

*Soft Skills in a Multicultural Society Context: A Case Study of Teaching Profession
Students in the Southern Border Provinces of Thailand*

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Abstract

Developing soft skills in the teaching profession students is important for teachers to facilitate the learners to learn to live together peacefully in the society. This research aims to investigate the soft skills in a multicultural society of the teaching profession students in the southern border provinces of Thailand through a qualitative method using the phenomenological approach. Data was collected by the researcher through in-depth interviews with 10 stakeholders including educational supervisors, school directors, university lecturers, psychologists, teachers and guidance counselors in the southern border provinces. and through content analysis. The results were found and classified into four main themes: (1) Communication and relationship building consisting of speaking, writing, and body language used to communicate and build relationships with people in a multicultural society; (2) Working with other people, consisting of co-working with others, joining together, taking initiative, coordinating, helping, and supporting other people in a multicultural society; (3) Adaptation consists of changing one's own ideas, feelings, and behaviors to suit the environment in the society of different cultures; (4) Accepting cultural diversity consists of learning the cultures of other people by showing respect for their differences. The results of this study provided an understanding of the development of soft skills among teaching profession students in a multicultural society. The conclusion and application of research results for educators, researchers, and counseling psychologists to promote the development of soft skills leading to quality teacher development are discussed and presented in this article.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Multicultural Society, Teaching Profession Students

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Introduction

In the provision of education in the 21st century, educational institutions play an important role in developing students in both core subjects and other skills needed for future careers. "Teachers" are therefore like "creators," who have a primary role in transferring knowledge and facilitating the learning process until the learners are able to discover their true potential and have the skills necessary for employment and living (Paengthai, 2019; Wangsrikoon, 2014). Therefore, the Faculty of Education is one important unit of an institution that aims to produce "teaching profession students with four desired characteristics: 1) professional skills, 2) soft skills, 3) citizens and citizens of the world, and 4) entrepreneurs or job creators of career skills (Office of Higher Education Policy and Planning, 2018). The desired characteristics of "soft skills" are one of the skills that are important for the development of teaching profession students to become qualified graduates and teachers who will advance to higher professional status.

The southern border provinces have their own cultural identity that are different from other provinces in terms of culture, race, religion, language, dressing, and way of life, which is considered a "multicultural society." This region consists of Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala, Songkhla, and Satun provinces, serving as the center of educational resources because there are up to seven institutions that focus on producing teachers and promoting the academic standing of local teachers in a multicultural society (Suwanvong, 2017; Thongmark1 et al., 2018). This results in the flow of many multicultural students from all provinces in the south of Thailand into this area to study (Augnoil et al., 2020).

Therefore, developing teaching professional students to adopt soft skills is an important mission for educational institutions that produce quality teachers (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Malykhin et al., 2021). especially the teaching profession students in the multicultural society context who will serve as facilitators for learners to have a learning process for living together, respect the rights of others, appreciate human dignity and prestige, cultivate conscious mind and awareness of cultural identity of oneself and others, and connect them to create understanding under the differences (Watthanabut, 2021). This is in line with the study by Capella University (2018), which indicated that soft skill is a characteristic of teachers of a new era. Thus, it is necessary and important to prepare teaching professional students to become "professional teachers."

The researchers realize the importance of developing soft skills in a multicultural society in order to understand the meaning and the components of soft skills in a multicultural society based on experiences of stakeholders who are involved in educational management, guidance, and psychology in the context of a multicultural society. This is done through group discussions about the components of soft skills in a multicultural society, leading to the development of soft skills for students in the southern border provinces in the future.

Methodology

This study was conducted with a phenomenology qualitative research design, as detailed below.

Participants

Participants were 10 stakeholders involved in educational management, comprising educational supervisors, school directors, university professors, psychologists, teachers, and guidance counselors in the southern border provinces chosen through the purposive sampling.

The criteria for selecting key informants for group discussions were specified as follows:

- 1) Have knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning conditions for teaching professional students in southern border provinces within the context of a multicultural society.
 - 2) Have either a doctoral degree or master's degree in education, counseling psychology, or guidance.
 - 3) Have work experience in research, supervision, providing psychological counseling services, guidance, educational administration, textbook writing, trainer or speaker for psychological and educational work in the southern border provinces within the context of a multicultural society.
 - 4) Be capable of conveying experiences well.
 - 5) Be willing to participate in their research, serving as key informants, signing a letter of intent. to participate in their research and joining 2–3-hour group discussions.
- Details are shown on the table below.

Table 1: Key Informants

Participant	Gender	Career	Education level
1	Male	School director	Doctor's Degree
2	Female	Educational supervisor	Doctor's Degree
3	Male	Educational supervisor	Master's degrees
4	Male	University lecturer	Doctor's Degree
5	Female	University lecturer	Doctor's Degree
6	Female	University lecturer	Doctor's Degree
7	Female	Psychologist	Master's degrees
8	Female	Psychologist	Master's degrees
9	Male	Guidance counselor	Master's degrees
10	Female	Guidance counselor	Master's degrees

Instruments

Research tools include:

1. The researcher is considered an important tool for qualitative research. This is because the researcher is the person who observes, builds up relationships with informants, records information, and runs data analysis. Therefore, the researcher will prepare himself/herself well in terms of knowledge and understanding of a qualitative research method to carry out research efficiently.
2. Sample questions for group discussions include:
 - a. “How important do you think soft skills are for the teaching profession students in a multicultural society in the southern border provinces?”
 - b. “What is the meaning of soft skills in multicultural society for students in the teaching profession in the southern border provinces? What aspects or elements are there in soft skills, and what does each aspect or element mean?”

- c. "Do you think which aspect or element of soft skills in a multicultural society is the most important or necessary for teaching profession students in the southern border provinces?" Please prioritize the said elements."
3. The record of the interview is for recording general information about the informants and that obtained from group discussions, such as conversation atmosphere and behaviors of the informants that occurred during the group discussions.
4. Audio and image recording equipment The Microsoft Teams program is used for group discussions.

Data Analysis

After verbatim transcription of the interview tapes, the scripts were analyzed by coding messages with similar meanings together. Then those with the same themes were grouped into subcategories and categories. The trustworthiness of the validity of the analysis, interpretation, and summary of supportive data were achieved through external auditing conducted by an expert on qualitative research.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the findings as detailed below.

From the interviews with key informants, it was concluded that soft skills in a multicultural society referred to skills of teaching professional students, both internal and external skills, which were related to interactions and collaborations between teaching profession students and students, school personnel, local community networks, and religion leaders. These skills included thoughts, emotions, feelings, and behaviors under cultural diversity in the southern border provinces, which were used to improve oneself in communication and relationship building, teaching and learning, collaborative promotion, development, prevention and solving problems of the students, adaptation, and acceptance of cultural diversity, and living happily in the multicultural society context in the southern border provinces. There were 4 elements: communication and relationship building, working collaboratively with others, adaptation, and accepting cultural diversity, as described below.

Theme 1: Communication and Relationship Building

Communication and relationship building are important skills that teaching profession students must have in themselves. They consist of self-disclosure and healing, choosing effective communication methods, listening carefully and attentively, honoring yourself and your interlocutors, understanding others sympathetically and without quick judgement, and solving communication problems appropriately. Details are as follows.

1. Self-disclosure and tuning in. It is an expression of sincerity, building good relationships with each other, revealing emotions, feelings, and exchanging stories, and public mindedness, especially to students and communities, through different forms of communication, including verbal communication, body language, smiling, showing good friendliness, and understanding each other.

"Teaching profession students must speak professionally, have good human relations with others, be broad-minded and sincere, have good personality, good mood, and care for others. This is because a person who has good human relations is able to get

along with others easily, which becomes a characteristic of a person that strengthens interpersonal relationships very well.” (ID10)

“Being a teacher, a person needs to have a sense of giving help to students and good communication skills in working with communities, parents, and religious leaders. If anyone has this skill, he/she will be able to make connections and reconcile with people and the communities.” (ID5)

2. Choosing effective communication methods is the action of using the language that suits the local context. Either the use of a local dialect to make the “we-group conversation or a straightforward and polite way is acceptable. We can use tones that indicate sincerity and show facial expressions that do not cause misunderstandings and conflicts.

“Teaching profession students should know how to use the language that corresponds to the spatial context, words that do not cause conflict and violence. They should show their humility to each other—both the people of the same religion and those of different religions and cultures.” (ID3)

“The languages that teachers should use in communication could be body language, facial expressions, gestures, spoken language, and the use of a polite tone of voice, speaking logically, and speaking with the tone that indicates sincerity.” (ID10)

3. Listening carefully, attentively and respecting yourself and your interlocutor in a multicultural society, being a good listener is important and necessary because of the differences in cultural context. The teachers should understand their interlocutors of other religions through attentive listening, paying attention, and respecting interlocutors.

“The relationship is a matter of value. Appreciation, regardless of conflicts, respect and honor each other, flexible adjustment for involvement in the society where cultures are different and unfamiliar.” (ID3)

“Listening is an action that is shown outwardly. Everyone can notice this behavior. Therefore, the communication that comes in the form of listening respectfully is a good thing that helps students in the teaching profession apply it in their work in general, in teaching and learning, and in their harmonious coexistence in a multicultural society.” (ID 4)

Theme 2: Working With Other People

Working with other people is an important skill that teaching profession students must have. This skill includes a willingness to work with people and communities of diverse cultures, sharing opinions, listening to other people's views, showing a sense of being equally important, understanding each person's roles and responsibilities, and unity and coordination with agencies both inside and outside the school.

1. Willingness to work with other people is the action when a person shows that he is open-minded and accepts the diversity of the people in the community in which he

lives. Adjusting the mind or behavior of the teaching profession students is therefore important.

“Start from yourself. You must be ready for adjustment, have flexible thoughts, and know how to control your own emotions when you work with other people like parents and communities, not school staff only.” (ID2)

“In working together, we have to be open-minded. We must listen to other team members or to the community. We have to welcome diverse ideas and opinions. If the said matters can be resolved, the work will be easily accomplished because it comes from the cooperation of all parties.” (ID8)

2. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of each person and cooperating in goal setting means the ability to understand own roles and responsibilities, the state of having skills when serving as a leader or a follower, and the ability to cooperate in goal setting or guidelines for working together.

“Teaching profession students should have a good human relationship in persuading other people to do things that serve the set goal and work collaboratively in goal setting with other team members based on mutually set criteria.” (ID3)

“First, teaching professional students must have a clear behavior in terms of understanding their own roles and responsibilities when serving as a leader or a follower, knowing how to set goals of thoughts and life. When you have a clear goal or clear direction, you will be able to encounter various obstacles and will have the determination to face them. Being farsighted will make cooperative work go smoothly.” (ID6)

3. Coordination with agencies both inside and outside the school is the action of working in a multicultural area under good coordination and relationships with the communities or outsiders and networks. There are also plans to prevent and solve problems.

“Among the diversity of a multicultural society, from a psychological point of view, it might be that teachers must have their mental processes in terms of thoughts. Their thoughts and emotions need to be appropriately managed when coordinating with agencies both inside and outside the school. Problem solutions should be direct to the points.” (ID 4)

“Students in the teaching profession must have a good verbal communication manner and know how to work together in harmony, leading to mutual cooperation and coordination within the school and with the communities surrounding the school.” (ID 10)

Theme 3: Adaptation

Adaptation is an important skill for teaching professional students. It includes flexibility in thinking, sensible analytical thinking, controlling and expressing emotions and feelings appropriately, as well as participating in various activities of the schools and communities.

1. Having flexibility in thinking means knowing how to adjust oneself to suit one's role and duties, knowing how to be kind to others, and being considerate, for example.

“Teaching profession students in the context of a multicultural society should adjust themselves peacefully according to roles, duties, responsibilities, and the time frame context without causing trouble to others.” (ID3)

“Adjusting oneself and to be accepted that I am like this, you are like this, and what is the middle part between us? What topics can we not touch on? What topics can we warn each other about? We have good relations, and we help each other in order to adjust ourselves.” (ID9)

2. Sensible analytical thinking is the state of having good judgment in living in an area of diversity, knowing how to think over cultural differences to be able to understand the real world.

“To be able to live together happily in a multicultural society, those who want to be teachers must learn how to live together in the society with judgment and how to think analytically and logically amidst the differences that are unfamiliar in order to cope with self-adjustment and work.” (ID1)

“Being calm, mindful, still, and knowing how to think reasonably amidst cultural differences. Accept and understand your own attitudes and those of others well.” (ID10)

3. Participating in various school and community activities is the action of modifying one's own behavior in participating in activities in the Buddhist community, Muslim community, or Christian community, listening to opinions or criticisms and applying them in self-adjustment in living together in the community.

“The action shows that he can listen to criticism and different opinions. When he is in the community, he can adjust himself to participate appropriately in school or community activities.” (ID7)

“Changing one's own behavior; for example, if one goes to live or do activities in a Buddhist Thai community, a Muslim community, or a Christian community, one must behave accordingly, adjust himself to interact with students, teachers, colleagues, or the community, or understand the nature, conduct, customs, behavior, and differences of each culture.” (ID8)

Theme 4: Accepting Cultural Diversity

Accepting cultural diversity is an important skill that teaching profession students must have. It includes adjusting their views and leading their lives relevant to the cultural context, appreciating the value of other cultures, showing respect in doing all actions, no insulting, no offending other cultures, and seeing the differences and similarities of one's own culture and other cultures.

1. Adjusting views and conduct following the cultural context is the action showing understanding what other people are doing in different environments and self-conduct

following the principles of one's own religion to understand the limitations and conditions of the people of other religions, resulting in being able to become open-minded and learn more about the differences.

“Differences and diversities are everywhere. We will have to learn to understand other people's actions. Especially in the teaching profession, students who are going to teach schoolchildren have to attentively and deeply understand the way of life and differences of cultural context.” (ID1)

“Firstly, in the teaching profession, students must understand the differences among people by adjusting their own views. Let's say we have to work in another province and must stay in a provided residential area in the school. However, we can't accept why we must go there. Why do we follow the others? If we cannot accept the local context of the school, it could be a hard time.” (ID5)

2. Appreciating the value of other cultures is an acceptance of the differences of other cultures that are different from our own and knowing how to learn the ways of life of other cultures. This will make you understand other people more, especially valuing the culture of each area.

“We must accept. In addition to understanding, you must also accept and realize that the cultural behavior practiced by others is something different from what we already are. For example, in the southern border provinces, Muslims have their own way while Buddhists have another way, and so do the Chinese.” (ID2)

“We know that when teaching profession students are in school, it is necessary for them to observe and learn about other cultures that are different, including organizational culture. And I personally think that organizational culture is something they must learn, especially the issues regarding gender diversity, diversities in classes, ages, and culture that interact with one another in order to understand more about work.” (ID3)

3. Showing respect, no insult, and no violation of other cultures is an expression of respect to the values of other cultures, no insult, no abuse, listening to beliefs and applying them with understanding. Never argue with other people's opinions that are different from our own one.

“An important thing about being a teacher is never argued against other people's opinions that may be different from your own. However, the differences should be taken as advantages, strengths, and focuses of learning to create interactions with each other in the form of expressing respect for each other's opinions in living together in diverse cultures.” (ID4)

“The teaching profession students must have the skills to learn different cultures that they are not familiar with since their birth and learn to accept that culture without insults nor violation. Accept beliefs in order to develop yourself.” (ID8)

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reflects the important soft skills that teaching profession students should have in working within the context of a multicultural society in the southern border provinces of Thailand. The informants reflected those soft skills in a multicultural society consisted of 4 skills: (1) communication and relationships, (2) working with other people, (3) adaptation, and (4) accepting cultural diversity. The details are as follows:

1. Communication and relationship-building skills include self-disclosure and healing behaviors that require the disclosure of emotions and stories to be exchanged with one another, selecting the communication method that suits the local context, learning local dialects, listening attentively and carefully, and honoring the interlocutor by being a good listener. These matters will become a foundation for empathy and without quick judgments of the people who have different views or cultures, leading to living together in a positive atmosphere. The results of the study on this issue are consistent with the study by Mailool, Retnawati, Arifin, Kesuma, and Putranta (2020), which investigated teachers' experiences teaching soft skills in professional courses in Indonesia. It was found that communication skills are very necessary that every teacher must have because teachers must use many communication skills together to organize learning so that learners will have knowledge, skills, and desirable characteristics as specified. In addition to teaching, teachers will have to do other jobs in the school. Teachers' work requires communication skills, which consist of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, especially when working with culturally diverse individuals.
2. Skills for working with other people consist of a series of behaviors that reflect willingness to work with diverse community members, both inside and outside the school, starting from being open-minded to accept the diversity of individuals and communities we are interacting with and sharing opinions in a democratic way. Everybody is equally important, and all reasons are welcome. These actions will lead to unity in the future. The results of the study in this issue are consistent with the study of the characteristics of teachers that students are satisfied with (Chanani, Chaisawat, Konchalard, & Chanapan, 2020), which found that students expected that teachers were their good role models. The learners would develop good learning behavior using teachers as role models. Therefore, if teachers showed they honored other people, helped each other, and knew their own roles and responsibilities, the learners would absorb and imitate such desired behaviors. In addition, Ağçam and Doğan (2021) had suggested that the important skills in working together with others were the ability to work with a variety of people (not just the people you agreed with) and a willingness to find new perspectives regarding various issues. A recognition of other people's skills and experience and understanding that you don't have them should be beneficial to the project or the team in finding the best solution.
3. Adaptation skills consist of behaviors that are flexible in thinking, controlling, and expressing emotions appropriately. It includes participating in various activities of community schools in the area and paying serious attention to religious activities that are different from one's own for a good adaptation to living together in a diverse cultural context. Arias, Sancho, Vergara, & Barrientos (2021) had studied the soft skills of American university professors' self-perception. An interesting finding from this study is that teachers should have emotional and mental flexibility and have an attitude that is open to growth. Open to learning new challenges. Be open to opinions that are beneficial to yourself. Always be ready to change, adapt, and develop yourself. Under a peaceful multicultural society, with reliance, respect, and non-

violation of each other's rights. Because if teachers are able to adapt and create equality in multicultural classrooms, these things will be the beginning of an open society full of equality where everyone has rights and freedom under the uniqueness of each person, so that students have the opportunity to learn from each other and accept differences. This is why adaptability skills are so important.

4. Skills in accepting cultural diversity consist of the behavior in adjusting ideas and attitudes and the practice in the cultural context. Teachers have to understand the action performed by people from different cultures or religions, including seeing the value of learning ways of life and the conducts that reflect respect, no insult, no infringe on other cultures that are different from one's own, and without using one's own thoughts to judge, in line with the study by Cinque and Kippels (2023), which found that teachers with positive attitudes toward multicultural classrooms are the person who can promote peaceful coexistence by promoting students to live together, think together, and realize that no matter what race or religion, these differences are not barriers to friendship. In living together and being successful in life, the teacher must be the one who initially introduces the exchange of cultural understanding of the students in a classroom or even in the communities on basic matters such as language, dressing, way of life, or working together in order to encourage students to understand and accept differences without the feeling of being separated. The cooperation in building up unity in diversity by encouraging children to do activities together with their parents to expand the children's society. In the event that a problem is encountered, the teacher should give advice to the students to solve the problem in a peaceful way. For respect, culture, humility, and open-mindedness, in a small society like a multicultural classroom, the teachers are the ones who encourage and provide guidance in learning to understand and live with people who are different, including sharing, caring, and openness. These elements will be a good foundation for students to go out and create an open society in the future.

Therefore, self-development for teachers of today is not only the preparation for classroom teaching and constructing the body of knowledge, but also the ability to cope with fluctuation and the changing diverse society. The ability to understand the meaning and the skills the teachers should develop in themselves is important and necessary because they are the skills that the teachers can be trained to foster. These skills are not only beneficial to the teaching job but also to the teachers themselves.

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