

Abstract

Debates in girls' education policy and practice point to life skills programs as a promising intervention for improving the outcomes of marginalized girls. Yet the difficulties of defining and measuring life skills and the complexities for practice of understanding how to instill the soft capacities like self-efficacy which are often the focus of life skills programs, have contributed to serious knowledge gaps. This article synthesizes theories from education, developmental psychology, and gender and development to offer Agency as a locally adaptable framework for measuring of life skills programs. Based on empirical examples and curriculum from five life skills programs, I argue that agentic capacity is critically linked to identity formation processes in adolescence and that alternative pedagogical practice and skills-based learning are important facilitators of Agency formation. I offer a draft theoretical framework for how agentic capacity can be cultivated by girls' education programs.

Biography

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Action on Agency: A Theoretical Framework for Defining and Operationalizing Agency in Girls' Life Skills Programs

by

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence from around the world shows that increasing girls' schooling dramatically reduces child marriage (Wodon et al. 2017), increases national GDP (Klasen 2002), lowers maternal death by more than 66% (Bhalotra et al. 2013; Gupta et al. 2002), and reduces child mortality by up to 49% (UNICEF 2010). Recently, however, questions about gross inequities in school quality have challenged the traditional assumptions about the implicit value of education, especially for girls (Learning Metrics Task Force 2013). Differential experiences of education for boys and girls (Mensch et al. 2003) combined with real concerns about school safety for girls (Psaki et al. 2017), have led to a growing acknowledgment that education that does not actively address existing social inequities can be disempowering (Adely 2012; Dehyle 2009). Yet the promise of an "empowering" education, continues to have powerful implications for gender equity, social mobility, and the positive transformation of society (Sperling and Winthrop 2016). Because of the link between sexual and reproductive health, schooling, and child marriage, the gains are largest for girls during the child-bearing years, thus amplifying the benefits of girls' education during adolescence and at the post-primary level (Sperling and Winthrop 2016; Wodon et al. 2017).

In this paper, I take the notion of an empowering education as the goal of education efforts globally and seek to understand and untangle the circumstances of practice which might contribute to education becoming an enabling force for girls, and fulfilling its promise of opportunity. The central question of this study, then becomes: How can practitioners ensure that girls stay in school through secondary and can translate their educations into viable change? Recent conversations in policy and girls' education practice point to informal life skills programs as successful for enhancing the effects of girls' schooling, thus improving the health and labor market outcomes of adolescent and secondary school-aged girls (Acharya et al. 2009; Dupuy et al. 2018). In particular, life skills programs have shown marked success at supporting girls' own abilities to address unhealthy relationships between gender and power (Haberland 2015) and support the development of soft skill capacities such as self-confidence, self-awareness, leadership, and self-efficacy (Dupuy et al. 2018), that have been linked to positive schooling outcomes. Yet, the diverse and often disparate range of skills included in life skills programs, as well as the qualitative nature of many of the skills enshrined in life skills curricula, begs an obvious set of questions: What are life skills? How can they be measured? And which skills are important for which girls? To date there is no sector-wide consensus on these issues to inform practice and investment. In fact, successful life skills programs cover a wide array of skills and competencies including (but not limited to), sexual and reproductive health knowledge, social and interpersonal skills, self-awareness, job readiness training, leadership, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and gender rights (Dupuy et al. 2018).

This paper argues that the success of life skills programs at improving the education, health, and economic trajectories of girls is a result of their ability to improve girls' agency. Yet agency, much like girls' own lives and cultures, is not a monolithic construct. I posit that the vast majority of life skills programs are attempting to instill a set of positive self-beliefs and personal competencies in young women, and that together, these competencies and self-beliefs create

agency or agentic capacity.¹ If agency is, indeed, the end goal of life skills programs, I hypothesize that the means (the specific skills and self-beliefs required to foster agency) will necessarily shift from country to country, and community to community, based on the specificities of place, culture, and context. Whereas some skills may be universally important for girls' success across place, practitioners are now beginning to acknowledge that there are likely a host of skills and capacities that can and should be locally defined (ibid). Thus the current diversity of life skills curricula can be seen as a reflection of the diversity of contexts in which girls live.

I address the issue of how to define and evaluate life skills programs by offering a culturally and locally adaptable definition of agency as a framework for measuring life skills programs across place. Importantly, such a framework has powerful implications for measurement and practice of life skills programs by offering a universal yardstick for evaluating success in a way that allows, and even encourages, practitioners to invest in context-specific approaches rather than one-size-fits-all models of scale.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: First, I review definitions of agency from across the social sciences literatures and synthesize an operational definition of localized agency. Second, I offer a brief review of life skills curricula and the evidence on agency as it relates to girls, women, and education showing that agency as an organizing frame for life skills is bolstered by a surprising consensus across disciplines on the importance of Agency to education. I then discuss two empirical examples of girls' education programs that investigate promising pedagogical strategies developing agency for girls and I use lessons from these examples, to offer a draft theory for how life skills programs can successfully cultivate agency.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF [A]GENCY

The rise in academic interest in life skills and by extension, agency, has been driven by the global focus on redefining the parameters of a "quality education" to include a variety of soft or "21st Century Skills" that show promise for later life outcomes (Winthrop and McGiveny 2016). Driven by revelations about reduced student learning despite increased enrollment globally (Learning Metrics Task Force 2013), soft skills have found a central role on the Sustainable Development Goals policy agenda for education (ibid). Subsequent work on measurement and evaluation practice suggests that agency is particularly important for marginalized girls' education in countries where access to goods, services, and resources of any kind come at a high premium and where the most valued role for adolescent women is as a wife and soon-to-be mother (Murphy-Graham and Leal 2015; Sahni 2017; Santhya et al. 2015; Sperling and Winthrop 2016; Warner et al. 2014). A recent report published by the Brookings Institution, identifies agency as one of two critically important mediating factors required for girls to translate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) gained in educational programs into empowered action (Kwauk and Braga, 2017). My research suggests that agency is not separate from the knowledge, skills, and attitudes cultivated by girls' programs, but rather is the desired outcome of the right combination of these competencies.

Coming to a clear understanding of agency as a key outcome is complicated by the fact that, much like life skills, it lacks a common definition. In the social science literature, agency is most commonly utilized to denote any kind of choice or action taken by an individual (Kabeer 1999, 438). However, the type of agency referred to in this paper is much more specific than this broad notion of exercising choice. The agency herein refers to a particular capacity—an ability to

coordinate multiple skills, resources, and contexts to achieve a desired strategic outcome. It is an understanding of agency that looks at the internal capacity of an individual and her relationship to power—both her own internal power to take control over her life, but also her ability to navigate the external power structures that may either constrain or enable her actions. This type of agency is one we might distinguish with a capital ‘A’ and is concerned with the skills required to achieve a desired goal within the specific socio-cultural environment and network of power relations in which an individual is necessarily embedded.

In the introduction to her book *The Structure and Agency of Women’s Education*, Mary Ann Maslak offers two definitions of agency that are roughly parallel to the distinction made in this paper. First, Maslak identifies *oppositional agency*, or agency that is actively challenging the “established norms in a system” to achieve a desired outcome, and juxtaposes this to what she calls *allegiant agency*, which refers to the actions of an individual in making choices that “align with popular thought” (2008, xv). Maslak’s definition is a dynamic one because it places at the center the structures of constraint—what she calls the “established norms”—within which individuals must choose and act. It is similar to Naila Kabeer’s definition of agency as the “power-to” or, more specifically as “people’s capacity to make their own life choices and define their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others” (1999, 498). Also explicit in Kabeer’s construction of agency is the idea of goal-setting and action towards those goals. In a review of metrics used to measure women’s agency around the world, Donald et al. expands Kabeer’s definition to include three core capacities:

1. Ability to define goals “that are in line with their values;”
2. Self-perceived control/ability; and
3. Action towards goal achievement (2017, 6).

The specification of goal-setting as a skill that must be guided by an individuals’ own values is a critical distinction and one that mirrors Maslak’s oppositional and allegiant categories. Implicit in the idea of aspirational goal setting is the need for positive self-belief. In other words, a person must believe that she is capable of achieving her goals before achievement is possible.

The current consensus on goal setting and goal achievement as central to Agency, glosses over the importance of specific skills beyond goal setting that might be important to strategic action—things like strategic thinking, inter-personal communication, decision making, self-awareness, etc. Current conceptualizations of Agency also do not distinguish between action and effective action, nor do they flush out the kinds of positive self-perceptions that are likely required for effective action towards aspirational goal achievement. A more detailed, and nuanced approach to defining agency is necessary for understanding how agency might be measured or how life skills programs should be designed to cultivate agency.

For this type of specificity, we must turn to the field of developmental psychology, which offers some compelling insight into how agency operates. Among the earliest writers on the subject of agency within this field was Fritz Heider who conceived of agency as an “effective personal force,” which he believed was “underpinned by a combination of power or personal ability, the intentions to try, and any relevant environmental factors” (Little et al. 2006, 64). Herein we see Heider offer a rough framework for understanding Agentic capacity as one that connects skills or abilities, to intention and the structure of the environment. Heider’s definition offers a bit more direction for practitioners because it differentiates between aspects of Agency which can be explicitly taught by written curricula in more or less traditional settings (skills or abilities),

versus aspects which are dependent on personal development or environmental constraints (intentions and structure). .

Albert Bandura adds to Heider's view by identifying the self-efficacy capacity of human agency as a necessary pre-cursor for developing agentic ability (1982, 1989, 1993). Bandura divides agency into two functions—perceptions or self-beliefs (in lieu of Heider's intention to try) and coordinating skills or abilities. For him, the most important aspect of human agency is self-efficacy or the self-belief that a person “can produce the desired effects and forestall undesirable ones by their actions” (Bandura 2009, 179), whereas agency skills he understood as the actual ability to organize self-beliefs like self-efficacy, actions and resources to “influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstance” (2006, 1). On the subject of environment, Bandura provocatively notes that although individuals act as their own agents in the world, they also act as agents of their environment, thus implying action is constrained by structural forces (1989, 1181)—a point also acknowledged by Maslak and Kabeer. However, none of these scholars discuss how agency might also be *enabled* by environmental factors and how environment may, itself, be influenced by individuals' agency. These are critical questions for practice as life skills programs grapple with the balance of interventions that focus on individual skills and capacities versus the opportunity structures and environmental constraints that necessarily influence outcomes (Kwauk and Braga 2017).

Little et al. (2006) expands Bandura's theory of human agency placing it within a broader theory of the development of human agentic capacities throughout the life span, noting that agency is comprised of two different types of capacities—causal capability and agentic capability—the former being defined as the “knowledge, behavioral skills, self-perceptions and beliefs about one's environment” required to demonstrate the latter (67-68). Within Little et al.'s framework a number of skills commonly associated with life skills in the education and development literatures are identified as examples of either causal or agentic capacities. These include skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, goal-setting, problem solving, and decision-making (ibid).

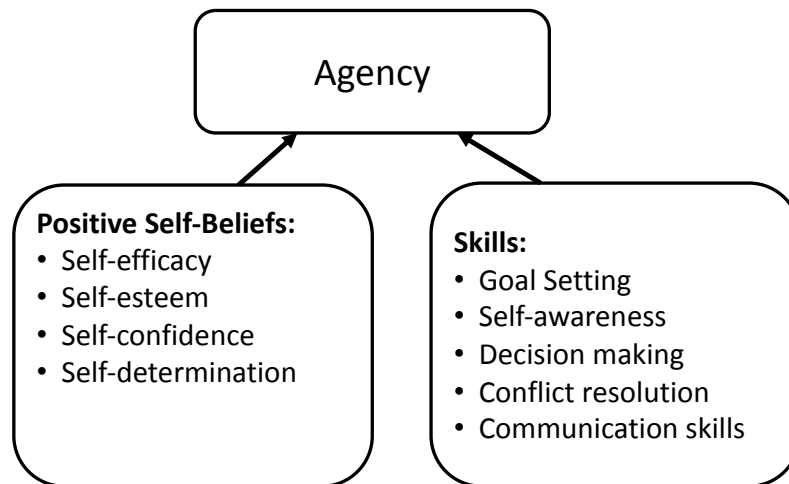
Although, these theories of agency are strongly rooted in Western notions about autonomy, individualism, and personal desire, they still offer a foundation for understanding alternate or culturally-mediated forms of agency, and what those might look like when culturally emplaced. In sub-Saharan Africa for example, rapid urbanization, demographic shifts, and the related changes to family structure, have introduced new social, political, and economic contexts in which opportunities are accessed based on new and more fluid notions of culture, tradition, and community (Giroux et al. 2010). Defining a flexible framework for understanding agency as it is currently being deployed in practice, actually allows for local negotiation, interpretation, and understanding in ways that can meaningfully improve practice.

From Heider, Bandura, and Little et al., the distinction made between the skills and self-perceptions function of Agency is particularly useful for practice and reflective of the current field. Bringing together psychological theories and evidence from development and education practice, I offer my own synthesis and working definition of “big A” Agency—one that can be conceptually interrogated and operationally deployed (see Figure 1):

[A]gency—The capacity of individuals to define aspirational goals¹ and coordinate the knowledge, skills, attitudes² and resources both internally available to them (individual capacities) and externally available to them (in their social, institutional or physical

environments) in order to take action to achieve stated goals.³ Thus, Agentic capacity is made up of both **positive self-beliefs**, (including self-efficacy but not excluding things like self-esteem and self-confidence), and concrete **skills** which can be learned over time.⁴ These skills include core information or knowledge as well as internally- and externallyfacing skills that are required for goal setting and achievement.

Figure 1. A Working Definition of Agentic Capacity



At a minimum, this definition of Agency, provides practitioners with a framework for housing and thinking about many of the individual skills and attitudes that are already the focus of life skills programs in girls’ education and that are at the center of the global citizenship skills conversation under the new SDG framework. Often specific soft skills (e.g., goal setting) and attitudes (e.g., self-confidence) are discussed in silos—disconnected from a theoretical framework that helps practitioners to understand that skills and attitudes are interconnected and important “package deals” in programs that seek to support girls’ Agentic development.

Given what we know from both the theoretical review above, and the forthcoming empirical evidence (below), I posit that self-efficacy—the belief in one’s own ability to achieve stated goals—is among the most influential self-perceptions involved in the human Agency function and is a necessary pre-requisite for Agentic capacity (Bandura 1989; Donald et al 2017). Similarly, given their prevalence in the literature we might hypothesize that specific skills such as goal setting, decision-making, self-awareness, and inter/intra personal communication are among the most universally important skills that make up Agentic capacity, although these are likely to change based on the environmental and social constraints of each place. There is a clear need for practitioners to test, and revise the specific skills, self-beliefs, and their combinations that might be most relevant for developing Agency in particular communities, to better understand which combinations are most important for which contexts.

AGENCY IN THE LITERATURE & POLICY

When we consider the specific curricula of life skills programs from across the field of practice, we can see this delineation between positive self-perceptions and skills clearly reflected in both the content of curricula and in the outcomes identified for measurement. Table 1 presents a curricular review of five life skills programs operating across sub-Saharan Africa. These

curricula are those that have been made publicly available, have garnered a fair amount of acclaim for their quality, and were developed by leading technical experts. The table organizes curriculum content into skills (both internally- and externally-facing) and positive self-beliefs. The selected curricula are drawn from two primary types: those that were funded by international development donor communities for use in a diversity of countries and those that were developed by the local leadership of single-country-focused NGOs, and tailored to the communities and populations served.

Table 1: Summary of Five Sub-Saharan Africa Focused Life Skills Curricula

Curriculum	Author	Country	Self-Beliefs	Skills	
				Internal	External
CHATS: Creating Healthy Approaches to Success	AGE Africa 2016	Malawi	Self-efficacy** Self-esteem**	Decision making***	Interpersonal communication**
				Self-awareness***	Public speaking**
				Goal setting***	Negotiating romantic relationships**
				Positive gender attitudes*	Preventing pregnancy**
				Resisting peer-pressure**	Conflict resolution*
				Self-advocacy*	Identifying GBV*
				Leadership*	Negotiating sex and sexuality
				Stress management*	Legal literacy
				Personal hygiene/menstruation	Identifying gender power imbalances
	Group facilitation				
Educate Leadership & Entrepreneurship Course	Educate! 2014	Uganda	Self-efficacy**	Decision making***	Public speaking**
				Self-awareness***	Conflict resolution**
				Goal setting***	Interpersonal communication**
				Problem solving	Financial literacy**
					Financial Planning**
					Collaboration/team work*
					Resource mobilization
					Peer mentoring
	Networking				
Health and Life skills Curriculum	Population Council 2015	Multi-country (piloted in Zambia)	Self-esteem**	Decision making***	Interpersonal communication**
				self-awareness***	Public speaking**
				Goal setting***	Conflict resolution**
				Resisting peer-pressure**	Community service*
				Positive gender attitudes*	Financial planning**
				Flexibility (resilience)*	Financial literacy**
				Leadership*	Negotiating romantic relationships**
				Life planning*	pregnancy prevention**
				Stress management*	Identifying GBV*
Self-advocacy*	Negotiating sex & marriage				
Ambassador Girls' Scholarship Program Guide to Mentoring & Life Skills	USAID & AED 2008	Multi-country (Malawi, DRC, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana)	Self-esteem**	Decision making***	Negotiating romantic relationships**
				Self-awareness***	Preventing pregnancy**
				Goal setting***	
				Resisting peer pressure**	
			Leadership*		
Akazi Kanoze, Youth	USAID (PEPFAR)	Multi-country	Self-efficacy**	Decision making***	Interpersonal communication**
				Self-awareness***	Financial literacy**
				Goal setting***	Financial planning**

Livelihoods Project	& EDC 2010	(piloted in Rwanda)		Life planning*	Collaboration/team work*
				Flexibility (resilience)*	Job Seeking skills
				Exercising rights	
*** Present in 5 out of 5 reviewed curricula ** Present in 3 or more curricula * present in 2 curricula					

From the short list reviewed in Table 1, we see a few key patterns emerge. First, although there is a broad range of skills covered in these curricula (from financial literacy to negotiating healthy romantic relationships), there is also a fair amount of overlap—particularly on which positive self-beliefs are covered, and internally-facing skills. Three out of five curricula have content area explicitly focused on teaching self-efficacy and self-esteem. Notably, both locally focused curricula identified self-efficacy as central—in agreement with Bandura, Little, and the other theorists referenced in the previous section. Second, there is near consensus on a set of internally-facing skills with 4 out of 5 curricula adopting decision-making, self-awareness and goal setting—which is also a clear reflection of what we’ve learned from our literature review to-date. Third, there is much less of a consensus across curricula on the externally-facing skills that are important—with no skills being represented in even 4 out of 5 of the curriculum reviewed and only a few appearing in at least 3. Such a diversity of externally-facing skills supports the argument that as social, cultural, and economic contexts change, so too, does the set of skills needed for improved outcomes. Agency, as it is presented in this paper, allows for this diversity, while still providing a comparable yardstick for measurement. In other words, under our definition of agency, life skills programs that focus on financial literacy, and financial management skills and those that focus on negotiating romantic relationships, for example, can both be considered as contributing to improved Agentic capacity.

In Dupuy et al.’s review of twelve informal life skills programs’ key outcomes, ten out of fourteen identified the concrete skills (e.g., decision-making, goal setting, financial literacy, etc.) and knowledge content (e.g., sexual and reproductive health) as key outcomes, and eight out of fourteen evaluated positive self-perceptions (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, or self-confidence) (2018). Those that didn’t identify positive self-perceptions as a key outcome identified these as one of several goals for the program that were presumably unmeasured due to the difficulty of evaluating such non-cognitive capacities.

Bolstering the argument for Agency as an organizing frame for life skills programs is both empirical and theoretical evidence from a variety of disciplines and methodological practices. These practices have shown that core social-emotional learning competencies, like self-confidence, have contributed to improved academic achievement (Borghans et al. 2008; Gutman and Schoon 2013; Hawkins 1997; Malecki and Elliot 2002; Welsh et al. 2001; Zins et al. 2004). When we narrow the focus of inquiry specifically to core skills related to Agency as defined above and positive self-beliefs, a surprising consensus exists across disciplines and methodologies on the importance of these beliefs and competencies in both education and later life outcomes.

In the gender and development sector Naila Kabeer has established women’s agency as a foundational skill for empowerment. Her work has heavily contributed to the notion that such successful interventions for women must consider a broad set of internal capacities such as agency as part of what enables the material circumstances of success. Murphy-Graham and Lloyd in their framework for understanding the core competencies and conditions that contribute to an empowering education, identify agency and personal efficacy as two of the necessary pre-

conditions that generate the circumstances of empowerment through educational settings (2016, 558). They further divide the core competencies into knowledge, personal competencies, social competencies, and productive competencies. This is a more nuanced and detailed way of thinking about internally-facing skills (e.g., personal competencies and knowledge) and externally-facing skills (social competencies and productive competencies) as I have roughly laid them out in Table 1.

Reinforcing the centrality of agency to women's empowerment programming, qualitative evidence from the fields of anthropology and sociology identify a variety of positive self-perceptions as influential components of the educational experiences of girls from around the world (Adely 2012; Cervantes-Soon 2016; Deyhle 2009; LaBennet 2011; Maslak 2008; Mensch et al. 2003; Miron and Lauria 1998; Sahni 2017; van Santen 2010). In these studies, the key to girls' educational success is a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and other aspects of positive self-belief that are produced by enabling environments and pedagogies (Cervantes-Soon 2016; Maslak 2008; Sahni 2017; van Santen 2010). Empirical studies like those referenced seem to point to girls' identities—how they are developed, and either reinforced or discouraged by girls' socio-cultural environments—as a critical factor in the kinds of change produced (ibid).

Causal evidence, primarily from the field of economics, corroborates these findings. Bowles et al. (2001) and Osborne-Groves (2005) conducted studies that showed the positive returns on the labor market to self-efficacy and other cost saving skills, while Pamela Lenton's work, causally linked self-efficacy in women to higher educational attainment and earnings (2014). Ibarra et al.'s study of a life skills program in the Dominican Republic established a causal relationship between higher levels of hope for the future (aspirational goals), persistence, conflict resolution and leadership skills, with reduced pregnancy for girls and increased labor market outcomes (2014). Although the specific soft skills of interest were not teased out, Furnham et al. (2009) and Lounsberry et al. (2004) show that non-cognitive⁵ (soft) skills have a positive effect on reducing absenteeism and dropout rates and increasing educational attainment. These studies build on the work of economists Raj Chetty (2011) and Kirabo Jackson (2012), who established that teachers' ability to improve student non-cognitive skills accounted for much of the variability in longer-run outcomes, and, in some cases, more so than cognitive skills alone.

DOING THE WORK OF CULTIVATING AGENCY IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

If Agency is, indeed, an appropriate frame for measuring life skills, what do we understand about effective strategies for developing agentic capacity in girls? From our working definition of Agency, two strategies emerge from the literature of practice as important for the acquisition of agency skills, positive self-perceptions, and the development of agentic capacity. The first strategy is the positive youth development approach, which employs skills-based learning and community engagement as tools for improving the developmental assets of youth. These assets include many of the skills and positive self-perceptions important to Agency, including self-esteem, planning and decision making, and personal power (Search Institute 1997). Second, programs that utilize critical pedagogy as a strategy for developing youth into agents of change in their own environments offer a powerful model for developing both positive self-perceptions as well as Agency-related skills. The former focuses on skills and helps youth build Agentic capacity and positive self-perceptions through the acquisition of concrete organizing skills and the practice of those skills, whereas the latter pursues a more complex, albeit potentially longer-

lasting, strategy of re-educating youth on the structures of power that order their lives and offering them analytical and practical tools for upending those power hierarchies.

Skills-based learning and positive youth development programs have garnered at least two decades of compelling quantitative and qualitative evidence to support their use. Much of this literature is causal and offers a fairly nuanced understanding of particular skills and capacities (Catalano et al. 2004; Larson and Angus 2011; Lerner and Lerner 2005a). Among the skills highlighted by Catalano's critical review of more than seventy-seven positive youth development programs, at least one-third have been identified by developmental psychologists as important for agentic capacity: self-efficacy (Bandura 1989), self-determination (ibid.; Little et al. 2006), positive identity formation (Brandtstadter 1999; Larson and Angus 2011; Lerner et al. 2005b), and belief in the future, or hope.

Whereas positive youth development practice has been implemented and tested in many countries, less is known concretely about its partner: critical pedagogy for improving youth outcomes. Although strong theoretical arguments support its use, to-date, primarily ethnographic and qualitative empirical evidence exists to promote critical pedagogical approaches in education, all of which suggest positive effects of these programs on agentic capacity (Cervantes-Soon 2017; Miron and Lauria 1998; Sahni 2017; Stevens and Slavin 1995). While some positive youth development programs adopt innovative pedagogical approaches in the pursuit of skill development (such as youth-driven, or youth-led program designs), typically these programs do not embrace the complete pedagogical redesign advocated by the founder of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1970), or the lineage of thinkers who followed him (e.g. bell hooks, Robert Chambers). Critical pedagogy assumes that endemic to educational practice itself are a set of perverse power relationships—such as that between teacher and student and the various intersectionalities of their identities—which must be transformed through a pedagogy that reinvents these power dynamics and places student power at the center of learning. Critical pedagogy is then, by definition, a powerful approach for groups of people who experience disproportionate disenfranchisement and oppression, such as the working-class poor; racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; as well as women and girls.

Within the practice of critical pedagogy, learners uplift themselves by becoming aware of the power structures in which they are embedded and by acquiring the skills required to challenge those power structures. Critical pedagogy's focus on the skills needed for change, combined with the personal awareness required to acknowledge that change is needed, mirrors our working definition of Agency.

In critical educational environments, the primary tool of developing Agency (or “conscientization”) is critical dialogue—an active conversation between students and teachers that illuminates the systems of inequality and oppression affecting the lives of students and supports their autonomous development (Freire 1970). From a bird's-eye view, one might see critical pedagogy as a foundational and pre-cursory practice to a positive youth development approach—one that could be used to uplift and amplify the effects of skills-based learning because skills would be built upon critical social analysis which fosters an empowered self-efficacy. The implication is that skills-based learning, combined with alternative pedagogical approaches which produce self-efficacy, are a powerful combination for cultivating agentic capacity. Indeed, we will see that life skills programs have already begun to experiment with alternative teaching strategies. But how does critical pedagogy work to instill positive self-beliefs like self-efficacy? What can we understand about this process? What follows are two

examples which attempt to illustrate how critical pedagogical approaches work to foster self-efficacy in education. Both these examples are from a school-setting, but their lessons remain relevant for application in formal and non-formal life skills practice. I will take lessons from each to formulate a framework for understanding how agency develops in education practice.

Claudia Cervantes-Soon's ethnography *Juarez Girls Rising* (2017), offers a detailed analysis of critical pedagogy amongst poor young women attending a public high school in Juarez, Mexico. Altavista is a state-funded secondary school that actively embraces a critical pedagogy, with three tenets at its core:

1. Freedom and autonomy of students;
2. Radical love and reciprocal care; and
3. Critical discourse and activism (133).

Young women's experiences of these principles opens a unique and powerful space for self-expression and through it, identity formation or "autogestion" (self-authorship). Cervantes-Soon argues that autogestion is enabled by critical pedagogy which views learning as a collaborative process, where the hierarchy between teacher and student are intentionally broken down. Students are asked to critically evaluate what was being taught to them, examine theories, and offer rebuttals. Despite the many other facets of their lives where young women's thoughts, appearances, and choices were heavily monitored and policed, Altavista school is a place where girls' opinions matter, their voices are acknowledged, and where they are actively encouraged to express themselves (144). "Thus young women viewed the freedom that Altavista offered as a precious and unusual opportunity to take control of their own actions and their own learning, to explore the possibilities about who they could be and what they were capable of in a safe space" (143). Thus we see that the environment created by the school's core principle of freedom and autonomy, created the circumstances for positive self-expression:

The hallmarks of Altavista's critical pedagogy...worked in unison to promote a space of liberation for women and the development of autogestion [self-authorship] as articulated by students and teachers. For the young women...to be a [self-author]⁶ meant to have the will and embrace the possibility to develop their own mission, to undertake their own project of life...[Self-authorship] was necessary to be able to...pursue their goals with little external support...This is an ultimate form of agency, the most empowering result of the students' education. (177-178)

Agentic capacity at Altavista is cultivated through the careful and painstaking work of critical self-awareness and self-authorship—in other words, the work of identity formation. For Altavista teachers and students, the two are inextricably linked—agency evolves simultaneously with, and as a result of, students' developing a sense of self and self-determination. Thus critical pedagogy is enabling a space for positive identity formation which in turn builds self-efficacy.

We find similar evidence from India in Uvrashi Sahni's book, *Reaching for the Sky*, which is an ethnographic and autobiographical account of the creation of Prerna School—a primary and secondary girls' school serving the poorest of the poor in Lucknow, India. Sahni describes the school's pedagogy as a critical feminist one that features critical dialogues as a mainstay of the school's philosophy and success (2017). Sahni defines the academic success of Prerna students as follows:

To reach the overall goal [of the school], a girl must: Read, write and successfully complete the government mandated syllabus; Learn to recognize herself as an equal person; Emerge with a sense of agency, of control over her life, of aspirations for her future, and have the confidence the skills to realize them; [and finally] Gain a critical understanding of the social and political structures that frame her life and determine its limits and possibilities, which would, in turn, enable her to push the boundaries and reconstruct her life in more empowering ways. (60-61)

Sahni's construction of the methodology of the school is strikingly similar to Altavista—incorporating elements of radical care, critical discourse, and self-authorship. Goal number one of Prerna is identified as building a “universe of care” and a “web of support” that together helps girls to experience what Altavista referred to as radical love from teachers, administrators, and support staff. Much like Altavista at Prerna, this effectively opens up girls' learning by allowing them a safe space for self-expression and creativity. “The key is being attended to and responded to as whole persons not as objects. By confirming each other and rendering each other valuable our lives are made visible and valuable...” (82).

Beginning in grade four, students engage in critical dialogues, where they are given space to share and reflect on their lived realities, and are then offered tools to deconstruct these realities and reconstruct them in ways that are more empowering and enabling for their lives (113). Ultimately, however, the goal of Prerna school is to explicitly do by design what Altavista seems to have accomplished implicitly, which is to support girls in the formation of their own unique identities. Sahni places this process as the central goal of education: “The goal of all teaching and learning...is to answer the fundamental question: ‘who am I and what is my relationship with the universe and others in it?’” (129). Sahni goes on to articulate how Prerna supports students' development of their own identities by interweaving creativity, performing arts, and critical dialogue throughout the curriculum of the school. Coupled with the structures of care already put in place as a foundation to this learning, Prerna school has extraordinary outcomes—with graduation rates well above the national average and 97% of its graduates continuing on to higher education (194).

LESSONS FROM CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Although both Prerna Girls and Altavista schools represent formal schooling environments, important lessons about the mechanisms of agentic formation can be gleaned for use in life skills programs which have often experimented with alternative pedagogies. Of the five curricula reviewed in Table 1, at least three utilize alternative pedagogical delivery methods—either peer-led facilitation (AGE Africa CHATS curriculum), peer mentoring (Ambassador Girls' Scholarship Program), or participatory teaching methods (Educate's Socially Responsible Leadership Curriculum and Population Council's Health and Life Skills Curriculum).

From the Prerna and Altavista examples, we can clearly see the importance of identity formation to the creation of positive self-efficacy and the relationship between identity formation and environment. Young women in both these schools are offered an enabling environment in which to explore self-expression and self-concept in ways that had a profound impact on their Agentic capacities. The self-expression exercised by girls in these schools helped them to develop self-efficacy and develop personal life goals in accordance with their values. After forming the basis of this self-efficacy—through critical dialogue, community engagement, social justice practice, and activism—girls learned the skills necessary to build self-efficacy into fully-formed Agency.

Returning to our working definition and theory of Agency which conceives of agentic capacity as a combination of skills and self-perceptions, I identify the unique work of critical pedagogy as primarily one that helps to build self-efficacy—an important self-perception necessary for agentic capacity. Secondly, critical pedagogy seems to support the development of key agency skills such as goal setting and self-awareness.

This relationship between identity formation and self-efficacy is reflected in the development psychology literature. Jochen Brandtstadter believed that self-concept and identity guided and directed the self-regulatory process that is critical to agentic functioning (1999). He identified the relationship between identity development and self-regulation as a critical need of further research and pointed to adolescence as the most important time period for studying self-regulation because of identity formation, and conceptions of self are among the major developmental milestones occurring at this age, as summarized by Lerner et al. (2005b, 7). However, such arguments contradict some of the wisdom from policy which point to early childhood as the most important time period to begin developing agency and adolescence as potentially too late (Kwauk & Braga 2017, 17). While this might certainly be true for many cognitive skills and competencies, the unique nature of adolescence as a time of the emergent self, when identity and self-concept are the primary task of the brain likely indicate that adolescence is the ideal time to cultivate Agentic capacities, and thus life skills programs are well placed to do so.

Another issue emerges in the untangling of self-efficacy and agentic development—this is one of environment. The Prerna and Altavista case studies succeeded in developing agentic capabilities amongst their students in part because it was first ensured that school environments created an enabling context for the development of agency and transformational learning even when home or social environments did not. This underscores the importance of programmatic environment and perceived safety in that environment—especially when those environments are much less controlled than schools—as is the case for many life skills programs.

Although environmental influence is acknowledged, there is still no consensus from psychology on the exact nature of the impacts of environment on the individual. Some psychologists have argued that identity formation involves an individuals' ability to regulate the relationship between themselves and their environment (Lerner et al. 2005b, 2-3), while most at least identify this relationship between environment and person as a priority for further study (ibid; Bandura 1989; Brandtstadter 1999; Little et al. 2006). For answers on this question it is useful to turn back to the field of anthropology. Whereas the field of psychology views the development of human capacities as a protracted and teleological process that takes place over the course of a lifetime, identity is viewed from the lens of anthropology as a fluid construct that is constantly developing in relationship to environment (Holland et al. 1998).

Identity is a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations...we begin with the premise that identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice. (5)

Identity formation—as a process that necessarily captures the social and lived realities of an individual—makes much more sense from the lens of education, where social practice is intimately linked to learning. From this view people can both produce environments and be produced by them, indicating human Agency is a powerful factor in mediating lived contexts.

There is both empirical and theoretical evidence to support this, suggesting that Agency itself includes the ability of the individual to influence his or her environment and potentially change the constraining factors that exist (Bandura 1989; Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Larson and Angus 2011; Little et al. 2006; Sahni 2017). A theory of agentic development in life skills practice therefore must look at the specific interaction between individuals and their environments.

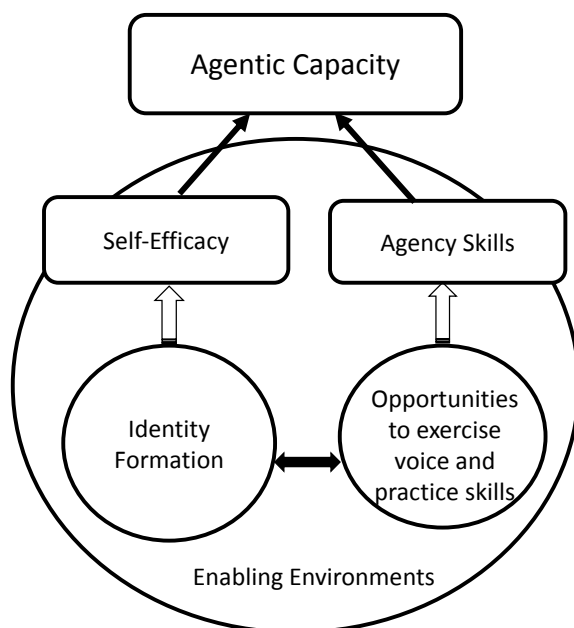
SYNTHESIZING A FRAMEWORK FOR AGENTIC DEVELOPMENT

Given what we now understand about Agency as a combination of positive self-perceptions and concrete skills, as well as the relationship between identity formation and self-efficacy, it is not difficult to sketch a draft framework for the development of Agentic capacity in education practice (Figure 2). In the framework I postulate that programs that effectively cultivate Agentic capacity share two common components:

1. A theory of positive identity formation which leads to the development of self-efficacy; and
2. Opportunities for participants to learn and practice agency skills and assert their identities in relatively safe environments.

These two components reinforce each other. Turning to practice, we can see that the latter is often accomplished through life skills programs for young people that focus on skills building and the applied practice of social change. However, it is the former—positive identity formation—that is arguably the most critical ingredient and yet is much more difficult to accomplish. In the examples offered in this paper there is some evidence to suggest that positive identity formation happens naturally in environments of critical pedagogy and youth-directed or youth-driven learning. It is also possible that the development of self-efficacy can be an iterative process that happens in tandem with the acquisition and practice of agency skills, and vice versa. Regardless, it is important that practitioners have a clear working theory of how these two aspects are developed by their programs, and test these theories through their monitoring and evaluation work.

Figure 2. A framework for Cultivating Agency in Education Practice



CONCLUSION

A few things should be clear from this synthesis. First and foremost, Agency as defined in this paper offers a useful and locally adaptable framework for measuring current life skills programs. Understanding life skills from within an Agency frame suggests that focus on skills development should continue, but those skills should be identified according to the specific needs of each place based on the realities of culture and context. Second, life skills programs should seek to foster positive self-perceptions, like self-efficacy and self-esteem. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that programs which actively facilitate positive identity formation and create space for the practice of self-expression and newly acquired skills are best positioned to cultivate the development of positive self-belief amongst adolescent girls. Further, alternative pedagogies are a particularly promising approach for doing the latter, because they focus on creating a safe power-neutral space where positive identity development and skills practice can take place in a risk free environment. This is a critical area for further research. While we know that alternative pedagogical practice can be an effective mechanism for fostering self-efficacy and Agency skills, more research is needed to fully catalogue and understand the mechanisms of change within the practices that do exist. Third, Agency's unique relationship to identity formation makes adolescence a prime age for programs that build Agentic capacity. This is contrary to much of the current thinking—which identifies the “sweet spot” of many developmental processes as being in early childhood—underscoring the need for investment in research and programs for girls during older adolescence and during the secondary-school years.

Finally, this paper points to several areas of further research. Most immediately the need to understand in more detail the relationship between Agency and context. Which skills and self-beliefs are universally important for the development of Agentic capacity in girls from all socio-cultural and geographic contexts? Are there certain skills and self-beliefs that are more important for rural girls, for example than girls growing up in urban slums? How do country and culture influence the particular combination of skills and beliefs required for effective programming? Resources should be invested in learning about how programs that develop Agentic capacity

might also be reliant on context. Alongside contextually-specific understandings is the need to flesh out a more nuanced understanding of best practices for curricula and interventions that foster self-efficacy, both within the realm of critical pedagogy and without. What strategies have already been tested, and are there viable means for measuring success that are both cultural relevant and can quantify results and direct investment?

NOTES

1. Agency and agentic capacity are used somewhat interchangeably throughout this paper. However, there is a subtle distinction. Agency is the set of skills/self-beliefs required to exercise “agentic capacity.” Agentic capacity being the actual ability to exercise agency. The author assumes that if one has Agency, then one also possesses agentic capacity.
2. Donald et al. 2017, Kabeer 1999
3. Kwauk & Braga 2017
4. Based on Albert Bandura’s notion of agency but expanded to include a broader definition of resources.
5. Bandura (2009) theorized the importance of self-efficacy in agency, while Little et al. (2006) developed a theory of agentic capacity which included skills and self-perceptions.
6. The term “non-cognitive” was coined by James Heckman (2006) to denote the variety of soft skills and their effects on labor market outcomes.
7. The author utilizes the Spanish word “autogestivas”, but I have used the English translation for clarity.

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