

Critical Elements for Life Skills Transaction: Demystifying the Concepts



To the 22nd century teachers who will surely wonder what all the fuss was about and why it was so hard for everyone in the 21st century to do the obvious
Improvised quote from Bernie and Charles (Board members of Partnership for 21st century skills)

Life Skills Working Group
UNICEF India Education Programme
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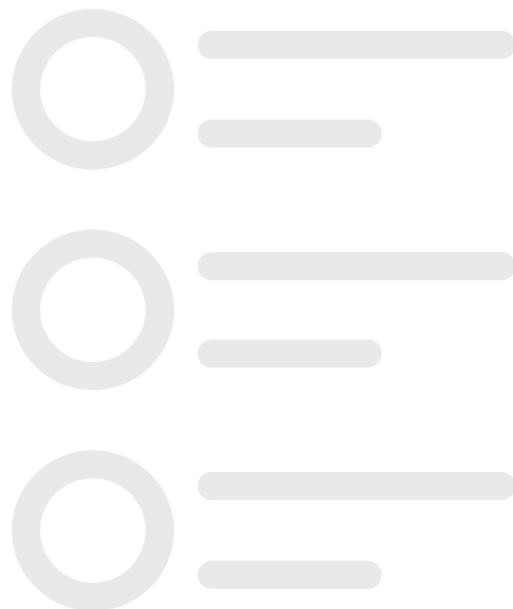
Objective

The objective of this paper is to clarify the confusion that often arise between life skills 'content focus' and life skills 'skills focus'; explaining the ways by which life skills can be developed in school and out of school spaces through any subject content.



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01

Context



Change is pervasive, and the world is experiencing it exponentially across social, political, physical and economic domains. To meet the demands that emanate from this change a set of capabilities, caliber, responsibilities and skills are needed to be nurtured across generations that include children from diverse communities, gender, disadvantaged and multilingual. It is universally accepted that education is the means and process that has a potential to meet this high expectation. Learning at school must change to accommodate and deal with a changing world. To meet the demands of this dynamic world, there is now a greater acceptability and emphasis around the need for life skills in education; more than ever before.

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF LIFE SKILLS



UNICEF India's comprehensive life skills framework defines life skills as a "set of abilities, attitudes and socio-emotional competencies that enable individuals to learn, make informed decisions and exercise rights to lead a healthy and productive life and subsequently become agents of change"¹. Based on Delors' four pillars of education as its foundation, it categorizes life skills into four interdependent domains of - learning, employability, citizenship and empowerment. This framework is useful to provide a guided approach to the interventions in the life skills arena, that are implemented through any sector (education, health, nutrition, child protection, and others).

A growing body of evidence² suggests that successful performance in school, work and life must be supported by a wide range of abilities, attitudes and socio-emotional competencies, the development of which should be fostered by the education system that go beyond traditional literacy and numeracy skills or confined to subject matter alone. Like skills are an aspect of quality education so the conversation around life skills in education needs to focus on the how – how learning is transacted so the children's abilities, attitudes and socio-emotional competencies are developed.

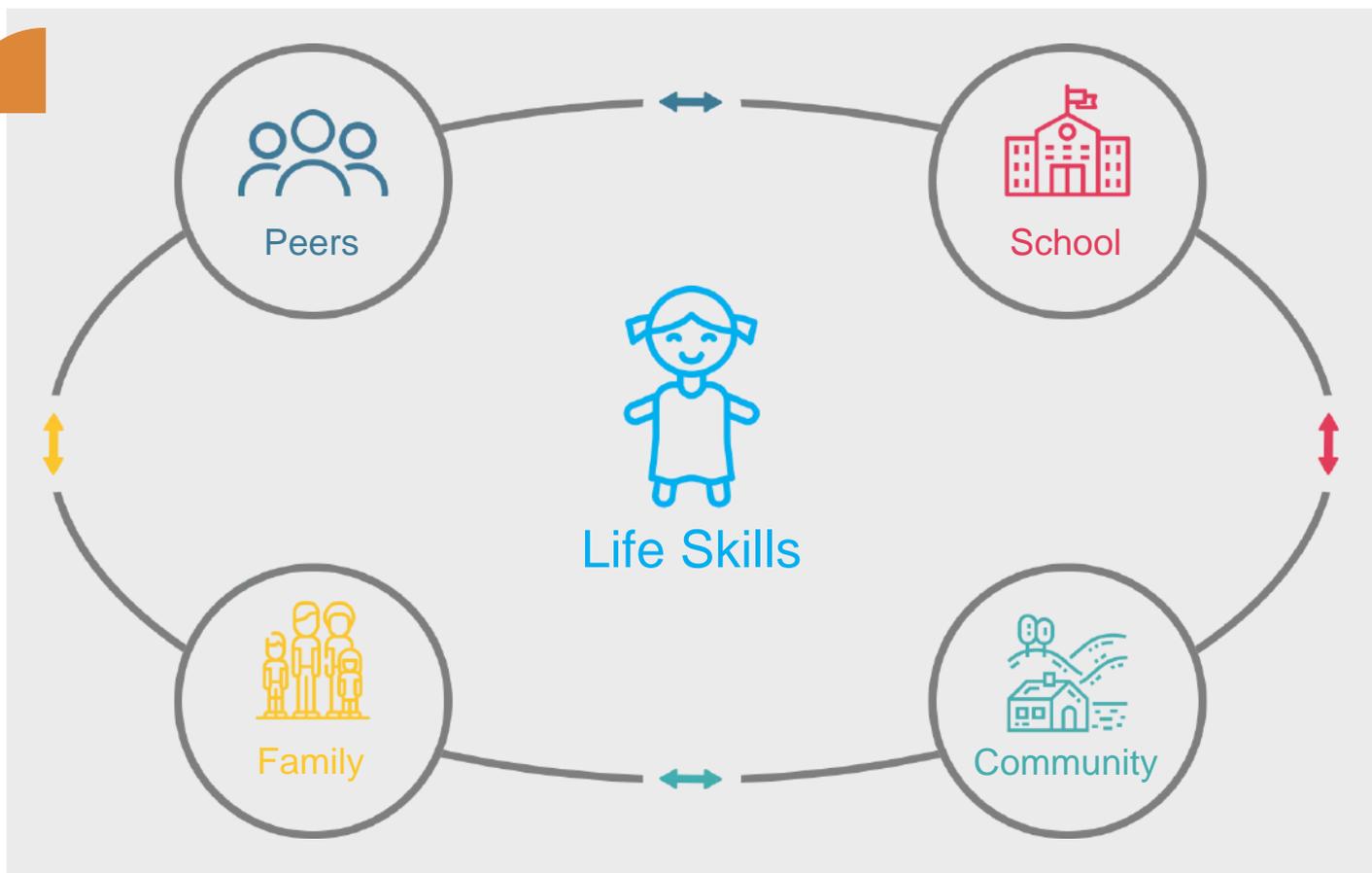
An important aspect to be emphasized is that learning begins at birth, is continuous and cumulative in nature and as life skills significantly contribute to learning they should be introduced from early childhood and continued into the school education.

While there is an understanding around the importance of life skills, there is a possible lack of alignment between traditional curricula and a life-skills learning agenda³ and a lack of understanding of how these can be developed. This has strong implications for designing educational policies and strategizing their implementation. For instance, we need to recognize important experiences that the children need to be exposed to during their early years of learning. Life skills need to be integrated into the teaching and learning process, including pedagogy and curriculum design. It is the pedagogical approach to life skills that is integral to education and transforms it into the 21st century. We will need to explore implementation models that integrate project-based learning, experiential learning, problem solving pedagogies, and re-visit teacher training in both pre-service and in-service areas to incorporate life skills. If one looks at conceptions of what schools should be doing (i.e. the Kothari Commission Report, 1966), many of these elements have already been articulated even though the term life skills may not have been used, however, schools have not lived up to these expectations and life skills should be delivered differently in schools. (cross refer Paper on Thematic paper on Learning, UNICEF India 2019)

¹ UNICEF, 2019 a, p.7

² Brookings, UNICEF Global life skills framework, OECD 2018

³ Vista, Kim & Care, 2018



The family and community context, where the child is situated, also influences the development and strengthening of life skills. Lived experiences of individuals exist in several socio-economic, political, geographical and cultural contexts. Those experiences are influenced by their interpersonal relationship with others in the home, school and other social environments. Life skills provide the basis of a lifelong learning perspective which relies upon the integration of learning and living both horizontally across family, community, study, work, leisure, and 'life spaces' and vertically from birth to death.⁴ This means that life skills are not transacted only through school education but also need to be utilized in informal spaces for their transaction.

Together, the family, community and school will continuously need to build and reinforce the skill building process that is also determined by what is privileged in society today through social media, prevalent market opportunities and social acceptance. While reaching the family and influencing what happens within it or within community spaces is a complex task; there is tremendous potential in integrating this into the parenting initiatives, such as those directed through early childhood and adolescent interventions, health and nutrition.

Life skills assume an even greater significance for girls who are often victims of discrimination, violence and are denied their rights. Research has found that only foundational skills (literacy and numeracy) are not enough for girls to excel in school and succeed in later life (Kwauk, Heyman, & Care, 2016). They also need to build life skills to be able to develop voice, agency and capacity to negotiate with people in position of power. Life skills makes them aware of and prepares them to deal with situations that put them at risk and enables them to lead independent lives. Life skills improve their coping skills, develop problem solving abilities, and encourage peaceful conflict resolution. Girls become more aware of issues of gender-based discrimination, violence, and they become capable of addressing their issues by seeking help from appropriate support systems available to them. In addition, life skills make education and livelihoods as accessible to girls as they are to the boys of their age (Kwauk, Heyman, & Care, 2016). Life skills should build their problem solving, critical thinking skills as well as interpersonal skills to navigate through difficult situations and exert agency to fight discrimination.

⁴ Singh, 2003, p.5



In India, a range of initiatives that are largely content focused, are being implemented both in-school settings (non-residential and residential) and out-of-school settings (informal spaces- community space, school premise, anganwadi). In schools, subjects focus on specific content with an aim of helping students to develop knowledge or understanding of a specific topic that respond to the challenges (especially) of the adolescence age such as reproductive sexual health, menstrual hygiene, safety and others. The sets of curricula differ in content as well as in form and in the way, they are transacted. However, amidst the diversity of the content and form, they often do not have mechanisms to support pathways for children to apply that content or acquire life skills that are important to navigate their lives.

Many educators and facilitators face a confusion between the difference between subject-based content (related to health, nutrition, protection and others) and pedagogy in building skills (life-skills) also referred to as transferable skills. While there is consensus amongst educators on the importance of life skills, they lack clarity as to how to transact them. Evidence from 2019 baseline research⁵ conducted by Young Lives for UNICEF, in five states of India shows that the key stakeholders working on life skills have a limited conceptual understanding of them. Mostly life skills are understood as knowledge on a topic such as gender empowerment, value education, literacy or livelihood skills and not as skills enhancing psycho-social competencies and the 4Cs (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication) of the 21st century skills⁶.

The Young lives study notes that often teachers express dilemma in choosing between teaching a wide variety of content and conducting hands on activities that 'teach skills', due to limited class time. There are no defined learning outcomes related to competencies connected to life skills. Inputs relate to provision of information about life skills rather than developing skills which can be practiced by children and young adolescents in their lives⁷.

In addition, while many teachers are enthusiastic in taking life skills sessions, they do not have requisite pedagogical skills to undertake the sessions using a learner-centred approach. The perception on life skills among teachers varies according to their training, interest and attitude towards teaching process. Some teachers hesitate to focus on life skills because of time and the pedagogy needed to immerse them in the curriculum, or because life skills are not considered important by school administration and not aligned within the examination system. Some teachers believe life skills to be a non-academic activity having less importance and in classroom processes. Schools feel that participatory learning approaches tend to affect discipline, requires excess time leading to non-accomplishment of their core subject syllabus on time (ibid.). This has implications for boards of education which continue to dish out content focused syllabi.

*The sections that follow will discuss the modalities of addressing the transaction of life skills through the school platforms and attempt to demystify the prevailing confusion between **life skills 'content focus'** and **life skills 'skills focus'**. Notwithstanding the importance of life skills for out of school children, the paper is limited to addressing only in-school spaces.*

⁵ Young lives for UNICEF, baseline on life skills education in five states in India, 2019

⁶ UNICEF, 2019b

⁷ UNICEF, 2019b

03

Life Skills Integration into School Spaces



The school platforms are legitimate and fertile spaces to transact life skills. Life skills must be integrated into the functioning of each of the school-based platform and into the structure of organised groups of students.

Schools function as the most effective platform to introduce learners to life-skills because of:

- Universal recognition of schools as formal learning spaces
- Schools access many learners (children), each at different stage of development
- School as a space for socialization
- Availability of infrastructure
- Availability of teachers responsible for delivering education
- High credibility of schools with parents and community
- Have established mechanisms of assessment

Laying a strong foundation of life skills requires time and meaningful engagement with the learners, which in turn require spaces that are easy to access, safe and have an enabling environment. In school, such spaces may not be restricted to classrooms only, but must encompass several platforms- such as the morning assembly, cultural programmes, sports, or a separate class and specific organized groups of students- such as the Bal Sansad (children's cabinet), Meena-Raju Manch and children committees.



Life skills⁸ must be an integral part of school as they promote:

- Physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing
- Development of positive gender transformative self-image and self-esteem
- Smooth transition of individuals from one development stage to another
- Empowerment of young people to, protect themselves and promote positive social behavior and relationships
- Agency of young people to take positive action (and not be passive recipients) to participate in, contribute to their communities and be able to influence environment
- Support young people to make positive health choices, avoid risky health and practice healthy behavior

This strongly establishes convergence of sectors such as protection, health, nutrition, disaster risk reduction and WASH. It also recognizes certain other skills that can be used to expedite achievement of the competencies and behavior in relevant areas such as digital literacy, language acquisition and others. Life skills bring build specific skills in learners that support them to take adequate and appropriate action to lead healthy and productive life and be agents of change.

However, life skills relate directly to the vision and mission of education and should influence all pedagogy and practices in school in all spaces.

⁸ UNICEF Mena framework 2018, Global Life skills framework 2019, UNICEF India life skills framework 2019

04

Integration vs Standalone Approach to Life Skills



Another segment of the life skills discourse revolves around the debate between integrating life skills into school curriculum or treating it as a standalone subject.

Two key approaches used in school to transact life skills are i. as a specific subject or embedded in non-classroom activities (co-curricular activities) ii. as integrated across subjects. Evidence remains divided on the most appropriate approach to life skills education. Some researchers believe that life skills are important skills that require separate place and time allocated to them in the school curriculum. Others see merit in integrating them across subjects for impactful delivery and achievement of relevant age appropriate competencies. We will do a critical analysis of both the approaches.

[i. The most prevalent standalone approach sees a confusion between subject transaction and life skills development.](#)

A plethora of material has been developed across various sectors that are intervening through school platforms as well as through out-of-school platforms. Some key materials provide information around careers, health, sexual reproductive health, technology, safety, livelihood and others and is considered as life skills education. This material is transacted often for its content but not to build core life skills to apply the knowledge and information acquired to critically analyze, apply creativity, take decisions or negotiate around that specific content. For example, the content around sexual reproductive health provides knowledge in that area but life skills of critical thinking, communication, taking decision for one's healthy and productive life may not be built through this content.

Life skills are not seen as a theme that cuts across the application of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes which are important in the process of individual development and lifelong learning. They are not just a set of skills, nor are they part of skills of survival, livelihood, or vocation, in fact they are part of all these skills. (UNESCO, 2004a).

The situation on the ground displays a need for reflective processes, pedagogy and methodology of facilitating life skills and not delivering just the content. It is important to ensure that a certain level of content is delivered through an appropriate pedagogy and process, making life skills education more relevant for students.

[ii. The integration of life skills with subjects is rudimentary and lacks direction and support to facilitators](#)

Integration of life skills into the existing curriculum and school course content has yet to take off in India in a more structured manner. Curriculum framers provide teachers separate syllabi due to which the teachers are unable to fully comprehend that life skills are developed to support overall learning as well as the enhancement of psycho-social competencies and communication skills amongst learners. They are not a subject to be taught. Teacher are unable to distinguish life skills from literacy and livelihood skills or how they related in the teaching and learning process. While the uptake and readiness for life skills education is high, the preparedness quotient in education departments for holding the process and ensuring that the teachers, functionaries and parents are on a common page, is considerably low.

The premise of the strategy to integrate life skills within subjects and their teaching process rests on the fact that learning life-skills enables children to use any content, be it language, mathematics, science and others. Teaching with a focus on life skills teaching can be facilitated through each and any subject. Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, innovation and self-direction, must be integral components in the classroom transaction across subjects. No extra teaching needs to be done to have students practice and perfect life skills through subjects. A teacher can easily fold the skills into a lesson. All she needs are requisite pedagogical skills necessary to undertake the subject sessions using a learner-centred approach.

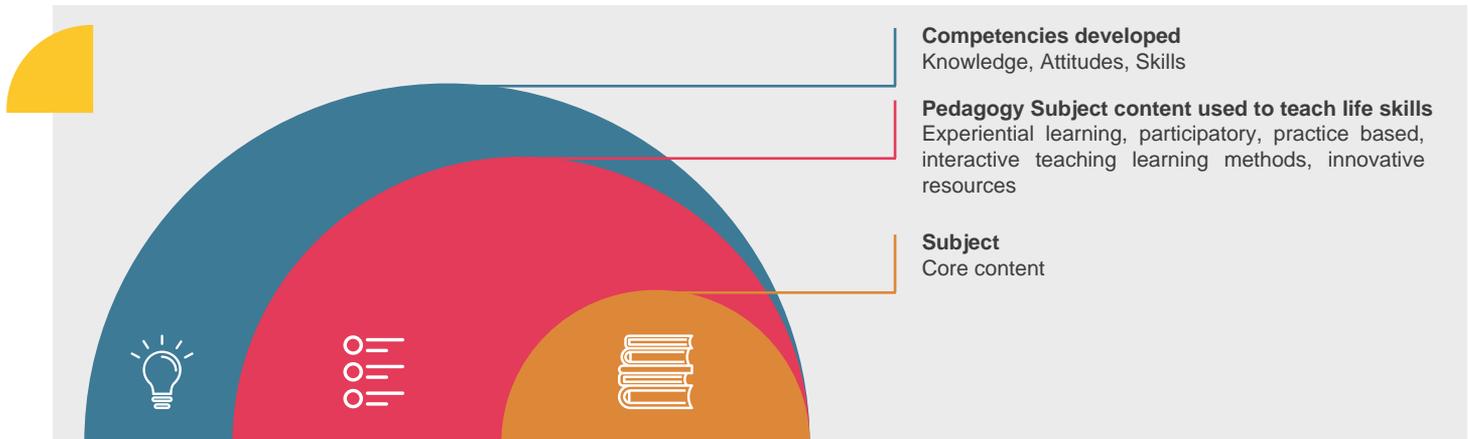
05

Pedagogy of Life Skills



World over it is now accepted that life skills must not teach skills in isolation, rather they must become an integral part of all subjects and also of a variety of ongoing educational programmes such as drug abuse prevention, prevention of adolescent pregnancy, AIDS education, protecting young people from abuse, peace education, suicide prevention programmes and programmes for vulnerable youth such as orphaned or those living on the streets (UNICEF, naz). Integrating life skills into subject teaching is the most important.

Content mastery should not be the goal any more but the use or application of the content, it should enable the facilitator to support learners in the development of life skills of critical thinking, collaboration etc.



In response to the need and the context mentioned above, a fundamental shift is needed in the way life skills are transacted. The content of any subject must provide opportunities for experiential learning. The facilitator must create a bank of activities aligned to each domain of life skills, that are developed based on the understanding of the principles of how children will develop life skills through these activities.

The most effective methods of life skill development involve young learners in active, participatory learning experiences rather than passive ones. Learners acquire life skills by exploring their knowledge (about a particular life skill) through organised set of activities that allow them to rehearse and practice the skill in different simulated and real-life situations, before it becomes a behavior. These must allow for student reflection and participatory learning methods which would translate to behavioral change. Life skills are gradually built through intensive engagement in activities specifically designed to bring about behavioral changes in individuals. Using different platforms, they need to be practiced in order to be learned. Delivery of life skills programs is based on active participation and cooperative learning as opposed to lectures” (World Bank, 2013, p.6).

Life skills must be integrated into various school subjects such that the subject specific content becomes the tool to build life skills. This can be explained through an example using science subject to transact life skills. As science involves inquiry-based learning activities, it promotes life skills around communication, participation, decision making, critical thinking, creativity and problem solving. A project-based activity designed for a group leads to transacting collaboration and communication skills. Learners also must apply creativity and critical thinking in science projects. It takes creative thinking and innovative actions to investigate science. To process the data that students generate, they need to reason, make judgments, take decisions, and solve problems.

Multidisciplinary approach to teaching science facilitates inclusion of diverse concepts like environment, health and different social issues in the curriculum. Life skills can be used to develop the connections with the themes, and in so doing, deeper levels of thinking, knowledge, and capacities will be created. However, this calls for a shift from regular lecture-cum-discussion method and requires the use of more interactive teaching-learning methods, self-learning and innovative resources. For teachers, it is important to independently plan a lesson in which meaningful activities and assessments support a learning objective, ask questions that invite ideas, opinions, and critical thought from children, engage children in knowledge-building and critical thinking activities.

Menstrual Health Management (Integrating life skills in class 8 science)

Objectives:

- To inform learners about processes taking place in their bodies
- To encourage learners to adopt healthy practices

Methodology: Situation analysis followed by a group discussion

Situation: Today in school, Dipti observed stains of blood on her salwar. The sight made her scared and confused. She did not know what to do or who to approach. After reaching home she told her mother about this. Her mother gave her a piece of old cloth. She advised Dipti to abstain from going to the school and entering the kitchen during this time.

Key discussion points: Adopting hygienic practices, use of menstrual management material, myths around menstruation, negotiating with parents.

Pedagogy focus: Developing awareness about one's body and its processes, challenging myths/superstitious beliefs, developing agency for negotiation

Awareness of my Surroundings (Integrating life skills in class 5 Environment Science)

Objectives:

- To identify different human activities causing water pollution
- To discuss possible solutions to address water pollution

Methodology: Screening of documentary film tracing the journey of a river through a town, followed by a discussion.

Key discussion points: Contribution of different human activities towards water pollution, alternatives/innovations and possible solutions to address the issue

Pedagogy focus: Awareness about one's environment, analysis of nuanced relationship between human beings and their environment, identifying simple innovative solutions to complex environmental issues

Classrooms are apt platforms to develop skills in such areas as collaboration, cooperative learning, leadership and sharing of resources among learners. Teachers can foster these qualities by creating classroom opportunities for learners to work in diverse settings and interactions. These involve organising learners to work individually, in pairs and in diverse groups, using interactive activities (story-telling, role play, debates, projects, discussions, art forms, visits to museums, farms, community spaces, nature walk), using inquiry-based learning, engaging with information and communication technologies, involving learners in assessment tasks around themes (surveys, interviews and focus group discussions) and organizing learners around civic action.

Activities outside classrooms, if planned carefully, can be a source of great joy and a strong foundation to develop life skills of students. Arts and sports are increasingly being acknowledged as being therapeutic. They act as creative channels for directing young energy, build their confidence, promote cooperation, and foster leadership qualities. According to the new⁹ research by the Barça Foundation and UNICEF (March 2019), participation in sports improves overall educational attainment and skill development of children. Development of skills like leadership, cooperation and self-esteem contributes towards their overall development and empowerment. This calls for a meaningful integration of children's participation in sport, in programme design and generation of evidence.

Along with language, fine motor, social and emotional skills, sports and arts promote skills of communication, problem solving, self-expression, and creativity. For children, especially those out of school or those living in difficult situation, the role of education also includes component of psychosocial support children and youth recover from violence and the trauma of loss. Counseling, along with culturally and age appropriate, safe activities, like art therapy and games, can help them in coping with trauma. Different school spaces can be utilised to develop and strengthen life skills of learners within and outside the classroom.

⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/participation-sport-can-improve-childrens-learning-and-skills-development-new-bar%C3%A7a>

06

Enabling Teachers



The role of a teacher is significant in the context of life skills education and especially for education and empowerment of the children who face challenges due to gender, marginalization and disability. In that sense, “Teachers are not only implementers but also the architects of change” (OECD, 2011) and for that they need to be enabled to make a positive difference in the lives of children. The first and foremost necessity for teachers is to have a critical understanding of social and political reality by which the powerless (children) gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives and accomplish learning.

Effective teaching-learning enables children to develop the life skills they need to succeed and to absorb the necessary content. Teacher must be capacitated to understand and deliver life skills-based lessons. She herself should be able to have a clear understanding of these skills and have them herself. Only then she will be able to transact them in a classroom situation. This must involve (i) intensive teacher education (ii) regular in-service training, (iii) enhanced training on facilitation skills, (iv) on-going mentoring, and (v) access to material (including activity banks) to support better engagement with learners. Thus, scaffolding, on-site mentoring and professional development of teachers and facilitators through effective institutional provisions in the system is critical. (Sachdeva, Kaul & Paranjpe 2018). For this to happen, curriculum framers and Boards have to set the ball rolling. With syllabi being content driven and assessment focused on rote learning, teachers cannot afford to change practices even if they are trained in them.

In-service and continuous professional development for teachers’ programmes must equip teachers on learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning (e.g. experiential and inquiry learning, critical pedagogy), and effective classroom management for inclusive and equitable experience and integrate technology to support teaching. (Egbo 2011). Life skills must be core of the teacher education curriculum. Teacher educators need to be trained to deliver life skills pedagogy, and DIET / SCERT faculty needs capacity building.

In addition to conducting traditional orientation and refresher trainings, the capacity building exercise must include innovative approaches such as teacher mentorship, exposure visits and teacher exchange programmes, maintaining reflective journals, establishing teacher support networks and others.

Presently, teacher preparation is lacking all the above, and this is ultimately reflected in the classroom. Merely introducing life skills into an education system that has not done the basics well all these years, may not work unless we address the deeper issues plaguing teacher education, at least as far as schools are concerned.

¹⁰ <https://www.unicef.ca/en/discover/education>

07

Life Skills Assessment



As we go about integrating life skills into school curriculum, both inside and outside the classrooms, it is imperative not only to support students to develop these skills but also to apply completely new approaches, both in the measurement aspect and collection of assessment data. Further it involves efficient use of the collected data to understand students' learning and plough back this data into the programming strategy to yield better results (Vista, Kim and Care, 2018).

While India has a well-established large-scale assessment system for learning achievement, it does not have the same for life skills. This is because of a challenge in defining indicators and competencies in this area that can be measured. It is also because life skills are demonstrated differently in different contexts and situations and thus require assessment approaches that are either sufficiently broad or sufficiently dynamic to capture this essential quality (Vista, Kim and Care, 2018). Thus, data on student performance in life skills is largely unavailable. What is needed are valid and reliable tools to measure knowledge, skills and attitudes of learners.

Both formative and summative assessments are suggested throughout the teaching learning process with the direct purpose of improving the learning outcomes (around life skills) of those students being assessed. Formative is continuous and summative conducted at the end of the learning processes to evaluate students' learning outcomes by comparing them with some validated standards or benchmark. Both should lead to using this data for getting quality teaching and learning processes around life skills in place and for monitoring and accountability (ibid). In India, CCE approach needs to be revived and reconceptualized.

Key principles that guide life skills

1. *Learning begins at birth and is continuous and cumulative in nature.* Life skills are process-based and not content-based and therefore these should be introduced from early childhood and continued throughout school education.
2. *Life skills cannot be developed in isolation*
Life skills are not transacted only through school education. The family, context and communities where the child is situated also greatly influence in developing/strengthening life skills.
3. *Premise of life skills development is the behavioral change*
The outcome of the teaching learning process must translate into a behavioral change.
4. *Content and life-skills are both important and interrelated.*
Learning life-skills enables children to apply different concepts in their real life. Otherwise, content risks becoming an academic chore. Effective teaching enables children to develop the life skills they need to succeed and to absorb the content that is necessary. Thus, life skills must be integrated in the subjects rather transacted through a stand-alone approach.
5. *Life skills must be integrated into all aspects of the curricula*
There is life skills teaching in every subject and thus facilitators can support learners to practice and accomplish life skills through subjects, without needing any extra teaching time. Skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, innovation and self-direction, must be integral components in the classroom transaction across subjects.
6. *Scaffolding, on-site mentoring and professional development of teachers and facilitators through effective institutional provisions in the system is critical*
Effective teaching-learning enables children to develop the life skills they need to succeed and to absorb the necessary content. Teacher must be capacitated to understand and deliver life skills-based lessons. She herself should be able to have a clear understanding of these skills and have them herself. Only then she will be able to transact them in a classroom situation. This must involve (i) intensive teacher education (ii) regular in-service training, (iii) enhanced training on facilitation skills, (iv) on-going mentoring, and (v) access to material (including activity banks) to support better engagement with learners. She must be supported by curricula that is conducive for life skills and a supportive or consistent assessment system.
7. *Life skills transaction must be built on meaningful strategies*
The approach to life skills transaction both in-school and out of school must include implementing meaningful strategies, (i) provisioning for safe and enabling environment to transact life skills (ii) reconceptualising subject teaching-learning to provide opportunities for experiential learning iii. applying effective pedagogies and emphasizing values of equity, inclusion and justice.
8. *System must commit at the highest level to the development of life skills*
Systemic commitment is visible through integration of life skills in national policies, curriculum frameworks, budgets, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems and certification frameworks. This will lead to appropriate placement and attention to life skills development at all levels of the system.
9. *Measurement of life skills must be inbuilt into the learner's competency assessment*
The capacity of the teachers and facilitators must be built to undertake appropriate measurement of life skills and use the data to inform their teaching learning processes.

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