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Novice Teacher Perceptions of the Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace

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Abstract

Soft skills complement hard skills and have a significant impact on the ability of teachers to do their job and on their employability. Soft skill components acquired by future holistic human capital are communicative skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work skill, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, moral and professional skill, and leadership skill. This research aims to investigate gaps related to soft skills obtained from their teaching professional training compared to the soft skills needed in their workplace among the novice teachers. A total sample of 250 novice teachers was selected from all secondary schools in Malaysia by employing purposive sampling. This study employs the quantitative method to collect data from novice teachers during their induction year. The findings showed that team work skill and communication skill were the two most important soft skill components, not only very much needed in their workplace but also gained from their teaching training program. However, entrepreneurship skill was the least capacity soft skill component needed in their workplace as well as gained from their teaching training program. According to the results of t-test analysis, there is a significant difference between the gained and needed level of soft skill components. In addition, the mean score for all the soft skill components needed in their workplace are higher than what they gained from their teaching training program.

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1. Introduction

Teachers are important and they make a difference. The quality of teaching is crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools (Tang, 2013). Teaching is a complex act, requiring a wide range of knowledge and skills including hard and soft skills to successfully manage the demands of the classroom. Teachers must understand both subject matter and student, as well as how to teach their specific content to the specific learner which needs soft

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skills (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Teaching is additionally complex for novice teachers (Flores & Day, 2006). Their knowledge and skills are necessarily limited by their recent entry into classroom and their understanding of teaching and learning, yet they are given the same roles and responsibilities as veteran teachers. The complexity of teaching extends to the preparation of teachers (Soffner, 2011).

The complicated nature of teaching, in both practice and preparation, encourages teacher educators to explore the complexity of novice teachers' experiences and identify the concerns they face in the first few years. Teacher educators must respond to forces such as application of soft skills in order to prepare teachers for today classroom. By understanding novice teachers' concerns, teacher educators may better prepare pre-service teachers to meet and surmount the challenges posed by those concerns in the first few years of teaching. However, for education and training to be successful in raising productivity, there is a need to focus on the internal and external efficiency of education and training programs. Failure to focus on both internal and external efficiency can result in the mismatch in the supply of graduates in the industries (Abdul Rashid Mohamed et al., 2007).

Soft skills are vital for all teachers to acquire, regardless of their specific expertise. Research suggests that soft skills are just as good an indicator of job performance as traditional job qualifications or hard skills. For example, one study carried out by The Protocol School of Washington, DC and conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Stanford Research Institute has shown that technical skills and knowledge account for about 15 percent of the reason an individual gets a job, keeps the job and advances in that job (Crosbie, 2005). The remaining 85 percent of job success is based on individual's soft skills.

2. What are soft skills

The Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as incorporating aspects of generic skills which include non-academic skills such as communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and information skills, entrepreneurship, ethic and professional moral skill, and leadership skill. These seven components of 'soft' skills that are to be embedded in the syllabus taught at Institutes of Higher Learning. In this study, soft skills that needed by novice teachers is referred accordingly to Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2006).

2.1. Communication skills

Novice teachers are expected to be fluent and able to communicate effectively in both Malay and English language. They should be able to convey their thoughts with clarity and confidence both in written and oral forms. They are also expected to be active listeners while providing the necessary response. They should also be capable of giving and using technology during presentation confidently.

2.2. Critical thinking and problem solving skills

With this skill, novice teachers should be able to think in a critical, creative, innovative, and analytical manner which includes the ability to apply knowledge. Elements that they must possess under this aspect are the ability to identify and analyze complex situation as well as making evaluations that are justifiable. They should also have the ability to expand and improve thinking skills, to provide ideas, and alternative solutions.

2.3. Team work

Team work skills involve the ability to work and cooperate with people from various social and cultural backgrounds so as to achieve a common goal. In order to build a good working relationship with his/her peers, it is essential that they are respectful toward others' attitude, behaviour, and belief. From time to time they are also expected to undertake the role of a leader and a group member interchangeably.

2.4. Lifelong learning and information management skills

In acquiring skills and knowledge, novice teachers should be able to do self-regulate learning independently. They should have the skills to search for relevant information from various sources and able to manage them efficiently. They should also be receptive to new ideas and able to develop an inquiry mind.

2.5. Entrepreneurship skill

This skill involves the ability to venture into business and work-related opportunities while creating risk awareness. This skill includes the ability to identify business opportunities and be able to prepare, build, and explore business plans which eventually leads to self-employment.

2.6. Ethic and professional moral

With this skill, novice teachers are able to practice with high moral standards in the relevant professional practice. They should also be able to understand the effects of economy environment, and socio-cultural factors on their respective professional practice. In relation to ethical issues, they should be able to analyze and arrive at decisions in matters concerning ethics. Beyond the working environment, they should be able to practice good ethics while having a sense of responsibility toward society.

2.7. Leadership skill

Leadership skill entails the ability to lead in various activities. Novice teachers should have the knowledge on basic leadership theories which will enable them to lead a project. It is also essential that they are able to understand the role of a leader and a group member and be able to carry out those roles interchangeably.

3. Statement of the problem

Soft skills are shaping human beings' personality, therefore educators' goal is that graduates, especially from tertiary education institutions, should not only be experts in a certain field but matured personalities with a well balanced, rounded off education (Schulz, 2008). However, this characteristic is reflected in soft skills, not in hard skills. Today's job market which is in many fields including teaching profession is becoming ever increasingly competitive. To be successful in this tough environment, novice teachers have to bring along a 'competitive edge' that distinguish them from others with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. In bringing along additional knowledge and skills, added up by convincing personal traits and habits are their competitive advantage. It is no longer enough for teachers to be academically strong in this increasing global, technological economy. They must also be able to work comfortably with people from other cultures, solve problems creatively, write and speak well, think in a multidisciplinary way and evaluate information critically (Gewertz, 2007). They also need to be punctual, dependable, and industrious. Therefore, they need soft skills to complement technical skills.

4. Research objectives

The following are the main objectives of this study:

- a) To assess the level of soft skills (communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, professional moral, and leadership skill) that needed by novice teachers in their workplace.
- b) To assess the level of soft skills (communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and management of information, entrepreneurship skill, ethics, professional moral, and leadership skill) that gained by novice teachers from their teaching professional training.

- c) To investigate gaps related to soft skills needed in their workplace compared to the soft skills gained by novice teachers from teaching professional training.

5. Methodology

This research is a survey using a structured self-administrated mailed questionnaire to novice teachers who have graduated not more than three years from five identified public universities in Malaysia. It utilized quantitative research methodology involving a sample of 250 novice teachers. The questionnaire was mailed to 250 novice teachers and the return rate was 100 percent of the total number of questionnaires distributed. A purposive sampling was employed. The questionnaire consists of 58 items including 6 items of demographic information and 52 items related to soft skills needed and gained by novice teachers.

6. Findings

6.1. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Results based on Table 1 show respondents' perceptions on the level of soft skills that needed by novice teachers in their workplace. All the soft skills are considered to be highly needed by novice teachers in their workplace, mean score ranged from 4.07 to 4.36. There are two major soft skills, namely team work and communication skills which are not only highly needed in the workplace but also gained from their teaching professional training. However, entrepreneurship skill found to be least capacity compared to the other six soft skills either it is needed in the workplace or gained from teaching professional training.

Soft skills such as lifelong learning and management information which are highly emphasized in teaching professional training but they are not so much needed in their workplace. Likewise critical thinking and problem solving skills that have paid least attention in teaching professional training but they are highly needed in their workplace. In addition, when we refer to the level of soft skills which are gained by novice teachers from their teaching professional training are found to be lower compared to soft skills needed in their workplace.

Table 1. Level of soft skills needed by novice teachers in the workplace

Soft skills	Mean score for soft skills needed	Mean score for soft skills gained
Team work	4.36	4.15
Communication skills	4.29	4.02
Leadership skill	4.25	3.94
Critical thinking & pro. solving skills	4.22	3.89
Lifelong L. & management of infor.	4.21	4.01
Ethics, professional moral	4.18	3.94
Entrepreneurship	4.07	3.80

6.2. Inferential Statistical Analysis

Findings from t-test analysis show that there is a significant difference between the soft skills needed in the workplace and soft skills gained from teaching professional training by novice teachers at the significant level as 0.01. This result shows that the soft skills gained from their teaching professional training are insufficient for them while they are working in the workplace.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study seeks to develop an understanding of teacher educators regarding the gaps between soft skills needed in their workplace compared to the soft skills gained by novice teachers from teaching professional training. Although the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia has already developed and launched the Soft Skills Module for Malaysian Public Universities which contained of generic skills that cut across all fields of study, but findings from this study showed that it is inadequate in meeting the needs of teachers to fulfil the soft skills required in their workplace. Teacher educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills, because novice teachers' university time, teacher educators have major impact on the development of their teacher trainees' soft skills. Besides raising awareness regarding the importance of soft skills and encouraging teacher trainees to improve their skills, teacher educators should actively practice soft skills with their teacher trainees (Schulz, 2008).

In developing teacher trainees' soft skills through integration of the skills in their teaching, teacher educators at public universities are faced with various challenges. There are large classroom size, limited time to cover the syllabus and teacher trainees' negative attitudes in the classroom. While teacher educators realized the importance of soft skills for the teacher trainees, some found that incorporating them in their lectures was a daunting task, while others relied on their creativity and pedagogical skills to enhance teacher trainees' soft skills.

A very effective and efficient way of doing this is to include soft skills training into the teaching of hard skills. As a positive side effect the lessons will become more attractive, which in turn will increase the success rate of teacher trainees thus well equipped them in their workplace later. Soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing his/her hard skills. However, over-emphasizing it to such an extent should not taint the importance of soft skills, that hard skills, i.e. expert knowledge like pedagogical knowledge, technical teaching strategies, and content knowledge, are demoted to secondary importance.

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