

Life Skills Education: A Mechanism for Balancing Children's Learning and Development

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Abstract

The contemporary education lacks a balance between children's learning and development, which impacts negatively on their character and makes them incapable of proffering solutions to problems of life. The aim of this study is to propose the introduction of life skills in all levels of education across the globe so as to help balance children's learning and development by building character and resilience in learners. The study argues that by building these in children, they are equipped to thrive in a challenging world with or without their parents/guardians. Data are drawn from observation, internet secondary sources, and the responses of fifty oral participants engaged in telephone interviews on the subject matter. Qualitative method, critical discourse and content analyses, and descriptive and interpretive techniques are employed. The analysis shows that life skills have huge potentials in stock for child learning and development. The study concludes that having life skills education would mould children's character, inculcate values and resilience into them, and balance their learning with cognitive and social development for remarkable academic performance, social relations, self-reliance and economic independence. Its major recommendation is that schools of all nations should sustainably introduce life skills education into their curricula.

Keywords: Life skills education, Balancing, Children, Learning, Development

Introduction

The dire need for life skills education (LSE henceforth) in this critical era of human existence and development cannot be overemphasized. As identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1997 in Geneva, life skills (LS) are of the following major categories: decision making, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship, self-awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and coping with stress (Behera, 2020). LSE is an all-round form of teaching and learning beyond the traditional form, in which a wide range of skills are imparted into learners for immediate and future relevance to self and society. It covers different sets of skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving skills, critical literacy, entrepreneurial skills, (i.e. entrepreneurship), time management, stress management, decision-making, communication and interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence, to mention but a few (Pathan & Amin, 2023; Dupuy et al., 2018; Kwauk & Braga, 2017). The skills make it possible for the individual to do a lot in life in all ramifications, not just in the school learning environment.

LSE plays an essential role in child development and learning processes. The role includes arming children with the practicable skills needed for personal and professional successes. Regrettably, there currently exists a significant space for LSE in the curricula of many schools across the world, with those of developing nations like Nigeria being the worst. This study is informed by the need to integrate LSE into the traditional education of theoretical and conceptual epistemologies alone. It does not only project LSE as a multifaceted framework for practical teaching and learning. Given the huge benefits of LS on one hand and those of LSE on the other, this study seeks to dissect LSE as a mechanism for making a significant change in the education of children in the contemporary society, where new trends continually emerge and work against the ideal meaningful education of children.

The Need for Life Skills Education across the Globe

This study's thesis that there is currently no balance between children's learning and development in contemporary education is given credence by studies such as Robert and Besong (2023), Robert (2017), and Robert et al. (2016), among many others, which are of the unanimous view that the education of these days largely lacks the ideal core essentials of education. The lack is evident in the character of young people of these days, despite undergoing both formal and informal educational trainings, or despite being educated. Robert and Besong (2023) point out that the education obtained between the

1970's and the 1980's differed significantly from that of these days. The irony is that most of the today's technologies and innovations, which have made teaching and learning as well as other endeavors easy, were non-existent then. Yet, quality education characterized by life skills education obtained then quite more significantly than what obtains these days.

The common trends of the 21st century include giving priority to paper qualifications over talents, competence, dexterity and practical skills; sacrificing quality for quantity; being after money and thereby admitting even unqualified admission candidates and consequently graduating them half-baked into the labor market; the absence or poor place of LSE in the curricula of so many schools across the globe; unproductive high number of schools charging unnecessarily high or outrageous school fees; and examination malpractices and other forms of unethical practices among school management officials, teachers, learners and parents/guardians (Robert & Besong, 2023; Behera, 2020; Joynes et al., 2019; Ndubuisi, 2018; Robert, 2017). More so, the issues confronting the traditional education of children in contemporary times include teacher's incompetence, shortage of qualified and competent teachers, lack and/or shortage of teaching-learning materials, unconsidered individual differences and varied backgrounds, issues of comprehension level, social factors, co-education system of gender mix, the wave of globalization, and the negative trends of new media with their evolving language (Robert & Besong, 2023; Nwode, 2022; Nzeagwu, 2018).

As Behera (2020) rightly notes, the trends of digitalization and globalization make LSE imperative. According to Joynes et al. (2019), LSE is imperative in the 21st century because of the increasing demand for information and communication technology and the role of critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration. They call on educational authorities to include LSE in the reforms needed urgently to be carried out in school systems (Joynes et al., 2019). LSE is needed to produce behavioral, cognitive, psychosocial and interpersonal competencies in young people, which would make it possible for them to cope with challenges, get developed appropriately, and succeed in various contexts (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Also, LSE is needed to "enhance human capabilities and prepare young people for survival and participation in an increasingly skill-based global economy" (Bancin & Ambarita, 2019, p. 320).

It is given the trends lamented by scholars and authorities in the education sector that this paper strongly proposes the introduction of LSE into schools of all levels across the globe. It argues that if its proposition is considered and imbibed judiciously, many of the issues confronting the education sector would become a history. The sustainable adoption and integration of LSE into the mainstream education (practice) in terms of curricular coverage would proffer deserving changes to society in general and impact positively on children in particular. Its impact on children would include improving on their learning and expanding the extent of their development. It shall also change their character, as LSE emphasizes and upholds the idea of being a good learner or student in both learning and character, not either of the two alone.

There is no doubt that children having a well-built foundation in learning and character have all-round development and are capable of manning even the most difficult tasks or situations of life. In that context, their learning and development is balanced. This is more like one who eats a balanced diet. A balanced diet is not just of great valuable to child growth, development and learning enablement, but also to the maintenance of good health for children and adults alike. The implication of the foregoing is that LSE is a means of balancing child learning and development –putting the two at an equilibrium level of functionality for the overall wellbeing of children through adolescence to adulthood.

Borah et al. (2020) show that LS impact positively on adolescents. Baby et al. (2022) emphasize the effects of LS on young people, including adolescents. That is, young people exposed to LSE usually do well and exhibit self-efficacy, as they are capable of solving problems and balancing positive and negative emotions. This study argues here that children with well-developed learning and development

processes are undoubtedly resilient, because they are well equipped with the needed skills to be so and to achieve great feats in life.

Nexus between Learning and Development

Development, as Besong (2017) defines it perhaps comprehensively, refers to “significant all-round improvement, change, innovation, growth, increase, advancement and capacity that were hitherto lacking in a place and among a people” (p. 59). Leaning on Besong’s (2017) above noted definition, this paper notes that development is used herein to mean the all-round changes, advancement, growth and improvement in one’s learning and other capacities, which require training in both formal and contexts of knowledge impartation. These contexts are basically two: school and home or family. Baby et al. (2022) also indicate that LS training increases self-efficacy and academic performance. Development does not concern phenomena, infrastructure and society alone, which is why one talks about human development, capacity development and so on.

As Besong (2021) rightly notes, “self-development is the first phase of human development, which involves the advancement of the human person” (p. 3). He further notes that “it is after the first phase of human development that the second phase is anticipated from the society– the government, the family, peer and pressure groups, religions, and other organs of the society” (Besong, 2021, p. 3). It is important to note that the nexus between learning and development is affirmed by the fifty oral participants of this study. As children acquire knowledge, LSE in this case or context, they grow, advance or get mature rationally, cognitively, scholarly, socially and otherwise. The advancement is what development means.

It follows that by participating in learning, children contribute to their own development. Learning makes it possible for them to grow or advance their current state to others. The importance of skills acquisition is what informs organizational (re)training of their employees. Most employers so much value life skills (LS) and look out for them from job seekers. High level of creativity and academic achievement are common attributes of students possessing LS. Given the importance of LS, this study argues that LSE has to be deployed by all schools across the globe to provide children with the pragmatic skills needed for success in various spheres of life.

A common expression among the fifty participants reads, “learning and development connect”. This means that majority of the participants confirmed that there is a nexus between learning and development. Thus, the need for LSE in children’s learning and development cannot be over-emphasized. LSE is as important as the life skills are. Students possessing LS have developed in the course of LSE. At the same time, these skills are inculcated into young people (learners) lacking them. For this study, LSE is a way of *showing persons how to catch fish rather than giving them fish*. Students exposed to the nitty-gritty of LSE can handle different tasks with or without relying on their teachers, parents, elder siblings and so on.

The participants made statements such as:

- (i) Children that over depend on their parents, teachers... need life skills education more in order to learn how to face realities and hard situations of life, when those they depend on are not they.
- (ii) Life skills, as technical skills, provide as well as individuals with technological skills and innovations.
- (iii) Life skills education, if made general, would help reduce the issues characterizing education with little or no practical, technical or life skills.
- (iv) People like Dangote, Bill Gate, Elon Musk, Davido, Tuface, Timaya, etc. are who they are today because of their life skills, not school knowledge.
- (v) I prefer life skills education to its opposite.
- (vi) Yes, I agree 100% – life skills education molds children’s character, develops them and makes them learn better and practically.

- (vii) Elements or results of life skills include self-reliance, economic freedom or independence, high academic performance, smooth social relations, and cognitive and social development.

Prospects of Life Skills Education

The impact of LS is affirmed by Nursabaha et al. (2022), who find LS to be capable of addressing some problems among adolescents, and thereby call for the implementation of LSE in school curriculum. Gupta (2021) agrees that school curricula have to be revised, as pedagogy plays an essential role in the development of LS. Vijaysing Patil et al. (2021) stress the need to develop and implement LS in schools. Similarly, Chaurasiya (2018) is of the view that the changing times in contemporary times require pedagogical adjustments or reforms in order to adopt LS. Kaur and Kaur (2017) show that LS are mechanisms for human resource and sustainable development. Dewan and Sarkar (2017) stress the need to make young people employable after formal education by exposing children to LSE while in school. UNICEF HQ/Education Development Trust (2017) considers LSE to be a mechanism for improving the work results of young people.

The importance of LSE is why Behrani (2016) calls for the implementation of LSE programs in secondary schools. Agadi (2021) also stresses the need to expose secondary school students to LSE, as a way of preparing them for the life challenges ahead of them in life. Indeed, the importance of life skills education cannot be overemphasized. This is in view of its huge prospects. For this paper, life skills education is imperative because it is a profitable result-oriented avenue for balancing children's learning and development. This is because LSE arms children with practicable skills for immediate and future uses and benefits. This phase of education does not only build character and resilience in children but also prepares them for facing and addressing life challenges in different regards. For example, it prepares them for and as well arms them with the following skills: self-reliance, team building, goal setting, personal finance, negotiation skills, critical skills, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, and virtual productivity, among others.

Life skills education provides the avenue for training children to be self-reliant in various regards. This is because since they are armed with the different skills needed for different aspects of life, they rely more on themselves than on others for solutions to their problems, including their financial, academic, psychological, social, health, and technical or technological needs, among others. LSE takes cognizance of life challenges and thereby prepares learners (children) ahead of the challenges by arming them with practicable skills beyond theories and concepts. LSE trains the individual for efficient performance at personal and professional levels. With LSE, the individual multitasks, performs tasks well independently and in team, makes rational decisions, sets, pursues and realizes goals, manages time and resources well, and solves (even the most complex) problems.

This form of education also trains the individual to be self-reliant and makes them to practically do so in reality. Life skills are needed for efficient budgeting, spending and investment. LS are needed for high level of intellectuality, well developed prowess and dexterities, smooth relations, peaceful intergroup relations, efficient conflict and time management, research, development, and objective and in-depth analysis of situations, issues, phenomena and humans. These examples, among others, are skills that children gain from life skills education (LSE). Therefore, it is indeed imperative to balance children's learning and development. That is to say children's learning should be made to accommodate life skills that impact on their development, with the results manifesting throughout their lifetime at various points in time and in various contexts.

Self-Reliance and Life Skills Education

Self-reliance revolves around self-worth or self-value, self-dependence, self-expression, self-knowledge, resilience, and self-acceptance (Robert et al., 2022; Besong, 2021; Moore, 2021; Kloppers, 2019; Baumeister, 1987). Robert et al. (2022), Besong (2021), Moore (2021) and Baumeister (1987) unanimously emphasized that self-reliance makes it possible for one to:

- i. Rely on oneself while at the same time relying on others;

- ii. Express positive things about yourself;
- iii. Express oneself in terms of innate knowledge;
- iv. Be resilient and self-dependent; and
- v. Accept oneself whether others accept you or not.

Baby et al. (2022) also determine the nexus between LS and self-efficacy as what address mental health challenges interdependently. According to Besong (2021) and Kim and Isma'il (2013), self-reliance demands that every individual should believe in themselves and rely on their own efforts and abilities. Thus, children should be taught to believe in themselves and rely on their own efforts and abilities. They should be made to understand that the teacher is not a monopolist of knowledge. LSE is imperative because it trains children to develop themselves while being developed by the teacher, the family and the society. Just like many others, Jang et al. (2021) confirm that LS produce self-efficacy.

Also, Jang et al. (2021) show that LS can be attained and made manifest through new media (resources), such as videos that offer the individual the opportunity re-learn independently and consequently perform well or better. The demonstration made by their study highlights technological innovations. Thus, LS impact positively on performance in school activities and other activities involving the application of LS. Interestingly, all human endeavors involve the application of LS in different regards. It should be noted that the self-efficient individual is self-reliant.

Critical Thinking and Life Skills Education

Critical thinking describes the act of being active, persistent, careful and considerate about any act, practice, belief or supposed form of knowledge as regards the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it is tended (Nwode, 2022; Besong, 2021). Nwode (2022) is of the opinion that critical thinking skills are needed for productive, refined, innovative and interactive learning. This paper adds to Nwode's (2022) noted point that critical thinking, an aspect of life skills, make it possible for children to realize that everyone is great in different regards. Also, Besong (2021) points out the following benefits of critical thinking (CT):

- (i) CT betters our own humanity and the humanities of other persons in general;
- (ii) With it, discoveries, innovations and new world orders are made;
- (iii) It makes us to remain steadfast in pursuing our dreams;
- (iv) CT makes one to refuse to give up on anything, no matter the situations;
- (v) With CT, individuals keep on pushing harder and harder in life until they attain success and greatness or realize their dreams;
- (vi) CT makes it possible for us to endure and be tougher than tough times;
- (vii) CT causes significant changes in various regards.

Many other scholars agree that CT has several other benefits (Nwode, 2022; Robert et al., 2022; Besong, 2021; Moore, 2021; Baumeister, 1987)). They are of the opinion that with critical thinking, we rely on ourselves, while at the same time relying on others; show wisdom, innate knowledge, understanding and intellectuality; express positive things about ourselves; accept ourselves as unique individuals, whether others accept us or not; and see the need for being resilient and self-dependent (Nwode, 2022; Robert et al., 2022; Besong, 2021; Moore, 2021). Therefore, it is quite clear that critical thinking and other aspects of life skills make it possible for children to make discoveries, be resilient, diligent, determined, optimistic, creative, productive, multitasking, thorough, and so on (Besong, 2021; Robert et al., 2022). With critical thinking, children can make exploits of different life situations because they are grounded with the skills of maneuvering any situations and harnessing the potentials of different systems and phenomena of society.

Again, with critical thinking skills, the individual thinks deeply, critically, creatively and positively. The foregoing is given credence by Smith (2021), who says, "Each of us, developing ourselves and the community we live in, makes up the government in that area" (p. 247). This means that we do not need to wait for government to meet our needs, but keep striving on our own to meet our needs, with or without government's offers that meet individuals' needs. Thus, children have to be taught as well as

arm with critical thinking skills. Again, LSE is imperative in order to enable children acquire and master critical thinking skills, which are identification, research, identifying biases, inference, determining relevance and curiosity (Erstad, 2018). Critical thinking allows for positive thinking. This means that positive thinking, an aspect of critical thinking, is also an integral part of the whole life skills that this paper advocates education on them so as to inculcate them into the child learner for lifetime development that goes beyond academic development and purposes of learning.

Positive thinking is affirmed to be result-oriented (Mahmoudfakhe et al., 2021; Esmaeili-Douki et al., 2019; Day & Thorn, 2017; Dastgheib et al., 2012). The study by Day and Thorn (2017) demonstrates that positive thinking is a multifaceted way of dealing with emotions, distress, depression and other related problems. Mahmoudfakhe et al. (2021) stress the need for deploying positive thinking to get rid of negative thoughts that culminate to mental health issues. Positive thinking sees things with optimism rather than pessimism. Dastgheib et al. (2012) note that positive thinking is an element of positive psychology that deals with human strength and happiness. This paper adds that positive thinking is also an element of life skills, which has to be taught to children as a way of living healthily and thinking critically and creatively. It is a key to achieving positive learning outcomes and developing oneself psychologically, socially, academically, technically and otherwise.

Conclusion

As the foregoing exposition or descriptive analysis shows, LSE has a lot of prospects for children, which are of both immediate and future values and uses. Although many are aware of the prospects of this form of education, they seldom practice it. Therefore, in order to make it a general practice in the education system, LSE has to be introduced in all schools across the globe in order to universalize it. Currently, it is not a statutorily universalized educational practice. The need to make it a universal pedagogic practice informed this proposition with its advanced arguments. There is no doubt that teaching children life skills would fore-arm them with the mechanisms for facing and tackling life challenges and maneuvering them, finding solutions to problems no matter how difficult they are, being critically literate and minded, analytical and scholarly, being resilient, self-reliant, financially independent, and so on.

Therefore, LSE implies investing into the future of the global society by building a solid educational foundation upon which children can stand unshaken at all times, because of the life skills training they have had overtime. This investment, which is a thankless task, is profitable to humans, the non-humans and the society at large both now and later in many regards. In the course of learning through LSE, children develop their academic, cognitive, social, emotional and physical aspects of lives. In essence, while learning facilitates development, one of the products of learning is development. Given the foregoing, this study charges schools of all nations to sustainably introduce life skills education (LSE) into their curricula.

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