

Chapter 4

Reframing Life Skills: From an Individualistic to a Relational Transformative Approach



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Abstract This chapter examines how life skills education draws on a dominant individualistic behavioral approach that aims to teach skills to young people so they can overcome various social and economic problems. Life skills are taught to girls so that they can be empowered to overcome health issues, such as HIV/AIDs or early pregnancy. They are also targeted at boys who are deemed ‘at risk’ of engaging in asocial behaviors in efforts to reduce violence and to contribute to the economy. Yet many of these societal problems are linked to changing social, economic and environmental relations. 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 in a critical and relational approach. Such an approach requires a reframing of skills to consider the values and perspectives that are often implicitly taught, such as individual responsibility and self-promotion, and to reorient these skills around values that youth desire and need within their challenging contexts. It concludes with a discussion of some common life skills and how they can be reframed to achieve transformation in society so youth can live life well – oriented toward greater justice, equality and peace.

Keywords Youth · Life skills · Transformative social learning · Relational

Acronyms

J-PAL	Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

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Introduction

In a non-formal livelihoods program in Tanzania and Uganda for youth who had not completed their secondary education, life skills were taught to young women and men to set goals, to be responsible and conscientious, and to develop confidence so that they could have a livelihood through formal or informal work (DeJaeghere, 2017). Development organizations and program staff assumed that youth who didn't have these life skills, as well as other technical ones, were constrained from working. In another life skills program, young girls in India were learning how to set goals, make decisions, solve problems, and develop their self-esteem so that they would continue in school and not get married early (Arur & DeJaeghere, 2019). Similar to the livelihoods program, donors and staff again assumed that if girls possessed these life skills, they would succeed in school. These programs were teaching life skills to empower young people, to help them achieve at school and in their work. But both of these programs did not necessarily achieve these outcomes for many young people because other conditions also influenced whether youth worked or continued through schooling. These programs shared some common life skills that are deemed important for all youth, but they did not adequately account for the values and perspectives of these young people and their families/communities, nor for the economic and social conditions that affected their ability to live life well, as Murphy-Graham and Cohen (Chap. 2, this volume) describe as a goal for life skills education.

These education programs are based in a dominant narrative that if we teach children and youth life skills, they will be able to solve problems they face, and they will not be a risk to society by being unemployed, married early or involved in illicit activities. Yet many concerns facing young people, including a lack of jobs, social or political conflict, and discrimination and harassment based on sex, race, or other social inequalities, cannot be addressed solely through an individual's ability to set goals, communicate, and make decisions. These skills may be important for everyone to live as a particular kind of educated person (Levinson et al., 1996), but they are insufficient to achieving a broader set of goals for living life well, which includes addressing the social and economic inequalities that many young people face around the world.

There is now a considerable body of literature on life skills education examining its purposes and effects on various outcomes for different groups of youth (see Murphy-Graham & Cohen, Chap. 2, this volume; Brush et al., Chap. 3, this volume). The dominant body of literature frames life skills as individually learned and a psycho-social phenomenon, drawing on psychology, child and youth development, prevention science/health, and economics, as indicated in Murphy-Graham and Cohen's chapter (Chap. 2, this volume). Programs from this perspective teach life skills to decrease risky behaviors as measured by health outcomes, and to increase youth's productivity in society as measured by school and work outcomes. This individual and productive oriented approach does not necessarily question the underlying purpose of these life skills, or the values they purport to represent. In stark contrast, literature from sociological, anthropological, and critical (feminist)

perspectives, including new childhood studies and youth studies, focus on the broader ecology and systems that affect child and youth life outcomes. This socio-cultural and critical perspective emphasizes that educators and policymakers need to consider the larger societal values and systems, including constraints and possibilities within which young people develop and enact life skills. From this perspective, scholars have argued that life skills are not skills per se, but rather they are a set of values, attitudes and beliefs. In most life skills education programs, the values and beliefs are implicit, and they are influenced by dominant discourses and perspectives on what young people are to do and be: healthy and productive youth (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006). But life skills education can also be informed by alternative frameworks that consider broader values and approaches to what it means to live life well.

The introduction chapter to this book (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, Chap. 1, this volume) lays out the critical role that life skills play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that guide education policy and practice. But many questions remain as to how teaching the dominant framing of life skills can achieve broad social outcomes of peace, sustainability and gender equality. This chapter takes up these questions by examining the assumptions and values that underlie life skills education and how these skills can be reframed to address goals of greater justice, equality and peace.

This chapter has two aims. First, it discusses problems related to the dominant conceptualization of life skills and the values therein. I show how different groups of young people are targeted for purposes of achieving individualistic behavioral outcomes, such as teaching “poor” girls life skills to empower them to delay marrying or having children, or teaching out-of-school youth skills to earn a livelihood in a precarious economy, when these life skills tend to responsabilize young people to take control of and improve their own lives. The purpose of learning these skills is to ensure that youth do not become social or economic risks for others, including the state. Such an orientation does little to address the systemic social and economic conditions that create injustices and inequalities. A second aim of this chapter is to offer an alternative framing of life skills based in a critical and relational approach. It explains how a relational worldview and values shift how we think about life skills and how they could be taught and learned. This approach accounts for and aims to transform social relations that create inequalities, violence and injustices that many young people face today. It also requires us to rethink the values needed to live life well.

In the next section, I examine literature that has influenced how life skills are conceptualized and taught in order to illustrate the underlying orientation of an individualistic behavioral approach. By this, I mean that the life skills most commonly identified are those that are individually held values and perspectives that, when acted upon through a person’s behaviors, can achieve desired outcomes such as being healthy, employed, and satisfied with one’s life. My analysis is informed by two studies I have conducted on life skills: one on youth livelihoods programs in East Africa, and the other a life skills program for mostly Dalit (those placed in

lower castes) girls in India, aimed at reducing early marriage¹. While these studies have been written about elsewhere, the findings from these studies informed a critical and relational conceptualization that I describe in the second section (Arur & DeJaeghere, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2019a, b; DeJaeghere et al., 2019). By relational, I mean that these values, perspectives, and skills are situated within relationships with others and within societal structures, and therefore youths' power to enact these skills requires changing unequal relationships to other people and structures. In that section, I also draw on critical sociology, anthropology and youth studies literature to consider how this alternative framing can be used to transform young people's lives and livelihoods. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some common life skills and how they can be reframed to be transformative toward the goals of gender equality, sustainability, and peace.

Life Skills as Individualistic Behaviors for Social and Economic Success

The dominant conceptualization of life skills for over two decades has drawn from an individualistic behavioral orientation that positions young people as being able to learn these skills and use them to achieve desired outcomes – namely, being productive workers through employment, and having appropriate social behaviors that contribute to healthy and peaceful families and communities. This orientation regards young people as lacking these necessary skills, and if they do not accomplish these outcomes, they have not been successful. This has been referred to as a deficit approach to education. For instance, life skills education programs have particularly targeted girls, as well as youth living in poor conditions, in order to achieve greater productivity (through employment) and reduce factors that affect such productivity, including early marriage, pregnancy, and school dropout. Boys have also been recipients of such programs, particularly when they are deemed to be involved in “unproductive” or asocial behaviors. Many of the skills identified two decades ago continue to be taught to achieve similar outcomes, yet the social and economic environments in which youth live are precarious in different ways, and the values they hold for a good life are also shifting.

In the 1990s, the World Health Organization (1999) identified life skills as important for personal and social development, defining them as “psychosocial skills that are required to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (p. 3). They categorized various skills along the domains of cognitive, personal, affective, and social and interpersonal abilities. Years later, UNICEF (2012), in its review of life skills programs, used a similar categorization of skills: cognitive, personal and interpersonal (p. 9), and included 10 specific skills that

¹These studies were approved by the ethics review board of the University of Minnesota, and they followed ethical guidelines for research with young people in these specific contexts.

young people should learn. Interpersonal skills (and sometimes referred to as social skills, see Gates et al., 2016) refer to collaboration, negotiation, and communication, while intrapersonal, or socio-emotional skills, include confidence, motivation, coping with emotions/stress, and persistence. Cognitive skills consist of decision-making and problem-solving, as well as critical and creative thinking. While the current literature reviewing life skills programs states that there is still contestation over which skills are important for, and effective toward, achieving different outcomes, there is considerable agreement on these broad categories and these specific skills (see Gates et al., 2016).

The teaching of certain life skills, such as motivation or communication, is widely regarded as necessarily positive in fostering the ability to live life well. Rarely considered, however, are value orientations and social relations of power that might be implicated in the use of these skills in different settings. For instance, learning to communicate with others who have perpetrated violence of which one was a victim is different than communicating with others to be hired for a new job. Research and educational programs also tend to focus on the more easily, and individually, taught skills that can be seen through individually observable behaviors rather than socially enacted and value-laden skills for achieving complex social outcomes, such as communicating to reduce violence (Gates et al., 2016; Heckman, et al., 2006; Kautz, et al., 2014).

Both the WHO's and UNICEF's reviews of life skills noted that they are universally relevant and are important to promote broader social outcomes, including gender equality, good citizenship, and peace – all elements taken up in the SDGs. They also state that life skills are necessary for young people in order to prevent or address violence, conflict and environmental issues (WHO, 1999, p. 4) or “to deal with specific risks ... [such as] sexual and reproductive health and ... disaster risk reduction” (UNICEF, 2012, p. viii). But teaching these skills carries a set of assumptions that youth can use them to avoid, change, or be resilient against these economic, social, or environmental risks. In order to achieve these desired outcomes, life skills education has tended to focus on two different groups with slightly different assumptions about the desired outcomes. First are programs that assume life skills can empower girls by teaching them skills of communication, negotiation, self-esteem and decision-making that will delay marriage and child-birth and improve their chances of becoming educated and employed. Another set of programs focuses on boys, teaching them socio-emotional skills, confidence, and coping with stress, in efforts to improve their employment, reduce poverty and conflict, and foster peace.

Life Skills Education for Girls

As discussed in Murphy-Graham and Cohen's, Pacheco Montoya and Murphy-Graham's, Sahni's, and Kwauk's chapters in this book, girls have often been recipients of life skills education to achieve the goals of gender empowerment and eliminating gender inequalities. But these larger goals are to be achieved through

short-term objectives, such as reducing early marriage, fostering sexual health (and reducing early pregnancy), and improving employment. In a recent report on non-formal education programs of life skills for adolescent girls, Dupuy et al. (2018) identified five areas of positive outcomes for girls: (1) psycho-social and attitudinal outcomes, (2) health and relationships, (3) early marriage, (4) economic skills, and (5) cognitive skills. Teaching skills for these outcomes often focus on behaviors as immediate outcomes, such as setting goals for future work, but the link between an individual girl's behavior and being successful in her life and livelihoods, as the report indicates, is less clear. For example, girls may acquire economic skills, but whether they are able to use them toward employment and earning in different contexts requires attention to social and economic values and structures that inhibit or provide these opportunities.

A common approach to teaching life skills is to focus on individual behaviors that can be learned and changed. This point is further exemplified in how life skills are defined, and then conceptualized and enacted through programs. Dupuy et al.'s (2018) review of life skills programs for girls further illustrates the individualistic behavioral orientation:

[they are] tools for achieving positive change. For instance, decision-making and problem-solving skills enable *individuals to assess options* for courses of action, as well as the effects of these different options, and to deal constructively with problems. Creative and critical thinking skills *empower individuals to analyze* information, explore alternatives, and respond adaptively to situations. Through communication and interpersonal skills, *individuals can positively express themselves* verbally and non-verbally. Self-awareness and empathy entail recognition and understanding of the self and others, while *coping skills allow individuals to manage* negative emotions and stress (pp. 10–11, my emphasis).

The report recognizes that girls are particularly challenged by poverty and gender discrimination, but with these life skills they are expected to “overcome these challenges” (Dupuy et al., 2018, p. 1). This means that girls are expected to create opportunities within, or even change, the same social and economic environments that produce the challenges and inequalities they face.

While formal schooling for girls, and life skills education specifically, can foster higher academic outcomes, lower marriage and birth rates, enable future employment, and support a healthy family (e.g., Herz & Sperling, 2004; Mirdrikvand et al., 2016; Paghale et al., 2014; Schultz, 2002), these outcomes are not synonymous with achieving gender equality, sustainable livelihoods, or a non-violent society (see Chisamya et al., 2012; Kwauk & Braga, 2017; Moeller, 2014). The onus to address these societal issues is placed on girls and their skills to change society themselves (Vavrus, 2002). Considerable literature on girls' education and gender inequalities has raised the concern that educating girls alone cannot create transformative change, yet the renewed focus on life skills for girls is another iteration of seeking educational solutions to do so (Kabeer, 1999; Stromquist, 2015). Kwauk and Braga (2017), writing about a framework of girls' life skills for social change, state that life skills literature and programs do “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” (p. 7). Despite raising these concerns, the dominant approaches to life skills do not conceptually or in practice create much engagement with unequal power structures and relations that disadvantage girls (see also Kwauk, Chap. 5, this volume).

Life Skills Education for Boys

Life skills education also targets boys and young men for the purposes of changing asocial behaviors that will, in turn, reduce violence (see Blattman, et al., 2015; Herrenkohl et al., 2012), and engage them in productive work (see programs discussed by Honeyman et al., Chap. 6, this volume). Programs that focus on “at risk” and asocial behaviors teach young boys and men to learn emotion management, such as coping with stress, as well as conflict management. The aim is to reduce asocial behaviors in society, and in turn, foster peaceful and sustainable livelihoods. Here again, the dominant approach comes from literature in psychology, prevention science, and youth development, which identifies specific attitudes and behaviors associated with engaging in or preventing youth from these risks (e.g., Blattman et al., 2015; Herrenkohl et al., 2012). While many programs have multiple components to address attitudes and behaviors linked with engaging in violence, such as gangs and terrorism, teaching life skills is a critical one.

A review by J-PAL (2017) of what they call non-cognitive (or life) skills training programs showed mixed results in affecting asocial behaviors in the short and long-term. For example, one program in Liberia offered cognitive behavioral therapy and/or cash to men who were involved in crime, violence, or drugs, in order to see if and how each intervention reduced these asocial behaviors. Both interventions targeted individual behaviors by teaching men to think and respond to situations that put them “at risk” (through cognitive behavioral therapy) and by fostering individual choices about spending money for their livelihoods. They did not find consistent reduction in asocial behaviors, though the therapy seemed promising if followed by cash, but not alone (Blattman et al., 2015). A different study used similar approaches of teaching conflict and emotion management and goal setting to young men in Chicago who were unemployed and participating in crime. It did not find an effect of the therapy program, though other aspects of the program (employment) seemed to have an effect on reducing arrests for violent crimes (Heller, 2014). These examples illustrate the complexity of changing attitudes and behaviors to effect social change, such as to reduce violence. Furthermore, programs often do not take a structural or ecological approach to addressing social concerns of violence or unsustainable livelihoods. Rather, these programs assumed that if young men learned how to control their emotions or to manage conflict, violence will be reduced. This approach did not attend to the complex nature of structural violence (including poverty, racism, and shame) that constrains the possibilities for a peaceful community and sustainable livelihood.

In another recent review of strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism, Kelly (2019) found that some programs working with youth in conflict settings, such as Somalia or West Africa, may reduce the “risk factors”, or types of behaviors related to conflict, by providing counseling and teaching peaceful attitudes and behaviors, but the long-term impacts are not discernible. The review noted that some programs concentrated on the individual level factors for engaging in extremism but neglected the structural causes, including state-induced conflict, disenfranchisement, unemployment, and other violations of rights.

Finally, a key goal for life skills programs targeting youth (both boys and girls, but often boys) living in poor conditions or who are socially and economically marginalized is to promote employment and reduce poverty. For example, a key aim of the USAID YouthPower Initiative is to develop life skills for employment (Gates et al., 2016; Honeyman et al., Chap. 6, this volume; Lippman et al., 2015). This use of life skills education has been particularly supported by economics research that has shown positive effects of some life skills, such as communication and self-control, on securing employment or increasing income (e.g., Heckman et al., 2006). But increasing employment and earnings, particularly in precarious economies characterized by growing non-formal sector employment, necessity entrepreneurship, and little expansion in the formal labor market and social sector, is not the same as a sustainable livelihood. The ILO defines decent work as that which is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize, and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men (International Labour Organization, 2015). Life skills programs tend to focus on helping youth to attain employment, rather than how employers, workplaces and the government can provide for decent work and wellbeing through such employment.

Youth employability and employment programs that include life skills also show mixed results, even on the short-term measures of increasing employment or income (Olenik and Fawcett, 2013). Furthermore, there is little evidence of how life skills specifically affect workforce outcomes (Gates et al., 2016). Most programs assume that intrapersonal skills, such as self-confidence or persistence, are helpful to finding and retaining work, but the link between these skills and outcomes is tenuous. For instance, Alcid (2014) and DeJaeghere et al. (2019) show how having these skills and then securing employment do not ensure that young people are able to continue working long-term, or be paid fair wages. Decent work or sustainable livelihoods for youth living in contexts of poverty are affected by many other factors, including a lack of education/training certification, discrimination, as well as unpredictable labor markets and few social supports (See Lefebvre, et al., 2018). Therefore, this individualistic behavioral orientation to life skills for employment misses many other factors that affect sustainable livelihoods (DeJaeghere, et al., 2019).

Much of the literature on life skills education concludes with a call for more research on identifying necessary skills and how they are taught to different groups

of young people to attain the outcomes of employment/poverty reduction, gender equality, and a reduction in violence. This approach is primarily technocratic, instrumentalist, and individualistic, often assuming a neutral orientation to these skills. Programs assume that these individually-focused life skills are the right skills for marginalized youth to achieve particular outcomes that help build a more stable and productive society. While seemingly neutral, this approach is embedded in values that deem these particular skills and goals as important for living life well. But living well for many marginalized youth is more than having work, not getting pregnant, or not engaging in crime; it is about having a sustainable livelihood, being in a relationship characterized by gender equality, or living securely and in peace.

Within the dominant approach's definitions and application of life skills, there is insufficient consideration of how youth, equipped with these skills, can transform complex social problems. This requires another orientation, one that is imbued with the value that teaching life skills is for the purpose of creating a more just and equitable society, if young people are to live life well. The next section offers a transformative perspective on how to define and teach life skills to achieve these broader social aims.

Life Skills as Relational and Transformative

Outside life skills education, there is a growing body of scholarship and educational practice focused on how economic and social relations affect young people's livelihoods and wellbeing amidst economic, social, and ecological adversity. This literature comes from a variety of perspectives, including new childhood studies (or the new sociology of childhood) (e.g., Maithreyi, 2019); youth studies, and particularly critical perspectives and youth activism (e.g., DeJaeghere et al., 2019; Taft, 2010); and anthropological studies of education and youth (e.g., Mains, 2012). This body of literature offers a social-cultural explanation of the knowledge and skills youth learn and use within their communities, and therefore it shows what is valued and why for living within the community. It is skeptical of labeling youth as "at risk", recognizing that this tends to characterize the individual in a deficit way, while overlooking the societal factors that shape how young people can live a good life (Maithreyi, 2017, 2019). Finally, these studies are concerned with relational aspects of young people's lives – how the social, economic, and environmental relations, both local and global, have influence on youth's ability to attain a sustainable livelihood and to live life well. These studies suggest that education – and life skills – should be oriented toward transforming connections, including unequal power relations, among humans as well as between humans and their environment, so that young people can achieve a good life – one that is characterized by collective wellbeing and solidarity.

What is a relational approach to education, and specifically to life skills? And how can it be transformative to address social and economic inequalities that constrain youth from living life well? A relational approach assumes that humans live

and learn always in relation to others and their environment. This approach does not refer to the kinds of relations we have with others, such as good or trusting relationships, though these are important to learn from a life skills perspective. Rather, it is used analytically to consider how our lives interconnect with others, as well as the material and social world around us, and to examine how power is used to either oppress or transform these relations (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1988; see also DeJaeghere, 2019a). Analyzing these relationships allows us to see dependencies, both equal and unequal, that can result (Ferguson, 2013). A relational approach is present in worldviews among African and Indigenous peoples. For instance, Le Grange (2012, p. 61) refers to *ubuntu* – a worldview embedded in many communities in Africa that means “humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others” – as a relational way of living and being in the world. He argues that it is a value that can be taught through education to restore the suffering not only of the self, but also of society and nature. In this way, these relations are not only human, but also with non-human aspects of our societies, including the economy and the environment. While this chapter does not allow for a deeper discussion of a relational approach to education, its aim is to rethink life skills education and how it can consider the different relations (human and non-human) that can foster a good life.

This relational perspective was also evident in the youth’s lives in the studies in East Africa and India that I led (Arur & DeJaeghere, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2019b). For instance, these life skills programs taught young women to be self-confident in their skills so that they could be employed or earn a livelihood. They could use this confidence to influence how others saw them and their abilities to work. But community members and the material environment around them also affected whether they were confident or how they used their skills. For example, if an employer pays a young woman less than others, her material environment and these social relations do not value her in the same way as they value others. Therefore, her confidence is dependent on the social or material environment in which she enacts it. In this example, teaching confidence as a life skill requires examining the social relations and material structures that affect a young woman’s understanding of and realization of her particular goals. This may mean that life skills programs should not only teach young girls, but they must also consider and work with others in their environment to create change so that young women can have more just and equitable livelihoods.

This framing and teaching of life skills as relational is concerned not only with how people’s lives are dependent on others in order to live life well; it also attends to the kind of changes needed in their environments in order to live life well. Dupuy et al. (2018) note that life skills should create positive change, but they do not specify whether this is individual or social change, nor the type of change. In contrast, Kwauk and Braga (2017) call for conceptualizing life skills so that they can achieve transformative change between the individual girl and her social, political, and economic environment, and particularly through collective action that might transform inequalities that girls face. This means that life skills education needs to consider the relations that inhibit young people from achieving a good life. Life skills educators also need to understand what it means to live life well from youth’s perspective

rather than assuming it means being employed or delaying marriage, or some other desired outcome.

Redefining Life Skills Toward Achieving Justice

If the goals of education, and life skills as a component of it, include fostering well-being, justice and sustainable livelihoods as the SDGs suggest (Walker, 2012), then we need to think more expansively about life skills – how they are learned and enacted, for whom and for what kind of social changes (see also DeJaeghere, et al., 2016). Transformative social learning offers one way to reframe life skills, and how and for what purposes they are taught (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Reed et al., 2010). Social learning draws on a relational approach because it regards learning as constitutive of the social life and environments in which we live. Furthermore, it recognizes that education can either work to reproduce or change social structures and norms that create inequalities. The transformative component of social learning is oriented toward creating equitable and just ways for all to live a good life (e.g., Murphy-Graham, 2012). This use of transformative social learning calls attention to how we think about and teach life skills relationally as well as the outcomes desired from learning them.

Reframing life skills relationally and transformatively requires changing what we call these skills and how we assume they are learned, and in turn, reimagining ways to teach these skills through social processes. In Table 4.1 below, I suggest ways to relabel and reframe several life skills found throughout the literature through a relational approach. These relational skills are not ideal forms; they are found in empirical examples of young people’s lives as they navigate and negotiate their precarious and uncertain worlds (Correa & Murphy-Graham, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2017). For example, Correa and Murphy-Graham (2019) illustrate how a program that aims to improve processes of community life, meaning those aspects of community life that are valued to live a good life, teaches young people transformative agency. Here, transformative agency is not only about individual skills and actions, but acting within and upon their own environments to improve them. This example

Table 4.1 Redefining a set of transformative life skills

Common life skills	Transformative life skills
Self-concept and self-esteem	Dignity (through recognition of value) of species (persons, non-humans)
Self-motivation (and goal orientation)	Collective aspirations
Responsibility	Reciprocity – mutual dependence
Positive attitude; optimism	Hope
Empathy	Solidarity – mutual support and care

suggests that transformative social learning of life skills requires a form of agency that is collective and oriented toward community wellbeing.

What might these transformative life skills be? How can we redefine and teach common skills such, as self-esteem, self-motivation, and responsibility, among others, through a transformative social learning process? Self-esteem is regarded in many life skills education programs as necessary for achieving life outcomes, particularly for out-of-school and other marginalized youth. Brush et al. (Chap. 3, this volume) refer to self-esteem as a domain of identity – as shaping how young people view themselves. Expanding on this, Dupuy et al. (2018) suggest this concept is linked to how young people process information they receive from others about themselves and the forms of status that others attribute to them. Both of these points suggest that ‘self’-esteem or ‘self’-concept is not individually developed; it is fostered in relations with others and the environment. If one’s self-esteem is linked to how status is attributed, then it can also be negatively affected in an environment of racism, gender inequalities, or marginalization.

A transformative life skill approach might focus on how other people in the community regard young people as having dignity and value, or as having esteem, which shifts the focus from the individual to society. Seeing young people as valued may, in turn, allow them access to social and economic opportunities from which they had been excluded. Fostering dignity requires a different engagement with and response from people and institutions who do not value youth and regard them as “Others” – as poor, at risk, and delinquent. This means that life skills programs and pedagogy need to understand why some youth are “Othered”. For example, youth who had not completed their secondary school in Tanzania were regarded as idle and not able to contribute to their community. Developing dignity for these youth meant helping them identify how they could contribute and what gave them a sense of dignity, as well as what conditions in their environment gave them a sense of indignity. Then the program fostered connections with others in the community, and worked to develop trusting relationships with them. As community members learned more about the youth, they saw them in new ways and valued them and their contributions. In sum, they regarded the youth as a person with value and esteem (DeJaeghere, 2019a, 2019b).

Another life skill that is particularly linked with workforce development is to teaching young people self-motivation: to develop goals so that they can achieve their education and be employed. Goal-setting and the steps to achieve goals are often taught in life skills programs (see examples in Honeyman, et al., Chap. 6, this volume; and Kwauk, Chap. 5, this volume). But when goals are not achieved, young people are either blamed for not being motivated enough, or they adjust their goals to something that is achievable, often regarded as more realistic but not what they aspired to. Self-motivation is an important attribute, but it may not be sufficient to obtain work in a precarious economy or to have a fair and just working environment.

A transformative approach to self-motivation might include identifying collective aspirations that are shared with and supported by others, and which are oriented toward achieving more just and sustainable livelihoods. Such aspirations take into account, as Appadurai (2004) has argued, that notions of the future are situated

within the interactive and contested spaces of culture, or what young people can be and do with their family, peers, and community. Critical to the process of identifying collective aspirations is to develop a sense of them being shared, and if they are not shared, then there needs to be the space for debate about how to address the obstacles to achieving them. While not all collective aspirations are achieved, the process of identifying and working together on goals allows youth to support each other emotionally, socially, and even financially. Tzenis' (2019) study of Somali youth in the US offers pedagogical practices for how aspirations can be identified and discussed in relation to collective concerns of families, communities, and young people. She used an identity wheel to help youth discern what was important to them, and how these different identities related to their future aspirations. In this case, a youth's goal to pursue further education and become a doctor was informed by the needs and the history of her family and of Somali refugees; these goals did not come solely from within. While becoming a doctor may or may not be eventually achieved, her goals were supported by her family and other youth who shared similar aspirations for how they would use their education to help others.

Responsibility is another core skill included in life skills education programs to achieve various outcomes, including employment/livelihoods, peace, and sustainable development. Honeyman et al. (Chap. 6, this volume) note it as one of the key skills identified in the USAID study on youth workforce success. Teaching responsibility includes attending to related skills like self-control (over one's behaviors), as well as values that support youth to engage in pro-social, or socially acceptable and responsible behavior (see Brush et al., Chap. 3, this volume, on these related values). But teaching responsibility to young people who face injustices and precarity is based upon the assumption that certain kinds of pro-social behaviors – such as the skill to take care of oneself – will fix the failures of the economic, social and political systems that have left some youth marginalized.

A transformative life skill would be responsible solidarity, or reciprocity among people living and working together, which contrasts with an individualized notion of responsibility (Miller & Rose, 2008). Reframing this skill as reciprocity orients one toward caring for others, and in turn, one is also cared for (see more below on solidarity, which is a related life skill). This notion of reciprocity is also grounded in the ethos of *ubuntu*, discussed above, as a way to reframe life skills as relational. As such, reciprocity requires a different value orientation to how youth think about themselves and others, and how they can achieve a good life. Much education, and particularly life skills education for employability and entrepreneurship, teaches a young person to take responsibility for their own employment, to care for themselves, and to ensure their own wellbeing. Reciprocity requires thinking about and engaging with others to improve a collective wellbeing, including generating and sharing wealth together. Yet, as both Brush et al. (Chap. 3, this volume) and Kwauk (Chap. 5, this volume) find in their review of life skills programs, many do not attend to values that are needed to address today's societal problems. Or certain values, such as competition and individual advancement, are implicitly fostered through such skills training when developing responsibility. Furthermore, from our studies in East Africa and India, the value of reciprocity is already part of daily life,

but it needs to be strengthened among youth who are marginalized. Kwauk (Chap. 5, this volume) also proposes the related skill of giving back, or of sharing knowledge and skills to contribute to the community, which was promoted in some sports life skills programs.

Positive attitude is another desired characteristic for youth that enables their participation in society as good citizens. Brush et al. (Chap. 3, this volume) and Kwauk (Chap. 5, this volume) refer to this as a perspective of optimism, and how we view and approach the world. An individualized approach, however, places the onus on young people to create a positive attitude, or to feel optimistic, even when life is filled with violence, discrimination, and uncertainty. And yet whether a youth has a positive attitude is certainly influenced by the possibilities and opportunities, or lack therefore, available to them. A transformational approach to this skill is fostering hope. Hope is future-oriented, based in a shared sense of a better world. Hope is not only an internal perspective or feeling; it is cultivated through relationships. Mains' (2012) study of young Ethiopian men illustrates that hope for their future is embedded in a complex network of relationships in which they are regarded as dignified through social and economic relationships with others. Through these relationships, they can maintain hope for their future. Without these relationships that shape who they are and can be, they are deemed hopeless, future-less, and without dignity. Mains (2012) also shows how an orientation that fosters hope through social relationships contrasts with the current economic and social order that glorifies individualized self-esteem and privately-owned wealth, thereby producing inequalities. Hope, like dignity, collective aspirations, and reciprocity, needs to be cultivated through life skills education by discussing values and fostering relationships that are important for a good life. Kwauk's chapter adds some important perspectives that need to be cultivated that may also foster hope, including resourcefulness to navigate barriers and map out opportunities, and understanding and using power effectively. These skills offer a way to negotiate challenges toward living life well.

Empathy is included in most life skills programs as a component of emotional skills. Brush et al. (Chap. 3, this volume) include it in their mapping of life skills programs as managing emotions in relation to others and responding to others in pro-social ways. Empathy, therefore, has both an affective and cognitive component for understanding how someone else is feeling (Lippman et al., 2015). But in their review of studies on the relationship of empathy with violence, Lippman et al. (2013) find that the affective element is more important than the cognitive understanding of another person's life. The focus on empathy in life skills programs is often directed at others, and yet for marginalized youth, they may be the victims of such violence. For instance, Honeyman et al. (Chap. 6, this volume) note that a program for victims of violence had to shift their focus so that the young people not only learned how to adapt to others, but also how to prioritize their own health and safety.

A transformational approach to empathy considers the relations that inhibit a young person from living life well. This can be fostered through the value and behaviors of solidarity. Solidarity means that one's life and wellbeing is intimately connected with others' wellbeing. It is more than the ability to understand another's

feelings; it requires seeing how another's experiences are connected with one's own and then taking actions of care to challenge injustices. For example, youth in East Africa who participated in a life skills program to foster livelihoods/entrepreneurship exemplified this value. When they were able to earn from their work, they often spoke about using their earnings to help others who couldn't earn at that time. They felt empathy – an understanding of another's situation – but they also valued and acted upon the idea of solidarity, or the sense that if they care for someone now, they will also be cared for in the future and everyone will have a better life. To cultivate this value and behaviors, educational pedagogies and activities can focus on care and solidarity to show how our lives are intertwined with and affected by one another. Zembylas et al. (2014) show how such care can be fostered through critical pedagogies; they argue that care links concepts of power, emotion, and responsibility to change social and economic structures that inhibit living a good life.

In sum, reconceptualizing these life skills is an attempt to reconsider the underlying values and assumptions of self-esteem, responsibility, and self-motivation, among others, which place an onus on youth's individual behaviors and efforts to achieve living life well. These individualistic life skills may be important in some contexts and for achieving certain outcomes, but they are not sufficient to transform the social, economic, and environmental precarity and inequalities that affect so many youth's lives. This orientation is also not incompatible with many of the life skills programs discussed in this book. These chapters have illustrated the important need to contextualize life skills within the broader social and cultural values of a society, as well as with regard to the specific inequalities that affect youth.

If life skills education programs are to achieve the SDG goals set out in target 4.7 that reference knowledge and skills for sustainable development, including sustainable livelihoods, gender equality, and peace, then we need to think about and enact transformative social learning, as Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) have called for. This requires more than individually learning knowledge, skills, and attitudes; it requires shifting our ways of thinking about education as it interfaces with society, and the specific pedagogies and practices we use. Finally, teaching life skills from this relational perspective means they are applicable to all children and youth to live life well, not only those who are marginalized in an effort to catch them up or get them out of poverty. If living life well includes how we relate to others in our communities, including the material and ecological environment, then developing collective aspirations, hope, solidarity, and dignity are important life skills for all of us.

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