

Learning Needs and Life Skills for Youth: A Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of the International Review of Education (IRE) explores the learning needs and life skills essential for the youth in the context of globalization, rising unemployment, and societal changes. The introductory section engages in a conceptual discussion, distinguishing between "21st-century skills" and "life skills" and emphasizing the importance of whole-person development.

Keywords: Learning Needs, Life Skills

The special issue of the International Review of Education (IRE) on "Learning Needs and Life Skills for Youth" is structured into two primary segments. The initial section comprises a conceptual discussion focusing on the learning domains identified for youth within the framework of globalization, marginalization, and escalating worldwide unemployment levels. This discussion contends that the skills and behaviors requisite for sustaining economic growth and development, commonly referred to as "21st-century skills," are frequently intermingled with "life skills," although the latter term emphasizes a more robust notion of the holistic development of individuals concerning their identity and self.

The contemporary emphasis on youth necessitates contextualization within the backdrop of rapid global transformations propelled by globalization, coupled with a heightened concern for individual autonomy—a core tenet of modernity, democracy, and the knowledge economy (Lauder et al., 2006). This underscores the imperative to perceive youth not merely as a biological entity but rather as a social construct. Much like other social groups, the living conditions of youth exhibit variations contingent upon factors such as gender, location, ethnicity, and socio-economic background.

A salient characteristic of postmodern society, as articulated by German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992), is the imperative for individuals to craft their own identities and life trajectories through processes of choice and reflexivity. These processes unfold in an environment where certainties have become elusive. It is crucial to comprehend that these exercises in choice and reflexivity do not merely represent extensions of individuals' autonomous decisions but are intricately entwined with the operations of social institutions that delineate boundaries shaping individual needs and opportunities. In this context,

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education emerges as a pivotal institution with a profound impact on shaping the life prospects of individuals.

The universal characteristic of youth is their status in a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, demanding that they navigate taking control of their personal lives and embracing social commitments (UNESCO, 2004a, p. 4). Alternatively, this period is seen as a valuable opportunity for acquiring life skills and establishing self-identity (Perret-Clermont, 2004, p. 4, as cited by Anna Bernhardt et al. in this special issue of the IRE). The heightened focus on youth is motivated, in part, by the potential risks associated with losing a generation to unemployment, especially given the unprecedented global youth population of 1.8 billion (aged 15–24 years), constituting one in six of the world's population (UN, 2013, p. 17; UNESCO, 2012, p. 14). In the Arab region, a quarter of the youth population faces unemployment, the highest rate globally, with Southern European countries experiencing similarly elevated proportions due to the 2008 financial crisis (IFC, 2011; UNESCO, 2012).

Projections indicate that by 2020, an estimated 57 million jobs need creation to prevent escalating unemployment rates in the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2014, p. 14). Sub-Saharan Africa faces a distinctive challenge, given its expected dominance in the anticipated surge in the 0–14 age group by 2030 (UN, 2011). Consequently, this region must intensify efforts to create educational and other opportunities for its youth. Furthermore, altering the definition of youth to consider the actual adult functions performed by many children, defined within the age range of 0 to 18 years (UNICEF, 1989), in alignment with local cultural norms would underscore the severity of the situation (Kendall, 2008).

One of the visible manifestations of the lack of jobs and other opportunities for youth is increased rural–urban, regional, and international migration which often has disastrous personal consequences, as witnessed by the many tragedies in the Mediterranean. Another is the dissolution of social cohesion, as has been apparent during and after the Arab Spring in 2010. The two are strongly interlinked and can be explained partly by the hopes for a better future somewhere else raised through images of the “good life” in the media and the increased opportunities for travel (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009). In reality, however, the concomitant development of globalization and marginalization has created pockets of inequality in all contexts, is restricting legal immigration into wealthy areas, notably Europe, and has created risks and uncertainties for young people at local, regional, and global levels which unite them in decline (*ibid.*) rather than in opportunity.

The role of education in fostering economic growth and sustainable development has gained prominence, particularly with a focus on its connection to the labor market. This emphasis aims to cultivate knowledge and develop a highly skilled workforce, essential for ensuring economic competitiveness in a global economy characterized by flexibilization and deregulation. Simultaneously, education is recognized for its role in fostering social cohesion and social justice, influencing the dynamics of diversity, inclusion, and citizenship. These priorities are evident in the current emphasis on learning outcomes within the curriculum and educational reform discussions, including those related to Education for All (EFA) in both pre- and post-2015 contexts. A key recommendation from the United Nations' High-Level Panel for the post-2015 agenda proposes a shift toward transforming economies "for jobs and inclusive growth" (UN, 2013) to combat extreme poverty and promote sustainable development. One of the identified goals to achieve this transformation is the

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provision of quality education and lifelong learning. Targets include increasing the percentage of adolescents achieving recognized and measurable learning outcomes, enhancing the skills of young and adult individuals for work, including technical and vocational skills, and ensuring the completion of primary education with minimum learning standards while expanding access to and completion of pre-primary education (ibid.).

The emphasis on quality education and lifelong learning underscores the notion that the learner should be at the center of the teaching and learning process. Recognizing diverse learning needs based on factors such as location, gender, ethnicity, religion, and special needs is considered crucial for achieving successful learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2004b). Additionally, there has been considerable attention to the complementary and interlinked nature of formal, non-formal, and informal education, with a focus on inclusivity in the teaching and learning process (Hoppers, 2002). The discussion has expanded to include new learning modalities, such as the Internet, raising debates about their potential to replace traditional modalities in formal education, especially at higher education levels (Lauder et al., 2006).

Efforts have also been directed towards ensuring equivalency and formalization of knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments, as well as recognizing education degrees completed at different educational institutions globally. Despite these efforts, compartmentalization and non-recognition of credentials persist in various contexts. This challenge may, in part, result from the unintended consequence of associating foundational, transferable, and technical and vocational skills specifically with primary and secondary education, despite the prevalence of such skills at other levels and outside formal education settings (UNESCO, 2012).

Learning Needs and Life Skills

The definition of learning outcomes, encompassing both knowledge and skills, has evolved and varies across different contexts. These outcomes are often conceptualized in generic terms rather than being specific, reflecting a broad understanding that is not tied to individual learner backgrounds and needs. The term "life skills" is particularly comprehensive and dynamic, encapsulating both specific cognitive skills (such as literacy and numeracy) and non-cognitive skills, including expected behaviors and attitudes (also referred to as psychomotor or soft skills).

In this holistic perspective, education extends beyond the traditional focus on providing knowledge and skills solely for economic growth or poverty reduction. The conventional notions of skills for work, skills for jobs, income-generation skills, entrepreneurship skills, and technical and vocational skills are broadened within the concept of life skills. This implies a recognition that education should not only address economic imperatives but also contribute to the development of well-rounded individuals with a diverse set of cognitive and non-cognitive skills necessary for various aspects of life.

In essence, the understanding of learning outcomes has expanded to encompass a comprehensive set of competencies that go beyond the traditional academic or vocational domains. It acknowledges the multifaceted nature of skills and knowledge required for individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern world, emphasizing not only economic success but also personal and social development.

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Life skills, often encapsulated as "skills for life," find a comprehensive and profound representation in the four pillars of learning outlined in the Delors report (Delors et al., 1996). These pillars articulate the outcomes of education in four crucial areas that significantly impact an individual's self-fulfilling life and contribute to societal development.

Pillars of Learning	Description
Learning to Know	Mastery of the instruments of knowledge.
Learning to Do	Application of knowledge in practical settings.
Learning to Live Together and Living with Others	Prevention and resolution of conflicts; promotion of peace and respect for other people, cultures, and spiritual values.
Learning to Be	Ensuring the all-round development of each individual.
Learning for Change and Transformation	Emphasizes the need for learning to bring about change and transformation in response to rapid global and individual life changes.
Learning to Become	Focuses on the lifelong learning journey and the continual process of becoming through education and personal development.

In addition to these four pillars, two more pillars were suggested at the first World Forum on Lifelong Learning in 2008: learning for change and transformation, and learning to become (Ouane, 2008). These additions respond to the rapid changes occurring globally, emphasizing the dynamic nature of learning throughout an individual's lifetime. These pillars underscore the importance of adaptability, continuous learning, and personal transformation in the face of evolving circumstances.

Building on the Faure report (Faure et al., 1972), the interpretation of life skills in this context places emphasis on both whole-person development, often referred to as the "complete man," and a lifelong learning perspective. Life skills, as articulated through these pillars, embody a holistic approach that extends beyond traditional academic or vocational skills, emphasizing the enduring importance of learning and personal development throughout one's life.

In ongoing discussions, the term "life skills" is frequently used interchangeably with "21st-century skills," particularly in contexts that underscore individual competencies to effectively navigate diverse and complex challenges. This convergence is notably observed in wealthier nations, including high- and middle-income countries such as those affiliated with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and in emerging economies like China, as explored in this special issue of the International Review of Education (IRE).

In the context of 21st-century skills and competences, which are crucial for meeting evolving demands, the focus extends beyond traditional academic knowledge. These skills encompass a broad spectrum of "psychosocial resources, including knowledge and skills, motivation, attitudes, and other social and behavioral components" (Schleicher, 2007, p. 349). The objective is to cultivate individuals' capacity and activate their innate abilities, enabling them to engage in research, innovation, and adaptability. This is seen as essential for sustaining the construction of knowledge-based economies and societies.

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According to Andreas Schleicher (2012, p. 34), 21st-century skills can be categorized into four key groups:

Categories	Description
Ways of Thinking	Emphasizes cognitive skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities.
Ways of Working	Focuses on collaborative and creative approaches to work, promoting effective teamwork and communication.
Tools for Working	Involves the use of technology and other tools to enhance productivity and efficiency in tasks.
Skills for Living in the World	Encompasses social and emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and adaptability to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

The four categories mentioned bear resemblance to, yet diverge from, the four learning pillars outlined by the Delors Commission. Both underscore the significance of lifelong learning, but in contrast to the Delors report, Schleicher's four skills categories prioritize three overarching instrumental competencies instead of delving into four intrinsic learning domains. These encompass the ability to: (1) operate autonomously and thoughtfully concerning the physical and social environment, as well as on a personal level in the pursuit of individual objectives; (2) proficiently employ tools in a broad sense, such as computers, language, and knowledge, in an interactive fashion; and (3) establish, engage in, and adeptly operate within multiple, intricate, and socially diverse groups. The latter is perceived as indispensable for shaping an individual's identity and self (Rychen and Salganik 2000).

On the contrary, in regions severely impacted by unemployment and poverty, particularly those dominated by large informal and farming sectors, there remains a significant focus on formal education, especially at the secondary level. The emphasis often revolves around "catch up" or "minimal" skills, typically provided in non-formal education settings, particularly for individuals who have not attended or completed formal education or any specialized training, namely youth and adults with low levels of education or none at all (Hoppers, 2002; UNESCO, 2012, 2013/14; Fredriksen & Fossberg, in this special issue of the IRE). However, there is also a growing emphasis on life skills and 21st-century skills, which are being re-conceptualized from a narrower economic purpose to a broader importance for human capital and human development.

Understanding and framing life skills and 21st-century skills within particular contexts:

The articles authored by Ronald Sultana, Ewan Wright, Mosung Lee, and Kwame Akyeampong underscore the ongoing flexibility in defining the terms "life skills" and "21st-century skills," emphasizing the necessity of contextualizing them within specific local settings, notwithstanding the influence of globalization. While these papers share a common focus on the nexus between education and the labor market, the anticipated impact of education—interpreted through the lenses of life skills and 21st-century skills—varies. This disparity is particularly evident in the differing emphasis on their significance for individual, personal development, and self-formation compared to their broader importance for economic development.

Ensuring the Acquisition of Life Skills and 21st-Century Skills for Youth: The Responsibilities of Educational Providers:

Hence, although there is considerable emphasis on addressing the learning needs and life skills of youth, the starting point does not necessarily consider their unique life

circumstances within their specific context and what is necessary to "ground self-identity" (Perret-Clermont, 2004, p. 4). Instead, there is a prioritization of generically identified skills aimed at fulfilling their "social commitment," maintaining a persistent belief that the skills and values imparted through education can contribute to social change. While these skills are broadly categorized across cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, with an emphasis on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, the argument for economic relevance continues to prevail.

Moreover, there persists a strong belief in education as a catalyst for both individual and societal progress, notwithstanding economic and cultural barriers that hinder the education system from effectively fulfilling its positive role. Naila Kabeer (2000) argues that addressing these barriers requires a redistribution of resources and acknowledgment of diversity and identity, guided by principles of equality and equity, for education to actively counteract social exclusion.

As highlighted earlier, there are common threads in the educational challenges identified by Ronald Sultana, Ewan Wright and Moosung Lee, and Kwame Akyeampong. These challenges are intertwined with long-standing issues that have hindered the development of education systems in general, encompassing the ongoing debate between education for the mind and education for practical application. Consequently, content knowledge continues to be prioritized and evaluated more than practical and personality aspects, despite the evolving needs of future societies. Teachers also grapple with a lack of pedagogical tools necessary for cultivating a "whole" person equipped with 21st-century skills and essential life skills relevant to their context. Proposed solutions include comprehensive teacher training, recognition of the value of diverse educational approaches, and a reassessment of criteria for evaluating performance and progression in education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discourse on learning needs, life skills, and 21st-century skills for youth underscores the intricate interplay between education, societal development, and individual empowerment. While there is a notable emphasis on addressing these needs, challenges persist in bridging the gap between educational ideals and the practical realities shaped by economic and cultural barriers. The persistent trust in education as a catalyst for progress remains, yet it is acknowledged that systemic issues must be addressed, including resource redistribution and a recognition of diversity, to effectively combat social exclusion.

The educational barriers outlined by scholars such as Ronald Sultana, Ewan Wright, Moosung Lee, and Kwame Akyeampong reveal systemic challenges that have endured over time. These challenges range from the prioritization of content knowledge over practical and personality aspects to the inadequacies in teacher training and pedagogical tools necessary for nurturing individuals with holistic skill sets. Proposed solutions, including enhanced teacher training, appreciation for diverse educational approaches, and a reevaluation of performance criteria, present avenues for overcoming these barriers.

As we navigate the complexities of education, it becomes evident that a nuanced approach, cognizant of local contexts and the dynamic needs of individuals, is essential. By addressing these challenges and adopting more inclusive and adaptive educational strategies, we can pave the way for a transformative educational landscape that equips the youth with the necessary skills for a rapidly evolving global society. Ultimately, the journey towards

comprehensive educational reform requires collaboration, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to the principles of equality and equity.

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Conflict of Interest

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