Addressing the Life Skills Crisis

Dr. Spencer

Kagan

We face a life skills crisis. The crisis can be conceptualized as a potentially catastrophic imbalance between supply and demand. Much is being made these days of the need to boost academic achievement. In reality, though, in terms of importance, the need to boost academic achievement runs a distant second to the need to boost life happiness and success of our students and productiveness and success of our society, we need to admit, face, and address the crisis.

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Life Skills:

Supply is Down

Any teacher who has been in the profession for a couple of decades can tell you students today are radically different from students a generation ago. Students of past generations came to class with basic virtues and life skills such as honesty, courtesy, and perseverance. If we fast-forward from that time to today, we find the norm has become dishonesty, rudeness, and impulsiveness. Students were sensitive to the feelings of others; today's students too often treat others as objects. An alarming percentage of students have lost the fundamental values of respect, honesty, kindness, and lawfulness.

In short, today's students do not come to school with basic life skills. Compared to students of a generation ago, students today lack basic **social skills**: they are rude, uncooperative. They lack **emotional skills**: They are do not control their impulses when it would be adaptive to do so; they act out their feelings without awareness of the feelings. They lack **personal organizational and planning skills**. And they lack basic **citizenship skills**: with shocking frequency they lie, cheat, and steal.

The decline of character and emotional intelligence is not just an impression among those of us who have been educators for a number of years; shocking statistics substantiate the radical transformation of the nation's youth:

160,000 students skip school each day because they fear bullies. [1]

More than 1 in 3 students report they do not feel safe at school. [2]

83% of girls and 60% of boys have been sexually harassed at school — touched, pinched, or grabbed in a sexual way. [3]

54% of middle school and 70% of high school students cheated on a test in the last year. [4]

47% of high school students report they stole from a store in the past 12 months. [5]

In 1950, among youth of 14-17 years of age, less than half of one percent was arrested; by 1990 the figure had climbed to over 13%. [6]

Why is Supply Down?

Supply is down. Students don't come to schools with life skills we once took for granted. Why?

There are many factors that have contributed to this radical erosion of positive social character.

> • **Economics have shifted,** making a two-parent income a necessity with the consequences that parents are less available to socialize their children. In 1950, 11% of mothers with children under six worked, by 1990 the percentage had climbed to 58.2%; by 2000 the figure was 64.6%![7]

> • **Far more families are divorced or never married.** In 1940, 3.8% of babies were born to unwed mothers; today the figure is over 32%![8] In 1960, only 9% of the nation's youth lived in single parent homes; by 2000 the percentage had reached 27%.[9] Of children born today, over half will be reared part time in a single parent family before they reach 18 years.

> • **Today's families are mobile.** Families move on the average of two to three times during a child's school age years.[10] Because of increased mobility, neighbors do not know the children that play on their street so students are no longer under the watchful eye of others who care for them. Grandparents become at best a phone call instead of a living presence in the home. Thus neighbors, grandparents and community members are no longer an important force in transmitting prosocial values and life skills.

> • **Families are smaller**[11] so younger children do not have older children as caregivers and the older children do not learn to care for others — an orientation once integral to family life.

Thus, in the last half century many forces have converged to create the **abandoned generation** — students who are not receiving life skills training outside of school, who, to a frightening extent, are rearing themselves, struggling on their own to formulate values and learn life skills.

Children of the **abandoned generation have turned to television and video games** in an attempt to fill the socialization void, to formulate their values. Children today spend 1180 minutes a week watching television;[12] they spend 38.5 minutes a week in meaningful conversation with a parent.[13] The average American child sees 200,000 violent acts on TV by age 18.[14] Ninety-two percent of children and adolescents play videogames, and 90% of the top selling games contain violence.[15] Half of the top selling video games today contain serious violence.[16] In most violent video games, violence is portrayed as justified and goes unpunished.[17] Violent TV and video games are hardly the model needed to fill the socialization void.

Along with the media, **peer influence** has become the primary socializer of today's youth. It is revealing that the gang leader is most often called "father." Today's youth gangs are a substitute family, merely an attempt to fill the socialization void for the abandoned generation. For the first time, lacking adult supervision, students have created a peer-based value system. Student's are creating their own "rights" and "wrongs." Today, what a teacher or parent says is right or wrong is not nearly as important as what a peer says. Because peers are deriving their values from television and media, they contribute to rather than fill the values void for the abandoned generation.

Life Skills: Demand is Up

At the same time supply of positive life skills is down, demand is increasing dramatically. The work world has changed so that social skills are at a premium. Over seventy percent of jobs today involve membership in a team, and the number is increasing.[18] Increased technology in the workplace is associated with interdependence — no one person working alone can design a computer. Teams cooperate with other teams. In today's world teamwork skills are employability skills.

Large national surveys from a number of countries reveal employers state **the most important employability skills are ability to work well with others, communication skills, and teamwork skills.** For example, the National Training Organizations of England found skills shortages in ability to work with customers, teamwork skills, and communication skills were greater than shortages in numeracy and literacy.[19] The Conference Board of Canada states the skills most needed to "participate and progress in today's dynamic world of work" are of three types: Fundamental Skills, Personal Management Skills, and Teamwork Skills.[20] In the United States the two largest studies of employability skills, one by the American Society of Training and Development[21] and one by the Secretary's commission on Achieving Necessary Sills (SCANS)[22] both emphasize the importance of group effectiveness skills (teamwork skills, interpersonal skills); Developmental Skills (self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, career planning); and Communication Skills. For example, the SCANS report concluded, "the emphasis on teamwork in more and more workplaces means that instructional approaches must also emphasize learning collaboratively not just individually." "For all types and levels of schooling and training, the fields emerging research findings challenge what we teach and how we teach it."[23]

To cope with the increasing pace and change rate of modern life, our **students also need new life skills such as the ability to deal with stress and frustration.** Today's students will have many new jobs over the course of their lives, with associated frustration and need for flexibility. As medical science advances, it will place additional demands on future generations: more than previous generations they will be called to care for older others with special needs. Kindness, compassion, care giving skills will be in demand. As mobility increases, society will include greater and greater diversity, so tolerance and diversity skills also will be at a premium.

In short, demand for a wide range of life skills is up.

Addressing the Life Skills Crisis

Thus, at the very moment when the supply of life skills is down, the need is up. How are we in the educational community going to respond to this crisis? Narrow curricula that focus exclusively on academic achievement and that ignore the traditional social skills and virtues will contribute to the crisis. **We need to broaden our curricula to include life skills.** The alternative can spell disaster for our students and for our society.

There are a number of educational frameworks that advocate life skills curricula to address the socialization void. Each has a unique focus and addresses a subset of what a comprehensive life skills curriculum needs to address. **No one framework is completely comprehensive or satisfying.** The frameworks overlap in various ways but each has its own focus, including some skills to the exclusion of others. These approaches to life skills have been developed independently, and educators implementing one approach are often ignorant of the other approaches and the links among the approaches. One goal of this paper is to draw the connections. By seeing the links, the areas of overlap, as well as the skills that are unique to each approach, we can be aware of ways to supplement programs we are implementing and make more intelligent choices among approaches to meet the needs of our particular settings.

Among the most important ways to categorize life skills are the following four distinct but overlapping broad frameworks:

Life Skill Frameworks

I. Emotional Intelligence
II. Character Education
III. Habits for Success
IV. Multiple Intelligences

In addition to the broad life skill frameworks, there are specific life skills curricula and numerous teacher-friendly books on how to teach specific life skills such as friendship skills, conflict resolution skills, and communication skills. An overview of all the life skill resources is beyond the scope of this paper, but we will briefly examine two life skill curricula:

Life Skill Curricula

I. The Prepare Curriculum
II. Skillstreaming

Life Skill Frameworks and their Links

I. Emotional Intelligence

The Emotional Intelligence framework as presented by Daniel Goleman distinguishes five broad sets of skills:

1. Self-Knowledge
2. Self-Control
3. Self-Motivation
4. Empathy
5. Social Skills

In his formative book, *Emotional Intelligence*,[24] Goleman provides the rationale for emotional intelligence, showing in many ways that it is more important than IQ in predicting job and life success.

Books on emotional intelligence provide classroom activities to help students obtain emotional literacy.[25] Although the emotional intelligence framework is broad enough to encompass most of the important life skills, it is so broad that it provides little guidance for educators beyond establishing the importance of life skills. For example, it identifies the importance of social skills, but it does not identify or categorize the myriad social skills that need be taught and does not provide detailed guidance in how to teach each.

II. Character Education

Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control: These three alone lead life to sovereign power.
— Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892)

Character Education focuses on the acquisition of traditional virtues such as honesty, respect, and responsibility. Wisdom, considered by the ancient Greeks to be the master virtue, includes the study of moral principles and the development of moral reasoning.[26] Thomas Lickona provides the rationale for character education in his classic book, *Educating for Character.*[27] Lickona documents the lack in today's youth of the character virtues fundamental to a civilized society. Lying, cheating, and abusing others have become so much the norm that they produce in today's students no remorse.

Popular character education programs emphasize different virtues, as seen in the following table: **Virtues In Character Education Programs.**

Virtues in Character Education Programs

Character Counts	Integrated Thematic	WiseSkills
	Curiosity	
		Diligence
	Effort	
Fairness		Fairness
	Flexibility	
	Friendship	
Honesty	Truthfulness**	Honesty
	Initiative	
	Integrity	Integrity
	Organization	
	Patience	
	Perseverance	
	Personal Best**	
		Personal Goals
		Positive Attitude
	Problem-Solving	

	Problem-Solving	
		Relationships
Respect		Respect
Responsibility	Responsibility	Responsibility
		Self-Discipline
	Sense of Humor	
	Trustworthiness**	Trustworthiness

** In the ITI model Trustworthness, Truthfulness, Active Listening, No Put Downs, and Personal Best are "Lifelong Guidelines," which are a combination of traditional virtues and modern social skills.

Categorizing, Promoting the Virtues

Character Counts[28] advocates six core virtues. Integrated Thematic Instruction[29] offers fifteen virtues called "Lifeskills" and five additional virtues and social skills called "Lifelong Guidelines." The WiseSkills Program[30] consists of eight monthly character themes with 32 weekly skills and hundreds of projects, discussion ideas, group activities, journals and logs. It is used ten to fifteen minutes of each school day. The program includes conflict resolution materials and parent involvement and has four versions, one for each of the grade levels K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. The high school version focuses on a somewhat different set of virtues than do the pre-high school programs.

Numerous books are available for teachers wishing to implement character education programs.[31] Character programs foster virtue acquisition via a range of methods:

Ten Approaches to Virtue Acquisition

1. Recognizing, acknowledging, celebrating successful use of virtues in self and others
2. Recognizing, discussing virtues in contemporary, historical and literary figures
3. Deriving and discussing the moral of stories (Don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg; Don't cry wolf).
4. Teacher modeling virtues
5. Student planning use of virtues
6. Student debriefing use of virtues
7. Activities to foster the virtues including analysis of moral dilemmas
8. Studying, discussing wise quotes, sage advice, and moral precepts
9. Instituting Virtue-of-the Week or Virtue-of-the-Month programs which include the points above
10. Instituting School-Wide Character Education Programs

For example, throughout the ages philosophers have offered moral precepts which are excellent discussion starters:

Studying moral precepts and developing one's own moral principles are important components of becoming a person of character.

Structures for Virtues

In my own approach to categorizing virtues and fostering virtue acquisition,[32] I categorize virtues in three domains (Personal, Relationship, and Community) with five core virtues or sets of related virtues in each domain:

Kagan's Three Types of Virtues[33]

Personal Virtues

> **Courage**
> **Good Judgment/Wisdom**
> **Self-Discipline/Impulse Control/Perseverance**
> **Integrity/Pride in Ones Work**
> **Self-Motivation/Positive Attitude**

Relationship Virtues

> **Respect/Courtesy**
> **Caring/Kindness**
> **Cooperativeness/Helpfulness**
> **Honesty**
> **Understanding**

Community Virtues

Citizenship
Fairness
Leadership
Responsibility
Loyalty/Trustworthiness

The Kagan approach advocates fostering virtues based on instructional strategies called structures. Rather than (or in addition to) teaching lessons on virtues and instituting the ten approaches to fostering virtue acquisition, the teacher chooses **instructional strategies that include virtues as an embedded curriculum.** For example, as students do a simple **RallyRobin** (taking turns sharing ideas) they are acquiring the academic content but also are learning to take turns. As they do a three-step interview on any content students acquire listening skills. Kagan offers structures to promote acquisition of each of the fifteen virtues in his model.

Structures for Virtue Acquisition

Kagan Structure	Embedded Virtues
Circle the Sage	Leadership, Helpfulness
Estimate and Prediction Line Ups	Good Judgment
Expert Group Jigsaw	Cooperation, Helpfulness, Leadership
Folded Agree-Disagree Line Ups	Courage, Respect, Understanding
Gambit Chips	Courtesy
Paraphrase Passport	Caring, Impulse Control, Respect, Understanding
Pass-N-Praise	Kindness
Spend-A-Buck	Fairness
Talking Chips	Impulse Control
Team Pair Solo	Cooperation, Helpfulness, Leadership, Self-Motivation, Pride in One's Work
Team Statements	Citizenship, Cooperation, Integrity, Respect
Three-Step Interview	Understanding, Responsibility

An advantage of the structural approach to virtue acquisition is that **no time is taken from academic content;** the virtues are acquired as the teacher delivers regular academic content. With lessons on virtues, students learn about a virtue; with structures, students acquire the virtues. The structures create distributed practice because the virtues are practiced all school year.

Links: Emotional Intelligence and Character Development

Development of emotional intelligence and development of character virtues are very closely linked:

"There is an old-fashioned word for the body of skills that emotional intelligence represents: Character."
— Daniel Goleman

The life skills advocated in Emotional Intelligence and Character Development are remarkably aligned:

Emotional Intelligence	Character Education
Self-Knowledge	Wisdom, Integrity, Honesty (with self)
Self-Control	Good Judgment, Common Sense, Self-Discipline
Self-Motivation	Perseverance, Diligence, Personal Best, Personal Goals, Initiative
Empathy	Understanding, Respect
Relationship Skills	Cooperativeness, Caring, Kindness, Fairness, Trustworthiness, Patience, Friendship, Cooperation, Respect, Honesty (with others)

An advantage for educators of the character education approach over the emotional intelligence approach to life skills is that the character virtues are concrete and specific and more easily translate into teachable, learnable curricula. It is hard for most teachers to translate "relationship skills" into classroom lessons and activities whereas it is much easier to deal with "caring," "cooperation," or "fairness" as discrete, teachable virtues. An additional advantage of the character education framework over the emotional intelligence framework is that it is more comprehensive. Virtues such as citizenship, common sense, and curiosity are generally accepted as important life skills, but do not fit neatly into the EQ framework. Wisdom is based in part on self-knowledge (we cannot make wise choices if we do not know what we want), but it is far more encompassing, including ability to predict short- and long-term consequences of actions, understanding and living in accord with moral principles, and ability to engage in sophisticated moral reasoning.

III. Habits of Success

In reviewing the 'literature of success' published in the United States since 1776, Steven Covey uncovered a remarkable trend. For the first 150 years or so since the founding of our country, success was deemed a function of character. The road to success and happiness was to acquire virtues such as humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, and simplicity. Following World War I the success literature shifted; the focus moved from character to personality and skills. The literature emphasized having a positive mental attitude, impressing others, communication skills, being liked, and playing the power game. Covey argues for a paradigm shift to a principle-centered approach and identifies seven habits of highly effective people:

Covey's Seven Habits

1. Be Proactive
2. Begin with the End in Mind
3. Put First Things First
4. Think Win/Win
5. Seek First to Understand...then to be Understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the Saw

Covey provides wonderful examples, quotes, and personal anecdotes to support each of these habits. The seven habits are a powerful life skills curriculum.

The seven habits align well with emotional intelligence and character education:

	Seven Habits	Character Virtue	Emotional Intelligence
1.	Proactive	Initiative	Self Motivation
2.	End in Mind	Integrity	Self Knowledge
3.	First things First	Good Judgment	Self Control
4.	Win/Win	Fairness	Relationship Skill
5.	Understand First	Understanding	Empathy
6.	Synergize	Cooperation	Relationship Skill
7.	Sharpen Saw	Pride in One's Self	Self Knowledge

Having students study the seven habits can be a powerful component of a comprehensive life skills program. In *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Covey explains his seven habits in the context of teen life.[36]

IV. Multiple Intelligences

*Emotional Intelligences is an **affective** approach.*
*Character Education is a **moral** approach.*
*Seven Habits is a **principle-based** approach.*
*Multiple intelligences is a **cognitive** approach.*

No life skills program is complete if it does not foster the development of the various ways to be smart. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences[37] identifies eight intelligences:

Gardner's Eight Intelligences

1. Verbal/Linguistic
2. Logical/Mathematical
3. Visual/Spatial
4. Musical/Rhythmic
5. Bodily/Kinesthetic
6. Naturalist
7. Interpersonal
8. Intrapersonal

In contrast to traditional IQ-style thinking, MI theory makes the case that each of these intelligences is not fixed for life but rather can be developed. This provides the rationale for including them in a comprehensive approach to life skills. A number of comprehensive resources provide lessons and activities to engage and develop the intelligences.[38]

MI Links to Other Approaches

Like each of the life skills formulations, MI has important unique elements and important links to the other approaches. The five dimensions of Emotional Intelligence are all part of what Howard Gardner originally called the **Personal Intelligences**: The first three EQ skills are forms of *Intra*personal Intelligence; the last two are forms of the *Inter*personal Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence	Multiple Intelligences
Self-Knowledge Self-Control Self-Motivation	*Intra*personal Intelligence
Empathy Relationship Skills	*Inter*personal Intelligence

Although the two theories overlap, there are distinct differences: MI theory emphasizes cognitive abilities (knowing what another is feeling) whereas EQ places more emphasis on emotion (feeling what another is feeling). MI emphasizes "social smarts:" Who is friends with whom in this classroom? EQ emphasizes "social sensitivity:" What is Johnny feeling right now?

Links exist between the multiple intelligences, the character virtues, and the seven habits. For example, good judgment and doing first things first are both dependent on the logical intelligence.

Although in many cases the various life skills frameworks are alternative languages to discuss and promote the same life skills, each framework provides a unique contribution.

Life Skill Curricula

I. The Prepare Curriculum

The Prepare Curriculum[39] is a very comprehensive program with theory and research supporting the need to teach ten life skills:

1. **Problem Solving**
2. **Interpersonal Skills**
3. **Situation Perception**
4. **Anger Control**
5. **Moral Reasoning**
6. **Stress Management**
7. **Empathy**
8. **Recruiting Supportive Models**
9. **Cooperation**
10. **Understanding and Using Groups**

The Prepare Curriculum combines in-depth theory and research along with detailed lesson plans

to develop each of the ten life skills. Each life skill is presented in depth. For example, interpersonal skills training provides role-plays for fifty interpersonal skills divided into six categories:

1. Beginning Social Skills
Listening, Asking a Question, Giving a Compliment...
2. Advanced Social Skills
Giving Instructions, Apologizing, Convincing Others ...
3. Dealing with Feelings
Knowing Your Feelings, Dealing with Someone Else's anger, Expressing Affection...
4. Alternatives to Aggression
Negotiating, Using Self Control, Responding to Teasing...
5. Dealing with Stress
Dealing with Embarrassment, Responding to a Failure, Dealing with Group Pressure...
6. Planning
Setting a Goal, Arranging Problems by Importance, Making a Decision...

Skillstreaming

Skillsteaming[40] is a comprehensive curriculum to develop prosocial skills. The skills are divided into five groups with between ten and 25 distinct skills in each group:

1. Classroom Survival Skills

Listening, Completing Assignments, Making Corrections...
2. Friendship-Making Skills
Introducing Yourself, Joining In, Apologizing...
3. Dealing with Feelings
Knowing your feelings, Understanding Another's Feelings, Dealing with Fear...
4. Alternatives to Aggression
Using Self-Control, Staying Out of Fights, Negotiating...
5. Dealing with Stress
Dealing with Boredom, Answering a Complaint, Dealing with Group Pressure...

The life skills curricula, like the life skills frameworks, emphasize overlapping sets of skills, each with its own unique skills and focus. The life skills curricula may be seen as ways to implement the life skills frameworks. For example, knowing the feelings of others is common to both curricula and central to Emotional Intelligence (Empathy), Character Education (Understanding), Seven Habits (Understand First), and Multiple Intelligences (Interpersonal Intelligence).

In short, there is no question about the need to educate for life skills. There also is no lack of resources to educate for life skills. All that is lacking is the courage among educators to act on what they know to be true: The greatest need in education today is the need to educate for life skills.

Walking Up Stream

Let me conclude this plea with a parable I have shared before:[41]

Two women are standing on a bank of a swift river. In the strong current, desperately struggling to stay afloat, a man is carried downstream toward them. The women both jump in, pulling the

man to safety. While the brave rescuers are tending the victim, a second man, also desperate and screaming for help, is carried by the current toward them. Again the women jump into the river to the rescue. As they are pulling out this second victim, they spot a third man flailing about as he is carried downstream toward them. One woman quickly jumps in to save the latest victim. As she does, she turns to see the other woman resolutely walking upstream. "Why aren't you helping?" she cries. "I am," states the other. "I am walking upstream to see who is pushing them in!"

In response to the life skills crisis we have a choice: To be reactive or to be proactive. An example of reactive responding was education's response to the recent rash of extreme violence in schools.*42* Following the killings there was a great deal of money spent on metal detectors, sophisticated surveillance cameras, and security officers. Schools adopted and enforced stricter harassment policies. In short, schools jumped into the stream. What was needed also was to walk up stream — to adopt life skill curricula.

To the extent we jump into the stream without also walking up stream we are treating only symptoms when we need also to be preventing the disease. **As educators we need to walk upstream in addressing the life skills crisis.** If we are to maintain quality of life as well as success in the modern work world, **we must elevate life skills to the status of core curriculum** — Let's walk up stream. Let's educate for life skills.

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