ABSTRACT

The thesis presents a discursive analysis of a psycho-educational programme called life skills education (LSE), examining ‘what skills’, and to ‘whose lives’ do they matter? LSE has been popularised by international agencies, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), as an evidence-based approach to keep children on a positive trajectory of growth and development and prevent ‘risk’ behaviours in them. It has also come to be established as an essential part of the international framework for achieving Education for All (EFA), and has been adopted by several countries (including India) as a part of their national policies on education. Specifically within the Indian context, these programmes have been considered as important tools for ‘empowering’ the poor, and teaching them to ‘escape their cycles of poverty’.

Yet, few studies examining the effects of LSE are available outside the disciplinary frameworks of Psychology, which largely continues to see it, uncritically, as progressive forms of educational interventions that can “meet learners’ needs” (UNESCO, 2000), and ensure personal competence and well-being. Undertaking an alternative reading of these programmes, drawing on the Sociologies of Childhood and Education, and Critical Psychology, the thesis attempts to present the ‘disciplining’ (rather than the enabling) effects of such programmes. It raises questions about the universality, neutrality and benefits of LSE by attempting to show how specific skills (e.g., self-awareness, decision making, etc.) get linked with particular ways of relating to one’s self, as ‘responsible’, ‘choice-making’, ‘rational’ subjects whose goals are
aligned with those of nations, corporations, and other ‘elite’ networks (e.g., development agencies, psychologists, middle class citizens and ‘social entrepreneurs’). By critically examining the discourses and practices of LSE, the thesis tries to show how these ideas about the self get discursively established as features of normal childhood development, and how any deviations from these (middle class) norms get established as ‘risk’.

Further, through a discursive analysis of the techno-scientific rationalities (e.g., psychological, educational and economic literature) that inform these programmes, and a critical reading of LSE policies, programmes and curricula, the thesis shows how these ideas of ‘normal’ are neoliberal ones - focused on the development of ‘self-responsibility’, ‘self-maximisation’, and ‘enterprise’, that are considered central to outcomes of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in relation to number of social-welfare domains such as education, employment and health. However, in presenting the neoliberal constitution of these programmes, the aim is not to argue for its homogenising effects, leading to a reproduction of existing forms of social inequities and disadvantage through these new educational-interventional routes. Rather, the aim is to present LSE an illustration of how actors strategically and opportunistically respond to the structural conditions and identities imposed on them, in making sense of their lives. The thesis shows how actors selectively adopt, reject, appropriate and resist these larger discourses, thus, neither allowing for a straightforward reproduction, nor transformation of social contexts and conditions. Instead, it tries to foreground the materiality and underlying rationalities of such social interventions, and actors’ responses to them that are contextual, strategic, yet ‘blind’ to the larger outcomes of social transformation or continuity that they contribute to.