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DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL IMPROVING THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENTS

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Abstract: The development of soft skills has become an important component of contemporary primary education because academic knowledge alone is insufficient to prepare children for effective learning, communication, cooperation, problem-solving, and adaptation to changing social environments. This article examines the theoretical and methodological foundations of soft skills development in primary school students and proposes an integrated framework for improving this process within classroom practice. Particular attention is given to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, self-management, adaptability, empathy, and reflective learning. The study is based on competency-based, learner-centred, activity-based, systemic, socio-constructivist, and reflective methodological approaches. The analysis demonstrates that soft skills should not be treated as isolated supplementary abilities but as interconnected competencies that can be systematically embedded across subjects and learning activities. A methodological framework consisting of motivational-cognitive, interactive-practical, and reflective-evaluative stages is proposed. The article also identifies pedagogical conditions, instructional strategies, assessment criteria, and indicators that can support the systematic development of soft skills among primary school students. The proposed framework may serve as a methodological basis for designing teaching materials, classroom activities, diagnostic instruments, and further experimental research in primary education.

Keywords: soft skills, primary education, primary school students, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, self-management, competency-based education, reflective learning.

Introduction Contemporary education is undergoing a significant transformation in response to social, technological, and economic changes. The traditional model of education, which primarily focuses on the transmission and reproduction of knowledge, is increasingly being supplemented by approaches that emphasise learners' ability to apply knowledge, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, solve unfamiliar problems, generate ideas, and regulate their own learning.

Within this context, the concept of **soft skills** has gained considerable importance. Although definitions vary across academic and professional contexts, soft skills generally refer to personal, interpersonal, social, cognitive, and self-regulatory abilities that influence how individuals communicate, cooperate, adapt, solve problems, make decisions, and organise their activities.

The OECD has paid considerable attention to social and emotional skills and their relationships with educational and broader life outcomes. Its framework considers dimensions such as task performance, emotional regulation, collaboration, open-mindedness, and engagement with others. Such approaches indicate that competencies beyond conventional academic knowledge constitute an important part of children's holistic development.

Primary education is particularly significant in this regard. During the primary school years, children develop fundamental patterns of learning behaviour, interaction with peers, communication

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with adults, responsibility for tasks, self-evaluation, and participation in collective activities. Therefore, the purposeful development of soft skills should begin at an early stage of formal education.

However, incorporating soft skills into primary education requires more than introducing individual exercises. It requires a theoretically grounded and methodologically coherent system that defines which competencies should be developed, through which pedagogical approaches, under what conditions, and how their development should be assessed.

Accordingly, the **purpose of this study** is to analyse the theoretical and methodological foundations of soft skills development in primary school students and to propose an improved integrated framework for organising this process within primary education.

The theoretical foundations of soft skills development are interdisciplinary and include educational theory, developmental psychology, competency-based education, social-emotional learning, constructivist pedagogy, and theories of self-regulated learning.

The OECD's work on social and emotional skills provides an important conceptual basis for understanding non-academic competencies. Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez (2019) describe social and emotional skills as individual capacities that can be manifested in consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and that may be developed through formal and informal learning experiences.

Another relevant conceptual framework is **LifeComp**, developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. Sala et al. (2020) organise personal, social, and learning-to-learn competence into three interconnected areas. The personal area includes self-regulation, flexibility, and well-being; the social area incorporates empathy, communication, and collaboration; and learning to learn involves growth mindset, critical thinking, and managing learning.

These approaches demonstrate that soft skills are multidimensional. They include both interpersonal competencies, such as communication and collaboration, and intrapersonal competencies, such as self-regulation, responsibility, flexibility, and reflection.

The theoretical foundations of the issue can also be associated with Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective. From this viewpoint, learning is not merely an individual cognitive process; it is mediated through interaction, language, and participation in socially organised activities. Consequently, collaborative tasks, dialogue, peer interaction, and teacher scaffolding create favourable conditions for developing communication and cooperation skills.

Constructivist approaches similarly emphasise the learner's active participation in constructing meaning. When pupils analyse a problem, discuss alternative solutions, formulate hypotheses, explain their reasoning, or jointly produce a project, they simultaneously develop cognitive and interpersonal competencies.

The concept of social and emotional learning also contributes to understanding the mechanisms through which children can develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies overlap substantially with many categories commonly described as soft skills.

The literature therefore suggests that effective soft skills development requires an integrated educational environment rather than fragmented instruction. Nevertheless, the practical challenge remains to translate broad theoretical categories into age-appropriate pedagogical mechanisms for primary school classrooms.

The analysis identified several pedagogical conditions required for effective implementation of the proposed framework.

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First, the classroom should provide a psychologically supportive and interactive learning environment. Pupils need opportunities to express ideas without fear of inappropriate criticism and to recognise mistakes as part of learning.

Second, soft skills development should be integrated across subjects. Communication and collaboration can be developed in language lessons; logical reasoning and problem-solving can be strengthened in mathematics; creativity can be encouraged through art, technology, reading, and interdisciplinary projects.

Third, teachers should employ open-ended and problem-oriented tasks. Tasks with more than one possible answer encourage children to compare ideas, explain reasoning, negotiate alternatives, and develop creative solutions.

Fourth, cooperative learning should be organised systematically. Group work becomes educationally meaningful when pupils have a common goal, individual responsibility, clearly defined roles, and opportunities for reflection.

Fifth, the learning process should incorporate continuous formative assessment and feedback. Pupils need to understand not only whether an answer is correct but also how effectively they communicated, collaborated, organised their work, and responded to difficulties.

Discussion

The findings suggest that soft skills development in primary education should not be treated as an additional programme separated from academic learning. Instead, it should function as a cross-curricular pedagogical dimension embedded within everyday teaching.

This position is consistent with international competency frameworks that emphasise the interdependence of cognitive, social, emotional, and self-regulatory competencies. The LifeComp framework, for example, integrates personal and social competencies with the ability to learn, demonstrating that effective learning involves more than cognitive knowledge acquisition.

An important feature of the proposed framework is the transition from episodic soft skills activities to systematic pedagogical development. Conducting an occasional group task cannot by itself ensure stable collaborative competence. Skills need repeated practice in different contexts, age-appropriate feedback, self-assessment, and gradual increases in task complexity.

Another significant consideration is the role of the teacher. Within the proposed model, the teacher functions not only as a source of information but also as a facilitator, organiser of interaction, observer, feedback provider, and designer of developmental learning situations.

For instance, instead of simply asking pupils to “work in groups”, the teacher may assign specific responsibilities:

- coordinator;
- idea generator;
- recorder;
- presenter;
- timekeeper.

Roles can subsequently be rotated. Such an approach provides every pupil with opportunities to practise different interpersonal and organisational competencies.

Problem-based learning can also contribute to the development of multiple soft skills. A simple primary-level question such as “How can our class reduce paper waste?” requires pupils to identify a

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problem, generate ideas, evaluate alternatives, communicate arguments, cooperate with peers, and present a common solution.

Thus, the methodological improvement proposed in this study lies not in adding another isolated subject called "soft skills", but in reorganising learning activities so that academic tasks simultaneously create conditions for personal, social, cognitive, and reflective development.

Assessment Criteria and Development Levels

Assessing soft skills requires multiple sources of evidence because these competencies are primarily manifested through behaviour and performance in different situations.

The following criteria are proposed:

Communicative criterion: clarity of expression, listening ability, appropriate questioning, and participation in dialogue.

Collaborative criterion: contribution to group work, fulfilment of assigned roles, mutual assistance, and respect for others.

Cognitive-creative criterion: generation of ideas, comparison of alternatives, explanation of reasoning, and problem-solving.

Personal-regulatory criterion: responsibility, perseverance, planning, adaptability, and task completion.

Social-emotional criterion: empathy, emotional awareness, respectful interaction, and constructive responses to disagreement.

Reflective criterion: self-assessment, acceptance of feedback, identification of difficulties, and formulation of improvement goals.

Three developmental levels can be distinguished:

Low level: the pupil demonstrates the skill mainly with continuous teacher assistance and has difficulty applying it independently.

Medium level: the pupil demonstrates the skill in familiar situations but may require occasional guidance in more complex tasks.

High level: the pupil independently and consistently demonstrates the skill across different educational situations and can explain or evaluate its use.

Assessment methods may include systematic observation, teacher checklists, student self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolios, project activities, situational tasks, reflective journals, and performance-based rubrics.

Importantly, assessment should primarily serve a formative developmental function, particularly in primary education. Its purpose should be to identify progress and guide further learning rather than to label children.

Practical Implications

The proposed framework can be implemented through several practical strategies.

Teachers may begin lessons with problem questions rather than exclusively reproductive questions. Pair discussions can be organised before whole-class answers so that every child has an opportunity to formulate an idea.

Short collaborative tasks can be introduced regularly. Pupils may create a common poster, solve a mathematical problem using different methods, retell a story from several perspectives, or design a solution to an environmental problem.

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Reflection can be incorporated into the final three to five minutes of a lesson. Pupils may complete statements such as:

"Today I learned…"

"I helped my group by…"

"One difficulty I faced was…"

"Next time I will…"

Teachers can also maintain observation records based on selected soft skills indicators. Rather than attempting to evaluate all skills simultaneously, two or three target skills may be observed during a specific activity.

The systematic use of these strategies can transform soft skills development from an incidental outcome into an intentionally designed component of primary education.

Soft skills represent an important component of holistic development in primary school students. Communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, self-management, adaptability, empathy, and reflection enable learners not only to acquire academic knowledge but also to use it effectively in educational and social situations.

The study demonstrates that soft skills development requires an integrated methodological foundation combining competency-based, learner-centred, activity-based, systemic, socio-constructivist, and reflective approaches.

An improved framework consisting of target, content, methodological, process, and evaluation-result blocks was proposed. Within the process block, soft skills development is organised through motivational-cognitive, interactive-practical, and reflective-evaluative stages.

The methodological novelty of the proposed approach lies in conceptualising soft skills development as a **systematic, cross-curricular, activity-oriented, reflective, and diagnostically observable pedagogical process**, rather than as a set of isolated extracurricular activities.

The framework can provide a theoretical basis for developing experimental teaching programmes, diagnostic criteria, assessment rubrics, methodological recommendations, and instructional materials for primary school teachers. Further empirical research should test the effectiveness of the proposed framework through controlled pedagogical interventions and quantitative and qualitative assessment of changes in pupils' soft skills.

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