Developing Soft Skills Among IP Learners: Intermediate Level

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Abstract — Soft skills—such as communication, empathy, collaboration, and adaptability—are essential for holistic learner development. Among Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners, these skills are often expressed in culturally specific ways that require sensitive and contextualized teaching approaches. This study aimed to explore the experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights of intermediate-level teachers in developing soft skills among IP learners. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved ten intermediate-level teachers. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and lived experiences related to soft skills instruction. The analysis revealed six key themes related to teacher experiences: Alignment of Self-Expression with Cultural Norms, Emergence of Soft Skills in Group Activities and Daily Interaction, Difficulty in Explicitly Teaching Soft Skills, Need for Supportive School Environment, Varied Levels of Soft Skills Among Learners, and Lack of Parental Involvement. Teachers coped by Integrating Soft Skills into Regular Lessons, Building Informal Peer Support, Using Mixed-Ability Grouping, and Maintaining Regular Communication with Parents. Insights gained include the importance of cultural responsiveness, the need for consistent practice, and the value of teacher training. The findings highlight the need for culturally relevant training, consistent school support, and family engagement. Recommendations were offered to support soft skills development in diverse learning environments.

Keywords — Soft skills, Indigenous learners, intermediate teachers, cultural context, classroom interaction, qualitative research

I. Introduction

The soft skills, often referred to as "people skills" or "interpersonal skills," are essential for young learners' holistic development, enabling them to navigate social interactions, work effectively in teams, and manage their emotions. For learners in Grades 4-6, the development of soft skills such as communication, empathy, critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration is critical for fostering a well-rounded education. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping these skills, and their experiences in cultivating soft skills among young learners are invaluable for understanding effective educational practices. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of teachers in developing the soft skills of learners in Grades 4-6, using a phenomenological approach to provide deep insights into the challenges and strategies employed by educators.

The problem is further compounded by varying cultural and educational contexts. In Western countries, where critical thinking and individual expression are often emphasized, the integration of soft skills into classroom instruction may look significantly different from that in Asian or African contexts, where communal values and rote learning have traditionally been

prioritized (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). As a result, teachers struggle to align soft skills development with local cultural expectations, further complicating their ability to foster these essential competencies in learners.

Additionally, there is a lack of standardized assessment tools for measuring soft skills development in learners, making it challenging for educators to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching methods. The absence of concrete benchmarks has led to inconsistencies in both instructional practices and student outcomes, as highlighted by OECD (2021). Teachers, therefore, are often left to devise their methods for nurturing soft skills, leading to a disparity in educational quality and equity across different regions and schools.

To better explore the experiences of educators in teaching soft skills to students in Grades 4-6, with an emphasis on the difficulties they encounter, the coping strategies they use, and the knowledge they acquire along the way. The study was directed by the following research questions:

What are the experiences of teachers in developing soft skills among IP learners?

What coping mechanisms do teachers employ on developing soft skills among IP learners?

What insights can be generated from the experiences of teachers in developing soft skills among IP learners?

The development of soft skills is particularly important during the intermediate years of education, as these years serve as a transitional phase where learners begin to develop a stronger sense of self and social responsibility. Research by Pellegrino and Hilton (2015) highlights those soft skills such as adaptability, problem-solving, and emotional regulation are crucial for equipping learners to face challenges in an increasingly complex world. These skills not only prepare students for academic success but also foster resilience and the ability to engage constructively in their communities. Teachers, as facilitators of these skills, often adapt their instructional practices to create learning environments that promote collaboration and critical thinking, despite the numerous barriers they encounter.

In the specific context of Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners, cultural relevance and sensitivity are key components of effective soft skills instruction. IP learners often come from backgrounds where communal values and traditional practices shape their worldviews, requiring teachers to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy into their approach. According to Garcia and Villena (2020), culturally aligned strategies, such as incorporating community practices and storytelling into classroom activities, have shown promise in enhancing the development of soft skills among IP learners. However, the lack of training on culturally relevant methodologies and the absence of context-specific resources continue to impede teachers' ability to fully address the needs of IP learners. These challenges underscore the importance of providing targeted support to educators in diverse cultural settings.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has increasingly emphasized the importance of soft skills in its K-12 curriculum, recognizing that academic achievement alone is insufficient to prepare learners for the complexities of the modern world. However, the integration of soft skills into the Philippine educational system has encountered significant challenges. Teachers often lack the necessary training and professional development opportunities to effectively teach these skills, leading to varied levels of understanding and implementation across schools (Manlangit et al., 2021).

In Davao City, the challenges of developing soft skills among learners are particularly pronounced due to varying levels of access to resources and support across public and private schools. Learners in public schools often face large class sizes, limited instructional materials, and diverse academic and social needs, which can hinder the cultivation of essential soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and emotional regulation (Mendoza & Navera, 2022). Additionally, socioeconomic factors such as poverty and limited parental involvement in some communities further exacerbate the issue, as many students arrive at school with varying levels of social and emotional readiness. These challenges highlight the need for targeted interventions and support systems to ensure all learners have the opportunity to develop the soft skills necessary for personal and academic success.

Developing soft skills among young learners in Grades 4-6 is a complex but essential aspect of modern education. Teachers' experiences in fostering these skills reveal significant challenges, from global disparities in educational frameworks to local limitations in resources and support. In the context of Davao City, understanding these experiences is crucial for addressing gaps in policy and practice and ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to develop the soft skills necessary for success in life and learning.

II. Methodology

The study's focus on lived experiences, the qualitative assumption further supports the use of phenomenological methods to uncover the essence of these experiences from the participants' perspectives. This approach allows the researcher to explore the complexities of teaching soft skills in diverse educational settings, acknowledging that the meanings teachers ascribe to their practices are influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, and environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By adhering to this qualitative assumption, the study emphasizes the importance of dialogue, reflection, and interpretation to generate knowledge that is rich, nuanced, and context-specific.

A qualitative research design using phenomenological research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of teachers in developing soft skills among young learners. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of human experiences by examining how individuals perceive, describe, and make sense of a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). This design is best for the study because it allows for an in-depth

exploration of the subjective experiences of teachers, capturing the nuances and complexities involved in teaching soft skills within varied classroom contexts. By employing phenomenological research design, the study seeks to uncover the meanings and interpretations that teachers assign to their experiences, providing rich, descriptive insights that are not accessible through quantitative methods.

Phenomenology emphasizes the importance of bracketing, where the researcher sets aside preconceived notions to fully engage with participants' perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). This approach aligns with the study's goal of understanding teachers' challenges, strategies, and reflections without imposing external frameworks or assumptions. By focusing on the lived experiences and the essence of these experiences, phenomenology enables a deeper understanding of how teachers navigate and make sense of their roles in fostering soft skills, making it a robust and appropriate design for the study's objectives.

III. Results and Discussion

This section presents the experiences of teachers in observing and developing soft skills among Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners.

The first theme highlights how soft skills among IP learners tend to emerge more clearly in informal or collaborative settings, where learners are less pressured and more culturally comfortable. As supported by Pellegrino and Hilton (2015), these natural interactions serve as important opportunities for developing interpersonal competencies that may not surface during formal instruction. Teachers recognize the value of incorporating frequent group-based and interactive tasks to create learning environments where soft skills can thrive organically.

The second theme reveals that teachers often rely on personal strategies and improvisation to incorporate soft skills into their teaching, due to the absence of formal guidelines or structured support. As Manlangit et al. (2021) emphasized, this lack of direction results in inconsistent practices and places the responsibility solely on the teachers to find ways to teach soft skills effectively. Despite their efforts, many feel that explicit instruction in soft skills remains unclear and under-supported within the current education framework.

The third theme shows that while teachers are committed to promoting soft skills, the lack of institutional support can hinder their initiatives. A cohesive school environment that values and reinforces soft skills development makes a significant difference in empowering teachers. As Zinsser et al. (2021) observed, fostering soft skills is most effective when schools operate as unified, emotionally supportive communities.

Some of the insights given by the participants is to emphasized that parental involvement plays a critical role in reinforcing soft skills taught in school. However, many observed that the absence of consistent support from parents—due to work demands, lack of awareness, or distance from school—hinders learners' progress in developing interpersonal and emotional competencies.

This gap leaves the full responsibility of soft skills development on the teachers, which can be overwhelming

The participant also shared that soft skills do not develop instantly; rather, they are strengthened over time through consistent modeling, daily routines, and positive reinforcement. Learners—especially those who are shy, hesitant, or influenced by cultural norms that encourage silence—require repeated exposure to social situations where they can gradually build confidence, empathy, and cooperation. Teachers emphasized that with patience and regular opportunities to engage, learners begin to show clear growth in their soft skills.

These accounts show how the absence of parental involvement affects the consistency and depth of soft skills development among learners. Teachers are aware that while school-based instruction is important, it needs to be reinforced at home to become truly effective. When parents are disengaged, learners may not receive the guidance or modeling they need outside the classroom, which can slow down their growth in areas like empathy, responsibility, and respect.

As emphasized by Zinsser et al. (2021), a strong partnership between school and home is essential in promoting social and emotional learning. Without this collaboration, teachers are left to carry the full weight of both academic and character development. Despite these challenges, teachers continue to find ways to bridge the gap by maintaining communication with families and creating a nurturing classroom environment that compensates, as much as possible, for the lack of support at home.

In conclusion teachers experience both fulfilment and difficulty in promoting soft skills among Indigenous Peoples (IP) learners. While they observe that learners exhibit soft skills like empathy, respect, and cooperation, these are often expressed in culturally nuanced ways. However, the absence of explicit instructional guidelines, limited school support, and varied learner readiness present challenges in teaching these skills effectively. Despite these limitations, teachers consistently find that soft skills are naturally demonstrated during group activities and daily routines, highlighting the need to strengthen informal, contextual learning opportunities.

In the absence of structured support, teachers have developed adaptive strategies to sustain soft skills development among learners. These include integrating soft skills into regular academic lessons, forming peer support systems with fellow teachers, grouping students by varied skill levels to encourage peer modeling, and maintaining regular communication with parents. These coping mechanisms demonstrate teachers' commitment to nurturing holistic learner development, even when formal guidance and training are lacking.

Teachers have gained a deeper understanding that soft skills develop gradually and are influenced by both cultural context and daily social interactions. They recognize the importance of patience, consistency, and cultural responsiveness in supporting learners' growth. Teachers also acknowledge the need for more professional training to confidently and intentionally teach soft

skills. Ultimately, they affirm that soft skills are best nurtured through everyday classroom experiences, where learners are given time, trust, and opportunities to grow.

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