehensive range of life skills. Because there are so many outcomes of interest in “life skills” education programs, determining their effectiveness is a tricky undertaking. A narrative systematic review of life skills education (Nasheeda et al, 2018) reviews twenty-five studies (that met their inclusion criteria) in both developed and developing countries.<sup>v</sup> This review concludes that the totality of evidence for the studies reviewed delivers “encouraging prospects for improving life skills education programs.” Their conclusion is similar to Kwauk and Braga’s (2017) observation that studies tend to focus on “life skills components”

as opposed to “understanding what knowledge, skills and attitudes adolescents require in order for positive behavior change to occur” (2018:13).

In addition to identifying published reviews, we also conducted our own review of all articles that mentioned “life skills,” adolescent, and girls in the title, with variations in the vocabulary (e.g., adolescence, girl, female) and identified 28 unique results in Google Scholar. For the purpose of this paper, we focused on the peer-reviewed sources (either academic publications or government reports (n=13) that reported on life skills related to adolescent girls. Most considered the effect of a life skills intervention, but some only looked at associations between life skills and demographic characteristics (e.g., Choudhary, 2015). In examining these 13 studies more carefully, we eliminated two studies that did not specify the outcome of interest (Choudhary et al., 2012; Choudhary & Gulati, 2013). Two studies evaluating Life Skills programming in India (Diptty & Bino, 2017; Pathania & Chopra, 2017) mentioned what sounded on the surface like an intriguing “Life skills assessment scale.” In Diptty and Bino’s study, they cite the source of that scale as “Vranda, 2009” however, they do not include that citation in their bibliography. We were unable to locate the scale. Pathania and Chopra seem to be using a similar scale in their study, and they also do not include the scale citation. Both of these studies report outcomes on decision making, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, self-esteem, critical thinking, creating thinking, problem solving, empathy, and stress management. Given the difficulty of measuring any one of these categories, we decided to eliminate these two studies from our review because we could not verify the validity of the outcome measures. We eliminated one additional study that focused on increasing physical activity through life skills education and did not include any outcomes that we conceptualize as life skills.

This left 8 studies which we have summarized in Table 4.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the studies are from the prevention discourse community, with just two focusing on dimensions of quality education and one on labor market outcomes. Psychological competencies were the most common outcome to focus on (6 of the 8), five studies reported outcomes related to knowledge and information, and none examined critical ways of thinking. The interventions varied widely in terms of emphasis; there were some that focused on reproductive health and others that focused on psychological outcomes. The evaluations of the interventions varied in rigor, with quality being quite poor in many cases. Evidence of intervention effectiveness was limited. The “totality” of evidence from these studies is not particularly compelling, since so many were short-term in nature and focused on changes in knowledge or information. There is some indication of positive impact on psychological or emotional distress.

There are two very promising impact evaluations of life skills programming in progress. The Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program (Hewett et al., 2017) evaluation includes a number of validated scales/measures of self-efficacy, gender-normative beliefs, financial literacy, knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, as well as other outcomes of interest (including behavioral and biological outcomes). In addition to this study, the findings from a randomized control trial of the girls’ education and life skills program implemented by Room to Read in India includes a life skills assessment tool that includes self-reporting scales and activity-based tasks.

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<sup>3</sup> Two of these seem to be the same study as they have the same second author, reporting on different but related scales – a psychological distress scale and an emotional distress scale (positive and negative affect schedule) (Hita & Kumar, 2017; Ghasemian & Kumar, 2017).

These two studies will be of great interest to the international development education community, results should be forthcoming in the next two years.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to gain a clearer understanding of how life skills education has been conceptualized, given its popularity in international development education. We identified three distinct discourse communities that are concerned with life skills education. To recap, these are: 1) “prevention and protection” which includes the fields of public health and social work, 2) “labor market outcomes” which draws from the discipline of economics, and 3) “quality education” which draws primarily from research in education and gender studies. We identify three areas of synergy among these distinct communities which include mastering specific tasks, and gaining access to information and knowledge; development of a set of psychosocial competencies; and fostering critical ways of thinking.

The identification of these synergies should not be considered a new framework or conceptualization of life skills – it is really intended to provide a “least common denominator” of sorts across these discourse communities. Focusing only on what is common across these discourse communities may be overly reductive. At the same time, a common framework or shared way of thinking about life skills that is multi-dimensional will be necessary to advance research and practice in the field. A number of frameworks already exist (such as Kwauk and Braga, 2017; UNICEF, 2017; WHO, 2001). Hopefully, there will be future opportunities for the stakeholders involved in life skills education – including youth, practitioners, implementing and donor agencies, and researchers – to continue to engage in consultation around how to conceptualize life skills education in research and practice.

This consultation may benefit from returning to the larger question of the purpose of education, and what quality education entails, as discussed earlier in this paper. Again, widespread agreement that education must cultivate at a bare minimum basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills. As a paradigm concerned with social justice, the capability approach “encompasses and goes beyond” the rationale provided by human capital and human rights approaches to policy emphasis on quality education (Tikly and Barrett, 2011:3). Indeed, when Tikly and Barrett advanced a framework of education quality informed by a capability approach, they stated that the approach was “still in its infancy” and had “a limited currency outside of academia” (2011:8). This no longer seems to be the case. Research and policy statements informed by the capability approach have blossomed over the last decade. For example, even the World Bank, traditionally epitomizing a human capital perspective, seems to have shifted its language to incorporate capabilities. The opening lines of the 2018 World Development Report emphasize education and capabilities: “Education is a basic human right, and it is central to **unlocking human capabilities**” (2018:38).

One distinguishing feature of the capability approach that may prove useful to the thinking about life skills education is the recognition of the ultimate worth of education in its own right (Tikly and Barrett, 2011:7; Nussbaum, 2000). As Unterhalter (2007) explains, from a capability perspective the goals of education include the ways in which being educated supports what each and every person has reason to value. In the literature on life skills, more often than not, these are conceptualized as a means to an end. Life skills training has other goals as ends,

including improving employment, reducing pregnancy and marriage, and even keeping youth engaged in school. While indeed there is emerging evidence to support the fostering of life skills as a means to other outcomes of interest, it is also important to see life skills as having “ultimate value” even if they do not have strong causal linkages with outcomes typically measured such as fertility, earnings, or total years of schooling (Robeyns, 2017:54). For example, psychosocial competencies might foster richer social relationships. Critical ways of thinking might lead to transformation of gender norms or other manifestations of inequality. These are not traditionally measured in life skills education evaluations, and future research would benefit from considering life skills as both predictors of outcomes and outcomes in their own right. Studies should also have a longer time frame to better understand the ways in which life skills education can influence adolescent development trajectories.

Given the limitations in research to date, rigorous evaluations of interventions that work with adolescent girls to build life skills are of critical importance. And while these interventions and evaluations are underway, research on school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) from the United States, Europe, Australia, Latin America and other world regions that have been implementing SEL in schools, may be a very informative body of knowledge to inform best practices in life skills education, given the overlap between SEL and the psychosocial competencies emphasized in life skills education. A valuable resource is the Taxonomy Project, based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which has created an online platform that allows users to navigate the field of SEL and includes a number of program evaluations.

Finally, it is also important to recognize that while life skills have both instrumental value and ultimate value, the contexts are where many life skills programs are implemented are complicated. An important article (Boler and Aggleton, 2004), written almost 15 years ago, very succinctly captures the emerging critique of life skills education framing that has also been made in the United States (see Rose, 2014). This critique was directed toward the field of HIV/AIDS prevention, but seems applicable across the discourse communities that are involved in life skills education today. They point out that the assumption underlying much life skills education is that a person is somehow lacking certain skills (also called a deficit approach). The idea is that if you give them these skills, things will get better. However, “young people live in a web of social and cultural interactions which frame their decisions and actions” (Boler and Aggleton, 2004:8). This web is commonly referred to as a “social-ecological model” (Center for Disease Control, 2018) or an “ecological framework” (WHO, 2018), and draws from the work of the developmental psychologist Urie Broffebrenner (1979). Boler and Aggleton (2004) argue that, “if contexts are not taken seriously, educators risk speaking to a fictional world. In the hands of poorly prepared and hard-pressed teachers, life skills education appears to offer an instant one size fits all panacea, but complex problems require complex solutions” (p. 7). While the aspirational goal of any intervention is to improve well-being indicators, the ones that are traditionally measured are influenced by a complex web of factors, and any single intervention will be hard-pressed to have a significant impact. This is particularly important when considering that many life skills programs are short term and may only work with adolescents in sessions lasting a few hours a week for a set number of weeks (see Table 4 for examples).

That does not mean, however, that programs should stop promoting life skills for adolescents. These should be part of how quality education is conceptualized, and woven throughout the formal primary and secondary education curriculum, just as is the case with

literacy and numeracy. The focus on life skills education, from a capability perspective, should be to develop the capabilities societies and individuals have reason to value, as well as to examine whether or not an individual is “being put in the conditions in which she can pursue her ultimate ends” (Robeyns, 2017:49). Such a perspective will focus not only on the individual acquisition of skills, but on the broader ecological context as enabling or inhibiting individuals to improve their well-being. Those of us who work in quality education community have the opportunity to broaden how life skills are conceptualized and incorporated into education (both in the curriculum and in assessment) as well as to set realistic expectations for what is possible through education.

We conclude with a note of caution: we are not optimistic that an emphasis on “life skills” will adequately capture the imperative to of the capabilities approach to “advance justice or reduce injustice in the world” (Sen, 2009 quoted in Walker, 2012: 392). Time and additional research will allow for an investigation of whether or not the discursive shift away from “empowerment” toward the more neutral “life skills” will ultimately dampen the transformative nature of educational programs for adolescents. In the meantime, there is keen interest in life skills education for adolescent girls and boys from diverse disciplines and locations around the globe. We hope this analysis of life skills education will advance research and understanding in developing, implementing, and evaluating high-quality interventions that are adapted to local contexts to best support adolescent girls and boys, especially in developing countries, to live life well.

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