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University of San Francisco

**Conceptualizing the Promise of Life Skills Education for
Adolescent Girls in the Global South: A Critical
Discourse Analysis**

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in International and Multicultural Education

By
Olivia Casey
August 2019

Conceptualizing the Promise of Life Skills Education for Adolescent Girls in the Global South: A Critical Discourse Analysis

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by
Olivia Casey
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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, international development organizations have increasingly championed life skills education as a crucial tool for empowering girls in the global South. However, while life skills education continues to gain momentum and popularity within the international development landscape, the diversity and heterogeneity of life skills interventions remains significant. In this study, I aimed to uncover how key global actors differently conceptualize life skills and the promises they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South at the current moment. Utilizing the methodology of critical discourse analysis, I examined key documents on girls' life skills education published by central global actors and stakeholders within the landscape of life skills programming. My research has concluded that human capital theory is a central framework through which life skills are conceptualized and invoked by key global development actors. Namely, within this framework, life skills are understood as a vehicle by which adolescent girls can accumulate human capital. Whereas certain global actors have explicitly aligned themselves with this approach, such as the World Bank, other organizations call for the development of new frameworks for conceptualizing life skills and the significance it holds. As the key organizations within the crowded and highly complex field of life skills programming continue to call for convergence, it will be important to continue to trace how contesting conceptualizations of life skills are invoked and what significance they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

In recent years, international development organizations have increasingly championed life skills education as a crucial tool for empowering girls in the global South. A global discourse has emerged surrounding life skills—asserting an urgent need for adolescent girls to develop the skills necessary to overcome the challenges and barriers which they are presumed to face in their everyday lives. Moreover, this discourse holds that the development of life skills unlocks girls’ untapped potential, particularly with regards to education and employment outcomes. Thus, the potential of life skills education has become increasingly entwined with the presumed guarantees of girls’ education more broadly.

However, while life skills education continues to gain momentum and popularity within the international development landscape, the diversity and heterogeneity of life skills interventions remains significant. In a comprehensive literature review of life skills, the Brookings Institution found that “the concept of ‘life skills’ is often defined so broadly as to include almost any form of non-academic education programming” (Dupuy et al, 2018, p.7). In light of this lack of clarity, several key stakeholders within the field of international development have recently called for collaborative efforts to develop a common framework for defining and understanding life skills. In this study, I have explored how these key global actors differently conceptualize and invoke life skills and the guarantees they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South at the current moment.

Statement of the Problem

Over the past few decades, life skills programming has sparked global attention within the field of international development. Life skills education has come to be regarded as essential for developing young people's capacities to overcome challenges and mitigate risks. Multilateral organizations such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have widely advocated for and supported the development of life skills initiatives in several countries and contexts, within both formal and informal education settings ("Global Evaluation," 2018). Accordingly, life skills initiatives have rapidly emerged on national education and policy agendas across the globe; in a 2007 review by UNICEF, seventy countries possessed a "national intervention" for life skills education ("Global Evaluation," 2018, p.3). Furthermore, life skills education has been incorporated within major global frameworks and documents, including the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All and the United Nations General Assembly Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS.

As global investments in life skills education have proliferated, many life skills interventions have particularly aimed towards empowering girls in the global South. Whereas women and girls have been historically marginalized in international development projects, in recent decades, a consensus has arisen surrounding the importance of the prioritization of adolescent girls in international development projects. Centered around the rationale that increased schooling would curb fertility rates and contribute to economic growth, the international development field markedly shifted their policies and funding towards girls' education throughout the 1970s to 1990s (Moeller, 2018, p.68). From the 1990s through the present day, several global campaigns and initiatives have heralded girls' education as the solution to overcoming a host of development challenges and unlocking positive change in

communities worldwide, centered “around the figure of the girl as the ‘change agent’” (Khoja-Moolji, 2018, p.10). Moreover, as alluded to by the 2018 theme of International Day of the Girl— “With Her: A Skilled Girl Force”—the rising calls for life skills education have become increasingly entangled with promises tied with girls’ education more broadly (“International Day of the Girl Child,” 2018).

However, while the popularity of life skills education swells, there remains a lack of consensus on what precisely constitutes life skills. An incredibly broad mix of interventions fall underneath the banner of life skills, with one literature review finding that “there are as many definitions of life skills as there are global education actors and thought leaders (Dupuy & Halvorsen, 2016)” (Cohen & Murphy-Graham, n.d., p.1). Indeed, the concept of life skills is utilized to refer to a wide array of competencies, attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, many global actors who implement life skills programs fail to explicitly define how they understand life skills in key documents pertaining to their respective programs (Dupuy et al., 2018).

The most commonly cited framework for understanding life skills comes from the World Health Organization (WHO), which defined life skills as “abilities for adaptive and positive behavior, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO, 1997, p.1; Dupuy et al. 2018, p.9). Alongside this definition, the WHO (1997) identified a set of ten core life skills, namely: decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and coping with stress (p.1). Yet, at the same time, the WHO (1997) argued that the nature of life skills must ultimately be determined in context: “inevitably, cultural and social factors will determine the exact nature of life skills...the exact content of life skills education must therefore be determined at the country level, or in a more

local context” (p.3). Maithreyi (2015) similarly argued that life skills “appears to function as a ‘strategically deployed shifter’ - that is, a term that has no context-independent lexical meaning of its own, but that attains its pragmatic value depending on the context of its use (Urciuoli, 2008)” (p. 1).

Moreover, the landscape of life skills programming has arisen out of multiple academic disciplines and has been complexly informed by a variety of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. For instance, many life skills interventions have been influenced by the prevention approach of public health—positioning life skills as a tool for mitigating against certain risk factors, particularly pertaining to sexual and reproductive health. Others have framed life skills as a driver of economic empowerment—focusing on employment, earnings, entrepreneurship, and other economic and financial outcomes. Finally, many programs emphasize the psychosocial benefits of life skills, such as fostering mental health, well-being, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, communication and negotiation skills, and much more. As life skills initiatives frequently cut across these multiple domains, the life skills landscape cannot be clearly situated within any singular discipline or framework.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, a stable and comprehensive definition of life skills remains elusive. While it remains to be seen which particular theorizations of life skills will rise to predominance as the key stakeholders increasingly call for convergence, this study aims to critically analyze and differentiate between the multiple, emergent global discourses surrounding the benefits of life skills education. To this end, this study examined how key global actors differently conceptualize life skills and the promises they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South at the present moment.

Background and Need for the Study

In recent years, life skills programming has garnered the attention of global education actors as a vehicle for empowering adolescent girls. To date, much of the literature on life skills education has intended to demonstrate its effectiveness at achieving desired outcomes. Further on in this study, in my literature review, I conduct an in-depth review the growing body of research which broadly attempts to create an evidence base for girls' life skills education through research, monitoring and evaluation. This literature predominantly consists of impact evaluations and randomized controlled trials which claim to precisely measure and quantify the effectiveness of life skills programs across a host of outcomes. In reviewing this body of literature, I also argue that global actors involved in creating this life skills research are deeply entrenched within an increasingly pervasive form of evidence-based institutional governance, which has permeated the field of international development. Indeed, I hold that these organizations are embedded in what Merry (2016) has termed "indicator culture...a body of technocratic expertise that places a high value on numerical data as a form of knowledge and as a basis for decision making" (p.9).

Moreover, much of the existing literature on life skills education lacks a critical reflection or nuanced analysis of structural relations of power, privilege and oppression that are faced by girls in life skills programs and their broader communities. Instead, this literature typically argues for the importance of bolstering individual capacities and skills as a cure-all solution for structural problems such as poverty and inequality. The purported panacea of life skills education often is presented in a decontextualized, depoliticized, and ahistorical understanding that frames girls' individual skills development as the crucial solution to a host of structural development problems.

Though there exists a modest amount of literature that historicizes, contextualizes, and critiques the rising calls for girls' life skills programming (Maithreyi, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006; Kwauk & Braga, 2017), I will attempt to demonstrate the significant gaps in this limited area of scholarship. Namely, none of these works have fully attended to understanding the nuanced ways in which certain life skills programs are invoked as a vehicle for empowering adolescent girls in the global South.

In conclusion, there exists a pressing need for further scholarship to critically analyze the promises and guarantees that girls' life skills education has become understood to hold in recent years. Therefore, this study serves as an initial inquiry into this wide gap in the literature, in seeking to understand how life skills are conceptualized and in what ways they are understood to serve as a crucial tool for adolescent girls' empowerment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how life skills are differently conceptualized by key global actors in the field of international development and what promises and guarantees they are presumed to unlock for adolescent girls. My central intent was to shed light on the distinct ways in which life skills are being differently conceptualized and invoked by key stakeholders within the life skills landscape. In doing so, I also aimed to uncover the ways in which these discourses have shifted over time—as well as how they have been contested—both within and across global actors in the life skills landscape.

Research Questions

This study was focused on the following research questions:

1. How do global actors within the field of life skills education differently conceptualize life skills and the guarantees they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South at the current moment?
2. How have these distinct conceptualizations of life skills and their presumed guarantees for adolescent girls shifted and been contested within and across central global actors in life skills landscape?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, my theoretical framework rests primarily upon the rich body of scholarship which interrogates the shifting constructions of idealized girlhoods in recent times. These theoretical accounts have interrogated the ways in which adolescent girls have been distinctly positioned as flexible, resilient, idealized subjects and have come to embody new forms of neoliberal subjectivity.

For instance, this study was informed by Harris's (2004) account of the new central role girls and young women have taken on within the context of the late modern capitalist social order. Harris argues that girls and young women have been positioned as the ideal subjects to thrive in the so-called risk society of the twenty-first century. Conceptualized as "flexible, adaptable, resilient, and ultimately responsible for their own ability to manage their lives successfully," Harris (2004) puts forth an account of the "future girl" who is understood as being capable of molding herself to succeed within rapidly evolving social and economic conditions (p.7). Importantly, the notion of flexibility that the future girl is imagined and expected to possess reflects the underlying insecurities and anxieties of unpredictable, risky, economic

conditions. In the midst of a failing and uncertain economy, the future girl is imagined to be the best social actor positioned to succeed and adapt to this context.

In addition, my theoretical framework in this study also draws on Calkin's (2018) account of ideological neoliberalism. In this account, Calkin uncovers how several development interventions which target adolescent girls are rooted in ideological neoliberalism and aim to mold girls into entrepreneurial, self-governing, productive marketplace actors. In making this argument, Calkin (2018) draws on Peck and Tickell's framework which distinguishes between two distinct forms of neoliberalism—*economic* neoliberalism (including the reduction of state welfare) and *ideological* neoliberalism, which is “characterized by the creation of new governance forms, including socially interventionist policies and the delegation of authority to non-governmental agents” (p.22). In other words, ideological neoliberalism fosters new subjectivities inured to the deleterious effects of neoliberal economic policies: it is “aimed primarily at developing women's capacities to govern themselves without state intervention or provision, such that they can operate in a context of economic neoliberalism” (p.31). Notably, girls' life skills programming appears to fall squarely within the bounds of ideological neoliberalism, as it strives to prepare girls for the numerous challenges they are presumed to face across economic, social, and other dimensions of life. Life skills are understood to shift the behavior, attitudes, and modes of thinking of adolescent girls to shield them from the challenges and risks they would otherwise face.

Finally, intersectionality provides another crucial theoretical lens in this study. Crenshaw's (1990) massively influential conception of intersectionality served to “highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). Indeed, girls who are targeted in life skills programming in the global

South are positioned as a particular type of precarious subject, often described as disadvantaged, at-risk, vulnerable, and disempowered. An intersectional approach is crucial to recognize the classed, gendered, racialized, and other ways that the adolescent girl is constructed and marked along several axes of difference within the context of global discourses on girls' empowerment through life skills.

Methodology

This qualitative research study was informed by the methodology of critical discourse analysis. Though critical discourse analysis encapsulates a broad range of investigative approaches, van Dijk (1995) outlined many of the key aims of critical discourse analysis, including a focus on the “relations of *power, dominance, inequality* and the way these are *reproduced or resisted* by social members” (p.18). Further, van Dijk (1995) holds that critical discourse analysis broadly aims to “*uncover, reveal, or disclose* what is implicit, hidden, or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of discursively enacted dominance or their underlying ideologies” (p.18). I chose this research methodology insofar as I aim to uncover the hidden assumptions, theories, and frameworks which have rendered life skills programming visible as a crucial means of empowering girls in the global South.

The data which I analyzed in this discourse analysis consisted of research reports, studies, and other articles focused on girls' life skills education published by key actors and stakeholders within this field. The documents were selected for analysis through a purposive sampling, guided by my literature review. This method of sampling has the central aim of allowing the researcher to “focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest” to enable a tailored investigation of the research questions (“Purposive sampling,” n.d., para. 3). In this study, this

method of sampling was chosen to help to focus my analysis more closely around documents which would be the most useful to elucidate the question of what conceptualizations of life skills are circulating among key global actors in the present moment. Specifically, the type of purposive sampling which I utilized was maximum variation sampling, with the aim of taking into consideration multiple perspectives and orientations both within and across international organizations (“Purposive sampling,” n.d.).

To analyze the data, each of the documents were uploaded into the qualitative software Dedoose. As a first step, documents were coded on a descriptive level, staying close to the language of the text. Throughout the data analysis process, I also wrote brief analytic memos to aid in the development of both a theoretical interpretation and critical analyses of these texts. Finally, after a review of the descriptive codes to gather themes, I conducted a second round of theoretical coding to selective portions of the data.

This research study constituted an initial investigation leading into a larger research study with Dr. Karishma Desai, Assistant Professor of Education at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. This larger research project commenced in the summer of 2019 and will continue on throughout the rest of the year. The larger research study will attend to the same research questions that I have focused on in this study, as well as additional research questions surrounding frameworks for measuring and assessing life skills and the significance of these measurement approaches. However, unlike this critical discourse analysis, the larger study utilizes a critical ethnographic approach and will involve interviews with several key individuals involved with research, program design, and monitoring and evaluation of life skills at major international non-governmental organizations and other central organizations in the field. In addition, this study will involve participant observation at key meetings, events, webinars, and

celebrations of life skills programming. Participants will be recruited through a mix of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, to allow for a variation of perspectives both across and within organizations. The initial participants were identified through desk research. This larger study will build on the findings of this initial study and help to further fill the significant gap in the literature.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in its exclusive focus on critical discourse analysis. This research would be strengthened by incorporating additional perspectives and methods of inquiry. For instance, a critical ethnographic analysis utilizing interview and participant observation could be a fruitful method to gather a more nuanced analysis about the ways in which different global actors uniquely conceptualize life skills and the promises they hold. Additionally, the incorporation of further perspectives of key stakeholders in life skills programming—such as those of donors, participants, educators, and evaluators—could help to provide a more nuanced understanding as well.

Furthermore, this study was also limited due to the unavoidable influences of my positionality and the biases it entails, insofar as “any analysis inevitably involves selection, translation, interpretation, and the influence of one’s own beliefs” (Murphy-Graham, 2012, p.27). My positionality as a researcher was also complicated by the fact that, during the time of the research, as well as the few years leading up to it, I was employed at a key organization advancing life skills programming targeted at adolescent girls. While my role within the development team did not involve working on life skills programming, I was regularly exposed to and embedded within the discourse of life skills programming circulating within this organization. Furthermore, I materially benefitted as a result of my employment and association

with this organization. Therefore, while I researched this phenomenon, my perspective in conducting this research constituted that of an insider to the community which I was studying in certain ways, but an outsider in other important ways, as well. Additionally, my positionality as an economically privileged, white woman also influenced my perspective in undertaking this research.

Significance of the Study

This research has significance for the major international organizations involved in girls' life skills education, as it will help to elucidate the major conceptual frameworks, rationales, and assumptions which inform and underlie this programming. Moreover, the approach utilized in this study aims to advance a nuanced understanding of complex dynamics of power and privilege which inform the global discourses circulating on life skills education, as well as ways of knowing and representing educated girlhoods in the global South. As the momentum surrounding life skills education continues to grow, the findings of this study may present new critical considerations which could influence how major global actors and organizations in this field approach this work in the future.

Definition of Terms

global South - While there are multiple conceptualizations of this term, in this paper, I employ this term “in a postnational sense to address spaces and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization” (Mahler, 2017). As Mahler (2017) elaborates, this understanding of the global South:

captures a deterritorialized geography of capitalism’s externalities and means to account for subjugated peoples within the borders of wealthier countries, such that there are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South. While this usage relies on a longer tradition of analysis of the North’s geographic Souths—wherein the South represents an internal periphery and subaltern relational position—the epithet ‘global’ is used to unhinge the South from a one-to-one relation to geography.

International Day of the Girl - “In 2011...the United Nations declared October 11 as... International Day of the Girl Child... 'to help galvanize worldwide enthusiasm for goals to better girls’ lives, providing an opportunity for them to show leadership and reach their full potential.’”

non-governmental organization (NGO) - “voluntary group of individuals or organizations, usually not affiliated with any government, that is formed to provide services or to advocate a public policy” (Karns, 2019).

multilateral organization - agency or entity which is “formed by three or more nations to work on issues that are relevant to each of them” and “able to fund [its] projects by receiving funding from multiple governments” (Harrigan, 2017). Examples of multilateral organizations include the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

psychosocial - “involving both psychological and social aspects” (“Psychosocial,” n.d.).

randomized controlled evaluation (or randomized impact evaluations, or randomized control trial) - a type of evaluation which “randomizes who receives a program (or service, or pill) – the treatment group – and who does not – the control. It then compares outcomes between

those two groups.” In this type of evaluation, the control group is understood to “[mimic] the counterfactual...defined as what would have happened to the same individuals at the same time had the program not been implemented” (Ambroz & Shotland, n.d.).

United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) - “formerly (1946–53) United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, special program of the United Nations (UN) devoted to aiding national efforts to improve the health, nutrition, education, and general welfare of children” (Mingst, n.d.).

World Bank - also known as the “World Bank Group, [an] international organization affiliated with the United Nations (UN) and designed to finance projects that enhance the economic development of member states” (Chossudovsky, n.d.).

World Health Organization (WHO) - “agency of the United Nations established in 1948 to further international cooperation for improved public health conditions” (The Editors of Britannica, n.d.).

CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In recent years, life skills programming has sparked widespread interest within the field of international development as a tool for empowering adolescent girls in the global South. In this study, I will explore how key global actors within this sector conceptualize life skills education and how it is understood to transform the lives of adolescent girls.

In this literature review, I first review the growing body of scholarship which broadly attempts to establish an evidence base in support of girls' life skills education. Notably, life skills literature has been heavily shaped by the push within international development towards evidence-based programming, which seeks to quantify programmatic outcomes through intensive processes of monitoring and evaluation. To date, research on life skills has largely taken shape in the form of impact evaluations that purport to measure and quantify program effectiveness across a host of indicators. In particular, randomized control trials have amassed the most recognition—garnering praise as the gold standard of evidence and as the most rigorous form of evaluation. This section of my literature review reveals that—though there exist widescale efforts to assess a broad variety of program impacts—there remains a stark lack of clarity regarding the distinct ways that life skills are being conceptualized and invoked among the various global actors implementing this work. This gap in the literature serves as the impetus for this study.

In the remainder of my literature review, I will turn my attention to critical literature that historicizes, contextualizes, and critiques the rising calls for girls' life skills programming. First, I will review literature which turns a critical eye directly on life skills education, while acknowledging the significant gaps in this limited area of scholarship, particularly the lack of nuanced, intersectional analyses of girls' life skills education. Subsequently, I will review the

wider set of critical scholarship which historicizes the massive investments in girls' education more broadly in recent years. I will review critical body of literature which has mapped how shifting discourses of population, economy, and human capital have rendered the adolescent girl in the global South legible as the ideal development agent in the present moment. While such critiques provide a necessary context for understanding the proliferation of girls' educational interventions more broadly, this literature review attempts to demonstrate the need to extend such critiques to interrogate the developing field of life skills scholarship.

Impact Evaluations of Girls' Life Skills: The Creation of an Evidence Base

Over the past several years, international non-governmental organizations, multilateral organizations, and national governments alike have extensively invested in life skills education programs targeted at adolescent girls. Alongside these global investments, a burgeoning demand has emerged for the creation of an evidence base to justify this type of programming. In this literature review, I will begin by surveying the body of scholarship which attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of life skills programming at achieving a multitude of outcomes for adolescent girls. Much of the growing set of literature pertaining to girls' life skills education has come in the form of impact evaluations of existing programs, which aim to rigorously measure and quantify the effectiveness of life skills education across a wide array of indicators.

As this literature review will demonstrate, a great deal of girls' life skills evaluations has converged around a few focal areas in recent years. First, a substantial subset of the life skills literature has been informed by the prevention approach of public health and understands life skills as a tool for mitigating against certain risk factors. In particular, such programs often focus on providing knowledge pertaining to sexual and reproductive health and influencing young

women's sexual and reproductive choices, behaviors, and attitudes. Other interventions focus on life skills as a driver of economic empowerment for young women, spanning from job preparation to entrepreneurial skills. Finally, several life skills programs emphasize the psychosocial nature of life skills programs, encompassing a multitude of capacities spanning from personal self-management and mental health to social skills and maintaining healthy relationships. Life skills interventions often overlap across these multiple focal areas, leading to a lack of a shared understanding towards what life skills signify.

To date, most of these studies within the life skills evidence base have amassed around extensive global initiatives in life skills. For instance, one significant body of literature has coalesced around one of the most far-reaching global interventions in girls' life skills education to date: the Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) program. Launched in 2008, the ELA program is operated by the non-governmental organization Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC) and has been implemented in Bangladesh, Uganda, Tanzania, Liberia, Nepal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Haiti ("Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents," n.d.; Banks, 2015; Banks, 2017; Kashfi, Ramdoss & MacMillan, 2012). Described as a "human capital intervention targeted to young women," the ELA program has a two-pronged approach consisting of (i) life skills education focused primarily on sexual and reproductive health and (ii) vocational education aimed at improving girls' economic prospects (Bandiera, Buehren, Goldstein, Rasul, & Smurra, 2018, p.1). The life skills component of the ELA program aims to improve girls' knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and "reduce risky behaviors, early pregnancy, and transmission of STDs and HIV/AIDS," as well as contribute to skills such as leadership and negotiation (Banks, 2017, p.94). Evaluators of the ELA program frequently emphasize that the program's life skills component is interconnected

with its broader aims of economic empowerment; for example, Bandiera et al. (2012) argue that “these economic and health issues are obviously interlinked: teen pregnancy and early motherhood are likely to have a decisive impact on the ability of young girls to accumulate human capital in adolescence, and limit their future occupational choices” (p.3).

For the most part, studies of the ELA program have generally concluded the program significantly impacts its intended sexual and reproductive health outcomes. In a randomized controlled trial led by the World Bank of the ELA program in Uganda, Bandiera et al. (2018a) found that the program decreased rates of teen pregnancy and early marriage, and increased condom usage by 50% among sexually active girls. Similarly, Bandiera et al. (2012) found that the ELA program in Uganda significantly increased knowledge pertaining to pregnancy and HIV (p.4). In addition, in a randomized control evaluation of the ELA program in Sierra Leone during the devastation of the Ebola crisis, the program was found to prevent early pregnancies and increase contraceptive use relative to the control group (Bandiera et al., 2018b). However, one randomized control evaluation of the ELA program in Tanzania led to contradictory findings: no significant changes to any outcomes of sexual or reproductive health were observed, which the authors speculated might be due to lack of quality of implementation of the program “due to resource constraints and several contextual factors” (Buehren, Goldstein, Gulesci, Sulaiman, & Yam, 2017, p.3).

Furthermore, the impact evaluations of the ELA program have also largely observed significant economic impacts. In Uganda, Bandiera et al. (2012) found that “the likelihood of girls being engaged in income generating activities [increased] by 35%, mainly driven by increased participation in self-employment” (p.5). Shanaz and Karim (2008) wrote that ELA centers strengthened the participants’ engagement with microfinance and enhanced their

entrepreneurship, “as they are more likely to take loans as well earn [a] substantially higher amount” (p.35). Kashfi, Ramdoss, and MacMillan’s (2012) research claims that the ELA program in Bangladesh resulted in a significant increase in the number of days girls spent on income-generating activities (p.3). Finally, yet again, the randomized control evaluation of the ELA program in Tanzania led to contradictory findings, insofar as no significant economic impacts were observed. (Buehren, Goldstein, Gulesci, Sulaiman, & Yam, 2017).

In addition to the ELA program, the Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) was another notable global intervention that has been central to the creation of a life skills evidence base. Launched in 2008, the AGI was a public-private partnership between the World Bank, the Nike Foundation and the governments of Afghanistan, Australia, Denmark, Jordan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Liberia, Nepal, Norway, Rwanda, Southern Sudan, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Funded at \$20 million, the AGI aimed to provide adolescent girls and young women with skills to transition to employment and was piloted in eight countries from 2008 to 2015: Afghanistan, Jordan, Lao PDR, Liberia, Haiti, Nepal, Rwanda, and South Sudan (“Adolescent Girls Initiative,” n.d.). Furthermore, the creation of an evidence base was part and parcel with the aims of the AGI; a completion report states the AGI “was established to build the evidence base on what works to help young women enter productive employment” (“Partnering for Gender Equality,” 2016, p.31). Moreover, the AGI was celebrated for its success in “[producing] rigorous evidence on program impacts to guide policy decisions” (“Partnering for Gender Equality,” 2016, p.31).

Life skills training was incorporated into each of the AGI pilots and life skills were cited for their linkages to health, education, and labor market outcomes (“Life skills: what are they,” 2013). While the content of the life skills education varied significantly across the AGI pilots, it

covered areas such as decision-making; negotiation; communication; sexual and reproductive health; resisting peer pressure; self-awareness; self-esteem; managing stress and emotions; and preparing for employment. Additionally, similar to the ELA program, several of the AGI pilots included additional technical, vocational, business, or livelihood skills training in addition to the life skills component.

Comparable to the ELA program, the AGI evaluations largely found positive impacts. For instance, The Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project in Liberia was one of the eight AGI pilots and among the most widely cited for its strong results. The EPAG project was designed to help young girls to overcome the challenges and barriers they might face in their everyday lives to attaining employment. Adoho et al. (2014) conducted an impact evaluation of the EPAG project utilizing a randomized control trial design to assess the relative impact of life skills training on earnings and employment outcomes of program participants compared with a control group of non-participants. The authors found that the EPAG program increased labor force participation by 47 percent and increased incomes by 80 percent. Further, they argued that the study constituted a strong piece of evidence to justify further funding and research in similar programs. From the standpoint of sexual and reproductive health, however, the EPAG program did not appear to have any significant impact on sexual or reproductive behaviors. Though this was not an explicit aim of the program, the authors state these findings might be surprising in light of “recent studies [which] have shown a causal link between...economic empowerment and reduced fertility” (Adoho et al., 2014, p.19).

In addition to the ELA and AGI initiatives, there are numerous other girls’ life skills programs with corresponding impact evaluations, many of which have also converged around the focal areas of sexual and reproductive health and economic empowerment. For instance, in 2010,

the Nike Foundation funded a three-year project in Ethiopia's Amhara region, Towards Improved Economic and Sexual/Reproductive Health Outcomes for Adolescent Girls (Edmeades, Hayes, & Gaynair, 2014). Implemented by the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere Ethiopia and evaluated by the International Center for Research on Women, this intervention included both financial and life skills education and found that girls' participation in the program resulted in increases in employment, income-generating activities, as well as a "large and statistically significant rise in girls' use of modern family planning methods" (Edmeades et al., 2014, p.9). In Zimbabwe, Dunbar et al. conducted a randomized control trial of the Shaping the Health of Adolescents in Zimbabwe program which found that the life skills program resulted in fewer unintended pregnancies among participants and less risky sexual behaviors. (Dunbar et al., 2014) In Zambia, Innovations for Poverty Action designed the "Negotiating a Better Future" project to bolster girls' negotiation and communication skills, with the goal of improving economic and health outcomes and "and, in the long term, [contributing] to the expansion of a healthy and skilled labor force that can support the country's economic growth and development" (Ashraf, Low, & McGinn, 2012).

As demonstrated by these numerous studies, momentum has surged around global girls' life skills initiatives and evaluations in recent years. Importantly, the findings from these initial studies have been cited as a rationale for scaling up life skills programming and evaluation. For instance, the World Bank stated that "[the AGI and ELA] pilots and evaluations delivered lasting improvements in the lives of young women and provided evidence on what works for skills development programs for adolescent girls *that have influenced much larger-scale investments* [emphasis added]" ("Sustainable impact on girls' lives", 2017, p.2). Such massive, subsequent investments include the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD)

project, which was launched by the World Bank and the United Nations in 2015 and will support 300,000 girls and women across Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The SWEDD project includes “life skills and sexual reproductive health training” and has a total investment of \$67 million (“Sustainable impact on girls’ lives”, 2017, p.2). Similarly, the Zambia Girls’ Education and Women’s Empowerment and Livelihoods project includes life and business skills training and will reach 75,000 girls and young women in Zambia with an investment of \$36 million (“Sustainable impact on girls’ lives”, 2017, p.2). Finally, the India Tejaswini Socioeconomic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women project will reach 400,000 girls through an investment of \$68 million, and also in large part consists of life skills education. Importantly, the World Bank notes that all of these projects build on the evidence base from earlier interventions, such as in Uganda and Liberia. While the impact evaluations of these interventions are still underway, and the findings are thus not yet available, it is clear that the evidence base for girls’ life skills continues to gain momentum.

Finally, in addition to the aforementioned impact evaluations of particular interventions, there are a growing number of reports which aim to systematically review the evidence base of life skills education as a whole. For instance, in 2018, the Brookings Institution and Chr. Michelsen Institute conducted a systematic review of non-formal life skills programming. The study involved a thorough review of life skills literature around the globe, in addition to an in-depth mapping and review of the life skills programming landscape in three countries: Lebanon, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. The key findings of the literature review echo the consensus that evaluations of life skills to date have primarily demonstrated positive outcomes:

on balance, the few existing rigorous evaluations of life skills programs benefiting young women conclude that these programs generally positively influence psycho-social and attitudinal outcomes, health, and relationships. They can help to prevent early marriage, and they help to develop important economic and cognitive skills. (Dupuy et al, 2018, p.2)

However, the other key finding of their literature review was that there exists a lack of clarity surrounding how life skills programs are designed and towards what ends they serve: “there is a lack of systematic documentation...on what kinds of life skills programs are being offered to girls across developing countries and by whom, how these programs are designed, and what outcomes they intend to achieve” (Dupuy et al, 2018, p.2). Cohen and Murphy-Graham (n.d.) concur, stating that “the meanings and terminologies associated with the concept of life skills vary, and the methods for systematically measuring and tracking life skills are not well defined” (p.1). Indeed, while there are numerous evaluations which explicitly track countless outcomes and indicators across life skills programs, there nonetheless remains a stark lack of clarity regarding how life skills are defined and understood.

Furthermore, in stepping back to evaluate this collection of studies as a whole, it becomes clear that life skills research has been largely produced out of settings and contexts embedded within an increasingly pervasive form of evidence-based institutional governance. I follow Merry (2016) in asserting that global development institutions are deeply entrenched within “‘indicator culture’...a body of technocratic expertise that places a high value on numerical data as a form of knowledge and as a basis for decision making” (p.9). Thus, major organizations contributing to life skills research attempt to collectively establish their credibility, validity, and claims to knowledge and expertise through forms of technocratic measurement, monitoring, and quantitative evaluation—rather than through other ways of knowing.

As Merry’s insightful account reveals, though indicators purport to track and correspond with objective truth, they often fail to do so in important ways. For instance, indicators create a false sense of precision and specificity that fail to reflect the many uncertainties and contingent factors that shaped their creation: “the ambiguity of the categories, errors in counting, missing

data, and lack of commensurability disappear in the final presentation of the indicators to the public” (Merry, 2016, p.19-20). Along similar lines, Merry argues that indicators conceal the ways in which they “are subtly and even unconsciously shaped by the assumptions, motivations, and concerns of those who carry them out...[as well as] the disciplinary and institutional site of their creation and by the resources available to collect relevant data” (Merry, 2016, p.20).

In conclusion, the developing life skills evidence base has coalesced around a crowded field of indicators which purport to quantify program effectiveness across a multitude of dimensions. However, these indicators serve a depoliticizing function, by framing the benefits of life skills as a phenomenon that can be objectively measured in a neutral and scientific way. In other words, the underlying rationales, frameworks, and theorizations that actually serve to establish narratives and truths around life skills are deemphasized by this evidence-based discourse which claims neutrality. Moreover, as has been shown in the review of the literature, most of this evidence-based research lacks a clear description of the precise ways in which life skills are conceptualized and invoked. Therefore, this paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing the distinct, shifting, and contested ways life skills are understood among varied global actors implementing such programs.

Critiques of Life Skills Programming

In the previous section of this literature review, I surveyed numerous evaluations which attempt to establish an evidence base to support the presumed efficacy of life skills programs. In contrast to these studies, I now turn to the limited realm of scholarship critically examines life skills education. The few studies which evaluate life skills education through a critical lens have primarily arisen only within the span of the past few years, and the scope of these studies are

quite limited. As I will demonstrate from the below review, while the existing literature in this realm has begun to historicize and contextualize the rise of life skills programming, there remains a significant gap in the literature, and a further need for nuanced, intersectional analyses of girls' life skills education.

To date, few scholars have analyzed life skills programs through a critical lens. Maithreyi is one such scholar whose ethnographic fieldwork and discourse analyses helped to uncover the historical conditions which gave rise to life skills programming and to pose critical questions surrounding life skills education and its purposes. Focusing her inquiry on life skills education in India, Maithreyi (2017) argued that life skills programming is steeped within a deficit approach and aimed at inculcating middle class-values and modes of being onto poor children. In subsequent research, Maithreyi (2018b) held that life skills programs frame children as byproducts of their socialization, rather than as agentic subjects. This positions children as at-risk and in need of constriction and regulation to set them on the appropriate pathways.

Furthermore, Maithreyi (2018a) conducted a genealogical analysis of life skills education. According to her account, the earliest interventions of life skills arose in the 1960s - 1970s in a period of economic and social unrest. During this time, the discipline of psychology was under attack for not equipping individuals to sufficiently adjust to the social and economic conditions they faced. Thus, life skills initiatives were developed "in response to some of the criticisms levied against psychology...to 'give away psychological skills' (Larson, 1984) that would help make unemployed youth and adults become 'self-reliant, self-directing, employable citizens' (Adkins, 1984)" (Maithreyi, 2018a, p.254-255). In other words, the development of life skills programs repositioned external conditions and problems - such as the economic conditions - as issues that an individual ought to overcome through acquiring life skills: "the external conditions affecting an

individual's life were made problems of individual psychological development (Maithreyi, 2018a, p.255). Bearing similarity to this account, Butterwick and Benjamin's (2006) discourse analysis of the life skills and career education curriculum in British Columbia, Canada found that the life skills curriculum served to decontextualize and depoliticize the issue of unemployment as a structural issue by shifting focus on the individual employability (Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006).

Notably, Maithreyi and Benjamin and Butterwick's research represents important initial contributions among the scant field of life skills critique. However, their work does not attend to the nuanced ways in which life skills discourses have circulated around the figure of the adolescent girl in the global South, who has been uniquely positioned as the ideal beneficiary of life skills training in recent years.

By contrast, Kwauk and Braga (2017) put forth one of the few critiques which investigates girls' life education in particular. They argue that life skills education needs to be more explicitly linked to the wider processes of social change: "practitioners often overlook the dynamic and social processes through which life skills development in the individual girl can actually help girls to transform their life outcomes and circumstances." (p.4) In this report, the authors present a novel framework for reconceptualizing life skills with a focus on equipping girls with capacities to advance transformative social change against the unequal conditions which they face. While this contribution to the landscape of literature notably attempts to reframe life skills within a broader push for social transformation and gender equity, it still does not attend to the multiple discourses which have positioned the adolescent girl in the global South legible as the ideal recipient of life skills education at the present moment.

In conclusion, while there are a few examples of critiques life skills education, there remain significant gaps in this body of literature. In particular, there exists a need for further studies which

elucidate the diverse ways in which life skills are conceptualized and invoked among key global actors and the guarantees they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South.

Life Skills, Human Capital, and the Economization of Life

In the final section of this literature review, I will turn to the broader set of literature that provides a context for understanding the rising calls for girls' empowerment through education more broadly. In recent years, many international development agencies have shifted their attention towards adolescent girls—a phenomenon which has been dubbed the 'girling' of development. Over time, a growing consensus emerged in the field of international development that investing in girls and women constitutes "Smart Economics" (Calkin, 2018, p.16). Thus, the question emerges as to what underlying rationales, theories, and frameworks were able to successfully render adolescent girls and young women legible as ideal development agents. Many scholars have provided insightful critiques which help to uncover how this was made possible.

In spite of the preponderance of messaging surrounding girls' empowerment through education at the present moment, the 'girling' of development is, in fact, a relatively new spectacle. Indeed, for decades, women and girls were significantly marginalized within international development. For instance, with the establishment of the World Bank in 1944, postwar educational investments were heavily targeted towards men and focused predominantly on secondary education and vocational or technical training, under the rationale that such investments were the most closely linked with economic growth. At this time, global investments in women's education or skills training were limited: women's labor was rarely recognized as contributing to economic growth (Moeller, 2018). However, in the 1970s, a noticeable shift

occurred in the World Bank's approach, as they "began to recognize the poor and women as critical to modernization" (Moeller, 2018, p.68).

Thereafter, the World Bank and other international development agents increasingly targeted the poor and women in their lending, as well as reoriented their efforts to be more inclusive of primary school and non-formal education. Notably, these shifting policies came alongside an increasingly neoliberal framework for development that prioritized individual, rather than structural, solutions to poverty. Throughout the 1980s, the World Bank and IMF imposed neoliberal structural adjustment policies throughout the global South that consisted in privatization and the reduction in social services and public funding for education; poor women bore the brunt of the severe hardships and harmful consequences of such policies (Moeller, 2018). Therefore, while the inclusion of girls and women within development projects has been often understood on its face as an advancement of gender equality, many feminists have expressed concern that the gender equality discourse gained power as it was co-opted in the service of agendas and narratives: "these ostensible gains are complex and ambiguous because much of the gender equality policy discourse is so closely tied to the advancement of a neoliberal economic policy agenda characterized by market fundamentalism, deregulation, and corporate-led development" (Calkin, 2018, p.2).

Notably, the development of human capital theory played an indispensable role in establishing the consensus for investing in adolescent girls. Broadly speaking, human capital theory was foundational in shaping the emphasis of the postwar international development regime on education, giving rise to the notion of education as an investment (Murphy-Graham, 2012). In the early 1970s, Theodore Schultz, one of the first scholars to do empirical work within this field, called for the "importance of studying the investment in formal education and

quantifying the rate of return on this investment” (Murphy-Graham, 2012, p.10). Though Schultz’s work made no gendered distinctions, his son, T. Paul Schultz, later argued that there existed a particularly high rate of return from women’s education (1987). Calkin (2018) argued that human capital theory has reframed gender equality in instrumental terms as a vehicle for economic growth and has particularly positioned adolescent girls in the global South as the primary focus and targets of development interventions in education. Within the framework of this theory, girls have been increasingly reconceptualized as a resource to be “tapped” or whose potential can be “harnessed” or “unlocked” (p.104).

Furthermore, there are many specific narratives from within the framework of human capital theory that have circulated as justifications for prioritizing investments in girls and women. For instance, one frequently cited rationale highlights that women tend to reinvest their earnings back into their household and children at higher rates than men, which in turn helps to accelerate the accumulation of human capital at the household level. However, Calkin (2018) argued that this narrative problematically hinges on gender-essentialist views of women as naturally altruistic caregivers. Instead, she holds that this phenomenon ought to be interpreted with an acknowledgment of the gendered social norms that place a disproportionate amount of the burden of household and care work on the shoulders of women (Calkin, 2018). Secondly, another often cited justification for investment in girls and women from the perspective of human capital theory revolves around the assumption that their inclusion within higher wage jobs will help to stimulate the economy. In particular, this discourse emphasizes a balancing act to maximize women’s productive and reproductive labor, which Calkin argued also hinges essentialized notions of womanhood:

because women’s labor is currently ‘misallocated’ in low paying or unpaid jobs (read: reproductive work), their employment in high quality, higher wage jobs will raise family

incomes and by extension, national economic growth. Indeed, the harnessing of the double burden to extra productive and reproductive labor from empowered women rests on the premise that productivity and efficiency are natural manifestations of their responsible, family-oriented feminine nature. (Calkin, 2018, p.114)

Thus, while human capital theory purports to demonstrate unbiased, quantitative rationales for investing in girls and women, a critical analysis reveals the gender-essentialist tropes which underlies this discourse.

In addition to human capital theory, the development of theories of population and economy more broadly also set the stage for the calls to invest in girls and women. Murphy (2017) historicizes the ways in which postcolonial social science led to the theories and models of population and economy as objects of experimental concern which could be governed and controlled. In turn, a set of practices emerged “that differentially value and govern life in terms of their ability to foster the macroeconomy of the nation-state, such as life’s ability to contribute to gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation” (p.6). Murphy names these practices the “economization of life,” and traces different arcs of how these practices led to interventions within population and economy.

For instance, investments in adolescent girls’ education constitutes one of the examples of the economization of life which Murphy historicizes. Citing Lawrence Summers’s calculation that investing in girls’ schooling was more effective at curbing fertility than typical family planning programs that distributed contraception, girls were placed within a central role within the economization of life: “with Summers’s calculation, a new phantasmagram was congealing around girls, fertility, and economic futures” (p.113). Girls’ education was rendered the best investment in a country’s future economic prospects. Importantly, Murphy’s account attends to not only the discursive but also the affective dimensions which coalesced around investments in girls’ education—rendering the girl a site of anticipation and potential, but also one of risk.

Finally, in addition to the contributions of scholars such as Calkin and Murphy, other scholars have importantly traced how the field of international development has become inextricably linked with the interests of global corporations, which have become major funders of girls' empowerment initiatives. For instance, Moeller (2018) uncovered how corporate foundations have become deeply enmeshed with the global development regime, circulating a certain theory of change surrounding the economic potential of marginalized adolescent girls in the global South. Moeller (2018) argued that despite these interventions' claims to economically empower girls, they often instrumentally serve the strategic purpose of deflecting from the structural factors that oppress girls and women, particularly those in the global South. For example, corporations which were critiqued for unethical working conditions, labor practices, and the exploitation of adolescent girls developed these programs to assuage their public image and to continue to shape girls' subjectivities in alignment with market and labor needs. In other words, corporate philanthropic efforts targeted at adolescent girls largely arose as an instrumental tool for deflecting from criticism and serving corporate interests—allowing corporations to continue to massively profit from exploitative labor practices without addressing demands to reform deeper structural issues.

In conclusion, many scholars have provided insightful accounts that historicize, contextualize, and critique the rising investments in girls' empowerment initiatives. Though prioritizing investments in adolescent girls has become elevated to the status of common sense within the mainstream development sector, many critics interrogate the hidden assumptions, frameworks, and theories that have helped to construct this understanding. While the aforementioned, critical scholars have not focused their analyses on life skills education, their

collective body of work provides a vital context for examining the soaring investments in girls' life skills education in the present moment.

Summary

In summary, I have reviewed the background literature surrounding investments in girls' life skills education, including the mainstream evidence base of impact evaluations. I have attempted to demonstrate that, whereas there exist many critiques of neoliberal investments in girls' education as a whole, there has been very little scholarship critically examining the sudden ascendance of girls' life skills education. To date, none of the critical contributions in this body of literature have fully attended to nuanced ways in which life skills education are understood to benefit adolescent girls in the global South. Therefore, this study will attempt to address this major gap in the literature, in seeking to understand how life skills are conceptualized as a crucial tool for girls' empowerment.

CHAPTER III RESULTS

Introduction

In this study, I have explored how global actors understand the potential of life skills education for empowering adolescent girls within the global South. Through this research, I have sought to fill a gap in the body of literature by critically exploring how global actors within the field of life skills education differently conceptualize life skills and the guarantees they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South at the current moment. Furthermore, I have attempted to trace these distinct conceptualizations of life skills and their presumed guarantees for adolescent girls have shifted—as well as been contested—within and across key organizations in the life skills landscape. In this what follows in this chapter, I will present the findings which have resulted from this study.

Life Skills as Human Capital Accumulation for Adolescent Girls

Throughout my analysis of the crowded and confused field of life skills conceptualizations, one particular notion of life skills emerged as among the most significant and clearly identifiable. Namely, this conceptualization interprets life skills within the confines of human capital theory. Similarly, this understanding frames the promise and significance of life skills along the same lines—as the guarantee of accelerating girls’ accumulation of human capital to an unprecedented degree.

Notably, the World Bank serves as the clearest and most significant example of an organization within this framework—invoking the terminologies and rationales of human capital theory very explicitly in its life skills research. In my discourse analysis, I purposefully selected

several documents from the World Bank to analyze, since it constitutes one of the most consequential organizations investing in girls' life skills initiatives and research on a massive scale. Of note, the World Bank has been highly influential in shaping the production of knowledge within international development as a whole, attempting to establish itself as a key creator of development knowledge and expertise. Calkin (2018) argued that the World Bank "has been the most powerful producer of Gender and Development knowledge since the 1990s, in part because of explicit efforts to position itself as such" (p. 71). Therefore, the World Bank was identified as a crucial organization for examination within this study.

Importantly, my discourse analysis revealed differences in the ways in which life skills were invoked across different researchers and authors *within* the World Bank. This highlights the fact that conceptualizations of life skills are far from settled and univocal, even within the context of a singular organization. Rather, life skills are an important site of contested and shifting significations. In what follows, I highlight the distinct ways in which life skills were conceptualized across both the ELA and AGI initiatives, including similarities and differences. As outlined in my literature review, these initiatives both constituted massive global interventions in girls' life skills education. While both initiatives were evaluated by the World Bank, the ways in which they invoked and conceptualized life skills differed.

In descriptions of the ELA program, life skills are explicitly conceptualized *directly* as a form of human capital in itself. Bandiera et al. (2018a) from the World Bank describe their intervention as:

a multifaceted program that provides adolescent girls with an opportunity to simultaneously accumulate two kinds of *human capital*: *vocational skills* to enable them to start small-scale income generating activities, and *life skills* to help to make informed choices about sex, reproduction, and marriage. [emphasis added] (p.2)

Strikingly, in their conceptualization of the ELA program, life skills are heavily conceptualized around the focal areas of sexual and reproductive health. Buehren et al. (2017) from the World Bank briefly refers to the life skills component of the ELA as “information on sex, reproduction, and marriage” (p.2). Later in the paper, the authors provide a more detailed description of the program content which reiterates this narrowed focus, stating that “a range of topics are covered in the life skills trainings including sexual and reproductive health, menstrual disorders, dangers of early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS awareness and family planning” (p.5).

In another study of the ELA, Bandiera et al. (2018a) presents a nearly identical list of key topics of the ELA program, including: “sexual and reproductive health, menstruation and menstrual disorders, pregnancy, sexual transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS awareness, family planning, and rape” (p.10). However, in this study, the authors state the program also includes “other sessions cover enabling topics such as management skills, negotiation, conflict resolution and leadership,” among a few other topics (p.10). Though this description of life skills programming content is broadened, the description of these skills as “enabling” points to the instrumental role they are presumed to play in serving the ultimate ends of the program. Namely, Bandiera et al. clearly state that the “overarching aim of the life skills component of the program is to socially empower girls by enhancing the control that adolescent girls have over their own bodies, and to enable them to act on improved knowledge of reproductive health” (p.10).

Based on these descriptions, one might understand the World Bank’s notion of life skills as simply a straightforward form of sexual and reproductive health education. However, instead of solely conceptualizing life skills as solely an intervention aiming to influence sexual and reproductive outcomes, it is important to recognize that the authors frequently *also* reiterate their

understanding that the strength of the ELA program lies in the combination of its multidimensional approach on both vocational *and* life skills. Indeed, the authors repeatedly highlight that this bundled approach is what holds the key to its relative success, especially in comparison to interventions that are standalone programs offering either vocational or sexual and reproductive health interventions, but not both.

In essence, the authors imply that the combination of these two components add up to more than the sum of their individual parts. Moreover, human capital theory provides the rationale for this result, as the components are understood to work in tandem with each other to reinforce girls' human capital accumulations. Indeed, the authors state that "a key strength of the [ELA] approach is its potential to give a big push to adolescent girls' empowerment along these dimensions simultaneously and kickstart a virtuous cycle of gains" (Bandiera et al., 2018a, p.30). Throughout the paper, this is juxtaposed against the alternative of the vicious cycle of that status quo, which consists "precisely [in] events such as getting married or having children during adolescence which interrupt human capital accumulation and thus permanently and significantly adversely affect the lifetime earnings potential of women across the developing world" (p.31-32).

Thus, it becomes clear that the authors conceptualize the life skills component of the ELA program as an instrumental means for influencing and controlling girls' reproductive futures. Yet, even more precisely, they place the importance of these skills within the context of human capital theory. Namely, life skills training represents the promise of unlocking girls' latent human capital potential, through limiting their fertility and also in virtue of the presumed interlinkages between reproductive and economic outcomes.

By contrast, in turning to the World Bank's depictions of the AGI interventions, a different and broader characterization of life skills is presented. While the majority of AGI pilots similarly include a sexual and reproductive health component, they also emphasize many other skills beyond the scope of the content highlighted in the ELA program. For instance, the AGI interventions include content pertaining to a broad range of other psychosocial skills, including leadership, communication, negotiation, problem-solving, decision-making, self-esteem, interview skills, and many more ("Life skills: what are they," 2013, p.3). In a learning brief from the AGI pilots entitled "Life skills: What are they, why do they matter, and how are they taught?" the authors broadly draw on the WHO's definition of life skills, by stating that life skills are social and behavior skills which "enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands of everyday life" ("Life skills: what are they," 2013, p.1).

However, despite this broadened definition of life skills, these authors *still* understand the significance and guarantees of the life skills in the AGI pilots within the context of human capital theory. For instance, in their brief, they go on to elaborate on the reasons why life skills matter, and in doing so, they "draw heavily from Heckman's work as well as other economists who wrote from a human capital perspective" (Cohen & Murphy-Graham, n.d., p.12). While not cited as explicitly or obviously as within the ELA program, the transformative potential of life skills within the AGI pilots is *also* tied back to sexual and reproductive behavior and labor market outcomes.

In conclusion, human capital theory has emerged a significant framework through which development actors conceptualize life skills and its significance. In this section, I have traced how researchers and authors from the World Bank, in particular, have put forth varying conceptualizations of life skills and its significance. While the precise definitions and content of

life skills vary, the significance and presumed guarantees attached to life skills coheres together, understood as a catalyst for accumulating human capital.

Life Skills as Quality Education and Empowerment

In the previous section, I reviewed a predominant conceptualization of life skills as a means for jumpstarting human capital accumulation in and through adolescent girls. In this section of my findings, I focus on a different conceptualization of life skills which, on its face, appears quite distant from the human capital conceptualization. Namely, many global actors emphasize life skills as a tool for girls' social empowerment and personal well-being. Almost exclusively, global actors broadly embedded within this understanding neither focus solely on social and interpersonal factors nor only personal qualities, but rather cite numerous benefits across *both* dimensions within their work. This dual focus on both social and personal skills may be partially driven by the widespread influence of the WHO's (1997) framework on life skills, which included both social and personal dimensions.

However, my discourse analysis has revealed that, although actors within this community appear to at times distance themselves from the terminologies of human capital theory, their work nonetheless tends to bear a great deal of similarity with those interventions which are more explicitly grounded in the human capital conceptualizations of life skills. I observe that while there exists a desire to come up with new frameworks for conceptualizing life skills, existing programs ultimately appear to serve a very similar function and purpose as those aimed at unlocking girls' human capital. In other words, in this section of my findings, I will attempt to put into question the overly simplistic narrative that global actors who cite dimensions of girls' social empowerment and personal well-being are entirely set apart from the human capital conceptualization of life skills.

In order to better elucidate this research finding, it is helpful to analyze Cohen and Murphy-Graham's (n.d.) exploration of different conceptualizations of life skills. In their review of this topic, which examined a set of research questions which were highly similar to my own in this study, the authors broadly identify three discourse communities that encapsulate the main ways in which life skills have been invoked across different global actors. They define "discourse community" as "a group of people who share a set of basic values, assumptions and goals, and use communication to achieve those goals. (Swales, 2009)" (Cohen & Murphy-Graham, n.d., p.1).

First, they identify a discourse community of prevention and protection, associated with the disciplines of public health and social work. This discourse community developed as a means of discouraging youth from engaging in risky behaviors, particularly with regards to sexual behaviors. Second, they identify another discourse community of economists concerned primarily with labor market outcomes and "drawing upon the work of personality psychologists" (Cohen & Murphy-Graham, n.d., p.11) which is gathered around a human capital perspective.

In relation to the previous section of my research findings, I argue that Cohen and Murphy-Graham's (n.d.) account of these first two distinct discourse communities fails to recognize the ways in which human capital theory has been predicated upon simultaneously controlling both girls' productive *and* reproductive futures. Whereas Cohen and Murphy-Graham broadly place sexuality education within the discourse community of prevention and protection—or also within the confines of public health and social work—they fail to recognize the ways in which economists have taken up a great deal of interest in indicators pertaining to sexual and reproductive health as well, through the guise of human capital theory. Though Cohen and Murphy-Graham do note that the discourse communities share some overlapping features,

their account fails to represent the strong interlinkages which have been forged across these areas in girls' life skills programming.

Furthermore, Cohen & Murphy-Graham (n.d.) go on to outline a third discourse community—one in which they self-identify—of life skills conceptualized as “quality education in developing countries” (p.1). In elaborating on this discourse community, they argue life skills has been increasingly cited as an essential component of quality education, especially for adolescent girls. Broadly speaking, Cohen & Murphy-Graham situates this discourse community within the human capabilities approach—arguing that it has expanded outside of academia in “research and policy statements” and moves beyond the rationales of human capital approach.

On the one hand, Cohen and Murphy-Graham's (n.d.) account of life skills conceptualized vis-a-vis quality education broadly speaks to the set of actors who appear to desire to set themselves apart from the discourse and terminologies associated with human capital theory. However, even Cohen and Murphy-Graham note that in the *majority* of the existing literature to date, life skills are positioned in instrumental terms as a means to other ends: namely, the dozens of indicators and outcomes that are captured in life skills evaluations. In contrast to this current state of the field, they argue that it is important for the field to begin to recognize the intrinsic value of life skills in themselves, regardless of whether or not they are found to ultimately possess “strong causal linkages with outcomes typically measured such as fertility, earnings, or total years of schooling” (p.18).

In interpreting Cohen and Murphy-Graham's account of the life skills as “quality education,” I would argue that this more precisely represents what might be thought of as an *aspirational* conceptualization of life skills that certain organizations have begun to attempt to align themselves with, but largely has not yet been borne out in practice. As demonstrated within

my review of the literature, the vast majority of organizations implementing life skills work have coalesced around outcomes pertaining to economic empowerment and sexual reproductive health. Furthermore, as demonstrated within my analysis of the AGI conceptualization of life skills from the World Bank, even programs which emphasize the psychosocial benefits of life skills education might also conceptualize the *significance* of these skills and competencies within the broader rationales and context of human capital theory, as well. Simply put, it is difficult to find any substantial examples of girls' life skills programming that have evaded the broader discourses circulating in international development surrounding the unique potential of intervening in the productive and reproductive futures of adolescent girls. While this is not to say that the field of life skills programming and its complex set of significations can be simply reduced down a single theory or framework, I would argue that it does highlight the degree to which the human capital theory has influenced the field of girls' life skills programming.

In summary, while I do not agree that Cohen and Murphy-Graham's (n.d.) outline of this discourse community meaningfully represents any specific group of global actors that are not implicated in human capital theory at the present moment, I still hold that is significant in pointing to relatively new calls within the field for a new way of understanding, branding, and representing life skills programming and its significance. Notably, the Brookings Institution has also emerged as a key actor calling for the development of new conceptualizations of life skills—and was also listed as one of the few examples of organizations within the quality education discourse community by Cohen and Murphy-Graham. (Kwauk & Braga, 2017).

Finally, another interesting dimension of Cohen and Murphy-Graham's description of the discourse community of life skills as "quality education" which is worth discussing is its relationship to girls' empowerment. Given the recent preponderance of life skills initiatives

across several global organizations who also conceive their work as a form of girls' empowerment, Cohen and Murphy-Graham discuss the possibility that the terminology of "life skills" has arisen in popularity in supplanting the use of the term "empowerment." Due to its seemingly depoliticized and neutral phrasing, the authors speculate it might more readily attract certain ministries of education and other stakeholders:

A discursive shift seems to have taken place whereby 'life skills' has become the focal point for organizations working with girls...It is possible that 'life skills' is a more palatable term for interventions because they do not include the word 'power' and may therefore seem less radical or politically motivated. (p.14)

Importantly, this discussion demonstrates the somewhat ambiguous relationship between life skills and girls' empowerment. Even within the context of any singular organization, it is possible that the signification of life skills programming precisely signifies is adjusted to suit to the audience and context. Within some settings and contexts, the empowerment dimensions of life skills may be strategically highlighted and well-received; in other contexts, life skills can be strategically deployed in a depoliticized fashion. Therefore, moving forward, it is important to trace all of these multiple, nuanced, complex ways in which conceptualizations of life skills discourses are invoked both within and across global development actors. No singular organization or group of organizations should be simplistically attached to a stable, unchanging definition of life skills. Rather, it is important to attend to the multiple, complex ways in which life skills are invoked both within and across different global development actors.

Summary

In summary, my research has found that human capital theory is a crucial lens and framework through which life skills are conceptualized and invoked by key global development actors in the present moment. Whereas certain global actors such as the World Bank have very explicitly aligned themselves with this approach, there exist other global actors who appear to distance themselves from this conceptualization and call for the need to develop new frameworks for understanding life skills and the significance it holds. However, it remains difficult to locate substantial examples of girls' life skills initiatives that have, in practice, successfully evaded the broader discourses circulating in international development surrounding the unique potential of intervening in the productive and reproductive futures of adolescent girls. As the crowded and highly complex field of life skills programming continues to call for convergence, it will be important to continue to trace how contesting conceptualizations of life skills are put forth and vie for dominance in the field.

CHAPTER IV DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

In many ways, the findings of my research relate back to my literature review. Perhaps most significantly, my literature review explored the historical development of human capital theory and its influence on calls to invest in adolescent girls in the global South. In alignment with this review, the findings of my discourse analysis revealed the broad extent to which human capital theory has influenced conceptualizations of girls' life skills programming and its significance.

Conclusions

In summary, my research has concluded that human capital theory is a central framework through which life skills are conceptualized and invoked by key global development actors. Whereas certain global actors such as the World Bank have very explicitly aligned themselves with this approach, other organizations call for the development of new frameworks for understanding life skills and the significance it holds. However, it remains difficult to identify substantial examples of girls' life skills programs that have, in practice, successfully evaded the broader discourses circulating in international development surrounding the unique potential of intervening in the productive and reproductive futures of adolescent girls. While this does not mean that the field of life skills programming and its complex significations can be simplistically reduced down a single theory or framework, it does highlight the extent to which the human capital has shaped the field of international development with regards to investments in adolescent girls at the present moment.

Recommendations

Though this study represents an initial investigation into the ways in which life skills have been conceptualized and invoked in the present moment, there exists a great need for further studies to advance this work. As mentioned earlier in this study, this research study constituted an initial investigation leading into a larger research study with Dr. Karishma Desai, Assistant Professor at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. This larger study will attend to a very similar set of research questions as the ones that I have focused on in this study.

In addition, this larger study will attend to research questions surrounding frameworks for measuring and assessing life skills and the significance of these measurement approaches. While approaches to measurement were beyond the scope of my research questions in this paper, this also represents an important area where critical scholarship is needed. Broadly speaking, the same set of global actors who are attempting to define and conceptualize life skills are also calling for common frameworks for successfully measuring and assessing them.

Unlike the critical discourse analysis which I have conducted, the larger study will be rooted within a critical ethnographic approach and will involve interviews with several key individuals involved with research, program design, and monitoring and evaluation of life skills programs at major international non-governmental organizations and other central organizations in the field.

In conclusion, there exists a great need for further critical investigations into how global actors differently conceptualize and invoke life skills and the guarantees they are understood to hold for adolescent girls in the global South. As the crowded and highly complex field of life skills programming continues to call for convergence, it will be important to continue to map the

contesting theorizations of life skills that emerge, as well as the broader significance and guarantees that come to be associated with them.

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