Partnership between Educational Staff and Parents is Not Just a Recommendation: The Case of The Life Skills Program

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Abstract

This paper reviews the Life Skills program in Israel, discussing it as an example of the complexities involved in establishing school-parent partnerships in the context of social-emotional learning (SEL). It is argued that, once educational rather than academic matters are addressed, parental involvement is not only necessary but also indispensable. Moreover, fostering partnership in the context of programs like life skills presents a valuable opportunity to build a robust school-parent partnership. The paper advocates for a gradual approach to developing this partnership, including: First, addressing life skills that all partners recognize as important. Rather than concentrating solely on academic achievements, move on to collaboration on matters related to children's character development. Finally, expand the partnership to all relevant aspects of school life. Ultimately, this gradual process fosters mutual respect and leads to a comprehensive partnership between teachers, parents, and students, promoting a sense of unity and progress toward shared goals.

Keywords: life skills, social-emotional learning, school-parents partnerships, character education, values

Introduction

The expectation of school-parent partnership is not derived solely from the intuitive insight that it will be beneficial for the children who study in the educational setting. Rather, it is anchored in the accumulating empirical support for this insight. However, many studies examining the impact of such partnerships were conducted in the context of school learning, which focuses on the acquisition of academic knowledge. Recently, a similar expectation for school-parent partnership emerged in the context of educational programs and activities that address social-emotional learning (SEL); the Life Skills program (LSP) is one such program. That is to say, intervention to foster life skills focuses on individuals and the extent to which they acquire skills deemed essential to their positive development. This notion point to the difference between LSP and SEL; i.e., while LSP focuses on building skills, SEL intervention is activity that has broader and diverse content, and it target not only individual skills but also those at the group or society levels, such as promoting students' positive self-image or managing a classroom in an informed way that will help students with predisposition to poorly manage their emotions (e.g., Kellam et al., 2008).

This article briefly reviews the issue of school-parent partnership in general and focuses on it in the context of the Life Skills program in Israel. After a historical review of its development worldwide and in Israel, some general conclusions are presented regarding the program. From these conclusions, it is evident that, with regard to the Life Skills program, school-parents partnership is not only a crucial and essential requirement, but also an opportunity and an opening for the creation of a broad school-parents partnership in other contexts as well.

Parent-Educational Staff Partnership: The Goal is Clear; the Path to It is Unclear

The roots of the recognition of the importance of school-parents partnership can be traced back a hundred years, to Adler's Theory of Individual Psychology (Adler, 1917; Adler et al., 1927). According to Individual Psychology, the arrival of a baby in the family involves an inherent and unavoidable feeling of inferiority. To overcome this, infants or children undergo a gradual process of exploration to gain a sense of worth and uniqueness within the family.

The school is conceptualized as a natural continuation of the home (Dinkmeyer, 1967; Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 2000). When children enter the education system, they are inclined to continue using the specific mechanism they've developed at home to maintain their sense of worth and competence in the new socio-educational framework (for example, by demonstrating highly developed verbal ability). However, they will frequently encounter difficulties in continuing to do so. For example, because other students use the same mechanism, or some students use a contradictory one, this does not allow for "coexistence." According to Adler's approach, the lack of a sense of worth and competence is a major source of difficulties in adjusting to school and a common obstacle to students' willingness to learn and succeed.

In these cases, the teacher needs to manage the class properly, enabling each student to identify an alternative way to (re)acquire a sense of worth within the new educational framework. To prevent these situations and help children acquire a sense of worth and belonging in the class, a partnership between the educational staff and parents is necessary.

Since the 1980s, recognition of the importance of school-parent partnership has increased and gained a foothold among parents, educational staff, and decision-makers in many countries worldwide. For example, the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Europe (CIDREE) defines partnership between the educational staff and parents as one of the essential characteristics for establishing early childhood daycare centers (Aursand et al., 2022).

A key factor in the growing recognition of the importance of school-parent partnership is the empirical evidence showing its significant contribution to improving students' academic achievements (Carlson & Christenson, 2005; Christenson & Reschly, 2010; Epstein, 2022; Kim, 2022; Minch et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2020). Another factor that has contributed to this is the recognition of changes in the modern family, particularly in the scope and degree of parental presence at home. Notably, the changes in modern families which intensified greatly in the 1960s and 1970s, is connect to other global phenomena, such as: postponement of the age of marriage, growth in the number of single-parent families, an increase in women going out to work, a rise in the number of women who begin to develop a professional career before giving birth, and more (Israelashvili & Mozes, 2022). Such societal changes underlie the decline in the proportion of families in which raising and nurturing children is a primary family task for one of the parents (Nelson-Coffey & Cavanaugh, 2021). A by-product of that is the lack of parental involvement in their children's lives and daily experiences in the educational system.

The changes in modern family structure and functioning shouldn't be misleading; each of these parties – the educational staff, the parents, and the

entire community – has unique knowledge about the child as well as singular abilities, and therefore can and should contribute its input to the child's positive development (Miller et al., 2022). To enable these contributions, an ongoing dialogue and collaboration among the three partners must take place.

Speaking about dialogues, it is important to remember that, in creating a partnership between educational teams and parents, another significant party in building the partnership is the students themselves. Their place in the collaborative effort seems obvious, since it concerns the students and their well-being. However, publications and initiatives on school-parent partnership do not always emphasize the need to listen to students, involve them in the process of building this partnership, and even motivate them to contribute to its management. One reason for this may be that most studies and initiatives to promote partnerships between educational staff and parents have focused on elementary school (approximately 60%; Smith et al., 2020), and children of these ages are often perceived as too young to be partners.

However, such a perception is false. First, the school-parents partnership is important from an early age, and there is evidence that this partnership is also extremely significant for two- and three-year-old children (Israelashvili & Maimon, in preparation). Second, there is no objective reason to exclude even elementary school students from the communication process between educational staff and parents. The challenge is to do it in a way that is appropriate for the child's age and needs, as well as for their parents'. An example of this is a "different parents' meeting" that was successfully implemented in an elementary school and in many ways enlightened teachers, parents, and students (Israelashvili & Levavi, 2002; Eva & Mei, 2019; Rimm-

Kaufman & Pianta, 2013). Third, among middle school students, one obstacle to a partnership between educators and parents is students' reluctance to communicate with these adult figures. Related to adolescents' developmental needs, not a few students prefer that communication between their parents and their teacher take place exclusively through their mediation or in their presence. Therefore, ignoring the student while still in elementary school may intensify this phenomenon, miss the point of the school-parent partnership, and actually reduce the likelihood of it occurring. Remembering that the main justification for wanting partnership between the educational staff and parents is the desire to benefit the child - i.e., for the student to feel better in the present and have more successful development in the future - is it surprising to discover that the students' voices should also be heard in this context?

Partnership between parents, educational staff, and the community should be carried out in a variety of ways, including creating and maintaining ongoing relationships, openness to understanding the other side's perspective, multi-channel communication, and striving for mutual understanding. The specific content of the partnership depends on the cultural, social, economic, and community characteristics of the parents' population (McWayne et al., 2022) and the unique needs of students and parents (Miller et al., 2022). However, in practice, it appears that there are several obstacles to the development of such a partnership, including teachers' negative image of some of the parents ("What do they know?"), some of the parents' negative image of teachers ("Who goes into teaching?"), the gap between the parties in understanding the concept of partnership ("Are they going to tell me, the teacher, what to do?"), the pressure put on teachers by the administration, supervisors and parents themselves to

intensify students learning of the curriculum, the lack of teachers' training how to manage partnerships with parents ("I was taught to teach, not to look after parents"), the missing of opportunities for the proper establishment of a healthy dialogue between the parties ("Do they expect me not to go to work and talk to the teacher?"), and schools' reluctance to adopt a gradual, ongoing process toward a fruitful partnership ("Who is responsible for this? Me, the teacher, the school counselor? The principal?").

These problems are common and global, representing genuine difficulties and concerns. However, they are magnified regarding school-parent partnerships on social-emotional learning issues.

Partnership between Educational Staff and Parents in the Context of Social-Emotional Learning

Interest in social-emotional learning began to increase in the early 1980s. This interest arose from the need to bridge the gap between a greater understanding of the cognitive processes through which knowledge is acquired and a lesser understanding of the processes that enable or prevent students from actualizing learning and performing well in their educational settings. One of the major arguments in SEL is that the above-mentioned gap stems from students' lack of understanding of their own and others' social and emotional processes. Elias (2003), one of the first researchers of social-emotional learning, defined this area as "social intelligence", or a collection of social-emotional skills that enable students to work with others, learn effectively, and contribute to the functioning of their family, community, and workplace. The CASEL Institute (CASEL−

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) uses similar terms (CASEL, 2020):

> "SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (ibid. p.3).

CASEL's model of intervention to promote SEL aims to improve a person's level of self-awareness; i.e., to improve children's ability to understand what they are feeling, what is important to them in life (their values), what their goals are, how confident they feel, how capable they feel they are at performing tasks, and in which areas they have higher or lower abilities than others. All of these are also supposed to be the basis for their ability to understand what others are feeling and the processes they are going through.

Gradually, there has been a growing understanding that social-emotional learning paves the way not only to improved learning processes but also to better mental health (Hymel et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). As the modern era is characterized by frequent and significant changes across a variety of contexts, competence in social-emotional areas is the cornerstone for children's adaptation to school and, later, to life in general (Durlak et al., 2007). Moreover, there has been a growing recognition that the best place and period of learning in formal educational settings is the best time to promote these social-emotional skills, as at this time the students are accessible for interventions, they are still under parental supervision and tend to obey mature figures, and staying in the educational setting for several years enables to conduct long-term interventions

properly and comprehensively. Thus, the topic of social-emotional learning emerged in response to the education systems' difficulties with part of the students – e.g., underachievers - but is implemented within educational systems as they are the best setting in which SEL can be advanced and lead to optimal results.

Based on a review of 117 studies, Sheridan and colleagues (2019) evaluated the impact of school-parents' partnership on students' (a) social-emotional learning, (b) social-emotional functioning, and (c) mental health. The review indicated that such a partnership made a significant contribution to students' social-emotional development after participating in the program. However, ethnic and residential (city versus village) differences were found. The more efficient channels of partnership were communication between teachers and parents, sharing activities in joint tasks, and parental involvement and behavioral support at home. The social-emotional outcomes measured in these studies were attention regulation, behavior regulation, externalized problem behavior, peer relationships, social skills, and general social-emotional competence.

In another study, Smith et al. (2020) evaluated the impact of school-parent partnership on the impact of intervention to promote SEL and found similar results. In this evaluation, 51 studies were reviewed, and the exploration addressed both academic and social-emotional functioning, including: the development of children's social skills, behavioral regulation, externalized problem behavior, attention regulation, peer relationships, internalized problem behavior, and students' sense of self-worth. Finally, another meta-analysis of 523 related studies also found that SEL interventions contribute to increases in

social-emotional skills, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, and academic achievement, alongside decreases in participating children's behavioral disorders and feelings of emotional stress (Durlak et al., 2022).

However, notably, in these three literature reviews, the focus was on evaluating the impact of a school-parents partnership component in SEL programs' interventions on the promotion of maladjusted students or students with special needs. Namely, the major concern was children's difficulties with emotional or behavioral regulation and/or the demonstration of problem behaviors (internal or external).

This notion constitutes a general limitation in the field of social-emotional learning and is emphasized by several researchers. For example, Hoffman (2009), who summarized the SEL literature at the time, argues that social-emotional learning leads to better social, academic, and overall achievement and helps students become happier citizens who contribute more to society (see also Cohen, 2006). However, Hoffman adds that research on social-emotional learning focuses more on the benefits to the environment in which children function than on the benefits to the children themselves. According to Hoffman, the emphasis in evaluating the interventions was on the extent to which social-emotional skills are promoted and contribute to young people's ability to control their behavior, reflect on it, and direct it in ways that are less disruptive to their teachers and parents. Alternatively, Hoffman suggests, SEL can contribute to creating a more open and healthy community life and to giving the community greater resilience, enabling it to meet growth challenges and deal with crises.

Other researchers raise similar points using stronger language. For example, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) define existing interventions for social-emotional nurturing as "therapeutic education," which they say represents only a trend that lacks a solid empirical basis, and errs in labeling all young people as vulnerable and in need of treatment. According to these researchers, these interventions give unjustified priority to emotion over intellect and ultimately convey an expectation that the student will recover and achieve normative behavior, which has a very broad, but shallow, common denominator. Similarly, Cipollone et al. (2022) recently described the SEL approach as inhumane, intended to force problematic students to behave "nicely" at school. According to them:

> SEL, as frequently operationalized, is a dehumanizing process that seeks to assimilate non-dominant children into dominant ways of being while concurrently seeking to enforce compliance and normalize children to oppressive structures. SEL is often seen as a "nice" form of classroom management, perfect for a field dominated by "nice" white women who see their work as apolitical and neutral rather than political and rooted in the maintenance of white supremacy (p. 131).

Other proponents of this critique argue that SEL programs essentially shift all responsibility to the individual, the student, who is expected to "heal" through the acquisition of new skills (Hvalby et al., 2024).

Referring back to the issue of school-parents partnership, the above-listed reservations regarding the SEL programs' contribution should be phrased in the following general question: What about the majority of students, those with

normative adaptation and reasonable academic performance? Would a partnership between educational staff and parents in the context of SEL benefit both parties? Or maybe there is no need for such a partnership for ordinary students who do not exhibit any difficulties or problematic behaviors?

The case of the Life Skills program provides a positive answer to this question and helps rephrase the importance of school-parent partnership in the context of social-emotional learning.

The Life Skills Program

In the Social Sciences, a life skills program was first formulated in the late 1970s by Botvin et al. (1980, 1982, 1984, 2004). The program was developed as the field now known as prevention science emerged (Israelashvili & Romano, 2017) and was designed to prevent youth substance use. Botvin combined insights from the cognitive-behavioral approach, which emphasizes the stage of acquiring cognitive and behavioral skills, with Jessor and Jessor's problem behavior theories (Jessor & Jessor, 1997). According to this theory, problem behaviors such as (regular) smoking, (extreme) drinking, drug abuse, or uncontrolled sexual behavior are products of social learning, rooted in the combination and mutual input of personal characteristics and environmental circumstances. Contrary to the previous practice of trying to prevent these behaviors by highlighting their negative effects, the theory proposed preventing them by strengthening the individual's ability to resist the influence of such environmental circumstances. A clear example of this is substance abuse. Often, youths' first consumptions of substance abuse occur in response to external social pressure or in response to an internal inclination to join a social

group or maintain social status within the group. Therefore, under certain circumstances, strengthening the individuals' ability to cope with social pressure could contribute to preventing them from succumbing to social pressure to use drugs. Later experiences with substance use will result from the person's decision to continue with it. Hence, Botvin conceptualized the process of preventing problem behaviors as one in which a person's abilities must be built: to resist social pressures (when they are proposed for the first time), make decisions independently (whether/when to experiment with this behavior from time to time) and solve problems (how to remain part of the group without slipping into problematic behavior).

Botvin called these abilities "life skills." In practical terms, the skills this program focused on were: decision-making, independent thinking, controlled media consumption, self-perception and self-improvement, coping with anxiety, interpersonal communication, social skills, and assertiveness.

Later, Botvin argued that this list of skills is relevant not only to preventing problem behaviors but also to addressing a wide range of personal difficulties, such as adopting healthy eating habits. Following this notion, the way was paved to generalize and claim that learning these skills is essential for all young people's positive development and for achieving the best possible life as adults. The program developed by Botvin for imparting life skills has several versions, depending on participants' age and ethnic background, and is delivered over 20 group sessions. The program begins by presenting facts about various (problem) behaviors, and then the participants are taught and practice the skills mentioned above. For example, the chapter on acquiring social skills includes teaching and practicing ways to introduce yourself to someone new,

maintaining interpersonal relationships so that they last, dealing with pressure to do unwanted things in order for the relationship to last (e.g., fear that my boyfriend will leave me if I don't do what he says), identifying situations in which one should to end social relationships, and alternative appropriate ways to end unwanted social relationships without giving in to social pressure.

Botvin and colleagues presented findings from evidence-based studies, showing that participation in the life skills program contributes to the prevention of problem behaviors. For example, they recently presented evidence of the effectiveness of a hybrid version of the program (Williams et al., 2025).

Over the years, many life skills programs have been proposed; their common denominator is the recognition that children need a variety of skills for a mature and positive lifestyle. The difference between the programs lies in the definition of the skills to be learnt and in the way they are imparted (Hvalby et al., 2024). For example: (a) the American School Counselors Association (ASCA, 1992; 2022) suggests a variety of life skills that should be taught, grouped into three categories: how to learn, how to work, and how to live (e.g., eating healthy foods). (b) The 4-H program, developed in the USA, presents a list of 35 skills, sorted into four general areas: Hands; Health; Head; Heart, hands – how to contribute to the community and to others, how to work; health – how to live, how to conduct oneself (for example, self-control); head – how to think, how to strive for goals; heart – how to relate to others, how to care for others (Maass et al., 2006). (c) An international research team on life skills (Wallach et al., 2000), which included people with disabilities, determined that the essential skills they need are: writing and documentation, calculation, problem-solving, practical reasoning, teamwork, communication, and digital information.

A review by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1997) proposed the following general definition of life skills: "A person's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (ibid., p. 1). Obviously, the content and nature of everyday life vary from society to society and from one age group to another. However, regardless of the need to approach an agreement about the life skills to be taught and the need to validate and test it empirically, currently the act of imparting life skills is recognized as one of the cornerstones of optimal nurturing – emotional, intellectual and social – of children and youth (Buchert, 2014; DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022; Kirchhoff & Keller, 2021).

The Life Skills Program in Israel

In the mid-1990s, the Life Skills Program (LSP) was introduced in Israel by the Psychological Counseling Service (PCS) of the Ministry of Education as part of an effort to prevent substance abuse. However, it was quickly understood that LSP offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for integrating various prevention programs that PCS seeks to promote (e.g., bullying prevention, child abuse prevention, and healthy sexuality). This insight led to the conversion of LSP into a nationwide, obligatory program in all Israeli elementary and middle schools. The program had two versions: one for state-secular schools and the other for state-religious schools. The main difference between the two versions was the presence or omission of certain topics or examples.

Much can be said and discussed about the program and its evolution over the past 30 years, since it was proposed to the PCS as a comprehensive conceptual framework (Israelashvili, 1995; 1996). In the current context, it

should be noted that upon implementing the program, two fundamental problems arose: teacher resistance and parental resistance.

Resistance of Teachers

According to the PCS guidelines (PCS, 2022), the school counselors are responsible for implementing the Life Skills program. However, they are supposed to do so with the active help of the school's educational staff. In practice, school counselors often encountered teachers' resistance to guiding life skills lessons. Common reasons for this included the burden of teachers' workloads, the demand to progress through the curriculum, lack of time to implement the program, lack of student cooperation, etc. (Buchanan et al., 2009; Hahn et al., 2002; Stratman & Helton, 2024).

However, a deeper investigation of the reasons for teachers' resistance to implementing a life skills program revealed additional weighty reasons, such as (1) Lack of training: Teacher education consists mainly of acquiring pedagogical skills; teachers do not receive any focused training on how to present, and encourage a conversation about, "soft" topics such the ones LSP address (e.g., forming interpersonal relationships). Therefore, many teachers felt that they were not qualified to deliver this type of program in the classroom; (2) Reluctance to be exposed: Conversation about the topics in the program "invites" students to ask questions about the teachers' personal lives. Many teachers do not want students (or their parents) to shift their relationships from a formal to an informal, personal level. Teachers were reluctant to expose their personal life and history to their students; (3) Lake of knowledge: Many teachers are not sure that they themselves master the life skills included in the

program, and therefore do not know how to teach others how to acquire them; (4) Some of the topics in the program are related to situations that teachers are reluctant to discuss with their students (e.g., establishment of social relationships); (5) Teachers fear that a conversation about life skills, rather than teaching academic materials, might lead to the teacher losing control over classroom behavior; (6) Some teachers are afraid to take responsibility for the possible consequences of conducting a lesson that deals with life skills. An example of this is a case where a teacher talks in class about coping with stress and one of the students realize the amount of stress and disappointments (e.g., difficulties with parents) and reaches a feeling of helplessness; (7) Teachers do not want to take on the role of parents and, according to their perception, a conversation about life skills might cause some students, especially those from struggling families, to see them as a parental figure or as someone who can be relied on in general life contexts (see reference to Individual Psychology above).

All of the above also applies to the school counselor, who is supposed to serve as the figure guiding teachers in their work with students. School counselors also need extensive training and a comprehensive understanding of the program's rationale and implementation. Assuming that school counselors understand the program and wish to deliver it to teachers and guide them in implementing it, they should structure school guidance in a gradual, continuous manner. In particular, they should ensure the teacher can explore their own life skills and discuss related personal issues. It means leading a group process, but not a dynamic one. The final purpose of the group process is to enable each teacher to examine their personal opinions of the program. In doing so, the

teachers will better define for themselves the strengths and experience they bring to the students, as well as the areas, skills, and experiences they need to clarify and complete to administer the program in their classes. This step shifts the nature of the required school training from a process of consultation, in which school counselors have some experience and training, to a process that more closely resembles group/individual counseling for teachers.

Embarking on such a process entails risks and complexities that not every counselor can handle.

That is, a school counselor who guides teachers in a life skills program must act with caution. They must encourage and initiate an introspective process, but not spill over into a therapeutic one; they must encourage a group process, but end it by strengthening the personal side of each participant (rather than the group/collective side); they must assure the management that there is a team of teachers who are more qualified to teach a life skills program than others. Needless to say, some teachers and principals will cooperate with a school counselor who applies the steps suggested above. Other teachers will not only be deterred by the move but will also try to resist it with all their might and dump responsibility for fundamental problems on the school counselor.

Given the difficulties and complexity of the issues mentioned here, it is not surprising that, gradually, it became apparent that the school counselors, rather than the teachers, were the ones delivering the life skills program to students in the classrooms. For many school counselors, this situation challenged their relationship with the students; i.e., is the school counselor simply "another" school teacher, or does the school counselor have a different role for me (as a student)?

Resistance of Parents

Yoram Bronowski (1948–2001) was a translator, essayist, and journalist, and one of the more prominent and respected intellectuals in Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. After his death, it was said that he was the voice of reason, clear thinking, common sense, and above all – a man who viewed the world through a clear and distinct scale of values, distinguishing between quality and waste, and more importantly, between real and fake (Marmari, 2001). In a short article he published in the Haaretz newspaper, titled "Education at Zero Hour" (Bronowski, January 1, 1995), Bronowski expressed his strong opinion against the life skills program and against every involvement of teachers in anything related to social-emotional learning.

The opposition by Bronowski and others to the Life Skills program is based on a widespread perception among parents that the education system should provide students with intellectual stimulation essential to children's success in life, a role parents cannot provide – i.e., academic knowledge. This misconception was addressed extensively in Tough's book (2013) "How Children Succeed." According to Tough, the story told by parents and the education system is that those who succeed on tests will succeed in their studies and in life. But the truth is that what is important for success in life are a person's character and personality traits, such as perseverance, curiosity, awareness, optimism, and self-control. The author concluded that if parents and schools invested less in pursuing academic knowledge and scholastic achievement and more in developing children's personalities, including life skills, they would contribute decisively to their children's positive development. Tough's book had a significant impact in the US and was an international

bestseller. It should be noted that Tough's message in this book, and the sequel (Tough, 2018) regarding the need to invest in nurturing children's life skills, seems particularly relevant to children growing up in economically well-off families, where educated parents push their children to excel academically and do not invest enough in nurturing their children's social-emotional skills (Lareau, 2003; 2018).

But there are other reasons for parents' resistance to the Life Skills program. Some of them are related to parents' implicit criticism towards teachers (Campbell, 1993; Vincent, 1996). The roots of this criticism lie in the public image of the teaching profession, which is relatively low in Israel, in the parent's negative perception of their child's teacher due to the unflattering reports their child has told them about the teacher, and the feeling that teachers do not perform their role at a sufficiently high professional level (Addi-Raccah & Grinshtain, 2021). In addition, another source of the parents' resistance to the life skills program relates to their feeling that a teacher cannot - and is not entitled to – shape their child's life skills in accordance with the exact way and quality as they can (Shek et al., 2021). Moreover, parents are skeptical about the extent to which teachers have undergone the introspection required to effectively teach life skills (Buchert, 2014) or about the morality of entrusting the cultivation of life skills to anyone other than the student's parents.

This is not a philosophical-theoretical question but a practical one. A clear expression of this is, as mentioned above, that the series of books on life skills published by the Israeli Ministry of Education was issued in two editions: one for students in state education and the other for students in state-religious education. Obviously, the motive for two different editions didn't stem from

differences in the kinds of students or in students' initial skill repertoires. Rather, it stemmed from a preliminary difference in values, views on the essence of life, and the appropriate way to impart the skills, beliefs, and educational goals of those in charge of state education and those in charge of state-religious education.

It is important to emphasize that the teachers' and parents' resistance does not stem from a lack of interest in the child's well-being. On the contrary, both are derived from a desire to benefit the children. However, they are driven by different perceptions regarding the basic concepts: What is the child's best interest? What skills should children be taught? Who should teach the skills? How should they be taught? Does the person who is supposed to teach the skills know how to teach them? Will teaching skills take place at the expense of progress in the educational material to which both teachers and parents aspire?

In retrospect, one reason these problems arose during the introduction of the Life Skills program into schools was the relatively rapid transition from the conceptualization stage to implementation. That is, a relatively short time between the general outline of the presentation of the general idea and preliminary guidelines of a life skills program and the Ministry of Education (Curriculum and Educational Planning Division & PCS) presentation of the Life Skills program as a mandatory program in all elementary and middle schools (Arnan et al., 1996). Although a tendency to implement prevention programs rapidly before they have matured and been scientifically substantiated is common (Israelashvili, 2015), this time it had a crucial negative implication on the schools' ability to proceed with the program and successfully implement it practically. Notably, to date, no comprehensive study has been conducted to

examine the program's contribution in an informed and orderly manner; feedback on the LSP in Israel comes only from occasional, preliminary surveys. The Life Skills program is still operated in Israel today by the Ministry of Education, under the name "The Life Skills on the Way" (PCS, 2022). It includes the following emphases:

> The program sees parents as partners throughout the process, addressing various topics based on developmental stage. It is important that parents are familiar with the content being taught and that discussions take place on these topics both in the classroom and at home. In addition to connecting parents to the various subjects, the program includes two meetings intended directly for parents, one in each age group, covering the topics taught in detail at each level (ibid., p. 8).

The current program does not yet provide detailed information on the overall process or on how to implement it in a given school gradually. However, it does presents guidance for parents' participation and suggests three ways to participate in the program: (1) Two meetings a year with parents, on the main theme of that year; (2) Letters to parents detailing the conduct and progress of the Life Skills program in their child's class; (3) Distribution of brochures prepared by the Ministry of Education and the national parents' leadership addressing current, relevant issues (e.g., safe Internet surfing). As mentioned, these ways of involving parents are desirable, but, based on past global experience, they do not address all the obstacles to effective school-parent cooperation. In particular, they do not highlight the benefits of collaborative

activities between educational teams and parents, particularly regarding children's acquisition of life skills and social-emotional learning.

Partnership with Parents in a Life Skills Program: Challenges, Gaps, and Opportunities for Deepening the Partnership

Many of the concerns, reservations, and criticisms raised by teachers and parents regarding the Life Skills program are very similar to those raised in other contexts of discussions on partnerships between educational staff and parents (Gimbert, 2023; Gomes, 2025; Hvalby et al., 2024). Yet, in the case of social-emotional learning, which the Life Skills program represents, they are even stronger. Thus, intensive and thorough efforts are needed in order to overcome them (Ng & Bull, 2018). However, the present paper presents a more complex argument: on the one hand, there is a need to establish a school-parent partnership to address the full scope of issues related to the life skills program and social-emotional learning. On the other hand, this necessity creates a unique and effective opportunity that must be seized to lay the foundation for the full range of school-parent partnerships across other topics (e.g., academic issues, behavioral norms and problems).

This argument is based on several notions:

First, social-emotional learning is developing and becoming more present in the Israeli education system. Hence, school staff cannot ignore this. The issue has gained new importance in light of the changing nature of modern society and the situation in Israel over the past few years. Technological developments, including the total exposure of children and teenagers to smartphones and their accompanying apps, the spread of social networks and their implications for

children and teenagers, the development of artificial intelligence and its entrance into the world of young people and the establishment of distance learning and its increasing use in education systems - all raise weighty educational and ethical issues on which parents must take an informed and relevant stance. In addition, phenomena of recent years – whether universal, such as the coronavirus pandemic and globalization, or local, such as political polarization and the conflict in the Middle East – necessitate the presence and involvement of parents in school contexts unrelated to academic learning. Technologies, global change, and the emerging reality in Israel also necessitate a more informed approach to life skills, social-emotional learning, and broader mental health issues. Thus, when it comes to life skills programs – and social-emotional learning in general - dialogue between educational staff and parents is not a recommended option, but rather a vital and basic necessity, from the stage of early education.

Second, the importance of partnership with parents stems from the fact that parents have the authority, the moral, and the practical right to determine what kind of life they wish to prepare their child for (e.g., religious or secular; in Israel or abroad; in a kibbutz or in the city), what life skills they can provide their child with at home and what they expect the school to contribute to their child.

Third, precisely in light of the centrality of the content that the Life Skills program deals with, which is also educational and not just academic, it can be leveraged, and the foundations for a broad partnership between school teams and parents can be based upon it, so that they also permeate other aspects of school life, such as the academic context. The question is: How can it be done practically?

The Question Is: How Can It Be Done?

In many cases, a heated discussion may develop between parents and teachers regarding the very need for social-emotional learning or the appropriate way to implement a life skills program in classrooms. However, it is suggested that the problem be given its true magnitude: once the dialogue among teachers, parents, and students begins, it is often evident that the gaps in expectations are not as great as one might have feared. Moreover, the gaps can also be clarified, and partial or full agreement can be reached on the topics of concern.

For example, in the case of the Life Skills program, it seems that school staff and parents can reach a broad agreement on the nature of the **first stage** of its implementation – i.e., the importance of learning two skills about which there is usually no argument: (1) *How to make decisions***.** Awareness of the need to acquire this skill is part of every value system a person holds. Moreover, the acquisition of the ability to decide, in itself, is a necessary condition for achieving a clear and valuable self-definition that a person must strive for as a preliminary step towards the operational decisions mentioned. Therefore, parents should encourage their children to acquire the ability to make decisions. The same goes for teachers who have to encourage students to learn to make decisions, at least to develop a proper understanding of academic matters (e.g., what homework should I complete first?). In light of this, the likelihood that all parties concerned will agree on the need to collaborate on imparting or acquiring this skill is high; (2) *How to adapt to new situations*. Always, and especially in light of the globalization processes the world has undergone over the past 50 years, the ability to adapt to new situations has become an essential

skill for everyone throughout their lives (Carlson et al., 2017). For example, the old scenario of a child learning a profession through an apprenticeship and continuing to practice it for the rest of their life is no longer relevant to large parts of the world's population. On the other hand, the scenario of a child acquiring general knowledge, learning a second foreign language, becoming acquainted with the changing and developing world of employment, starting work in a certain place, and changing several jobs during their lifetime has become the reality for many people. In this new scenario, the skills to make decisions and to adapt to new situations have a central place in a person's mental and economic well-being.

In light of these notions, it seems fruitful to suggest that the **first step** toward partnership among school teams, parents, and students should focus on dialogues about these two important and widely acknowledged skills. Notably, these two skills complement each other, and there is extensive and accessible theoretical and practical knowledge on how to promote them (Israelashvili, 2023).

The **second stage** in the suggested process for creating partnerships will involve transitioning from the two skills stated in the context of the partnership towards the establishment of a dialogue around an expanded list of life skills to be imparted to students. The expanded list can be either proposed to the partners (i.e., the teachers, the parents, and ,when possible, the students) or gradually established by them. A list of 10 such possible and universal life values was proposed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017; UNICEF MENA Regional Office, 2017): decision-making, problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, self-

awareness, empathy, coping with emotions, and stress. In practice, for example, in the second stage, this list of skills can be presented to students and parents, and they can be invited to an open discussion about these skills and their relevance to students' lives and the reality in Israel. After a while, parents and teachers can be asked to choose additional skills from the list to work on together later.

Such a gradual process can serve as a basis for a calm, productive dialogue between the parties. Importantly, it will serve as a positive experience and a fertilizing background for a long-term partnership between them across a variety of fields, not just in social-emotional learning and life skills. Approaching such a broad partnership is the **third stage** in the process. The parties, however, will reach it after many hours of joint discussions, experience of sharing agreement on various actions (in the first and second stages), and, above all, personal mutual acquaintance without stigma. Actually, the literature on the partnership between schools and parents repeatedly aims to address such situations (Hart et al., 2024).

The proposed approach – gradual, respectful, participatory, and starting with agreements about what should happen in school – proved itself in studies on the introduction of prevention programs into communities and schools. For example, the Communities That Care program (CTC) (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Kuklinski et al., 2021) begins with a gradual, respectful dialogue with parents and gradually defines the goals for agreed-upon prevention interventions. Only later will the CTC present the program itself.

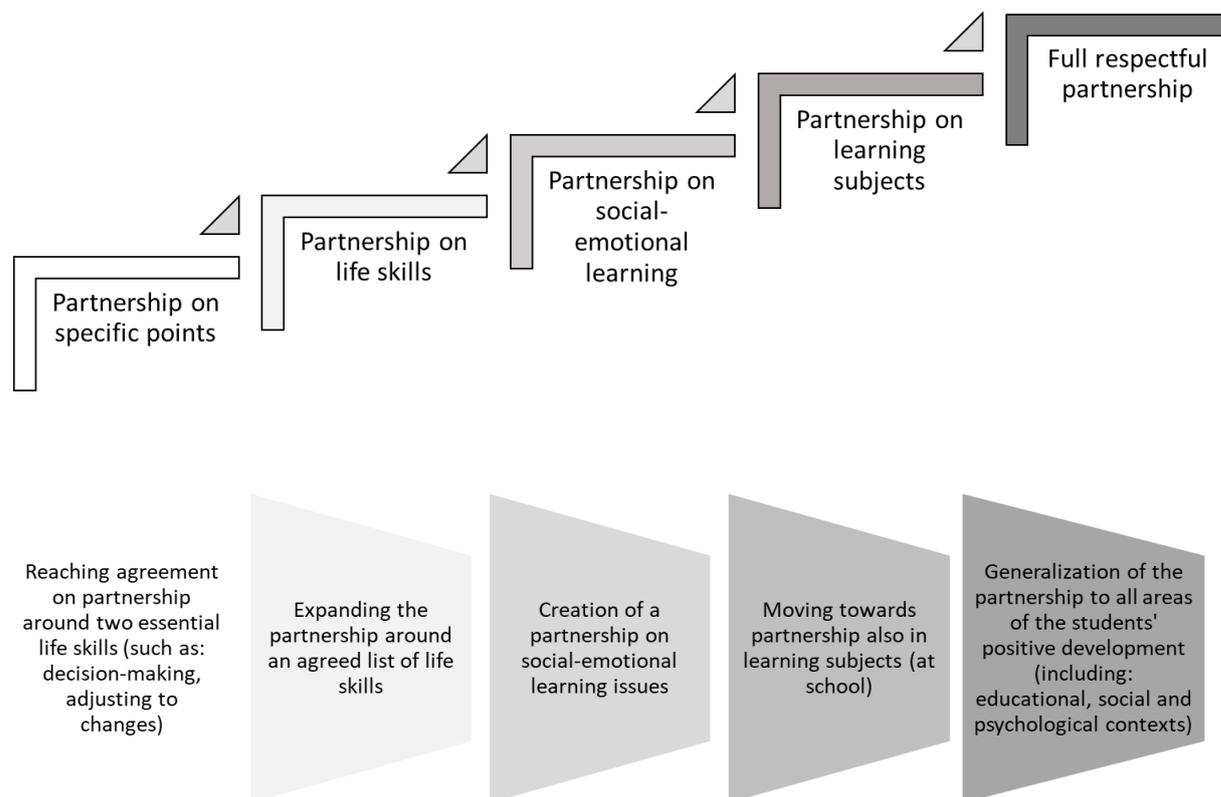Figure 1 shows the course of the proposed gradual approach.

Partnership on specific points

Partnership on life skills

Partnership on social-emotional learning

Partnership on learning subjects

Full respectful partnership

Reaching agreement on partnership around two essential life skills (such as: decision-making, adjusting to changes)

Expanding the partnership around an agreed list of life skills

Creation of a partnership on social-emotional learning issues

Moving towards partnership also in learning subjects (at school)

Generalization of the partnership to all areas of the students' positive development (including: educational, social and psychological contexts)

Figure 1: Establishment Of Teacher-Parent Partnership Based on Life Skills

Finally, it is important to note that the CASEL Institute – the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) - also presents the possibility of using social-emotional learning issues as a springboard for creating a broad teachers-parents partnership. In a comprehensive review of this topic, CASEL recently (2023) proposed that the issue of social-emotional learning, despite its complexity or perhaps precisely because of its complexity, could serve as a lever for creating a better partnership between educational teams and parents. The series of actions that CASEL proposes includes presentation of social-emotional education activities as relevant to the overall school activity. Therefore, it necessarily leads to a redefinition of the school's goals, both for students and for society as a whole, to improve students'

learning experience and achievements and to reduce school dropouts. CASEL proposes carrying these out through multidimensional and integrated action that includes the following components: (a) **Connection to learning:** linking learning materials to topics and goals that concern parents; (b) **Creating engagement** through steps that build trust and confidence between parents and the educational team; (c) **Development:** initiating processes that will give both parents and teachers a feeling of enrichment and development; d) **Collaboration:** actions that enable parents and teachers to learn together in groups, rather than individually; (e) **Mutual connection:** initiatives that provide opportunities for practice and guidance of learning processes.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present article was to present the Life Skills program as a singular case that illustrates broader aspects of social-emotional learning and school-parent partnership.

On the whole, a life skills program appears to be a challenging, complex, and at the same time inviting platform. Namely, it paves the way for the creation of improved, comprehensive partnerships between schools and parents, benefiting all parties: students, teachers, parents, and, ultimately, the entire society.

It is argued that the Achilles heel in creating the school-parents' partnership is the lack of proper teacher training: how to initiate, establish, manage, and sustain the desired partnership process with parents. An appropriate training process, carried out in an informed, ongoing, and professional manner, will instill in educational staff the recognition of the need and their ability to promote

partnerships of the type proposed. There is also truth in the belief that a proper teacher training process will promote and strengthen teachers' life skills (Israelashvili & Wegman-Rozi, 2005; Shechtman et al., 2005), ultimately contributing to their overall conduct as teachers. However, both this hypothesis and other issues discussed in the present review deserve examination and empirical proof.

Recommendations for Further Research

Studies conducted in the USA have supported the utility of a life skills program for its participants. This evidence indicates that adolescents who participated in the program acquired the skills taught, thereby preventing escalation into problem behaviors.

In Israel, however, only a few studies have examined various aspects of the Life Skills program, and these were mainly surveys rather than evidence-based evaluation studies. In oral testimony to the editors of a review on social-emotional learning, it was stated that a single study conducted by the Ministry of Education (Shechtman, 1991) found no evidence of a life skills program's contribution to students (Ran et al., 2018). As mentioned above, another study found a certain contribution to teachers who participated in training on how to deliver a life skills program (Shechtman et al., 2005). Therefore, there is a need for a series of studies on the Life Skills program in Israel, including: studies of the program's components (e.g., life skills that adolescents in Israel perceive as essential for their development), studies of the cultural- and age-appropriateness of the processes of imparting life skills, and studies of issues related to ways to introduce the program into schools. Especially, there is a

need for comprehensive, evidence-based studies on effective ways to train trainee teachers to deliver lessons on life skills across various class levels and educational settings. All of these are studies that will advance the evaluation of a life skills program designed to support students' development and functioning. Recently, the seeds of research activity on social-emotional learning have begun to emerge (Kazarnovski & Cucoș, 2022). However, most, if not all, of these studies focus on social-emotional learning within school learning processes (e.g., Ketko-Ayali et al., 2025). Thus, in this area too, there is still a need for studies examining whether parents in Israel believe in social-emotional learning, whether they feel that school can add to what they do at home, and whether they are willing to partner with teachers in this regard. Finally, there is a need for further studies on how partnerships between educational teams and parents can be integrated into school activities aimed at fostering social-emotional learning in Israel.

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