
Ebersohn, L. and Eloff, I *Life skills & assets* (2nd Edn)
2006. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
ISBN 0 627 02532 3

Ishara Maharaj

Life Skills & Assets is a text which fills an important gap in the literature as it provides a link between the epistemological perspective of asset-based approaches and a theoretically grounded programme for life skills facilitation. The practical asset-based programme for life skills is conceptually well framed and can assume utility within educational, community, preventative health care and helping profession contexts. The very clear paradigm shift from the needs-based model to the asset-based model is well reasoned and avoids the polemics that can cause one to detract from the authors' sustained attention to the potential of asset-based approaches to influence well-being and life proficiency. The approach does not overtly challenge the larger endemic complexities of social injustice, inequality and social stratification, but it does seek to empower individuals and communities to impact on their own social transformation. This updated edition improves upon the first by drawing clearer and more coherent links between life skills and the asset-based approach.

The asset-based approach which forms the foundation for life skills intervention is framed to facilitate an assessment and building of human strength or life skills from a perspective focused on systematically building competency rather than correcting weakness. The theory behind asset-based approaches indicates a shift in the framing of the problems in societies such as poverty and social exclusion. It shifts the perspective from a society in social turmoil and the preoccupation with victims to a society with the capacity for fulfillment and a life worth living. The focus is on proactively mobilizing the skills for life proficiency by identifying strengths and assets, both intrinsically and extrinsically. The approach does not deny that needs exist and is by no means reductionist. The perspective simply has a different starting point which is the half-full glass perspective as compared to the half empty glass perspective. It empowers people into the realization and awareness that they do not have to be passive recipients of a capitalist social order but that they can access and mobilize knowledge and local resources to address needs and challenges, which can be very affirming and empowering. The authors offer insight into the theoretical foundations of asset-based approaches and the implications for how we define and address problems.

The authors clearly premise the development of their theoretical model with an exploration of the underlying assumptions of the asset-based approach and the motives and presuppositions that subsequently shape their theoretical framework for life skills facilitation. Summaries and questions for reflection are effectively used to allow the reader to engage more meaningfully with the text, enabling the transformation in perspective that the authors hope to cultivate. The book is divided into four sections.

Section 1 links an asset-based approach to life skills by showing the conceptual relationship between theories such as Positive Psychology and models of resilience to the characteristics of life skills facilitation in a South African context. The focus is on facilitating personal enablement through the mobilization of assets that are accessed within the individual and in the environment resulting in efficient adaptation to challenges.

Section 2 presents a post-modern critique of the needs-based approach and a comparative analysis of the two approaches on the basis of its ontology, the role of the professional and client, and service orientation. The framework proposed for an assets based intervention provides a good foundation for anyone wanting to explore this perspective. It does require a change in mind set which is not an easy accomplishment if one has been steeped in the deficiency or needs-based model. However, the authors have provided a very accessible dialogical framework with well-defined constructs. Chapter 3 provides clarity and understanding regarding the asset-based approach. The stages of an asset-based approach to intervention are outlined and the process of mapping assets is highlighted. An assets map is a creative and compelling assessment tool in an assets-based approach. It can be used to assess the strengths and assets of an individual, community, or even a nation. It provides an informed reference point for facilitating the mobilization and sustainability of strengths and assets. Appendix A provides clear illustrations of asset mapping with individuals, schools and communities.

Section 3 provides the rationale for life skills facilitation and the theoretical discourse that underscores the authors' development of their theoretical framework which led to the development of an asset-focused life skills facilitation programme. Chapter 4 reviews the latest research findings on coping and resilience, and how these relate to life skills. The diverse spectrum of life skills becomes evident in the comprehensive categorization that is provided, however the authors delineate the core life skills for life proficiency with the focus on developing intra- and interpersonal skill. Five central questions premise the theoretical framework for life skills facilitation with the

first three focused on intrapersonal life proficiency and the last two on interpersonal life proficiency. These are:

- *Who am I?*
- *What/how do I think?*
- *What/how do I feel?*
- *What do I do?*
- *Where am I?*

These questions are subsumed by the basic question that is central to the model which is: “What do I do with what I have internally and externally to flourish?”

Chapter 5 explicates the conceptual framework which is tied into answering the five central questions. *Identity formation* theory addresses the question of “Who am I?” and highlights the important notion of self-talk in the process of defining oneself in the different roles that life demands. *Cognitive regulation* addresses the question of “What/how do I feel?” and here the assumptions are grounded in Rational Behaviour Therapy. *Emotional regulation* addresses the question of “What/how do I feel?” and draws on the presuppositions grounded in theories of Emotional Intelligence. The last two questions are addressed from an ecosystemic perspective with proactive behaviour viewed as asset-focused choice with a contextual delineation. The authors view self-talk or the internal dialoguing that one has with oneself as central to the core life skills. ‘Conscious proactive self-talk’ is a key concept coined by the authors which encompasses the ability to be self-aware, to reflect, to encourage agency and ultimately cope more resiliently and be happier.

In chapter 6, the asset-focused life skills facilitation programme is presented which demonstrates the pragmatic application of the theoretical wisdom. The programme facilitates ‘client-partners’ to achieve sustained agency in coping by achieving self knowledge, developing values and attitudes that enable self-regulation, and establishing the skills for self-regulation. It is aimed at organizing and facilitating the overall internalization of the core life skills identified, with conscious proactive self-talk as the meta-heuristic. Six steps are presented in the form of six facilitative sessions. Each session is presented with an outline of the goals, guidelines for conducting the session and the assignment that prepares ‘client partners’ for the next developmental session. Reflection is encouraged after each session to facilitate consolidation and internalization. The final session facilitates integration and establishes coherence of the life skills sessions. It also provides the opportunity for an evaluation of the core skills. The authors encourage flexibility, creativity and adaptability in the application of the programme.

Section 4 provides an examination of case studies in research and practice of life skills facilitation and the asset-based approach. Chapter 7 provides a range of research applications using the asset-based approach subject to the vicissitudes of context. These include school systems, transdisciplinary teams, community-based intervention, early childhood intervention, vulnerable children and a family with a child who has cerebral palsy. In Chapter 8, a case study is presented which illustrates the implementation of the asset-based life skills programme with a group of children in a place of safety. The case study demonstrates the practical application of the programme and cautions facilitators to the need for flexibility and creativity in practice. Appendix B and C provide illustrations of the different process outcomes with individuals in the life skills programme.

Life skills facilitation has become an integral part of Life-Orientation Programmes and Prevention models in the new South African context and the authors of this text have made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge that informs the factors and change agents that facilitate transfer and impact transformation in differing cultures and communities. The facilitation of the core life skills highlighted in the book should form the hallmark of any life skills programme as it sets the foundation for life proficiency.

Both authors have conducted extensive research with a focus on Positive Psychology and asset-based approaches in different South African contexts. The authors present a different perspective to the pervasive notion of the South African pursuit for reparation. It provides knowledge, values and attitudes, and skills for enablement and fulfillment. However, it is a perspective that opens itself for harsh critique when the issues of social injustice, power and dominance are not overtly challenged. The authors may respond by asserting that people need to recognize their potential to build on both internal and external resources, knowledge systems and experiences to facilitate not only a change in consciousness but also to impact on social transformation towards equitability and social justice. The book has much to contribute to education policy, teacher development and initial teacher education if not only to engage with a paradigm shift in the framing of educational challenges associated with a post apartheid education system.

Ishara Maharaj
Faculty of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal

maharaji@ukzn.ac.za