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The Role of Soft Skills in Promoting Effective Communication and Cooperation among Students in a Multicultural Classroom Environment

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ANNOTATION

This study was conducted to examine the importance of soft skills in promoting successful communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment. Soft skills, including effective communication, active listening, empathy, and teamwork play an important role in building positive relationships and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Through the study of documents and the results of interviews with 12 students from 8 universities in Hanoi, the research results demonstrate that students who actively participate in the development of soft skills demonstrate a greater level of awareness and appreciation of their role in a multicultural environment. Based on the results of the study, a number of collaborative learning strategies, cultural exchange programs and real-world problem-solving activities are encouraged to raise students' awareness and understanding of the importance of soft skills.

KEYWORDS: Soft skills, communication skills, effective cooperation, multicultural classroom, Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, effective communication and collaboration skills are becoming increasingly important for students to succeed in a diverse cultural environment (Dell'Aquila et al., 2017). In the context of Vietnam, where the education system is gradually attracting students from different countries to live and study, it is important to understand the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students from different cultures. Soft skills, such as intercultural competence, teamwork, and empathy play an important role in building positive relationships, resolving conflict, and promoting inclusion in the classroom (Kantrowitz, 2005). Therefore, this study aims to explore the importance of soft skills in supporting communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment. Although the importance of soft skills is increasingly recognized, there still seems to be very limited specific studies focusing on their role in the Vietnamese context, especially in a multicultural education environment. By looking at the role of soft skills in communication and cooperation from the perspective of Vietnamese students, this study aims to provide deeper insights into the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment in Vietnam. To achieve this goal, the following research questions will be answered:

1. Students' awareness of the importance of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classrooms?

2. What is the experience of Vietnamese students in communicating and collaborating with friends from diverse cultures?
3. What specific soft skills contribute to promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in multicultural classrooms?

This study has important theoretical and practical implications. The findings of the study will contribute to supplement existing knowledge on soft skills development in the Vietnamese education system, with a particular focus on their role in multicultural classroom environments. By exploring students' perceptions and experiences, this study will provide insight into the importance of soft skills in supporting effective communication and collaboration. The results of the study will inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers about the importance of integrating soft skills development programs into the Vietnamese education system to better prepare students in a multicultural environment. Finally, this study aims to contribute to the enhancement of educational activities to promote an inclusive and collaborative learning environment in Vietnam.

2. Theoretical basis and literature review

2.1. The concept of soft skills

According to Joshi (2017), soft skills refer to a set of personal attributes, behaviors, and qualities that enable individuals to interact effectively with others and navigate social situations successfully. While technical or hard skills involve specific knowledge and expertise in a particular area, soft skills are more general and transferable across a variety of areas, including education, employment, and personal life (Bora, 2015).

Scholars and researchers have provided various frameworks and classifications for identifying and conceptualizing soft skills. One widely recognized framework is the “Big Five” model, which includes five broad categories of soft skills: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and cultural competence. These aspects include skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Arat, 2014).

Another commonly used framework is the Cooperation for 21st Century Skills (P21) framework, which identifies a range of skills needed to succeed in the 21st century. These skills include communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and global awareness. The P21 framework also emphasizes skills such as information literacy, media literacy, and social and cross-cultural skills.

The different frameworks and models above may have slight differences in the classification and terminology of soft skills. However, they all emphasize the importance of interpersonal, personal, and cognitive skills that contribute to effective communication, cooperation, and adaptability in different contexts.

2.2. Importance of soft skills in educational contexts

Soft skills play an important role in the educational context, especially in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in multicultural classrooms, specifically as follows:

Comprehensive development: Soft skills contribute to the comprehensive development of students, supplementing academic knowledge and technical skills. Develop soft skills that enhance students' social and emotional well-being, promote self-awareness, and nurture their personal development (Majid et al., 2012).

Employability and career readiness: Soft skills are highly valued by employers in today's job market. Employers look for candidates who not only have technical competence but also demonstrate strong

communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability skills (Joseph et al., 2010). Soft skills are essential for students to be work-ready, helping them thrive in a diverse work environment and adapt to changing job requirements.

Collaboration and teamwork: Soft skills such as collaboration and teamwork are important in an educational environment that encourages team projects and collaborative learning. Students who possess effective collaboration skills can work in harmony with their peers, taking advantage of diverse perspectives and achieving common goals.

Interpersonal Communication and Relationships: Soft skills such as effective communication, active listening, and empathy are foundational to building positive interpersonal relationships. These skills allow students to express their thoughts clearly, understand the perspectives of others, resolve conflicts peacefully, and promote a supportive and inclusive classroom environment (Shakir, 2009).

Critical thinking and problem solving: Soft skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity help students analyze information, evaluate different perspectives, and create creative solutions (Hung, 2022). These skills are essential for academic success and lifelong learning.

Global citizenship and intercultural competence: Soft skills, especially cultural competence and global awareness, are important in preparing students to become responsible global citizens (Hirsch, 2017). In multicultural classrooms, students with intercultural competencies can navigate cultural differences, appreciate diversity, and communicate and collaborate effectively with individuals from different backgrounds.

Lifelong learning and adaptability: Soft skills are not limited to specific tasks or contexts but can be transferred and applied in different situations. Students who develop solid soft skills will be better equipped to be ready for lifelong learning, adapt to new challenges, and thrive in an ever-changing world.

Overall, the importance of soft skills in the context of education goes beyond academic achievement. Soft skills contribute to the personal development, employability, cooperation, communication, critical thinking and adaptability of students. Recognizing and integrating soft skills development into educational practice can enhance the overall educational experience and prepare students for success in future endeavors.

2.3. Soft skills and the promotion of effective communication and cooperation

Soft skills are indispensable for effective communication and collaboration in diverse settings, including multicultural classrooms. These include important soft skills and their role in promoting effective communication and collaboration:

Communication skills: Effective communication is critical for exchanging ideas, sharing information, and understanding the views of others. Soft skills such as active listening, clear expression, nonverbal communication, and empathy contribute to successful communication (Shakir, 2009). Students with good communication skills are able to communicate their thoughts effectively, correctly interpret the messages of others, and engage in meaningful conversations.

Collaboration and teamwork: Soft skills related to collaboration and teamwork are essential in multicultural classrooms. Students need to work together, respect diverse opinions and leverage each other's strengths to achieve a common goal. Skills such as collaboration, conflict resolution, flexibility, and compromise help students collaborate successfully, appreciate diverse perspectives, and build trust within the team (Arat, 2014).

Cultural competencies: Soft skills related to cultural competencies are particularly relevant in a multicultural classroom environment. Cultural competence involves an understanding and appreciation of the different norms, values, and communication styles of the culture. Students with cultural competencies can navigate cultural differences, adapt their communication methods, and communicate respectfully with peers from different backgrounds.

Emotional Intelligence: Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and empathize with the emotions of others. Soft skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social awareness contribute to improved communication and cooperation. Students with emotional intelligence can navigate interpersonal dynamics, build positive relationships, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others.

Critical thinking and problem solving: Soft skills related to critical thinking and problem solving enhance students' ability to analyze complex situations, evaluate different perspectives, and generate creative solutions. These skills allow students to approach challenges collaboratively, think critically about problems, and communicate their ideas effectively to solve problems.

2.4. The role of soft skills in a multicultural classroom environment

Soft skills play an important role in promoting effective communication and cooperation in a multicultural classroom environment. The following are the key aspects that highlight the importance of soft skills in such contexts:

Connecting cultural differences: Soft skills such as cultural competence and empathy help bridge cultural differences and promote understanding among students of different backgrounds. Students who possess these skills can appreciate and respect diverse perspectives, communicate effectively, and build harmonious relationships in the classroom.

Enhancing communication: Soft skills such as effective communication and active listening are essential for students to engage in meaningful interactions with peers from different cultures (Joseph et al., 2010; Hung, 2022). These skills help students understand diverse perspectives, express themselves clearly, and foster open dialogue, creating an inclusive and respectful communication environment.

Facilitating collaboration: Soft skills related to collaboration and teamwork are critical for students to work effectively in multicultural teams. Students with strong collaborative skills can leverage diversity, resolve conflicts constructively, and promote collective problem solving. These skills foster a culture of collaboration that values the contribution of all students, regardless of their cultural background.

Promoting inclusive learning: Soft skills contribute to creating an inclusive learning environment where all students feel valued and respected. Skills such as empathy, cultural competence, and open-mindedness help students appreciate diversity, challenge biases, and actively bring voices from different cultures into group discussions and activities.

Intercultural competence development: Soft skills play an important role in developing students' intercultural competence, which is critical for their future global interaction. In multicultural classrooms, students have the opportunity to enhance their intercultural communication skills, adaptability, and appreciation of diverse perspectives, preparing them for orientation in multicultural contexts outside the educational setting.

2.5. Studies on the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment

The process of reviewing studies around the world on the views and perceptions of students about the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment can be mentioned in some of the following point studies:

Gruzdev & Kuznetsova (2022) conducted a study to investigate students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classes at 3 universities in the United States. The research results show that the majority of students have a limited awareness of the importance of soft skills in a multicultural classroom environment. Many students primarily focus on academic achievement and technical knowledge rather than recognizing the essential role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and collaboration. However, students who have participated in collaborative projects and cross-cultural activities have demonstrated a greater level of awareness and appreciation of the importance of soft skills. These findings suggest that educational interventions are needed to raise students' awareness of the value of soft skills in multicultural classrooms. It is important to combine clear instruction and experiential learning opportunities to highlight the benefits of soft skills in promoting effective communication, collaboration, and intercultural understanding. Based on the results of the research, educators should make revisions to the curriculum to clearly integrate soft skills development between different subjects. A combination of collaborative learning strategies, cultural exchange programs, and real-world problem-solving activities can enhance students' awareness and understanding of the importance of soft skills in a multicultural classroom environment.

Laker et al., (2023) explore students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills in fostering effective communication and collaboration in multicultural classrooms at an Australian university. The research results show that students have a significant level of awareness of the importance of soft skills in a multicultural classroom environment. Students recognize the importance of effective communication, active listening, empathy, and teamwork in building positive relationships and creating a harmonious learning environment. Moreover, students who participated in cross-cultural activities and were exposed to diverse cultures demonstrated a greater level of awareness and appreciation of the role of soft skills. Research results indicate that the university's efforts in promoting cross-cultural education and promoting inclusive practices have positively impacted students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills. The findings suggest that exposure to cross-cultural experiences and celebrating diversity can contribute to students' understanding of the role of soft skills in effective communication and collaboration. Based on the results obtained, the study recommends that other schools in Australia should promote multicultural education by integrating activities that encourage interaction between students from different backgrounds. Providing opportunities for students to participate in cultural exchange programs, collaborative projects, and classroom discussions can further raise their awareness of the importance of soft skills in fostering effective communication and collaboration in multicultural classrooms.

Stewart et al., (2019), explore students' experiences of communicating and collaborating with friends from diverse cultures at 6 universities in Canada. The findings show that students have had positive experiences communicating and collaborating with friends from different cultures. Students emphasize the benefits of cross-cultural friendships, such as gaining new perspectives, learning about different cultures, and developing better communication skills. They also expressed that collaborating with friends from diverse cultures enhanced their problem-solving abilities and fostered creativity in teamwork. However, some students

mentioned early challenges in understanding cultural differences and adapting their communication styles. Research results indicate that students' experiences of communicating and collaborating with friends from diverse cultures are generally positive and enriching. These findings suggest that cross-cultural friendships can promote cross-cultural understanding, promote effective communication, and enhance cooperation skills. The initial challenges mentioned by some students highlight the importance of cultural competence and the need for clear guidance on how to address cultural differences. Based on the results of the study, schools in Canada should promote cross-cultural friendships by organizing activities that encourage interaction between students from different backgrounds. A combination of cultural exchange programs, team building exercises, and cross-cultural projects can provide opportunities for students to develop stronger communication and collaboration skills. Furthermore, educators should consider providing guidance on cultural competencies to help students better navigate and appreciate cultural differences in their friendships.

Stevenson & Starkweather (2018) looked at students' experiences of communicating and collaborating with friends from diverse cultures at 12 universities in India. Research results indicate that students have a mixed experience of communicating and cooperating with friends from different cultures. While some students report positive experiences, highlighting benefits such as increased cultural awareness, improved communication skills, and expanded perspectives, others face challenges in understanding cultural nuances and overcoming language barriers. Students emphasize the importance of openness, respect and patience in building effective cross-cultural communication and cooperation. Research shows that students' experience of communication and collaboration with friends from diverse cultures can be both positive and challenging. Positive experiences reflect the potential for cultural exchange and intercultural learning, while challenges highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and effective communication strategies. The study also recommends that universities in India promote intercultural understanding and effective communication by implementing multicultural programs and initiatives. Providing language support and cultural competency training can help students overcome language barriers and address cultural differences more effectively. In addition, fostering an inclusive classroom environment that encourages dialogue, respects diverse perspectives, and celebrates cultural diversity can further enhance students' communication and collaborative experiences with friends from different cultures.

Thus, mentioning the awareness of students about the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment is not only a concern of developed countries in particular but also a concern of all countries in the world. As can be seen, the studies conducted to examine students' perceptions of the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment are focused on the following point of view: The majority of students highlight the potential benefits of communicating and collaborating with friends from different cultures, such as acquiring new perspectives, improving communication skills, and promoting intercultural understanding. However, challenges related to cultural differences and language barriers may arise and need to be addressed. Therefore, exploring the awareness of Vietnamese students about the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment towards enhancing students' communication and collaboration experience with friends from different cultures, leading to improved intercultural understanding, effective communication skills and successful cooperation in a multicultural environment is essential.

3. Research Method

This study uses qualitative research methods to explore the views and perceptions of Vietnamese students about the role of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in a multicultural classroom environment. The sample in this study was selected through intentional sampling, evenly distributed among students from the first to the last year of undergraduate study.

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 students from 8 universities in Hanoi city. The interviews were conducted between October 2023 and December 2023 on the basis of face-to-face and telephone interviews lasting from 30 minutes to 45 minutes each, the contents of which were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key topics and samples emerging from interviews.

4. Research results

4.1. Students' awareness of the importance of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classrooms

The interview results show that Vietnamese students are generally aware of the importance of soft skills in promoting effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classrooms. Although the perception of each individual may be different, some common themes and perspectives can be identified as follows:

Recognizing cultural diversity: Students often recognize and appreciate the diversity present in multicultural classrooms. They understand that effective communication and collaboration requires acknowledging and respecting different cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and communication styles. Students value soft skills as essential tools for navigating and embracing this diversity.

Bridges of understanding: Students see soft skills as a bridge to help them understand and connect with their peers with diverse cultures. They believe that soft skills such as intercultural competence, empathy, and communication skills help them break down barriers, overcome stereotypes, and establish meaningful connections. They also recognize that soft skills help to communicate effectively, enhance mutual understanding, and foster collaboration among classmates.

Enhancing the learning experience: Vietnamese students consider soft skills to be an integral part of the overall learning experience in multicultural classrooms. They understand that effective communication and collaboration driven by soft skills creates a supportive and inclusive environment that enhances their academic and personal development. Vietnamese students recognize that by developing these skills, they can engage in richer discussions, learn from diverse perspectives, and develop a broader understanding of the world.

Preparing for global citizenship: Vietnamese students are aware that soft skills are essential to prepare to become global citizens. They recognize that in an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to communicate and collaborate with individuals from different cultures is critical. Vietnamese students understand that soft skills not only support effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classrooms but also equip them with valuable skills for their future careers and interactions in a globalized society.

Resolving conflict and promoting inclusion: Vietnamese students value soft skills as a tool to resolve conflicts and promote inclusion in multicultural classrooms. They understand that differences in views, values, and cultural norms can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Vietnamese students recognize that soft skills such as empathy, active listening, and compromise help them resolve these conflicts, find common ground, and create an inclusive and harmonious learning environment.

It can be seen that soft skills are essential in promoting effective communication and cooperation in multicultural classrooms. The majority of students recognize the value of these skills in embracing diversity, enhancing the learning experience, preparing for a globalized world, and fostering inclusion. Vietnamese students understand that the development and cultivation of soft skills not only contributes to personal development but also contributes to overall success on the learning journey and future efforts.

4.2. Students' experience of communicating and collaborating with friends from different cultures

Vietnamese students' experience of communicating and collaborating with students of diverse cultures may vary depending on their personal experience, education level, and specific multicultural classroom environment. However, some common themes and experiences can be identified:

Cultural awareness and curiosity: Some Vietnamese students often show curiosity and enjoy learning about other cultures and perspectives. They can actively seek out opportunities to socialize with friends of diverse cultures, ask questions, and learn about their customs, traditions, and language. This curiosity fosters cultural awareness and sensitivity, fostering a more inclusive and respectful classroom environment.

Language barriers: Students may experience language barriers when communicating and collaborating with peers from different language backgrounds. Language differences can create challenges in understanding, expressing ideas, and engaging in meaningful conversations. However, these language barriers also provide opportunities for Vietnamese students to develop their language skills, exercise patience, and explore alternative means of communication such as nonverbal signals or translation tools.

Challenges in cross-cultural communication: One of the challenges students may face is the challenges of navigating cross-cultural communication norms and styles. Different cultural backgrounds can influence communication patterns, such as directness, indirectness, or the use of nonverbal cues. Vietnamese students need to adapt their communication styles to interact effectively with their culturally diverse peers. This requires cultural sensitivity, flexibility, the ability to interpret and adjust to different communication cues.

Building trust and establishing relationships: The majority of students said that they initially faced challenges in building trust and establishing relationships with peers from different cultures. Cultural differences, stereotypes, and preconceived notions can hinder the formation of connections. However, when Vietnamese students engage in collaborative activities, work on group projects, and participate in experience sharing, they have the opportunity to build trust, develop mutual understanding, and establish meaningful relationships between cultures.

Conflict resolution and negotiation: Students also encounter conflicts and disagreements in multicultural classes due to differences in views, values or approaches. These conflicts arise from misunderstandings, misunderstandings, or conflicts about cultural norms. Vietnamese students with experience in conflict resolution and effective negotiation skills can contribute to solving these problems. Conflict resolution skills, such as active listening, empathy, and compromise, are important in promoting understanding, finding common ground, and maintaining harmonious relationships.

Overall, students' experiences of communicating and collaborating with friends from diverse cultures can be both challenging and enriching. These experiences provide opportunities for personal growth, cultural learning, and the development of important soft skills needed to thrive in a multicultural environment. By leveraging these experiences and actively engaging with their peers, Vietnamese students can enhance their

intercultural competencies, broaden their perspectives, and contribute to a more inclusive and collaborative learning environment.

4.3. Soft skills contribute to promoting effective communication and cooperation among students in multicultural classrooms

Specific soft skills that contribute to fostering effective communication and collaboration between students in multicultural classrooms may vary depending on the context and experience of the individual. However, a number of important soft skills have been identified as critical in facilitating positive interaction and collaboration in diverse educational settings. The following soft skills are particularly relevant:

Intercultural competence: *Intercultural* competence refers to the ability to understand, appreciate, and communicate effectively with people from different cultures. Vietnamese students with intercultural competencies are more likely to show respect for diversity, demonstrate an open mindset, and adapt their communication style to suit different cultural norms and perspectives. This skill allows students to bridge cultural gaps, overcome communication barriers, and build meaningful connections with peers from a variety of backgrounds.

Communication skills: Good communication skills are essential for effective collaboration in multicultural classrooms. Vietnamese students with effective communication skills are able to express their thoughts and ideas clearly, actively listen and pay attention to others, and engage in constructive dialogue. This includes verbal and nonverbal communication, active listening, and the ability to ask clarifying questions. By mastering communication skills, students can reduce misunderstandings, resolve conflicts peacefully, and promote a positive learning environment.

Teamwork and collaboration: Collaborative skills are important for working effectively in multicultural teams. Vietnamese students with collaboration and teamwork skills can actively participate in group activities, contribute their unique perspectives, and work collaboratively towards common goals. This includes skills such as active participation, active contribution, compromise, and conflict resolution. Through teamwork and collaboration, students learn to appreciate diverse perspectives, leverage personal strengths, and achieve better outcomes together.

Empathy and recognition: Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings and experiences of others. Vietnamese students demonstrate empathy and perspective-taking skills that can develop a deeper understanding of their peers' perspectives, culture, and background. This skill allows them to relate to others, build trust, and establish strong interpersonal connections. By cultivating empathy, students can navigate cultural differences sensitively, resolve conflicts empathetically, and foster a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Emotional Intelligence: *Emotional* intelligence includes the ability to recognize and manage one's emotions as well as understand the emotions of others. Vietnamese students with high emotional intelligence are able to regulate emotions effectively, show empathy, and navigate social interactions sensitively. Emotional intelligence allows students to handle conflict constructively, build positive relationships, and create an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The research results demonstrate that students who possess and actively participate in the development of soft skills will better understand the importance of these skills in a multicultural environment. Research shows that students who engage in collaborative projects and cross-cultural activities have demonstrated a greater level of awareness and appreciation of the role of soft skills. These skills, including effective communication, active listening, empathy, and teamwork, are believed to be essential in building positive relationships, promoting intercultural understanding, and creating a harmonious learning environment.

To raise students' awareness of the importance of soft skills and give them the tools they need to succeed in a multicultural classroom environment, some of the following recommendations can be considered:

Curriculum revision implementation: Integrate soft skills development between different subjects to ensure the curriculum has clear guidance on soft skills. This can be achieved by incorporating dedicated lessons or modules that focus on developing communication, collaboration, empathy, and teamwork skills.

Incorporating collaborative learning strategies: Encouraging collaborative learning approaches in which students actively participate in group activities and projects. This approach fosters collaboration, communication, and teamwork, allowing students to develop and practice their soft skills in a multicultural context.

Introduction of cultural exchange programs: Organize cultural exchange programs to give students the opportunity to interact with peers from diverse cultures. These programs promote cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and respect, enhancing students' ability to communicate effectively and collaborate with individuals from different cultures.

Includes real-world problem-solving activities: Design learning activities that simulate real-world situations and require students to work collaboratively to solve problems. This approach helps students develop their critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills while navigating cultural differences and diverse perspectives.

Provide professional development for educators: Provide training and professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their understanding of soft skills and strategies to promote effective communication and collaboration in a multicultural classroom. This support allows faculty to create an inclusive learning environment that promotes the development of students' soft skills.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can create an environment that emphasizes the importance of soft skills and equips students with the tools they need to succeed in a multicultural classroom environment. This approach promotes effective communication, cooperation, and intercultural understanding, preparing students to succeed in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

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