LIFE SKILLS: TOOLS FOR SURVIVAL AND SUCCESS

This issue of What Young People Are Saying is dedicated to children and adolescents’ thoughts, opinions and expectations of life skills. The importance of skills as learning outcomes for young people is recognized by the international movement on Education for All (EFA). With the forthcoming publication of the Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children, which will be launched on October 11th, the UN is spotlighting the responsibilities of governments to prevent and eliminate violence against children. What Young People Are Saying aims to complement that report by highlighting the strategies available to children and young people to protect themselves from violence and HIV and AIDS, as well as other threats and challenges to their well-being.

OVERVIEW

The term “life skills” refers to internal tools for using knowledge critically, for managing personal feelings and decisions, and for mastering inter-personal communication (UNICEF).

Young people on Voices of Youth value the acquisition and development of life skills as crucial to their education and development in general. Their understanding of the capabilities designated as “life skills” range from specific competencies for dealing with a situation, to the full scope of qualities that defines an individual. As VOY members share the stories of difficulties in their lives, the advice and encouragement they receive from fellow members invariably refers them back to key skills such as navigating peer or media pressure, building self esteem and practicing assertiveness.

VOY members devote considerable attention to the importance of looking at, and understanding life skills from the perspectives of children and young people themselves. They advocate for the full partnership of young people in planning and implementing life skills education to ensure their input. Young people understand that it is ultimately up to them to make and enact the right decisions for their own health, and they call for assistance in developing those skills.

POLAND

“There are so many important things for youth: healthy style life, education, life skills - which we cannot learn at school” girl, 16

Although they may not always use the term “life skills” as such, VOY members demonstrate awareness of the different types of action competencies for leading a valued life and meeting new challenges head on. In this respect, they value life skills education that helps them develop the ability to reason, agency and social competence in order to act. To respond to this need, life skills education needs to be child centred, participatory and skills building, and support learning to know, learning to be, learning to live together and learning to do – the four pillars of education.

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NEW ON VOY

EXPLORE
Visit the new section in Take Action called “Youth Leadership Profiles”.

SPEAK OUT
Don’t miss your chance to submit questions for the upcoming roundtable on the Study on Violence against Children.

TAKE ACTION
Participate with children from all over the world in Taporí’s silhouette campaign.
Find out more.

FROM OUR ONLINE DISCUSSIONS
“Being reasonably modest, using wisdom when judging people’s character, being aware of how you come off to other people, and not being afraid to stand up for yourself– all measures people should definitely take” girl, 18, US
Join the discussions!

COMING SOON ON VOY
Promotional banners to post on your emails, blogs and personal websites to help spread the word about VOY.

UPCOMING ISSUE
THE GIRL CHILD
LIFE SKILLS: TOOLS FOR SURVIVAL AND SUCCESS

DEFINING LIFE SKILLS

VOY members identify many skills, cognitive, personal and interpersonal, that they see as important in everyday life. Many of these skills are the same as those considered important by life skills educators as well.

SINGAPORE

“…good values such as the importance of having friends and family in our lives. The meaning of faithfulness and loyalty [...] hope and learning to believe in yourself when the odds are stacked against you.” girl, 21

Growing up marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, and truly is a period of learning to become and to be. This is reflected by particular attention given to the notion of developing “agency”, of finding yourself and being confident in who you are.

PAKISTAN

“Femininity is not having the perfect figure or the perfect features, skin tone or hair, it’s having full confidence in what you believe in and standing up for your own rights” girl, 17

Life skills are important at all stages of growing up, and need to be learned in all settings of life. Parents and other adults are a decisive influence in the acquisition and development of life skills in children, which is very clear to VOY members. Some members identify the crucial role whereby parents can optimize their children’s future prospects by helping them to identify and use valuable life skills.

UNITED STATES

“Parents need to explain to children and help them understand why their behavior was wrong or inappropriate. Doing this helps children to think for themselves and be able to differentiate between right and wrong in subsequent situations. Parents also need to lead by example. Children are impressionable and will mimic the people they look up to (usually parents).” girl, 18

One member is concerned that parents might fail to acknowledge existing life skills in their children, thus restricting their further development.

MOROCCO

“Parfois, les adultes pensent que les enfants ou les jeunes sont incapables de prendre des décisions, innover afin qu’ils puissent exploiter leurs capacités. Il faudrait qu’ils comprennent que chaque enfant peut être un génie en lui donnant ces chances.”

“Sometimes, adults think that children or young people are incapable of making decisions, innovating to explore their abilities. They would need to understand that each child can be a genius if given those chances.” girl, 17

LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

Many VOY members recognize and value the importance of their schools as a source of both academic knowledge and life experience from which they acquire and develop cognitive and social skills to learn to know and to live together. One member identifies the social environment created by bringing groups of young people together to learn as a key contributor to her personal development.

UNITED KINGDOM

“You learn a lot of life skills in school. I have learnt so much about dealing with all kinds of people and situations and I have made some of my greatest friends there. I would have never got this many experiences or interacted with such a variety of personalities if I could only stay at home.” girl, 16

One VOY member sees value in the rigor of academic assessment, having identified that the professional and personal responsibilities of adulthood will be very demanding.

MEXICO

“We always live under pressure because of exams - had 9 this week. In my school they do it as a sort of training - the more pressure we handle right now, the less we will suffer when we go out into ‘the real world’.” girl, 16

VOY members compare their diverse experiences of education and assess the different advantages and disadvantages. With regards to life skills, one member identifies benefits to both home-schooling and formal schooling. The optimum skill set includes both independence and social skills that can be achieved in a variety of settings.

MALAYSIA

“The home-school system lives on self-teaching, which is a valuable commodity as it trains you to be more independent. In a school setting you gain more social experiences to look back on and learn from. Facing cliques, groups, peer pressure, sanctions, and participating in extra-curriculum activities, supply one with more confidence for later situations.”

gender undisclosed, 20

Some VOY members have moved beyond expressing frustration at the lack of resources for life skills education, and are suggesting their own ideas for life skills education initiatives in their communities and beyond.
**LIFE SKILLS: TOOLS FOR SURVIVAL AND SUCCESS**

**ROMANIA**

“Communication and society. A practical course for children. They will learn how to write and speak in public, how to discuss and collaborate with other people and how to create a project and make it real.” girl, 19

Some members question the relevance of traditional learning that focuses only on survival and academia, and not on assertiveness, decision-making and negotiation. In this thinking, life skills need to be valued alongside reading and writing to allow even the poorest and most deprived children to live better lives, improving opportunities for employment and for civil and political participation.

**SOMALILAND**

“We need skills to implement the information that is given to us. Information that one has is of no use if one can’t implement it.” girl, 19

**HIV / AIDS AND LIFE SKILLS**

Most members fully appreciate the threat of HIV and AIDS in their communities and worldwide, and know how valuable life skills are in protecting themselves and others against infection and related stigma. Strong life skills are seen as an important tool in the fight against HIV and AIDS and in their development in all walks of their lives.

**PHILIPPINES**

“Here’s us [we are] the ones making the decision for ourselves. I believe that the self-respect and the certain responsible treatment of the opposite sex are key into containing the plague.” boy, 19

**INDONESIA**

“Skills are always there, but they would be useful if people, particularly young people, would want to use [them]. Sometimes they just pretend not knowing anything - pretend AIDS don’t exist” girl, 19

Members appreciate that there are many different life skills that will help them and their peers deal with the issue of HIV and AIDS, and understand that life skills are useful in combination rather than just as individual tools.

**INDIA**

“How do we elders protect children from getting abused? By educating them about the dangers that are lurking around and empowering them with knowledge and inner strength. We counselors can do that job most objectively, in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way.” girl, >21

**CONCLUSION**

Voices of Youth members make connections between specific life skills and their life experiences, or situations they hear about from other members. Whether they acquired those skills through general education, from their parents or in a specific life skills education program, they are quick to highlight the applicability of skills, such as assertiveness, self-confidence and decision-making, to tackling the wide range of issues they confront in their daily lives. Furthermore, many of the posts on Voices of Youth, regardless of their topic, display the members’ own strong life skills, as they argue their points, introduce new ideas, and participate in heated debates from opposite sides of ideological divides.

For more information, read past newsletters from Voices of Youth:  
August 2004: “Education is Freedom!”  
April 2006: Livelihoods: Working for Change

One member laments young people being in denial, and not using the skills they do have to protect themselves.

“Violence causes trauma in young children and low self-esteem and these innocent children are more prone to become violent people from their own experiences [...] it is worth a try to promote healthy ways to cope with stress and anger in ways that would discourage violence” girl, 16

Some VOY members are themselves helping others to acquire the skills that they need to cope with violence in their lives, and remind us of the important role of parents, care givers, mentors and facilitators.
YOUTH LEADERSHIP PROFILE: AMINATA PALMER

BIOGRAPHY
Aminata Palmer is an 11 year old girl who lives in Sierra Leone. According to Aminata, the leaders of her country believe that children should be seen, but not heard. However, Aminata advocates, “If you love children, you can listen to children”. In order to promote Child Survival and Development (CSD) issues, Aminata has become an active member of the Children’s Forum Network, as well as Voices of Youth. She has also served as hostess of the 2005 National Excellence Award, an annual event facilitated by CFN in which children who have excelled in various disciplines, including academia, the arts, sports and advocacy, are acknowledged and awarded a certificate by the children themselves.

ISSUES
Aminata has been involved in many child-to-child sensitization and advocacy activities that aim to promote Child Survival and Development (CSD) issues such as quality basic education and the education of the girl child, HIV/AIDS, child exploitation, improved health care facilities and poverty. Issues such as quality basic education and the education of the girl child are especially important to Aminata. She states that, “If a child has the right to go to school, [he/she] will be responsible to study and get good grades and eventually do something good for the community – these are the worlds’ future leaders”.

ACTIVITIES
In 2003, Aminata joined the St. Joseph’s Primary School branch of the Children’s Forum Network (CFN), and became an active member of the organization’s drama group. The CFN often uses drama to convey messages on the rights and wellbeing of children to peers as well as adults in schools, institutions and communities. Aminata is also an active member of the Western Area CFN and is currently a member of the executive board serving as Public Relations Officer. In order to try and educate citizens, mothers, guardians, and stakeholders about the rights of children, Aminata also participates in the Voice of Children (VOC) radio program, ‘Our World’, in Sierra Leone. In 2005, she attended the C8 in Gleneagles where she participated in outlining the current problems affecting children, and made recommendations on how to make sure these problems were brought to the attention of national leaders.

FUTURE CHALLENGES
While Aminata acknowledges that some progress has been made, she also reminds us that challenges still remain. For instance, the CFN has been trying to write a newsletter since 2003, but does not have the funding to do so. “There is nobody to guide us, and we don’t have materials, paper, etc to use”, says Aminata. She also expresses a feeling of frustration about speaking openly in Sierra Leone about children’s rights, because she does not feel as though the leaders pay her the attention that she deserves. She feels that people really listen to her when she is outside of Sierra Leone, and she hopes that in the future ministers within her own country will afford her this kind of respect and willingness to take action.
DISCUSSION ON LIFE SKILLS

World leaders in education have committed to a goal to ensure meeting life skills learning needs of all young people (EFA Goal 3). This goal recognizes that young people, especially adolescent girls, face risks and threats that limit learning opportunities and challenge education systems, such as exploitative labor, the lack of employment, conflict and violence, drug abuse, school-age pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. In response, it stipulates that all young people must be given the opportunity to gain the knowledge and develop the values, attitudes and skills which will enable them to develop their capacities to work, to participate fully in their society, to take control of their own lives, and to continue learning. Such opportunities should cover information, skills, counseling and services needed to protect young people from risks. The opportunities should be meaningful and relevant to young people’s environments and needs, and should help them become active agents in shaping their future and develop useful work-related skills.

What are your thoughts on life skills? Help us to better understand which life skills are important in your life, and how teachers and educators can be better placed to respond to the needs of young people today, as stipulated in EFA Goal 3. Join the discussion on life skills in the Voices Of Youth forums and let us know:

What are the most important life skills for you and how can life skills help you be the person you want to be and lead the life you want to lead?

What are the most important life skills when it comes to gender inequalities, to HIV and AIDS, and to violence?

How can teachers and educators be better placed to help young people develop and acquire life skills?

Do you think that the four pillars of learning framework adequately represents a life skills approach? What skills are important under the different pillars of learning to know, learning to be, learning to live together and learning to do?

For more information on life skills, please visit the life skills page of UNICEF’s website: www.unicef.org/lifeskills

VOICES OF YOUTH

Since 1995, VOY has focused on exploring the educational and community building potential of the Internet, and facilitating the active and substantive participation of young people on child rights and development related issues. Through web boards, interactive quizzes, youth leadership profiles, live chats and more, Voices of Youth provides more than 20,000 young people from over 180 countries with an opportunity to self-inform, engage in lively debate, and partner—with their peers and decision makers—to create a world fit for children.