

## DEVELOPMENT TRENDS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE LIVING VALUES AND LIFE SKILLS PROGRAMS IN VIETNAMESE SCHOOLS

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**Abstract.** Living values and life skills education has been popularly carried out in Vietnam over the two decades. A large number of in-depth studies on living values and life skills have been conducted and many of the research findings applied. Various living values and/or life skills education programs have been translated and piloted in Vietnamese schools nationwide. This paper reviews the existing approaches, concepts and education programs of living values and life skills in the period of 2000-2020. Previous approaches tend to be mainly separate: living values education or life skills education, very few programs clearly integrate the living values education with life skills education. The review results show that currently the integrated approach to the education of living values and life skills is selected by many educational programs. The article also analyzes the development trends and sustainability of those programs in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** living values, life skills, integrated approach, theory of multiple factor intelligence.

### 1. Introduction

In Vietnamese education system, besides the subject of “morality”, which is regulated as a compulsory subject in the national education curricula, the subject or activity of living values and life skills has been integrated in class activities or provided as an extra curriculum activity since 2005 (Nguyen, 2009; Do, 2011; Dang, 2011; Tran 2013, Tran 2015, Nguyen 2018, MOET, 2018).

In 2008, living values and life skills programs were included into their curricula by many institutes (Nguyen, 2009; Tillman & Colimina, 2000). As the living values and life skills programs integrated into class activities or were provided as extra curriculum sessions, they could be included officially in the formal educational curriculum (Mac, 2004, Nguyen, 2006). Those programs can be classified into two types, including (1) programs focusing on social skills, and (2) programs stressing education and training of life skills.

This paper reviews the existing concepts, development trends, and approaches as well as the implementation of the living values and/or life skills education programs from 2000 to now. It also provides a brief introduction to the sustainability and potential of this educational model.

### 2. Content

#### 2.1. Methodology

This paper studies living-value and life-skill education programs in both domestic and international.

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In order to do this, the author collected 60 reviewed papers and books published from 2000 to 2019 as references. Some of these papers and books were published by highly prestigious publishers in Vietnam such as Vietnam Education Publishing House, the National Political Publishing House, Tri Thuc Publishing House, the Journal of Education of the Ministry of Education and Training, the Journal of Science of Hanoi National University of Education. Some foreign copyright books were translated into Vietnamese and widely used for living values and life skills education programs in Vietnam.

## **2.2. Core concepts**

### ***Values***

Values are beliefs that are beneficial, attractive, and respectful for an individual or a society (Pham, 2010; Mac, 2011; Do, 2011; Dang, 2011). Human beings use values to measure how useful a certain thing is for themselves. Values are used to measure how intellectual, ethical, and talented a person is, the concepts and actualities of beauty, truth, and kindness of a society, the quality of a certain object that can be measured via currency in exchanging and purchasing relations and the size of a quantity or a variable (Nguyen et al., 2010). An individual, a community, or a nation that lives in different natural and social conditions develops his/her or their typical qualities especially in selecting and ranking priority in a scale of values, system of values, core values, survival values, basic values, and priority values. Although many old values may disappear and new values may appear, the universal values of human beings and the fundamental traditions of a nation remain and pass through generations (Mac, 2011, Pham, 2010).

### ***Living values and living-value education***

Living-value education means to teach practical values in association with life skills for an individual. It is to help the person to lead a better life and to do a better job (Mac, 2011; Pham, 2010; Tran, 2013; Do, 2011).

In nature, there is no difference between the concept of living values and the concept of values. These concepts are approached differently at different times to emphasize their various aspects or to meet the needs of the society.

Living values refer to those values that are beneficial, attractive, valuable, important, and meaningful for life. These are values that everyone wants to acquire and express so that his/her life will be better and so that he/she can make effective contributions to the community (Do, 2011; Tran, 2013, Mac, 2011; Tillman & Colomina, 2000; Nguyen, 2012).

Living values develop, maintain, and change along with the development of a person, a community, and a nation. In education, living values are looked at from the angle of an individual person.

Living-value education is a process that helps middle and high school students to be aware of and acquire the society's universal values, and then to turn these values into personal values belonging to themselves. The process also facilitates the students to develop positive, effective, and appropriate thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors about themselves so that they can satisfy society's expectations later (Mac, 2011; Pham, 2010; Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2013).

### ***Life skills and life-skill education***

According to UNESCO, life skills are the personal competences that can help an individual to function fully in daily life (Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2012). WHO says that life skills are socio-psychological and communication skills used for interaction and problem solving on a daily basis (Nguyen, 2009).

Life skills can be understood as competences (or technical aspects of an action) that reflect the living values of daily activities and communication (Mac, 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2013).

Life skills consist of the skills that a person needs for a safe and healthy life (Nguyen, 2009; Mac, 2011; Do, 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Luu, 2012; Tran, 2013).

Life skills are also the skills that a person acquires through learning activities or experiences; they are used in daily situations for interactions and problem solving. Life skills consist of soft and social skills. Soft skills are closely associated with a person's social integration or interactions with society, community, or organizations (Gutkin & Reynolds, 2009; Do, 2011; Tran, 2013). Soft skills may include emotional management, development of self-concept, decision making, goal setting, communication, teamwork, leadership, public-speaking, conflict-solving, empathy, exploration of personal values, reflection, positive thinking, study and self study, time management, etc. (Tran, 2013)

Life-skill education helps learners change awareness by providing them information and knowledge, develop more positive and cooperative behaviors, and be aware of the consequences that their behaviors or attitudes may result in so that they will be able to apply the principles of sustainable development. (Nguyen, 2009)

Life-skill education provides learners with individual and social skills. Thus, they can turn what they acquire (consciousness), feel (attitude) and are keen on (values) into competences and know what they should do and how they should react (behaviors) in daily situations (Nguyen, Dinh, & Bui, 2010).

### **2.3. Relations between living values and life skills**

Living skills help learners learn and work effectively, communicate and behave in a more friendly manner, and do positive things and avoid negative things. Living values orientate and promote an individual's actions while life skills help him/her act effectively and avoid "technical" mistakes. Therefore, living values education cannot ignore either life skills or universal values (Tillman & Colomina, 2000; Gutkin & Reynolds, 2009; Pham, 2010; Mac, 2011; Tran, 2013)

Both positive and negative living values and life skills may exist and develop in every person. The living values and life skills that are nurtured will grow and show up in daily life. Specifically, positive living values may include love, unity, peace, responsibility, respect, simplicity, tolerance, modesty, cooperation, honesty, and happiness. These positive living values lay a sound foundation for good life skills. Vice versa, if negative living values, such as irresponsibility, lying, selfishness, jealousy, disrespect, poor cooperation, etc. are nurtured, they will grow as bad life skills (Do, 2011; Tran, 2013).

If life skills are not well taught and learnt, they may be used for bad objectives. For example, a middle school student who acquires good communication and presentation skills may tell a lie to his teacher (he claims he doesn't fulfill assignments because he is sick), or to his friend (when he loses money, he lies to his friend to borrow money for breakfast). Maybe this child hasn't understood what truth and respect means or he hasn't developed such values (Tran, 2013).

Living values and life skills should not be taught separately because living values lay a foundation for life skills, and in turn life skills facilitate the existence and diversity of living values.

### **2.4. Living-values and life-skill education programs – development trends and approaches**

Though living values and life skills education programs vary greatly, they apply a quite universal framework as repeatedly stated in reviewed papers, research, and foreign copyright books published from 1995 up to now.

#### ***Popular living values and life skills education programs in Vietnam***

In 2008, 2009 and 2010, HCMC General Publishing House and Tre Publishing House launched the translation of three living values education programs authored by Tillman & Hsu: (1) *Living Values for Young People*, (2) *Living Values for Children Aged from 3 to 7 Years Old*, (3) *Living Values for Children Aged from 8 to 14 Years Old*.

In 2009, Women's Publishing House introduced the publication *I Am Gifted - So Are You* by Khoo in the Vietnamese language – this book introduces a diversity of soft skills for children and adolescents so that they can make use of their competences.

In 2010, thanks to the support of the United Nation Children's Fund, Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training introduced four books or programs of life skills education, specifically: (1) *Life Skills Integrated in Learning Subjects for Grades 1-5*, (2) *Life Skills Provided as an Extra Curriculum Activity for High Schools*, and (3) *Life Skills Integrated in Learning Subjects Such as Geography, Ethics, Literature, Biology etc. for High Schools*.

In 2010, a group of independent authors cooperated with VNU Publishing House to compile a set of four education programs of living values and life skills: (1) *Living Values and Life Skills Program For Preschool Children*, (2) *Living Values and Life Skills Education Program for Elementary Students*, (3) *Living Values and Life Skills Education Program for Middle School Students*; and *Living Values and Life Skills for High School Students*.

In 2011, Canh Buom Team worked with Tri Thuc Publishing House to publish a life-style education program for primary students. This program focuses on educating students with groups of skills related to students' daily lives.

The Education Program of Living Values and Life Skills for Secondary Students (NBK, 2014) is an integrated program introducing 12 living values (according to UNESCO research results) and 9 groups of basic life skills for secondary students.

In 2015, the Vinschool system had translated the Lions Quest Program (Lions Clubs International Foundation, 2015) and started using this to educate students from grade 1 to grade 12.

Educating Life Skills and Social Issues (Dang et al, 2018) focuses on equipping students with social skills to build positive friendships and conflict-resolution skills. The program focuses on three skill groups: Life skills in schools, Life skills in the family and society and Skills to cope with and prevent current social issues.

These nine living values and life skills education programs are said to be good choices for schools and parents, or it may be that schools use those programs as source of references to design their own life skills/living values programs.

### ***Approaches***

In general, since 2000, there have been three major approaches in living values and life skills education programs for preschool to high school students: (1) Independent approach – living values are taught separately from life skills (Khoo, 2012; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, Dinh, Bui, Phan, Vu, Tran, & Dang, 2010), (2) Integrated approach - living values and life skills are integrated in extra curriculum activities or mandatory learning subjects (Bui et al., 2010), and (3) Mixed approach – living values and life skills are included in a lesson, experience, or activity (Canh Buom, 2011; Tillman, 2008; Tillman & Hsu, 2008; Tillman & Colimina, 2000; Tillman, 2010; Tran, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; NBK, 2019).

### ***Objectives of popular living values/life skills education programs in Vietnam***

Seemingly, all living values education programs aim to: (1) provide principles and skills for comprehensive human development (physical, psychological/emotional and social aspects), (2) help each person to think of twelve values and the impacts of the expression of these values on himself, surrounding people and community, and (3) build a better understanding for students and motivate them to take responsibility in their personal and social choices towards

positiveness (Pham, 2010; Canh Buom, 2011; Tillman, 2008; Tillman & Hsu, 2008; Tillman & Colimina, 2000; Tillman, 2010; Tran, 2013; Do, 2011; Mac, 2011; Khoo, 2009; Bui et al., 2010; Tran, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; NBK, 2019).

Particularly, living-value education for students is to develop living values “of students, by students, for students”. As a result, they will live a better life, work effectively; and generate benefits for themselves, their families, school, and society (Mac, 2011; Tran 2015, Nguyen 2018).

Life-skill education programs have two major goals, including: (1) awareness increasing and positive behavior changes for dealing with daily problems, and (2) understanding impacts of personal attitudes and behaviors in other people and then having the ability to practice the principles of sustainability (Nguyen, 2009, Tran, 2013; Do, 2011; Mac, 2011; Khoo, 2009; Bui et al., 2010; Tran, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; NBK, 2019).

### ***Contents of popular living-value/life-skill education programs in Vietnam***

Living-value education programs often focus on the following twelve fundamental and universal living values stated by UNESCO and UNICEF in 1997: peace, respect, love, tolerance, happiness, responsibility, cooperation, modesty, honesty, simplicity, freedom, and unity (Tillman, 2008; Tillman & Hsu, 2008; Tillman & Colimina, 2000; Tillman, 2010; Do, 2011; Pham, 2010; Tran, 2013; Do, 2011; Mac, 2011; 2009; Bui et al., 2010). These values are selected for the education of students of a wide range of ages including preschool, primary, middle, and high school, and even higher education as shown in Table 1.

These life-skill education programs work on groups of basic skills depending on educational levels. The groups of skills are based on UNESCO’s classification in 2003. According to this classification, life skills are divided into three groups as shown in Table 1: (1) skills of knowledge (critical thinking, problem solving, awareness of consequences, decision making, creativeness, self-concept, goal setting, value determination and etc.), (2) skills for facing emotional issues (stress control, emotion management, self-management, self-supervision, adjustment, etc.), and (3) social skills or interaction skills (communication, determination, negotiation, refusal, positive listening, cooperation, sympathy, awareness of others’ willingness and etc.) (Nguyen et al., 2010).

The life-skill education program from VNU Publishing House (as shown in Table 1) introduces six skills for preschool children: self-concept, social relations, self-confidence, self-help, responsibility, and cooperation (Nguyen et al., 2010). Eight skills are introduced for primary students: self-concept, sharing/empathy, positive thinking, anger management, consistency, conflict solving and support seeking (Nguyen et al., 2010), and eight skills for middle school students: self-concept, self-esteem, empathy, courage, critical thinking, problem solving-decision making, conflict solving and consistency (Nguyen et al., 2010). For high school students, six skills are introduced: self-concept, consistency skills, refusal, decision-making, cooperation and listening (Nguyen et al., 2010).

The life-skill education program from VNU Publishing House introduces a group of twenty-one skills for primary, middle and high school students as shown in Table 1 (Hoang et al., 2010).

***Table 1. Living values and life skills for preschool, middle, and high school students***

<b>12 living values for students of all education levels</b>	<b>6 life skills for kindergarten</b>	<b>21 life skills for primary, junior and senior secondary students</b>	
Peace	Self awareness skill	Self awareness skill	Co- operation skill
Respect	Social relation skill	Value determining skill	Critical thinking skill
Love	Self confident skill	Self emotional control	Creative thinking skill

Tolerance	Self reliant skill	Coping with stress skill	Decision making skill
Happiness	Developing responsibility skill	Support finding skill	Problem solving skill
Responsibility	Cooperation skill	Self confident skill	Consistent skill
Cooperation		Communication skill	Responsibility skill
Humility		Active listening skill	Goal setting skill
Honesty		Empathy skill	Time management skill
Simplicity		Negotiating skill	Information finding & processing skill
Freedom		Conflict resolution skill	
Unity			

These living values and life skills education programs have a lot of similarities in their content and they are differentiated by names or classification of skills.

***Teaching methods and techniques of popular living-value/life-skill education programs in Vietnam***

Living-value/life-skill education programs have used many teaching methods following the learner-centered principle and making use of the learners' active role. Basically, small group teaching, case study, brainstorming, problem solving, role-play, games, and projects are seven of the most widely practiced methods.

These methods are administrated via about twenty-two positive and diversified techniques as presented in Table 2.

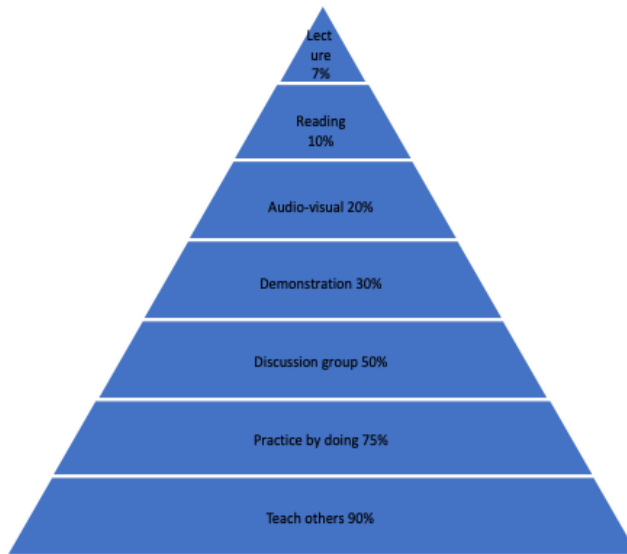
***Table 2. Techniques used in living-value/life-skill education programs for children of all educational levels (preschool, middle and high school students)***

Techniques used to teach living values/life skills	
Positive value-based atmosphere	Sharing
Discovering the real life	Discussion
Discovering different ideas	Acting
Thinking point	Imagination
Recalling	Focus experience
Art activities	Setting an example
Mind mapping	Receiving information
Diagram/graph	Diary
Matching	Asking the experts
Game	Making questions
Group interaction	Film/clip analysis

The methods and techniques of Tillman, Hsu, & Colimina living values programs were all based on Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Factor Intelligence (Table 3) and J. S. Bruner's philosophy of learning process/learning styles (Figure 1).

***Table 3. Howard Gardner's nine types of intelligence (Armstrong, 2010)***

1. Linguistic intelligence	6. Interpersonal intelligence
2. Logical-mathematical intelligence	7. Intrapersonal intelligence
3. Musical intelligence	8. Naturalist intelligence
4. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence	9. Existential intelligence
5. Spatial intelligence	



*Figure 1. Effectiveness of learning styles*

## 2.5. Discussion

In this part, we discuss about approaching trends and future perspectives of living values and living skills education.

### 2.5.1. Approaching trends

Some recent theoretical and practical studies show that living values and life skills should not be taught separately. Instead, they should be taught together or living values should be introduced before life skills (Greenland, 2010; Mackie, 2010; Nguyen, 2009; Pink, 2008; Pham, 2010; Phan & Nguyen, 2003; Tran 2013; Dang, 2011; Do, 2011; Armstrong, 2010; Tran, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; NBK, 2019).

It is possible to integrate living values and life skills education into learning subjects or activities with a focus on academic performance and skill training. Therefore, living values are the key target and life skills are the realization of the living values. Positive values may lay a foundation for the development of right and positive skills; negative values may build a basis for negative and inhumane skills. If positive life skills are developed, they will serve as the basis to promote and enrich the positive living values for each individual person.

Thus, living values are the “origin” or the “soul” of life skills. Life skills are the ability to turn values into behaviors. In other words, living values and life skills are inseparable as they complement each other. For example, some students who have good communication skills may use this ability to lie to teachers, friends, etc., to overestimate materials, or to become selfish. Such students may lack core values such as respect and honesty.

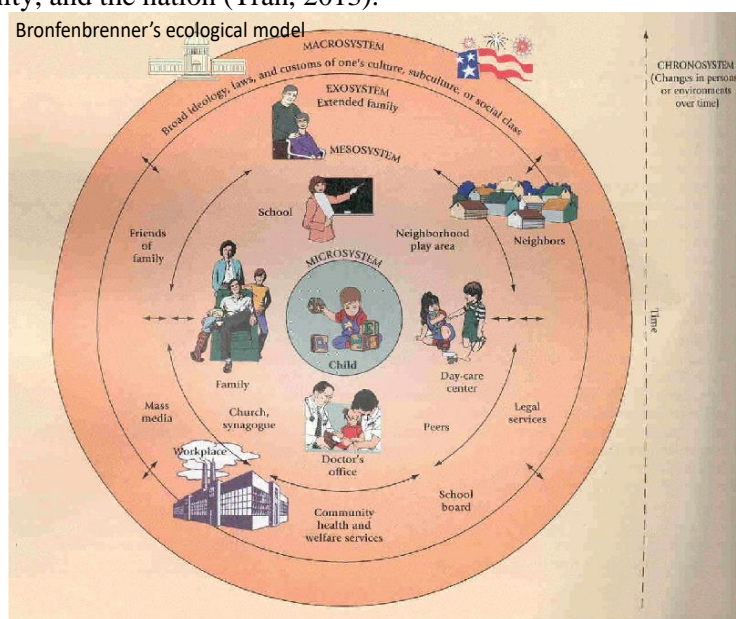
Therefore, living-value and life-skill education should be included in an integrated approach, which means: (1) educating both living values and life skills at the same time, (2) providing living values and life skills education based upon open methods and the theory of multi-factor intelligence to promote various types of intelligence, and (3) combining positive teaching techniques and methods in every learning activity or session (Tran, 2013).

To practice an integrated approach, teachers must be a model, which means they should have positive living values and life skills themselves. (Although no one is perfect — their values and skills are expressed through their daily language and behaviors). Teachers should also have received relevant training courses on living values, life skills, and be active and employ the modern teaching methods and techniques (Tran, 2013).

### **2.5.2. Future perspectives**

Living values and life skills education aims to equip students with appropriate knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills so they can develop and practice positive behaviors and/or habits, eliminate negative behaviors and/or habits in daily relationships, situations and activities and create conditions for students' right and dutiful performance as well as physical, intellectual, spiritual and moral development (Tran, 2013; Do, 2011; Mac, 2011; Pham, 2010; Hoang et al., 2010; Tillman, 2008; Tillman & Hsu, 2008; Tillman & Colimina, 2000; Tillman, 2010; Greenland, 2010; Mackie, 2010; Tran & Pham, 2013; UNESCO, 2019).

The living-value and life-skill programs can be built on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as portrayed in Figure 2. With this approach, the values and skills will focus on the children's immediate environment and gradually expand to larger environments and relationships. Children learn to understand or realize firstly about themselves, understand their own values, love and have a need to practice life. As a result, they develop values and skills relating to family, community, and the nation (Tran, 2013).



**Figure 2. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model**

As mentioned previously, the teaching methods and techniques of the living-value and life-skill education programs are various. Noticeably, the organization and teaching techniques must develop at least four out of nine intelligences as stated in Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Factor Intelligence and promote the capabilities of both left and right brain hemispheres (Tran, 2013; Pink, 2008; MacConnel, 2001; Buzan, 2010; Diggins et al., 2010; DeGangi, Kendall, 2011; Mackie, 2010; Siegel & Bryson, 2011; Scott, et al., 2012; Wagner & Kegan, 2006; Zippoli & Melloy, 2001; Tran, 2015; Nguyen, 2018; NBK, 2019).

Currently, many organizations, schools, and individuals who are living-value and life-skill education providers have realized the shortage of a certain content and the implementation of living values and life skills separately (Nguyen et al., 2018).

In Hanoi, a group of volunteers and independent researchers who are members of the Young Talent Fund and Ms. Marina Thys – an educational expert from Belgium – have piloted an integrated approach in living values and life skills education from 2001 until now. It was found that there are positive changes in students, teachers, and parents (who were trained on living values and life skills at the same time). Currently, the group is continuing to design and pilot programs for students of all grades in different schools (NBK, 2014; Tran, 2015).



### 3. Conclusions

With the review of the existing concepts, development trends and approaches, as well as the implementation of the living-value and/or life-skill education programs from 2000 to now, it is possible to say that the development of an integrated approach in living values and life skills education is sustainable and highly suitable for the comprehensive innovation of Vietnam's education as undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Training currently (MOET, 2018; Nguyen & Tran, 2018, Nguyen, 2019).

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