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Soft Skills Integration in Teaching Professional Training: Novice Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper is part of a bigger research project and focuses on issues related to soft skills and teaching professional training. The research project is on developing an integrated soft skills training module for teacher education program in Malaysian Public Universities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the extent of soft skills that has been integrated in teaching professional training from the novice teachers' perspectives. The issues of unemployment and lack of quality among teachers are associated with the notion that teachers have not adequately acquired employability skills and soft skills during their training in universities. At the preliminary stage, 15 novice teachers who have graduated from five identified public universities for not more than three years were interviewed. There are a total of three focus group interview cycles. The interview protocol consists of seven soft skills are: communication, critical and problem solving, team work, life-long learning and management of information, entrepreneurship, ethics, moral and professional, and leadership. The findings showed that six out of seven soft skills were perceived as important and relevant to their teaching tasks except entrepreneurship skill. However, these novice teachers were concerned about the insufficient soft skills acquired from teaching training in order to support them in their work place. Since soft skills are important prerequisite in shaping an individual's personality, therefore it is recommended that teacher educators should utilize the integrated soft skills training module during teaching professional training.

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1. Introduction

Teachers' soft skills are important. The attainment of these skills will make a difference in quality of teaching and effective learning. The quality of teaching is a 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 (Tang, Nor Hashimah & Hashimah, forthcoming 2015). Since teaching is an additional complex process (Flores & Days, 2006), novice teachers need to have important soft skills.

Consequently, teacher educators today are confronted with the issue of how best to ensure that teaching graduates will continue to be relevant and bring value to the job market. It is the responsibility of the universities to ensure that teaching graduates have relevant skills to gain employment. Hence, soft skills development should be imbued into the professional training program. Furthermore, universities should combine hard skills and soft skills in the curriculum if confident students with a sense of balance and proportion in these skills to be produced (Hairuzila, 2009).

A study had been conducted by 87 pre-service teachers from Universiti Sains Malaysia on 435 novice teachers between July and September 2010. The findings indicated that novice teachers are actually experiencing lack of support from school environment to achieve their expected level of soft skills. The findings are in agreement with Fantilli & McDougall's (2009) showed that novice teachers are given heavy responsibilities in which they might not be ready yet. In addition, findings also revealed that novice teachers from urban areas have broader gap between actual and expected soft skills compared to novice teachers from rural areas.

Another study had been carried out by 28 pre-service teachers from Universiti Sains Malaysia on 28 novice teachers. The interview was used and questions asked are related to the soft skills that they possessed and their teaching practice. The findings indicated all the novice teachers agreed that soft skills support them in their teaching practice. Furthermore, soft skills such as communicative, creative thinking, problem solving and team work really support them in providing effective strategies and techniques while dealing with the problems occurred during their teaching and learning process. Thus, novice teachers will be more confident in their teaching and able to face all the challenges. Similarly, this finding is in line with the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) (June 2010).

2. Definition of soft skills

The Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as incorporating aspects of generic skills which include non-academic skills such as communicative, critical thinking and problem solving, team work, life-long learning and information, entrepreneurship, ethic and professional moral, and leadership. These are the seven soft skills to be embedded in the curriculum at Institutes of Higher Learning. In this study, soft skills are defined according 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, behavior, 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-regulated 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 novice teachers' abilities 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 skills

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 social-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 of novice teachers 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

In Hairuzila's (2009) study, 38 percent of engineering lecturers stated that university students' attitude was a challenge for them in integrating soft skills in their teaching professional training. Furthermore, students' attitude in the classroom was compounded by the fact that they themselves were not aware of soft skills importance. Hence, according to the lecturers, some of the challenges they faced in the classroom were students' lack of attentiveness in the lessons that incorporated soft skills as well as lack of interest in developing their own soft skills.

In addition, time constraint is another challenge in integrating soft skills. The lecturers claimed that they have insufficient time to cover the syllabus in 14 weeks. Many believed that integrating soft skills would take up more of their valuable time which they felt could be used to lecture on important topics (Hairuzila, 2009). However, researchers recognized that the deterrent was not the result of time constraint but rather their lack of awareness of the various teaching methods that they could employ to integrate soft skills in their teaching within the time that they had.

Having a large class was the norm at public universities. This scenario is found to be very challenging to lecturers in integrating soft skills during their teaching because they could not focus to all the students. Some lecturers were aware of the pedagogies underlying the development of soft skills but were constrained by a large class size. Many felt that they lost the flexibility to integrate soft skills in their teaching (Hairuzila, 2009).

In conclusion, the integration of soft skills in teaching professional training became apparent that most of the lecturers did not really understand the essence of this integration. Integrating soft skills does not mean that they have to add a new topic in their curriculum or add lengthy activities in their teaching. The skills could just be embedded in the existing tasks and assignment.

4. Aims of this paper

In view of the importance in integrating soft skills in teaching professional training, it will be beneficial to examine how translating the soft skills obtained by these novice teachers from their teaching professional training to their workplace. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the extent of soft skills that has been integrated in teaching professional training from the novice teachers' perspectives.

5. Methodology

This study employed focus group interview with 15 novice teachers from five established public universities in Malaysia. Altogether, a total of three focus group interview cycles have been carried out among 15 novice teachers who have graduated from the public universities for not more than three years. The aim of the interview was to explore novice teachers' perspective about the relevant of actual soft skills acquired from teaching professional training to match their expected working skills. The interviews were video recorded for analysis. All the video recording were imported into NVivo and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were analyzed several times to gain emerging themes. The themes were then categorized into related groups.

6. Findings

Analysis of the focus group interviews provide great insight regarding from the most significant to the least important soft skills. Findings showed that all the seven soft skills except entrepreneurship skill are relevant. Data derived from the focus group interview was then analyzed according to the six themes. The soft skills are presented from the most to the least important soft skills perceived by novice teachers.

6.1. Communication skills

Majority of the novice teachers stated that communication is the most important soft skill needed in their working tasks. However, they complained of insufficient opportunities to learn this skill practically and effectively during their teaching professional training. These novice teachers revealed that they learned communication skills during micro teaching course. This is further enhanced when excellent teachers were invited to evaluate and guide them.

Moreover, novice teachers had a positive note on communication skills that was greatly developed through activities such as tutorial presentation, 12 weeks of teaching practicum, extra-curricular activities, attend courses like educational philosophy, educational sociology and learning management.

6.2. Critical thinking and problem solving skills

Many of novice teachers mentioned that creative and critical thinking course had assisted them to develop both critical thinking and problem solving skills. However, majority of the novice teachers commented that critical thinking and problem solving skills are essential and challenging when they carried out their working tasks in schools. In addition, they highlighted that critical thinking and problem solving skills were very much needed when they had to solve problems in various scenarios.

Furthermore, novice teachers explicitly pointed out that critical thinking and problem solving skills were least required when the school environment is stable with sufficient facilities and limited disciplinary problems. Therefore, novice teachers seldom need to look for various methods to solve the problems. Some novice teachers emphasized that they seldom have the opportunities to solve problems because these tasks are normally taken by experienced teachers. Nevertheless, this skill can be developed in the work place situation. Workload in schools is

quite different from what they acquired from teaching professional training. In order to solve problems, novice teachers had to refer to experienced teachers and administrators most of the time.

6.3. Team work

All novice teachers agreed that they learned and developed team work skill during their teaching professional training. Novice teachers stated that they attained team work skill through activities such as development of human capital, field work, and group work assignment that required them to work with the other members in the team.

6.4. Lifelong learning and information management

Lifelong learning skill had to be sustained after novice teachers graduated. They have to utilize this skill to develop students' interest, spirit and independent studies. Novice teachers indicated that they themselves would like to further studies to sustain this skill because they found themselves lack of knowledge, need new ideas to conduct their lessons, and search for extra information to share with their colleagues. In addition, information management skill was able to assist novice teachers to disseminate related information systematically, study accumulated information, and arrange the information from various sources in proper manner so that readers would comprehend easily.

Some universities provided multimedia or educational technology courses which have helped novice teachers in preparing comprehensive lesson plan and presenting their lesson using multimedia gadget. On top of that, novice teachers mentioned that these courses were very useful for them to learn to create website, photo shot and others. However, some novice teachers claimed that they were not attaining this knowledge through their teaching professional training on how to develop their students' capabilities using information management skill, for example the students database.

6.5. Ethic and professional moral skills

According to novice teachers, there were certain universities highly emphasized on teacher appearance such as dress code ethic. For example, the first day of registration, all the university students had to agree to follow all the rules and regulations of the universities. Furthermore, first year university students had to join the cadet team to ensure they would develop their high self-discipline. All the novice teachers agreed that they had well developed these ethics and professional skills through various courses offered by the universities. These courses encompassed teaching professional ethics, ethics in management, philosophy and management ethics, and guidance and counseling. Besides, novice teachers pointed out that extra curriculum did help them to develop the ethic and professional moral skills throughout their teaching professional training. For instance, community services and children adopted program.

6.6. Leadership skill

According to majority of the novice teachers, leadership skill was able to be developed through activities and practices. The development was naturally through their involvements in extra curriculum activities and group assignment. They did not deny that some universities had offered them some leadership and management courses but this skill could not be taught theoretically. Most of the time, novice teachers gained this skill through their working experience in actual situation.

7. Discussion

This study seeks to explore the extent of soft skills that has been integrated in teaching professional training from the novice teachers' perspectives. The findings showed the gaps between actual and expected soft skills in their workplace. Although the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education in Malaysia (2006) has already developed and launched the Soft Skills Module for Malaysian Public Universities which contained generic skills that cut across all fields of study, however findings from this study showed that it is insufficient in meeting the needs of novice teachers to apply the soft skills required in their workplace.

Teacher educators have a special obligation in developing soft skills among teacher trainees. In addition, teacher educators have major impact on the development of teacher trainees' soft skills. Unfortunately, the period of four year training in university was not optimally used to instill soft skills among teacher trainees. This is supported by this finding. This result seemed to be consistent with Schulz's (2008) suggestion. Schulz stresses that teacher educators should actively practice soft skills with their teacher trainees in order to raise awareness on the importance of soft skills and thus encouraging teacher trainees to improve their soft skills.

In developing teacher trainees' soft skills, teacher educators at public universities are faced with various challenges namely large classroom size, limited time to cover the curriculum, and teacher trainees' negative attitudes in the classroom (Soffner, 2011). It is suggested that teacher educators to rely on their creativity and pedagogical skills in order to enhance teacher trainees' soft skills.

A very effective and efficient ways to inculcate soft skills is to integrate training of soft skills into the teaching of hard skills. Therefore, a positive impact of the teaching and learning processes in universities will be realized. The teaching and learning processes become more attractive, which in turn increase the success rate of teacher trainees and equipped them with sufficient soft skills in their workplace.

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