

Unpacking gender: social and emotional skills in the Global South

Matthew Jukes, Fellow in International Education at RTI International

Transcript

Julia Tilford

Hello, I'm Julia Tilford and I'm delighted to welcome you to this podcast from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of poverty and inequality in the global South. This podcast features 3 in-depth conversations between young lives Director Professor Cath Porter and research into policy experts to explore the topic of children's skills, particularly how these skills develop and what this means for children's futures. In the first episode, Cath explores the less well documented socio emotional skills with Doctor Matthew Jukes. In the 2nd Doctor Renu Singh joins Cath to spotlight gender differences in higher education completion in India and in a three-way conversation, Young Lives senior policy officer Kath Ford and Foreign Commonwealth Development officer Sarah Lane Smith joined Cath to explore what policies can support children's skill development and how change to improve young lives comes about.

We really hope you enjoy these conversations. You can find all the research on our website at www.younglives.org.uk and for regular updates, follow us on social media.

Would like to thank all our contributors to this podcast and note that the views expressed here are their own. And finally, we thank all our funders for their generous support of Young Lives research, especially Echidna Giving whose funding made these podcasts possible?

And so over to Cath.

Cath Porter

So I'm Cath Porter. I'm the director of the Young Lives program at the University of Oxford.

I think people come into this podcast probably know who we are, but we've been running for more than 20 years now in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. We've been following the lives of 12,000 children since the beginning of the Millennium, and it's a very broad-based study that looks at all aspects of children's lives as they develop. And I'm here today with Doctor Matthew Jukes, who's a fellow in international education at RTI International, and he's got 25 years of academic and professional experience in the education sector and worked in several countries, including Tanzania, in particular. He's worked at Harvard University and he's also done many consultancies and collaborations with places like the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID and Save the Children.

So, hi, Matthew.

Matthew Jukes

Hi, Cath.

Cath Porter

Nice to be talking to you today. Today we want to talk about something which has several terms in the literature, psychosocial skills, social, emotional skills, non-cognitive skills to the economists. Can you decipher this language a little bit and try to tell us what we're talking about here?

Matthew Jukes

Yes. Well, I mean, I think the sector lacks a pithy definition or a concise consistent term just because it does include so many different types of skills. But I use social and emotional competencies or skills which I think covers most of what we talk about, that the emotional is understanding, recognizing, and being able to express your own emotions, to manage your own emotions, and to recognize emotions and others. And then social is about being able to interpret and navigate the social world and interact with others, have healthy relationships.

But I think the term, although the focus is on the social and emotional there are more cognitive competencies that people include in this bracket, such as executive functional skills, which are about managing setting goals and managing your behavior around achieving those goals.

But also things like creativity and critical thinking get thrown in there as well. Maybe we'll use social and emotional skills for this chat.

Cath Porter

Great, great. Thank you. And in your career, you've done a lot of work obviously on this topic, which is why we're talking today. So can you tell us a bit about your sort of personal journey and academic journey through navigating this work?

Matthew Jukes

Yeah. So I started my post PhD career with a group that was interested in the impact of health and nutrition on children's cognitive development. So I did a couple of, several studies, but two in particular one in Tanzania and one in The Gambia where we were looking at the impact and measuring a set of fairly standard IQ like tests, cognitive tests.

But was very interested in getting the perspective of the populations who were involved in the research, what they valued as competencies for their children to develop and what you find across sub-Saharan Africa particularly in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa that people value a whole set of things above cognitive skills like social responsibility is a useful term that that encompasses a whole set of these traits, but things like kindness and cooperation and respect and obedience will tend to be the first things that certainly the populations in the Gambia and Tanzania told us were the things they wanted their children to develop, you know, before cognitive skills. So I think in a way this is something that, that we in the in the Global North have come to more recently, but has always been central to the values of African communities.

Cath Porter

Right, right. And like you say, yes, we we've come late to I think this is something where in in the past we've often been very focused on as you say cognitive skills, things like reading, writing, arithmetic. But what you're saying is that on top of this these other skills are more valued potentially in Global South context.

Matthew Jukes

Yeah. I mean, I think that broadly the sort of rationale for thinking that there's a difference is.

There's this fascinating work on how people construct the self, the sense of self either are kind of western, but particularly common in you know Western. But urban, educated, industrialized societies, you have a view of the self as being independent.

You think of yourself as you know you, you have perspectives and preferences and self-esteem. And I mean communities, particularly with a history of subsistence agriculture, the self is construed as more interdependent that you think of yourself in relationship to others.

And things like sense of belonging, respect, obedience, togetherness are more important than thinking about your own, your own self.

Cath Porter

So it seems you've got very direct experience yourself of talking to people in The Gambia in Tanzania about the importance of these skills and the value they place for their children and what opportunities it gives to children, right?

Matthew Jukes

Yeah. Well, I mean, I don't think I ever actually speak to the people themselves, but I'm training a group of people who are I'm standing around the corner whilst they're talking to them? Yes, but I'm. I'm it's amazing how you find this consistently across Africa. These things that are valued, that respect, obedience, sense of community and it makes sense because if you think about what's functional for people's lives or what's adaptive for people's lives, if you're living in a small community, you know and you're and you, you're farming, you're working in a large family group, maybe you're farming, what makes you economically productive is functioning as a group, not particularly standing out or being creative and all your relationships that you have are with people you know and you see every day. So maintaining those relationships is paramount. If you compare that to an urban environment, even you know within Tanzania or The Gambia.

Where commerce is prevalent, you need cognitive skills to be able to.

Uh, participate in in commercial activities and use technology and most of the people you interact with are strangers, so you have more fleeting interactions. So those kind of those, you know, those interpersonal skills or the sort of maintaining relationships with people is less important.

So it makes complete sense that that by and large culture changes slowly. But by and large and it's set up to adapt to the needs of the society you live.

Cath Porter

Yeah, that's really interesting and what's the state of the academic literature on this topic? Is there a lot of research evidence? Do we have surveys on this topic or how? How do we measure skills like this?

Matthew Jukes

Well, it's a challenge. I mean I think that the, the academic literature.

Even the global North has a long way to go, but there's been a lot of progress in recent decades in in measurement and evaluations and we know I'm particularly interested in in the role of Social emotional skills in and in education and the development of academic skills, and we know that lots of studies,

largely in the global North that that programs to develop children's social emotional skills can have a benefit to their academic skills. But there's a huge dearth of research in the global South.

If we just take one example Africa. Africa is having a quarter of the world's children and .6% of research in top child development journals. So there's a complete mismatch.

And I think one of the challenges is that because of what I was saying earlier about, you know, we have these theories and frameworks and some good anthropological evidence of what about how childhoods are different in to take the extremes, you know, small subsistence, agricultural community and a big city.

That people's intuitions about the kind of things that are important can be way off, like if maybe you you've read dozens of articles about the importance of self-esteem, you feel self-esteem is important to you. Like it makes sense to you that self-esteem is a critical thing, right? But because there's just no research.

In you know these other contexts and lack of academic voice in this other context, it could be that it isn't and you know, I would argue that maybe a sense of belonging is more important than how you see yourself. That kind of the sense of self-esteem that we have.

But largely, as I say, we just don't know because there's just huge lack of research in this area.

[Cath Porter](#)

So, Matthew, I wanted to talk more specifically about the work you've been doing recently using the Young Lives Data set, investigating gender differences in the evolution of Socio emotional skills. So could you tell us a little bit more about it please?

[Matthew Jukes](#)

Yes. Well, it's been great to have the opportunity to work on this the young lives data set.

You can tell you you'll know better than me what it what it consists of, but it consists of what 5-5 rounds of data that we've been able to analyse over 20 something years in four countries and just and following the same individuals over time. So you've been able to really understand the growth in a set of skills that you measured and understand the relationship between those skills.

Yeah. So as I say, in a field where we're really lacking information, it's really been a gold mine to be able to dig into it.

We looked at I guess, a couple of questions over 2 papers that we're focused on the development throughout adolescence of competences - social, emotional competencies that relate to the self. Things like self-efficacy, the belief that you can that that you can be effective in what you do, particularly academically in agency, the feeling that you have control of your life.

So these are things we looked at across the four countries. There are a couple of things that came out of the data which were interesting. One was looking at the gender differences in the development of these competences. We found this particularly clearly for self-efficacy that throughout adolescence the gender gap widens with the boys out outperforming girls in this sense of self efficacy.

And this is something we see from, in the literature from elsewhere that it seems that adolescence is a particularly important time for the development of concepts of self.

And it's when gender differences tend to emerge where they do so. It's interesting that we find this, at least in in three of the four countries in The Young Lives study.

And it has huge implications, of course. That as girls, young women are leaving education and going into employment. They're starting that journey at a disadvantage and that they have less feeling of control over their lives, less sense in their own or less confidence in their own abilities.

And we don't know yet because we haven't followed them beyond that point. But the expectation is that that would set them at a disadvantage in, in, in a whole range of future life outcomes.

Cath Porter

Yeah. And I mean in, in other work that's been done using young lives. This is also despite the fact that in some cases for example in Vietnam, actually girls are outperforming boys in maths, for example, but the gender gap in the in the socio emotional skills is girls are at the disadvantage.

Matthew Jukes

Yeah, that's right. And so the other interesting thing we found which relates to that was about the relationship between academic and skills and self efficacy, and of course when you're when you're a school people, you spend a lot of time at school and how well you do there is a major source of how you feel about yourself and we found in the data actually a bidirectional relationship that children who were doing better in, which we looked just at mathematics.

But children doing better mathematics had a stronger sense feeling of control over their lives, but then those who had a strong feeling of control over their lives went on to have better, better maths later on. So there's this bidirectional relationship.

But going back to your original question, even though we find this relationship between academic achievement and self-efficacy. In Vietnam, as you say, there isn't. The girls are doing as least as well as boys and yet their sense of their sense of efficacy, self-efficacy is still reduced compared to boys so it's an interesting finding. Yeah. And we don't know, I think we haven't really got to the bottom where those come from, but by and large, it seems that the countries with more positive gender attitudes, that is that people perceive that boys and girls, Men and women have similar roles in society and can do things equally well. Tend to have a less likely to have this gender difference in in self efficacy.

Cath Porter

So Matthew, when you say 3 out of the four countries girls are at a disadvantage with regard to the development of their social emotional skills, can we just delve into which of the three countries that is?

Matthew Jukes

Yeah, sure.

Two countries were India and Ethiopia, and those were the countries also with less equal attitudes to gender roles. So that was consistent. And then the other country was Vietnam and we didn't see the pattern in Peru.

Cath Porter

The findings are really interesting. How about policy implications, then, of the work?

Matthew Jukes

Well, I think the implication of this study in particular is that if we can implement interventions that are able to improve girls, self-concept, self-efficacy and sense of agency, then we may be able to narrow this gap and prevent the knock-on effect in future life outcomes.

And there are studies out there that have shown a positive impact on these kind of self-related concepts for adolescent girls.

RTI recently, last year we published a review of programs in lower-and-middle income countries that had been shown to have an effect and one of them was a study in a program in Uganda that had been successful in improving a whole range of outcomes, including things like sort of empowerment related outcomes, including things like agency for girls.

So that would be a clear policy implication I think more broadly, what we found in that review that we conducted is that there have been a number of effective approaches to building children's social emotional skills in low-and- middle income countries.

One approach is a very direct sort of taking children aside, taking people aside into a separate class and having a set of activities with them to build skills, things have been successful in in that category have been things like developing children's growth mindset. You know, the belief that if you work hard you'll improve your abilities, particularly academic abilities.

Things like mindfulness and executive function. So that sort of goal directed planning kind of behaviour.

All of these things have been shown to work in different contexts as sort of targeted skills programs.

Other approaches have been successful by trying to infuse these things rather than take them. Taking a separate lesson and fuse them into instruction so that they're part, maybe of textbooks, or just in the way that teachers interact, help develop children's skills through typical lessons.

And then another approach is focused on school climate. So trying to really in some ways responding to children's social emotional needs.

And particularly in context where you know that chalk and talk kind of education is common and there's a need to get children to be more involved, participate more and they're learning, ask questions, then creating that, welcoming, the emotionally supportive, welcoming environment for children to do that is very important. Has been shown to be successful in a couple of contexts.

Cath Porter

How enthusiastic are governments about this kind of policy? Do you have any examples of where governments are open to this kind of thing or against it?

Matthew Jukes

Well, I think that there is support for these kinds of programs. I think we haven't had great examples of these programs going to scale of working, how to get them to fit them into the into the curriculum.

But there is a lot of enthusiasm. I went to a fantastic initiative, the RELI initiative in East Africa a couple of months ago, for a conference which is a regional East African conference.

And all the governments, I think 8 or 9 Governments of east Africa were there and all very keen on, I mean the term we used in the meeting was life skills but all very keen that life skills is in is integrated into the curriculum somehow.

So I think that there is support. I think some of the things we need to do to get more support I feel like you know the skills are important for a whole range of things that are important for well-being for a whole range of life outcomes. I think demonstrating that education is more effective when you focus on these skills that children learn that the reading and writing and the arithmetic more effectively because you focus on these skills could be a very key way to persuade, to advocate for these kind of programs. And I think, and as I said figuring out ways to take these programs to scale, you know, because they can be quite involved targeting a range of different competences. So how to take to them to scale within a within a national education system, I think is a challenge too.

Cath Porter

So, Matthew, how do you see the research agenda developing in the future?

Matthew Jukes

Well, I think there a number of fronts we need to work on.

One of the issues I just mentioned, which is trying to understand better how these skills have an impact on children's academic skills. We have some research, a national survey we did in primary schools in Kenya, which has some nice results that actually a whole range of different social and emotional skills to help children to succeed academically. I think there's a need I see also to get fine grained you know we, in most of this conversation, we are still talking very generally about social emotional skills, but like that covers you know, empathy relationships, cognitive flexibility, creativity. Which of these are important and in what ways?

And I'm also very passionate about the idea of understanding these skills, which of these skills are important in context and trying to do a better, a better job of catering to the needs of populations, which I think is challenging because I mean I've talked about the rationale why we think some skills may be different in in different contexts around the world that have valued differently important for life in different ways.

But of course everywhere is changing and you know, education itself is a major instrument of change and we found in our research in Tanzania that if you compare the kind of social, emotional skills that are valued by teachers. They often differ from those valued by parents, which is kind of some way a sort of microcosm of, I think, of cultural change, and teachers tend to, you know, be educated and come from urban environments.

So, for example, we found that teachers want students to have self-confidence and curiosity are two things that teachers mentioned in in in Tanzania that that parents didn't. So there's a really interesting divide there, which and that's particularly in rural areas that you find the parents in even in small towns tend to endorse curiosity as a value more than in rural areas. So I think the then the challenge in designing programs to support social emotional skills and working out which ones to focus on means you have to balance the priorities of what experience is the child getting at home this is what are they

getting at school but also what is adaptive for their lives now versus what will be adaptive for their lives in 10 years' time when they leave school? How, how will society have changed? So I think this is a, you know, a conversation with a lot of different groups of stakeholders and research to understand that.

Cath Porter

Thanks very much, Matthew. It's been a pleasure.

Matthew Jukes

My pleasure.