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GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING SOFT SKILLS AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS



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YOUTHPOWER ACTION

Guiding Principles for Building Soft Skills among Adolescents and Young Adults

June 2017

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CBO	Community-based organizations
CBT	Cognitive behavior therapy
EPAG	Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women
LAC	Latin American and Caribbean
OST	Out-of-school time
OSY	Out-of-school youth
PA	Positive Action
PAS	Prepara Ami ba Servisu
RCT	Randomized control trial
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
STYL	Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evidence is growing across fields and disciplines that highlights the importance of “soft skills” to the achievement of long-term education, employment, health, and violence prevention outcomes (Heckman et al., 2006; Carneiro et al., 2007). Soft skills are skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that help people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals (Lippman et al., 2015). Soft skills are expressed in the form of observable behaviors, generally in the performance of a task.¹ Once believed to be fixed personality traits, evidence shows that soft skills are malleable throughout the life cycle.

International youth development programs have placed more and more attention on soft or life skills. Investments in school-based, out-of-school, and workplace-based programs and activities that promote developing soft skills have grown significantly worldwide, in different settings, with different mechanisms of change, and aimed at different groups of adolescents and young adults. USAID has invested in identifying the most important soft skills for specific youth development outcomes—first through Workforce Connections and later through YouthPower Action—and on assessing tools that measure those skills. Much less attention has been placed on understanding how these skills are built and what practitioners should do to foster them.

A broad consensus holds that increasing youth soft skills is critical to many development outcomes. Yet the field lacks explanations of how to do this, especially at scale and among the most disadvantaged youth, with rigorous evidence of which practices are best for specific situations and groups. As a result, the research focus on programming is slowly shifting, no longer determining *whether* activities and programs for adolescents and young adults raise soft skills, but also on understanding *how* and *under what conditions* soft skills can be developed.

This report identifies guiding principles and strategies that foster soft skill development among adolescents and young adults, ages 12–29, across different program contexts and youth characteristics.² It shows the most basic methods that enable youth soft skill development and explains why they are thought to be effective. The report also describes ways that the guiding principles can be used in programs and activities in out-of-school as well as formal education contexts. The report addresses two main questions:

¹ Other commonly used terms that overlap to some degree include life skills, non-cognitive skills, social and emotional skills, 21st Century skills, and transferable skills.

² This review drew from synthesis literature on soft skill development to develop a database of over 50 diverse resources, which varied in methodological approach and level of rigor, as discussed further in the Methodology section. It should be noted that most studies either focus only on high-income countries or adopt a global approach (including low- and middle- income countries as well as high-income countries). Only a few resources were identified that focus exclusively on low- and middle- income country contexts.

- **Are there common principles that have been successful in developing soft skills across different types of programs, target populations, and clusters of soft skills?**
- **If common principles apply, how can they be used effectively in various programs in diverse settings?**

This report focuses on guiding principles that are effective for developing soft skills in general. Where relevant, we highlight a subset of key skills that can help achieve positive outcomes across three different areas: workforce development, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH), according to a previous YouthPower Action study (see Gates et al., 2016).³ The report found that seven skills enjoy strong and wide-ranging support across one or more areas, while also being age appropriate and adaptable during ages 12–29. These are: **positive self-concept, self-control, higher order thinking skills, social skills, communication, empathy, and goal orientation**. Where possible, this report shows how certain principles may be particularly effective for developing these soft skills. These connections are highlighted in the text and summarized in Appendix B.

We reviewed and analyzed recent literature, including literature reviews and meta-analyses, general guides on how to develop soft skills, and technical documents. We used these criteria: 1) targeted at youth ages 12–29; 2) addressed at least one of seven key soft skills for cross-sectoral youth outcomes, as identified by USAID YouthPower Action research; and 3) synthesized findings or recommendations regarding soft skill development through activities and programs.

Our analysis revealed that across diverse youth programming, effective programs do indeed share a common set of characteristics that can yield guiding principles for designing and carrying out effective programs. Principles can foster the greatest skill development when applied in combination. The principles can guide program funders, implementers, and researchers involved in teaching soft skills for more extensive and higher quality youth soft skills programming and evaluation.

³ Gates, S., Lippman, L., Shadowen, N., Burke, H., Diener, O., and Malkin, M. (2016). Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes. Washington, DC: USAID’s YouthPower: Implementation, YouthPower Action.

KEY GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Six guiding principles for fostering soft skill development emerged from the literature, applicable to **out-of-school** and **formal education** programs.

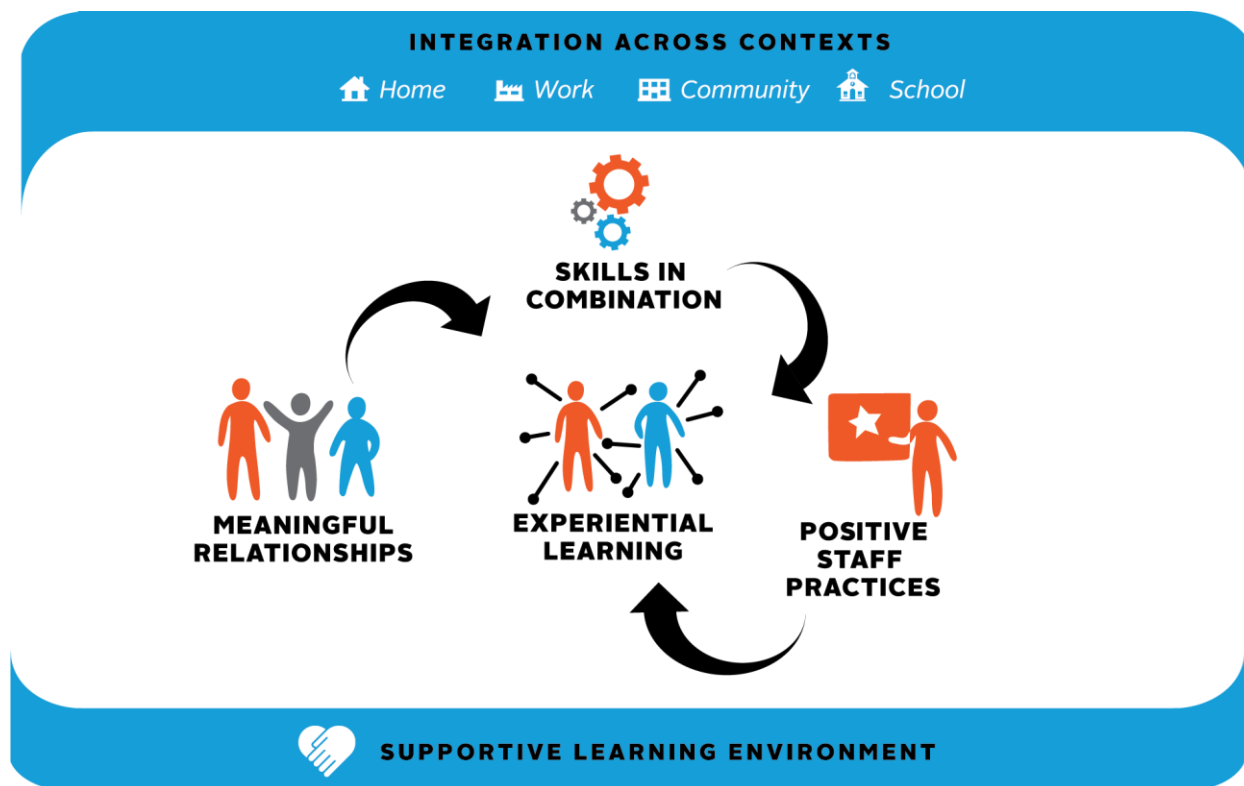


Figure 1. A Framework for Building Soft Skills

Principle 1: Promote experiential learning (through challenge, experience, practice, and reflection)

Soft skill development occurs “primarily through the feedback, reflection, learning, and growth that result from new **experiences**” (Elias et al., 1997, p. 25, emphasis added). Programs and activities should give youth ways to **practice** and apply soft skills to tasks in everyday, meaningful situations so they can see the value and the “how-to” of soft skills (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). Practice can include familiar and new tasks and should allow youth to use soft skills in a variety of situations (UNICEF, 2012). These can be within the program through roleplays or project-based learning, or in real-life situations through volunteering, outdoor projects, or workplace-based learning. Youth will be more motivated by activities that are both interesting for them and are novel or challenging (Ryan and Deci, 2006). Youth’s developmental stage and current skills should inform activity design to make sure that they provide the right level of **challenge** — “beyond what the young person can do by him or herself and just within what he/she can do with support” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 20). Experiential learning and practice should

be paired with **reflection** (“meaning-making”) in which youth describe what they understand, evaluate their performance or choice, connect that experience to what they already know, and envision opportunities for the future (Nagaoka, 2015).

Principle 2: Address skills in combination rather than in isolation, recognizing how they interconnect

Programs should address and promote a combination of soft skills, rather than single skills, through experiential learning. Program designers should consider how soft skills work together in performing a particular task, in order to determine when skills should be introduced. It is critical to understand how skills relate to and reinforce each other so that programs can reflect this and draw connections between interrelated skills throughout the program (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). Given the more flexible nature of out-of-school programs, developing skills is often done in **cycles**. Key soft skills are introduced, revisited, and reinforced throughout the program, in a sequence that provides many chances to practice the same skills in different settings or stages of the project or activity (Smith et al., 2016). Soft skills activities and programs in formal education tend to be more structured. Curricula usually adopt a **sequence**—“learning builds upon what has come before” (CASEL, 2005). These programs usually stress that foundational skills should be covered as “prerequisites” before more advanced skills can be taught.

Principle 3: Promote strong relationships between adults and youth and among youth themselves

Experiential learning is most effective in the context of strong, supportive relationships. Strong, supportive relationships help youth feel secure and allows them to safely try new activities, roles, and behaviors. Supportive relationships are meaningful, caring, and two-way; they **respect youth’s contributions**, and are **based on shared power**, where youth are seen as valued partners and contributors (Search Institute, 2016). Promoting strong, positive, and supportive relationships may be especially relevant to out-of-school programs that target vulnerable youth. Often, those youth do not have a chance to develop such a relationship with their parents or other adults. Although relationships with adults can affect skill development in powerful and positive ways, so too can close connections with friends, siblings, and other peers (Search Institute, 2016). Program staff should try to build strong relationships with participant youth, but also promote strong, supportive, caring relationships among youth peers (Nagaoka, 2016). Staff skills matter for building strong relationships with and among youth. Programs need to have staff who can connect well with youth, are sensitive to their reality, and interact with them in a positive and respectful manner (Miller, 2005).

Principle 4: Promote positive staff practices

Within positive relationships, program staff should adopt a core set of basic practices that promote developing soft skills. **Modeling** means program staff demonstrate high proficiency in the soft skills they want youth to develop. Modeling should be an important part of the youth–staff interaction, since youth learn best from role models who demonstrate soft skills. Often, however, staff may not have the soft skills they need to model. In this case, professional development should be offered so that staff can explore and develop their own soft skills. In addition, program staff should continuously **reinforce** positive attitudes and behaviors, and give

constructive feedback and encourage youth's efforts to apply and strengthen soft skills. Staff should identify and reinforce positive behaviors, rather than simply criticize negative behaviors (Davis et al., 2013). Another key practice is **scaffolding**, or building skills on youth's current skill levels and interests (Smith et al., 2016). Scaffolding makes sure that any youth activities are challenging, demanding but achievable, which is particularly important for programs that promote skill building through projects and hands-on activities. Staff **facilitate** soft skill learning by enabling **communication** between participants, strategic questioning, framing activities as learning experiences, and allowing learners to take active roles (Smith et al., 2016).

Principle 5: Create a safe, caring, supportive, and enriching program environment

A safe, caring, and supportive environment allows youth to feel comfortable expressing themselves, even on difficult topics, knowing that they will be accepted and not bullied or ridiculed. Staff should create structures where youth feel included and appreciated by peers and by staff themselves. An important factor is having positive and supportive relationships in place between staff and the youth and among youth and their peers (see Principle 3). Staff should also promote practices that increase safe peer group interactions, and decrease unsafe confrontation (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, p.9). **Ground rules for group processes** (e.g., listening, turn-taking) and sharing emotions (Smith et al., 2016) are common group practices. Typically, youth and staff collaborate to develop ground rules. When youth participate in designing common rules, they are more likely to respect them (Elias, 2007). Environments should be **"richly" stimulating**, constantly challenging, and facilitate growth through exploration (Nagaoka, 2016). In addition, staff and peers should create norms, within the program context, that encourage **high expectations**, challenging youth and encouraging them to have high aspirations (Durlak et al., 2015; Nagaoka, 2015).

Principle 6: Promote integration of learning contexts

Effective programs promote integration of learning contexts by adopting approaches that involve **families, the local community, education institutions** (schools and/or universities) and **the workplace** (where applicable). During adolescence and young adulthood, youth are part of several networks, and peers, the school, the community, and the workplace increasingly influence skill development. Skill development is enhanced when those areas are connected and staff, peers, and family provide **clear, consistent, and compatible standards and messages** (Elias, 1997). Skills learned in one environment can be reinforced in another and over time, providing further rationale for combining learning contexts (Ikesako and Miyamoto, 2015, p. 29).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

Any skill building program should consider several factors, including youth's developmental level, the program context, the nature and number of targeted skills, and the intended program outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010). Programs will be most effective during the developmental stages when skills are being actively acquired and used often (Guerra et al., 2014). As much as possible, activities and programs should target the optimal developmental periods and use age-appropriate concepts and methods (Cunningham et al., 2016). Out-of-school programs should

be tailored to the context and risk characteristics of the youth who participate. For instance, programs that target at-risk youth, such as gang-affiliated youth, traumatized youth, or youth in conflict areas, need to consider that soft skills may be lacking as the result of being exposed to more stress, as well as higher levels of impulsive behavior. National and contextual factors should be considered, especially when designing programs in formal education. Program designers should investigate (1) whether soft skills are included in the national education curriculum and if so to what extent and (2) how much flexibility schools have to adapt the curriculum to use academic subjects to foster soft skills.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The field needs new research to further its understanding on effective youth soft-skills-building programming. Key questions include:

- Which program characteristics are most effective in promoting which soft skills outcomes for youth?
- What are the common features of effective, rigorously evaluated programs?
- Which research and programming recommendations based on experience from high-income countries also apply to low- and middle-income countries?
- How can soft-skills-building activities and programs address gender differences in soft skills development?
- Which soft-skills-building strategies are most effective for specific age groups?
- How might principles and strategies for soft skills building differ by sector and/or outcomes targeted by a program?
- How can soft skill development be most effectively integrated in formal education in low- and middle-income countries?

CONCLUSION

A core set of guiding principles can inform all, or nearly all, efforts to build soft skills among adolescents and young adults. Youth program funders, project designers, and program implementers are encouraged to reflect on the six guiding principles as they design new programs for and with young people. Each principle can be thought of as a challenge or way to invite many possible program responses. Furthermore, better and more research and evaluation are needed to help us understand how effective these approaches are with specific youth in specific contexts to provide critical feedback for program improvement. The more youth programs reflect evidence-based, cost-effective, and youth-friendly ways to address the opportunities posed by the six guiding principles, the more we can expect to see all youth ready for work, community participation, and life.

INTRODUCTION

Growing evidence in economics, education, and psychology highlights the importance of soft skills to long-term education, employment, health, and violence prevention outcomes (Lippman et al., 2015; Deming 2015; Almlund et al., 2011; Heckman et al., 2006; Carneiro et al. 2007). Soft skills are skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that enable people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals (Lippman et al., 2015). Many terms refer to similar sets of skills, including life skills, non-cognitive skills, and social-emotional skills.⁴

As this evidence base has grown, international development programs have placed more and more attention on soft or life skills. School-based, out-of-school, and workplace-based programs and activities that promote developing soft skills have expanded significantly worldwide. USAID has invested in identifying the most important soft skills and analyzing tools to measure them (see Lippman et al., 2015 and Gates et al., 2016). Much less attention has been placed on understanding how these skills are built, however, and what practitioners should do to foster them.

Recent research from economics, education, neuroscience, and psychology shows that soft skills are not fixed personality traits. Rather, they are adaptable throughout life, although how adaptable they are is still debated.⁵ ⁶ Emerging evidence shows that soft skills can be promoted among youth through programs and activities, although we still lack youth program evaluations with long-term follow-up as well as evaluations in the context of developing countries (Heckman and Kautz, 2013; J-PAL, 2013; Puerta et al., 2016). Meta-analyses have shown that participating in activities such as outdoor adventure programs, service-learning, and school-based and after-school Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs can have a positive impact on a number of soft skills.⁷ Initial studies also show positive returns on investment in soft-skills-building programs that target youth, although more research is needed on costs and benefits.⁸

Although the literature on the effectiveness of programs and activities that develop soft skills is still very limited, the research focus is slowly shifting. The emphasis is no longer only on

⁴ See pp. 238–239 of Duckworth and Yeager (2015) for a helpful discussion of skills terminology.

⁵ For instance, neuroscience findings on the development of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain directing self-regulatory and planning skills, suggest malleability (adaptability) of this region of the brain into the mid-twenties (Dahl, 2004; Steinberg, 2008).

⁶ For research on the malleability/adaptability of soft skills see Carneiro and Heckman (2003), McCrae and Costa (1996) and (2003), Roberts, Walton and Vechtbauer (2006), and Walsh (2005).

⁷ For meta-analysis on outdoor adventure programs see Hans et al. (2000), Wilson and Lipsey (2000), Gillis and Speelman (2008); for meta-analysis on service-learning programs, see studies by Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011), Billig (2000), and Conway, Amel, and Gerwein (2009); for meta-analysis on school-based and after-school Social Emotional Learning Programs see Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010), Durlak et al., (2011), Hahn (2007), and Payton et al. (2008).

⁸ A cost-benefit analysis conducted by Belfield et al. (2015) on SEL programs implemented in elementary and middle schools in the United States suggests positive economic returns through higher tax revenues and lower costs of public services for health, public assistance, and criminal justice.

determining *whether* programs targeted at adolescents and young adults can have an impact on raising soft skills, but also on understanding *how* and *under what conditions* soft skills can be developed through programs.

PURPOSE

Although a broad consensus believes that increasing youth soft skills is critical to economic growth, health, social stability, and other development outcomes, the field is unclear on how to do this, especially at scale and among the most disadvantaged youth. Nonetheless, there is a growing agreement that general principles and strategies can consistently help youth to develop and apply soft skills in various aspects of their lives. Youth develop skills in many program contexts, in and out of school. Programs for out-of-school youth (both drop-outs and graduates) might develop soft skills through work readiness workshops, internships, apprenticeships, mentoring, community service projects, advocacy, and cooperatives. These programs are typically offered by community-based organizations (CBOs), workforce training companies, and youth centers. Employers are also providing more rapid soft skills training to their new hires, as well as on-the-job mentoring. In-school efforts include reforming academic curricula and teaching for more active learning and developing social-emotional skills, as well as life or soft skills workshops. Programs for in-school youth outside the academic classroom are diverse, including afterschool and enrichment programs, sports, field trips, mentoring, and weekend and summer programs. These may be organized around recreation, the arts, service-learning, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, health, or career exploration, either in school itself or community centers or other locations. This broad programming reflects the importance of developing soft skills along the life span and implies that a wide range of adults can foster and support youth soft skills development, from parents and teachers, to counselors and coaches, to community leaders and employers.

This report identifies the common principles and strategies that underlie soft skills development for adolescents and young adults ages 12–29, across all (or most) program contexts and youth characteristics. It will tease out the most basic processes that enable youth to develop soft skills and explain why these are considered effective. The report will describe how these common or “guiding” principles inform programs and activities in school and out of school. The main questions that this report will answer are:

1. Are there common principles that have been successful in developing soft skills across different types of programs, target populations, and clusters of soft skills?
2. If common principles apply, how can they be used effectively in various programs in diverse settings?

This report focuses on guiding principles that are effective for developing soft skills in general, but where relevant, it highlights skills that were identified by previous YouthPower Action research. This research (see Gates et al., 2016) identified a common set of key soft skills that can help achieve positive outcomes across three different areas: workforce development, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). The research found that seven skills enjoy strong and wide-ranging support while being age appropriate and adaptable for ages 12–29. These are: **higher order thinking skills, social skills, communication, self-control,**

positive self-concept, empathy, and goal orientation. (See “A Common Skills Approach to Youth Programming” on p. 10 for more information on these seven skills.) Where possible, we distill how principles are relevant for cultivating these soft skills. These connections are highlighted throughout the text and summarized in Appendix B.

The report methodology, detailed in section 3, used extensive review of recent synthesis literature—any literature that summarizes findings/recommendations on how to develop soft skills among adolescents and young adults through programming. Synthesis documents include: literature reviews and meta-analyses, general guides on how to develop soft skills, and technical documents or reports. Our purpose is to clarify for youth program funders, implementers, and researchers the core guiding principles and strategies for youth soft skills development to support more, high-quality youth soft skills programming and evaluation.

BACKGROUND

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills development is a multifaceted process. It is affected by many different contexts at once, including family, school, community, and the workplace (Ikesako and Miyamoto, 2015; OECD, 2015), as well as by the different types of people. A person's social network, including parents, teachers, peers, mentors, employers, and community members, affect developing soft skills. The relative importance of each context and type of person depends on the youth's stage of life (OECD, 2015). During infancy and early childhood, parents and caregivers (family) play the main role. During adolescence, peers, school, and the community become more important. In young adulthood, education and training institutions as well as the workforce dominate skill development (Cunningham et al., 2016; OECD, 2015).

Emerging evidence shows that there are optimal periods for developing soft skills (Heckman and Kautz, 2013; Guerra et al., 2014). For example, adolescence might be the best time for gaining higher order thinking skills, since this is when the cognitive abilities that support abstract reasoning are developed (Guerra et al., 2014). That does not mean skills cannot be learned in other periods, only that greater effort might be required.

Soft skills are not fixed, predetermined exclusively by genes, or developed in a vacuum. Instead, their development depends on factors such as age, previous skill levels, and individuals' environments.

Skills develop over time, and skills beget skills: the higher level of skills a person has, the higher the gain in future skills (Ikesako and Miyamoto, 2015; Carneiro and Heckman, 2003). Developing skills in early and middle childhood is ideal, therefore, to set the stage for developing later skills. Continued efforts to build soft skills during adolescence and young adulthood sustain previous gains and build new and more complex skills. Skills are also “cross-productive.” In other words, one type of skill can help foster other skills over time (Cunha and Heckman, 2007). For example, “**positive self-concept** and **self-control** facilitate the development of higher levels of **social skills, communication, and higher order thinking skills**, and in turn, proficiency in these skills supports **self-control** and **positive self-concept**” (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 34).

This “window of opportunity,” heavily influenced by brain development and psychological readiness, also supports continued investments during adolescence and young adulthood (Guerra et al., 2014). At earlier ages of adolescence this window is more open, before the brain reaches full maturity by the mid-20s (Guerra et al., 2014). Recent studies from neuroscience have shown that the pre-frontal cortex (that is, the area of the brain directing self-regulatory and planning skills) continues to develop through late adolescence and early adulthood, further supporting the potential for change through activities and programs (Steinberg, 2008; Davidson, 2007).

THEORIES AND MODELS SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS

This report draws on the psychology literature to understand theoretical foundations of and potential approaches to soft skills building (see Box 1 for more details). These approaches are drawn mostly from Western social science but are thought to be relevant across cultures.

Box 1. Key Theories on Soft Skills Development

Self-determination theory (SDT): Focuses on the self-motivation behind the choices people make (Deci and Ryan, 1985 and 1991; Ryan and Deci, 2000 and 2006). The theory assumes that three basic psychological needs motivate people and support developing skills: need for competence (ability), relatedness (being connected), and autonomy (freedom of action). SDT stresses the importance of “autonomy-supportive contexts,” or situations that support youth in setting and reaching their own goals, for developing skills in self-regulation and planning.

Social learning theory: Posits that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context (Bandura, 1977). Individuals learn to behave by observing adults and peers around them; through direct instruction, whereby teachers, role models, and other authorities tell youth how to behave; and through reinforcing behaviors (WHO, 2003; Bandura, 1973).

Self-efficacy theory: Bandura (1977) suggests that behavior is determined by a person’s beliefs regarding her ability to master skills and tasks as well as her confidence in causing something to happen. Self-efficacy, in turn, can determine the person’s choice to approach or avoid challenges.

Cognitive-behavior model: Focuses on how thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes affect feelings and behavior. Cognitive-behavior theories are the foundation for cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), which helps people identify and challenge negative thinking patterns to change the way they feel about situations and, in turn, change their behaviors (Beck, 2011).

Self-theories (Mindsets): Investigates how people develop beliefs about themselves (i.e., self-theories) and how these self-theories create their psychological worlds by shaping thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Dweck, 2000). Self-theories lie on a continuum from fixed to adaptable. People who view their abilities as fixed or stable tend to avoid challenges, while people who view their abilities as adaptable engage in challenges, because they see them as an opportunity to improve (Schumann et al., 2014).

A COMMON SKILLS APPROACH TO YOUTH PROGRAMMING

Since the 1990s there has been a shift from programming that focuses only on preventing and avoiding problems to promoting skills, assets, and psychological well-being (Catalano et al., 2004; Eccles and Gootman, 2002). This shift in focus away from only addressing and preventing problems and toward positive youth development, which promotes a broad set of interrelated positive outcomes, laid the groundwork for cross-sectoral youth programming that stresses a set of common soft skills (Gates et al., 2016)).

To advance research in this area and inform this new cross-sectoral approach to programming, USAID has funded a series of studies on soft skills for youth development. In 2015, USAID published “Key Soft Skills that Foster Youth Workforce Success,” which identified the soft skills most critical to youth workforce success (Lippman et al., 2015). Building on that evidence, USAID’s YouthPower Action project conducted an extensive literature review to identify key soft skills that can foster positive outcomes across three different areas: workforce development,

violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) (Gates et al., 2016). The research identified seven skills that enjoy strong and wide-ranging support while being age appropriate and adaptable during ages 12–29. These are: **higher order thinking, social skills, communication, self-control, positive self-concept, empathy, and goal orientation.**

Figure 2: Key Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Development: Top Supported Skills Across Fields



Figure 2 (Gates et al., 2016) highlights the top seven skills that strongly predict outcomes within workforce development, violence prevention, and SRH, as well as where they intersect. Three critical soft skills were among the top five supported across each area and emerged as the most likely to increase the odds of youth success: **positive self-concept, self-control, and higher order thinking skills**. Two skills also garnered strong cross-sectoral support, being among the top five skills in two of the three areas: **communication** supported in the workforce and SRH literature, and **social skills** supported by the workforce and violence prevention literature. Two additional skills emerged from the review of the SRH and violence prevention literature as important to those specific fields: **empathy**, emphasized in the violence prevention literature, and **goal orientation**, critical according to the SRH literature. The soft skills identified by the USAID YouthPower Action research are similar to the group of skills proposed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), called the Core Social and Emotional Learning Competencies. CASEL identifies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making as important predictors of educational outcomes.

These top seven skills have the most support across the three areas analyzed have been found to be adaptable. We recommend these as targets for youth development programming by the YouthPower Action initiative. This technical report highlights specific strategies that contribute to the development of these seven skills.

Box 2: Definitions* of the Key Seven Soft Skills Identified by the USAID YouthPower Action Initiative

Higher order thinking skills: Skills encompassing problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making. These skills may reflect the same underlying skill set, which is the ability to take in information from multiple sources, identify the issue(s), evaluate potential options, and reach an appropriate conclusion (Stein, 2000).

Self-control: The ability to delay gratification, control impulses, direct and focus attention, manage emotions, and regulate behaviors (Lippman et al., 2015).

Positive self-concept: A realistic awareness of oneself and one's abilities, strengths, and potential (Lippman et al., 2015, "Appendices," p. 84).

Social skills: A cluster of skills necessary to get along well with others, including:

- Respecting and expressing appreciation for others (requiring cultural sensitivity)
- Demonstrating context-appropriate behavior and ability to behave according to social norms
- Using a range of skills or processes aimed at resolving conflict

Communication: The ability to effectively express and understand knowledge and ideas. Includes one's ability to negotiate and persuade, as well as transmit and interpret knowledge. Types of communication include listening, and skills in verbal, non-verbal, and written communication.

Empathy: The ability to feel and understand what someone else is feeling.

Goal-orientation: The motivation and ability to make reasonable plans and take action toward desired goals.

*The above definitions were taken from Appendix H of Lippman et al., 2015, with the exception of empathy and goal orientation. The definitions for these skills were taken from Lippman et al., 2014.

METHODOLOGY

The following questions guided the research process:

1. Are there common principles that have been successful in developing soft skills across different types of programs, target populations, and clusters of soft skills?
2. How are these principles applied effectively in various programs in diverse settings?

To answer these questions, the research team reviewed the main findings of available synthesis literature—literature that summarizes findings/recommendations on how to develop soft skills among adolescents and young adults through programming. Four main types of documents were included: literature reviews and meta-analyses, guides on how to develop soft skills, program literature, and other technical documents or reports. Program-specific literature, such as program evaluations and program-specific curricula, did not fall within the methodology of this research. The team included literature that fell within the following criteria: 1) targeted youth ages 12–29; 2) addressed at least one of the seven soft skills concepts identified by the YouthPower Action research; and 3) synthesized findings or recommendations for developing soft skills through programs and activities. In the final stage we summarized and analyzed the main findings. This resulted in identifying the general principles and specific strategies highlighted in this report. To illustrate how to apply the general guiding principles in practice, we draw on program examples and references from the synthesis literature. Where appropriate, we also connect the guiding principles and specific soft skills, with a focus on the seven described in Figure 2. For a more detailed description of the methodology, including the literature consulted and key documents selected, please consult Appendix A.

The review produced a database containing over 55 diverse resources, which differ on their methodology and level of rigor. Some resources identify specific soft-skills-building standards based on systematic reviews of effective activities and programs. Others are less rigorous and recommend effective strategies based on knowledge/practice in carrying out programs.

We identified three major gaps in the resource base. First, only a very few resources in our database focus exclusively on soft skills building in low- and middle-income countries (notable exceptions include Brown et al., 2015 and UNICEF, 2012). Most studies either focus on high-income countries only, notably the United States. Others adopt a global approach, reviewing interventions and/or making recommendations that apply across low- and middle-income countries as well as high-income countries. As a result, the studies in the database do not capture the unique experiences and challenges faced by low- and middle-income countries. This gap is particularly noticeable for the syntheses on formal education, which builds mostly on research and program experiences and evaluations from the United States. Second, most of the resources reviewed focus on general recommendations and findings and do not address concrete strategies on how to put general recommendations into practice through youth programming. Information on how to implement programs is often lacking. The literature does not address in-depth aspects such as ideal length of programs, the best class or group size, or background needed for program staff. More guidance is also needed on the potential challenges that might emerge when trying to implement the general recommendations. Third, the literature

reviewed does not address in depth how principles and strategies for building soft skills might be different for young women and men and does not address gender-sensitive delivery of soft-skills-building programs.

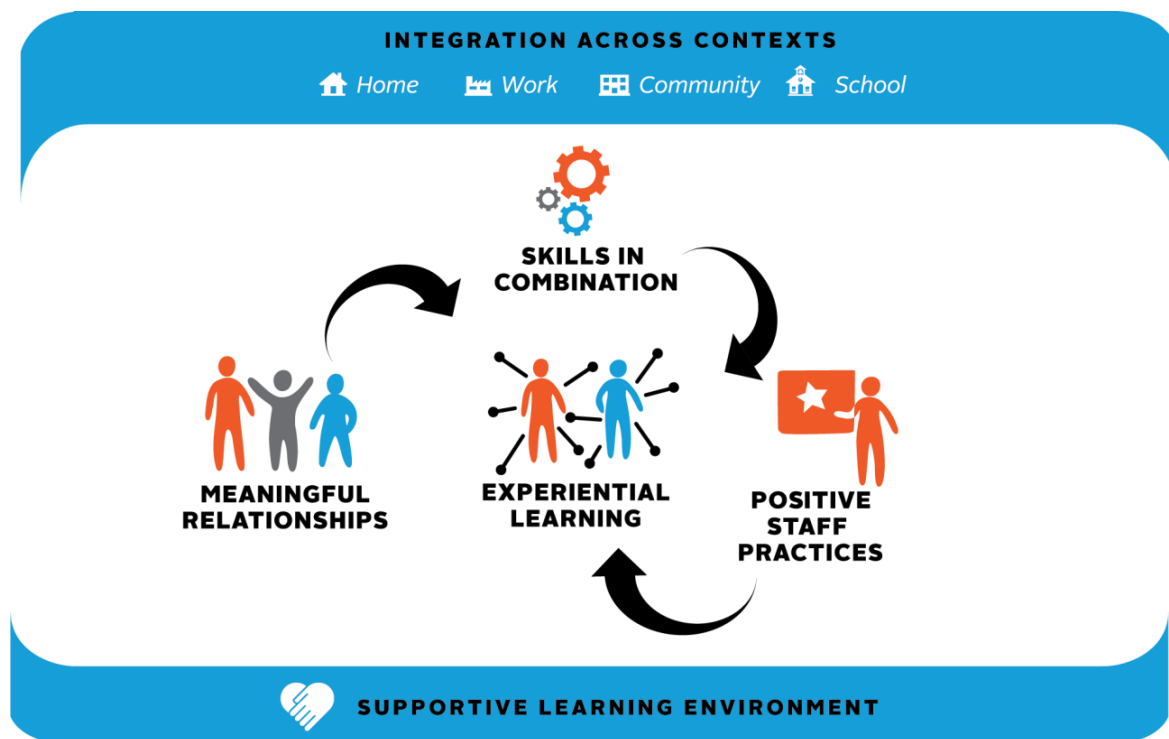
The findings in this report are limited by the gaps in the synthesis literature. We were only able to identify general guiding principles that might apply across both low- and middle-income and high-income countries and across genders. Principles, strategies, and implementation challenges that might be gender-specific or unique to low- and middle-income countries are not fully captured in this report. Further research in this area is needed.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS

Many interventions focus on developing soft skills across different settings, with different change mechanisms, and different sub-groups of adolescents and young adults. Nonetheless, our analysis showed that effective programs do indeed share common characteristics that can form guiding principles for designing and carrying out effective programs. When applied together, these principles foster the best skills development. The guiding principles identified are supported across different resources reviewed, and, therefore, apply across different settings, programs, age groups from 12–29, and clusters of soft skills. These principles guide program designers and implementers who teach soft skills to adolescents and young adults and include:

1. Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice, and reflection
2. Address skills in combination rather than in isolation in the program design
3. Promote strong relationships between adults and youth and among youth themselves
4. Support positive staff practices, such as modeling and positive reinforcement
5. Develop a safe, supportive, and enriching environment for program implementation
6. Promote integration across the different learning contexts to which youth are exposed

Figure 3. A Framework for Building Soft Skills



These principles apply to programs in the two main settings covered in the literature: formal education and out-of-school programs (which refers to both afterschool programs and programs that target out-of-school youth). It is important to note, however, that many of these principles apply across both types of settings. Where there are unique implications to applying the principle in one setting or the other, we include a separate section on how the principle might be applied in that particular setting.

SOFT SKILLS BUILDING PROGRAMMING IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL SETTINGS

There are two distinct types of out-of-school programs: out-of-school time (OST) and out-of-school youth (OSY) programs. OST programs refer to programs for youth who are enrolled in and regularly attend school.⁹ In contrast, OSY programs target youth not enrolled in school, either because they have dropped out or because they have completed secondary education but have not become employed nor entered higher education. OSY programs are especially relevant to developing countries, where many youth and young adults are not enrolled in secondary or higher education and, therefore, cannot be reached through school-based programs and activities.

In contrast to formal education programs, which are often constrained by the school's physical boundaries and an established curriculum, out-of-school programs can be more flexible in exposing youth to many settings and experiences. They may take place in the community, training centers, or even in the workplace. Workplace-based programs have been emerging more recently, although programming for acquiring new skills in the workplace is still a new area for research (Cunningham et al., 2016).

Out-of-school programs include outdoor adventure programs, service-learning, sports, mentoring, and workshop skills training, among many others. Some programs stand alone and focus exclusively on developing soft skills. Others focus on improving several elements, such as health behaviors, vocational skills, or academic performance. Multi-part programs usually focus on helping youth apply soft skills to making positive life choices. Although some programs build soft skills through direct instruction, others focus on forming trusting and bonding relationships (mentoring) or on activities that promote skills development through practice (outdoor activities, sports, music). Often, however, programs do not have a clear theory of change.

It is also common for out-of-school programs to combine targeting based on geography with targeting based on beneficiary characteristics, such as age group, gender, or income level. Some programs also include screening that not only considers school enrollment status, but also individual socio-economic situation, risk, and vulnerability. This is because low-resourced

⁹ For the purposes of this study, out-of-school refers both to extra-curricular (OST) or community-based programs for in-school youth, as well as programs that target youth who have either dropped out of or graduated from school (OSY).

situations may be less conducive for soft skills building, and youth from these areas may have fewer chances to develop such skills.

SOFT-SKILLS-BUILDING PROGRAMMING IN FORMAL EDUCATION SETTINGS

Soft skills programming in formal education refers to any systematized, school-based effort to teach soft skills to enrolled youth. Soft skills development programs in formal education adopt three main approaches, which are often carried out in tandem.¹⁰

- 1) *Integration into academic course material.* School administrators and teachers are encouraged to integrate soft skills lessons into standard course material by adjusting teaching methods, specifically by focusing on active learning, whereby “students learn through discovery, facilitated by a teacher” (Cunningham et al., 2016, p. 50). Examples include:
 - Facing History and Ourselves, which builds skills such as communication and problem-solving into lessons about history and literature (Guerra et al., 2014)
 - CEPIDEA, an Italian program that promotes prosocial behaviors by incorporating a specialized curriculum with routine educational practices (Caprara et al., 2015, p. 2211).
- 2) *Freestanding lessons.* This is “closest to treating the teaching of socioemotional skills on a par with the teaching of other subjects, such as history or language” (Cunningham, et al. 2016, p. 50). This requires a specialized curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and schedule. Schools often offer smaller scale versions that include once-per-week classes focused on a limited number of skills.¹¹ For example: the University to Enterprise and Society’s “Boost Your Skills” program in Belgium offers standalone courses (14 credits in total) focused on developing soft skills such as organization, communication, and personal development to help enrich the university curriculum (Cinque, 2016).

Incredible Years¹² is a lesson-based program from the United States designed to develop social competence, emotional regulation, persistence, problem solving, anger management, and prosocial behavior (Cunningham, et al. 2016).
- 3) *Whole school approach.* In this approach, all school staff are equipped with the language and behaviors that reinforce soft skills training in their everyday interactions with youth. The whole school approach has substantial support in the literature, and is often recommended to support either integrated or standalone soft skill lessons.

¹⁰ Regardless of the approach, almost all interventions directly involve teachers in some way (Sklad, et al., 2012).

¹¹ Although stand-alone training programs continue to be utilized, some literature recommends integrating soft skills training into the curriculum and regular school-day experience (Shafer, 2016; CASEL, 2015).

¹² Incredible Years is intended for elementary youth (and younger).

The literature also recommends a S.A.F.E. (Sequenced, Active, Focused, Explicit) approach for effective soft skills building in formal education. S.A.F.E. recommends that soft skills programs incorporate four elements: 1) sequenced step-by-step training, 2) active forms of learning, 3) enough time to develop skills, and 4) explicit learning goals or elements (Durlak et al., 2011).

It should be noted that school systems in many low- and middle-income countries may face resource limits and other challenges in carrying out these approaches. In many low-income countries, other priorities such as increasing secondary school completion rates may appear more pressing. Education systems and teaching methods are often focused on instruction, making highly participatory programs challenging to carry out without overall reforms. Although evidence suggests an increasing international trend toward recognizing the importance of soft skills in national education strategies and frameworks, there is less evidence of change in curriculum, teaching, and practice (Care, et al., 2016).

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

PRINCIPLE 1: PROMOTE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (THROUGH CHALLENGE, EXPERIENCE, PRACTICE, AND REFLECTION)

Youth learn through experiences. During adolescence, skills development occurs “primarily through the feedback, reflection, learning, and growth that result from new experiences” (Elias, 1997, p. 25). Youth need ways to practice and apply soft skills in everyday situations and in meaningful contexts to be able to see the value and the “how-to” of soft skills (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). The literature highlights two main concepts: 1) experiential learning—the process of grasping meaning from the experience itself (UNICEF, 2012) and 2) developmental experiences—opportunities and activities that give youth “the necessary conditions and stimuli to advance their development appropriate to their age” (Nagaoka, 2015, p.).

Unfortunately, lecture-type approaches to teaching soft skills occur most often in many programs. This is a problem, because youth have difficulty taking in and using soft skills in their own lives when they do not have the chance to practice these new skills (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). Developing new skills is initially difficult and requires perseverance and support, which means youth may need many practice sessions to be able to master a skill (FHI, 2007). Practice is especially important to soft skills fluency—the ease with which youth apply their soft skills—since it means not only learning many new skills, but it may also mean unlearning habits of thought and behavior (Elias, 1997). This is particularly important when youth are in emotionally charged or high-pressure situations, and may have trouble remembering soft skills information and are, therefore, more likely to fail in applying new skills. Practicing skills helps youth learn how to use skills easily and appropriately, especially in stressful and difficult situations.

Practice should include familiar as well as new situations and should allow youth to use soft skills across many situations (UNICEF, 2012). These opportunities can be provided within the program—through roleplays or project-based learning—or in real-life situations, through volunteering, outdoor projects, or workplace learning. In the end, youth will be more open to learning through activities that both interest them and are novel or challenging (Ryan and Deci, 2006).

Programs that address the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents often use a variety of experiential learning methods—such as personal writing exercises, role play, and the use of case studies to facilitate group discussion—that enable the development of life skills alongside the acquisition of SRH information (Haberland, 2015).¹³ Examples of programs that do this successfully include SIHLE, HORIZONS, Stepping Stones, the Children’s Aid Society Carrera program and Project Safe. Stepping Stones is a 50-hour program that uses a participatory

¹³ See also UNESCO’s (2009) International Technical Guidelines for Sexuality Education which emphasizes the importance of life skills.

learning approach involving critical reflection, roleplay, and drama and covers a wide range of relationship topics such as “how we act and what shapes our actions ... taking risks and sexual problems ... safer sex and condoms ... and communication skills” (Jewkes et al., 2008). Likewise, a life-skills program in the form of a girls’ parliament in India provides soft skills practice through role-playing games that mock real-life scenarios adolescent girls commonly face. Girls work through scenarios such as early marriage and standing up to parental authorities (Devadalle et al., 2015) to develop and exercise skills such as problem solving, decision making, and developing interpersonal relationships, among others.

Youth’s developmental stage and current skills should inform practice design to make sure that they support as well as challenge. Scaffolding is a helpful practice that staff can apply to set up or adapt skill-building opportunities, keeping the work challenging but possible (Smith et al., 2016). Smith and colleagues (2016) describe the best level of challenge as one at the top of youth’s capabilities, in a “zone” that is just “beyond what the young person can do by him or herself and just within what he/she can do with support” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 20). This complex practice is discussed in greater detail in the section on promoting positive staff practices beginning on p. 28.

Positive reinforcement, feedback, and chances for reflection are also critical for experiential learning (CASEL, 2015). Action should be paired with reflection (“meaning-making”) in which youth describe what they understand, evaluate their performance or choice, connect that experience to what they already know, and envision ways to use skills for the future (Nagaoka, 2015; GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). Program staff can play a key role in this process by facilitating youth’s reflection about their experiences and helping them make meaning of them (Nagoaka, 2015).

Mastery of experiences

Promoting mastery of experiences has been recognized as one of the most effective ways to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy, a facet of **positive self-concept** (Bandura, 1977). Through mastery of experiences, youth overcome obstacles by persevering and achieving success on a specific task. It is less important what the task is than that they master it. Providing chances for skills building and mastery is key for youth to become confident in their ability to master their own situations and develop a sense of personal efficacy (the sense that he or she can succeed in using the skill) (Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

Box 3: The Ankasha Intervention

Ankasha, a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that operates in the slums of Bombay, India, raises the soft skills of children and adolescents from poor backgrounds. The program uses the concepts and ideas of experimental learning through workshops, drama, art, and story-telling.

The program, described by Krishnan and Krutikova (2012), rejects the idea of lecture-based teaching and introduces soft skills through lessons in a very interactive way. Youth learn skills by depicting the personalities, actions, and experiences of fictional characters, followed by non-fictional well-known figures and group exercises in which youth identify these skills. The program has youth keep a diary in which they record their daily encounters with the skills they learn about to apply what they learn outside of the program. Afterwards, they share their findings in the workshop groups and discuss/reflect upon them. Sports, drama, and art activities form another part of the program. The program promotes projects such as annual musicals where youth take on new challenges, work as a group, and persevere. Using sports, drama, and art gives youth mastery experiences by guiding them to successful completion of challenging tasks that are fun and interesting.

A program evaluation found that it was successful in promoting soft skills: it had substantial impacts in raising both self-esteem and self-efficacy, facets of **positive self-concept**, as well as smaller impacts on life evaluation and aspirations (Krishnan & Krutikova, 2012).

Cooperative learning

The literature has recognized cooperative learning as an effective way to develop a range of soft skills, including **social skills**, **communication**, and **higher order thinking skills** (problem solving, decision making, and critical thinking). Two specific strategies show cooperative learning in practice: organized problem solving and project-based learning (PBL). In organized problem solving, students work in small groups on an assigned problem, guided by the teacher who monitors the groups. Through PBL, students develop a research question about their interests, carry out the research, and tie everything together (Bell, 2010; Lange, 2014). Both organized problem solving and PBL are student-driven processes, with the teacher acting as a facilitator rather than instructor.

Through these two strategies, youth learn to evaluate and make decisions, as well as use logical thinking and reasoning, thereby improving their **higher order thinking skills**. While collaborating and generating ideas together, youth can enhance their **social skills** and **communication**. Reflection is key to this process. For instance, youth should think about how they used their communication skills—do they listen well to others’ ideas, and do they believe their own opinions were heard (Bell, 2010). Consistently using these soft skills through project-based problem solving can potentially strengthen them over time and lead to proficiency and mastery (Bell, 2010).

FHI’s Life Skills Toolkit for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in India (2007) suggest six concrete steps to promote organized problem solving. Each step is facilitated by the program staff but led by youth themselves and are directly linked to developing specific soft skills.

Table 1: Six Step Approach to Organized Problem-solving

Step	Action by Youth	Key Skills
Understand the problem	Choose a problem that is both important and can be solved.	Critical thinking, decision making, communication, problem solving
Find out more	Gather more information about the problem and define an actual, true to life situation.	Communication, critical thinking, empathy
Discuss findings and plan action	Analyze the data/information, discuss the results and consider various activity options.	Communication, decision making, creative thinking
Take action	Implement the activity with families and communities.	Communication, interpersonal relationships, problem solving
Evaluate	Discuss what worked and what did not work and explore explanations.	Critical thinking
Do better	Discuss what to do next time and how to do better, using lessons learned.	Problem solving, decision making, communication

Source: FHI (2007), *Life Skills Toolkit for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in India*.

Service-learning

Soft skills are strengthened not only through real-world practice, but also by a sense of mattering and belonging. Service-learning can offer the chance for youth to experience and practice a range of soft skills, as well as contribute to their communities. Several German universities have adopted this approach, where students are connected to projects that “respond to actual needs of layers of non-profit actors in the region” (Cinque, 2016, p. 409). El Education also values service-learning as an important part of education. Skills learned in the classroom are applied to building better communities through social-justice-focused volunteer projects jointly selected by teachers and students.¹⁴

Workplace-based learning

The literature recommends on-the-job experiences, such as internships and apprenticeships, for building responsibility, **communication**, teamwork, and other soft skills. Workplace-oriented training teaches field-specific technical skills, but also soft skills, such as responsibility, communication, punctuality, personal presentation, and teamwork (Puerta et al., 2016). YouthBuild¹⁵ is an international program that does this by engaging young people in building homes, schools, clinics, parks, playgrounds, water systems, and other community infrastructure as hands-on training to build both technical and soft skills. Heckman and Kautz (2013) similarly recognize that workplace experiences can help youth attain skills such as personal autonomy, efficacy, motivation, realism, and optimism. The authors point to the role played by internships in teaching the importance of persevering and being conscientious, along with other job-related skills that improve their readiness for the labor market. Soft skills building can be enhanced by program activities within the workplace. An example is the *Prepara Ami ba Servisu–PAS* program, implemented in East Timor. It offers individual and group support through mentoring, coaching, and targeted skill-building activities throughout the first four months after youth enter the world of work (EDC, 2009). Nevertheless, more research is needed on how to structure on-the-job experiences for youth to maximize soft-skills-building efforts.

Box 4. Tips for Developing Soft Skills through Experiential Learning

1. Use activities of interest to youth that are novel or challenging.
2. Practice opportunities in familiar and new situations, focused on real-life situations.
3. Give choices for practicing skills.
4. Use skills across a variety of settings and scenarios.
5. Practice skills in stressful and difficult situations.
6. Keep activities challenging but possible.
7. Give chances for reflection by having youth describe and evaluate their experiences.

Apprenticeships, internships, and job training also help to “break down the rigid separation between school and work” (Heckman and Kautz, 2013, p.35). This method has achieved success in a number of OECD countries. In Finland, for example, internships are considered important parts of an “integrated pedagogy” that combines education with practical experience

¹⁴For more information, see: <http://secondaryguide.casel.org/description-page.html#el>

¹⁵For more information, see: <https://www.youthbuild.org/what-we-do/we-build>

and reflection (Cinque, 2016). Career Academies is another program that links academics with practical work experience and pairs core-subject teachers with vocational educators to teach joint classes and host joint activities.¹⁶

A number of programs in low- and middle-income countries provide workplace-based learning opportunities for youth through job placement, internships, and/or apprenticeships. Examples include Akazi Kanoze, in Rwanda (Alcid, 2014); the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG), in Liberia (Adoho et al. 2014); *Galpão Aplauso*, in Brazil (Calero et al., 2014); *Juventud y Empleo*, in the Dominican Republic (Ibarran et al., 2014); *Entra 21*, in El Salvador, Peru, Paraguay, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Bolivia (Lasida & Rodriguez, 2006); and *Prepara Ami ba Servisu (PAS)*, in East Timor (EDC, 2009). Most of these programs provide training on soft skills and technical or vocational skills before youth have on-the-job experiences. As the PAS objectives highlight (EDC, 2009) the program offers participants ways to learn “for work” by giving youth technical and soft skills training before entering the labor market, and “from work” by offering chances to build soft skills in the workplace. In general, these programs have shown positive results on employment-related outcomes, but the evidence on their impact of soft skills development has been mixed.

Experiential learning within out-of-school settings

Out-of-school programs are in a unique position to provide rich experiential learning. Programs can offer activities as diverse as theater, sports, community service, computer programming, and outdoor adventures. Building boats, going on a canoe trip through the wilderness, and contributing to the community all help youth learn to plan, strategize, anticipate, and manage uncertainty and provide creative solutions to challenges (Smith et al., 2016). Out-of-school programs can give structure to these youth-driven projects, create ways for youth to observe models of successful work, help youth learn and solve problems on their own, and offer youth the chance to reflect on project outcomes (Smith et al., 2016).

Out-of-school programs and activities should reflect and attract youth’s interests. In the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, sport is one of the most popular activities among youth and has been integrated into a few programs to provide chances to develop soft skills. For example, the A Ganar program, implemented in several LAC countries, combats problems of youth unemployment by using soccer and other team sports to help “at risk” youth find positive community engagement (USAID, 2015). Soccer engages youth in activities that allow them to learn soft skills in a team atmosphere and as a tool for transmitting soft skills through discussing the value of teamwork, **communication**, consequences of not following rules or respecting others, and how persons show creativity and solve problems (USAID, 2015). *Futbol en Tres Tiempos* is another example of how soccer has been used in LAC to promote soft skills. FutbolNet and Futbol Callejero use the methodology, which has some rules that differentiate it from traditional football: in the teams there is no gender distinction (young men and women play together), no referees participate, and the matches are divided into three times. During the first

¹⁶ For more information, see: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2006/03/15/27voced.h25.html> and <http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/factsheet/career-academies>.

round, the teams establish and agree upon the rules together; the second and third times the game is played, all of the players talk about how the game developed and whether they respected the rules they had been mutually agreed upon. Throughout these three rounds, a mediator facilitates the dialogue and the interaction between the teams, but does not intervene or regulate the game. By having youth set their own rules, discuss, and analyze the results of the match, the methodology allows participants to develop and practice important soft skills, such as self-regulation, communication, decision making, and problem solving.

Experiential learning within formal education settings

The literature indicates that interactive teaching methods along with ample chances for practice are necessary for effective youth soft skills development in formal education. Practice may be classroom based or may take place outside the classroom and provide a bridge to the community, through activities such as service-learning. Interactive teaching can be teacher led, student led, or a combination. Some interactive teacher-facilitated activities include: skill demonstration, simulations, case studies, debates, and use of visual and audio aids. Some interactive student-facilitated activities include: small group work, games and puzzles, observing and examining models, storytelling, and hypothetical decision-making exercises. Regardless of the activity or program, interactive learning should be paired with chances for youth to both draw on their own experiences and reflect on the exercise. Teachers may also assign follow-up work to encourage further practice, either alone or with family and friends (WHO, 1997).

Box 5: Career Academies

Career Academies enable high school students to build soft skills in small, integrated learning communities that strengthen school engagement and improve post-secondary and career outcomes. The program links academic and technical curricula by pairing small groups of students with teachers from different subjects to work together as a team. Meeting for several periods each day creates close bonds and nurtures teacher–student relationships. Participants are expected to take part in extracurricular activities such as sports and clubs. The theme is designed locally around a relevant, thriving industry. Partnerships with local employers provide real-life workplace opportunities, and employers are expected to be actively involved in the program, whether through programming, a steering committee, internships, and/or post-graduation job placement. Higher education institutions are often included through cross-walking coursework, dual enrollment, and/or field trips.

Shorter term outcomes have included increases in attendance, credits earned, graduation rates, school engagement, levels of interpersonal support, and a decrease in drop-out rates. Longer term outcomes have included higher earnings, more hours worked per week, and greater likelihood of living independently. The program was designed to be used with diverse racial and ethnic groups, and has shown to be effective in schools with large minority populations.

Extracurricular activities

Extracurricular activities are excellent for reinforcing soft skills, since many youth already engage in this type of programming, and the format can be flexible enough for practicing soft skills (Cunningham et al., 2016). Outside the classroom, schools can support extracurricular activities, service-learning, and apprenticeship or job training as ways for youth to practice soft skills. Career Academies is an example of a program that links academics with practical work experience and pairs core-subject teachers with vocational educators to teach joint classes and host joint activities. Through extracurricular activities, which might include tutoring, arts-based activities, or sports, youth engage with their own interests. AfterZone offers middle school students in Providence, Rhode Island, with a wide range of interactive learning and enrichment

activities provided by over 70 CBOs.¹⁷ The aim is to motivate and inspire youth to excel by experimenting with new interests, developing new skills, and making connections between the school and their broader community.

PRINCIPLE 2: ADDRESS SKILLS IN COMBINATION RATHER THAN IN ISOLATION, RECOGNIZING HOW THEY INTERCONNECT

The evidence reviewed in section 3 (that skills beget skills and that skills are cross-productive) supports the notion that skills are interrelated. Program designers should take interrelatedness into account to understand when skills should be introduced during a program. Whenever a curriculum is available, make connections between interrelated skills throughout the program (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). Regardless, program designers need to understand how the skills being promoted relate to and reinforce each other so that the dynamic between soft skills is reflected throughout the program design and activities.

Indeed, the literature suggests that developing skills separately may prove ineffective. SEL programs typically combine rather than separate teaching soft skills to promote integrating emotion, thinking, **communication**, and behavior (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. recognize that attempts to foster discrete emotional skills without also promoting social interaction skills could be shortsighted. The review by Catalano and colleagues (2002) on out-of-school programs revealed that effective programs addressed at least five positive youth concepts, with most programs and activities addressing at least eight concepts. Likewise, successful sexual and reproductive health programs incorporate multiple skills in order to help youth apply new content in their lives. Haberland (2015) discusses how fostering critical thinking and positive self-concept skills, along with facilitating personal reflection about concepts related to gender and power, “overlap and reinforce each other” in helping youth to apply new SRH knowledge and skills in their lives.

The literature shows several examples of how soft skills are interconnected. **Positive self-concept** and **self-control** help to develop higher levels of **social skills**, **communication**, and **higher order thinking skills** (Lippman et al., 2015). Self-control can enhance problem solving and controlled decision making, because it enables people to stop and think before acting and to respond in a controlled way rather than automatically (Guerra et al., 2014). Attempts to develop the later skills without first fostering self-control and self-concept might prove ineffective.

Self-awareness may be needed to develop empathy (Smith et al., 2016); as youth become more aware of the self, they become better able to understand others’ perspectives and feelings. Self-efficacy—appraising one’s own capabilities—also strongly influences **goal orientation**: the stronger a person’s self-efficacy, the higher the goals they will set for themselves and the firmer their commitment to them (Catalano et al., 2004). It follows that strategies to increase youth’s confidence could lead to greater motivation and ability to set and work toward goals.

¹⁷ For more information, see: <http://www.mypasa.org/afterzone-middle-school/>.

Addressing skills in combination within out-of-school settings

Given the greater flexibility of out-of-school activities and programs, skills development is often carried out in cycles, whereby a project or activity is set up with multiple chances to practice the same skills in different settings or stages (Smith et al., 2016). In this way, key soft skills are introduced, revisited, and reinforced throughout the program. Youth build and rebuild a skill as they encounter new tasks or situations, practicing and adapting skills, leading toward mastery (Smith et al., 2014).

Out-of-school programs can also combine a soft skills curriculum with a project sequence curriculum. Smith and colleagues (2016) recommend that the project or activity be guided by the sequence of the curriculum. Each stage should be structured to give youth chances to develop and apply a soft skill (or combination of soft skills) established in the program curriculum.

Addressing skills in combination within formal education settings

Soft skills programs and activities in formal education tend to be more structured. Curricula usually follow a logical progression through particular soft skills, based on the premise that “learning builds upon what has come before” (CASEL, 2005). The WHO similarly recommends implementing “a planned and sequenced curriculum across primary and secondary school” (2003, p. 29) that considers the age and the developmental stage of learners. Concepts should advance from simple through more complex, with each new lesson building upon previous lessons (WHO, 2003). According to this approach, programs usually stress that more basic skills should be covered as “prerequisites” before more advanced skills can be addressed. Elias (1997) points out that that learning soft skills relates to other types of academic learning in that the initial building blocks are added to over time and can be combined to address more and more complicated situations.

PRINCIPLE 3: PROMOTE STRONG RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADULTS AND YOUTH AND AMONG YOUTH THEMSELVES

Experiential learning is most effective within strong, supportive relationships that allow youth to feel secure so they can safely try out new activities, roles, and behaviors. These relationships should be meaningful, caring, and two-way, with respect for youth’s contributions and shared power, where youth are seen as valued partners and contributors (Search Institute, 2016). The Search Institute has coined the term “developmental relationships,” meaning that interaction with caring adults and close connections with peers are central to young people’s development (2014).

Exposure to new and different networks creates ways for youth to form strong relationships across different settings and people, including parents and family members, friends and peers, staff members in their schools and programs, and caring adults in their neighborhoods and communities (Search Institute, 2016). Although each relationship is important, the presence of many developmental relationships is key for best soft skills development.

Strong, supportive relationships are the foundation of mentoring programs and a key part of apprenticeships. Heckman and Kautz (2013) highlight that “successful interventions at any age emulate the mentoring and attachment that successful families give their children” (Heckman and Kautz, 2013, p.89). In particular, in mentoring and apprenticeship programs, the attachment between youth and an adult helps develop soft skills by emulating the attachment bond between parent and child (Heckman and Kautz, 2013). Davis and colleagues (2013) similarly acknowledge that mentoring programs can be effective because certain key skills and behaviors are best learned in the context of a relationship.

In addition, staff should also promote strong, supportive, caring relationships between youth peers (Nagaoka, 2016), which contributes to a climate of inclusion and acceptance. As noted by the Search Institute (2016), though relationships with adults can affect skills development in powerful and positive ways, so can close connections with friends, siblings, and other peers. Caprara (2015) emphasizes a “peer modeling effect” in which improved cooperation and supportiveness in classrooms may create a more positive group dynamic and norms.

Staff’s personal skills matter for building strong relationships with and among youth. Programs that build soft skills need staff who can connect well with youth, are sensitive to their reality, and interact with them in a positive and respectful manner (Miller, 2005). Program designers and managers should seek to hire staff members who are flexible, patient, good listeners, and can empathize with youth’s needs and fears. Programs should also attempt to further foster these abilities among staff through professional development.

Although the link between strong, supportive relationships and effective soft skill development is clear in the literature, the ways in which developmental relationships help build soft skills is less clear and needs further research. The following are some broad potential processes, followed by specific strategies in the literature.

Box 6: Staff Practices for Building Strong and Supportive Relationships with Program Participants

Nagaoka (2016) and the Search Institute (2016) stress five staff practices for building strong, supportive, consistent, and reciprocal relationships between program participants. These are:

1. Expressing care – showing youth that they matter to staff
2. Challenging growth – pushing youth to keep getting better
3. Providing support – helping youth complete tasks and achieve goals
4. Sharing power – treating youth with respect and giving them a say
5. Expanding possibilities – connecting youth with people and places that broaden their world

Youth engagement, modeling, and experiential learning

The literature shows that youth engagement, whereby youth participate in planning and decision-making of program activities, is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes (Miller, 2005). Because supportive relationships promote shared power; value youth’s ideas, perspectives, and strengths; and show youth that they matter, young people may feel more a part of the program and as a result participate more actively.

A second potential channel is program staff as role models. Youth may look at program staff as “social mirrors” into which they form and refine their opinions of themselves (Davis et al., 2013).

Youth may increase their sense of self-worth through acceptance, support, and regard from mentors, who are seen as role models (Davis et al., 2013).

A third channel is the support strong relationships can offer to experiential learning. As mentioned earlier, certain soft skills may be more likely to flourish in the context of these safe relationships.

Building relationships through mentoring and apprenticeships

Mentoring and apprenticeships are especially useful for building confidence (a facet of **positive self-concept**), assertiveness, and leadership (Davis, et al., 2013). Strong and positive relationships are at the core of the theory of change of these programs. In mentoring, the relationship itself is the primary (if not the only) mechanism for change. In other words, beneficial effects on soft skills are expected only to the extent that mentors and youth have strong relationships of mutuality, trust, and empathy (Gutman and Schoon, 2013).

Mentors and youth need to spend time together on a consistent basis over a significant period of time (Gutman and Schoon, 2013). The Big Brothers and Big Sisters program, which provides one-on-one mentoring to at-risk youth, carefully matches adult volunteers with youth based on backgrounds; the stated preferences of adult volunteers, parents, and youth; and geographic proximity (Tierney et al., 1995). The adult–youth pairs meet on average for three to four hours three times per month for at least a year (Tierney et al., 1995). Through regular, lengthy, and one-on-one meetings, the program allows mentees and mentors to form stronger attachments. Strong relationships are also key in apprenticeship programs. Even though the emphasis of such programs are usually on job skills, the strong attachment of a supervisor to an apprentice helps promote soft skills through a version of the parent–child attachment bond (Heckman and Kautz, 2013). Similarly, SRH programs frequently employ mentoring and social support strategies, which have in a number of cases, been associated with positive behavior change and increases in SRH knowledge (see Plourde et al., 2017, in press).

Leveraging similarities, sharing personal experiences, and demonstrating caring

Leveraging what program staff/teachers and students have in common can be one powerful method for developing **positive self-concept, communication, social skills, and empathy**, through strengthening relationships and promoting positive outcomes (Gehlback et al., 2015). Simple acquaintance exercises can help staff and students recognize commonalities. For example, adult–youth pairs who complete “get-to-know-you” surveys and then share similarities they identified (five similarities was considered the desired minimum) experienced improved relationships, and students received higher course grades (Gehlback et al., 2015). Another practice is to share personal experiences. When adults share part of their personal lives to illustrate a soft skill, they build bonds with students and, in the context of the school, excite student interest in the lesson (Elias, 1997). Adults can demonstrate caring in two fundamental ways: empathizing with youth’s feelings and dilemmas and listening for and validating their value and wisdom (Elias, 1997).

Peer relationships: collaborative learning

Fostering peer relationships can be effective for helping youth develop their **communication** and **social skills**. Practices to promote positive peer relationships through collaborative learning in small groups include: 1) attentive listening, 2) appreciation/no put downs, 3) the right to decide to pass your turn or participate, and 4) and mutual respect (Public Profit, 2014).¹⁸

Promoting strong and supportive relationships within formal education settings

Program providers in formal education should prioritize open, positive, supportive relationships with students defined by tolerance, respect for diversity, trust, and open **communication** (Durlak, et al 2011.) Learning is a social process: by improving relationships between teachers and students, we can also improve student outcomes.

Large classroom sizes and an emphasis on standardized testing and lecture-style teaching, however, inhibit strong teacher–student relationships. This situation is even more difficult in many low- and middle-income countries where teaching methods tend to be more authoritarian and focused on rote memorization. Leveraging similarities, sharing personal experiences, and demonstrating caring, can help to address these challenges.

Box 7. Tips for Developing Soft Skills through Relationships

- Share personal experiences.
- Leverage similarities between program staff and youth.
- Empathize with students' feelings and dilemmas and listen for and validate their value and wisdom.

PRINCIPLE 4: PROMOTE POSITIVE STAFF PRACTICES

In positive relationships, program staff should adopt practices that promote developing soft skills. We consider program staff as any adult who plays an active role and is directly involved in delivering the program, including trainers, facilitators, supervisors, teachers, coaches, mentors, and others.

Modeling, previously mentioned in the third principle, is a powerful technique that requires program staff to demonstrate the soft skills they want youth to emulate or develop. Modeling should be an integral part of the youth–staff interaction, since youth learn best when they see a role model demonstrating soft skills. A point to consider is that often staff do not possess the soft skills they need to model. Professional development in which staff explore and develop their own soft skills should be provided.

In addition to modeling, program staff should practice positive reinforcement and give constructive feedback, as emphasized in the discussion on reflection under Principle 1. Staff should identify and reinforce positive behaviors rather than simply criticize negative behaviors (Davis et al., 2013). Because positive reinforcement may affect youth's motivation to engage in similar behavior in the future, staff should continuously reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors as well as constructive feedback and encouragement to use soft skills (Catalano et. Al., 2002; Nagaoka, 2015).

¹⁸ For more information, see: <http://tribes.com/about/>.

Modeling and positive reinforcement

Modeling and positive reinforcement are important practices in fostering **positive self-concept** and **social skills**. According to Bandura (1977): “Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers’ beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed.” Positive reinforcement is in line with a practice Bandura (1977) calls “social persuasion”—that people can be persuaded to believe that they have the skills and capabilities to succeed (Cherry, 2016). Positive reinforcement and encouragement from program staff can help youth overcome self-doubt and focus on giving their best effort.

Social skills, specifically social self-efficacy, can also be fostered through modeling and positive reinforcement.¹⁹ Strategies to build social skills should include efforts to increase youth’s beliefs that they can engage and sustain positive interpersonal relationships. Some of the same strategies reviewed for building self-efficacy might also apply to interpersonal self-efficacy. Program staff modeling social skills and giving feedback/encouragement can increase youth’s confidence in their ability to engage socially and make them more apt to use their social skills.

Coaching

Coaching is a positive staff practice that can foster self-awareness, an important part of **positive self-concept**. Youth may learn new things about themselves through new experiences and practices the program promotes. Staff can coach youth in interpreting new experiences and understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, helping youth frame a situation and their emotions (Smith et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2013). It is important, however, that the staff respect youth’s emotional autonomy by not manipulating youth or telling them what they should feel (Smith et al., 2016).

Scaffolding and facilitation

Scaffolding can be especially useful in developing youth’s self-efficacy, a part of **positive self-concept**. In scaffolding staff adapt skill-building opportunities to fit youth’s current skill levels and interests (Smith et al. 2016) to make sure that any activity youth engage in is challenging: demanding but achievable. In particular, scaffolding becomes a key practice for programs that use projects and hands-on activities. According to Smith and colleagues (2016), staff scaffold by balancing two approaches—stepping in to assist and give input as needed to help youth solve problems and learn (e.g., helping youth develop strategies when stuck or unsuccessful)—and “stepping back to support youth’s increasing independence in their work as their skill grows and to allow youth space to struggle with challenges” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 109).

Scaffolding is also important in mentorship and apprenticeship programs. Heckman and Kautz (2013) describe scaffolding in apprenticeship programs: “Adult mentors scaffold the discipline

¹⁹ Smith and Betz define social self-efficacy as “an individual’s confidence in her/his ability to engage in the social interactional tasks necessary to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships” (Smith and Betz, 2000, 286).

protocol for the apprentice, sequencing and controlling task demands to keep them on the constructive side of difficulty. They direct apprentices' attention, demonstrate new points, and sometimes collaborate with them" (Heckman and Kautz, 2013, p. 67).

Facilitation and questioning

Staff facilitation and questioning are key to fostering youth's **communication** and leadership skills. Staff's primary role is to facilitate, not to teach (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014; UNICEF, 2012). Staff facilitate soft skills learning by enabling **communication** between youth, strategic questioning, framing activities as learning experiences, and allowing learners to take active roles (Smith et al., 2016). To facilitate effectively, program staff must receive appropriate training through staff development initiatives. Staff training should reflect the interactive and participatory teaching methods of facilitation that the staff will be expected to use (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014).

Questioning, as part of effective facilitation, can be adopted by program staff and teachers to promote critical thinking. Program staff and teachers can ask guiding questions and provide resources for youth so they can engage in analyzing the content, evaluating it, and applying it to their daily lives. As Lange (2014) explains: "Questioning models for students how they should think." Questions should be open-ended to encourage discussion and active learning, should require students to synthesize information and think critically, and should be age appropriate.

Box 8. Tips for Developing Soft Skills through Positive Staff Practices

- Adopt positive reinforcement and provide constructive feedback.
- Scaffold skill-building opportunities to meet youths' skill levels.
- Enable communication between youth, guide learning through strategic questions, frame activities as learning experiences, and allow learners to take active roles through facilitation.

Promoting positive staff practices within formal education settings

Teachers are most likely to lead soft skills programs and activities in formal education, and their actions have a major impact on program effectiveness. Teachers can adopt positive reinforcement and feedback and modeling in the classroom, as described above. Teachers should also encourage students to monitor and regulate their own behavior, not simply tell them how to behave (Yoder 2014). Modeling is also one of the most powerful techniques that educators can use (Elias, 1997). School leaders and teachers should model the soft skills language and practices they want students to adopt and support their broad usage (CASEL, 2015). To effectively model the desired soft skills, professional development should be offered to help teachers and school staff identify, develop, and strengthen their own soft skills.

PRINCIPLE 5: CREATE A SAFE, CARING, SUPPORTIVE, AND ENRICHING PROGRAM ENVIRONMENT

A safe, caring, and supportive environment allows youth to feel comfortable expressing themselves, even on difficult topics, knowing that they will be accepted and that staff will not allow them to be bullied or ridiculed. A climate of inclusiveness allows program participants to

risk making mistakes because they know program staff and peers accept them and that mistakes are part of learning (Elias, 1997; GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). When youth feel accepted, they are more likely to take responsibility for their own interpretations and insights (Haselberger et al., 2012).

To develop this environment, staff should ensure that youth feel included and appreciated by peers and by program staff. Having positive and supportive relationships is an important enabler of a safe and inclusive environment. Program staff should also promote safe peer group interactions and decrease unsafe peer confrontations (Eccles and Gootman, 2002, p.9). Environments should also be “richly” stimulating, constantly providing challenging learning opportunities and facilitating growth through exploration (Nagaoka, 2016). In addition, staff, peers, and communities should encourage high expectations for youth, and challenge them and encourage them to have high aspirations (Durlak, et al., 2015; Nagaoka, 2015).

Ground rules and other group processes

Ground rules for group processes (e.g., listening, turn-taking) and sharing emotions (Smith et al., 2016) are common staff practices for creating positive norms in school-based and out-of-school programs that foster effective **communication** and **social skills**. Typically, ground rules are developed collaboratively between youth and program staff. When youth participate in designing common rules, they are more likely to follow them (Elias, 2007). Collaboratively making classroom rules and norms helps build a sense of community (Elias, 1997). Holding meetings or sharing circles can also help to create an atmosphere of trust and inclusivity. During these activities, youth may be asked to “check-in by describing how their week has been, what they think about the topics being explored in lessons, or how they are feeling about a class, school, or civic event” (Elias, 1997, p. 46).

Autonomy-supportive environments

Environments that support autonomy play a key role in developing self-regulation skills, a component of **self-control**. Program staff should not dictate a strict set of rules but instead should provide an environment that allows for choice within a reasonable set of options. Elias et al. (1997) recommend that “teachers ... give students opportunities to practice self-regulation by reducing overt supervision of the class for short periods” (Elias, 1997, p. 53). Specific examples of autonomy-supportive style practices that programs and activities can be adopted in different settings to promote self-regulation include: 1) provide choice; 2) encourage experimentation and self-initiation; 3) foster youth’s willingness to take on challenges, explore new ideas, and persist at difficult activities; and 4) offer optimal challenges (neither too easy, nor too difficult) (Visser, 2007).

Perspective-taking activities

Safe and supportive environments are also key to fostering empathy through perspective-taking activities. These include: 1) creating appropriate ways for youth to share their stories and emotions and listen to those of others; and 2) providing ways to practice relating to others with acceptance and understanding (Smith et al., 2016).

Creating a safe, caring, supportive, and enriching environment within out-of-school settings

Providing a safe environment free of violence, chaos, and instability may be most relevant for out-of-school programs and activities that target vulnerable and at-risk youth. Especially for youth who have lived through instability and traumatic events, providing a structured and predictable experience may be key for them to relax, enjoy, and benefit from the program. Consistent routines, activities, or procedures can provide this structured and predictable experience (Smith et al., 2016). Durlak and colleagues (2015) highlight that the physical conditions should be characterized by a quality space, with “no unclean floors or walls, unrepaired ceilings, broken furniture, chipped paint, vandalism” (Durlak, et al., 2015., p. 42). The program space should not only be physically safe for beneficiaries to gather in but also to travel to and from (World Bank, 2013). Youth centers with a troubled culture and climate may jeopardize soft-skills-building efforts. In South Sudan, staff and beneficiaries of a life-skills program at adolescent girl clubs indicated that these safe spaces were critical for carrying out programs successfully (World Bank, 2013).

In the case of out-of-school workshop programs that promote soft skills training, a low youth-to-staff ratio is recommended. Very large groups may inhibit participants’ ability to express themselves and very small groups limit the possibilities for small group work. (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014). A low youth-to-staff ratio fosters individual and small group work, strong and positive staff–youth relationships, and personalized activities and facilitation (Miller, 2005).

Creating a safe, caring, supportive, and enriching environment within formal education settings

The whole-school approach is quickly gaining traction as a highly effective method for building youth soft skills. In the whole-school approach, all adults in the building are aware of and trained in **communication** and behavioral response techniques to use with youth daily (Shafer, 2016.) Trained school staff clearly and frequently identify, recognize, and reward positive behaviors. School staff model soft skills in real-life situations throughout the school day when youth are interacting and conflict is more likely to arise. This type of frequent and consistent modeling reinforces the soft skill building that occurs through focused lessons during classroom time (Jones, 2016).

Yoder (2014) offers a three-part concept of a positive school climate that might characterize a whole-school approach: A) *Engagement* – strong relationships exist between teachers and students, among students, among teachers, and between teachers and staff; B) *Safety* – students are safe from bullying and violence and feel emotionally and academically safe to take risks in the classroom; and C) *Environment* – well-managed schools and classrooms fulfill students’ basic needs of autonomy, competence, and connectedness.

Box 9. Tips for Developing Soft Skills through Caring, Safe, Supportive, and Enriching Program Environments

- Promote practices that increase safe peer group interactions and decrease unsafe peer confrontation.
- Establish ground rules for group processes (e.g., listening, turn-taking) and sharing emotions.
- Encourage high expectations for youth.
- Establish consistent routines, activities, and procedures.
- Adopt a low youth:staff ratio.

The School-Wide Positive Behavior Support Model is one example of a “set of procedures and organizational systems intended to establish a school culture of positive behavior” (Cunningham et al., 2016, p. 51). The first stage of this three-tiered program improves school climate by defining behavioral expectations, reinforcing positive behaviors, and establishing clear rewards and consequences.²⁰ Positive Action (PA) is a school-based SEL program for elementary and middle school youth first developed and implemented in the United States and later expanded internationally. The program is designed to increase positive behavior, reduce negative behavior, and enhance overall school climate.²¹ The classroom-based curriculum stresses better self-management and social interactions through positive behavior and is complemented by whole-school activities and approaches.

Providing a safe environment is especially critical for violence prevention programs that have a skills-building component. A UNESCO (2016) report on the role of the education sector in preventing violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression recommends supporting teachers and staff so that they can prevent and address violence, ensuring curricula and learning materials are inclusive, and providing “access to non-judgmental and accurate information on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.” One example highlighted is called Breaking Barriers, a gay-straight alliance at the Tagore International School in Delhi that has been working to reduce bullying by fostering empathy towards LGBTI students. Strategies the group has employed include encouraging students to dialogue about LGBTI issues via social media and a school notice board, which one project mentor described as leading to more frequent open discussions in senior classrooms about sexuality, thereby reducing bullying. Training was also provided for the wider school community with the goal of reducing ignorance-based bullying (UNESCO, 2016).

PRINCIPLE 6: PROMOTE INTEGRATION OF LEARNING CONTEXTS

That skills learned in one environment can be reinforced in another and over time provides the rationale for integrating learning (Ikesako and Miyamoto, 2015, p. 29). Effective programs promote integration of learning contexts by adopting approaches that involve families, the local community, education institutions (schools and/or universities), and the workplace (where applicable). During adolescence and young adulthood, youth are part of several networks, and the influence of peers, the school, the community, and the workplace tends to increase. Each person and context influences skills development.

Box 10: Positive Action (PA)

PA stresses the importance of both classroom and school climate in improving student soft skills outcomes. The program includes a detailed curriculum with 80–140 15-minute lessons, to be delivered two to four times per week. Lessons are delivered through diverse, interactive media, and make engaging students a priority. The curriculum includes six units on topics such as self-reflection, self-management, positive actions, social skills, and self-improvement. Climate development and counselor kits support classroom lessons by involving the entire school in practicing and reinforcing positive actions. Optional family and community engagement are also available.

²⁰ For more information, see the PBIS website: <https://www.pbis.org/school/swpbis-for-beginners>

²¹ For more information on this program and other related, evaluated youth development programs, please see: <http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/programs>.

When these areas are connected and people with whom youth interact provide clear, consistent, and compatible standards and messages, developing soft skills is enhanced (Elias, 1997).

Integrated learning contexts can ensure a program is locally relevant and sustainable. Parents and community members can support program staff in balancing concerns over potential tension between a program's soft-skills-building objectives and local practices and social norms (UNICEF 2012). For instance, programs may promote participants' self-esteem (part of **positive self-concept**) by creating and providing ways to perform behaviors their surroundings value and recognizing them for doing so. However, different families, communities, and cultural groups may have different definitions of what is good and hence what is a valued behavior (Elias, 1997). Connecting these different groups of people is key to lessening the chance of clashes between the soft skills and approaches a program adopts and the surrounding community.

Integrating families and communities into programming might be particularly relevant in some low- and middle-income countries. As highlighted by the FHI 360's Life Skills Toolkit for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in India (2007), in Western societies decision making is often reasoned, step by step process, based on the individual's wishes and needs. In non-Western societies, on the other hand, family and community are important players in decision-making processes. (FHI 360, 2007). Programs need to include ways in which both youth and the community can contribute to learning life skills. The Toolkit, for instance, proposes a way for youth to participate in learning life skills and for adults to foster this process in the societies in which they live.

Community partnerships

Programs that partner with the local community can help build **positive self-concept**, empathy, and **communication** skills by creating ways for youth to showcase their skills (through community service, presentations, performances) and receive feedback and approval (Smith et al., 2016). These opportunities give youth "a sense of purpose and accomplishment while also providing a chance for others to see youth as 'agents of change' who can make positive contributions to society" (GPYE IBRD IYF, 2014, p. 34). Creating chances for youth to perform valued behaviors in different situations and recognizing them for doing so are effective for promoting a **positive self-concept** by enhancing self-esteem (Elias, 1997). This is based on the premise that "youth who have skills that are desirable in specific contexts as well as opportunities to develop and showcase these skills are likely to build their self-confidence" (Guerra et al., 2014, p. 22). All Stars²² is an example of out-of-school program that stresses community partnerships and youth performances through the arts, theater, and music in front of their family, friends, and neighbors.

²² For more information, see: <https://allstars.org/who-we-are/>

In addition, the exposure to different people and lifestyles within a community can foster empathy as youth start to relate to other peoples' problems and circumstances. By engaging with the community, youth will also have to practice **communication** skills to explain their ideas and the purpose of their engagement.

Partnerships with employers

For programs that improve job prospects for youth, partnership with employers and local businesses is crucial to make sure that the soft skills included in the program are relevant to the local labor market (OECD, 2015). By partnering with local businesses and employers, programs may attract mentors and volunteers with work experience that can speak directly to youth about the value of soft skills in the workplace. These partnerships can also lead to internships and apprenticeships where youth can practice and improve the soft skills learned.

Partnerships with families and parents

Partnerships with families and parents can also broadly reinforce soft skills learned at school or through a program and foster **positive self-concept** by providing ways for youth to showcase their talents. Options for engaging parents in programs usually include training parents or involving them in carrying out programs (Catalano et al., 2002). Training for parents may take place through building parenting skills and self-efficacy and/or bonding with one's children.²³ Programs such as Parenting Wisely and Report Strategic Family Therapy worked to improve parental interactions with youth, which then was reflected in youth behavior (Nickel et al., 2006). The Go Girls! Toolkit intervention takes a socio-ecological approach to HIV prevention by working not only with girls but also with communities, parents, schools, and youth. For example, the Go Families! component of the intervention focuses on communication and relationship building skills with families so that they are able to talk openly with girls about their needs and life goals as well sensitive topics related to HIV.^{24 25}

Box 11: Juventud y Empleo Program

The Juventud y Empleo program, implemented in the Dominican Republic, is an example of partnership with employers to respond to local demands and create on-the-job learning opportunities. The program combines soft skills training, technical or vocational training, and on-the-job experience through internships. The soft skills training focuses on strengthening trainees' self-esteem and capacities for communication, conflict resolution, time management, and teamwork, while vocational training addresses the technical training needs of local employers and in a variety of fields, including cosmetology, sales, tourism, and electricity. Private sector partner offer three-month internships to program participants who complete the training. When the primary program setting is already the workplace and these links are usually embedded in the program design, on-the-job experience is an integral part of

²³ The negative impact of harsh parenting practices on soft skills and youth behavior has been documented by the literature (Dodge et al., 1994; Blatt and Homann, 1992).

²⁴ For more information, see: <https://www.k4health.org/toolkits/go-girls>.

²⁵ Another intervention that is building skills among families to improve SRH outcomes for youth is the Families Matter! program. For more information, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/globalaids/publications/fmp-2-pager-final-jan-2014.pdf>.

Training for parents may also include direct teaching the soft skills the program addresses to make sure parents reinforce these at home. For example, the KEEP SAFE²⁶ program from the United States complements soft skills training sessions for foster youth with sessions for foster parents, which focus on enabling parents to maintain stability in the home and develop ways to reinforce behavior and realistic expectations. The Aban Aya Youth Project, a program to prevent risky behavior among African-American students by fostering soft skills,²⁷ promotes engaging parents through having them join a task force and trainings to improve family **communication**.

Programs can also host special events in which students demonstrate new skills and everyone celebrates achievements. For example, the Second Step program, which provides interactive classroom-based soft skills training, includes videotapes about the curriculum for parents, guiding them on how to use the program principles at home (Elias, 1997).

Promoting integrated learning contexts within out-of-school settings

Out-of-school programs may have easier access to a broad range of settings and different groups of people because parents and families, employers and local business, schools, community members, and organizations can become involved in the program through different channels. In particular, through partnerships with schools, out-of-school programs that target youth currently enrolled in school (OST) can tailor their curriculum to complement the learning in the classroom (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). The program introduces new and complementary soft skills or reinforces school-based soft skills lessons by giving youth chances to practice skills in real-life settings. Overall, partnerships with schools may help eliminate or at least reduce the feeling of being disconnected that youth experience regarding what soft skills they should be learning (Durlak et al., 2015).

Box 12. Tips for Developing Soft Skills through Integrated Learning Contexts

- Host events that allow youth to demonstrate their skills.
- Partner with local businesses and employers to attract mentors and volunteers with work experience who can speak directly to the youth.
- Pair volunteering with instruction and reflection through service-learning.
- Provide training for parents through building parenting skills, parent self-efficacy, and/or bonding with one's children.
- Provide training for parents through direct teaching of the soft skills being addressed by the program.

Out-of-school programs may also have more flexible options for engaging parents by providing services to families, such as counseling, adult education classes, and connections with social services (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). These services can promote wellbeing of the family and indirectly lead youth to develop soft skills. Parents can also be encouraged to help implement and organize the program as a way to learn more about the program's messages. Engaging parents in out-of-school programs can be a daunting task, however, since there may be no formal mechanisms and it can depend on how motivated parents are.

²⁶ For more information, see: <http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/factsheet/keep-safe>.

²⁷ For more information, see: <http://www.childtrends.org/programs/aban-aya-youth-project/>

Promoting integrated learning contexts within formal education settings

When schools, families, and communities collaborate, school-based soft skills training can have the greatest impact. In particular, fostering school–community partnerships through service-learning projects, volunteering, and workplace tours are promising approaches since this “trigger[s] active engagement in the real world, strengthens understanding of community needs and provides a chance to reflect and deepen the understanding of the values of community engagement” (Ikesako and Miyamoto, 2015, p. 17). For example, service-learning projects that pair volunteering with instruction and reflection both enrich classroom-based learning and build connections between school and the community, which lead to improved academic, personal, career, and civic outcomes for youth (Celio et al., 2011; Billig 2000; and Conway et al., 2009). Local business owners, community groups, religious institutions, and colleges and universities (in the case of secondary schools) provide schools with ways for students to practice skills in the real world (OECD, 2015) and can support school-based soft skill development by acting as guest speakers and mentors (Elias, 1997).

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The main strategies for implementation reviewed in this section, are summarized in the table below, organized according to the six guiding principles.

Table 2: Strategies for Building Soft Skills

PRINCIPLE	STRATEGIES
<p>1: Promote experiential learning (through challenge, experience, practice, and reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project-based learning • Organizational problem solving • Interactive lessons: skill demonstration, simulations, role plays, hypothetical decision-making exercises, debating case studies, games and puzzles • Small group work and group discussions • Personal reflection time and practice • Storytelling • Service-learning • Community service • Internships or apprenticeships • Specialized extracurricular activities, including performing arts, sports, computer programming • Outdoor adventures • Workplace-based learning: internships, apprenticeships, and training
<p>2: Address skills in combination rather than in isolation, recognizing how they interconnect</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned and sequenced curriculum • Cyclical approach to skill development

PRINCIPLE	STRATEGIES
3: Promote strong relationships between adults and youth and among youth themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquaintance exercises • Perspective-taking exercises • Demonstrating caring • Collaborative group work • Peer modeling • Being sensitive to youth's reality • Sharing power and giving youth a say
4: Promote positive staff practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing staff's soft skill competencies and confidence • Positive reinforcement/feedback and modeling • Scaffolding • Facilitation and questioning • Counseling based on cognitive behavioral therapy
5: Create a safe, caring, supportive, and enriching program environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class meetings • Sharing circles • Collaboratively determining classroom rules and norms • Whole-school approach • Structured, predictable experiences • Common ground rules and positive social norms • Low youth:staff ratio
6: Promote integration of learning contexts	<p><u>School-community partnerships:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internships • Service learning • School–community advisory boards • Guest speakers and mentorship • Workplace tours • Field trips <p><u>Parental engagement:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informational meetings • Take-home materials • Trainings and workshops to develop soft skills • Task forces and advisory boards • Involvement in program implementation • Connections with services such as counseling and adult education classes

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN

This report identifies six guiding principles that foster soft skill development among youth across diverse programs and youth characteristics. The influence and effectiveness of each principle and strategy might vary, however, in relation to factors including youths' developmental level, the program context, the nature and number of targeted skills, and the intended program outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010). As programs that build soft skills are designed, the six principles should be adapted to each activity. In this section, we highlight some questions that program designers should think about during program design.

1. How do age and developmental stage of the targeted youth affect program design?

Skills development is cumulative, with certain skills forming the foundation for other skills to develop later on. It is shaped by a person's current stage of the life cycle. Some periods are better than others for individuals to gain certain soft skills. Soft-skills-building programs will be most effective when implemented at stages when skills are being actively acquired and frequently used (Guerra et al., 2014).

According to the framework proposed by Guerra and colleagues (2014), problem solving and confidence are basic skills that, if developed during early childhood, can form the base for enhancing those skills and building other skills later. Middle childhood can be the best period for developing most soft skills. Adolescence can be the best period to develop problem solving, **self-control**, self-starting, and confidence, allowing youth to further develop skills starting in middle school. Practicing skills during adolescence helps reinforce skills learned, including resilience, motivation to achieve, and teamwork. In young adulthood, youth practice and refine the soft skills acquired in earlier stages.

As much as possible activities and programs should target the best developmental periods highlighted in the literature and use age-appropriate concepts and methods (Cunningham, et al., 2016). If these periods cannot be targeted, evidence suggests that soft skills can still be learned in other periods. It may take more time, effort, and investment in learning, however, once the best periods for acquiring certain skills have passed. For instance, evidence from a randomized control trial (RCT) in Liberia suggest that **self-control** is adaptable among high-risk young adults ages 18–35 (Blattman et al., 2015).

2. How can design of out-of-school programs be tailored to the context and risk characteristics of groups of youth?

A host of programs and activities are implemented in out-of-school settings. When targeting low-risk adolescents and young adults—enrolled in secondary or higher education in “safe areas”—OST programs can enhance and reinforce soft skills developed at home and in school or higher education by offering chances for experiential learning outside the classroom. Youth enrolled in school and living in “safe areas” are more likely to have chances to develop soft skills at home and at school, in which case out-of-school programs might reinforce and provide ways to

practice these skills. Extra-curricular activities, such as service-learning, sports, arts, and drama, can be great ways to promote experiential learning.

Youth living in poverty, conflict, and violence are more likely to have lived through emotional trauma, high levels of stress, and physical violence. Research from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014) suggests that when individuals are exposed to harmful environments of neglect, abuse, and/or violence their stress may be “toxic,” which disrupts the brain development and can impair developing. The part of the brain most affected is the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that enables a person to regulate himself or herself in both emotions and thinking through situations. This effect on the brain, in turn, can lead to poorly controlled stress response, particularly over-reacting or shutting down when faced with threats (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014) even where no real threat exists.

Overall, programs that target at-risk populations, such as gang-affiliated youth, traumatized youth, or youth in conflict areas, need to realize that youth exposed to stress may not have developed soft skills and may be more impulsive. Successful programs and activities that target at-risk populations have taught participants to tell the difference between situations that need thoughtful and reflective decision making, versus situations that need more automatic responses. Results from three RCTs evaluated by Heller et al., (2015) show that activities and programs can reduce automatic behaviors and responses, which in turn lead to more positive

Box 13: Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)

Counseling based on Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) has garnered strong support from the literature as a powerful practice that program staff can adopt to promote self-control skills. In CBT, individuals identify and challenge any negative thinking patterns to change the way they feel about situations, thereby enabling behavior change. Blattman and colleagues (2015) explain the dynamics: “Its premise is that ... changing thoughts through lectures or counseling can influence behaviors, but practicing new behaviors can also change how a person thinks about himself and reacts to events” (Blattman et al., p. 2). This technique has shown to be particularly relevant for out-of-school programs that target adolescents and young adults with a history of anti-social behavior and lower initial levels of self-control because it makes people aware of harmful automatic patterns of thinking or behavior, disrupts these patterns of thinking, and fosters better ones by having youth practice new skills and behaviors (Blattman et al., 2015).

In *Becoming a Man*, an intervention implemented in Chicago, adolescents are taught to override “fast” decision making with conscious, “slow” reflection through CBT group counseling (Heller et al., 2015). The program helps youth tell the difference between situations that need automatic responses from situations where they ought to slow down and reflect. The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia intervention (STYL) similarly focused on improving self-control among high-risk young adults by teaching them to identify harmful thoughts and behaviors and providing ways to exercise self-control. Results from the evaluation of the STYL program reported by Blattman and colleagues (2015) showed that CBT improved self-control skills among high-risk men ages 18–35 in Liberia.

outcomes for disadvantaged youth.

At-risk youth are less likely to have formed strong bonds with adults in their lives. Mentoring can provide a chance for youth to form strong and trusting relationships with mentors who can

guide, support, and encourage youth exploration. Overall, out-of-school programs for this population should have more intense, rich, and consistent practice for soft skills building through engaging projects and activities.

Youth 18 and younger who have dropped out of school and young adults (19–29) out of school and not-working (known as “Ni-Nis” in Latin America) often lack the basic soft skills to stay and succeed in school or to flourish in the labor market. Interventions that offer remedial education and technical/vocational skills training and aim to improve educational and labor market outcomes should be combined with soft skills building. Programs can foster soft skills through workshops and experiential learning to improve specific soft skills. Youth can also practice skills through on-the-job training.

3. What national and contextual factors should be considered when designing programs in formal education settings?

When designing and implementing soft skills building programs within formal education, the national education context plays an important role. Program designers should find out whether soft skills are included in the national education curriculum and if so to what extent. Many curricula include soft skills but do not give explicit and practical instruction on how to build such skills (OECD, 2015). It is also important to consider how much flexibility schools have to adapt the curriculum to foster soft skills through academic subjects. The country’s culture and value of standardized testing may also play an important role. In countries where teachers and schools are assessed based on test results, teachers may feel overwhelmed by having to prepare students to perform well on core academic subjects and may place lesser value or have less time to focus on soft skills building.

Box 14: Psychosocial counseling for war-affected youth in low- and middle-income countries

Psychosocial counseling interventions targeting war-affected youth in low- and middle-income countries have shown some promising results. Interventions usually build upon concepts of trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy, which address the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors but considers traumatic events youth might have been exposed to. Some also include additional elements, such as creative-expressive and experiential therapy and cooperative play, which promote verbal and nonverbal expression of thoughts and feelings through songs, arts, roleplays, music, sports and games. Most often interventions are delivered through group interpersonal psychotherapy, and include weekly or bi-weekly sessions. Some of these programs and activities are delivered out-of-school in community settings (O’Callaghan et al., 2013; O’Callaghan et al., 2013) or camps for internally displaced persons (Bolton et al., 2007) while others take place within formal education (Jordans et al., 2010).

Results from evaluation studies in Uganda, Nepal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo indicate the potential of these interventions to reduce psychological difficulties and aggression and increase prosocial behavior among participant youth.

Programs and activities designed to reform curricula and teaching practices should focus on helping teachers to be able to teach soft skills in a variety of ways. This usually involves enabling educators and staff to develop new skills, since effective teaching methods may differ greatly from how they themselves were taught or from the pre-service training that they have received. Educational leaders’ understanding of the need to develop soft skills, as well as their active support, is needed for these wholesale efforts to succeed.

4. What are the constraints and challenges faced by low- and middle-income countries when implementing programs in formal education?

Education systems in low- and middle-income countries often face severe limits in terms of their human resources, teaching and learning materials, time available, curriculum and school capacities that may severely hamper adopting effective soft skills building. Experiences from low- and middle-income countries show that where soft skills have been incorporated in national or local curricula, lack of teachers, lack of resources, or lack of priority on soft skills learning remained challenges for teachers and students (UNICEF, 2012). In these countries, teaching soft skills often is squeezed out by regular subjects and by the emphasis on academic examinations (UNICEF, 2012).

A recent investigation of secondary education school-to-work transition and trends in youth employability in Colombia, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic confirm that such constraints exist (Florez & Jayaram, 2016). Educators interviewed argued that although soft skills are embedded in formal curricula in these countries, teachers lack the tools to develop them consistently and thoroughly. The report also interviewed teachers, who often were frustrated with their system's focus on academic standardized tests rather than holistic approaches, and felt they lacked the ability and resources to teach soft skills. Overall, there seems to be a gap between the quality of soft skills learning standards in the curricula of low- and middle-income countries and the reality of the ways these are carried out.

Low- and middle-income countries often lack participatory and active teaching and learning methods, such as experiential and activity-centered teaching, which support developing soft skills. Often the education systems use lecture-based and traditional methods and learning approaches. Entrenched traditional teaching challenges effective promotion of soft skills through the education system. Teacher professional development on more innovative teaching for soft skills is a major challenge. Teaching soft skills demands “personal and professional attributes that are difficult to develop through existing systems of teacher selection and training” (UNICEF, 2012, p. 76). To effectively change teaching approaches, more chances for in-service and pre-service training may be needed.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review has identified knowledge gaps in the literature that if properly addressed could add to the field's understanding on youth soft-skills-building programming. We highlight these knowledge gaps to provide direction to guide future research.

Which program characteristics are most effective in promoting which particular soft skills outcomes for the youth? Few studies make an observed connection between program features and youth outcomes (Jones and Bouffard, 2012). Because many activities and programs integrate several methods for soft skills building, they do not allow one to measure how effective each of these elements may be. Rigorous studies are needed that link program practices to youth outcomes. This type of research can provide important evidence the literature lacks, such as ideal length of skills building programs (considering the soft skills targeted), the best class/group size and set up, and the best background for staff who deliver soft skills building programs.

What are the common features of effective, rigorously evaluated programs? Research is needed that identifies common features of programs that have been rigorously evaluated and shown to have an impact on soft skills to add to the field's understanding of effective programs. Existing guidelines for effective soft-skills-building programs are mostly based on practice and know-how in delivering programs. Very few resources reviewed analyze and recommend effective practices based on common program features and rigorous evaluation. This may be because often the evaluation literature does not give in-depth description of program features. For research to advance in this area, evaluation reports should detail the goals, procedures, and contents of each program component (Durlak et al., 2010).

Which research and programming recommendations based on experience from high-income countries also applies to low- and middle-income countries? Most practitioner-oriented and academic literature reviewed focuses on high-income countries. Although some studies recommend general practices and approaches based on a review of programs and activities in both high-income and low- and middle-income countries, only a few focused exclusively on youth soft skills programming in low- and middle-income countries. J-PAL (2013) highlights that recommendations for high-income countries might also apply to low- and middle-income countries, given the scientific basis for soft skills formation. Nonetheless it is important to: 1) test whether similar activities and programs have similar effects in low- and middle-income countries; 2) analyze how different contexts, social norms, and structural conditions found in low- and middle-income countries may affect program outcomes; and 3) understand what these may mean for general guidelines/principles for carrying out programs. Overall, more research is needed to help us understand the specific experiences and unique challenges low- and middle-income countries face when putting into practice the general guiding principles in the field.

How can soft-skills-building programs and activities address gender differences in developing soft skills? The literature reviewed on youth programming lacks gender-aware assessments of soft skills. Although it gives some information about how soft skills levels may differ by gender in some cases, it does not address in depth how principles and strategies for building soft skills might differ. As a result, gendered provision is often lacking among programs

and activities (UNICEF, 2012). To better inform designing and delivering programs, critical questions that need to be answered include:

1. How critical periods and processes for acquiring soft skills might be different for males and females
2. How gender dynamics in society at large and within the program's scope affect the process of soft skills building differently for boys and girls
3. How programs can provide facilities, curricula, and learning processes that are welcoming to both girls and boys
4. When programs should be delivered to single-sex or gender-mixed groups

Some evidence can be pieced together to begin to answer the first question. For example, U.S.-based research²⁸ finds developmental differences in boys and girls that might inform soft skills development. These differences may affect the development of self-regulation, **positive self-concept**, empathy, assertive **communication** skills, and **goal orientation** among others (Mangrulkar et al., 2013). Other studies show differences in skill levels by gender, without looking at how this may affect different age groups. In particular, some evidence exists on gender differences in **social skills**, **positive self-concept**, and **self-control**.²⁹ Overall, however, more research is needed to link how these gender differences in skill levels (which may also differ by age and environment) are related to acquiring soft skills and thereby affect program delivery. By having information on how soft skills development differs by gender and on best practices for gender-sensitive delivery, program designers may be able to develop gender-appropriate strategies that address developmental needs and concerns of both young women and men.

Which strategies are most effective for specific age groups? Although there is a consensus that certain periods are best for developing certain soft skills and that activities that programs provide need to be age appropriate, the literature lacks specific recommendations on how to adapt some general, recommended practices to specific age groups. For instance, even though project-based learning is a recommended practice for in-school and out-of-school programming, it can take different forms when applied to adolescents or to young adults in the workplace or in higher education. More guidance is needed on when and how some general recommended practices can be adapted to fulfill the specific learning needs of different age groups.

²⁸ Gilligan, 1993; Sun and Stewart, 2007; and Mohr, 2012.

²⁹ For evidence on gender differences in social skills, see: Hill and Werner, 2006; Engel et al., 2014; and Wooley et al., 2015. For evidence on gender differences in empathy, see: Warden and MacKinnon, 2003 and You, Lee, and Lee, 2005. For evidence on gender differences in positive self-concept, see Pearson, 2006; Longmore et al., 2003, and Black et al. 2011, among others. For evidence on gender differences in self-regulation, see Davis, 1999 and Zuckerman, 1994.

How might principles and strategies for soft skills building differ by sector and/or outcomes targeted by a program? Soft-skills-building programs may focus on outcomes that range from workforce development, civic engagement, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and educational achievement. Previous YouthPower Action research (Gates et al., 2016) has shown that the specific soft skills a program targets will differ by the program's intended outcomes. The soft skills that are key for preventing violence, for example, differ from the soft skills that are key in promoting positive SRH outcomes. Further, the skills for preventing bullying will differ slightly from the skills for preventing violent crime. In sum, the better sense a program has of the outcomes it is trying to achieve, the more specifically soft skills can be targeted. More research is needed, however, to understand how the general principles and strategies highlighted in this report will differ for soft-skills-building programs and activities that take place across different sectors.

How can soft skill development be most effectively integrated in formal education in low- and middle-income countries? In the low- and middle-income countries, a lack of research in the formal education setting remains a major challenge for donors and practitioners who want to include soft skills building in their international youth development initiatives. According to a recent report that maps the impact of transferable skills programs on youth in low- and middle-income countries, “There is great demand and little evidence for interventions designed to reform curricula and train teachers to build transferable skills generally, provide teachers with incentives or help them to network or build institutional management and other capacity” (Brown, et al. 2015).

CONCLUSION

This review has shown that in spite of diverse program contexts, outcomes, and youth characteristics it is still possible to identify guiding principles that inform all, or nearly all, efforts to build soft skills among adolescents and young adults. The six general principles identified in this report are supported by both rigorous evaluation and practitioner experience, domestically and internationally. The principles recommend:

1. Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice, and reflection.
2. Address skills in combination rather than in isolation in the program design.
3. Promote strong relationships between adults and youth and among youth themselves.
4. Support staff positive practices, such as modeling and positive reinforcement.
5. Develop a safe, supportive, and enriching environments for program implementation.
6. Promote integration across the different learning contexts.

Each principle is expressed in a wide variety of programs and activities, including mentoring, project-based learning, internships, caring relationships between adult staff and youth, and many others—depending on the youths’ age and the program context and objectives. The important point is that these principles are fundamental because they are based on the latest understanding in social science about how young people learn and develop over their life spans in many social contexts.

We encourage youth program funders, designers, and implementers to reflect on these six principles as they design new programs for and with young people. Each principle can be a chance to invite many possible program responses. There are, for example, many creative ways that soft skills learning can be integrated across school, family, community, and potential employers (Principle 6). Further, better and more research and evaluation are needed for us to understand of how effective these approaches are with specific youth profiles and contexts. This feedback to improve programs is critical. The more international youth development programs reflect evidence-based, cost-effective, and youth-friendly ways to address the opportunities posed by the six guiding principles, the more we can expect to see all youth ready for success in work, community participation, and life.

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APPENDIX A

DETAILED METHODOLOGY

This section provides a more detailed overview of the process undertaken to identify and systematize: (i) guiding principles conducive to soft skills development in general, and (ii) specific strategies that promote the development of individual soft skills. The consecutive steps taken include: 1) formulating research questions; 2) developing inclusion criteria; 3) designing a search strategy; 4) gathering relevant literature that attended the inclusion criteria; and 5) summarizing and analyzing the main findings.

Two central questions guided the research process:

- 1) **Are there general guiding principles for soft skills development that can be adopted across different types of programs, target populations, and contexts? If so, how are these principles translated into effective practice by different program modalities in different settings?**
- 2) **What are the main guiding principles and specific approaches identified by the literature as most effective in the development of each of the seven priority soft skills identified by the YouthPower Action research?**

To answer these questions, the project team developed inclusion criteria to identify relevant literature. To be included, a resource had to meet the following conditions: 1) targeted youth ages 12–29; 2) addressed at least one of the seven soft skills concepts identified by the YouthPower Action research; and 3) synthesized findings or recommendations to soft skills development through programmatic interventions. Resources focusing on interventions targeting delinquent youth, youth with serious mental disorders, or youth with severe drug abuse problems were not included. Special emphasis was given to identifying resources focused on low- and middle-income countries, although resources focusing on high-income countries are also included. No criteria were applied in terms of publication date. Given that this is an emerging literature, efforts were made to ensure that the most up-to-date resources were included.

The project team searched for four main types of synthesis documents:

- 1) ***Literature reviews and meta-analyses:* previous literature reviews and meta-analyses conducted with high methodological standards that identify effective program strategies**
- 2) ***Guides on how to develop soft skills:* practitioner-oriented manuals, guides, or handbooks that synthesize standards, best practices, and curriculum features that support soft skills development**
- 3) ***Program implementation literature:* resources that review successful aspects of program implementation for soft skills development**

4) Other: any other technical document or report containing relevant information or recommendations on how to develop soft skills

To effectively identify resources that met the conditions established, the project team searched for literature following three main phases:

- 1) Phase 1: Consultations with key experts within FHI 360 to gather relevant resources**
- 2) Phase 2: A review of publications from organizations conducting work/research in the field, such as OECD, 3IE, World Bank, World Economic Forum, ILO, Harvard Family Research Project, Brookings Institution, Partnership for 21st Century Skills**
- 3) Phase 3: A broad keyword search for relevant documents and high-quality databases**

Resources that met the inclusion criteria underwent a two-stage process to identify, categorize, and analyze relevant information. First, the project team summarized each document using a standard template emphasizing particular areas of interest, for example: curriculum standards; teaching methodologies; staff practices; strategies per soft skill; or effectiveness by program approach. Subsequently, the project team populated a custom database with information identified through the summarization process to synthesize information across resources. This process allowed us to identify common principles and components highlighted in the literature as effective practices for soft skills development as well as potential gaps.

The process described above resulted in identifying general principles and specific strategies highlighted in the report. The literature reviewed included practitioner-oriented as well as academic literature, generating a database containing over 55 diverse resources. It is important to note that different resources used different methodological approaches to arrive at conclusions and recommendations regarding effective program practices for soft skills building. Some identified specific soft skills building standards based on reviews of effective interventions and analyses of their commonalities. Others adopt a less rigorous approach and recommend effective features based on program implementation knowledge. Among the literature reviewing effective interventions, the methodological standards for considering an intervention effective also varied; some focused on reviewing interventions evaluated through experimental or quasi-experimental designs, while others adopted broader inclusion criteria for selecting programs. Only a few resources reviewed attempted to empirically analyze the link between specific intervention features and outcomes for the youth. In addition, some studies addressed interventions focusing exclusively on soft skills building, while others incorporated programs that develop soft skills as mediators for other developmental outcomes, such as labor-market outcomes, sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, and education achievement.

There was also considerable diversity in the approaches utilized by the different programs reviewed in the literature, including skills and outcomes targeted, intervention design and composition, setting and actors involved, and characteristics of beneficiary population. While some programs focused on a small group of high-risk youth, others focused on an entire school or even an entire sub-national school system. Some programs involved only teachers and students while others engaged all school staff, families, and the broader community. Some programs were classroom based and included soft skills training through regular lessons while

others did not involve direct instruction and concentrated soft skills building efforts through activities such as sports, mentoring, or community service. Although the variance in approaches and intended outcomes of soft skills interventions for youth does present challenges in identifying common principles, it also provides a sweeping snapshot of the state of the field.

A significant challenge that remains for the field is the harmonization of soft skills terminology and measurement both across and within domains. Within the literature, there is not only considerable divergence in how certain skills are categorized, conceptualized, and named, but also some resources neglect to define their targeted individual soft skills, focusing instead on general skill building. To address this challenge, the team relied upon the extensive previous work done by YouthPower Action to identify and define specific soft skills and categorizations of soft skills.

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND ASSOCIATED PRINCIPLES THAT PROMOTE THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIFIC SOFT SKILLS

SOFT SKILL CLUSTER	SPECIFIC SOFT SKILL	RELEVANT STRATEGY(IES)	PRINCIPLES INFORMING STRATEGY(IES)
Positive self-concept	Self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributions in other contexts: provide opportunities for youth to make contributions that are valued by others. Partner with the local community and/or employers to create opportunities for the youth to demonstrate their skills and receive feedback and validation. Mentorships and apprenticeships, in particular, can help reinforce youth's self-confidence and self-esteem in their abilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote integration of learning contexts Promote strong, supportive relationships
	Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coaching: coach youth to interpret and understand their strengths and weaknesses in dealing with new situations/experiences promoted by the program. Provide youth with opportunities to reflect on their strengths and abilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote positive staff practices
	Self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff modeling: show youth that certain tasks can be successfully completed. Scaffolding: adapt skill-building opportunities so that they are demanding but achievable. Positive reinforcement and encouragement: help youth overcome self-doubt and persuade them to believe that they have the skills and capabilities to succeed. Skills building and mastery: provide opportunities for youth to apply and master skills through challenging experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote positive staff practices Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection
Self-control	Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autonomy supportive environment: minimize external controls and provide opportunities for participation, choice and shared decision-making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create safe, caring, supportive, enriching program environment

SOFT SKILL CLUSTER	SPECIFIC SOFT SKILL	RELEVANT STRATEGY(IES)	PRINCIPLES INFORMING STRATEGY(IES)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe and secure relationships: are the base for exploration among adolescents and young adults, with self-regulation more likely to flourish in the context of these safe relationships. 	
	Self-control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counseling through CBT: make youth aware of harmful automatic patterns of thinking or behavior and disrupt these patterns of thinking and foster better ones by having them practice new skills and behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote positive staff practices • Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection
Social skills	Social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff modeling of social skills and positive reinforcement / encouragement. • Cooperative learning: organized problem-solving and project-based learning • Small group work: give students opportunities to help each and collaborate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote positive staff practices • Promote strong, supportive relationships • Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection
Communication skills	Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative learning: organized problem-solving and project-based learning. • Establish ground rules for group processes that help youth to practice respectfully asserting their points of view. • Demonstrate effective facilitation so that youth are able to see and practice communication skills. • Contributions in other contexts: provide opportunities for youth to express themselves, verbally and non-verbally (examples include role play, mime, and drama) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection • Promote positive staff practices
Higher order thinking skills	Critical-thinking skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioning: provide guiding, open-ended questions. • Cooperative learning: organized problem-solving and project-based learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote positive staff practices • Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection
	Problem-solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real-world projects and challenges: provide structure for youth-driven projects that allow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote experiential learning through

SOFT SKILL CLUSTER	SPECIFIC SOFT SKILL	RELEVANT STRATEGY(IES)	PRINCIPLES INFORMING STRATEGY(IES)
	skills	<p>real world problem-solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide practice opportunities through role-playing and games • Cooperative learning: organized problem-solving and project-based learning • Build upon self-control: youth should learn to stop and think before acting and to respond in a controlled rather than automatic fashion 	<p>challenge, experience, practice and reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address skills in combination rather than in isolation
	Decision-making skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real-world projects and challenges: provide structure for youth-driven projects that allow real world decision-making • Provide practice opportunities through role-playing and games • Cooperative learning: organized problem-solving and project-based learning • Build upon self-control: youth should learn to stop and think before acting and to respond in a controlled rather than automatic fashion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote experiential learning through challenge, experience, practice and reflection • Address skills in combination rather than in isolation
Goal-orientation	Goal-orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build upon self-efficacy: strategies to increase individuals' perceived self-efficacy could lead to increased motivation and ability to set and work towards goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address skills in combination rather than in isolation
Empathy	Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective-taking instruction: create appropriate structure for youth to share their stories and emotions and listen to others' stories; create opportunities to practice relating to others with acceptance and understanding, using role play, discussions, and "what if" scenarios • Leveraging similarities between program staff or teachers and students and sharing of personal experiences by program staff/teachers • Build upon self-awareness: as youth become more aware of the self, they become able to understand others' perspectives and feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create safe, caring, supportive, enriching program environment • Promote strong, supportive relationships between youth and program staff and other adults and among youth peers • Address skills in combination rather than in isolation

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