

An Analysis on Strategies in developing students' soft-skills (A Case Study at a Bilingual School, Banda Aceh

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Abstract

The Indonesian educational system should guarantee that educational institutions in all levels not only train their students' cognitive ability but also develop their affective domain. This important domain can be developed through various strategies, one of which is through shaping students' soft-skills. This study was conducted to identify strategies implemented by a particular bilingual school in developing students' soft-skills. Having interviewed four teachers and the school principal, observed classroom, and analyzed documents, we found that the teachers use various strategies in developing students' soft-skills, one of which is through inviting students to participate in learning process and to engage in outdoor activities; promoting democratic dialogues; showing empathy and appreciation, and also showing good examples.

Keywords: Soft-skill; early childhood; education; teachers

Introduction

Education as mandated by the Regulation of National Education functions as a central point, in which students are trained to shape their intellectuality, good conduct, spirituality and skills required by the Indonesian community. However, educational process does not take place in formal setting, such as schools per se, it also takes place in informal and non-formal situations. It means that the educational process does not take place in a vacuum; it is therefore, taking place in the family level as well. Education in the family is carried out by parents. Family is the first socialization for all children, from which they learn how to behave and it develop their worldview. While at school the role of educator is carried out by teachers, at home, the main roles of educator lies on parents. For that reason, parents are responsible to instill Islamic values, attitudes and good conducts. This initial exposure will shape their later lived experience. It is undeniable that students' attitude in wider spaces, such as schools and communities is brought from their home environment.

Therefore, at home, children should be trained by their significant others, such as parents and their siblings. Students live with their parents, in which their attitudes are shaped to recognize Islamic values. Parents are also responsible to make sure that their children obtain enough love and care. This is important as a way to develop students' attitude. Children therefore will learn more from their parents

during the first socialization, which is the home environment. Parents therefore are encouraged to give a good example for their children.

In addition to home environment, school is seen as the second socialization for children. Schools are not limited to the acquisition of knowledge and skills training, they also shape the identity of students through cultural transmission and power, which is exercised within the school as an institution (Ball, 2004; Connell et al., 2007; Joseph, 2006; McLaren, 2007; Riordan, 1997; Webb, 1981). Critical pedagogy theorists claim that schools play two main functions; first, they function as a mechanism, which favours students on the basis of race, class, and gender; second, they act as an agency for "self and social empowerment" (McLaren, 2007, p. 187). Critical pedagogy theorists suggest that schools transmit dominant cultural values through teaching and curriculum to students regardless of their social backgrounds (McLaren, 2007; Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2006). In fact, Weis, McCarthy and Dimitriadis (2006) assert that schools cannot be viewed merely as great equalizers in society; instead schools have played significant role in promoting inequality among students (Clark, 2007). Schools serve to aggravate social inequality, and thus schooling experiences shape students' identity. Research by Davidson (1996) conducted more than a decade ago seems to support the earlier argument. Davidson's research suggests that schools shape students' ways of perceiving themselves.

As a school setting is a crucial place for identity construction, teachers should have effective strategies to develop students' soft and hard-skills as well. Developing soft-skills are challenging and need extra efforts, for that reason, developing ones' soft skill should start from early childhood stages, since it will last longer and give better and longer impact toward students' attitudes (Chomaria, 2010; Morrison 212).

Soft Skill referred to all sorts of personal and interpersonal skills. The personal skills refer to the ability to manage themselves, while the interpersonal skills refer to the ability to communicate and connect with others in terms of good attributes, such as fair treatment towards others, being considerate, respectful, communicative, and being able to solve problems (Mudlofir, 2012). These all attributes should be developed since childhood, and kindergarten is a formal educational site for the development of students' soft skill. In many kindergartens, students are trained to behave well and have good conduct. For that reason, developing students' soft skill is a must mission, in which all kindergartens should focus on. This study therefore, will identify strategies used by a particular kindergarten in Banda Aceh in developing students' soft skills. To guide this research, we raise two important research questions:

1. What are teachers' understandings of soft skills, and how do they develop students' soft skill?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter in developing students' *soft skill*? And solutions offered for these challenges?

Literature Review

Islam and students' soft-skills development

The teaching of the *Qur`ān* and the *Hadith* has made clear that Muslims are required to establish family through Islamic legal binding in a form of marriage. For example, the *Qur`ān* says that:

And among His signs is this: He created for you spouses from yourselves that you might find rest in them, and he ordained between you love and mercy" (*Qur`ān*, 30: 21).

Allāh has created spouses to all mankind, with whom they will establish family units and harvest happiness, and nurture their children. The Prophet Muhammad (PbuH) also recommends Muslims to establish families, since it is seen as an important

institution, in which human beings are raised and educated; and it is a "cornerstone of Muslim society" (Basit, 1997, p. 426). The *Qur`ān* states that men and women are created equal; likewise, there are no significant differences between husbands and wives in the Muslim families. Husbands and wives; mothers and fathers bear similar responsibilities to ensure their children's physical, emotional and educational needs are sufficiently fulfilled.

In addition, Islamic teachings stipulate the importance for Muslim parents to teach their children about worship Islam such as regarding the *ibadāt*; the competence in reciting the *Qur`ān*; and regarding good conduct. In this case, husbands and wives are to work cooperatively to ensure that their children are capable of reciting the *Qur`ān* and having good conduct (Ekram & Beshir, 2009). In addition to assure their children capable of reciting the Islamic Holy Book, Muslim parents are also expected by Islam to set good examples for their children. For example, upon teaching their children about performing the *salāt* or the *sawm*, they are obliged to give example through actions to allow their children imitate their ways of performing the rituals and to make their children get used to those *ibadāt*. For this reason, education in the Islamic point of view needs to start from home.

However, Islamic teachings suggest that parents explain Islam to their children with the best way possible (Ekram & Beshir, 2009; Stewart, et al., 2000). This means that parents in Islam need to position themselves as professional teachers and educators to enable them convey their messages to their children. The *Qur`ān* also gives guidelines on this matter, *Allāh* the Almighty states in the *surā* of *Luqman*:

O my son! Lo! Though it be but the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, Allah will bring it forth. For Allah is Subtle, aware. O my son! Establish prayer, enjoin goodness, forbid iniquity and bear with patience whatever may befall you. For that is the steadfast heart of things. Turn not your cheek in scorn towards people, nor walk the earth with pretences, for Allah loves not each braggart boaster. Be modest in your bearing and subdue your voice for Lo! The harshest of all voices is the voice of the ass (*surā* 31: 13-19).

Islam recommends certain important values that Muslims parents are encouraged to teach. First and the foremost, parents in Islam are required to teach their children about honesty and encourage them to be faithful to *Allāh*. The other important issue that the *Qur`ān* requires Muslim parents is to encourage their children to observe the *ibadat* such as the *salāt* and the *sawm*. These verses also teach Muslim parents to improve their children's behaviour, since it is one of the essences of the Islamic teaching.¹ The requirement to speak softly and the restriction to be pretentious is the example of *Allāh's* command toward the perfection of behaviour.

In addition to parents' obligation to their children, Muslim children are also strongly advised to treat their parents with respect and avoid speaking harshly to their parents and elders, since being disrespectful is considered one of the greatest sins in the Islamic teaching. The *Qur`ān* also gives clear guidelines on the obligation of children toward their parents. *Allāh* said in *surā* 17: 23-35 that:

Your Lord has decreed that you worship non but Him, and that (you show) kindness to parents. Should one or both of them attain to old age with you, Say not "Fie" unto them nor repulse them, but speak unto them a gracious word. And lower unto them the wing of submission through mercy and say: My Lord! Have mercy on them both as they did care for me when I was little. Your Lord is best aware of what is in yourselves. If you are righteous, then Lo! He was ever forgiving unto those who turn unto Him (17: 23-25).

¹ *Tafseer Ibn Kathir* (online-<http://www.qtafsir.com>)

These *ayāt* encourage Muslims not to say even a single harsh word that may hurt their elders such as parents, grandparents or other close relatives. In addition, Islam suggests that great rewards will be given by *Allāh* to children who are taking responsibilities on looking after their parents when these parents have reached their elder age. For this reason, in Muslim families, it is a rare phenomenon to see the elderly living alone without their relatives' company (Basit, 1997).

When certain children are sent to schools, they will be under the supervision of their school management and their teachers. There are several soft-skills need to be developed in students. Communication skill is one of the first and foremost that needs to be instilled into students. The second important skill is problem-solving skill. Other soft-skill, such as teamwork and the IT skills are also important to be developed in students. The other most important skill to develop is the learning to learn skill. This final skill in the list is indeed important, since it enables students to be independent learners. To develop these skills, teachers may need to engage in various strategies. The experiential learning strategy is the most feasible way to develop students' soft-skill. This kind of learning encourages students to take part in the learning activities, and that allow them to learn better. The teamwork and extra-curricular activities are also most important strategies teachers should implement to allow the development of students' soft-skills (Wats, 2009).

Strategies in development of soft-skills

Educational institutions in all levels should develop soft skills of their students in addition to their hard skills. The soft skills are seen as interpersonal skills linking to emotional intelligence, such as communication and teamwork. Emotional intelligence is seen as a very important aspect in learning. This emotional intelligence includes communication and team work. In today's workforces, prospective employees with high quality of soft skills are as important as hard-skills. In fact, in some cases, soft skills receive more attention from forces. This suggests that employees with high integrity and honesty are more likely to receive more attention than those who only have hard skill.

As developing students' soft-skills has become a must in contemporary period, schools should pay serious attention on developing those skills from early years. It should in fact starts from basic education, and the basic education starts from children's children first socialization, which is the home environment to students' basic formal schooling, starting from the Play Group, Kindergarten and also primary education. Therefore, the development of soft skills in formal educational institution lies on teachers.

Prior to taking some important stances to develop soft skills, teachers are encouraged to be aware of their students' potential and personalities. This is because understanding students is one the first and foremost step that all teachers should take into consideration. There is student-active ladder as described by Harmin and Toth (2006). These students' ladder starts from *work avoiders-halfhearted workers-responsible students-fully active learners*. To take students from one level to the other requires certain process and strategies.

To uncover students' potential and develop their soft skills, teachers themselves build crafting techniques, in which they craft students' soft skills. A few recommendations are important to discuss in this paper. Understanding students' natural needs is one of the first and the foremost component that teachers should take into account in teaching. It is important to note that students' natural needs should be considered and fulfilled when possible. One of the natural needs that need fulfilling is students' thirst for respect. The teachers should work extra hard to encourage the emergence of students' potentialities. Harmin and Toth (2006) argue:

"In this regard, we agree with Erich Fromm when he says that the heart of education is "helping the child realize his potentialities." By aiming high we also take advantage of Goethe's wisdom: "Treat people as if they were

what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being" (2006, p. 9).

This quote suggests that teachers' main responsibility is to help their students realize their potentialities, and this is the first step to take in helping students develop their own soft skill.

The second important strategy to do is helping students apply their potential in their daily life. This can be realized through giving students' opportunities to express themselves in the classroom and beyond. In addition, to help the development of students' soft skills, the teachers need to organize classroom culture that allows students to boost their own innate potentials.

Harmin and Toth (2006) state that to develop students' soft-skill, teachers should through understanding five students' abilities. "These five student abilities are dignity, energy, self-management, community, and awareness. We refer to them collectively as DESCAs" (2006, p. 6). With *dignity* we mean that teachers carefully safeguard students' dignity. Everybody on earth is believed to hold on their dignity, they do not want to be looked, belittled, discriminated against, and diminished and felt unworthy. Soft skills can only be developed if students' dignity is well guarded. *Energy* is also something important to consider upon building students' soft skills. Basically most students, especially those in kindergarten or prep-school have so much energy that enables them to work energetically. For that reason, teachers are encouraged to manipulate learning experience that allows their energy to be released positively. The other characteristic needs instilling to students is the ability to do *self-management*. To do so, teachers create classroom that allows students to be responsible to their own learning. In addition, in building students' soft skills students should be trained to socialize with people, love others and being considered, which then refer to the *community*, in the Harmin and Toth's (2006) term. The final characteristic that needs to be instilled in students as a way to develop their soft skills is students' *awareness* of learning. Students should be made aware that they are learning. Teachers therefore, need to figure out strategies to let students stay alert and avoid boredom.

Research Method

This is a qualitative research, in which we explore phenomenon under inquiry through participant observation, in-depth interview and document analysis. These methods of data collection enabled us to have an in-depth understanding on our inquiry. The observation allowed grasping the big picture on how teachers develop students' soft-skills; while the interview permitted us to understand more in-depth information on ways of developing the soft-skills. The document analysis is addressed to look into more details on written documents consisting on the visions and missions of the school.

a. Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted in a bilingual school in Banda Aceh. The school was chosen since it applies the so called progressive education theory. The school is also considered as one of the newly established school. To enable researchers explored comprehensive data to answer our inquiry, we invited five participants to take part in the study. Four teachers teaching in two different classrooms and a school principal were interviewed in this particular study.

b. Methods of data collection

1. Observation: The observation was conducted once in each classroom. The observation focused in teachers' strategies in developing their students' soft-skills. Teachers' ways of communication with their students; types of assignment given and teachers' classroom management were the main focus of the observation.

2. Interviews: In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect detailed data on teachers' strategies in developing soft-skills.
 3. Document analysis: The analysis of the document focus on school curriculum and visions and missions of the school.
- c. Methods of data analysis
- Data gained from this research will be analyzed qualitatively. First, the interview data will be transcribed in verbatim. The data will be then reduced to generate theme so that theories can be drawn.

Results and Discussion

Findings from the fieldwork have revealed important facts that teachers at *Ar-Risalah* Bilingual School used various strategies in developing students' soft-skills. Our observation, for example suggests that teachers use multiple ways of developing students' soft-skill. This is indicative from the way these teachers welcome students. For instance, the teachers have tried to shape students' soft-skills from the very beginning of their presence at school. The teachers communicate with students by the time they arrive at school, and that strengthen teachers-students' relationship. The impact of this early communication is significant in learning success. Good first communication between teachers and students will indeed shape the course of learning. A simple question, such as 'how are you?'; 'how was your day?'; 'did you do something special yesterday with your family?' are example of questions, which seem very simple, but yet it energizes students, in which they see classroom learning as fun and joyful.

Smith and Laslett (1993), for example emphasize the need to get connected with students prior to actual learning in the classroom. They stated first and the foremost that teachers should do in teaching is 'to get them in'. Teachers should make sure to get the students in first before learning. They could do this through three ways: greeting, seating and starting. Teachers are encouraged to *greet* students when they arrive at schools. Greeting is important to show a kind of warm welcome to students. Second, teachers should consider the *seating* arrangement. To provide creative and joyful learning, teachers may need to consider interesting seating arrangement for effective learning to take place; they should alternate seating arrangement to avoid boredom. The third way used 'to get them in' is the *starting*. Creative starting of the lesson is important that functions as the warming activities. To actually start the lesson, teachers are encouraged to first do some warming up activities to allow students get together and ready for the learning process. In addition, the interview data suggests four main strategies used in the attempt to develop students' soft-skills.

Promoting Democratic Dialogue

All four teachers and the principal interviewed agreed that engaging in good communication with students is a common feature of classroom characteristics in the school. The communication or dialogue with the principal show that most of the time, the teachers at school are highly recommended to always communicate with their students. This kind of communication with students develops a strong bond between students and teachers. As the principal stated in the following quotation;

At the beginning of the teaching process, the teachers always started by asking students about what they experienced the previous days. They for example asked "what did you see yesterday? And the teachers allow students to express themselves and to tell their story in public spaces of schooling (Dewi).

In line with this quote, Zulfikar (2009; 2013; 2015) emphasize the need to develop democratic dialogues with students. This will not only help students to establish

emotional attachment with their teachers but also allow them to develop positive learning attitude.

In addition, democratic dialogues can also be promoted through inviting the students to be independent and getting them to get used to positive activities during the instructional process at school. This is relevant to Harmin and Toth's (2006) theoretical basis related to dignity. The teachers in this particular school, have made some effort to guard students' dignity, in which they are thirst for respect and love by their teachers.

One of the teachers thus mentioned the following issues:

What we do as the teachers in developing students' soft-skill is to get them used to doing something good, such as sharing things like food or toys. We also trained them to be independent, such as getting them used to going to toilet themselves, doing their own diet and also get dresses (Lili)

These two quotes suggest that promoting democratic dialogue with students is an important strategy to develop soft-skill. These teachers believe that students should be made used to engaging with many positive activities.

Democratic dialogue is significant in the attempt to create a healthy learning environment because it gives students the space to voice their understanding or point of view on issues. Shared authority in the classroom will allow critical dialogue to emerge (Shor, 1992; Zulfikar, 2009).

Encouraging Learning Participation

In addition to promoting healthy communication or democratic dialogue, the teachers believe that students should be asked to participate in learning. In today's education, student-centered instruction has been a popular educational system. Inviting students to participate in learning yield many benefits. One of the teachers stated:

To enhance students' confidence, I usually ask if any of them want to go up to the stage to perform. Some students are willingly volunteers to perform, while some others need to be convinced, by saying that parents will be happy if they are willing to participate (Dewi)

This suggests that confidence can be improved by inviting students to participate during learning. Studies suggest that confidence is seen as one of the soft-skills needs to be developed in students.

In the same tone, Dian, one of the teachers at school states that confidence is needed to be instilled in students, and one way to do this is by inviting students to take part in academic as well as non-academic activities:

At school, students are invited to get involved in many social activities, such as inviting them to pick up rubbish/leaves and other kinds of wastes. One of the main objectives of this activity is to make students get used to live a healthy life (Dian)

This quote suggests that good habits should be *enculturalized* in students using various strategies. It is not easy to promote good habits unless it is socialized from childhood. Confidence is one the most important soft-skill to be instilled into students, since it helps them gain success in their learning process. It is for that reason, teachers should pay attention on developing this attitude. However, Harmin and Toth (2006) argue that teachers cannot give confidence to students; it is the *self*, who could give confidence, and what teachers could do is to stimulate this to

emerge through many ways possible, one of which is by expressing positive statement, such as 'good job'; you are very welcomed in this class'; I am happy you if you could participate in any way during learning' are some statement out of the many that could boost students' self-confidence (Harmin & Toth, 2006).

Showing empathy and giving appreciation

The other important finding about strategies in developing soft-skill is showing empathy and giving appreciation. Say for example, when students made mistake in their learning, teachers are not supposed to insult or underestimate these students, they in fact should encourage them to do much better and to try their best. Appreciation is vital in learning process, since it will boost students' learning success (Harmin & Toth, 2006). One of the teachers stated that:

After I ask student to do counting, for instance, I always say 'good job honey, and some other kinds of appreciation. By doing this, I believe students will be developed significantly (Dian)

In addition to appreciation, showing empathy is also an important strategy to boost students' soft-skill. Empathy should be shown by teachers as a way to respect their students. In this regard, teachers should implement a democratic teaching, since it regards students' mistake as normal in learning process. For example, punishing students for an inability to perform well in the classroom or for their inability to do homework will discourage students, and hamper their academic improvement. The basic tenet of a democratic classroom according to Wolk (1998) is respecting students because only then can meaningful learning occur. A democratic environment in the classroom will allow teachers to better understand their students' capabilities from any mistakes they might make. Understanding students' weaknesses will allow the development of students' soft-skills.

Showing good precedent

This is the other important strategy used in developing students' soft-skill is by showing good example. It is important to note that showing the action will be remembered better by students than giving instruction only. For example, if the teachers teach students to be responsible for their environment, by keeping it clean from any wastes, teachers should act the action first to show the students a good way to keep the environment clean.

In addition, the teachers should then convince students to do the same. One of the teachers stated as in the following.

We have prepared rubbish bin at school, and students are showed how to leave rubbish in the bin provide. If students ignore in keeping their rubbish away, the teacher then convince them by asking a hypothetical question, such as 'what if you leave rubbish around, do you think your school looks beautiful and clean?'

The quote suggests important fact that showing empathy and allow for mistake to occur, learning will take place more effectively. This is because it encourages students to try new things.

Conclusions

Developing students' soft-skills is important in educational institutions. Having interviewed some teachers and observed of classrooms, we found four main strategies used in our research settings: the soft-skills are developed through engaging students into learning, in which democratic dialogue is used. Democratic dialogue do not only help students engage in learning but also allow them to express themselves more freely. Showing empathy, appreciation and good example is also

regarded as one of the most important strategies used in developing students' soft-skill. Appreciation and empathy encourage the development of students' self-confidence. This is because students do not feel any significant pressure during the learning process, since teachers show empathy and appreciation on their classroom practices in spite of their learning weaknesses. Finally, showing good examples to students will also trigger the emergence of positive attitude.

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