Chapter 1

Introduction

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Abstract This chapter provides an overview of how life skills are conceptualized and taken up in curriculum, teaching, and measurement in different educational settings around the world, as discussed in the chapters in this book. We focus on life skills programming in low- and middle-income countries because bilateral and multilateral aid organizations have significantly shaped discourse and programming in life skills education. We intentionally included studies utilizing a variety of research methodologies, which allow for a deep understanding of both the micro level (curriculum, pedagogy, and youth engagement and outcomes) and macro level (organizational processes and assumptions) in life skills programming and policy. Chapters in the book highlight a disconnect between the dominant individualistic behavioral approach used by many organizations and programs and the life skills that youth and local communities emphasize as important to change social and economic problems. To respond to this disconnect, this chapter provides an overview of a capabilities approach to life skills, with the purpose of focusing on wellbeing. We suggest that life skills education should develop the capabilities that societies and individuals have reason to value.

Keywords Life skills · Low and middle-income countries · Capabilities approach · Wellbeing

Acronyms

NGOs	Nongovernmental organizations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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Rahul, a youth from India, learned that gender roles were not fixed—and that he wanted “an environment at home where no one is getting oppressed, or beaten and abused, everyone is equal and happy.” Ramona, a young woman from Honduras, learned “how to work in a disciplined way with respect, responsibility and to be more responsible and work as a team.” A youth named Hamadou, a member of the Afar nomadic population of Ethiopia, described the importance of the cultural practice of sharing: “if someone has extra money or resources like food, you share it with your neighbors.” These three youth from different geographic regions of the world have the common experience of participating in educational processes that were intended to build “life skills,” but their disparate commentaries illustrate that “life skills” can encompass diverse values, cultural practices, habits and behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations. Life skills education stems from the idea that youth need more than traditional academic skills to thrive; they need skills to be able to live life well.

While life skills education has a global reach, there is much conceptual confusion about these categories in the field of education. What life skills are important to teach? And to whom? And why? In the United States, where life skills education took root decades ago, the media has picked up on this confusion and has tried to help clarify. National Public Radio covered the issue in 2017: “more and more people in education agree on the importance of learning stuff other than academics. But no one agrees what to call that ‘stuff’” (Kamenetz, 2015). Seven categories of “stuff” were identified, including character, noncognitive traits and habits, soft skills, grit, social and emotional skills, growth mindset, and twenty-first Century skills. The confusion that the media was responding to is not new, and it is not limited to the United States. For example, in Australia, public and academic debate focused on youth and skills for the labor market throughout the 1990s (Taylor, 2005). There have been efforts to halt this semantic debate by introducing phrases such as “skills for success” which is meant to encompass the habits, mindsets, and non-technical skills that are integral to academic, personal and professional success (Tooley & Bornfreund, 2014). Even so, “skills” has become a catch-all phrase, lacking precision and conceptual clarity.

Perhaps because of or in spite of this lack of clarity, life skills education has gained considerable attention in the past decade among education policymakers, researchers, and educators around the globe as being the *sine qua non* for later achievements in life. It is easy to refer to life skills as important, but there is greater disagreement around which ones are important and why. Global and national education policies, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and international development education initiatives, such as USAID’s workforce development programs, emphasize the teaching of life skills as essential for a diverse set of purposes: reducing poverty, achieving gender equality, promoting employment and economic growth, addressing climate change, fostering peace and global citizenship, and creating sustainable and healthy communities. Teaching academic knowledge as well as life skills to support these goals is a broad and hefty task for educators. Yet, many education systems and non-formal programs are engaged in this work.

The aim of the book and each chapter is to examine how life skills have been conceptualized and implemented, particularly in contexts where youth are

marginalized—out-of-school, not employed, living in low-income or violent settings, and/or experiencing multiple forms of inequality (e.g., gender, caste, racial, socio-economic). While we assume that life skills are important for all children and youth to learn, youth in these contexts and conditions have been particularly targeted by life skills education initiatives. Yet, teaching marginalized youth in these different contexts requires an examination of some of the core assumptions of life skills education: How can these skills enhance their employability, health outcomes, and social outcomes, and how should educators teach them to achieve such outcomes?

This book arose out of a workshop hosted at the University of California, Berkeley in May 2018, where a group of experts gathered to examine how research on life skills reveals some of the assumptions of programs and to consider how to refocus educational efforts for greater effectiveness—that is, in helping youth to do life well. The workshop emerged from the recognition that youth organizations working in low-income countries increasingly see that youth need more than just traditional academic skills to succeed in school and beyond, and therefore they support life skills development. For some of these organizations, the term refers to building resilience, shaping aspirations, increasing self-confidence, and developing critical thinking skills. For others, it means teaching specific content such as financial literacy and/or sexual and reproductive health. During the workshop, we considered the contributions of scholars and practitioners in the fields of psychology, cognitive science, economics, and education, among others, who have collectively built a body of knowledge that defines the skills and mindsets that support youth wellbeing. Several early versions of chapters in this volume were part of our workshop deliberations.

The authors in this volume critically review a diverse body of scholarship and practice that informs the conceptualization, curriculum, teaching, and measurement of life skills in education settings around the world. We selected chapters from a wide range of geographic locations to capture how life skills programming has been implemented in different contexts. The following questions guided authors' analysis of life skills education and the organization of chapters in the volume:

- What are life skills? How is the teaching of life skills enacted by various actors in the fields of international development and education?
- Which life skills are most important, who needs to learn them, and how should they be measured in each context?
- What are the synergies and differences between life skills education and initiatives to promote social and emotional learning, vocational/employment education, health and sexuality education and other related skills? How might learning be shared across these different types of initiatives and fields?
- How might life skills be better incorporated into basic and secondary education, as part of the formal curriculum, given that many life skills interventions are taught through non-formal programs (and by NGOs)?
- How do or can life skills education, both conceptually and pedagogically, address structures and relations of power to help youth achieve desired future outcomes, and the goals set out in the SDGs?

How do life skills connect with the sustainable development goals and notions of quality education advanced in international policy agendas?

How can these bodies of practice and research evidence among thought leaders and donors converge to inform and reshape life skills programming?

Life Skills in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

We focus on life skills programming in low- and middle-income countries because bilateral and multilateral aid organizations, such as USAID and UNICEF, have significantly shaped discourse and programming in life skills education. Several chapters in this volume, including those by Honeyman et al. and Murphy-Graham, are based on research and programming funded by USAID. Other chapters present research that stems from private or family philanthropic funding, as well as corporate foundations (Pacheco & Murphy-Graham, Chap. 10, this volume; Sahni, Chap. 9, this volume). The scale of donor funding and involvement in this field is related to the growing recognition that national education systems are not adequately preparing youth with quality education that will improve their lives, particularly at the secondary level.

Over the last several decades, low- and middle-income countries made considerable progress in ensuring that all children have access to primary education (typically ending at grade 6). More recently, priorities have expanded to include universal access through 9th grade (see SDG 4). The expansion of schooling opportunities for youth is a step in the right direction. But secondary education traditionally served an elite, university-bound segment of the population and the curriculum is often geared towards preparation for tertiary (university) entrance. Many youth still drop out of secondary school due to high fees, the disconnect between the curriculum and their lives, and the need to work to support their families. So one aim of life skills programs, both those created by international organizations and governments, has been to provide skills that these youth need to be successful in life beyond those needed and learned in the formal education system. This includes life skills programs oriented toward preparing youth for different work options. In this area, USAID has a particularly strong presence in shaping life skills for employability (see Honeyman et al., Chap. 6, this volume).

International organizations and governments also target youth in low- and middle-income countries who are out-of-school and not employed in the formal sector because they need life skills to be healthy and safe in their communities. These programs address concerns around engaging in risky behaviors that lead to unhealthy lives, including sexually transmitted diseases, early pregnancies, and drugs or other illicit activities. Life skills play a critical role in preparing youth to live life well within these challenging contexts of poor or inaccessible education, limited formal employment opportunities, and social challenges. The program in the Philippines for trafficked youth in Honeyman et al.'s chapter and the sports programs reviewed by Kwauk are examples of life skills programs oriented toward

these aims. In analyzing these life skills programs, we reveal their implicit assumptions about youth's lives and how they can live life well, as well as the ways that these programs are recontextualized to address the skills that matter for youth in these contexts.

We critically analyze life skills programs by elevating the voices of participants through the use of qualitative and participatory research. We intentionally included studies utilizing a variety of research methodologies including design-based research, action research, case study, systematic reviews, and mixed methods. The methodological diversity allows for a deep understanding of both the micro level (curriculum, pedagogy, and youth engagement and outcomes) and macro level (organizational processes and assumptions) in life skills programming and policy. Through such analyses, chapters highlight a disconnect between the dominant individualistic behavioral approach used by many organizations and programs that teaches young people to manage their lives within social and economic constraints (as discussed by DeJaeghere, Chap. 4, this volume) and the life skills that youth and local community emphasize as important to change social and economic problems (see Arur & Sharma, Chap. 8, this volume; Yitbarek et al., Chap. 11, this volume). Collectively, the chapters of this volume clarify that assumptions about life skills have to be adapted to address local cultural values, needs and contexts.

The Purpose of Life Skills: To Live Life Well

The book makes critical contributions to the current debates about the purposes and practices of education more broadly, and considers how life skills education contributes to these issues: How can education foster sustainable economies and communities? What and how do we effectively teach children during a pandemic and during other crises, when learning inequalities are being further exacerbated, and which can have longer term effects on children's wellbeing? How can education address growing inequalities? Life skills education is not a panacea for addressing inequalities and future wellbeing outcomes, but life skills, when effectively contextualized and oriented toward valued outcomes, are critical to learning and living life well, particularly in precarious times.

We consider life skills, broadly defined, as the ability to live life well (see Murphy-Graham & Cohen, Chap. 2, this volume). This implies the need for a clear conception of well-being, and theory of the role of education in fostering such well-being. The capability approach is one theoretical framework that we find particularly useful in conceptualizing well-being. It attends to the freedoms, or real opportunities, to achieve well-being, and the public values about what constitutes well-being for individuals within societies (Robeyns, 2017). The capability approach does not measure economic wealth as a sole indicator of well-being, but rather it focuses on multiple dimensions of well-being: of what people are able to be and do. While it focuses on the assessment of individual level freedoms and achievements, it also demands an understanding of the social and institutional arrangements,

including past injustices and current policies, that affect one's freedoms to achieve wellbeing (Robeyns, 2017).

The capability approach has been used extensively in educational research to examine how different forms and processes of education support the expansion of freedoms—or real opportunities—so that inequalities can be redressed and well-being achieved (DeJaeghere & Walker, 2021). 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).

Beyond the threshold of skills, they argue that quality education that fosters wellbeing must also be relevant, inclusive, and support economic productivity, democratic participation, and sustainability.

From a capability approach, 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 Chap. 2, 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) have a narrower focus on specific domains of well-being (e.g., employment and prevention of disease/harmful behavior, respectively). In education, life skills capture a broader purpose of promoting various dimensions of well-being, including social and emotional outcomes and civic participation.

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 (Nussbaum, 2000; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The literature on life skills often conceptualizes them as a means to other ends, including improving employment, reducing pregnancy and marriage, and even keeping youth engaged in school. While there is indeed emerging evidence to support the fostering of life skills as a means to these outcomes, life skills may have “ultimate value” in learning and doing them even if they do not have strong causal linkages with typically-measured development outcomes, such as delayed fertility, earnings, or total years of schooling (Robeyns, 2017, p. 54).

From a capability perspective, life skills education should develop the capabilities that societies and individuals have reason to value, as well as examine whether or not an individual is “being put in the conditions in which she can pursue her ultimate ends” (Robeyns, 2017, p. 49). While not all chapters in this book utilize a capability approach to analyzing life skills education, it does offer a broader framework for the book in thinking about what it means to live life well, and to education for the real opportunities to achieve well-being in different contexts.

Contributions of the Volume and Chapter Summaries

The chapters in this volume make two critical contributions to our understanding of life skills education. First, authors pay particular attention to defining the specific life skills within the particular programs and contexts they analyze. They do not assume that life skills programs, which are designed for some particular set of desired outcomes, contexts, and youth, are relevant in other settings. They address how life skills are linked with the particular economic, political, and social aims of that program or context. Some chapters illustrate how international and national goals for such education may be in conflict with local community values and participants' experiences. These analyses suggest that in order for life skills education to contribute to addressing inequalities, creating more sustainable futures, and achieving well-being, they must identify both the valued outcomes and the constraints to achieving these outcomes.

Second, authors reflect on ways that specific life skills and programs can be reframed and adapted so that they not only focus on cultivating individually possessed behaviors and attitudes in young people, but they also address contextual constraints that inhibit young people from using their skills. In this way, the analyses presented in this volume do not offer a simple set of technical guides to developing a life skills education curriculum, nor how these programs can be adapted and expanded to improve outcomes for more youth. Rather, they assert that life skills education can and needs to transform certain values and practices that currently curtail young people's ability to live life well. Authors call for careful consideration of the values, knowledge, and behaviors that are important for young people to achieve well-being in these challenging contexts, so that policymakers and educators can more effectively design, implement, and evaluate life skills education programs according to valued outcomes.

To set up the book and the analyses in subsequent chapters, Murphy-Graham and Cohen undertake a review of theoretical, programmatic, and empirical research on life skills from different disciplinary perspectives. This chapter first broadly identifies life skills as those skills necessary to do life well. This is a broader conceptualization than the outcomes desired in the three discourse communities they identify: prevention and protection, labor market outcomes, and quality education. Through a thorough analysis of theoretical and empirical literature, they identify core life skills that overlap among these discourse communities: critical ways of thinking, development of social and emotional competencies, and mastery of certain tasks and information. These skills are a "least common denominator" of what is necessary to teach young people in order to live life well. They call for the need to contextualize these life skills within programs to examine what living well or wellbeing means for youth in across different contexts.

Social and emotional learning (SEL), a key component of most life skills programs, is examined in-depth in Chap. 3 by Brush et al. The authors explain that SEL is referred to by many names, often overlapping with life skills education and other initiatives to improve learning, health, and developmental outcomes for children and

youth. The chapter provides an overview of SEL and its relationship to life skills education, and identify where clarity and cohesion do or do not exist within the field of SEL by exploring how it is conceptualized, measured, and promoted in different settings around the world. The authors present work from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Taxonomy Project, drawing on data collected over a series of research projects. By applying a common coding system to SEL frameworks, programs, and measurement/assessment tools, the authors identify areas of overlap and divergence between them. The chapter summarizes key findings from these projects while highlighting the need for both deeper contextualization and localized research and development, and concludes by discussing implications for research and practice.

In Chap. 4, DeJaeghere examines how life skills education programs often emphasize teaching behaviors to young people to overcome their problems, such as youth unemployment and teen pregnancy. Her analysis, which is informed by two studies conducted on life skills—one as part of a youth livelihood program in East Africa, and the other a life skills program for lower caste and lower class girls in India—suggests that programs have an underlying individualist, psycho-social, and behaviorist approach. She points out that teen pregnancy and youth unemployment, among other issues, are social problems that an individualistic approach will not be able to fully address: “such an approach does little to address the systemic social and economic conditions that create injustices and inequalities” (p. 77). To think differently about how to use life skills to foster a “good life” that is just, equitable, and sustainable, the chapter offers a transformative framing based on a critical and relational approach that includes values and perspectives that youth desire and need within their challenging contexts. So, for example, rather than focus on “responsibility,” life skills could be framed as emphasizing “reciprocity.” Positive attitude can be reframed as “hope” and “empathy” reframed as “solidarity.” In specifying how to reconceptualize life skills, the chapter offers an alternative for how we can teach young people to live in changing social, economic, and environmental contexts that are marked by greater precarity and inequality.

A transformative approach to life skills education programs is also the focus of Kwauk's chapter, which analyzes sports programs designed to empower girls. Through an analysis of 10 life skills approaches guiding sport for development (SFD) programs, Kwauk examines how organizations often take an “unintentional and uncritical approach to education through sport—or in this case a normative approach to life skills education— ... to teach skills like teamwork, communication, and goal orientation” (p. 95). In contrast, she asks if they can “take a more transformative approach aimed at altering the conditions of inequality that have marginalized populations in the first place” (p. 95). She identifies the life skills and desired outcomes of each of these programs, which often place a heavy emphasis on pro-social and interpersonal skills. In order to be more transformative, she suggests that programs should pay more attention to the intrapersonal skills of values, identity, and perspectives, so as to change the way that young people think about their world and interact in it. She calls for re-thinking skills, such as teaching how to engage differences, to foster reciprocity and solidarity, and to develop partnerships and coalitions such that the onus for changes toward greater empowerment is not solely on the girl.

Honeyman et al.'s chapter illustrates how different organizations, working within a framework set out by USAID's life skills programs, engaged in a community of practice to learn from each other to develop and adapt their institutional approach. Their collective work in three different countries, Rwanda, Algeria, and the Philippines, highlights the importance of contextualizing programs, determining and training effective pedagogical approaches, and sustaining and scaling up these initiatives. Each institutional program engaged with different participants, including connecting out-of-school youth with vocational/entrepreneurial opportunities (Rwanda), working to integrate school completers into formal employment (Algeria), and reintegrating survivors of human trafficking into a safe workforce (Philippines). Each program adapted life skills frameworks from USAID within their organizations to navigate the diverse set of power relations among actors in order to implement a locally relevant program. They also illustrate the challenges that funded programs have in developing relevant curricula and pedagogy, including a lack of support for the training of educators/facilitators in teaching life skills, which is different from teaching content knowledge. Finally, they argue life skills programs could be more fully integrated into educational systems as a cross-cutting focus of instruction, or even through a wholehearted overhaul of general teacher pedagogy, in order to sustain and scale such programs.

In another example of programs aimed at employment, Murphy-Graham's chapter about a sports-based, life skills job-training program in Honduras and Guatemala shows the value of learning life skills as conditions for other capabilities, and as an outcome itself. Using a capability approach to analyze pre-conditions, capabilities, and wellbeing outcomes, she shows how certain life skills foster particular values that serve as pre-conditions for youth to act on their capabilities, or sets of opportunities that arise from the program. These include beliefs and attitudes about themselves, such as no longer feeling stuck, having self-confidence, and developing a sense of discipline and work ethic. Furthermore, she illustrates how certain life skills serve as both means and ends, particularly those that build relationships and social ties. Developing relationships with their peers and learning teamwork were critical to fostering a sense of affiliation, something most the program participants did not have because they were out-of-school, not employed, and disconnected from positive social networks. These life skills further enabled them to make new friends, a desirable outcome itself. This analysis points out that according to many of the participating youth, these kinds of life skills—as values that serve as pre-conditions to other capabilities, and as means and ends in themselves—were as important as getting a job, which was a desired outcome of the program, but which was further constrained by the socio-economic environment in which they lived. Murphy-Graham calls for life skills education programs to take into consideration the values that are desired for youth's wellbeing as well as the conditions in their environment that might constrain them from realizing what they value from these programs.

Arur and Sharma's chapter examines a different set of life skills—informational literacies—that are critical for preparing young Indian boys for future employment in precarious conditions. While informational literacy may be regarded as a set of technical, or cognitive, skills, Arur and Sharma use a sociocultural and transformational

approach to show how it is also imbued with social and political values about who one can become through their future work. In this way, literacy skills are connected with the identity domain discussed in Chap. 3 by Brush et al., in terms of understanding one's goals and preferences within a specific social-cultural context. By placing career information and skills within a framework of education for sustainable development, Arur and Sharma also show that such life skills for young boys go beyond gaining knowledge and information about getting employed, and toward skills for assessing/identifying more equitable and sustainable livelihoods. These "skills" include understanding the gendered and caste nature of the labor market; identifying alternative, local and "green" employability options; and identifying one's emotional responses and needs in relation to work, and the uncertainties of it. Finally, like Pacheco-Montoya and Murphy-Graham, the authors also illustrate the pedagogical tools they used to enhance these skills, including videos taken by boys of relevant social issues in their community in which they want to engage.

Sahni's chapter examines how the Prerna School in Uttar Pradesh, India focuses not on life skills as such, but on a broader concept of "life knowledge"—in other words, the type of knowledge and education that allow youth to navigate the difficult terrain of their lives. Sahni, an Indian feminist whose work on at the Prerna School for girls is renowned around the world and is recounted in her book, *Reaching for the Sky* (Sahni, 2017), describes the action research project she is currently engaged in with young men in the recently created Prerna Boys School. Realizing that "if we want a better world for our girls, then their fathers, brothers, and future husbands need to be part of the solution" (p. 200), the chapter explains the rationale and process through which the school was created. A key life skill that the school focuses on is developing a feminist consciousness in boys, utilizing critical dialogues on a wide range of topics including masculinity, violence against women at home and on the street, gender, and marriage. The chapter includes several excerpts of critical dialogues with male youth that illustrate, for example, how boys are able to discuss what they have learned about the differential treatment of boys and girls and whether they think it is fair. The chapter argues that life skills should not be considered an "add on" in an afterschool or extracurricular program, but rather fully integrated into the official curriculum, thereby "redefining the scope of education, deepening and widening it to make it more relevant in the lives of its students and the societies that they live in and can change in the future" (p. 214).

In another examination of how to shift gender inequalities through life skills education, Pacheco-Montoya and Murphy-Graham's chapter delves deeply into critical thinking, an oft-included but not well understood life skill. Their study illustrates how critical thinking is taught and used by young women and men in Honduras in an effort to prevent early marriage, and to alter gendered attitudes and relations more broadly. As a design-based study, they walk the reader through the development of a specific set of curricular and pedagogical tools, including using peer educators that acted as critical mirrors in examining gendered assumptions, and scenarios based on real experiences of youth that provoked discussions of alternatives to hegemonic gender beliefs. Through the use of these tools, they show how youth grappled with the cognitive dissonance that is produced between commonly

held beliefs and alternative perspectives. Finally, they illustrate how these new perspectives and knowledge informed young people's decisions in their daily lives. This chapter provides educators and development practitioners helpful examples of curricula and pedagogy that can foster these important life skills for transforming gender inequalities in this specific context.

In an examination of how education can support economically and socially sustainable pastoral communities, Yitbarek et al.'s chapter offers another contextually grounded and rich case study of the life skills that are valued by pastoralist communities in Ethiopia, and analyze whether and how they are taught in their school curricula. Through data gathered from a range of pastoralist community members, they show that the forms of education and life skills they value should be connected to their livelihoods in agriculture, while also preparing young people for a changing socio-economic future caused by economic challenges and climate change. Learning about livestock husbandry as well as construction of homes are central to pastoralists' ways of life, but they are not well integrated into the formal or non-formal education systems. In particular, they draw attention to the indigenous forms of knowledge that need to be taught and learned, which are also relevant for their specific environmental and social conditions. Community members also stressed the importance of learning about their culturally specific forms of community governance, conflict resolution, and values of sharing and reciprocity. Through an analysis of the current, official curriculum, they show that these forms of knowledge and skills are insufficiently included in the curriculum, which focuses more broadly on national values and skills to live together. They also call for specific pedagogical approaches used within pastoralist communities for effectively teaching such life skills, including experiential learning, mentorship and apprenticeship, and observation and listening—pedagogical practices that are also mentioned as relevant for young people's life skills for employment by Honeyman et al.

Our concluding chapter, authored by Dana Schmidt, identifies some of the cross-cutting themes of this book. She poignantly argues that:

Youth of today are part of a generation that will grapple with rising levels of inequality, the economic and health fall out of a global pandemic, the near and present danger of climate change, and more challenges which we cannot yet imagine. They need and deserve these skills to have a fighting chance of living life well. We owe it to them to continue working to define and teach these skills, and to do it at scale (p. 277).

Schmidt identifies three important contributions of the volume regarding how to engage life skills education from a critical perspective. First, life skills are especially important for marginalized adolescents, but should not be used as an excuse to put the onus of creating a life well lived entirely upon the individual, particularly not on an individual already marginalized within his or her socioeconomic context. Second, there are some common denominators with respect to which skills are important: clusters of social and emotional skills and cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking stand out. Critical thinking skills related to who holds power in society, and why, emerges as a key requirement to sparking social change. Finally, how life skills are taught may be as important, if not more important, than prescribing a very specific set of skills to teach. Given this, the ways in which teachers are prepared to teach life skills and the skills they themselves embody is crucial.

Conclusions

This book brings together a rich body of literature on life skills education that, we hope going forward, can help policymakers, educators, and practitioners in formal and non-formal education spaces. The analyses in this volume highlight ways to frame, contextualize, and teach life skills for purposes of ensuring that youth can live life better in conditions of precarity, inequality, and injustice. Drawing on critical perspectives and analysis, the authors in this book illustrate that life skills education is shaped by divergent purposes and contexts, not always aligned with what youth and their communities need nor value. By aligning life skills education, its content, and its pedagogies with what is valued for living life well, such education can go a long way toward achieving the goals that the SDGs, governments, organizations, and young people aspire to achieve.

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