

IMPORTANCE AND BASIC STEPS OF TRAINING SOFT SKILLS TO CHILDREN IN GLOBALIZED WORLD – AN OVERVIEW OF THE MATTER IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

Soft Skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual's personality, and should be introduced in the very early stages of childhood. In a competitive globalized world, the value of these skills is further enhanced. Soft Skills, especially life skills, help them know how to cope with daily situations as well as on more long-term choices. If children are well-equipped with Soft Skills, they will have the flexibility to manage their lives when they grow up. The field research in this paper was used to obtain a deeper understanding of how soft skills influent to children's future as well as an overview of Vietnam on the matter.

Keywords: vernacular schools, critical thinking, social perceptiveness, K-12 curriculum

Introduction

In a study conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center, which extrapolated findings from a 1918 studies, good soft skills account for 85% of professional success, while hard skills and knowledge account only 15% (Raghuram, n.d.). A survey by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) of Vietnam showed that about 13% of graduates must be retrained or supplemented with more skills, 40% of graduates must be closely supervised at work and more than 41% of graduates need added probationary time before they can actually perform their jobs (Luong, 2010). Moreover, Phan (2010) stated more criminals in Vietnam currently are well-educated teenagers, and the victims mostly are their friends and teachers. Reasons vary according to educational psychologists, but it is believed that the lack or absence of Soft Skills training during the formative years could be a main contributor. These skills empower them to understand who they are and how best they can come across as competent individuals in any given situation.

Methodology

The field research is applied to collect data appropriately since this method was remarked to go into the field for a phenomenon via participant observation (Bernard, 2004). This paper focuses on figuring out the importance of early soft skill training in a globalized world and an overview of how Vietnam education system contributes to the demands; and to some extent, identifying appropriate pedagogical methodology and techniques for this type of education. The findings are hoped to provide a deep insight for parents and educators towards the issues so that positive actions can promptly happen.

Why should it be at early age? What should be appropriate pedagogical methodology?

Learning soft skills is a life-long process, and by starting as early as you can, you will help prepare your child to succeed in not just his academic life, but also in the workplace. A recently released report by Laura H. Lippman and colleagues prepared for Child Trends highlights that soft skills “are a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals.” Schools are where soft skills are practiced and improved. After-school activities are a place where soft skills are refined. But parents and families are where soft skills are observed and learned (Tynan, 2015). By providing your child with the necessary soft skills, he will be able to thrive by adapting to changing circumstances. Additionally, he will also be more willing to learn from his experiences.

It should come as no surprise that many adolescents experience difficulties during their transition from academic life to adult life at the workplace. Some of the little things that they need to learn about are the importance of being on time for work, meeting deadlines, informing their superiors if they cannot go to work due to an illness, and getting along with their fellow workers.

Therefore, children taught at an early age usually benefit in the following ways: improved social skills, less or no need for special education instruction during subsequent school years, better grades, and enhanced attention spans. Likewise, some researchers have concluded that young children enrolled in pre-school programs usually graduate from high school, attend college, have fewer behavioral problems, and do not become involved with crime in their adolescent and young adult years (“What is so important”, 2018).

The father of modern pedagogy John Amos Comenius saw schooling as developmentally based and divided into four stages in which the second stage for children ages 6 to 12, was a public vernacular school. Children then would take different classes, including "religion, ethics, diction, reading, writing, math, music, economy, civics, history, geography, and handicraft" (Encyclopædia Britannica). In *The Great Didactic*, Comenius also recommended learning from nature, outside school contexts. If a child is in a school, he argued that learning should extend beyond the classroom and take place in everyday life. He accomplished this acquisition of worldly knowledge by giving students contact with objects in the environment and systematizing knowledge to make it more accessible and relevant to the children’s interests and life needs (Comenius, 1896). Comenius also said the following about schools: Artisans do not detain their apprentices with theories, but set them to do practical work at an early stage; thus they learn to forge by forging, to carve by carving, to paint by painting, and to dance by dancing. In schools, therefore, let the students learn to write by writing, to talk by talking, to sing by singing, and to reason by reasoning. In this way schools will become workshops humming with work, and students whose efforts prove successful will experience the truth of the proverb; "We give form to ourselves and to our materials at the same time." (Stowe, 2011)

It is the nature of everything that comes into beings, that while tender it is easily bent and formed, but that, when it has grown hard, it is not easy to alter. This is the same with human brain, because it receives the images of external objects that present themselves to its organs of sense is quite wet and soft in the years of childhood, and fit for receiving all images that come to it. Later on, it grows hard and dry by degrees, then things are less readily impressed upon it. (Comenius, 1896)

Comenius described early childhood as a unique life stage. Experience was critical in shaping development, with those under age 6 more malleable than older children. Parents were

responsible for educating their children in a rational manner, attending to their spiritual understanding, moral development, and knowledge gained through appropriate experiences. A measure of what was deemed appropriate was found in the study of a child's nature. Parents were encouraged to promote joyful learning through children's inclination to play and to make opportunities for their involvement in daily routines appropriate to their age. Comenius described young children as learning best through direct contact with the world of things.

According to behaviorists, learning is affected by changes in behavior. They concluded that all learners given the right environmental influences acquire identical understanding. In contrast to the beliefs of behaviorists, the constructivists viewed learning as a search for meaning. They believed that knowledge is constructed by the learner and that the learner develops her/his own understanding through experience. Whereas a behaviorist would continue to look at the content to be learned and the influence of the environment upon that learning, a constructivist would be more interested in knowing how the learner is attempting to construct meaning (Bush, 2006). Training soft skills to children is a combination of these two theories. Most childhood education specialists claim that young children learn best when they're not pushed too hard, they have an opportunity to interact with their peers, and their parents and instructors treat them kindly. Likewise, children learn best when instruction and educational activities are only a small portion of their days.

During past time, people used to think that children don't have ability to distinguish what is right and wrong so there is no need to educate them in their early ages. However, even though it is true that they cannot distinguish right or wrong, it is also true that children absorb everything what they hear and see through daily life and therefore early education is essential. Education given in early childhood shapes foundation of the life and helps mental and academic development of children.

Basic techniques on training soft skills to children

According to Pew Research Center, among ten important skills for children to get ahead into the globalized world, communication is the most important skill (90%) to compare with reading, math, teamwork, writing, logic, science, athletic. music and science (Goo, 2015). It may still seem like a stretch to say that interpersonal communications skills are more important than intelligence. Consider automation, however: As technology continues to progress, it's becoming painfully obvious that more jobs than just those centered around production lines are in jeopardy of being made obsolete. In fact, certain forecasters predict that the job market of the near future will consist of only two types of people: those who know how to design and operate automated systems, and those with creative and social skills whose job it will be to deal directly with customers (Leung, 2016). In essence, soft skills may soon be some of the only marketable skills that new hires can bring to the table.

According to common sense and the purpose of this study, the scope will be narrowed down into two categories of personal skills and interpersonal skills. It is, then, identified as in NCWD (2011):

Communication Skills: the ability to Communicate, Read with Understanding, Convey Ideas in Writing, Speak so Others Can Understand, Listen Actively, Observe Critically
Decision Making Skills: The ability to Solve Problems and Make Decisions/ Plans
Lifelong Learning Skills: The ability to Take Responsibility for Learning, Reflect and Evaluate, Learn Through Research, Use Information and Communications Technology, Time Management

Interpersonal Skills: The ability to Guide Others, Resolve Conflict and Negotiate, Advocate and Influence, Cooperate with Others

1. Active Listening: giving full attention to the speaker and try to understand on the mentioned story, make appropriate questions, not interrupting at inappropriate times. Parents should model active listening to children with good listening habits by demonstrating an interest in what children are saying and encourage them to do the same. Bancino and Zevalkink (2007) suggest some specific techniques to teachers/parents for modeling active listening:
 - Create a safe place (use door openers and be acknowledging: “Tell me more...”, “Could you explain...?”, “I see”, “go on”)
 - Become actively involved (Focus your complete attention on the speaker, make eye contact, smile genuinely, maintain an open, relaxed posture, sit or stand squarely, lean forward, avoid physical barriers)
 - Don’t judge, don’t criticize
 - Search for meanings (discover the real messages)
 - Confirm your understanding
 - Bring closure (summarize if appropriate)
2. Communication skill: According to annual surveys done by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, communication skills consistently rank among the top skills employers look for in a new employee. Helping youth improve communication skills will not only help them get a job, it can help them advance in their careers.
 - Record children giving directions for using the microwave or doing something they are good at, such as playing a computer game. Review the video with them. Did they speak clearly? Were the instructions clear? Other family members and friends can provide feedback as well.
 - Discuss the different types of communication one might use in different environments such as with friends, in the classroom, in a professional setting, and with family. Help them understand what might be acceptable and expected in one setting may not be appropriate in another setting.
 - Teach them appropriate speaking volume or standing distance.
3. Critical thinking: There are some different definitions for critical thinking, but each involves critically evaluating the validity and relevance of information. To be simply understood, critical thinking means making reasoned judgments regarding any variety of subject, from academic arguments to new stories. It includes recognizing and challenging assumptions, taking account of context, imagining alternatives, and developing reflective skepticism. Critical thinking enables us to have a better understanding of ideas, data, arguments (Leicester, 2010), analyze the situations and then come to a better decision making or problem solving.

In order to train children critical thinking, it should be at the simplest level of asking them:

- If they want to have additional information before answering the questions.
- To give explanation on their decision (giving reasons is a good way to focus on the thinking that went into an answer rather than the answer itself)
- State the problem in at least two ways (because many real problems are fuzzy, that is, they really are potential problems and each has its own possible solution.)

- Think about and decide which information is most important and which information is least important – Why. These questions draws children’ attention on the value of different sorts of information.)
 - List two solutions for the problem. (This encourages a more creative approach.)
4. Time management: It is actually concerned with managing the way one deals with time, rather than the managing of time. Parents should teach children planning, prioritization, methods for handling unexpected tasks, as well as give them an insight regarding time-consuming activities. Parents can help by creating regular schedules and encouraging children to predict the amount of time that various activities require. Moreover, for lengthier projects, parents can assist children in learning time management by breaking the project into smaller parts with immediate deadlines (Claessens et al 2007).
 5. Work with others: Teamwork and the ability to work well with others consistently appear among the highest ranked qualities employers are looking for in an employee in the annual surveys of National Association of Colleges and Employers. This includes the ability to communicate and work with people from different racial, religious, ability, and ethnic groups. Through daily interaction, parents should:
 - Encourage their children to help an elderly neighbor with yard work or join their parents to volunteer as a family to serve a meal at a homeless shelter.
 - Play family games with children and encourage team work such as board games which help children build many skills like cooperating with others, taking turns, following rules, controlling emotions, and learning new knowledge and skills.
 - Encourage them to play a team sport. Sports help children learn communication skills, decision making, self- control, and self-discipline as well as learning how to work on a team.
 - Introduce children to people who are different from them through taking part in community festivals that feature different cultures, attending various places of worship, or through books, magazines, film, television, or the internet. Start conversations about differences. Acknowledge that some people have ideas about people who are different from them.
 - Talk about why discrimination exists. Reflect upon the feelings that come up when someone discriminates against a person and use it as an opportunity to teach the importance of not acting that way towards another.
 6. Social perceptiveness: It relates to the emotional ability to both understand the perspectives of others and understand how to work with others. Social perspective taking is the ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person is reacting cognitively and emotionally to the situation. It is more or less a combination of many interpersonal skills.

Researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education found evidences to suggest increased social perceptiveness after taking part in a simulation or reading a detailed narrative that immerses the participant in the perspective of another individual. Denise Cavner (2008) also presents a variety of principles and concrete examples for developing empathy in the early stages of education. She recommends practicing empathy and social perceptiveness by having students care for a plant, a stuffed animal, or even a real animal, such as a hamster. Furthermore, parents should provide opportunities for discussing emotions and conversing about how their child would feel if he or she were in another child’s shoes. Another potential method is to have children read and discuss controversial stories with valued conclusions.

These stories and discussions help children gain insight into the lives of others (Hollingsworth et al, 2003).

AN OVERVIEW IN VIETNAM

Vietnam's education system is one of the most controversial topics of Vietnam's society today despite of improvement recent years. The traditional education method with too much theory, without hands-on activities, and with a lack of attention given to soft skills development is often criticized. Learners are required to memorize mechanically and this method prevents them from developing critical thinking, creative thinking, and self-awareness ("A Revolutionary Pedagogy", n.d.).

Vietnam's education in K-12 curriculum is quite heavy and considers math and science as the main subjects. The whole education process traditionally stresses on more theory than practice, more about academics than about soft skills. Most teachers in Vietnam apply traditional methods which teachers are primary speakers and students are primary listeners. This causes bore and passive attitude in learners and as results, children who are overscheduled do not have time to be children, to play with others or even by themselves on occasion. Playing is considered to be such an important contributor to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and as a right of every child. It gives children the opportunity to use their imagination, learn to solve problems, and develop social skills.

According to Mark Ashwill, the managing director and founder of Capstone Vietnam, the K-12 curriculum should be reevaluated which can create some room in the curriculum on age-appropriate soft skills development. And many parents need to spend more time with their children, teach them, guide them, discipline them and support them when necessary ("Vietnam should Teach Kindness", n.d.)

While Vietnam's rapidly growing economy demands highly for skilled labors, its education system can be able to produce about half of skilled workers the government seeks (Nuflic Neso Vietnam, 2009). According to a newspaper report, as much as 60 percent of Vietnamese workforce lacks life skills (Vietnam Net Bridge, 2011). Moreover, there are over 200,000 unemployed graduates in 2017, according to the General Statistics Office of Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (Quan, n.d.) Deficiencies of skill training in Vietnamese educational curricula necessitate one year of retraining graduates if they want to be quite qualified when joining to current workforce (Nuflic Neso Vietnam, 2009). As a former senior U.S diplomat in Asia noted, the future economic growth of Vietnam depended much on a high quality workforce with better skills and training in modern education (Runckel, 2009).

Conclusion

In general, parents should do activities that require children to work with them. Take turns allowing children to lead the activity and having their children follow, encourage children in areas that are hard for them, show them how much they have mastered those skills, let them determine their own solutions to problems. Sometimes, parents should do local charitable service projects and ask their children to join. Parents and educators should understand that children also have own thinking and proper education based on care and attachment is potent influence to them. Society and community should also recognize education given in these ages is very critical to child's mental and intellectual development and therefore provide more productive education program not only for the children, but for parent, since early childhood education is most efficient investment for society.

Three top priorities of Vietnamese government in the next ten years include infrastructure, institutional reform, and human resources development. Improving domestic education is a top priority in various plans and the initiatives include ambitious goals, such as 10 percent annual increase in domestic university enrollment and developing a higher education system that is more in line with global standards. In general, the Vietnamese government has increased the budget allocations, liberalized private sector involvement, and encouraged foreign participation in developing education and training services. However, many observers and the government also find the reform process to be slow and domestic higher education falls far short of meeting the demand (“Vietnam-Education and Training”, 2017).

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