
Building Future Leaders: Integrating Soft Skills in Multan's Secondary Education

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Abstract: This research study aimed to investigate the integration of soft skills in secondary classrooms in Multan, Pakistan. Four research questions guided the study: teachers' perceptions of soft skill integration's importance, the methods used to integrate soft skills, the difficulties hindering integration, and suggested strategies for improving soft skill development. Data from 386 public and private secondary teachers were collected through questionnaires and interviews, analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The study found that soft skills, encompassing cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, are crucial for students' future success. Both public and private school teachers recognized the significance of integrating soft skills in secondary education. Gender and school type showed no significant differences in teacher perceptions. Recommendations for improvement include raising parental awareness of soft skill development and incorporating soft skills training in teacher education. Addressing this issue is essential for preparing students to thrive in their professional careers and adapt to the changing world.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Integration, Secondary Classroom

Introduction:

The modern world grapples with numerous challenges, and one of the most pressing among them is combating scarcity. Governments and organizations have been striving to address this issue for years. However, an important aspect that demands attention is the disproportionate emphasis on hard skills over soft skills. Hard skills are specific to particular fields, while soft skills are versatile and crucial for success in any work environment.

In the pursuit of global competitiveness and future-readiness, Pakistan must also prioritize the integration of soft skills into its educational system. The nation faces developmental disparities compared to other developing countries, and overlooking this critical need could lead to further complexities. Presently, the educational system in Pakistan predominantly focuses on producing professionals for technical, medical, or engineering fields, neglecting the development of well-rounded individuals with essential core abilities.

Educational institutions in Pakistan primarily serve the purpose of imparting hard skills relevant to specific fields to secure promising job opportunities. The prevailing aspiration among students is to become doctors, engineers, or pursue other technical career paths. Unfortunately, the country lacks a comprehensive long-term plan for future development, and the educational system lacks emphasis on nurturing effective personalities with diverse skill sets.

Nonetheless, there is hope for change and progress. Pakistan can proactively address these issues and secure a brighter future. The government can devise and implement appropriate educational policies, establish specialized institutes dedicated to teaching soft skills in a professional and effective manner, and collaborate with foreign entities to run awareness campaigns. These steps will pave the way for Pakistan to prepare itself for the demands of the future world. Failing to act promptly would jeopardize the nation's competitive edge in the global arena. An understanding of the importance of hard and soft skills comes from research in the field. Downing (2005) emphasizes that hard skills are essential for accomplishing specific tasks and have a direct correlation with occupational strategies and existing traditions in major fields of study. These skills are typically taught in specialized courses, and their mastery is seen as a key determinant of an individual's success in their primary profession post-institution.

Amanda et al. (2014) acknowledge that enumerating soft skills on a resume can be challenging, while hard skills can be quantified and readily showcased to prospective employers. Soft skills are invaluable for enhancing an individual's interactions, behavior, and occupational predictions, constituting essential attributes for a well-rounded professional. While hard skills pertain to an individual's tangible services and the ability to perform specific tasks, soft skills transcend academic settings, and their absence can hinder overall development. Scholars equipped with these crucial competencies excel in academic performance, paving the way for prosperous associations in various aspects of life. To address the scarcity challenge and enhance Pakistan's future prospects, it is imperative to integrate soft skills into the educational framework. This integration will nurture individuals with the holistic skill set required to thrive in an ever-changing world. By focusing on a balanced approach to skill development, Pakistan can secure a competitive advantage and progress towards a more prosperous future.

Soft Skills

Soft skills, also known as nontechnical skills, encompass the interpersonal, human, and behavioral abilities required to apply technical knowledge effectively in the workplace (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera as cited by De Villiers, 2010). These skills play a crucial role in preparing students for the future and include communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, negotiation, professionalism, and ethics (Azim et al., 2010). In contrast, hard skills, referred to as technical skills, are specific to particular work settings and acquired through training, education, or on-the-job experience (Litecky, Arnett, & Prabhakar, 2004).

Integration of Hard and Soft Skills

The successful integration of hard and soft skills cultivates a balanced and mature generation that is self-aware, confident, and tolerant, benefiting society as a whole. Integration involves blending two or more subjects, creating connections, and facilitating interactive learning from the known to the unknown. Different methodologies and styles can be employed to achieve integration.

Statement of the Problem

Soft skills play a vital role in shaping well-rounded personalities, encompassing non-academic traits and cognitive elements crucial for success in the global economy. These skills include critical thinking, communication, emotional intelligence,

time management, and leadership. Despite worldwide recognition of the importance of soft skills, secondary education in Pakistan has largely focused on academic achievements, leaving little room for the integration of these essential non-academic skills. However, teachers can make efforts to incorporate soft skills into classroom instruction. To address the soft skills gap, it is essential to provide teachers with proper training and refresher courses. Research is needed to explore the current state of soft skill integration in secondary education and identify reasons for any existing gaps, aiming to create a highly employable workforce equipped for the global job market. Several factors contribute to the soft skills gap, including unclear definitions and approaches to soft skills in construction education, unstructured solutions, limited time for cultivating soft skills due to curriculum requirements, and a tendency to prioritize technical skills over soft skills by accreditation bodies across education levels.

Research Questions

RQ.1 What are the perceptions of teachers about the importance of integration of the soft skills in secondary classrooms?

RQ.2 How do they integrate the soft skills in secondary classrooms?

RQ.3 What are the difficulties that hinder integration of soft skills in teaching?

RQ.4 What are the strategies to improve the development of Soft skills?

Literature Review

The Perception of Soft Skills

Soft skills, referring to interpersonal or nontechnical abilities, are gaining recognition in academic literature (Perreault, 2004). Perreault (2004) defines soft skills as personal capacities and communication abilities that enable effective interactions and problem-solving. Meenu and Kumar (2009) categorize soft skills as "useful abilities" balancing the technical skills required for specific jobs. The integration of soft skills in education can improve individuals' performance and organizational outcomes (Whetten, Cameron, & Woods, 2000; Martin et al., 2008). Amanda (2014) emphasizes the importance of soft skills, which enhance communication, work orientation, and job prospects, unlike hard skills, which are task-specific.

Soft skills encompass various traits, including adaptability, time management, leadership, and collaboration (Hayes, 2002; Perreault, 2004). These skills influence one's emotional intelligence quotient, shaping interactions with others (Aworanti, 2012). In the workplace, soft skills are crucial for creativity and leadership (Nealy, 2005). However, university courses need to emphasize the significance of soft skills to better prepare students for their careers (Wellington, 2005). Secondary schools play a critical role in cultivating soft skills in students to make them active participants in the workforce (Thacker & Yost, 2002). Aricia (2013) highlights the importance of collaboration between educators, professionals, and parents to foster these skills early on. Modeling soft skills is an effective teaching method (Superlei, 2011). Soft skills contribute significantly more (85%) to an individual's productivity than technical skills (15%) (Klaus, 2007; Hargis, 2011). Incorporating soft skills assessment in open examinations can enhance workplace efficiency.

Soft skills encompass personal, social, communication, and self-management behaviors, as well as teaming skills, work

ethic, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Fogle, 2011; Hargis, 2011; Klaus, 2007).

Importance of Soft Skills in a Globalized World

Soft skills are crucial for job performance and are as significant as technical skills. Employers prioritize recruits with strong soft skills (Devadason et al., 2010). Communication skills, social skills, teamwork, and work attitude are identified as essential soft skills (Devadason et al., 2010).

Neglecting soft skills can be detrimental to one's career, as they translate hard skills into practical abilities (Devadason et al., 2010). The need to develop relevant soft employability skills led to the implementation of workshops focusing on soft skills for college students (Devadason et al., 2010).

Soft skills play a crucial role in personal and professional development, complementing technical skills for effective performance. Integrating soft skills into education faces challenges, including limited resources, overloaded curricula, and the need for qualified instructors. However, the importance of soft skills in a globalized world cannot be overlooked, as they significantly impact job performance and employability. Neglecting soft skills can be detrimental to one's career, and efforts must be made to enhance soft skills development in educational settings.

Some educational institutions have adopted the integration of soft skills into their curricula. Beard et al. (2008) observed the inclusion of soft skills in business-related programs. Pritchard (2013) highlighted niche practices in soft skills development at postsecondary institutions, including community colleges. Omar et al. (2012) and Pillai et al. (2011) recommend incorporating soft skills like communication, time management, and decision making into the curriculum. Some institutions promote student interaction with professionals to enhance soft skills (Pritchard, 2013).

Challenges in Developing Soft Skills

In the current education system, subjects are often treated as separate entities, leaving little time for the inculcation of soft skills among students. Consequently, even highly educated individuals may struggle to express themselves effectively in interviews or when writing applications and resumes. Integration of soft skills is frequently overlooked, both in educational institutions and corporate settings, as aspirants focus primarily on acquiring hard skills. This lack of emphasis on communication and stress management abilities can hinder career success.

Challenges for Soft Skills Teaching:

Integrating soft skills into education faces several challenges. Kechagias (2011) highlights the uncertainty among instructors about the approach to teaching soft skills. The need for qualified teachers with relevant skill sets poses a challenge for dedicated untechnical units (Makasiranondh et al., 2011). Embedding soft skills into the teaching of hard skills requires an ideal means of lecturing, and educators question whose responsibility it is to aid students in honing soft skills (Remedios, 2012). The already overloaded course curriculum leaves less room to focus on soft skills (Remedios, 2012; Makasiranondh et al., 2011). Educators may face challenges with soft skills themselves, impacting their ability to teach them effectively (Remedios, 2012). Devadason et al. (2010) suggest that integration of soft skills into the formal curriculum may not be as effective as desired.

Relevance of Soft Skills as Employability Skills:

Employability skills, including soft skills, are essential for employment in the competitive job market (Overtoom, 2000). Soft skills encompass a wide range of attributes, behaviors, and attitudes (Klaus, 2007; Yaacoub et al., 2011). Employers prioritize candidates with relevant soft skills, as they enhance job performance (Hargis, 2011). However, graduates may lack these skills, leading to employer concerns about recruiting candidates without the necessary soft skills (Bhanot, 2009; Rao et al., 2011).

Some educators integrate soft skills into courses, but additional training may be required for graduates to perform effectively in the workplace (Heimler, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). Students' perceptions vary regarding the importance of soft skills, but industry educators strongly emphasize their development (Jackson, 2013; Bennett, 2006). The need for soft skills is essential for personal and professional growth (Pukes & Pileicikiene, 2010). Institutions and students must recognize the value of soft skills as relevant employability skills and undertake responsibility for skill development (Attacker & Milner, 2010).

The integration of soft skills in formal curricula has become a common practice in various educational institutions. Employability skills, including soft skills, are crucial for success in the job market, as employers prioritize candidates with these abilities. However, some graduates may lack necessary soft skills, making additional training and skill development crucial for success in the workforce. Recognizing the importance of soft skills and incorporating them into education can lead to improved employability and personal growth.

Why we neglect Soft Skills

The neglect of soft skills in education and workplaces is a prevalent issue. While hard skills are emphasized, soft skills are often overlooked as they are not certified or quantified. The specific requirements for soft skills can vary depending on the workplace culture and mindset. Despite their importance, candidates tend to undervalue soft skills during job applications, leading to missed opportunities during interviews.

Soft skills play a crucial role in career success by complementing hard skills and enabling effective interactions with others. Scholars emphasize the significance of soft skills in personal development, communication, and problem-solving (Perreault, 2004; Meenu & Kumar, 2009). However, measuring the impact of soft skills training on ROI is challenging due to their intangible nature (Bronson, 2007). Nevertheless, the benefits of soft skills justify the investment in training programs (Moad, 1995).

In the context of Malaysia, soft skills development is considered essential for fostering academic excellence, employability, and future achievements (Management Division of Residential School and School of Excellence, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2006). Integration of soft skills in curricula is assessed through teacher evaluation and self-assessment, highlighting the importance of teachers' competence and practical knowledge in ensuring effective integration (Beijaard & Verloop). In conclusion, soft skills are invaluable for career success, and their integration into education and training programs is essential for preparing individuals for the workforce.

Theoretical Framework

Transformational learning theory proposes that learning leads to changes in an individual's perception of the world and

themselves, informing future actions (Mezirow, 1996). In this approach, learners use life experiences to transform their lives and strengthen self-confidence. The ten steps proposed by Mezirow's theory, including self-examination, assessment of premises, and generating possibilities for change, facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge for personal and professional growth (Merriam et al., 2007). Although transformational learning can take place in various environments, it has not been extensively documented in certain areas like the Middle East and secondary schools in Multan (Madsen, 2009). Nonetheless, the theory can be implemented in community college contexts to support the development of soft skills among students.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method research design followed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), as this approach helps in unfolding the facts comprehensively and gives a true picture. The research design is followed by synchronized triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data using questionnaires and interviews, respectively. The quantitative data helped to identify the association of strength of relevant factors in teaching practices. The qualitative data provided an in-depth understanding of practices and challenges.

Participants

The population included 3200 teachers who are currently secondary school instructors in diverse schools. Since this study was to explore the factors influencing students' major choice, the students were suitable sample chosen for participation.

Referable to the immense size of the prey population, three hundred eighty (386) Secondary School teachers, were purposefully selected for the survey. This added up to three hundred eighty (380) participants for Questionnaire who were selected and Six Teachers 3Male, 3 Female interviewed for the survey. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews being a secondary source of data that was collected for the study. An appointment was scheduled with the participants for the interview. To collect the information, each interview was audio recorded and notes were taken as well. Two participants captured in the sampled population were interviewed on each day of the field visit.

Instrument

The questionnaire designed by the researcher consists of two parts. The first part collects demographic information from the participants. The second part comprises 34 items related to teachers' understanding and perceived difficulties in integrating soft skills at the secondary level in Pakistan. Each item is rated on a Likert scale with five options: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The interview protocol was formulated to find out about the practices and challenges faced by teachers. The interview questions were semi-structured constructed to obtain detailed information (Whiting, 2008).

Data Analysis

All the obtained quantitative data were examined statistically via SPSS (version 23) with the help of different statistical tests such as Mean, Standard Deviation, and Pearson Correlations. Concurrently, the interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to express their opinions and perceptions. To better conduct these interviews, there was an interview

protocol outline to facilitate the process and ensure that all interviews were conducted correctly. Qualitative data was transcribed by one of the authors and double-checked by the entire research team for validity and reliability. Subsequently, the data was analyzed by adopting the approach of thematic analysis from Miles et al. (2013). The data was refined by repeating initial coding several times and then categorized into their respected categories that finally ended up as central themes (Miles et al., 2013).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations in this research study were carefully addressed. The researcher sought permission from relevant authorities before distributing questionnaires. Each questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter, and an introduction letter from the university was presented to the authorities. During data collection, the researcher's assistants explained the study's objectives and significance to respondents, assuring them of confidentiality. Written permissions were obtained from the selected school heads/principals for the study and conducting interviews with teachers and school heads. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonymized names were used to conceal their true identity.

Results

Research Question #I What are the perceptions of teachers about the importance of integration of soft skills in secondary classrooms?

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-I Descriptive Statistics for the prevalent soft skills among teachers

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication	350	4.4322	.26979
critical thinking	350	4.4322	.26958
teamwork spirit	350	4.4023	.30916
lifelong learning	350	4.4300	.34342
leadership techniques	350	4.4550	.31317

To test the perceptions of the teachers regarding the importance of integration of the soft skills in the secondary classroom teaching, descriptive statistics was used to analyze the teachers' preferred soft skills as follows: Communication ($M= 4.43, SD = .270$), critical thinking ($M= 4.43, SD= .27$), Team work spirit ($M= 4.43, SD = .270$), lifelong learning ($M= 4.4, SD= .31$), the leadership techniques ($M= 4.45, SD= .31$).

Figure I Descriptive Statistics for the prevalent soft skills among teachers



For the interview, teachers agreed all the soft skills are important. For Example, Participant 2, stated, “ *Well, yes I agree that all the soft skills are important but I think if student have good communication with people can make them good leaders and we can have economic development*”

This statement reveals the perception of the teachers towards the importance of leadership techniques and communication skills in student learning for the modern society. Ju et al. (2012) emphasized the need for schools to provide adequate training for students in basic literacy skills, mathematics, and communication skills.

Research Questions #2: How do they integrate the soft skills in secondary classrooms?

Responses that I captured by what 3 Participants confidently talked about,

Participant 1:

“I know it is so much important and definitely, we organize training sessions every year because, to meet with the global world and to for new fresh teachers training is required”

Participant 3 mentioned, *“I want to teach in class about these things but after courses wen I see the time it almost no time remaining but I communicate well with my peers, I also give their monthly results and I’m easy to talk to, an active listener,”*

Similarly, Participant 6 stated, *“Nowadays, people really need proper training for their professional development and it should be required to teach every faculty member about soft skills. having no problems really communicating with each other, delivering messages. I have seen a group of persons communicate how to avoid the boss at some point.”*

As the literature states, more and more people are using electronic media as a method of meeting people and to form communities of interest (Chenault, 1996). If schools are being looked to teach the soft skills required in their employable future, schools and curriculum need to include the skills that will allow for success in the twenty-first century.

Currently, the primary problem in teaching and integration of soft skills in Multan Secondary schools is the inability to assign a mark or grade to soft skill practices. Students tend to care about the mark attached to any work. Therefore, students generally will skip over or put little effort into tasks that are of no numerical value towards their final grade.

This has created circumstances where teachers must find other means to build soft skill integration into courses. Through various teaching techniques (student questioning, role modelling, positive engagement and learning experiences, prompt communication, formative assessments and feedback, building of community and peer-/self-evaluation), teachers are able

to negate the barrier set up by curriculum to facilitate soft skill integration in Secondary classrooms.

Community. The building of a community with the students is of foremost importance in order to ensure the learning of affective outcomes. By building a non-threatening environment, building familiarity with one another, and allowing adequate time to become acquainted, successful communities can be built (Warner, 2003).

The more connectivity the students feel with one another and their teacher, the more they are willing to share with the group. The more students share, the stronger the community, the more they share, etc. This community is largely initiated and sustained through the facilitation of the teacher. The teacher acts as a mediator and facilitator for the students (Wood, 2005), as well as develops their own relationship with the students (hence creating a safe environment for students – Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias, 2002). A correlation is evident here. The more the teacher is a part of the community; the more involved the student body. The more personable the teacher is (personal anecdotes and the sharing of personal experiences), the more intimate the relationship between the members of the particular learning community.

Conversely, the less the teacher is involved, the less involved students become, to the point of students ‘dropping out’ or becoming non-existent in conversations and dialogue. Therefore, once the community is built, the teacher must remain an active and willing participant, acting as a catalyst to discussion as well as keeping the community alive and strong. This is contrary to some of the literature where decreasing teacher involvement is recommended as the course progresses and community is formed (Oren, Mioduser, and Nachmias, 2006). As long as the teacher remains involved, the students will continue to model, practice, and engrain communication skills. However, it is apparent from the data that if the teacher begins to remove themselves from the course (in hopes of building independency), students read this as a lack of interest and begin to wane in their own responses, often to the point of becoming uninvolved.

One weakness on the part of the student is the lack of interest in written feedback. While teachers will give copious amounts of feedback to better students’ understanding and learning, students seem to look to the final mark of the assignment. This is consistent with the students’ interest in those tasks that will get them the final grade they desire and consistent with paying little heed to those things that would further their understanding if they took the time to carry out such tasks.

Research Questions #3: What are the difficulties that hinder integration of soft skills in teaching?

The difficulties or challenges that effects developing new learning innovations to increase the integration of soft skills level among teachers would be the key solution to reduce the soft skills gap. For the interview, teachers talked about all the issues that they have facing for the integration of soft skills.

For Example, Participant I, stated, “ *Well, yes I agree that all the soft skills are good to integrate but we don’t have any*

funds for this in our school and it also depend on the nature of teacher either he/she want to teach these in class without any package”

Participant 5 mentioned, *“I want to teach in class about these things but after courses when I see the time it almost no time remaining but I communicate well with my peers, I also give their monthly results and I’m easy to talk to, an active listener,”*

Integration of soft skills in Secondary classrooms is often challenged, primarily by the nature of the teacher. Many literatures talked about the funds for these soft skills are not available and teachers don’t have much time in secondary classrooms to do training session for these skills. Life experiences of the student does not always allow for enough trust to work in a group situation.

While these students grow in their comfort and ability to discuss in the various communications available at their school, they are still timid and hesitant to form a trusting and working relationship with a fellow student. Sometimes the experience, seemingly for those part-time students, does not measure up to the experiences within the classroom. Students become less interested in group work and tend to express their dislike for the lack of immediacy. While some schools make accommodations for some students, the skill of being able to work in settings that are not of their choosing is not being met with the greatest of success.

Research Question #4: What are the strategies to improve the development of soft skills?

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-2 Description of strategies by respondents

		Statistics					
		Curriculum should be revised to integrate soft skills	Teachers training should be based on integrating soft skills in teaching	Administrative assistance should be provided to the teachers for integrating soft skills in teaching	Parents should be provided with awareness on developing soft skills in students	Social groups, media and other stake holders should help in providing awareness on the importance of soft skills	Works and ser should arrange the teach periodic for deve soft sk stude
N	Valid	350	350	350	350	350	
	Missing	30	30	30	30	30	
Mean		4.2971	4.4257	4.3800	4.4771	4.3886	
Median		4.0000	5.0000	4.0000	5.0000	4.0000	

Mode	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	
Std. Deviation	.60820	.64583	.65222	.68825	.63145	
Variance	.370	.417	.425	.474	.399	
Range	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	

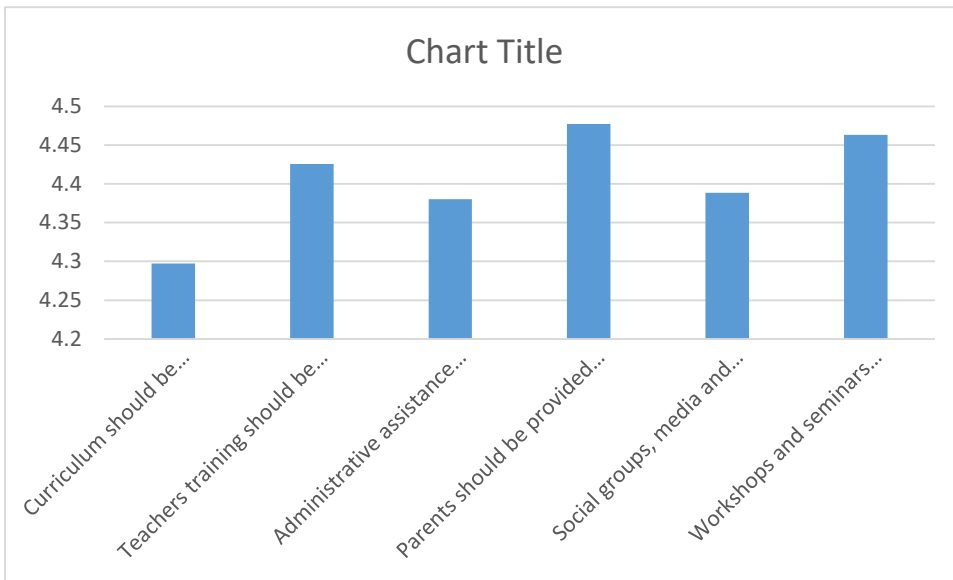


Figure *Error! No text of specified style in document.-2* **Description of strategies by respondents**

According to interviews and statistical data analysis the respondents Definitely, know many strategies to develop or build soft skills in secondary classrooms but they do not have resources to make the implementation and to approve the soft skills in secondary classrooms. Table 4-2 and figure 4-2 data is showing that the mostly respondents are agreed that Parents should be provided with awareness on developing soft skills in students and also teacher’s main highest strategy Workshops and seminars should be arranged for the teachers on periodic basis for developing soft skills in students.

Conclusion:

This research used a mixed method approach to explore teachers' perception of integrating soft skills in secondary classrooms. The results of this study reveals that Communication skills were identified as the most relevant and in need of improvement for students. The study emphasized the importance of soft skills training, alongside technical skills, to meet employer demands.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations:

Future research could utilize mixed methods or quantitative designs, and include perspectives from faculty and a larger sample size. Implementing integrated curriculum and evaluating its impact on soft skills cultivation in actual classrooms is suggested. Assessment tools should be developed to measure students' soft skills knowledge against technical

knowledge, and best practices from the construction industry can be utilized to enhance academic efforts.

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