

# BUILDING YOUTH LIFE SKILLS

## 6 Lessons for Government Officials



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### SNAPSHOT OF PSIPSE LIFE SKILLS PROJECTS

#### GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS



#### GOALS

Projects adopted one or more of these:

- (1) To increase transition rates into secondary
- (2) To facilitate school completion
- (3) To improve academic learning outcomes
- (4) To prepare youth for employment

All projects aimed to empower youth to become independent, successful adults.

#### TARGET LIFE SKILLS

Cognitive skills (e.g. critical thinking)  
Interpersonal skills (e.g. teamwork)  
Personal strengths (e.g. self-awareness)

#### INTERVENTION APPROACHES

PSIPSE grantees adopted one of two approaches to cultivate life skills—focusing on teachers or the youth themselves. Some worked within the education system—training and incentivizing teachers to adopt new teaching practices that help strengthen youth life skills. Others worked “outside” of the education system—conducting standalone sessions, after school or on weekends, to train youth directly.

#### INTEGRATION WITH OTHER INTERVENTIONS

Life skill interventions were often paired with other strategies to advance project goals, such as vocational training, career awareness programming, parental sensitization, and coaching in academic subjects.

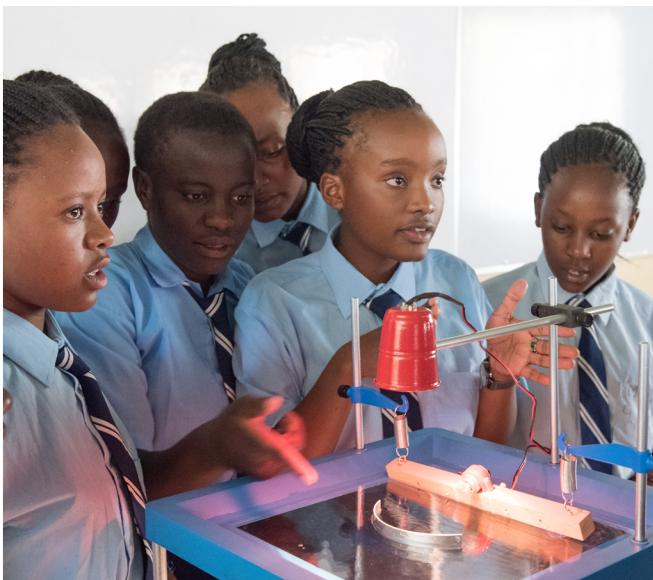
There is growing recognition that youth need more than academic knowledge and technical expertise to transition successfully into employment and adulthood (Dupuy et al. 2018). They also need “life skills,” a set of cognitive, personal, and interpersonal strengths that position them for success in their 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 that focus on developing life skills among youth (see left). Mathematica, the PSIPSE’s learning partner, recently conducted an in-depth study of these projects. The study used interviews with implementing organizations, an extensive review of project documents and evaluation reports, and high-level literature and landscape scans to examine project experiences, set them in context, and draw out lessons for a range of stakeholders. This brief summarizes the lessons for government officials—on how to successfully devise, roll out, scale, and strengthen life skills policies for youth in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs).

#### Use needs assessments to inform the development of life skills policies.

Governments committed to strengthening life skills among youth have characterized these skills in a variety of ways. Some take a values approach, seeking to inculcate in youth tenets such as respect for others, honesty, and humility. Others focus on content, providing information on topics such as gender, sexual violence, HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse that can position youth to make responsible decisions. Still others focus on strengthening key capabilities, with a view to enabling youth to think independently and critically, communicate clearly, and collaborate effectively to ultimately become empowered and productive adults. Regardless of how they characterize life skills, governments would ideally conduct a systematic assessment to identify target skills. This can help ensure that their life skills efforts are aligned with and supporting their overarching development goals.

For the full report summarizing findings from the PSIPSE life skills study, go to [www.psipse.org/library](http://www.psipse.org/library).



GESCI - Photo by PSIPSE/Zachary Rosen

In addition to pinpointing target skills, government officials also need to identify strategies to build those competencies. To date, governments in LMICs have adopted two main strategies. They have (1) rolled out standalone Life Skills Education courses and/or (2) tried to integrate life skills development into core academic curricula. Both strategies have experienced setbacks. For example, the implementation of Kenya's 2008 Life Skills Education course was largely stalled because of inadequate capacity-building for teachers and the non-examinable nature of the subject, which led to it being deprioritized by schools. Limitations in teacher training also hindered Uganda's 2015 rollout of new learner centered pedagogical methods for core academic subjects, which were also intended to develop students' life skills. More investigation is needed of what strategies are effective in cultivating youth life skills at scale. Systematic assessments can—in addition to helping identify target life skills—also help single out potential strategies for governments to adopt.

PSIPSE grantees' experiences shed light on how to design and structure these assessments. To identify target skills, grantees have employed a range of methods. The Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE) found interviews with employers to be particularly helpful. Its staff used these conversations to identify the competencies Ugandan employers look for in potential hires, and ultimately selected the 11 most highly ranked skills as their focus for new programming. Focus group discussions and quantitative surveys with students, teachers, and other stakeholders can also be employed to select target skills. To identify effective strategies to cultivate the selected skills, assessments would ideally incorporate literature reviews to learn about effective life skills programming. Note, however, that the evidence base on life skills will not yet be a comprehensive resource—given it is still relatively new.

**2 Convene a working group of practitioners and researchers with deep experience in life skills programming.** Given that life skills are a new or emerging area in many countries, and that the mandate for life skills development often stretches across multiple government agencies, some government officials may have limited exposure to and expertise in youth life skills. It may be helpful, therefore, to assemble an independent working group of experts to advise the government as it develops and rolls out a life skills policy. The working group would ideally be composed of NGO representatives implementing life skills programs, representatives of multilateral agencies and donor organizations, teacher representatives, and other experts in education, youth empowerment, and work force development. The group could guide the needs assessment process described above, weigh in on the life skills policy and its operational plan, and be a resource to government officials as they troubleshoot any implementation challenges.

PSIPSE grantees have found such advisory groups to be an extremely useful resource for strategic, technical, and implementation guidance. For example, PSIPSE grantee Plan International looked to its Technical Advisory Group composed of government, industry, and youth representatives for input on implementation challenges, potential program modifications, and sustainability planning. Governments could replicate this on a larger scale—bringing together a bigger, more diverse group of stakeholders to offer direction at all stages of policy development, including visioning and ideation, operational planning, initial roll-out, gradual scale-up, and ongoing monitoring and course correction.

### DEVELOPING LIFE SKILLS BY MODIFYING TEACHING PRACTICES FOR CORE ACADEMIC SUBJECTS

One particularly strong model for embedding life skills development into teaching practices has been developed by the Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative (GESCI). As part of its PSIPSE project, GESCI trained STEM teachers in ICT-infused teaching in three phases—technology literacy, when teachers learn how to use relevant software and ICT tools; knowledge deepening, when teachers design classroom activities that integrate ICT approaches; and knowledge creation, when teachers help students incorporate multimedia and web technologies into their own projects to support learning. GESCI has mapped each phase to specific 21st century skills. For example, in the technology literacy phase, teachers focus on cultivating critical thinking and collaboration. In the knowledge deepening phase, they strengthen communication and creativity. By pairing active learning techniques with life skills in this way, life skills development becomes more achievable for teachers and has a greater chance of becoming a part of classroom instruction in the long term.

### **Cultivate life skills through the core academic curriculum to provide continuous skills development at scale.**

As mentioned, governments opt for either standalone Life Skills Education courses or for integrating life skills development into the core academic curriculum. Of these, the latter is the more sustainable strategy. Teachers can be trained on how to cultivate life skills as they are teaching core subjects—which can facilitate the mainstreaming of life skills development into day-to-day classroom instruction. It is also a highly scalable strategy. In-service teacher trainings on life skills development can be cascaded across schools to reach large numbers of classrooms. What is more, preservice training, if modified appropriately, could ensure that all future educators in a country are equipped to build youth life skills. Given these advantages, governments engaged in building or refining a life skills policy may want to (1) embed life skills development into the curriculum, (2) roll out in-service teacher trainings on pedagogical techniques that can build youth life skills, and (3) encourage reforms in preservice teacher training to better prepare future generations of teachers.

There are a number of techniques that teachers can employ to grow life skills as they teach core subjects—as shown by the PSIPSE grantees (**see our full report**). As a first step, government officials should identify promising programs in-country that seek to cultivate life skills through classroom instruction, and integrate effective elements of those programs into any directives on teacher training within their life skills policy.

### **Encourage schools that have robust extracurricular programming to offer additional mentor-led, club-based life skills activities.**

Integrating life skills training into core academic instruction is an effective and scalable way to develop some, but not all, needed life skills. It is effective, for example, in strengthening higher-order thinking skills, but not as well suited to developing personal strengths such as self-confidence. A comprehensive life skills development strategy must include, therefore, approaches for cultivating a range of life skills. PSIPSE grantees found a good supplement in mentor-led extracurricular programming, which can help cultivate a host of personal strengths and interpersonal skills that are difficult to develop when teaching core subjects. American India Foundation discovered, for instance, that its interactive, discussion-based meetings for girls' and boys' groups helped youth become more self-aware, gain confidence, and develop communication, decision-making, and goal-setting skills.

Granted, implementing extracurricular programming at scale is likely to be a challenge since talented mentors are hard to find and teachers are often overwhelmed with academic duties and have little time and incentive to assume additional responsibilities. However, some schools may

### **MODIFYING EXAMINATIONS TO FOSTER DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER-ORDER THINKING SKILLS IN CLASSROOMS**

A critical challenge to the classroom-based approach to skill development is that teachers are not incentivized to cultivate life skills among their students. They are accountable—first and foremost—for helping students pass and perform well in critical examinations, and these examinations do not test for life skills. Students are also most concerned about material covered by examinations, and as a result may have limited interest in and enthusiasm for any work that detracts from their focus on doing well on those assessments. Indeed, some PSIPSE grantees have reported that students sometimes complain to school administrations about teachers' use of interactive activities that seek to deepen their engagement with academic material—voicing a preference for content they can memorize to pass tests.

PSIPSE grantee LGIHE hypothesizes that modifying examinations to test for life skills can shift both teachers' and students' priorities. It 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, and creativity. It remains to be seen if this approach is effective in changing classroom practices, and if so, which types of life skills are amenable to this type of testing. It can ensure that life skills policies not only develop teacher capacity in life skills development, but also motivate teachers to exercise that capacity.

have the capacity to implement additional extracurricular activities. Government officials could consider a “voluntary” roll-out of an extracurricular life skills course to schools that have the capacity and willingness to take this on.

### **Conduct a phased roll-out—embedded with evaluations—to scale the most effective iteration of the life skills policy.**

Life skills development is often new not only to government officials, but also to key staff running the day-to-day operations of relevant government agencies. When life skills policies are implemented at scale, unforeseen design-related and operational challenges can hamper implementation and dilute effectiveness. Therefore, it is vital to roll out life skills policy in stages—to identify risks and challenges on an ongoing basis and adopt mitigation strategies to tackle them. If feasible, government officials should embed rapid cycle evaluations at each stage of implementation to yield timely, actionable evidence on whether the policy is affecting the intended outcomes and shed light on what aspects of the policy may need to be reworked and how.

A model for this phased, evidence-informed approach is offered by PSIPSE grantee CorStone, which tested, evaluated, and refined multiple versions of its resiliency program prior to

## INTEGRATING CURRICULAR AND EXTRACURRICULAR LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

One PSIPSE grantee, Educate!, offers a promising hybrid life skills development model—that modifies teaching practices for core subjects while also implementing targeted extracurricular activities. Educate! trains teachers on a simple three-step learner-centered pedagogical approach that can help students build critical thinking and communication skills. At the same time, it offers students a mentor-led skills course and the opportunity to develop and implement income-generation ideas through business clubs. Implementing these strategies in tandem has been shown to yield strong impacts. An independent, quasi-experimental evaluation of Educate!'s Uganda program found that the program improved students' public speaking, leadership, and grit.

scale-up. It began implementation in India with a small pilot for 100 girls in New Delhi, expanded implementation to larger urban areas in another state (Bihar), then tailored the program for rural areas in Bihar and for both boys and girls, and is currently scaling up to all government schools in the state.

To inform these shifts, CorStone undertook (1) yearly pre-post analyses to track progress in key outcome indicators, (2) two randomized controlled trials to generate rigorous evidence of the impact of the model and make the case for scale-up, and (3) participatory action research to identify factors influencing scale-up. Punctuating policy rollout in this way with regular, utilization-focused evaluations could help ensure that the policy is relevant to local needs and context; quickly taken up by teachers, mentors, and other implementers; and positioned for impact at scale.

**Operationalize a monitoring and support system.** Once the life skills policy has been rolled out, it is important to put into place a robust monitoring and support system to track and assist progress toward selected goals. Such systems are crucial for assessing whether policies are being implemented as envisioned and providing needed technical assistance to implementers on the ground. Quantitative monitoring systems offer one approach to tracking implementation progress and identifying any challenges or risks. In Bihar, India, CorStone is developing easy-to-use monitoring dashboards that government officials can use to track implementation progress and movement in key outcomes such as teacher motivation and skill level, and make needed adjustments to implementation plans and ongoing teacher support strategies. Another PSIPSE grantee, Education Development Center, recommended that the Rwandan Ministry of Education place master trainers at the district level to oversee and support teachers implementing its work readiness curriculum (which the government is

scaling across the country). Such monitoring and support measures are critical to ensuring that life skills policies are implemented with consistency and quality over the long term.

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