Life Skills Education:
Teachers' Perceptions in Primary School Classrooms in Finland and Singapore

Sabrina Tan

ABSTRACT

Tan, Sabrina. 2018. Life Skills Education: Teachers' Perceptions in Primary School Classrooms in Finland and Singapore. Master's Thesis in Education. University of Jyväskylä. Department of Education.

This research paints a picture of how life skills education could look like as part of the curriculum in every day school life in primary schools in Finland in Singapore through the lens of teachers. Life skills education is discussed with reference to formal structures as set by the curriculum and also through informal approaches by teachers. Previous literature on life skills was considered in arriving at the main components of life skills to be used in this study.

A total of six teachers participated in the study. Three were from Finland and the other three were from Singapore. The teachers have different personal and professional training background as well as number of years of experience. The interviews were subjected to a qualitative, content analysis methodology, after which the findings were presented with respect to the research questions.

The results of the study reveal the importance of all stakeholders in life skills education. While the national curriculum provides structure and space for formal life skills education in schools, a large responsibility lies with the individual teachers in schools and parents at home. The study also reveals the different perspectives that teachers in Finland and Singapore hold with regard to life skills relative to academic skills, suggesting the influence of culture in both countries.

Keywords: life skills, life skills education, primary schools, Finland, Singapore, qualitative content analysis

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

Life skills education has been gaining traction in the field of education as international organisations such as UNICEF and World Health Organisation (WHO) and countries call for more holistic education. Traditionally, education is based on a broad church utilitarian tradition with the purpose of producing skilled labour for the economic market (Bessant, 2014). Academic achievement emerged as a dominant outcome in schools, the importance of which is evident in yearly reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that measures countries' academic performance amongst other things. However, as schools strive for academic excellence, are pupils learning essential skills and equipped to deal with life effectively in the future? According to Noddings (2005, p.34), schools should support students to be "healthy, competent and moral people". This involves equipping pupils with essential life skills that would help them to lead "healthy and productive life" (UNICEF, 2012, p.1). Therefore it is important to know how life skills education is implemented in today's schools.

The education systems in both Finland and Singapore are known for their academic performance. Yet both education systems are seemingly different, with Finland adopting a student-oriented approach while Singapore's schools are known for its competitiveness. In this regard, this study aims at offering a glimpse of how life skills education looks like in everyday classrooms and schools in Finland and Singapore in an attempt to consider if their education prepares pupils for life, beyond academic achievement.

This paper begins with Chapter 2 introducing life skills through various definitions by researchers and agencies before discussing the benefits of life skills briefly. This is followed by an introduction to life skills education and examples of life skills programs. Effectiveness of such life skills programs is also discussed briefly based on previous research studies. The chapter then concludes with an overview of the national curricula of Finland and Singapore, in the context of the relevance to and provision of life skills education.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for purpose of this study. Various frameworks on life skills are considered and then synthesised primarily into three broad categories of cognitive life skills, personal life skills and interpersonal life skills.

Chapter 4 sets the research aims and objectives for the study and introduces the three research questions that this study is based on. Chapters 4 and 5 explain the research process. Short narratives are used to introduce the participants of the study so that readers have a background to understand the teachers' perspectives. Reliability and ethical considerations are also included in Chapter 5, along with a write up on my personal interest in the study.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the findings with respect to the research questions. Findings from Finland and Singapore are presented in separate chapters for clarity, beginning with teachers' definition of life skills, followed by life skills in classrooms and in schools, then the teachers' perspectives of life skills education in general before concluding with the support and challenges they deal with in implementing life skills education.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of the findings based on the research questions. The discussion includes the role of formal structures in life skills education but also more dominantly, the use of informal approaches by teachers in the classrooms, thereby revealing the crucial roles that individual teachers and parents play in schools and at home. Finally, the chapter concludes with a mention of the considerations for this study and also interest for future studies on life skills education.

References and appendices are then found at the end of paper.

2 LIFE SKILLS AND LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

This chapter introduces life skills in relation to various definitions and the benefits. Life skills education is then introduced followed by examples of life skills programs which previous researchers studied for effectiveness. The national curricula of Finland and Singapore are then presented to provide background on how life skills education is regarded and approached formally in primary schools of both countries.

2.1 Definition of Life Skills

Life skills "essentially represent the basic, development building blocks of human existence" (Ginter, 1999, p.191). Gazda, Ginter and Horne (2001, p.318) sums life skills up as "all the skills and knowledge a person experiences that are necessary for effective living" (as cited in Currie, 2012, p.157). They can be viewed collectively as psychosocial and interpersonal skills for the function of helping one with decision-making, effective communications, coping and self-management skills for "a healthy and productive life" (UNICEF, 2012, p.1). Sohbi-Gharamaleki (2010) relates life skills as skills and abilities that build one's resilience in life situations and challenges or for one to "deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 1994a, p.1). While some refer to life skills as knowledge, skills and capabilities, researchers also define life skills as "adaptive and positive behaviour" (WHO, 1994a, p.1) or in terms of their function to cause "behavior change or behaviour development" (Sahu, 2013, p.77) that will lead to "reinforcement and change of attitudes, values and behaviors" (Naseri, 2005, as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013, p.2) and "pave the way for positive and useful behaviour" (Karimzadeh et. al., 2009 as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013, p.2). Brooks (1994:191 as cited in Ginter, 1999) ties it all together as "learned behaviors that are necessary for effective living, including requisite knowledge or conditions for the development or acquisition of such

behaviour". Despite these manifestations, a clear and consistent consensus on the ultimate outcome of life skills remains as "healthy and productive life" (UNICEF, 2012, p.1). Or in Freud's simple terms, life skills "enable all of us to love and do productive work" (Ginter, 1999, p.191).

2.2   Benefits of Life Skills

Life skills are acknowledged for their contribution to the healthy development of children and adolescent, prevent risk factors as well as prepare children and adolescents for dynamic life situations (WHO, 1999). The need for life skills is growing due to changing trends that affect modern life such as family structures and the decline of religion (WHO, 1999). Together with the rise of media influence, new challenges are added to the mix as young people struggle to find their identity amidst cultural and ethnic diversity (WHO, 1994a). Furthermore, demands and skills of the workplace are also changing, which means that young people have to learn to be more adaptable. The importance of the impact of these changing trends has been made visible through the mention and emphasis on life skills by renowned international organisations such as WHO and UNICEF. Life skills have also been included in global agenda and documents such as the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO, 2000). Traditional life skills education is disappearing or no longer effective (WHO, 1994a). For example, religion was found to provide stronger emotional and social support and had a hand in imparting values as well. With the decline of religion, new ways of developing and reinforcing life skills need to be considered.

Despite changing trends, life skills have always been regarded as important by researchers who recognise that childhood and adolescence are critical stages in one's life. Behavioural patterns formed during these ages would have far reaching consequences throughout one's life (Carnegie Council, 1995; Scales & Leffert, 1999, as cited in Waldron, 2009). For example, according to Irannezhad (2017), adolescence is a major development stage for one's psychosocial competences. It is a stage where adolescents explore the balance between

emotions and reason, and struggle with their identity as an independent person versus their identity based on their relationships with the people around them. Their struggle with identity makes them more susceptible to relational aggression (Remillard & Lamb, 2005, as cited in Waldron, 2009) and body image concerns (Millstein & Litt, 1990, as cited in Waldron, 2009). In the OECD (2016) report, 8.4% of all participating students reported that they were victims of nasty rumours.

Life skills serve prevention and promotion functions with direct and short term benefits as well as indirect and longer-term impact. Overall, the effects of life skills are linked to socioemotional health and the development of one cognitively, socially and morally (Brown, Way, & Duff, 1999, as cited in Waldron, 2009). Harter (1999) states that life skills provide direct motivational benefits (as cited in Waldron, 2009) and hence, contribute to positive short-term outcomes such as life satisfaction and even benefit academic achievement (Dubois and Tevendale, 1999, as cited in Waldron, 2009). Life skills would also increase one's self esteem (Power, 2010, as cited in Sahu, 2013; Enet, 1994, as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013) and one's self concept (Kreuter, 1991, as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013). Apart from that, improving one's empathy and social awareness through life skills also improves social inclusion. On the other hand, it also reduces social anxiety (Botvin and Eng, 1982, as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013), insomnia and physical symptoms (Hajizadehanari, 2013) although there is no impact on social dysfunction and severe depression, according to Hajizadehanari (2013) for example.

In the longer term, one learns to cope in challenging and dynamic situations (Irannezhad, 2017; Smith and Segal, 2011, as cited in Sahu, 2013). Such practice simultaneously strengthens one's mental health. Good mental health acts as a buffer against risk factors (Power, 2010, as cited in Sahu, 2013) which could potentially lead to emotional and behavioural problems in the future (Jamali, 2016). The lack of life skills or coping mechanisms could also cause socially unacceptable (Campenni, Muse-Burke & Richards, 2010) or self-destructive behaviours relating to substance abuse or acts of aggression (Sahu, 2013). These acts not only affect the people around them but also affect one

negatively in an emotional and even physical way. Irannezhad (2017) claims that the emotional stress builds up as mental pressure which could cause physical sickness and aggravate medical conditions (Gachl, 2001, as cited in Irranezhad, 2017). Hence, lack of life skills could cause detrimental effects in the long term while on the other hand, life skills development empowers one to lead a fulfilling and happy life in the long term (Wurdinger, 2011). The benefits go beyond and outside of school years in terms of the lasting impact and also benefits more than oneself as one begins to consider the "betterment of others" (Wurdinger, 2011, p.93) due to greater social awareness. This could possibly build the foundation through "environment education, consumer education, peace education, social cultural issues" (Sahu, 2013, p.78) to address global issues as declared in the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations, attesting to the far reaching benefits of life skills.

2.3   Life Skills Education

Life skills education is how life skills are being developed on a practical and strategic level. Firstly, as mentioned in an earlier section, life skills are perceived as knowledge, abilities and skills. Hence, life skills education would provide a platform for these skills to be taught, practiced and reinforced through learning experiences (Papacharisis, 2005; UNICEF, 2012; WHO, 1993, as cited in Adewald, 2011; WHO, 1994a). These skills, often related to social and health issues, are predominantly psychosocial and interpersonal skills for the promotion of literacy and self-sufficiency (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, as cited in Adewald, 2011). When designing a life skills curriculum or program for life skills education, it is important to consider the context. Context could be the primary objective of the life skills program or in a broader sense, the social, cultural, national and developmental context of whom the curriculum is designed for (Adewald, 2011; WHO, 1993, as cited in Adewald, 2011; WHO, 1994a; WHO, 1999). While life skills tend to be universal in general, it may be relevant to adapt according to social or cultural norms. For example, teaching respect in an Asian context would include bowing to elderly while in an African context, it

would include not pointing your shoes towards the elderly. Additionally, many life skills program are preventive programs where certain topics or issues are focused on to target social problems in the specific local context. For example, Zimbabwe and Thailand have programs to raise awareness and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS, while in Mexico, life skills programs aim to prevent teenage pregnancy (WHO, 1999). Alternatively, life skills can also be part of a broad-based curriculum or also integrated into the school's formal curriculum. Schools are perceived as a suitable platform for life skills education as schools are the social context in which children and adolescents are operating in (UNICEF, 2010; WHO, 1994a). Schools also have all the necessary stakeholders present at one place, namely children and adolescents, trained teachers and support of parents and the community.

2.4   Examples of Life Skills Programs

Life skills programs can take on many forms from formal interventions in schools, extra-curricular activities and community-based activities to programs targeted at specific skills or topics (prevention) (UNICEF, 2012). These programs have typically targeted a range of cognitive life skills, personal life skills and interpersonal life skills.

Formal intervention injects life skills education into formal school curriculum. For example in Nigeria, life skills are incorporated into school subjects such as "hygiene, social studies, science, agriculture, physical education and general knowledge" (Adewale, 2011, p.223). Another common approach by schools is introducing life skills as a separate module or program. These modules could be recurring as part of the yearly structure or one off to respond to current needs or situations. The latter is evident in a study by Kaligis (2012), where training in life skills was introduced after some students were evacuated due to a volcano eruption. After one week of training in self-esteem and coping skills, participants exhibited significant improvements in strength and coping skills. Numerous studies have also successfully proven the effectiveness in one time life skill training in developing life skills in all three categories. The non-

exhaustive list includes significant effects on (i) cognitive skills such as decision making (Albertin, 2001, as cited in Irrannezhad, 2007), leadership and management abilities (Sukhodolsky, Golub, Stone & Orban, 2004, as cited in Sobhi-Gharamaleki, 2010); (ii) personal life skills such as assertiveness and self efficacy (Weitlauf, Smith & Cervon, 2000, as cited in Sobhi-Gharamaleki, 2010), self-management and health maintenance (Jamali, 2016); as well as (iii) interpersonal life skills such as efficient and effective communication (Lashkari, 2006, as cited in Irannezhad, 2007).

Alternatively, formal intervention in life skills education in schools can come in the form of community-based and project based learning. These approaches are less common as it involves radical changes to a school's formal curriculum. Community-based schools such as Arbourthorne Community Primary School in the UK uses a learning challenge curriculum where students learn science, history and geography by exploring topics in classrooms and participating in community events outside the classrooms (http://www.arbourthorneprimary.co.uk/new-curriculum). Adopting Dewey's (1938) pattern of inquiry, Avalon Charter School in USA uses project based learning to provide experiences to enhance the development of life skills (Wurdinger, 2011). In Wurdinger's (2011) study, 42 school alumni were interviewed. Responses show that participants develop (i) cognitive skills such as time management, creative thinking, problem solving, goal setting; (ii) personal skills such as self-management, identity development and purpose in life; and (iii) interpersonal skills such as communication with others and accepting differences, confirming Irannezhad's (2007) review.

Extra-curricular activities (ECAs) are said to be school initiatives, organised and held in schools outside of formal curriculum time (Feldman, 2005). Personal skills such as identity development and purpose in life are encouraged through ECAs, as students explore their preferences and relationships with others and shape their identity (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin & Silbereisen, 2002, as cited in Feldman, 2005). On the other hand, community-based activities, as the name suggests, happen within the communities, providing a setting for students to discover and devel-

op life skills in the real world. Girl Scouts (http://www.girlscouts.org/en/about-girl-scouts/the-girl-scout-difference.html) are one example of community-based activities where learning outcomes include problem solving in the community, identity development, self-management and relationship skills.

Life skills programs centred on sports are popular as sports are widespread and provide good opportunities for life skills development (Waldron, 2009). Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation program (SUPER) is one such program where life skills are incorporated into existing sports programs (Danish, Nellen & Owens, 1996, as cited in Waldron, 2009). According to studies, participants in various SUPER programs showed improvements in (i) cognitive skills such as goal setting and problem solving; (ii) personal skills such as positive thinking and sports skills; and (iii) interpersonal skills such as social awareness and responsibility (Brunelle, Danish & Forneris, 2007, as cited in Waldron, 2009; Papacharisis, 2007, as cited in Waldron, 2009; Papacharisis, 2005). In another program, Play It Smart, student-athletes demonstrated the ability to apply life skills attained from football into classrooms (Petitpas, Van Raalte, Cornelius & Presbrey, 2004, as cited in Waldron, 2009). Papacharisis (2005) believes that it is natural to integrate life skills with sports (p.253) as sports bring out situations that test one's ability to deal with challenges. While programs like SUPER and Play It Smart targets athletes, programs such as Girls on Track (GOT; http://girlsontrackfoundation.org/about/) and Girls on the Run (GOTR; https://www.girlsontherun.org/what-we-do/6th-8th-Grade-Program) use sports and physical activities as a platform to develop life skills. In a study by Waldron (2009), GOT program proved to be successful in meeting three of the goals of the program targeted at personal skills. These three goals are identity, self-acceptance and understanding of the body. Similarly, participants in the GOTR program showed improvements mainly in personal skills such as self-esteem, health maintenance and body image (Debate and Thompson, 2005, as cited in Waldron, 2009).

2.5   Life Skills Education in Finland

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, written by the National Board of Education, serves as guidelines for the provision of basic education in Finland in accordance with the Basic Education Act. The purpose of the National Core Curriculum is "to ensure the equality and high quality of education and to create favourable conditions for the pupils' growth, development and learning" (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.9). Based on Section 15(1) of the Basic Education Act (1998), it is the responsibility of the education provider to adapt the curriculum to the school's context, depending on the needs of the students or environment. However, fundamentally, the purpose of education is "to support pupils' growth into humanity and into ethically responsible membership of society and to provide them with knowledge and skills needed in life" (Basic Education Act, 1998, Section 2(1)) and that education should be "provided according to the pupil's age and capabilities and so as to promote healthy growth and development in the pupil" (Basic Education Act, 1998, Section 3(2)).
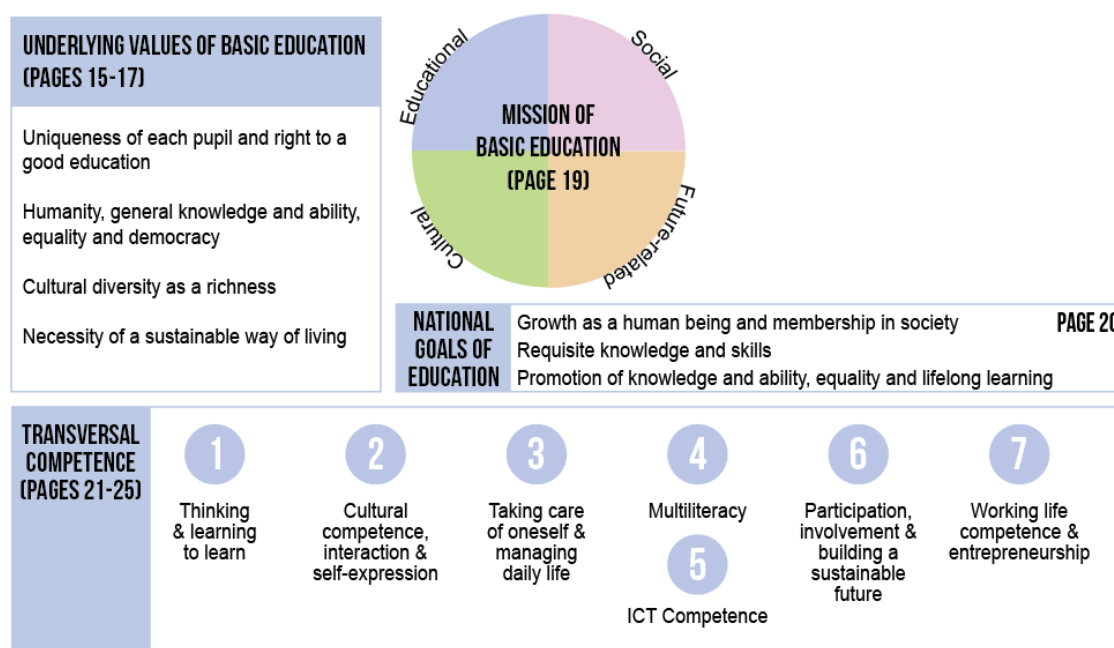

FIGURE 3 Summary of National Core Curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2016)

Figure 3 summarises the key elements of the National Core Curriculum. Within these elements, there is significant mention of life skills. Firstly, *cognitive life skills* education is noted from the curriculum's mention of the process

and outcomes of learning. The curriculum states the importance of developing "learning-to-learn skills" as "foundation for goal-oriented and lifelong learning" (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.17). According to the curriculum, learning happens through interactions with others as well as the environment. Through "thinking, planning, exploring and assessing" individually and together on one's learning journey, cognitive life skills are enhanced. Decision-making skills are also separately mentioned in the underlying values of basic education. Some of the learning outcomes mentioned under the underlying value of "humanity, general knowledge and ability, equality and democracy" include pupils being "capable of making decisions based on ethical reflection and consideration based on knowledge" and being able to "use information critically"(Opetushallitus, 2016, p.16). Cognitive life skills are also implied especially under the transversal competences T1, T3 and T7 (Fig. 3).

Personal life skills are similarly discussed in the learning processes and outcomes. One of the underlying values highlights the uniqueness of each pupil where pupils explore and build identities for themselves, in their communities and in the world as part of good education. An understanding of humanity and cultural diversity is also valued in pupils as a stand for humanity, equality and democracy. For this, pupils need to also develop the skills to be internally strong so as to have the "courage to stand up for what is good" for themselves and for the world around them (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.16). Schools should provide "encouraging guidance" and "positive and realistic feedback" to improve pupils' "self-image, self-efficacy and self-esteem" (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.17). Personal life skills are a big part of transversal competence, T3.

Lastly, *interpersonal life skills* are also covered in the curriculum. Again, to be a stand for humanity, equality and democracy and cultural diversity, pupils need to be able to accept differences and develop empathy. These life skills are developed also through the learning process where pupils should be given "opportunities for working together with others" (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.15). Transversal competences, T2, T3, T6 and T7 describe the importance of "human relationships" (p.22), "team work, project work and networking" (p.25), "signif-

icance of rules, agreements and trust" (p.25) and "practise negotiation skills, arbitration and conflict resolution (p.25) (Opetushallitus, 2016).

Life skills education appears to be integrated into the formal curriculum within the school subjects and promoted through the process of learning. Having said that, life skills education is highly visible in subjects such as Religion (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.333) as follows:

> The instruction supports the pupils' self-knowledge, self-appreciation, and the development of life management skills throughout basic education. The instruction provides the pupil with elements for building and evaluating his or her identity as well as personal view of life and worldview. The instruction of religion supports the pupil's growth into a responsible member of his or her community and the democratic society as well as a global citizen.

Ethics is another subject that also focuses on life skills (Opetushallitus, 2016, p.346):

> It is necessary that the instruction supports not only the pupils' general knowledge and ability related to worldviews and cultures but also the development of their capacity for thinking and acting ethically and critically as well as their learning-to-learn skills. In ethics, critical thinking is understood as a self-correcting activity that seeks reason and perceives connections, and is sensitive to different situations. It also involves an open-minded and reflective attitude.

2.6   Life Skills Education in Singapore

The National Curriculum of Singapore is developed by the Ministry of Education, Singapore and is centred on four Desired Outcomes – confident person, self-directed learning, active contributor and concerned citizen. These outcomes make up the purpose of education in Singapore.
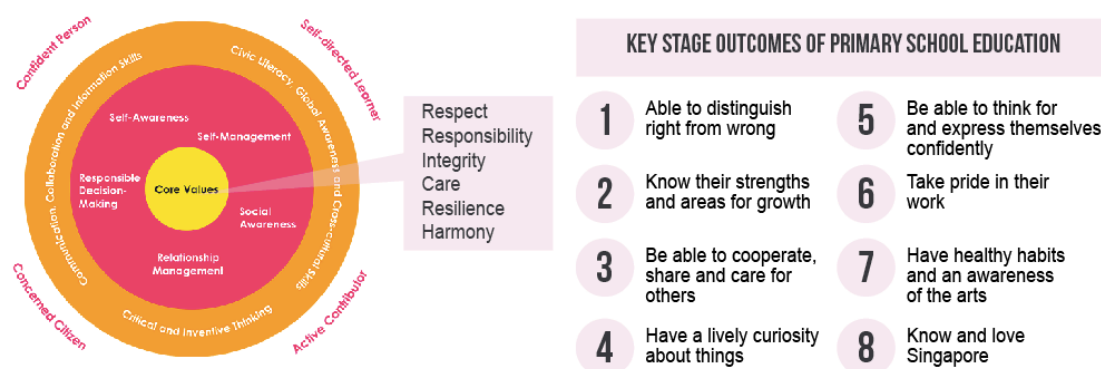
FIGURE 4 summarizes the Desired Outcomes of Education (Ministry of Education, Singapore)

The diagram on the left of Figure 4 illustrates the framework for 21st Centuries Competencies and key stage outcomes. *Cognitive life skills* are embedded in the outer ring under the element of "critical and inventive thinking" where pupils "need to be able to think critically, assess options and make sound decisions" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2015a:Annex C); and also under the element of "communication, collaboration and information skills" where pupils need to know how to seek and assess information for problem-solving and decision-making. In the middle ring, the Ministry of Education (2015a) adopts social and emotional learning components from Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as competencies, which cover cognitive, personal and interpersonal life skills. At the heart of the framework lie values that are centred around *personal life skills* such as self-worth and resilience and more dominantly, *interpersonal life skills* where the pupil understands one's role in the community, nation and world and acts accordingly to one's capacity for responsibility, integrity, care and harmony.
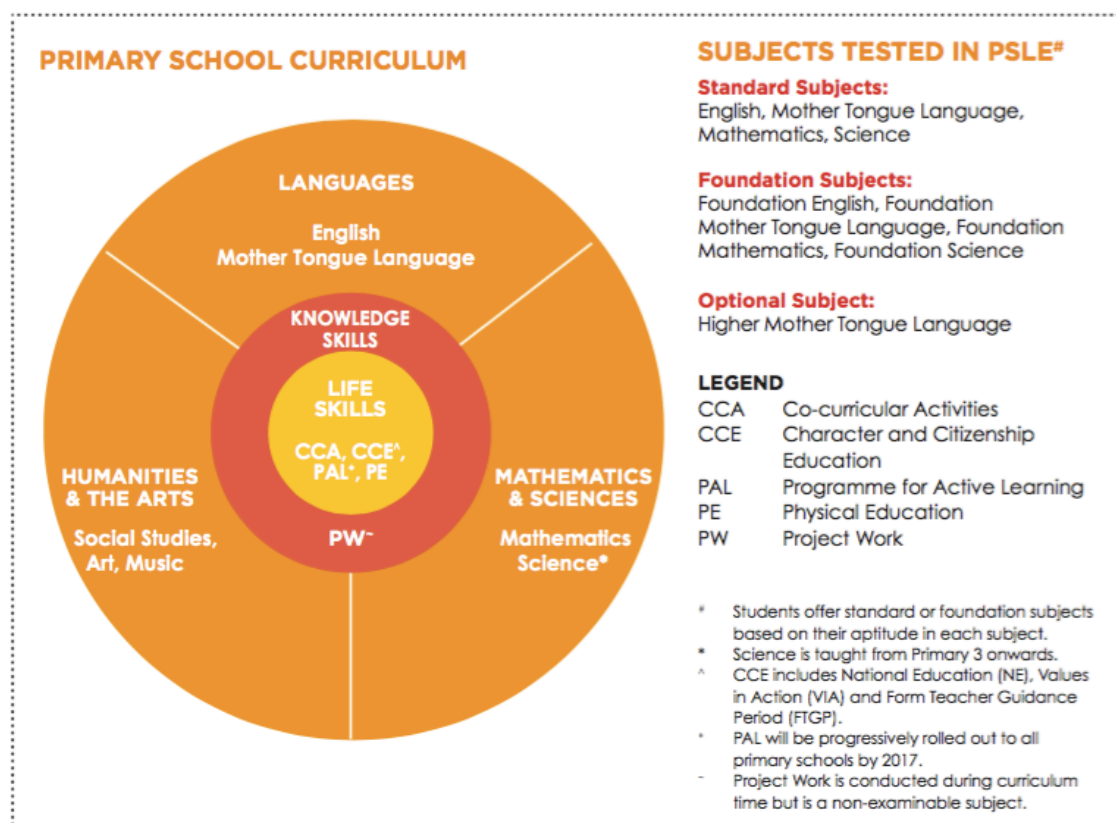
FIGURE 5 Primary School Curriculum (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2016b)

The framework aims to nurture each student towards the desired outcomes through subject disciplines, Character and Citizenship Education (CCE), enrichment programmes, teachable moments and through a diverse range of Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) as shown in Figure 5. The curriculum focuses on pupils' knowledge and skills (individual) and pupils' contribution to society and nation (community/ national).

The main platform for formal life skills education happens through Character and Citizenship Education (CCE). 60 hours per year is set aside for lower primary pupils while up to 75 hours is catered to upper primary pupils through components such as CCE lessons, Form Teacher Guidance Period (FTGP) and school-based CCE (Ministry of Education, 2012). For example, FTGP specifically focuses on social and emotional learning and include themes such as cyber wellness, education and career guidance and protection from abuse while school-based CCE involves school assembly periods where schools are given autonomy to decide its content and delivery (Ministry of Education, 2012). Outside of formal CCE sessions, teachers are guided by principles of "every teacher

a CCE teacher" and "values are both taught and caught". The former suggests that teachers act as role models for the pupils and that it is the responsibility of teachers to ensure their professional development in this regard. The latter discusses the importance for teachers to identify and make use of "teachable" moments through pupils' life experiences throughout the school day or in their interactions with the pupils (Ministry of Education, 2012, p.9).

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter 3 identifies and presents frameworks relating to categories of life skills. I will then provide a synthesis of these frameworks, thereby building up an analytical framework for purpose of this study.

3.1 Frameworks on Life Skills

According to Danish (2002), life skills are multi-dimensional in nature (as cited in Waldron, 2009) as necessary for one to navigate across the four primary domains of life: family, educational settings, community and career (Gazda, Childers & Brooks, 1987, as cited in Ginter, 1999). They can therefore be defined and categorised in a multitude of ways as can already be seen in Section 2.1.

In developing a taxonomy of life skills, Brooks collapsed 305 life skills descriptors into the following four developmental life skills areas: (i) interpersonal communication/ human relations skills; (ii) problem-solving/ decision-making skills; (iii) physical fitness/ health maintenance skills; and (iv) identity development/ purpose in life skills (Ginter, 1999). Brooks (1984) illustrates these four areas distinguished by broken lines in a wheel, suggesting that they are interrelated (as cited in Ginter, 1999). This is intended to be consistent with the dynamic and ambiguous nature of life skills.

In an alternative framework, five pairs of complementary life skills areas are considered instead of Brooks' four (WHO, 1994a). Creative and critical thinking can be categorised as a separate pair whereas Brooks encompasses that under problem-solving and decision-making area. Instead of physical fitness/ health management skills, this framework also includes self-awareness, coping with emotions and coping with stress, which makes for an interesting variation. This shifts the focus slightly to social and emotional competencies, which can be categorised into five core groups of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making

(https://casel.org/core-competencies/). These various and often overlapping categorisations can also be said to fall into three broad categories, namely cognitive, personal and interpersonal (UNICEF, 2012). In a study by Fitzpatrick (2014), these skills can also be categorised as practical skills, thinking skills and learning skills. Clearly, the many definitions and frameworks by different agencies and researchers can be messy and hard to digest. To provide a comprehensive picture of the similarities and differences, I identified and summarised the main definitions and frameworks in Table 1 below.

Brooks (Ginter, 1999)	WHO (1997)	CASEL	UNICEF (2012)	Fitzpatrick (2014)
Interpersonal communication/ Human relations	Communication/ Interpersonal relationships	Self awareness	Cognitive	Thinking
Problem-solving/ Decision making	Problem-solving/ Decision making	Self management		
	Creative thinking/ Critical thinking	Social awareness	Personal	Learning
Physical fitness/ Health maintenance	Self awareness/ Empathy	Relationship skills		
Identity development/ Purpose in life	Coping with emotions/ Coping with stressors	Responsible decision making	Interpersonal	Practical

TABLE 1 Summary of various categories of life skills frameworks

Still, these definitions remain broad, as a whole plethora of skills can then be considered as life skills. A lack of a finer distinction would diminish the concept of life skills (UNICEF, 2012). Gazda et al. (2001) addresses this by excluding academic skills from life skills (as cited in Currie, 2012). It is also possible to explicitly distinguish life skills from livelihood skills, such as computer programming and entrepreneurial skills (WHO, 1999). Livelihood skills can be defined as skills used directly for one to produce income or indirectly to help one secure a job (UNICEF, 2012). While viewed separately, livelihood skills are not any less important than life skills and can definitely be incorporated into life skills education (WHO, 1999).

Despite the various frameworks as illustrated in Table 1, many of the components, although termed differently, actually overlap with each other in

terms of their definitions. Therefore, I decided to synthesise them into Table 2 below to be used as an analytical framework for this study.

Cognitive Life Skills	Problem-solving skills
	Critical thinking and creative thinking skills
	Decision-making skills
Personal Life Skills	Self-awareness skills
	Identity development and purpose in life skills
	Self-management skills
	Health and fitness skills
Interpersonal Life Skills	Communication skills
	Relationship skills

TABLE 2 Life skills categories for this study

Firstly, to encompass all major components, I decided to adopt three broad categories of cognitive, personal and interpersonal skills. The various components in Table 1 are then sorted into these three categories. Most components are retained under similar names while some other components have been placed under broader categories. For example, empathy (WHO, 1994a) and social awareness (CASEL) are classified under relationship skills in general. Coping with skills (WHO, 1994a) have also been included under self-management skills. The categories listed in Table 2 will be defined and elaborated on in the next sub-sections.

While these skills are placed in separate categories, this does not mean that the skills sets are distinct and separate. In fact, they complement each other. Brooks (Ginter, 1999) illustrates the taxonomy of life skills by displaying the skills in a circle wheel, with broken lines in between his four components to serve as a distinction. The broken lines show the interconnectedness of the skills and abilities, and how they have an impact on each other. Similarly, the life skills categories are interconnected and complement one another.

3.2 Cognitive Life Skills

According to Fitzpatrick (2014), cognitive skills represent abilities for higher order thinking which supports the entire process of understanding, question-

ing, analysing, thinking critically and creatively to generate solutions, synthesising and assessing the alternatives and finally arriving at responsible decisions. The process can be broken down based on the skills required for each phase as follows: problem-solving skills, creative and critical thinking skills, and decision-making skills.

Problem-solving skills are universal as they include abilities to manage the whole cognitive process. Wurdinger (2011) discusses it simply as learning how to learn, which Fitzpatrick (2014, p.276) further explains as the ability to "learn, unlearn, and relearn" as one faces new situations as one goes through life. This includes the ability to set goals, making learning plans and to manage time and deadlines (Waldron, 2009; Fitzpatrick, 2014; Papacharisis, 2005). Papacharisis (2005) further discusses problem-solving skills as the abilities to perform under pressure, work with teams and managing feedback; all of which require personal and interpersonal skills as well.

Critical thinking and creative thinking skills are mentioned explicitly as a category on its own (WHO, 1994a). It can be argued that these skills help one to maintain objectivity by being able to identify and evaluate sources that influence one's attitudes and behaviours such as personal values or external pressure from friends, family, community and the media. Creative thinking skills specifically allow one to adapt in various situations as one assesses possible actions or non-action and their consequences before coming to a decision.

Decision-making skills are the abilities to make sound and informed decisions and are discussed as necessary for making healthy (GOT, as cited in Waldron, 2009) and effective decisions (Danish & Donohue, 1995; Danish & Nellen, 1997, as cited in Papacharisis, 2005). According to Fitzpatrick (2014), this also involves personal and interpersonal skills so as to have the courage and confidence to make a decision and stick with it. Furthermore, these decisions should be "constructive" for the individual and for others after taking "ethical standards, safety concerns and social norms" into account (https://casel.org/core-competencies/).

3.3   Personal Life Skills

Personal life skills include self-awareness and self-management (CASEL), coping skills (WHO, 1994a) as well as Brooks' (Ginter, 1999) physical fitness, health maintenance, identity development and purpose in life skills. Personal life skills encompasses first being aware of oneself, understanding what is beneficial for oneself then being able to take actions consistent with that especially in new and diverse situations, which may trigger emotions and stress.

Self-awareness skills are the abilities to accurately understand one's character in terms of one's values, functionality such as strengths and weaknesses, and thoughts and emotions such as desires and triggers (WHO, 1994a; https://casel.org/core-competencies/). It includes respect for self (GOT, as cited in Waldron, 2009), knowing when one is experiencing stress (WHO, 1994a) and facing life with a "well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism and a growth mindset" (https://casel.org/core-competencies/). Self-awareness skills serve as critical foundation for interpersonal skills.

Identity development and purpose in life skills, as termed by Brooks (Ginter, 1999), represent the abilities to adopt a positive outlook after acknowledging one's character. Eddison (2017), Fitzpatrick (2014) and Harter (1999, as cited in Waldron, 2009) echo this view for one to have a positive self concept, to be comfortable and confident in creating and pursuing meaning, purpose and direction in life. Waldron (2009) states that this is necessary for one to clarify and maintain one's values and being able to monitor oneself, which requires self-management and coping skills.

Self-management skills are the abilities to "successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours" as situations arise (https://casel.org/core-competencies/). Essentially, self-management involves coming to an appropriate response, after one establishes self-awareness. Generally, this presents itself in day-to-day life as self-discipline and self-motivation (https://casel.org/core-competencies/). This may also require the support of cognitive skills such as goal setting and organisation skills. Additionally, self-management skills are necessary when dealing with situations and challenges in life. They develop

one's ability to cope with emotions, stressors in life, as recognised as a distinct category of life skills (WHO, 1994a). It is important to be able to recognise sources of stress and intense emotions such as impulses and anger, and subsequently develop a rational response consistent with one's values and identity. This could involve finding ways to remove or reduce stressors in life, altering one's physical environment or habits, and generally learning to relax for example through meditation (WHO, 1994a). According to Naseri (2005), coping skills enable one to be resilient in life and are especially critical in extreme situations like crises (as cited in Hajizadehanari, 2013).

Health and fitness skills comprise of Brooks' physical fitness skills and health maintenance skills (Ginter, 1999). Basically, these are abilities for one's short and long-term health and fitness. Physical fitness and health maintenance skills are abilities for one to be physically active, feel good about one's body and maintaining healthy and nutritious diets (Fitzpatrick, 2014; Waldron, 2009). Breaking it down, it includes building of psychomotor skills so as to enjoy sports and an active lifestyle (Fitzpatrick, 2014) and maintaining a good posture (Papacharisis, 2005). Millstein & Litt (1990) adds on the importance for one to have a positive self body image, which reduces the risk of eating disorders and abuse (as cited in Waldron, 2009). Essentially, physical fitness and health maintenance skills deal with the ability for one to recognise the relationship between physical activity and well-being and quality in one's life. This may also include being aware of risk factors that could be a threat to one's health and fitness such as drug use, sexually transmitted diseases and suicide (Sahu, 2013), understanding the consequences and having the resources and abilities to seek help where necessary.

As defined previously, life skills serve to promote a healthy and productive life. While life skills are important, they are not critical to basic survival. Based on this distinction, I chose to exclude practical household skills as well as life and safety skills under personal life skills, all of which are critical for survival and can be seen instead as pre-requisites for life skills.

3.4   Interpersonal Life Skills

Interpersonal skills are skills required for communication, negotiation, cooperation, teamwork, inclusion, empathy and advocacy (UNICEF, 2012).

Communication skills relate to the abilities to express thoughts, ideas and feelings. It requires being able to confidently expressing opinions and ideas, and also being able to acknowledge vulnerabilities in expressing fears and asking for help (WHO, 1994a). This includes verbal and non-verbal forms of communication and the ability to be sensitive to the situational context such as cultural differences (WHO, 1994a). According to Fitzpatrick (2014), communication skills are necessary to resolve conflicts.

Relationship skills are the abilities to form, build and retain positive relationships with others. This includes the ability to end relationships (WHO, 1994a). While communication is a big part of relationship management, relationship skills focus more on one's way of being with others. *Social awareness* is highlighted as the ability to develop and demonstrate empathy through understanding and accepting different perspectives, as well as social and ethical norms (https://casel.org/core-competencies/). The ability to empathise is a big component in relationship skills. Fitzpatrick (2014) describes empathy as compassion. Another definition is the ability to imagine life in another person's shoes, which could sometimes be an unfamiliar situation for one (WHO, 1994a). Empathy supports social interactions and promotes nurturing behaviour, which tends to be especially beneficial towards those who need help and support in emotional situations or in health care. How relationship skills could translate in day to day life is showing respect for others, avoiding gossip (GOT, as cited in Waldron, 2009) or rumours, demonstrating simple turn taking (Fitzpatrick, 2014) for an inclusive environment for the people around one.

4 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

From the literature in Chapter 2 on the national curricula of both Finland and Singapore, life skills education appears to be well woven into the curricula through the values and formal sessions. All three broad categories of life skills as set in the framework in Chapter 3 are also visible in the national curricula. What remains, is therefore, to get an idea of how the curricula and life skills education are actually implemented on ground level in schools and classrooms. As such, drawing from the literature as framework set in Chapter 3, this research aims to explore how life skills education is promoted within and outside of the formal curricula through the following research questions:

- How does life skills education look like in classrooms and in schools?
- What are teachers' perceptions of life skills education?
- What are the challenges and support that teachers face in life skills education in classrooms and in schools?

5   IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY

This chapter describes and explains the research process where ethical considerations are also mentioned. The chapter follows with a narrative description of the participants of the study. Then, reliability of the study is discussed, together with my personal interest in the study.

5.1   The Research Process

Fundamentally, the study aims to obtain an understanding on how life skills education looks like on a practical level in every day school life. Both interviews and observations were initially intended for the study to obtain a clearer picture. However, due to time and other constraints, only interviews were conducted for qualitative content analysis.

For purpose of this study, three teachers were interviewed from both countries. The interview questions were framed to gather open-ended responses on their background and motivations as teachers, their approach to life skills education in classrooms and their perspectives on life skills itself as well as the practical aspects of life skills education.

The three participants from Singapore were gathered using my personal contacts. Given that all primary schools in Singapore are government schools, there was no need to specifically select teachers from particular type of schools to ensure wider perspectives. Coincidentally, one of the teachers was from a school where pupils are mostly from low-income families, which offered different perspectives. The interviews were conducted in Singapore in July and August of 2017. The interviews were exploratory in nature, with prompts given to keep the conversation close to the topic. The set of questions used as guidance can be found in Appendix 2 (Set A). The interviews were conducted in English mainly. During the interviews, some Chinese and Singlish (local slang) were

used for more accurate description. There was no problem understanding these languages which are my native languages.

From the initial data analysis, I felt that the first set of interview questions did not prompt the participants well enough to obtain clear information and perspectives. As such, some parts of the interviews were not directly relevant to the research topic. This includes interesting perspectives on the education system in Singapore. Although these perspectives were useful in understanding the bigger picture, the interview questions were subsequently revised to obtain more direct answers from the next three participants. The revised set of questions can be found in Appendix 2 (Set B).

In February and March 2018, three primary school teachers were interviewed in Finland. Similarly, participants were gathered from personal contacts, without intentional selection. It was useful that the teachers come from diverse roles. One was a classroom teacher, another doubled as a school principal while the third was a handicrafts teacher. The interviews were conducted in English. Language was a concern for these three teachers as English is not their first language. On the other hand, I do not understand Finnish. At some points in the interview, the participants struggled with finding the right words in English. The participants were encouraged to give their responses in Finnish in order to preserve the integrity of the data. I then enlisted the help of a Finnish friend who helped to transcribe those parts spoken in Finnish.

After transcription, coding for content analysis was done based on the framework established in Chapter 3. All data sets were analysed at the same time for consistency. Findings were then reported and discussed in relation to the research questions.

In this study, ethical considerations mainly concern participants' informed consent and anonymity. The participants were given full information on the purpose and scope of this study when contacted and before they agreed to the interview. At the start of the interview, the participants were briefed once again before giving their signed consent. While the participants did not request for anonymity, I made the decision not to reveal their names and schools. There is no conflict of interest.

5.2 Participants

All participants taught in schools in the cities. The following three teachers were interviewed in their schools in Finland.

F1 is currently a classroom teacher for 4th graders. She has been a classroom teacher in primary schools for more than 30 years. She feels that her role as a teacher has changed a lot over the years. Her priority now is to have time for the children and to be the "adult who notices them". She believes in leading the way for them to be themselves, "to find what is in them" and to help them learn all kinds of skills that they would need in life in the future.

F2 is currently a handicraft teacher in a comprehensive school where she has pupils from Grades 1 to 8. She has been a teacher in handicrafts for about 30 years. She has taught in primary schools, secondary schools and also at the adult education centres. She did not intend to be a teacher initially but she found it a good profession and now, a good way to inspire others to do something with their hands. She wants to give her pupils something to enjoy, and it makes her happy to see her pupils succeed in doing something by themselves.

F3 is both a school principal as well as a classroom teacher. He teaches eight lessons per week in Physical Education, Biology, Geography and Ethics. He graduated from teacher training in 2004. He believes that his role as a teacher is for the children and to raise them as good citizens for Finland.

The following teachers from Singapore were all trained at the National Institute of Education (NIE), as a requisite for teachers in government schools.

S1 has been a primary school teacher for seven months. Prior to that, he was teaching in a secondary school for two years and spent another one year in the headquarters of the Ministry of Education doing policy work. S1 is on the leadership track that would make him a school leader eventually. Personally, he wants to make a difference and develop himself as a school leader. He feels that while education is needed in Singapore to produce suitable human resource for the nation's economy, schools also play an important role in social engineering and imparting values to the young.

S2 was a primary school teacher for 2.5 years. In December 2015, she was posted to the headquarters of the Ministry of Education and is now working on

education policies. She is trained in Psychology and Special and Inclusive Education. As a teacher in her previous school, S2 sees herself as a role model for her pupils as they are typically from low-income families where parent presence and support is low. She hopes that the pupils she teaches will grow up to be independent, to be able to support themselves and their future family, and to make society a better place. Most importantly, she hopes that they will be good people who treat their peers well.

S3 worked as a primary school teacher for 17 years. She left her job in 2017 to take care of her children. As a form teacher, she had experience in most subjects except for Mother Tongue Language. She finds meaning and value in education and believes that the teachers have to be a good role model, mentor and facilitator. To do so, a teacher needs to have a strong philosophy in life. She emphasizes building relationships with her pupils - knowing them individually as a person and understanding their background, strengths and weaknesses.

5.3   Reliability

In qualitative research, validity and reliability are often discussed together. In this regard, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four commonly used criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to evaluate trustworthiness (as cited in Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009).

Acknowledging that a huge part of dependability hinges on the consistency of data across time and varying conditions (Elo, Kääriänen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs, 2014), a good description of selection and profile of the participants are provided in the previous subsections to improve dependability as well as credibility and transferability. This approach offers transparency to the readers and other researchers, giving them the opportunities to come to their own conclusions. While Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommends other ways such as prolonged engagement and persistent observation, this is not undertaken in this study due to constraints in time and resources (as cited in Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). Member checking was also considered but avoided due to drawbacks such as possible disagreement over interpretations or participants

changing their minds about their data (http://www.qualres.org/HomeMemb-3696.html). However, I worked closely with a group of peers who are in the same field of education to have discussions and feedback throughout the research process. For example, I shared the interview questions with the group and made revisions based on their feedback prior to the interviews. While the group of peers may not be experts in the phenomenon of life skills, the different perspectives were still useful.

I was the only one person who was involved in coding and the data analysis process. In this regard, quotations are used extensively to report the findings so as to enhance accuracy and hence confirmability. I would also like to acknowledge that there is always inadvertently subjective interpretation in the entire research process due to my personal background and experiences. However, while it is not possible to completely remove researcher bias, motivation or interest from the study, my motivations and perspectives are presented in the next subsection 5.4 to provide transparency.

5.4   Personal Interest

I was working as a private tutor in Singapore. In 2015, a 16-year-old student once engaged me a few months before her major examination as she had been failing in Mathematics. During our lessons, I noticed that when she encountered challenging questions, she would pause after each step for me to check and approve before she would continue. I also noticed that given time, she could usually solve most of the questions. I soon realised that what was stopping her were her self-confidence and her ability to cope in stressful and time constraining situations such as in an examination. From then, instead of coaching her on Mathematics equations and formulae, I showered her with encouragement and gave her tips and strategies for managing in a timed examination. It was a profound moment for me when months later, she thanked me for helping her achieve an A grade. It drove into me the importance of life skills. At the same time, it made me question why schools are not putting more efforts into this.

Furthermore, in interactions with my pupils, I find them constantly tired and stressed because of long school days and never ending homework and tests. When I asked what they usually did during their free time to understand their interests better, they could not answer me as they barely enjoyed free time. This was one of the reasons why I applied for the Masters Degree Program in Finland. It surprised me that despite a slower pace in school, with children enjoying a lot of free time after school hours, pupils in Finland perform equally well academically (OECD, 2016). It seems to me that clearly, there is more than one way to help pupils perform academically. After learning about the education system in Finland and also observing teachers in classrooms as part of my course, I realised that teachers here treat their pupils differently. The pupils receive more attention and autonomy, which allows for life skills to develop. As such, I am motivated to undertake this research study.

With the insights from this study, I hope to be able to design a curriculum that would have a good balance of academic and life skills education and benefit the pupils in Singapore.

6   FINDINGS FROM TEACHERS IN FINLAND

6.1   Teacher's Definition of Life Skills

Responses from teachers in Finland are inclined towards interpersonal life skills. All three teachers mention *cognitive life skills* such as problem-solving skills. F1 believes problem-solving skills are a big part of life skills and that it also includes being able to "manage and how to solve problems". *Personal life skills* such as motivation to do things are also mentioned. In terms of *interpersonal life skills*, F3 briefly mentions confrontation and communication skills such as "how to correspond with the teacher" and listening skills while F2 understands it as "how do you act with other people" and the ability to "behave like normal people do". F3 also mentions the ability to "get involved in the classrooms".

6.2   Life Skills in Classrooms and in Schools

As mentioned in Subsection 2.5, the Finnish curriculum includes lessons in Religion as well as Ethics which provide a platform for formal life skills education. For example, F1 sees the lessons as a way to discuss different situations with her pupils. She then involves her pupils in drama to explore ways to solve the situation. While working on the drama together, pupils might face challenges working with each other, which gives F1 an opportunity to discuss possible solutions with her pupils. On the other hand, in F3's school, Ethics lessons are used to work with pupils' self-image and explore pupils' views of themselves as a person, in their homes, schools, community, country and world.

Apart from that, F3 feels that "life skills are included in every lesson in the school of course and everyday". He gives examples of pupils learning problem solving by working with teachers and school assistants when they encounter problems or pupils practising decision making as they choose "how to do or what kind of businesses they want to make" in their life or in that particular

situation. F1 has a similar view. Although life skills education is not explicitly taught, she mixes it into the different subjects that she has with her class.

Cognitive life skills: Problem-solving and decision-making skills are encouraged by providing pupils with autonomy to make their own decisions and planning. School assignments tend to be open-ended. F3 mentions that they get to decide how and what they study, how and where to seek information and how to control their own learning. Pupils know what they are "supposed to learn", think about "what I should learn also" and "evaluate these things" after the learning chapter.

Both F2 and F3 talk about how handicraft projects can be used for pupils to practise cognitive life skills. Pupils make their own plan or "make some kind of paper work" according to F3. F2 shares that she allows pupils to make a different range of decisions depending on their developmental stage. For the lower primary pupils, she would "give them like two kinds of colours so they can choose" while for the older pupils, they can choose their own design, material and the technique that they want to use. Both F2 and F3 encourage their pupils to evaluate their own work at the end. All teachers support their pupils by working on the goals and plans with them. Through the project process, pupils also confront their ability to manage time. According to F2:

> Everybody is doing their own jobs and doing in their way and have the time. And I give them the date where it has to be ready and then they have to do it like on after school day or some other time if they can't do it ready in the classroom.

Personal life skills: All teachers promote self-awareness, healthy self-image and identity development by providing encouragement and feedback. F1 makes efforts to "boost the good in the child" and to make them feel welcomed and liked.

> Just this morning there was this one girl who was absent last week, all week. So first thing I met her there in the corridor, I said oh how great you are here. So she can feel that oh the teacher wanted me to come and she maybe has missed me. That kind of things.

Twice a year, F1 also provides formative feedback to her pupils which includes positive aspects and also areas which pupils can improve in. Similarly, F3 talks about having to "encourage them everyday and every lesson" especially for pupils with not so good self-esteem.

> Tell them about good things when they have succeeded something or they have managed to do something. Like a goal or they have succeeded in something. You have to raise them up and tell them that well done or something like that. That they get this self image of themselves up.

F2 does this by putting up her pupils' handicraft or artwork on display so that they can receive positive comments from peers. Sometimes, she finds pupils' works in the wastepaper bin or hears pupils making negative comments on their own work. She would use the opportunity to find out why and work out possible corrective actions.

> Or sometimes you can give it to a friend because a friend says oh that's really good, you can give it to me. So that's really good decision. So she can give it to her friend or something like that.

In terms of physical fitness and health management, the teachers ensure that pupils move around enough. In F2's handicraft classes, pupils are generally active as they move around workspaces. However, she would advise on their sitting posture when they are knitting or using the sewing machine. Breaks every 45 minutes are also typical in Finnish schools. In F3's school for example, pupils get 30 minutes breaks. The sports hall and sports equipment are also available for pupils' open use during breaks and along the school corridors. Inside the classroom, F3 mentions that some teachers use online applications on the screens in classroom where pupils can join certain activities using their own phones.

Apart from moving around, pupils learn about good health habits through themed months. In the municipality, there is a monthly theme to promote topics such as "sleeping or eating or whatever". Teachers can decide how they would incorporate this into their lessons. For example, in F1's class, they created menus in English and pupils track what they ate everyday. F3 discusses health related topics in his Biology classes. Additionally, school nurses also visit classes to discuss topics and answer pupils' questions. Good eating habits are also promoted through free and nutritious school lunches. Pupils can also refer to a plate model to know how much of each food type to take.

Interpersonal life skills: Interpersonal life skills are developed through interaction and group work within the class and between classes and even

grades. For example, F1 encourages communication and interactions "very much" in her classroom and also with the other classes of the same grade. In F3's school, as there is only one class per grade, teachers of different grades often collaborate to teach by mixing subjects together. Teachers also facilitate the group work process. F2 sometimes puts her pupils in groups for discussions, so that they can communicate and "solve the problems in a group". To facilitate that, F3 shares that "we have to all the time to guide the groups, how they manage to get, that everybody has something to do in the groups". In the case of conflicts inside or outside of group work, F3 would first have individual talks with the pupils involved to discuss then resolve the conflict together in a group.

> What is wrong, what do you think you made wrong, what happened, should you do like that, or is it possible to behave like that, or could you do some other.. like you do it or something like that. And then we discuss about this differences and something like that. And then we solve this problem maybe also apologise and think how do they behave and solve the problems in the future.

If necessary, he would also inform the parents through an online communication portal, Wilma.

6.3 Teachers' Perspectives on Life Skills and Life Skills Education

All three teachers feel that life skills are important and necessary. F1 points out that problem solving skills are essential as "if you can solve one problem, you can think in other situations also". All three teachers feel that communication is very important; in fact F3 believes that "nowadays the more important things are those communication skills". This means that "you are able to talk and speak and behave and everything like that". F2 also feels that pupils need to learn how to "act with other people, and that you do them what you wish other people do to you".

Life skills education is perceived as more important than ever now due to changes in upbringing and society. F3 feels that learning the basic skills in reading, writing or counting should be "a side effect" of education. On the other hand, F1 worries that there is "quite a gap there" for pupils. "Everything comes

easy" at home and they may not know how to "cope with normal life" or deal with situations where they have to make their own decisions, especially before coming to primary school. She mentions that even "many adults don't do that". Hence, pupils need a lot more "support in various kinds of areas nowadays".

At the end of the day, teachers feel that enjoying learning is most important.

> The main thing is that the pupils learn and they have fun in school and they think that it is nice to come to school and they are.. they like to be here, they meet friends. In most kinds of pupils, there is some kind of structure in the day.

> To get them to know what is.. what they can do with hands. And to do some beautiful plan and enjoy things they can do with their own hands.

> That they can feel that they are liked, maybe not always but loved. I don't know. But they can feel they are loved and liked here at school. That they are wanted.

6.4 Support and Challenges in Classrooms and Schools

Within the classroom, the teachers face challenges in supporting the pupils. F1 shares that some pupils require much more attention than others, and she feels that it is not fair to those that she could not spend as much time with even though those pupils "get maybe more attention at home and they are satisfied with a little less" in school. However, "it is how is work here". Another challenge that F2 faces is that pupils are not necessarily receptive to support and guidance and some would brush her off by saying "no discussion, we just want to work".

Generally, the teachers feel like they have a lot of autonomy to build relations with their pupils and to incorporate themes and life skills education into their classrooms. F1 loves this freedom "that we don't have to show all the time what we have done" because "society trusts that we do the things that we have to do here". F3 agrees with that and also feels this trust from the parents as "the parents are not like demanding us to do.. doing this or doing that." As such, they are able to help pupils learn in their own way. This autonomy and flexibility allow the teachers to incorporate life skills learning into lessons by mixing subjects up and teaching based on topics instead. In this regard, F2 does not feel a need to have separate classes focusing on life skills education.

> There are lots of projects where you can learn these things. And if the teacher knows what is the main point, so I think there are lots of subjects that you can learn these things. You don't have to have it like a own subject. It's going through all the different subjects.

F2 gives the example of knitting with her pupils. She says that while knitting, "we talk a lot and they solve some problems with the group when doing". "That is the most wonderful thing, just doing and talking about life skills maybe sometimes".

Having said that, all three teachers did mention time as a limited resource. Curriculum changes have affected the number of hours on non-academic subjects. For example, F3 mentions that "it is a shame" that Physical Education lessons have dropped from three to two hours as it is important for pupils to move. Similarly, F2 feels that there is "not so many hours anymore" in handicrafts.

> And there are lots of things you have to learn. And there's no time for learning all these skills because handicrafts is not so easy. You have to learn and do things and do it again that you got the skills so good that you do works.

F1 also agrees that they could "have more those skills lessons or skills subjects" but it is difficult to balance with the other subjects unless they increase the number of school hours. Although F1 feels that it is good to also have "luokan-valvojantunti" or class teacher's sessions in primary schools as well, the current lessons on Religion and Ethics are good platforms for now.

Also, F3 feels that more hours can be put in the non-academic subjects because "not every pupil is good in academic subjects" and that they may be "good at the non-academic". He believes that "every pupil should have some experiences in every day that they have managed to do something or they have reached something good in the school everyday".

7 FINDINGS FROM TEACHERS IN SINGAPORE

7.1 Teacher's Definition of Life Skills

Teachers in Singapore listed a wide range of life skills and also skills relating to character building, household skills, livelihood skills and survival skills. There is a strong theme of character building and values in the responses.

Cognitive life skills: Teachers state learning-to-learn skills such as taking notes, problem-solving skills such as critical thinking, being able to "independently search for answers" and also decision-making skills relating to planning their own study timetable and after school schedule. Furthermore, S1 explains that it involves making sure pupils can "make the right decisions when the crunch comes".

Personal life skills: Teachers in Singapore relate this to self-awareness and self-management. S2 feels it is "a lot about instilling in them discipline, routines and self-management" as many of her pupils often do not receive good parental or family support. She further explains that it involves teaching them to manage their emotions and the ability to be "independent and motivated" in managing their studies. S1 also believes that pupils need to learn to cope with failure and not be viewed as "fragile".

> If our pupils cannot fail in school.. then how do they face life? So to me, I usually get the weaker lot. So they fail an exam they look at me, they will cry, say I let you down. It's just an exam! I mean if you don't do well, if you are lazy, serve you right. If you have tried your best, I mean there's another exam at the end of the year, there's another exam next year right? Then why.. why you worry so much? I mean these are things we can remedy. If you cannot even fail in school, then we are a very sad state of society.

More practical skills are also mentioned. S2 shares that for the Primary 1 pupils, it could be something simple such as packing their own school bags. Resilience, responsibility, delayed gratification, social and emotional confidence and health management are also mentioned by the teachers. S2 also mentions understanding of boy-girl relationships. There is also mention of swimming and cycling which falls under physical fitness and health management.

Interpersonal life skills: The teachers agree that pupils need to learn to manage relationships with others. S1 uses the example of perspective taking and turn taking while S2 breaks it down as showing "respect to friends, to ask for things politely" and having the courage to apologise and to remediate mistakes. On the other hand, S3 sees life skills as having the capacity to be involved in the community, basically to "go and do something".

Others: Teachers talk about values education and character building as part of life skills. Character building and social and emotional learning can be said to be variations of life skills (UNICEF, 2012, p.8). However interpretations might differ. S3 discusses this as pupils having the capacity to pick litter, clean classrooms and toilets, visit elderly homes and orphanages, recycle, donate and play a part in sustainability. On the other hand, S2 mentions more practical household skills such as cooking and sewing while S1 lists livelihood skills such as Information and Communications Technology (ICT), computing skills, investment and financial literacy.

7.2   Life Skills in Classrooms and in Schools

As mentioned in subsection 2.6, the formal curriculum includes Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) for the development of life skills. According to S2, the Ministry of Education provides "a standard framework, syllabus and standard set of materials". Schools also receive resources such as "posters, cards, games". CCE lessons are conducted by the Mother Tongue teachers. For those without Mother Tongue, there will be an English speaking teacher for this purpose. S2 mentions that while there is a standard syllabus from the Ministry, "it's really up to the school how much else they want to weave it into their activities and stuff". For example, S1's school uses the Form Teacher Guidance Program (FTGP) to conduct sessions on financial literacy. S2 uses them to spend time with her pupils and talk about "different topics like bullying, managing your emotions, what happens when you are angry". Usually, at the end of each discussion, pupils will reflect and write in a journal which teachers "are required to mark". Essentially, as S1 mentions, FTGP "is a structured time … for form

teachers to build, touch base with children and everything". Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) are also mentioned by S2 as "an opportune platform to teach life skills". However, S3 disagrees. She feels that teachers "just read story, learn moral behind". S2 also mentions that some teachers do it as a "paper exercise" and that one "will never be able to tell" if the teachers actually deliver the lesson objectives.

S1 believes that it's a balance between having to "maximize on the informal" and having "structures to create formal". Therefore, he brings up the notion of "teachable moment" where values are "caught rather than taught". He brings up the examples of pupils having disagreements during group work in an English class or pupils arguing during break times. Those are "teachable moments". When referring to pupils in lower grades, he feels that life skills education has to be age appropriate so that pupils have the cognitive capacity to "be very mindful of my peers".

> Their attention span is very short and a lot of times you can't just engineer something to happen. Things will happen naturally. So you go in and talk to them about it. So both must happen at the same time but which one comes first will really depend on the situation.

S2 also mentions the teachable moments allow for life skills to be "taught during your normal curriculum time, you don't really need a dedicated time to do that". She believes that it is ongoing and there are always teachable moments to "pick up and teach the kids some things and help him or her to learn a lesson from what's going on in their day to day".

Cognitive life skills: S2 encourages problem-solving and decision-making skills with her pupils by guiding them in time management.

> For example, planning your study timetable, planning your after school timetable. Like how do you get your homework done, time for play, time for rest and then towards exams, how do you plan your revision schedule. And then there's time management within the exam paper. So you have this much time, you have this amount of questions. How do you allocate your time. If you cannot do a question, what do you do? Do you stall there for half an hour? Or do you move on?

On the other hand, S1 tries to create experiences for his pupils so that "the teaching is much easier" as he does not need to spend time "building it up" as

pupils learn from the experiences. For example, he brings his pupils to Kidzania, a constructed city where children can experience adult life by role playing at jobs and managing their own finances (http://www.kidzania.com/en). After the visit, he could discuss the experience with his pupils to consolidate their learning in problem-solving and decision-making.

Personal life skills: Practical skills such as public speaking skills are taught as part of the English syllabus according to S2 while financial literacy is included in FTGP in S1's school as mentioned earlier. Furthermore, S2 uses individual points system in her class to reinforce good behaviour such "to sit still when a teacher is talking, to show respect to friends, to ask for things politely". She sometimes receives "very bad feedback" from other teachers that her pupils are only well behaved in her class due to the points system and the rapport they have with her. While disappointed, she still feels that the points system is a good start for them to start developing habits.

In terms of identity development and pupils' worldviews, both S1 and S3 mentioned using events and festivals as a base to promote certain values, which shapes the pupils' identity and view of their place in society and the world. For example, S1 and S3 discuss Singapore's history with their pupils during Racial Harmony Day and National Day to help them understand the role they can play in the country. S3 also brings in the example of the September 11 attacks in her class to create dialogue, which she feels is very important.

> Killing is easy. I can kill you now with a knife. It's very easy to harm someone. But to save a life.. which one is more heroic? Ask them to talk. Sometimes throw the question back to them. Let them think. And when we have this kind of current affair, discuss with them. Let them see. So if you are the one working there, would you want? You would be running for your lives.. you will be terrified.. smoke everywhere! Let them have empathy.. some of them they don't have the empathy. Suddenly black out and you cannot breathe. Imagine now.. you know.. you cannot breathe.. how would you feel? You are running for your life, would you be scared? So life is so precious.

Interpersonal life skills: S2 not only uses individual points system but also a group points system in class to motivate her pupils to build teamwork. They practise supporting "one another to remind each other if one person is not behaving" and that "builds some kind of support within a classroom itself". Other than that, S2 tends to incorporate group work into normal classroom ac-

tivities during subject lessons so that "they will work together to produce the final product".

With regard to teachable moments, S3 believes in seizing the moment. When situations arise, she would stop the whole lesson to ensure that her pupils learn from the situations.

> When there are some teachable moments or when there are some fighting or something going on. And it's quite common. So every now and then when there is such thing, it will stop the whole lesson. And we will teach them. Why this thing happen? Why steal money? You know. And why you bully your friend? Then you will set aside you know 1 or 2 period to talk about it. It's okay.. you can't finish your English.. you can't finish your Maths but too bad. Just stop everything..

S1, on the other hand, would resolve the situation with the parties involved first, then "bring in (the topic) as a class next time" where "the teacher comes in front and addresses the class".

> This boy was accused by another pupil of mine that he did something wrong. He went to defensive mode, he said that this is unfair that kind of thing. So I pull him out, and spoke to him about it. Then when I came in, I decided to address the whole class.

7.3   Teachers' Perspectives on Life Skills and Life Skills Education

In the teachers' responses, two of them highlight the notion that life skills education is not about making life easier for the pupils but for them to learn how to manage and respond. For example, S2 feels that "it's not about removing stress from the kid completely but building resilience and managing it". S1 shares similar thoughts about instilling routines and discipline in the pupils so as to prepare them for the workforce in future.

> You need to get them into a routine. They need to be able to sit down, they need to be able to understand, they need to be able to listen. Because at the workplace how often do you run everywhere? Not very often right? Even those who are like flexible work hours.. they need to sit down and meet their clients correct? They can't move around and meet their clients, they can't jump around while meeting their clients so.. there's a space and time for it.

Furthermore, S1 believes that it is important for pupils to understand their identity as a Singaporean and why values are important. He acknowledges that young Singaporeans have a strong sense of self-entitlement and agrees with the Ministry's move in sending pupils to neighbouring Asian countries instead of

European countries so that pupils are shown "the realities that their parents and grandparents went through to get to where we are".

The teachers also believe strongly in tapping on teachable moments and feel that there is no need for too much structure in life skills education. S2 believes that it's how the teachers "design your classroom activities subsequently to teach and to provide opportunities for them to practise their values".

Apart from teachable moments, S1 feels that "at the same time, there are structures to create formal". S2 feels that physical education lessons are a good platform for teaching life skills. With regard to the formal CCE, S3 feels that sometimes it is still very book based and classroom based and prefers for it to be taken "out of the school context".

> So life skills is.. you are preparing them for life. So how do you prepare them for life? You must really let them taste life, experience life. If you don't let them taste life, how life is like, experience life, and you keep talking about life skills, talk, talk, talk and they just write, write, write. Those good students, they can write very good essays. You can have a compo on it, yes they can write very well. But did they really experience it? So how to have the life skills is to first throw them, get them to experience for themselves. It's through there they learn.

She suggests also for an interdisciplinary approach where pupils learn both academic and life skills by exploring topics through activities such as baking or planting. S1 also feels that more can be done and suggests including essential knowledge such as "artificial intelligence, or computing skills, coding skills" into the national curriculum. This does not have to be tested but "at least it's something that children are exposed to". To make time for this, he proposes to cut down on the number of major tests and examinations pupils have in a year from two to one. However, he still believes in maintaining the rigor as schools are where the pupils "pick up very foundation skills and understanding". The other teachers echo this thought. S2 feels that "primary school is where they build their foundational literacy and numeracy and without dedicated time to help them build a foundational numeracy and literacy they are not able to progress academically as well". This comes from a bigger perspective.

> Education also needs to be relevant to the economy and we need to be able to contribute to the economy. So I wouldn't then say that because values are important, then I should drop my EMS because at the end of the day, the students still need to be able to contribute to the economy as well. I find it difficult to drop anything on the formal curriculum to

trade off for values. But within the formal academic curriculum, there is definitely flexibility to make appropriate opportunities for them to build their values.

S1 also feels that pupils should understand that they need to at least "do reasonably well for everything" because "it's important to have options" or "a fair chance" as Singapore is a "meritocratic nation". He believes that knowledge is the key to opportunities. Similarly, S3 agrees that pupils have to "see beyond" and not have "just a narrow vision" as the "foundation is very important".

Ultimately, S3 believes that life skills is "a continual thing, it's a daily thing". She suggests for the Ministry to consider for all pupils to participate in Scouts activities, where pupils learn by doing and experiencing and creating value.

> Once you learn life skills, it's for you to create value out from it. It's not to destroy. You need to apply. If you can't apply, then it's not a life skill. It just stays inside. You need to apply. When you apply, you need to create value. It's not an application and creating value. And it has to improve something. I it doesn't help to improve the life of you and others and the community, then it's not helpful.

7.4 Support and Challenges in Classrooms and Schools

Support and challenges mentioned by the teachers revolve mainly around stakeholders, resources and structure. Firstly, discussing again on teachable moments, S2 expresses the concern that it is very much dependent on the teachers "whether they value the kids learning such things over them learning their EMS (English, Maths, Science)". She worries that there might be teachers who choose to focus on examination results since their "work review is not dependent on how good your kids are but good as in good people".

> You can't tell. There might be teachers who just go through the CCE curriculum or Form Teacher Guidance Period as a paper exercise. This is just part of my responsibility but you will never be able to tell. In fact these are the ones who might be finishing all of your books because they are just going through it right whereas sometimes I spend a lot of time just talking to the kids and they don't end up writing anything and then my book is empty but does that really mean I didn't teach my kids any values? So it's really hard to tell.

It is also possible that not all teachers are trained specifically for life skills education. S3 claims that teachers are entitled to take up courses but only some teachers do so. Therefore, she believes that teachers need to be very "well read".

> They need to know current affair, they need to have very strong philosophy of life. So it should come very naturally. Even if they are very.. some teachers are very well trained.. but it's all from books. Then they will just tell you the model answer.

On this note, S3 shares that although some teachers may not be good at teaching, it is possible for them to be promoted if they have good relations with their school principals. On the other hand, if the principal or supervisor dislikes a teacher, it may have an impact on the teacher's appraisal. This brings in the discussion of the influence of upper management or school leaders.

Apart from influence from the education ministers, who set the "vision, the direction they want", school principals play a critical role in setting the school culture, which could be very different depending on their focus.

> So one principal could be very academic driven.. very result oriented. Another principal could be very aesthetic.. go more for arts, sports, to get medals. And another principal more into character building. Then they will have character award.. give out some progressive character. So it depends on the.. different principals they have different styles. And that's how they shape the.. so the principal is very important. Actually leaders, they really set the tone, set the culture of the school. Set the vision, set the…

It is also up to the school leaders how they respond to external factors. S2 feels that there could be pressure from parents for pupils "to only do well in PSLE and think that schools should only be judged by how many top PSLE students they produce". In Singapore, pupils have to take a national examination called the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) at the end of their primary school education (https://www.seab.gov.sg/pages/nationalExaminations/ PSLE/general_information). Their performance would affect the secondary schools that they will be allocated to. In this regard, she feels that school leaders should not give in the pressure and also mentions "school leaders are always to keen to developing a culture like that". S3 disagrees slightly. In her opinion, some principals might not pursue life skills education as they feel the need to produce academic results.

> So it's a risk that they would have to take. So is the P(rincipal) game enough or not? Courageous enough to take this risk or not? Because life skill is not an overnight thing. You can't see it. You need to let it run for 1, 2 years. But those who are very result oriented.. end of the year they want. The principal might not take your idea for it. Cause end of the year they need to produce results. Then if that's the case.. it's not life skills. Life skills is the whole life. P1 to P6. It's a continual thing.. so no shortcut.

Secondly, schools also have different sets of resources and profile of pupils and parents. For example, S3 mentions that there are schools with hundred years of history and heritage, with good parents' support group and strong funding. On the other hand, in S2's school, parents are usually in the low-income bracket and have to work shifts. Therefore, even if the schools organise workshops to educate parents on financial literacy for example, parents do not come even if the workshops are heavily subsidised. In S1's view, educating and cooperating with parents is necessary. It would be confusing for a child if the values taught in school are not similarly advocated by parents at home. He feels that life skills education is enhanced when parents also make it a point to incorporate it in daily lives. S1 feels that schools do not "have the luxury of time to bring children out". Hence, parents can help to encourage discussions in everyday life such as exploring with their children how the Pokemon game works or why there is a need for them to take a bank loan and what the repercussions are. While S2 believes that "teachers will love doing it, to be able to teach, to support the child with every single way possible", it is sometimes not possible due to limited resources. She questions if it is the role of the schools to teach these things and that it is important for the Ministry to draw a line. Having said that, she understands that it depends on the demographics of the pupils. In the case of pupils with less parental support, it is necessary for schools to be "more involved to balance out". However, generally, she feels that "some of these things are actually for the parents to teach their kids" and "it doesn't have to be a teacher to do it".

To tackle limited resources, schools have been working with external organisations who provide support. In S2's school for example, the school hosts workshops conducted by external organisations and invites parents to participate. Schools also work with self-help or community groups such as Mendaki, Sinda, CDAC, and Eurasian Association. According to S2, these groups are "set up for the purpose of supporting the families within their communities". She feels that there is "definitely some room for collaboration" as it eases the load on the schools and teachers.

Lastly, S1 shares that the Ministry of Education (MOE) does provide support as well.

> But MOE, to their credit, they give a lot of leeway to how programs are being run or intended to be run in schools. Because the basic understanding is this.. the nation needs all these objectives but teachers, school leaders you are in the best position to know what your pupils and what your school needs. So feel free, list outcomes we want, how we get there you have a free hand. In fact, if you need help, I will provide some guidelines. It is never prescriptive. I think that's the beauty about how MOE and schools work.

8   DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews with teachers from both Finland and Singapore, similarities and differences can be noted on life skills education in classrooms and in schools. This chapter aims to summarise and relate the findings to the research questions and literature review on life skills and life skills education.

8.1   Formal Life Skills Education in Finland and Singapore

The purpose of this study is to have an understanding on how life skills education look like in classrooms and schools in Finland and in Singapore. The findings indicate that teachers in both countries do utilise the formal structure set by the curriculum for life skills education, namely in the form of Religion and Ethics classes in Finland and Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) and Form Teacher Guidance Period (FTGP) in Singapore. In both countries, teachers use these sessions to work on the pupils' view of themselves as well as in their homes, schools, community, country and world.

Based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, learning happens through one's participation and interaction with their experiences with the people and environment (as cited in WHO, 1994a). From the perspective of life skills education, active and experiential learning is suggested over didactic teaching and learning (WHO, 1994a). Participatory learning methods such as role-playing, "group work, discussion, debate, story-telling" are also suggested. The findings show that teachers in both countries use these methods especially group work for purpose of life skills development. Specifically relating to the formal curriculum, one of the teachers in Finland mentions the use of drama in her Ethics class whereas teachers in Singapore mention using standard materials provided. Pupils are also required to do journaling to reflect on their learning in class. This is in line with the idea that homework assignments should "encourage pupils to extend their analysis and practice of life skills to their lives at home and in their communities" (WHO, 1994a, p.19). One of the teachers in

Singapore did mention that pupils would sometimes write about situations that happened before in their lives.

In terms of formal structures, pupils in Singapore have the additional option to participate in Co-curricular Activities (CCAs). As mentioned previously in Subsection 2.4, these are school initiatives, organised and held in schools outside of formal curriculum time (Feldman, 2005), which provide another platform for pupils to develop themselves outside of the academic context. Pupils can choose to be involved in sports, music, arts, and clubs and societies based on their interests. While not directly in a fixed lesson or structure, findings show that teachers in Finland are given monthly themes which they are required to integrate into their lessons. One unique practice in Finland is also the provision of free school lunches, intended to promote good eating habits in pupils. This practice reflects how the nation values good health and well-being. On the other hand, in Singapore, findings suggest that national education is valued. Teachers in Singapore sometimes use current affairs, national holidays or national such as Racial Harmony Day as a starting point for discussions. This reiterates the importance of context for life skills education to serve social, cultural, national or development needs.

While previous studies suggest the effectiveness of targeted life skills programs and programs structured around sports, findings do not show that Finland and Singapore adopt these programs in the schools apart from the school-wide financial literacy module mentioned by one of the teachers in Singapore. Additionally, there is also no study on the effectiveness of the formal life skills structures in both countries. Based on the findings from this study however, teachers did raise certain concerns. One of the teachers in Finland mention that while the younger pupils enjoy the school lunches and eat well, the older pupils from grades 7-9 tend to not eat in schools. The teacher believes that these pupils head outside of school during breaks to get their own snacks instead. This brings the long-term effects into question – do pupils retain these good health habits after school years? In Singapore, the contrast is more apparent. One of the teachers mentions that her pupils are well-behaved only when she is in class and would misbehave when other teachers take the class. Again, this raises

questions on the effectiveness of these formal structures. Short-term effectiveness can be evaluated by specific learning objectives and pupils' perceptions of self-esteem and behavioural intentions (WHO, 1999). What is missing could possibly be specific learning objectives or process and outcome evaluation.

8.2   Informal Life Skills Education in Finland and Singapore

Based on the findings, formal structures only account for a small part in life skills education. Most of life skills education happen in classrooms, and is largely dependent on the teachers. Having said that, findings seem to suggest that the national curricula set a tone for the teachers in informal life skills education. This is observable in the different themes that emerge in the teachers' description of informal life skills education in their classrooms.

> If life skills program can be designed so that it can be both infused into other subjects and integrated either as a new subject, or within an existing subject, this offers greater potential for program success. (WHO, 1994a)

While far from being a concrete life skills program, the findings show that teachers in Finland and Singapore both see opportunities to infuse life skills education into lessons on a daily basis. This stems from the perspectives that the very nature of life skills education requires everyday life situations for learning and application. In Finland, teachers emphasise plan life skills elements into their lessons while in Singapore, teachers believe in catching teachable moments. Although seemingly similar, the difference lies in intentionality, which might be related to the level of autonomy and flexibility teachers have with their lesson structure. Teachers in Finland have the autonomy and flexibility to plan their lessons to intentionally and deliberately include life skills education. They can choose the topics and subjects to focus on as well teachers they could collaborate with, resulting in lessons bearing resemblance to project-based learning, which Wurdinger (2011) argues as a key factor in life skills education. On the other hand, findings do not suggest that teachers in Singapore have the same level of autonomy to engage in project based or multidisciplinary learning. In fact, teachers in Singapore bring up project based and multidisciplinary learning as something they hope to see in the curriculum. Regardless,

findings show that apart from mentions of incorporating group work and discussions, teachers from Singapore seem to rely heavily on teachable moments. Either way, in both cases, life skills education seems to be largely dependent on individual teachers' priorities and capacity. This brings about a set of benefits and challenges. Teachers in Singapore pointed out that some other teachers might not prioritise life skills education for various reasons such as wanting to focus on academic lessons. In cases where they do implement life skills education, it is also possible that it is done as a mere paper exercise. While informal life skills education in classrooms seems like a good idea, more could possibly be done to ensure consistency.

Teachers use a variety of approaches to allow for life skills development. Firstly, the findings show a common thread in that teachers see themselves as a role model for their pupils. Previous studies have shown that role modelling have a profound impact on pupils' behaviour (Rest, 1983, as cited in Kitchener, 1992). Kitchener (1992) proposes that to influence students' ethical behaviour, teachers themselves have to uphold the same values in their interactions and relationship with the pupils. Modelling of life skills by teachers and school staff is also necessary in life skills development (WHO, 1999).

Autonomy surfaces as a strong theme throughout the approaches that teachers use in Finland. For example, pupils are given a high level of autonomy in their schoolwork to develop their problem-solving and decision-making skills. Teachers in Finland also commonly and generously use words of encouragement and formative feedback to help pupils develop self-awareness and a healthy sense of self. Regular breaks between lessons and during lessons are enforced for pupils' physical well being. Teachers also expose their pupils to interactions with other pupils not only in their classes but also with pupils in other classes in the same grades and even with pupils across grades. Teachers would co-teach to bring different groups together or have their pupils work on projects together so as to provide opportunities for them to practise their interpersonal life skills. Theses approaches that teachers adopt are reflective of the formal curriculum, which places value on viewing pupils as human beings and

with respect. This in turn creates a culture where teachers are pupils-oriented, focusing on pupils' well being as can be seen from the teachers' approaches.

On the other hand, findings show that methods used by teachers in Singapore tend to be targeted at practical and specific outcomes. For example, pupils develop their problem-solving skills by planning their own study timetable to prepare for the examinations. Teachers bring pupils out for interesting experiences such as at Kidzania for the purpose of problem-solving in terms of finances. Teachers incorporate public speaking skills into English classes. Apart from those, one teacher uses points system to regulate pupils' behaviour. There is a general sense of teachers being task-oriented in their approach to life skills education. Again, this is reflective of the formal curriculum where education is measured in terms of Desired Outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2015b).

The interplay between formal and informal life skills education makes for an interesting discussion. Both countries have similar balance, with minimal formal sessions and school wide practices, and a much larger room for informal life skills education. While this gives space for teachers to determine how they can implement this in classrooms, it is also interesting to observe how the teachers in each country demonstrate similar values and approaches that could be attributed to the culture and tone set by the formal curriculum and guidelines.

Again, the outcomes of these approaches are not tracked and evaluated, which makes it challenging for evaluation of effectiveness and for improvements. There is a need for schools to be more intentional and critical in life skills education to ensure consistent outcomes.

8.3   Teachers' Perceptions of Life Skills Education

For teachers in both Finland and Singapore, there is no question that life skills are important. Teachers agree that life skills are important as they are transferable and versatile and can be applied to various life situations. Life skills education is also perceived as a continuous process, to be learned continuously and to be applied continuously too. While it is clear that all teachers view life skills as

important, it is interesting to note that the teachers of Finland and Singapore place importance on different types of life skills. Teachers in Finland value communication and ability to function according to social norms while teachers in Singapore emphasise routine and discipline that are important for work. Despite these differences which are likely to be related to cultural differences, the teachers seem to be coming from the same context as to why life skills development is important for their pupils. Teachers express a concern that pupils are used to an easy life and hence, have a strong sense of entitlement. When faced with situations, they may not know how to make their own decisions. This is the reason why teachers feel the need to address this gap through life skills education.

Although there is a consensus on the general importance of life skills, teachers in Finland and Singapore surprisingly have different perceptions on the relative importance of life skills and academic skills. Teachers in Finland feel that foundational numeracy and literacy should come as a "side effect" of education as pupils learn to be responsible human beings. However, while teachers in Singapore acknowledge the importance of life skills, they are not comfortable with compromising on numeracy and literacy. In a strongly meritocratic and resource scarce Singapore, teachers feel that academic skills are crucial for Singapore's economy. In S1's words, "schools must produce what the nation wants". Foundational numeracy and literacy are also important for pupils to have options later in their life, as they move on to higher education and even to working life in future. Despite these differences, all teachers want their pupils to enjoy learning and to grow up as good people. It appears that the start and end goals are ultimately the same, except that the approach can vary based on the different views on what entails a "good life".

8.4   Support and Challenges in Classrooms and Schools

Findings show that support and challenges vary the most for teachers in Finland and teachers in Singapore. Teachers in Singapore receive materials for CCE while teachers in Finland are given quite free play. Teachers in Finland are

generally happy with the freedom and autonomy that they have in classrooms to plan their lessons. This autonomy is by virtue of parents' trust in the teachers and generally in Finland's education system. On the other hand, teachers in Singapore are not afforded the same trust. One of the reasons for this is the emphasis on academic results. Parents hold teachers accountable for their child's academic performance or lack of. While the level of autonomy that teachers in Singapore have in classrooms is not discussed, teachers face pressure regardless in having to consider academic results in what they choose to do in classrooms. This pressure may be exemplified or lessen, depending on the tone set by the school principals. Increasingly, more schools are making bolder moves to break traditional models for education. For example, one school is now starting school at 8.15 a.m. instead of the regular 7.30 a.m.. The school even made sure that pupils still go home at the same time by redesigning the timetable structure. One of the immediate responses from parents was the concern that "with one hour less (of curriculum time), something must give" (https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/cnainsider/a-big-difference-in-students-after-nanyang-girls-starts-school-8833844). This response is telling of parents' priorities and also reflective of what they value in their children's education.

According to Hartley (2000), parents are important stakeholders in a child's education (as cited in Tekin, 2016). Research has shown that parental involvement benefits children in terms of academic achievement as well as in cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development (Wright, Stegelin, and Hartle, 2007; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994; Prior and Gerard, 2007; Kratochwill, 2004; as cited in Tekin, 2016). Findings show that teachers recognise both formal and informal parental involvement. According to Lefevre (2012), formal parent involvement usually refers to visible participation in school events and activities, as well as engaging in communication with the school while informal involvement refers to "behaviours, activities and emotional support that occur in the home" (p.710). Based on the findings, teachers in Finland try to involve parents by keeping them in communication through the online platform, Wilma. For teachers in Singapore, both formal and infor-

mal involvement is discussed. Formal involvement includes parents' participation in workshops that provide them with life skills education so that parents have the knowledge and resources to engage in informal involvement. One of the teachers in Singapore believe that parents' informal involvement would enhance pupils' life skills development as pupils are exposed to more opportunities and situations at home.

Time constraint was a concern for teachers in both Finland and Singapore. However, it is interesting to note the differences in context. Teachers in Finland feel that more time would be good to allow pupils to learn more at their own pace while teachers in Singapore want more time for life skills education so that they do not have to compromise on academic time.

8.5 Considerations and Interest for Further Study

This study provides an idea of the state of life skills education in classrooms and schools of Finland and Singapore based on teachers' perceptions. However, as identified in the earlier discussion, life skills education can be very subjective based on the nation's context as well as individual teachers' priorities. For a more holistic and deeper understanding of the phenomenon, more research is required in those areas to shed light on their impact on life skills education. Observations in classrooms would also add depth to the study. Additionally, as I grew up in Singapore's education system, it was challenging to report findings and write the discussion based on the actual data as past experiences and existing views often surfaced during the data analysis process. However, those also added deeper insights and understanding of the education system and culture. Recommendations for future studies could be to include a researcher from Finland to balance perspectives and insights or to include researchers not from these two countries to enhance objectivity.

Furthermore, findings of Finland may not be representative of the whole nation as interviews were only conducted in one municipality. As municipalities are given certain degree of autonomy, practices in life skills education might vary slightly in different municipalities. Additionally, in this study, par-

ticipants from Finland were relatively more experienced than the participants from Singapore. This might have contributed to the different perspectives shared by teachers from both countries.

Lastly, this study excludes various perspectives and contexts of life skills such as life skills from the perspective of mental health or life skills from the perspective of pupils' wellbeing. Studies from those perspectives could provide additional depth to understanding life skills as a phenomenon in primary schools. It would also be interesting to look into the perspectives of pupils and parents to provide a more holistic understanding.

9 REFERENCES

Adewale, J. G. (2011). Competency level of Nigerian Primary 4 pupils in life skills achievement test. *Education 3-13, 39(3)*, pp. 221-232.

Basic Education Act (1998). *Basic Education Act 628/1998*. Retrieved from http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/ kaannokset/1998/en19980628.pdf.

Bessant, J. (2014). A dangerous idea? Freedom, children and the capability approach to education. *Critical Studies in Education*, pp. 1-16.

Currie, L. K. (2012). Life-Skills as a Predictor of Academic Success: An Exploratory Study. *Psychological Reports, 111(1),* pp. 157-164.

Eddison, S. (2017). Design for life: The model home that's helping to reshape a community. (Life Skills Centre at Arbourthorne Community Primary School, Sheffield, England)(Talking Point). *Times Educational Supplement, 5246*, pp. 44-47.

Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative Content Analysis. *SAGE Open, 4(1)*.

Feldman, A. F. (2005). The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions. *Review of Educational Research, 75(2)*, pp. 159-210.

Fitzpatrick, S. (2014). Priorities for Primary Education? From Subjects to Life-Skills and Children's Social and Emotional Development. *Irish Educational Studies, 33(3)*, pp. 269-286.

Ginter, E. J. (1999). David K. Brooks' Contribution to the Developmentally Based Life-Skills Approach. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 21(3)*, pp. 191-202.

Hajizadehanari, K. (2013). The effectiveness of life skills education with religious approach to safety, mental health and self-esteem in elementary school students. *The European Journal of Social & Behavioural Sciences, 5(2)*, pp. 927-936.

Irannezhad, S. (2017). Effectiveness of life-skills training on the mental health of 2nd grade female High School students in Bam-Iran. Bali Medical Journal, 6(3), p. 583.

Jamali, S. (2016). The Effect of Life Skills Training on Mental Health of Iranian Middle School Students: A Preliminary Study. *Iranian journal of psychiatry, 11(4)*, p. 269.

Kaligis, F. (2012). Improving adolescent's mental health in the aftermath of Mount Merapi eruption with life-skills training. *Neuropsychiatrie de l'enfance et de l'adolescence, 60(5)*, p. S229.

Kitchener, K. S. (1992). Psychologist as Teacher and Mentor: Affirming Ethical Values Throughout the Curriculum. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 23(3)*, pp. 190-195.

Lefevre, A. L. (2012). Latino Parent Involvement and School Success. *Education and Urban Society, 44(6)*, pp. 707-723.

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2012). 2014 Syllabus. Character and Citizenship Education. Primary. Retrieved from https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/education/syllabuses/character-citizenship-education/files/2014-character-citizenship-education-eng.pdf

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2015a). 21st Century Competencies. Retrieved from https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/21st-century-competencies

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2015b). Desired Outcomes of Education. Retrieved from https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/desired-outcomes-of-education

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2016). Primary School Curriculum. Retrieved from https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/primary/primary-school-curriculum

Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2016). Primary School Education Booklet. Retrieved Apr 28, 2017, from https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/primary/primary-school-education-booklet

Noddings, N. (2005). *Challenge to Care in Schools*.

OECD (2016), PISA 2015 Results in Focus, PISA, OECD Publishing.

Opetushallitus. (2016). National core curriculum for basic education 2014. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.

Papacharisis, V. (2005). The Effectiveness of Teaching a Life Skills Program in a Sport Context. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 17(3)*, pp. 247-254.

Richards, K. C. (2010). Self-care and well-being in mental health professionals: The mediating effects of self-awareness and mindfulness. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 32(3)*, p. 247.

Sahu, K. (2013). Life skills and mental health. *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing, 4(1)*, pp. 76-79.

Sobhi-Gharamaleki, N. (2010). Efficacy of life skills training on increase of mental health and self esteem of the students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 5*, pp. 1818-1822.

Tekin, A. K. (2016). Parental Perceptions of Life Context Variables for Involvement in Their Young Children's Education. *Education 3-13, 44(3), pp. 353-13, 2016, Vol.44(3)*, p.353-366.

UNESCO (2000). The Dakar Framework for Action. Education for all: Meeting our collective commitments. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121147e.pdf

UNICEF (2012). Global evaluation of life skills education programmes. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_66242.html

Waldron, J. J. (2009). Development of life skills and involvement in the girls on Track program.(Original Research Article)(Report*). Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal, 18(2)*, p. 60.

World Health Organization. Division of Mental Health. (1994a). Life skills education for children and adolescents in schools. Pt. 1, Introduction to life skills for psychosocial competence. Pt. 2, Guidelines to facilitate the development and implementation of life skills programmes, 2nd rev. Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/iris/handle/10665/63552

World Health Organization. Division of Mental Health. (1994b). Life skills education for children and adolescents in schools. Pt.3, Training workshops for the development and implementation of life skills programmes, 1st rev. Geneva : World Health Organization. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/iris/handle/10665/59117

World Health Organisation (1999). Partners in Life Skills Education: Conclusions from a United Nations Inter-Agency Meeting. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/30.pdf

Wurdinger, S. (2011). Cultivating Life Skills at a Project-Based Charter School. *Improving Schools, 14(1)*, pp. 84-96.

Zhang, Y. & Wildemuth, B.M. (2009). Qualitative Analysis of Content.

10   APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Example of life skills from various literature

- **Interpersonal communication/ human relations**
  - Establish relationships, participate in groups and be close with others, developing a team and appreciating differences (Waldron, 2009)
  - Respect for other and self, cooperation, listening, avoiding gossip, learning about community, community begins with me, finalizing community project, "girl-thang" media portrayal (GOT as cited in Waldron, 2009)
  - Communication/interpersonal skills (Adewale, 2011)
  - Responsibility, team player (Wurdinger, 2011)
  - Behavioral psychological skills – communicating effectively (Papacharisis, 2005)
  - The ability to work with a team and within a system (Papacharisis, 2005)
  - Conflict resolution, negotiation, compromise, empathy, compassion, interacting with peers and adults and working effectively in groups, learning the suite of social skills we all need to get along including norms and conventions for relating effectively to peers, such as listening and turn taking, developing understanding and respect for difference (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
- **Problem solving and decision making**
  - Goal setting, critical thinking, time management (Waldron, 2009)
  - Changing behaviours, making healthy decisions, standing up for myself (GOT as cited in Waldron, 2009)
  - Decision-making and critical thinking skills (Adewale, 2011)
  - Creativity, problem solving, decision making, time management, finding information, learn how to learn (Wurdinger, 2011)
  - Cognitive psychological skills (Papacharisis, 2005)
  - Making effective decisions (Danish & Donohue, 1995; Danish & Nellen, 1997 in Papacharisis, 2005)
  - The abilities to solve problems, meet deadlines, set goals (Papacharisis, 2005)
  - **Thinking skills**: higher order skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation which involves helping children to question, to analyse, investigate, think critically, solve problems, apply learning and to develop flexibility and creativity, supporting children to make decisions, ability to make good informed decisions, give them the courage to question and the confidence to decide for themselves and not succumb to peer pressure (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
  - **Learning skills**: to form learners who know how to learn throughout their lives and ultimately learners who can learn-to-learn for themselves, moving away from learning by rote and more towards teaching children how to learn and how to think because they will have to learn, unlearn, and relearn throughout their lives → set own learning goals, make own learning plans,

develop skills to answer their own questions, assess and evaluate their own work and reflect on their learning (Fitzpatrick, 2014)

- **Physical fitness and health maintenance**
  - o Ability to be physically active, feeling good about one's body, nutritional maintenance (Waldron, 2009)
  - o Physical habits, expression emotions, spirituality, effects of drug use (GOT as cited in Waldron, 2009)
  - o Physical psychological skills - Taking the right posture (Papacharisis, 2005)
- **Identity development and purpose in life**
  - o Maintain positive self-view, clarify values, monitor themselves (Waldron, 2009)
  - o Values, positivism, standing up for myself (GOT as cited in Waldron, 2009)
- **Social Emotional Learning**
  - o Confidence and vision to achieve something (Eddison, 2017)
  - o Coping skills (Adewale, 2011)
  - o Self-management skills (Adewale, 2011)
  - o The ability to perform under pressure, handle both success and failure, receive feedback and benefit from it (Papacharisis, 2005)
  - o Happiness, meditation (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
- **Household skills**
  - o Washing up, preparing food, making a bed and vacuuming a carpet (Eddison, 2017)
  - o Growing plants, preparing food, cleaning (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
  - o Budgeting and paying bills (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
  - o Craft such as sewing and knitting (Fitzpatrick, 2014)
- **Prevention**
  - o They can be utilized in many content areas: prevention of drug use, sexual violence, teenage pregnancy, HIV/ AIDS prevention and suicide prevention. The definition extends into consumer education, environmental education, peace education or education for development, livelihood and income generation among others. (Sahu, 2013)
- **Personal safety/ survival skills**
  - o Day-to-day dangers and real life emergencies (North Devon Gazette, 2013)
  - o Survival skills (Adewale, 2011)
  - o Life and safety skills (Fitzpatrick, 2014)

Appendix 2 Interview Questions (Set A)

Beginning of interview to build rapport	Background information • Name • How long have you been a teacher? (Number of years of experience as a primary school teacher) • Subjects taught • What inspired you to be a teacher? • What do you think is the main role of a teacher? Or what is most important in the classroom? • What do you think is at the core of your work?
On perceptions of life skills	• Can you share a bit about how life skills development is approached according to the government/ school guidelines? • What are your opinions about the government's/ school's approach to life skills? • In your opinion, how important is life skills development as compared to academic subjects? • What do you think could be added to the curriculum?
Life skills development in classrooms	• What do you think is the most important academic skills? What about non-academic skill? • How does life skills development look like in the classroom when you teach? • Can you share an example that worked well? • Can you share an example when it did not work well? • What are your constraints/ considerations? • What kind of changes/ improvements could provide support?

Appendix 2 Interview Questions (Set B)

Beginning of interview to build rapport	Background information • Name • How long have you been a teacher? (Number of years of experience as a primary school teacher) • Subjects taught • Why did you become a teacher/ What inspired you to be a teacher? • What do you think is the main role of a teacher? Or what is most important in the classroom? • What is your current understanding of life skills (very briefly)?

Life skills development in classrooms	• What is currently done in schools and in classrooms to develop these life skills?
	• Can you give specific examples for the categories
	   o Interpersonal communication/ human relations
	   o Problem-solving/ decision-making
	   o Physical fitness/ health maintenance
	   o Identity development/ purpose in life skills
	• What are some constraints/ challenges in developing life skills?

On perceptions of life skills	• What do you think is a good balance of time spent on life skills and time spent on academic subjects? • What would you like to change in the curriculum?