BUILDING YOUTH
LIFE SKILLS

8 Tips for Practitioners

Basic Needs Kenya, CorStone - Photo by PSIPSE/Zachary Rosen

There is growing recognition that youth need more than academic knowledge to transition successfully into employment and adulthood (Dupuy et al. 2018). They also need "life skills," a set of cognitive, personal, and interpersonal strengths that position them for success in their lives and livelihoods. Life skills can enhance young people's agency and resilience, improve their psychosocial well-being, and predict a range of long-term outcomes, including health, job performance, and wages (Kwauk et al. 2018; OECD 2018, Kautz et al. 2014). The Partnership to Strengthen Innovation and Practice in Secondary Education (PSIPSE), a donor collaborative, has invested in 18 projects to strengthen life skills in young people. This brief offers eight lessons based on the experiences of these projects—on the design, delivery, measurement, and scale-up of youth life skills programming in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

1 **Systematically diagnose the life skills youth need.** Clarifying goals, and targets en route to those goals, is an important step in building and improving the effectiveness of any program. But it is particularly vital in life skills programming. Clearly identifying an intervention's target life skills is critical because definitions of life skills may vary across program stakeholders—there is no existing consensus on what types of competencies life skills constitute. The PSIPSE experience reveals two useful approaches for pinpointing target life skills. Some grantees developed strong theories of change by mapping backwards from goals to intermediate outcomes to the capabilities youth need to achieve those outcomes. For example, CorStone identified external structural barriers that students in rural India face—such as the lack of a strong adult role model or safe school environment—and worked backwards to identify the personal assets needed to navigate those conditions. Others used needs assessments to identify target skills. For instance, Education Development Center (EDC) gathered information from work force development experts on the skills youth in East and West Africa need to engage in typical entry-level job tasks.
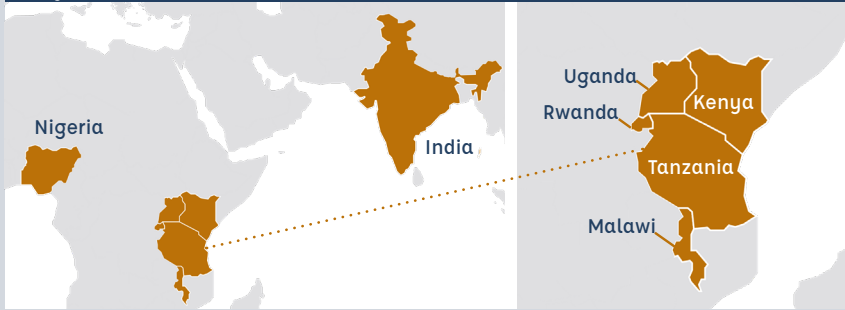
2 **Modify how core subjects are taught if developing life skills across a large population, but opt for standalone life skills sessions to meet the needs of smaller, marginalized groups.**

PSIPSE grantees adopted one of two approaches to cultivate life skills in their target populations—focusing on teachers or students. Some worked within the education system—by training teachers to modify teaching practices. For example, one grantee, GESCI, is training teachers on using ICT to enrich their teaching and develop students' cognitive skills (such as critical thinking and problem-solving) and non-cognitive skills (such as collaboration and communication). This approach supports scale-up—as teacher trainings on learner-centered methods that develop life skills can be cascaded within and across schools to reach large numbers of classrooms. In contrast, other grantees offer standalone sessions, after school or on weekends, to train students. This approach is less easily scaled up. However, with its specialized support and mentorship focus, it fosters the growth of a broader range of capabilities, including personal strengths and other interpersonal skills (such as negotiation), which are of paramount importance for vulnerable youth populations. The African Population and Health Research Center has leveraged this approach—conducting mentor-led academic and life skills support sessions for youth in Nairobi's urban slums to not only to strengthen literacy and numeracy, but also to build self-awareness, relationship skills, and social awareness. Practitioners working with clearly defined marginalized groups like these may want to opt for standalone life skills programming.

For the full report summarizing findings from the PSIPSE life skills study, go to **www.psipse.org/library.**

PSIPSE
The Partnership to Strengthen Innovation and Practice in Secondary Education

Mathematica

SNAPSHOT OF PSIPSE LIFE SKILLS PROJECTS

Project locations

Nigeria

India

Uganda
Rwanda
Kenya
Tanzania
Malawi

Target populations

Upper-primary to secondary students

Marginalized groups, such as out-of-school youth, refugees, teenage mothers, and children from urban slums

Project goals

Support primary-to-secondary transition → Facilitate school completion → Improve academic learning outcomes → Prepare youth for employment

EMPOWER YOUTH TO BECOME INDEPENDENT, SUCCESSFUL ADULTS

Intervention features

- The majority of PSIPSE life skills projects delivered standalone life skills sessions outside of the classroom
- A smaller subset of PSIPSE projects delivered life skills development through core academic subjects, by training teachers on active learning techniques or modifying examinations to test for life skills

Integration with other intervention approaches

Life skills development was the sole focus of some projects; others paired life skills development with other interventions, including:

Hard/vocational skills training

Coaching in academic subjects

Career awareness programming

Parental sensitization

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3 **Incentivize teachers to cultivate life skills while teaching core subjects—by leveraging other aspects of the educational system.** The work of one grantee underscores the value of leveraging existing education structures to promote life skills development. The Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE) is partnering with the Uganda National Examinations Board to introduce test items into the Uganda Certificate of Education examinations that require students to exercise higher order thinking skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and imagination. This approach seeks to leverage the existing practice of "teaching to the test" to facilitate life skills development. It recognizes that teachers in many LMICs are accountable—first and foremost—for helping students pass and perform well in critical examinations. It accordingly hypothesizes that modifying the content of these examinations will drive teachers to change their focus. That is, embedding questions into examinations that test for higher order thinking skills could incentivize teachers to cultivate these skills in their students. It remains to be seen whether this approach is effective and, if so, which types of life skills are amenable to this type of testing. However, if successful, this approach holds promise to become part of a comprehensive strategy to develop life skills in youth and also to fuel creative thinking around how other features of educational systems can be leveraged to foster life skills development.

4 **To increase program efficiency, recruit teachers to conduct standalone life skills sessions, but provide rigorous capacity-building to ensure they act as good facilitators.** Experiences across PSIPSE projects indicate that the ideal mentors to lead life skills sessions have high emotional intelligence (EQ), an ability to understand and connect with youth experiences, adequate time to devote to mentorship, and strong facilitation skills. Mentors hired from the community often fulfill several of these criteria. This led Plan International, for example, to hire local individuals in their 20s and 30s who demonstrated strong intuition and ability to engage with young people. However, other grantees found that community-based mentors can sometimes be unreliable; CEDA International experienced significant attrition among the local women conducting its social and leadership skills sessions. One solution—implemented by CEDA and others—is to employ teachers. A key challenge, however, is to get teachers to "walk back" their inclination to teach and instead learn to facilitate. PSIPSE grantees' experiences indicate that extensive capacity-building is needed to grow this skill. Their trainings have focused on helping teachers to: listen more and talk less, step down from their "dominant" position and operate at the same "level" as students, and craft opportunities for students to exercise budding life skills.

5 **To prepare youth for employment, combine life skills interventions with hard skills or vocational training and other direct linkages to the work force.** Life skills programming may be a tough sell for youth and their parents who might be uncertain about the tangible advantages that these skills yield. To alleviate this concern and increase the demand for their programs, organizations can integrate life skills programming with technical skill-building interventions, such as vocational training, on-the-job training, and internship placements. This strategy also offers youth a platform to

LIFE SKILLS PSIPSE PROJECTS SEEK TO CULTIVATE

COGNITIVE SKILLS	PERSONAL STRENGTHS	INTERPERSONAL SKILLS
· Critical thinking · Problem solving · Decision making · Planning · Learning to learn · Creativity · Imagination	· Self-realization · Self-awareness · Self-esteem · Self-management · Confidence · Taking initiative · Expressing feelings · Managing strong emotions · Dependability	· Communication · Negotiation · Conflict resolution · Teamwork · Social awareness · Listening skills · Debate

apply and strengthen their life skills and in some cases helps them obtain long-term employment. Research shows that combined hard-and-soft skills programs can be highly effective. In the PSIPSE context, a quasi-experimental evaluation of Educate!'s hybrid program found it had tangible impacts on employment outcomes, with treatment youth 11 percent more likely to own a business.

6 **Build strong evaluations into life skills programs that are beyond the pilot stage—to inform program improvement and scale-up and advance the knowledge base.** The evidence base on life skills programming is still growing, with further exploration needed of: (1) the effectiveness of life skills programming in improving academic performance, psychosocial outcomes, success in the informal labor market, violence prevention, and long-term health and employment outcomes, (2) the variable effects of different types of life skills on target outcomes, and (3) the ideal conditions for the implementation and scale-up of life skills programming. Organizations offering life skills programs have the opportunity to address these limitations by embedding rigorous evaluations into their interventions (ideally those that have been piloted already and have a solid model in place.) Evaluations will enable practitioners to improve and scale their interventions, contribute to the evidence base, and ultimately influence how a broad swath of other organizations approach life skills development.

7 **Advocate for program scale-up at the right time, using appropriate vocabulary and persuasive evidence.** As countries begin to pay greater attention to life skills development, and develop needed policies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have the opportunity to promote the scale-up of promising elements of their life skills programming. To conduct successful scale-up outreach, it is vital to use the right vocabulary to discuss life skills and "make them real" for policymakers. CorStone, which builds youth "resilience", used terms like character strengths and values when explaining its program to government officials in Kenya, and even used folk stories to explain key concepts. Also critical in making the case for program scale-up is the generation and strategic dissemination of rigorous evidence of program effectiveness.

8 **Carefully streamline program components for scale through government, without diluting them.** Government officials responsible for scaling an NGO's program typically have

less time to devote to the program than NGO staff do, and potentially less experience in cultivating life skills. Therefore, when organizations gear up to transition their life skills programs to the government, it is crucial that key program elements–such as training facilitators, offering ongoing support, and monitoring progress–be simplified. This focus on streamlining closely guides CorStone's scale-up efforts. As it partners with government to expand its model across Bihar, India, it is shifting from a model in which its master trainers lead in-person trainings to an approach where government trainers share video demonstrations and facilitate discussion around them. While streamlining is key to efficient scale-up, it is imperative not to oversimplify programs, given that life skills development takes time and skilled facilitation. For this reason, EDC is trying to ensure that local trainers continue to support teachers as its entrepreneurship curriculum is rolled out across Rwandan schools. To develop a scale-up model that is streamlined but still robust, organizations need to identify upfront the minimum program dosage needed to deliver impacts at scale.

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