

The Perception of Teacher Educators on Developing Soft Skills among Prospective Teachers.

H.M.N.D. Kumari¹ & P.R.K.A. Vitharana²

¹Hapitigam National College of Education, Mirigama

²Department of Education, University of Peradeniya

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills are personal traits that enhance a person's job performance, and career viewpoints. Soft skills are considered to boost competency and consequently upsurge one's ability to subsidize communal progression and transformation. (Chondekar, 2019). Developing soft skills has become as necessary as hard skills for 21st-century prospective teachers. Soft skills cover proficiencies such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, life-long learning and management of information, teamwork, leadership, ethics morals, and professionalism. The main objective of this study is to examine the perception of teacher educators regarding the development of soft skills in pre-service teacher education. This study was carried out through a survey research design. A total number of 212 teacher educators were taken as the sample through stratified random sampling. In line with the research objective, the data gathered through the questionnaire was based on soft skill classification: Personal skills, Management skills, and Social skills. The participant responses to the five-point items were quantitatively analyzed. The findings of this study revealed that more than 60% of teacher educators strongly agree with the notion that more attention should be paid to the development of soft skills for prospective teacher training in the 21st century. Further, 57% of the sample strongly agreed that soft skills directly influence the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process, while 40% responded with their agreement with that idea. 90% mentioned that a teacher's soft skills have a direct bearing on her personality traits. Further, 52.8% strongly agreed with the statement that the development of soft skills of interns helps them solve problems they face at school. Besides, the study revealed that 93.8% of respondents had shown positive responses saying that there should be more weightage for soft skills in the code of ethics of teachers. When inquiring about the teacher educators' perception of the importance of soft skills, there was a significant difference among them in terms of the National Colleges of Education they serve. Suggestions were made based on the findings to pay more attention to soft skills in the process of prospective teacher training, which should be appropriate for the 21st century, and to integrate soft skills into the NCoE curriculum.

Keywords: Perception, Prospective teachers, Teacher educators, Soft Skills

INTRODUCTION

Human Capital is considered a significant factor in the knowledge economy during the 21st century. Nowadays, possessing only technological skills for professionals is insufficient and consideration should be given to soft skills too. Each profession consists of both hard and soft skills. Soft skills are very essential in the teaching profession for effective and qualitative teaching (Tang 2015). Since teaching is complex process sound knowledge of both hard and soft skills are needed for good classroom management. So, it's a vital factor to develop both hard and soft skills among teacher trainees. Pre-service teacher education has been started in Sri Lanka in 1985. Yet, no attention is given to the uplifting soft skills of a teacher in the curriculum reforms. The main objective of education is to produce a holistic person through quality

education. Anyway, firstly holistic teacher should be produced before producing a holistic person. Employability skills which consider soft skills in the 21st century should be included in pre-service teacher education and as it is not comprised in the pre-service course of National Colleges of Education (NCoE) is a problem. Hence, the main objective of this study is to investigate the perception of teacher educators about developing soft skills in pre-service teacher trainees.

Objectives of the study

1. To study the teacher educators' perception of soft skills in the 21st century and pre-service teacher education
2. To study the perception of teacher educators regarding the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers.

Significance of the study

The Education White Paper of 1964 indicated that teacher training should be a meaningful act catering to global education trends. As Sri Lanka is not taking the necessary steps concerning this matter, producing competent teachers needed for the 21st century has become a problem today. Therefore, this effort of the researcher will be significant at the national level. This study investigates the soft skills of communicative skills, problem-solving skills, group work skills, sustainable learning and information management skills, ethics, and skills regarding professionalism and leadership skills among prospective teacher trainees. So, this study helps to identify the gap in soft skills among students, teachers, and other parties while engaging in working in the school system. So, this study helps a great deal to fill the gap in research studies. Thus, the importance of this study regarding the development of soft skills of pre-service teacher educators can be examined in several aspects of the field of education

1. As a result of the 1981 education reform proposals, the establishment of separate teacher education institutes called the National College of Education for pre-service teacher education outside the universities was expected to be structurally and operationally different from the previous teacher education courses and to improve the quality of teacher education. Implementation of pre-service teacher education courses with a target orientation. Therefore, there is a need for a study to investigate whether a novice teacher needs the soft skills expected to exist in the professionals of the 21st century and to take the necessary measures for that.
2. Curriculum reform of the teacher education courses in the National Colleges of Education was last done in 2012. However, there is no focus on the integration of soft skills into teacher education, which has received much attention in teacher education in the 21st century globally. Therefore, this study on introducing soft skills in pre-service teacher education will be a very important approach to fill that void.
3. Many countries in the world, including Malaysia, India, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, etc. South Asia and Western countries, WHO (World Health Organization, 2013), ISFOL (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers, 1994/1998, OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005, 2009), many organizations have also conducted various studies and programs on soft skills development. Since the late 1980s, Tang (2019) says that programs have been implemented with government support for the development of soft skills in the Kingdom. Sedara (2019), who points out the need for skill development in the 21st century, says that although many countries in the world pay attention to skill development, Sri Lanka Shows very little interest in this regard. Thus, this research evidence will be supported to fill this gap.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pachauri & Julia (2018), conducted a study on the significance of introducing soft skills in teacher education

courses and stated that communicative skills, leadership qualities, sustainable learning, information management skills, group work skills, logical thinking, problem-solving skills, ethical skills, and entrepreneur skills must be implemented in teacher training institutes. Ahmad et al and the team (2012), conducted a study on identifying the most important soft skills and recognized communicative skills, group work skills, and leadership qualities as the most important soft skills. This study was conducted on the students in four faculties and it is revealed that communicative skills as the most important soft skill for every student.

Tang (2013) says that in any profession, there are skills related to hard and soft skills, and in the teaching profession, it is essential for a teacher to have soft skills for effective and quality teaching work. Teaching in the teaching profession is a complex process for which the presence of hard skills with extensive knowledge as well as soft skills is essential for successful work in the classroom. (Tang, Nor Hashimah & Hashimah, Fortheomng, 2015). Although pre-service teacher training in Sri Lanka started in the year 1985, the curriculums changed from time to time. The reforms have not focused on the development of soft skills that a teacher should possess. The National Education Commission has presented three (3) content elements of teacher professional competence, indicating that teacher education is expected to acquire professional skills for teachers. Competence, performance, and behavior are those characteristics. The ability to teach creatively and student-centered subject mastery and the ability to use learning strategies as competence and the ability expressed by teaching subject concepts clearly and correctly as performance and the display of communication skills, professional behavior, and qualities as behavior. It says that (National Education Commission, 2009. p. 158). It seems that there is not much focus on skill development in teacher education. Although education aims to produce a holistic person through quality education, a holistic teacher must first be produced to produce a holistic person. For that, the development of soft skills, which are considered employability skills in the 21st century, should be included in the pre-service teacher training, but it is a serious problem that such a situation is not present in the pre-service teacher training implemented through the National Colleges of Education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Survey Design was used in this study to find out the perception of teacher educators about the development of soft skills among prospective teachers. The research sample comprised 212 teacher educators from fourteen, out of the 19 National Colleges of Education. Firstly, all the teacher educators who engage in the field of teacher educator service as professional and special/General were recognized and later fifty percent were selected using the cluster sample method. The primary data for this research were collected from a sample survey using a questionnaire administered by the researcher. Participants responded to the five-point items that were quantitatively analyzed. 5-point Likert-type scales were used to measure the degree of perception of soft skill development. Descriptive and inferential methods were used to analyze quantitative data. As such, the study employed the Anova test to find out whether the perception of the importance of soft skills of teacher educators by their colleges they work, that is to explore whether there was any significant of difference of teacher educators concerning their perception of the importance of soft skills development. The Cronbach's alpha was carried out to find out the reliability or internal consistency of the items of the measurement. The Cronbach's alpha Coefficient was .940 (greater than .70) which indicated that the items of scales in the measurement were reliable (Taber, 2017).

Hypotheses of the Study

H_0 – There is no significant difference between the importance of soft skills and the perception of teacher educators working in that college of education.

H_1 – There is a significant difference between the importance of soft skills and the perception of teacher

educators working in that college of education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inquiring about the perception of teacher educators to 21st-century soft skills and pre-service teacher training.

The first research question investigated the perception of teacher educators of 21st-century soft skills and pre-service teacher training. The statistical findings are illustrated in tables 1- 5.

Table 1 – Responses to paying more attention to the development of soft skills through 21st-century pre-service teacher raining

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| More attention should be given to uplifting soft skills for teacher development needs for the 21 st century. | — | — | 1.9 | 38.7 | 59.4 |

Table 1 shows that 60% of the respondents strongly agree that more attention should be paid to the development of 21st-century soft skills, while 38.7% express their agreement with the idea. Only 1.9% show an average value. According to the above, 98.1% of respondents point out a positive response towards paying more attention to the development of 21st-century soft skills through pre-service teacher training. Therefore, the conclusion based on the perception of the sample is that more emphasis should be placed on the development of soft skills for pre-service teacher training appropriate for the 21st century.

Table 2- The soft skills a teacher possesses, increase the effectiveness of the teaching learning process.

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Soft skills development should be included in teacher training for an effective teaching-learning process. | — | — | 2.8 | 40.1 | 57.1 |

In response to the above statement, 57% of the respondents have expressed their opinion as “Strongly agree” while 40% have shown their “agreement”. According to this statement also, the percentage of positive response is 97%. This also clearly indicates the dire need to develop soft skills through pre-service teacher training to expect an effective teaching and learning process.

Table 3- The soft skills that a teacher possesses are linked to his personality traits

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| The soft skills that a teacher possesses are linked to his personality traits | 0.5 | 1.9 | 7.1 | 55.2 | 35.4 |

The responses of the sample in table 3 depict the fact that “The soft skills that a teacher possesses are linked to his personality traits” For this statement, 90% of the respondents have shown positive response, whereas

only 2.4 have shown a negative response. This also points out that the perception of the sample is that teacher’s soft skills are linked to his personality traits.

Table 4 – There is an impact on the development of soft skills during the training period to solve the problems, teacher trainees face in school.

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| The soft skills that a teacher possesses are linked to his personality traits | 2.80 | 1.40 | 0.5 | 42.5 | 52.8 |

52.8% of the respondents strongly agree with the statement given in Table 4, while 42.5% have expressed their agreement. In this regard, the positive response is 95.3%. This revelation also proves the importance of developing soft skills by teacher trainees during their teacher training period.

Table 5- More place should be given to soft skills in teacher ethics.

| Statement | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| More place should be given to soft skills in teacher ethics. | | 1.4 | 4.7 | 54.2 | 39.6 |

Table 5 indicates the responses given for the statement “More place should be given to soft skills in teacher ethics”. This statement has obtained 93.8% positive responses and nearly 5% bearing an average opinion.

The perception of teacher educators regarding the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers.

There are two parts to research question 2: The **perception of teacher educators regarding the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers** and **Soft skills integration in pre-service teacher education courses**. Table 6 shown below address the research question 2.1, that is the perception of teacher educators regarding the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers

Table 6 – The perception of teacher educators regarding the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers

| Soft skill | Mean | SD |
|---|------|-------|
| Communication skill | 4.84 | 0.339 |
| Lifelong learning and information management skills | 4.65 | 0.498 |
| Ethic and professional moral skills | 4.63 | 0.407 |
| Teamwork | 4.61 | 0.49 |
| Critical thinking and problem solving | 4.55 | 0.502 |
| Leadership | 4.54 | 0.462 |

According to the responses, it indicates that the most important soft skill that should be developed among pre-service teacher trainees is Communication skills. (Mean – 4.84). The previous studies also proved that the most significant soft skills for teachers and other employees is Communication skills. (Jacson, 2009; Kermis & Kermis, 2010; Pachauri & Yadav, 2012; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2012; Ahmad et al., 2012; Ramlan

& Ngah, 2015). Further, some past studies in Malaysia by Ahmad et al. (2010) and Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) found that most students in higher educational institutions regard communication skills as the most essential soft skill component. Even though Lifelong Education and Information Management of high importance indicate a 4.65 Mean, the standard deviation takes a higher value compared to the other skills.

Among the soft skills presented, leadership and critical thinking skills have been perceived as less important. In contrast, the standard deviation of critical thinking skills is higher than leadership skills. However, the responses of the teacher educators reveal that all the soft skills presented to that sample are greatly important for teacher trainees.

The perception of Teacher Educators of the importance of soft skills in their college of education

The One way ANOVA test was administered to see whether there is a difference between the importance of soft skills and the perception of teacher educators working in that college of education.

Table 7- One-way ANOVA of importance of soft skills and the perception of teacher educators working in that college of education.

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 7.340 | 19 | .386 | 2.853 | .000 |
| Within Groups | 26.003 | 192 | .135 | | |
| Total | 33.344 | 211 | | | |

From the above table, the teacher educators’ perception on the importance of soft skills, there is a significant difference among them in terms of the National Colleges of Education they serve. (F=2.853, p=.000, < p=.05).

The perception of Teacher Educators of Soft skills integration into pre-service teacher education courses

The research investigated the perception of teacher educators regarding integrating soft skills into pre-service teacher education courses. Table 8 shows the perception of teacher educators about integrating soft skills into pre-service teacher education.

Table 8- The perception of teacher educators about integrating soft skills into pre-service teacher education

| Soft skill | Mean | SD |
|---|------|------|
| Ethic and professional moral skills | 4.60 | 0.56 |
| Critical thinking and problem-solving | 4.53 | 0.62 |
| Lifelong learning and information management skills | 4.53 | 0.52 |
| Leadership | 4.52 | 0.57 |
| Teamwork | 4.49 | 0.59 |
| Communication skills | 4.65 | 0.60 |

Ranking the important soft skills to integrate pre-service teacher education majority of the respondents were of the view that the most important soft skills are communication skills (Mean – 4.65) and Ethical and professional moral skills (Mean- 4.65). As a whole, all the soft skills presented to the sample are of great importance to integrate into pre-service teacher education courses. These findings concurred with the past

study by Vidanapathirana (2019) that all teacher educators of the faculty of education agreed with the integration of soft skills into the teacher education course.

CONCLUSION

The perception of the majority of the sample is to develop soft skills through teacher education and believes both soft and hard skills are essential in the 21st century. According to the perception, it was concluded that there should be a place for developing soft skills for pre-service teacher training appropriate for the 21st century. The teacher's soft skills are linked to his personality traits. There is an impact on the development of soft skills during the training period to solve the problems that teacher trainees face in the school. And also, more places should be given to soft skills in teacher ethics. The study results demonstrated that the sample was well aware of the importance of developing soft skills among prospective teachers.

According to the responses it indicates that the most important soft skill that should be developed among pre-service teacher trainees is communication skill. As a whole, the responses of the teacher educators reveal that all the soft skills presented to the sample are of great importance for teacher trainees. Teacher educators' perceptions of the essentiality of soft skills for teacher trainees differ according to the National Colleges they work in regarding communicative and leadership skills, Lifelong learning and information management skills, Ethic and professional moral skills, information management, group work, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Considering the integration of soft skills in pre-service teacher education courses, it was revealed that the most important soft skills to integrate are communication skills and Ethical and Professional Moral Skills. As a whole, all the soft skills presented to the sample are very important to integrate into the pre-service teacher education course.

SUGGESTIONS

It is proposed to provide more attention to the enhancement of the soft skills of pre-service teachers and achieve the teacher development required for the 21st century. The teaching-learning process must be adapted to the new paradigm catering to the needs of the 21st century. A student-centered learning environment can also be implemented through soft skills. It is hoped that project-based learning will develop problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, and leadership qualities, which are essential soft skills. It is important to give special consideration to the soft skills of prospective teachers when offering marks for personality tests. Furthermore, teacher trainees should be given marks for their soft skills during teaching practice sessions. Further, it is expected an effective teaching process by including soft skills in the National College curriculum. A special emphasis should be placed on soft skills during the co-curricular program during the training period. In addition, it is proposed to utilize an interdisciplinary approach to enhance soft skills across a variety of subject areas.

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