Reconceptualising Life Skills Education

A Critical Analysis of Ideas around Childhood, ‘Risks’, and ‘Success’

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by

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The thesis presents a study of life skills education (LSE), a form of psycho-educational skills development programme, targeted at children and adolescents, to teach them a set of personal ‘skills’ such as self-awareness, decision making, critical thinking, and other such skills for personal regulation and development. Centred on the questions, ‘what skills, and to whose lives do they matter?’, the thesis undertakes a critical review of these programmes, showing how they have come to inform our ideas about what constitutes a positive childhood, and outcomes of risks and success.

LSE has been popularised by international developmental organisations such as World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) since the 1990s, as a buffer against the socio-economic conditions of ‘late-modern’ life (e.g., rapid shifts in society, erosion of traditional social order, increased sense of uncertainty [Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991]). Pushed by these networks to be included within school education, they have come to be conceived as an essential component of education itself, following the Education for All (EFA) conferences at Jomtien and Dakar (UNESCO, 2000).

Yet, few studies have critically examined the effects of such programmes outside the framework of psychology. While there have been many studies within the sociological and anthropological literature on other kinds of skills training programmes (e.g., soft skills training; employability skills; etc.), few have focused on school-based life skills programmes (LSPs), which target the youngest available population (of children), considered even to be “not-yet-citizens” (McLeod, 2012). Thus, the thesis was motivated by the question of understanding ‘what is this population of children being prepared for?’, or ‘what kinds of citizen-subjects are they being trained to become?’ through LSE.

Further, while there have been critical studies on other psychological interventions for children (e.g., Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning [SEAL] and Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies [PAThS]), which have sought to teach children similar kinds of skills for self-regulation, LSE differs from these in scope and scale. That is, unlike these programmes that have remained restricted to local contexts or clinical set-ups, LSE has gained international currency and recognition as a form of, and approach to all of education itself.
Thus, the thesis was also motivated by an interest in understanding this transformation and extension of a clinical programme into an integral aspect of school education itself.

Based on these broad objectives of understanding a psychological intervention such as LSE through a sociological lens, the thesis attempts to address the following specific sub-questions:

a. How did LSE emerge as a field? What are the rationales underlying its practice?
b. What are the specific practices, discourses and ideas associated with LSE?
c. What social, political and economic conditions necessitate and sustain LSE as an important intervention for children?
d. How do these ideas and practices envisage ‘childhood’, and what forms of subjectivities do they seek to constitute? How does this inform our ideas about ‘childhood’, and children’s development?
e. What aspects of children’s lives does it address/ignore?
f. Which groups, fields and institutions control and shape these practices and programmes? How does this influence education and socialisation practices at a global level?
g. Are there alternate meanings, ideas and practices associated with LSE? How do these modify its discourses and practices? How are the dominant accounts of LSE received and negotiated within these conditions and what outcomes do they achieve?

Adopting a combination of institutional ethnography and Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA), it attempts to show how LSE forms a system of ‘global governmentality’, that is a discursive field of “governing efforts and representational practices” at a global level (Ilcan and Lacey, 2011), by which certain ideas about childhood and children’s education and socialisation have come to be established. Through ethnographic fieldwork, conducted over a course of a year within organisations conducting LSPs, and schools in Bangalore, the thesis attempts to present the micro-practices through which children, teachers and volunteers were conditioned to understand themselves (e.g., as ‘life skilled’; ‘educated’; ‘successful’; ‘at-risk’; etc.), as well as the contestations and negotiations to these discourses. Using FDA as a technique to interrupt “…the apparently natural flow of talk and text” (Luke, 1995-1996,
p.12), it attempts to identify the ways in which these ideas about LSE and its centrality to children’s development have been naturalised through larger institutional frameworks of policies, programmes, literature and theories on children’s development, thus, disguising the circulation of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980) through which children’s lives have been sought to be regulated.

Thus, based on the insights obtained using these methods, the analysis is organised in the following manner: the first analysis chapter presents a discursive account of LSE as a field, presenting certain key themes that emerge from a critical examination of the various textual material associated with LSE. These include the centrality of LSE for ‘positive and adaptive living and to manage the challenges of everyday life’ (WHO, 1993). LSE is constructed as important to everyday life within homes, schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and even to the intimate aspects of personal life (Hodge, Danish and Martin, 2012). Despite the ‘risks’ and challenges of everyday living considered to be the ones that emerge from the conditions of late-modern life (as mentioned above), the thesis shows how it is the individual/child who is ‘responsibilised’ through such interventions to take on the onus of adapting to these conditions. Further, as ‘skills’ important for everyday living, it shows how a larger population of children (many of whom would have earlier been outside the purview of clinical intervention) are brought under the purview of psychological regulation, through discourses that construct the mere absence of these specific skills and training as ‘risk’. Additionally, despite the broad term ‘life skills’ given to these programmes, it shows how the skills considered important to address these risks are specifically psychological ones. All problems of everyday life – from personal characteristics of impulsivity, to structural problems of poverty and violence, are all considered to be a problem of deficit in these particular skills, thus making the individual responsible for adjusting to and dealing with larger structural deficits that affect their lives.

Further undertaking a socio-historical analysis of the emergence and development of these programmes, the chapter shows how this paralleled certain shifts within psychology as well as society and economy. Emerging during the 1960-70s, specifically in advanced liberal countries such as the USA and UK that were undergoing a period of recession and intense social turmoil (Bretnall, 2013), LSE first emerged as a skills-training programme for unemployed youth. Based on the ‘reflexive turn’ that psychology as a discipline underwent, recognising the failure of behaviouristic models in bringing about deep-seated changes within the internal aspects of the self, and for addressing the social problems of the times (Larson,
1984; Murray, 2012), psychological interventions came to be reconceptualised as ‘self-help’. Behavioural modification was sought to be achieved by ‘giving away’ psychological knowledge for self-regulation as education and ‘skills’ (Larson, 1984). This reconceptualisation of psychological practice sought to harness the individual in managing his own life, promising greater freedom and autonomy in return for engaging in these practices of self-introspection and self-control (Rose, 1999). Thus, in this manner, a new normalcy was awarded to psychological regulation of everyday life, while individuals were sought to be ‘disciplined’ to take on greater responsibility to ensure ‘successful’ outcomes for their own lives and avoid ‘risks’ such as poverty, unemployment and other problems related to health and education. Thus, emerging along with the other development within the economy and political governance during this period – that is, of neoliberalism, the chapter shows how these developments within psychology and LSE were influenced by, and have embedded the neoliberal rationales of developing the ‘self-responsible’, enterprising worker-citizen, in their conceptualisation of childhood development, ‘success’ and ‘risk’.

Drawing from this theme of ‘disciplining’ children as neoliberal citizens and workers, the second analysis chapter attempts to present the mechanisms of ‘disciplining’ embedded within the programmes. Using field data obtained from interviews, observations, focused group discussions, and mostly from informal conversations, collected as a participant-observer on the field, the chapter analyses the curricula, the pedagogy, the classroom transactions, as well as the school culture, showing how each of these elements contributes to the ‘disciplining’ of the child. While the classroom transactions are structured in ways to give the child an understanding of him/herself as impulsive, lacking control over one’s self, hedonistic, uncultured, lacking social decorum, and so on, the curricula relates specific skills such as self-awareness to specific ways of being (e.g., as responsible for performing the duties that are associated with one’s social role as a student). It shows how other skills such as communication are also associated with specific kinds of behaviour (such as giving or taking instructions, learning the conventions of polite conversation, etc.). Thus, the chapter attempts to show how the ‘life skills’ are interpreted narrowly in this manner, without acknowledging other aspects of the self, such as one’s social backgrounds of caste, class, gender, race, etc., or the unequal relations of power of given social situations within which such skills must be applied. Further, analysing the experiential and participative pedagogy of these programmes, it shows how the programmes are designed to allow participants to reveal the internal aspects of the self, such as one’s beliefs, intentions and feeling, which underlie
behaviour, through participation; thus allowing the facilitator to guide individuals to bring about a change in these internal aspects of the self, in order to shape behaviour according to the ends desired by various authorities (such as schools, parents, the state, and various developmental agencies). Thus, it mainly tries to show how ‘life skills’ become ‘technologies of government’ (i.e., forms of control and administration), through which the neoliberal subject can be formed.

However, while the thesis argues for discerning the governing effects of these programmes, it also presents certain ‘disconnects’ that emerge in the practice of the programmes on field, as a result of the socio-cultural context within which it is deployed. That is, examining the practice of these programmes within the government and aided schools in Bangalore, it shows how the discourses of LSE get appropriated to different ends within this context, by schools, teachers and the facilitators, unfamiliar with the modern participative pedagogies of self-regulation and self-making. Thus, within the authoritarian context of the school, and its culture of teaching-learning that is structured as a didactic process of frontal teaching, instruction, repetition, memorisation and repeated practice, the final section of the chapter shows how LSPs themselves get ‘disciplined’ to transact these conventional practices and knowledges associated with the school.

Developing this observation further in the final analysis chapter, the thesis attempts to discuss the reasons for these ‘disconnects’ between the programmes’ rationales and goals, and their transactions on field. Based on the observation of these ‘disconnects’, it further attempts to present a theoretical account of the nature and circulation of power through such interventions and its effects on the formation of identities and subjectivities, showing how it neither leads to a straightforward reproduction nor a transformation of contexts. That is, identifying the ‘disconnects’ within the programmes as emerging from certain class differences between those who plan or design these programmes (from the elite sections of the middle class), and those who receive the programmes (which includes the facilitators from the life skills organisation and the children from the government and aided schools, who mostly belong to the lower or working classes), it shows how these ‘disconnects’ emerge as a result of the differences in their cultural capital. Demonstrating how these differences in capital inform the ways in which the programmes are transacted on field, this study tries to show how each of the groups of actors associated with the programmes (i.e., the facilitators, the children, and the managers who plan the programmes) interprets these programmes from their own stand-points, and appropriate or reject different parts of its discourse. In doing this,
it tries to show how even the managers, who are familiar with these practices of self-regulation and self-making, in fact appropriate the programmes to a different end, thus contributing to the ‘failure’ of these programmes in terms of achieving its neoliberal ends.

Thus, it tries to show how each of these groups ‘strategically opportunises’ – drawing on the discourses of LSE that threaten to render some of them as ‘irrelevant’ within the present context (by presenting them as not having the right set of skills), to stay ‘relevant’. Further, I attempt to show how they draw on these very discourses to construct alternative identities and social statuses for themselves as ‘socially conscious’, ‘enterprising’, ‘culturally better educated’, ‘successful’, as professionals and experts, thus, presenting instances of transformation. Yet, in presenting these strategies as ‘opportunistic’ I also attempt to show how they are also partially ‘blind’ to the long-term consequences of such ‘opportunising’, contributing to the sustenance of the very neoliberal discourses that threaten to render them irrelevant.

Thus, the thesis attempts to contribute to the literature on governmentality studies, and critical studies on childhood and education, examining the underlying rationalities of positive psychological interventions for children, such as LSE, and their local contextualisations (in a certain society) on the field. Further, it attempts to draw certain theoretical insights from these empirical observations, on the nature of social regulation, explaining how such programmes unevenly achieve their effects, thus allowing scope for reproduction as well as transformation. In terms of its practical relevance, the study raises certain critical questions about the nature of participative and experiential pedagogies. Without denying the importance of the need for these internal processes of self-reflection and greater understanding of the self, it identifies the gaps in the translation of many of these programmes, thus pointing towards the need to pay attention to the multiplicities of childhood. It points to the need for a new pedagogic design that is more sensitive to the social contexts and life-worlds of children in place of the current pedagogy that assumes a universality in children’s development.

References


