

Embedding soft skills to the teacher education undergraduate curriculum: perceptions of faculty and students

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Abstract

Soft skills have become a subject of increasing interest. Soft skills acquisition enhances personality development resulting in success in professional and personal life. Emphasis on the soft skills development in higher education has been a major focus in all undergraduate programs. The objective of the study was to conduct a status study on the implementation of soft skills development in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) program of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka which is the oldest and the highly recognized BEd program of the country. Within the case study purposive samples of ten faculty members and thirty students were selected. Data were collected on student perceptions, faculty perceptions and self reflections of the researcher who was the coordinator of the soft skills program. Data collection strategies were focus group interviews and reflective notes. Findings reveal that the students preferred soft skills workshops conducted as stand-alone support activities. Their participation in classroom activities with soft skills components was also encouraging. Faculty members were in favour of embedding soft skills to the teacher education curricula. The study suggests that a wide range of soft skills to be embedded into all teacher professional development programs through innovative activities.

Keywords— soft skills, teacher education, higher education, embedded curriculum

Introduction

Soft skills are considered to be one of the critical skills in determining the success of professional practice while shaping a person's personality. Hard skills are those skills that are specific to a particular career field or job while soft skills are those skills and personal traits which may be useful for performing any job, no matter the field of any human endeavours (Onabamiro, Onuka, and Oyekanmi, 2014, 109). Soft skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual's personality. Soft skills of school teachers are considered essential to meet the demands of the 21st century society.

As a faculty engaged in teacher education, the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo offers a Bachelors degree in Education (BEd). The BEd program is a degree program conducted by the Faculty of Education in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts. It is a four year special degree with 125 credits and also the only pre-service university based teacher education program. The BEd student follows 13 professional courses in three years beyond the first year of the undergraduate program. During the 2nd and 3rd years in every semester a student takes one professional subject and major concentration of the program remains with the academic subjects. In the final year or the four years B.Ed. student follows all courses with the Faculty of Education spends substantial amount of time on practice teaching and orientation seminars to strengthen their professional practice of education in school and classroom. Through the degree program both academic and professional competencies required by a teacher to teach subjects of General Education system.

Soft skills development is very important in the teacher preparation. Teachers are expected to acquire and develop academic knowledge, technical skills of teaching and also soft skills which in other words called as human skills and life skills. As in other faculties, prior to this systemic

intervention there had been no special emphasis for developing soft skills of the undergraduates of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo. With the directives to integrate soft skills into undergraduate curricula Faculty of Education also made efforts comply through reorganization of the professional component of the BEd course modules. The views of the students and faculty on the ongoing curriculum implementation were investigated to improve success of the intervention.

Review of Literature

Jain (2009) lists seven soft skills chosen to be implemented in all institutions of higher learning in United States. These include the following:

1. Communicative skills.
2. Thinking skills and Problem solving skills.
3. Team work
4. Life-long learning and Information Management
5. Entrepreneurship skills
6. Ethics, moral and professionalism
7. Leadership skills

It is also said that in introducing soft skills it is necessary to revise course content, the instructional system and learning environment in higher education. Soft skills cannot be taught directly and also cannot acquire through reading. Three models are recognised in the development of soft skills. One is the stand-alone subject model. This model uses the approach of training and providing opportunities to students to develop soft skills through specific courses that are carefully planned for this purpose. The next model is the embedded model. This model uses the approach of embedding the soft skills in the teaching and learning activities across the curriculum. It does not require the student to take special courses as in the stand-alone subject model. The combined

stand-alone and embedded model is the other model. This allows the faculty to introduce special courses if necessary and also to integrate elements as needed to the running program. In addition to these three standard models soft skills development through academic and non-academic support programs. While a similar report is compiled by Pachauri and Yadav (2014) they also add another model where soft skills are developed through academic and non-academic support programs. The academic support programs helps the student to acquire soft skills associated with academic components while the non-academic support programs are generic personality development focused programs.

Of the three models, the embedded model is reported as the most effective for soft skills development. By incorporating soft skills into the already existing curricula with minimum changes would facilitate students to develop their soft skills throughout their normal program (Schulz, 2008; Shakir, 2009). The development of soft skills through the embedded model requires teacher expertise to use a variety of student-centred teaching strategies which result in active learning.

A study on the readiness of lecturers to embed soft skills in curricula in a Malaysian teacher education institution has revealed that lecturers showed readiness irrespective of their number of years of professional experience. However, it was revealed that they needed support in gaining knowledge on soft skills (Hassan, Maharoff and Abidin, 2012)

Malaysian institutes of higher learning have introduced the same seven soft skills elements as USA to be incorporated into undergraduate studies. Shakir (2009) reports that there are several challenges faced in the process such as issues related to student belief that they do not lack any skills; getting the relevant parties such as students, lecturers to collaborate to make it a joint effort and realize the need for development of soft skills and having no clear guidelines to assess soft skills.

In a study of soft skills incorporation into an engineering higher education institution in Malaysia indicates that the issues related to soft skills development initiatives are the student negative attitudes on the need to learn soft skills, shortage of time to cover heavy syllabuses and having to deal with large class sizes (Idrus, et al, 2009). In India very little has been done in concrete terms to plan Soft Skills in teaching career ().

Vijaya Kumari (2014) and Balkrishnan and Raju (2015) report that soft skills development has not been adequately addressed in teacher education as in the fields of management, engineering and other technical fields. The study by Vijaya Kumari (2014) reveals a positive relationship between teacher accountability at the secondary school level and soft skills, thus confirming the need for soft skills for teaching as similar to other fields. The study recommends that training on soft skills should be an integral part of teacher education programs. A study by Balakrishnan and Raju (2015) with teachers of the high school indicates that soft skills are positively related to teacher competencies. This study too recommends soft skills training in pre-service and in-service modes. Both studies are based on samples of teachers India.

A study by Ngang, Yie and Shahid (2015) on the relationship between acquisition of soft skills and quality teaching has brought out that there is a strong relationship between the two variables.

Ngagng, Hashim and Yunus (2015) in a study of novice teachers' perceptions on a module of soft skills integration in teacher professional training revealed that except for the entrepreneurship skill other 6 skills are relevant to the teaching profession and recommended to be integrated to the soft skills module of teacher training.

A study by Onabamiro, Onuka and Oyekanmi (2014) on soft skills teaching and assessment indicate that irrespective of the gender teachers perceive that soft skills are teachable and can be assessed through essay type questions, assignments, projects and case studies rather than objective type questions.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study was to conduct a status study on the curriculum implementation of the soft skills integrated to the BEd curriculum. The seven soft skills stated above were embedded to the BEd curriculum in the form of student-centred teaching learning strategies. The entire academic staff of the faculty participated in including student centred activities to the specific subjects. The entire faculty was involved in developing activities for each topic where student soft skills are evoked. In addition three non-academic support workshops were conducted across the semester.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a case study of the implementation of the soft skills integrated BEd curriculum of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo. Purposive samples of ten faculty members out of 25 members and thirty students out of 120 students were selected to gather data. The entire academic faculty had participated in carrying out the task of embedding soft skills in the pre-service teacher education curriculum. Of the ten lecturers in the sample five were senior members of the staff while the other five were middle level members of the faculty. Academics of both genders were included in the sample. The student sample was selected from the final year BEd students who had been exposed to the curricula embedded to develop soft skills. The student sample consisted of only females as the BEd batch consisted of a large majority of female students.

Data were collected on perceptions of faculty and students and self-reflections of the researcher who was the coordinator of the soft skills program. Data collection strategies were focus group discussions and reflective notes of the researcher. Data categories were developed.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed the student experiences and the teacher views and challenges of implementing the revised curriculum that integrated soft skills developing activities. In addition the reflections of the coordinator were also accommodated to triangulate the findings.

All lecturers in the sample expressed that participation of BEd undergraduates in classroom activities enhancing soft skills components was encouraging. They were in favour of soft skills integration to the teacher education curricula when compared with the Stand-alone support programs. The curriculum rearrangement and introduced changes to the instructional methods to strengthen soft skills development were appreciated by the sample of lecturers. They indicated that strategies for self-learning, group learning and team-work were being implemented successfully. The activities such as individual and group assignments, presentations using multimedia, poster presentations, information search using internet, social work, small scale action research were also being implemented across the different modules of the curriculum.

The sample of the academic staff selected for the study unanimously agreed that unless soft skills are assessed on a regular basis with valid and reliable ways of grading, mere inclusion of these in the instructional system may not be effective enough to enhance these skills in every student. With the revision of the curriculum types of continuous assessment strategies were changed to deviate from written assignment style to other types of assessments such as oral and poster presentations, small scale research, role play, group work in class and small scale portfolios.

Student perceptions revealed that all students liked soft skills workshops conducted as non-academic support stand-alone activities by external resource persons as they were useful and enjoyable learning activities. The resource persons from corporate sector who conducted these sessions had been able to evoke an enthusiasm in students to be aware of the soft skills application in day to day life as a teacher or an educator.

However, when inquired about their preference for Stand-alone course modules on soft skills, they were not in favour to follow such modules. The main reason given was that they needed to concentrate and stay focused on academic and professional subjects and obtaining high grades at the final examination and they were not keen on having to follow a complete standalone module on developing soft skills. Unlike in Malaysian studies on students of technical courses (Adnana, Ramalingam and Ilias 2014; Shakir, 2009) in higher education these students admitted the need for soft skills for their future.

There were three main challenges faced by the lecturers in their effort to integrate soft skills in their teaching of BEd courses in the University of Colombo. These were the students' degree of readiness to participate in activities in the classroom, limited time to cover the syllabus and large numbers of students in a session. Three of the lecturers were of the opinion that it is better to provide the lecturers a training on soft skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Soft skills can be developed through consistent training and practice through embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses. can be considered as a feasible method of achieving both a student-centred way of teaching a particular content and as also an enhancement of soft skills of the trainees of the pre-service teacher education program. Most of the soft skills overlap with the skills needed for teaching and hence, the need to embed the soft skills in teacher education curricula

systematically is mandatory. It can be inferred that stand-alone courses may not be a necessity for teacher education programs. However, it would be necessary to assess the impact of the embedded model of the curriculum through follow-up studies. The stand-alone support workshops motivate students to understand the importance of soft skills. Therefore, occasional opportunities of participation would be a reinforcement.

The effort made by the staff towards the design and implementation of the soft skills development component has been highly positive. However, some further interventions are needed to address aspects such as assessment and time management during the academic year. The assessment system has to be developed with more valid, reliable and transparent assessment techniques and instruments as the continuous assessment marks are also added to the final marks with a 30% weightage.

Although there could be a difficulty in generalising the findings of this study, there is a possibility to make use of this as a baseline for future studies.

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