

# FieldNotes

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## Implementing Life Skills for Employability

**A**t 18, Kimberly Prieto found herself without friends, drinking too much and getting into fights with other students at her high school in Mexico City. Like thousands of other young people across the city, she joined a gang, and her life continued to spiral downwards. Ruby, 14, was abandoned in a maternity ward in Haryana, India, after her mother died giving birth to her. She was sent to an orphanage, where over the years, she became increasingly anti-social, lacked motivation, and regularly misbehaved with her peers. Kim and Ruby live in different regions of the world and have faced unique challenges growing up. Yet both girls are benefiting from the GE Foundation Life Skills for Employability (GE LSE) program, which is now being implemented in four countries worldwide.

Kim found she had more control over her life, and her anger, after participating in the GE LSE program. “I realize I can solve

my problems without violence,” she says, “and now I’m mentoring other young people in the community to help turn their lives around.” Ruby’s attitude and self esteem have also greatly improved. “These sessions have made me understand the value of life, and given me a sense of purpose,” says Ruby, who now plans to become a social worker.

An initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) that was launched in 2004 with a US\$1.2 million grant from the GE Foundation, this global life skills program equips young people, ages 14 to 18, with a range of skills that will help them stay in school and get the education, professional skills, and confidence they need to succeed in life. (See sidebar, page 2.) A key measure of success is the extent to which young people are either in school or employed six months after participating in the program. To date, 4,100 young people in Mexico and

## SKILLS FOR LIFE

While life skills programs vary widely, they often include some combination of general life competencies, service learning, and effective work habits. The core competencies being promoted as part of the GE LSE program include:

- **Personal competencies** (e.g. managing emotions, cooperation, personal responsibility, developing confidence, and respect for self and others)
- **Problem solving** (e.g. managing conflicts and reducing bullying)
- **Effective work habits** (e.g. teamwork, interviewing, workplace protocol, time management, and workers' responsibilities and rights)
- **Healthy lifestyle** (e.g. substance abuse prevention, nutrition, STD/HIV/AIDS prevention, healthy relationships, and decision making)
- **Community and environmental awareness** (e.g. environmental and community living spaces preservation)
- **Diversity** (e.g. respect for differences, tolerance, values)
- **Service learning:** (e.g. civic responsibility, community service, volunteering)

India have benefited from the life and employability skills course, and demonstrated significant success.<sup>1</sup> Building on the program's achievements and learnings, the initiative is now being implemented in Poland and Hungary through a 2<sup>nd</sup> grant of US\$1.8 million from the GE Foundation. In December 2006, the Foundation renewed its commitment to India and Mexico through a US\$520,000 grant to scale up the pilot program.

### Young People Empowered to Make Successful Life Transitions

Increasingly, educators, employers, and policymakers are placing a greater emphasis on the development of life and employability skills as a way to prepare young people for success in today's rapidly changing and globalized world. Building on those competencies helps young people to be motivated, reliable, and confident decision-makers, who are able to overcome adversity and realize their potential. Programs that teach social and emotional skills, according to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), have had multiple benefits, "such as decreasing aggression in boys, decreasing suspensions and expulsions, decreasing drug use

1 The program's target in India and Mexico was to have 80% of graduates be either in school or employed 6 months after the end of the program. The program surpassed its goal, with 97% of the Mexican cohort and 86% of those in India reaching those targets. The figure in Mexico is particularly significant, as only 50% of the comparison group in the same areas stayed in school.

and delinquency, and increasing academic test scores." Life and employability skills are also essential to success in the global marketplace, where employers demand workers who exercise good judgment, think creatively, have strong self-esteem, work well in teams, have effective communications skills, and can apply the knowledge they've learned in the classroom. Such competencies, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), "become increasingly important in determining an individual's ability to secure a job; retain employment; and move flexibly in the labour market."

Yet despite these clear benefits in terms of personal growth and enhanced employability, young people in many developing and newly industrialized countries lack access to such life skills training programs. The result: diminished prospects for long-term educational success and quality employment. Mónica Hernández, Programs Director for Education of the Fundación Rostros y Voces, a leading NGO in Mexico, explains the broader dimensions of unemployment in Mexico, where 8 million young people are not working or in school. "Young people are the strength of Mexico, and they are not prepared," she says. "That's why it's so important to have good programs like this one, that better prepare them to stay in school and gain employment." Adds Supreet Singh, Executive Director of Youthreach in India: "This program enables and empowers today's youth from disadvantaged communities to become informed, inspired human beings through learnings in the areas of life skills, employability, and entrepreneurship."

### An Evolving Debate Around Implementation

The growing number of life skills programs being implemented worldwide has generated lively and ongoing discussions among NGOs, program funders, and youth development experts about best practice strategies, evaluation challenges, and the real impact of such activities. What have we learned, for example, about how to effectively adapt a core curriculum to very different cultures and work with young people of widely different backgrounds? How important is it to establish strong ties with the local school system? What are the benefits of corporate employee engagement? How do you best track results?

This report seeks to capture some of the key learnings that have emerged from one particular life skills initiative that is being implemented by IYF partner organizations in four countries, and in a range of different settings and economic conditions.<sup>2</sup> We hope that by highlighting some of the shared lessons, challenges and achievements of these varied programs, we can contribute

2 Because GE LSE is currently in the first phase of implementation in Hungary and Poland, the primary emphasis of this report is on the learnings in Mexico and India, where the program has completed its 3-year cycle.

to the ongoing global dialogue around this critical youth development issue, and provide some specific suggestions for how to successfully adapt a life skills program to a wide range of locations and cultures.

### How Do We Allow for Flexibility Without Losing a Program's Integrity?

The GE Foundation Life Skills for Employability program is currently being implemented through four IYF partners: Foundation for Democratic Youth in Hungary; Fundación Rostros y Voces in Mexico; Polish Children and Youth Foundation in Poland; and Youthreach in India. Among the initial questions arising from such a multi-country, multi-cultural initiative is how to remain relevant to local needs while both maintaining the consistency and integrity of the program and the ability to monitor and evaluate the results across programs. Among our learnings in this key area:

- **Flexible Curriculum** A key strategy to address this complex and delicate balance has been to establish a standard life skills curriculum that offers 51 “core” life skills including 10 lessons on service learning, community service, and project-based learning – that are shared by all programs. Each country is then given the flexibility to complement that “core” curriculum with the development of additional lessons designed to meet local needs and address the local culture. For example, India has developed 15 country-specific lessons, which place a greater emphasis on such areas as contraception, entrepreneurship, environmental protection, nutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Mexico’s 12 country-specific lessons include ones dealing with gender discrimination, domestic abuse, and tolerance.
- **Local Committees** Another key component to ensure local relevancy of the program is the establishment

“ I realize I can solve my problems without violence and now I’m mentoring other young people in the community to help turn their lives around. ”

— Kimberly Prieto, participant in the GE LSE program in Mexico City, Mexico

of Curriculum Advisory Committees that include key stakeholders who help guide the development and implementation of the life skills curriculum. India’s advisory committee, for example, was comprised of experts in education, career counseling, youth development, and health. Supreet Singh of Youthreach explains that the committee helps maintain the curriculum’s standards of quality and context “within the existing India realities.”

One of the most passionate topics of discussion around the development and adaptation of a multinational and/or multi-site life skills curriculum implementation revolves around issues of programmatic control. In other words, what is the appropriate balance between local adaptation/ input and national or global management of the program?

- **Advantages of local input** Clearly there are advantages to providing local teachers and local curriculum experts flexibility in adapting the curriculum. They are keenly aware of the local social context for their students and therefore should be encouraged to change the scenarios used to illustrate life skills, including the timely insertion of “hot topics” of the day, to make them more culturally and socially appropriate. Some local control over the content also allows the teachers to feel “ownership” of the program,

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: A “WIN-WIN” STRATEGY

Private sector employees – in this instance GE employees -- can add value to a youth-directed program in a range of ways if they are well informed about the initiative, feel they have a stake in its success, and have a clear role to play. GE employees in India, for example, “were involved in the initial design phase of the program and right through the implementation phase,” reports Sushmitha Paidi, Manager, Corporate Program, for Youthreach. GE also offered its facilities in Delhi and Bangalore for instructor training, and GE volunteers conducted focus group discussions with youth beneficiaries to assess the extent to which they had internalized life skills lessons. Management trainees at GE were assigned to work with

the partner NGOs, and GE Capital employed four life skills graduates from extremely poor backgrounds, serving as a model for other companies in Delhi.

“For Youthreach, the partnership with GE has not only been a relationship of synergy and mutual trust, but also of continuous learning and enrichment,” says Paidi, who notes that the relationship has evolved beyond the GE LSE into other areas such as financial literacy and the environment. This multi-sector partnership, Paidi adds, “has given us the opportunity to help fill a critical gap in the lives of youth, to bridge the hope gap and to enable them to dream big.”

which can result in more effective teaching. Too many alterations to the lessons and/or curriculum, however, can affect the coherence and focus of the curriculum, with possible negative effects on the youth participants.

- **Benefits of standardization** A more centralized design of the curriculum, on the other hand, promotes quality control, standardization, and more intentional teaching practices. A more standardized curriculum is also far easier to evaluate, scale up, and adapt to other countries. Moreover, the replication and retraining of lessons can be done more easily within this framework.
- **A useful compromise** So the answer to this either-or question, should one allow local control over the curriculum and its implementation or should one centralize the control at the international level, is a surprising yes, do both. “There is a need to value negotiation and balance,” says Todd Johnson, IYF’s consultant on curriculum development and teacher training. “But there must also be clear guidelines established at the beginning that describe the extent of change and adaptation permitted and identify those things that are non-negotiable.”

## LESSONS LEARNED:

The GE Foundation Life Skills for Employability program has made a serious commitment to share learnings and best practices, in the belief that these learnings can facilitate implementation of similar programs in other settings. In that spirit, IYF convened a meeting of all four programs in Mexico City in October 2006 to identify lessons learned. Among them:

- **Teachers and/or facilitators need to provide immediate and constructive feedback on the curriculum.** Otherwise it will not be relevant or interesting to the participants. However, it is strongly suggested that the curriculum not incorporate significant changes until the end of the first implementation phase.
- **The decisions to change the curriculum should be evidence-based.** Decisions to alter or drop a lesson because, for example, it is too difficult for the teacher/facilitator, or may appear repetitive, should not be made too hastily. Teachers’ decisions to pick and choose from the curriculum rather than follow the entire curriculum as designed have in some cases negatively impacted measured life skills changes. Because of this potential for negative impacts connected with curriculum changes, it is more prudent to gather evidence about the efficacy of particular lessons and make changes to subsequent implementations based on this evidence.

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# changing lives

**Name:** Miguel Nuevez Lozada

**Age:** 21

**Location:** Mexico City, Mexico

Miguel, a lively young man with a sharp sense of humor, has loved drawing as long as he can remember. As a little boy growing up in the San Juan de Aragon neighborhood of Mexico City, he always drew on a notepad that he kept with him at all times. When he got to secondary school, however, he turned to painting graffiti in his community. With little to do after school, he joined a youth gang, and at night the group would roam the neighborhood, and draw huge pictures on the sides of buildings, which was against the law. Miguel, too busy hanging out with his gang to pay attention to his studies, dropped out of school.



Last year, he heard about a program called *Ocupate* (“Get busy!”) that works with gang members, run by the *Cauce Ciudadano* organization. As a result, Miguel participated in the GE Foundation Life Skills for Employability program. “This program taught me to be more tolerant of others, to walk in their shoes, but also to have more confidence in my skills as an artist,” he said. “I realized that I wanted to use my talents in a good way, not to waste them on vandalism, but to use them in a better direction.” Inspired by the life skills training course, Miguel is now designing postcards that have an educational message on the back. They are distributed free to young people across Mexico City.

“This was my idea to try to communicate to my peers through art, and I work with others to write the messages,” Miguel explains. Most of the postcards, which are beautifully designed by Miguel with drawings of young people, deal with how to have healthy relationships, how to stop sexual abuse, and how to lead a healthy lifestyle. “Do you know how you become infected with a sexual disease?” asks one.

- **High quality teacher training is a key element in the success of the program.** Effective training for teachers and/or facilitators is absolutely critical to gain positive results. In some cases, untrained teachers who are partially or fully taking over for trained teachers have negatively impacted outcomes.
- **Robust external evaluation of program is essential for documenting impact and making program adjustments.** The GE LSE program assessed changes in life skills through online baseline and program surveys, and measured the extent to which participants understood concepts presented in the curriculum through periodic mastery tests (changed to one in later rounds). In addition to attendance and lesson assessments by teachers, the program also conducted post program status surveys among alumni approximately six to eight months after program completion as a way to track employment and education outcomes.<sup>3</sup>
- **Teachers/facilitators should be compensated in some way for their extra work, but incentives and rewards should be sustainable over time.** Financial compensation may not be the preferred strategy. Giving awards to honor teachers for their dedication or offering additional education credits for attending the training are suggested alternatives. In Hungary, for example, IYF's partner organization has received approval from the Minister of Education to utilize such credits, which could positively impact a teacher's salary.

<sup>3</sup> The evaluation and monitoring plan was designed and instituted for GE LSE by Analytic Resources, a consulting firm associated with Brandeis University's Heller School of Public Policy.

“ We are hoping and expecting that this life skills program will positively impact participants' future academic and career paths. ”

— Matt DeCamara, Program Director, GE Foundation

- **Whether a program is voluntary or required does not appear to impact further recruitment of youth participants.** Once young people join the program, they tend to stay in it, and often become the most persuasive ambassadors to encourage others to join. Graduation ceremonies, where participants describe how the program has impacted their lives, are particularly effective in recruiting new students to the program.
- **Employee engagement can add value to the program when volunteers are well informed, feel invested in the program's success, and understand that such activities are supported by the company.** GE employees in India and Mexico have been engaged in a range of support activities, including providing valuable guidance on curriculum development. (See sidebar, page 6.) A program's proximity to a company facility is seen as an advantage in terms of its overall success.



- **A program should be designed from the beginning in ways that facilitate scaling up.** One effective way to facilitate a program's expansion is to develop a standardized teacher training toolkit and training package. This will control quality and equip larger numbers of master trainers and teachers/facilitators with the latest methodologies in experiential and project-based learning. These tools will also help guide them in how to deliver the lessons in a consistent and engaging manner in diverse learning environments. A second way is to negotiate multiple institutional entry points for program delivery, with a single controlled program. This will make it possible for the program to be introduced into formal school systems or delivered through non-formal educational systems.
- **A priority should be placed on ongoing sharing of lessons and challenges.** The most valuable input for improving and strengthening a program comes from those directly engaged in its implementation. Group exchanges among those individuals are especially rich and valuable when they take place face-to-face. Particularly when the life skills program is being implemented in widely diverse settings and cultures, these opportunities promote a shared vision and commitment to the program, and facilitate a more honest exchange of ideas and solutions.

## ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS

Among the key elements needed to create a successful multi-cultural, multi-country life skills training program:

- **interactive dialogue**, participatory decision making, cultural sensitivity, and transparent feedback, shared in a climate of mutual trust and respect
- **a trained cadre of experienced program staff** or youth workers to implement the curriculum, including how to use experiential and project-based methodologies to deliver the program
- **long-term relationships** with both domestic and international life skills curriculum consultants
- **Close adherence to a core framework of curricular activities** with local "situations"
- **Standardized teacher training program and toolkit**
- **Immediate application of new skills**, either through community or educational projects or life planning
- **Engagement of multiple key stakeholders** in building local credibility and sustainability.

## Additional Resources

Following are organizations, articles, and online resources that may be helpful as you consider developing or implementing a life skills program.

[www.vetnet.ch](http://www.vetnet.ch) is a one-stop internationally-focused web resource on life and employability skills development offering a wide range of articles, studies, and reports.

*Accountability in Education*, Jo Anne Anderson, #1 in Education Policy Series, and Economic Outcomes and School Quality, Eric A. Hanushek, " #4 in Education Policy Series, both co-published by the International Academy of Education and the International Institute for Educational Planning ([www.UNESCO.org/iiep/](http://www.UNESCO.org/iiep/))

*Debates in Skills Development*, Paper 8, Bonn, Germany, April 2003, by the Working Group for International Cooperation in Skills Development, produced by the Network for Policy Review Research and Advice on Education and Training in Geneva, Switzerland. ([www.norrag.org/wg](http://www.norrag.org/wg))

*Life Skills Approach to Child and Adolescent Healthy Human Development*, Leena Mangrulkar, Research Associate, HHD/EDC; Cheryl Vince Whitman, Director, HHD and Senior Vice President, EDC; and Marc Posner, Senior Research Associate, HHD/EDC, published by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). ([www.paho.org](http://www.paho.org))

*Resiliency; What We Have Learned*, by Bonnie Benard, published by WestEd, a nonprofit research and service agency. ([www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org))

*The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*, the World Bank, Washington, D.C. An excellent resource on youth development, with numerous examples of life skills programs, including those related to employability. ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org))

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*Field Notes* is a publication series of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) aimed at capturing valuable lessons and experiences from its programs worldwide.

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