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Analysis of soft skills in secondary school students in an educational context

Análisis de las habilidades blandas en los estudiantes de secundaria en un contexto educativo

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Abstract

The objective of this article was to analyze the development of soft skills in secondary school students at a public educational institution in the district of Lurín. The methodology adopted was a basic qualitative approach with a phenomenological and interpretive design. Six specialist teachers were interviewed, and a thematic analysis was applied to interpret their perceptions and experiences. The analytical process included familiarization with the data, coding using Atlas.ti version 9.1 software, and the identification of categories related to soft skills. Data triangulation also contributed to strengthening the credibility of the findings. The results show that, while some skills show significant progress, others require greater attention and strengthening, reflecting a differentiated and constantly evolving learning process. In conclusion, teachers highlighted the importance of active participation and critical thinking in the development of these skills, emphasizing the need for ongoing monitoring and active involvement on the part of students. Although considerable progress was observed in soft skills, this is not evident in all areas of the curriculum.

Keywords: soft skills, secondary education, qualitative approach.

Resumen

Este artículo tuvo como objetivo analizar el desarrollo de las habilidades blandas en estudiantes de educación secundaria de una institución educativa pública del distrito de Lurín. La metodología adoptada fue de enfoque cualitativo, de tipo básico, con un diseño fenomenológico e interpretativo. Se entrevistó a seis docentes especialistas y se aplicó un análisis temático para interpretar sus percepciones y experiencias. El proceso analítico comprendió la familiarización con los datos, la codificación mediante el software Atlas.ti versión 9.1 y la identificación de categorías relacionadas con las habilidades blandas. Asimismo, la triangulación de datos contribuyó a fortalecer la credibilidad de los hallazgos. Los resultados evidencian que, mientras algunas habilidades presentan avances significativos, otras requieren mayor atención y fortalecimiento, lo que refleja un proceso de aprendizaje diferenciado y en constante evolución. En conclusión, los docentes destacaron la relevancia de la participación activa y el pensamiento crítico en el desarrollo de estas habilidades, subrayando la necesidad de un seguimiento permanente y de una implicación activa por parte de los estudiantes. Si bien se observó un progreso considerable en las habilidades blandas, este no se manifiesta de manera homogénea en todas las áreas curriculares.

Palabras clave: habilidades blandas, educación secundaria, enfoque cualitativo.

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Introduction

Soft skills, including resilience, proactivity, empathy, and initiative, are increasingly recognized for their significance in both personal and professional development. International studies have highlighted their relevance not only in the business sector (Berry & Routon, 2020) but also in secondary education, where they are seen as crucial for cognitive performance and workforce readiness (Borghans et al., 2020). Despite this growing recognition, a gap persists in their effective cultivation within educational systems, underscoring the need for a comprehensive model that strengthens these competencies from childhood and adolescence onward (Bohórquez-Balón, 2024).

In Latin America, recent research conducted in countries such as Argentina and Brazil has reaffirmed the importance of soft skills in secondary education (Silva et al., 2023). In the Peruvian context, however, a deficiency has been identified in the development of these skills among students in public schools, pointing to a specific gap in the country's secondary education (Dávalos & Ernst, 2021). This situation reflects a common challenge across various educational systems: the need to effectively integrate soft skills development into the curriculum in order to strengthen students' holistic formation.

At the public educational institution in Lurín, the integration of soft skills into the curriculum is hampered by a shortage of resources and limited teacher training. In this regard, Lozano (2022) noted that the education sector, having been affected by recent health crises, must adapt to the digital environment in order to foster the development of these competencies. It was also concluded that while there is a clear need to employ playful methodologies and effective pedagogical strategies, efficient management and the availability of adequate resources are essential for their implementation.

For these reasons, the following research question was formulated: How are soft skills developed among secondary school students at a public educational institution in Lurín? The corresponding objective was to analyze the soft skills of secondary school students at that institution.

Various studies have addressed the development of soft skills in different educational contexts. Chica-Esquivia (2023) highlighted their importance in higher education and in specific sectors such as the gaming industry, identifying creativity, leadership, and analytical orientation as essential skills in postgraduate studies. Similarly, De La Osa (2022) observed that effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving are key to success in that sector, suggesting that teaching these skills in applied contexts enhances student understanding and satisfaction.

Montañez et al. (2022), for their part, underscored the diversity of leadership styles within educational institutions, concluding that no single style guarantees effectiveness. Aneva et al. (2022) found that participation in academic competitions, such as the International Young Physicists' Tournament (IYPT), significantly improves soft skills including communication, problem-solving, and leadership. Likewise, Alghamdi et al. (2021) emphasized the benefits of assertive communication in educational settings and the empowerment of students through coaching strategies.

Conversely, Calanca et al. (2018) analyzed the presence of soft skills in job advertisements, particularly in low-wage and feminized occupations, showing that these skills can partially predict gender composition in certain job categories. However, they also noted that skills considered "feminine" tend to be associated with wage penalties.

From a theoretical standpoint, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) theory and Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory are fundamental to the development of soft skills in education. Durlak et al. (2021) explained that SEL promotes the teaching of skills such as emotional self-regulation and empathy through integration into the school curriculum, demonstrating positive effects on academic and professional success. Brackett et al. (2019) argued that EI, centered on the recognition and management of emotions, fosters the development of both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, including empathy and decision-making.

From a constructivist perspective, Kerimbayev et al. (2016) pointed out that knowledge and soft skills are constructed through social interaction and experience, promoting active and contextualized learning. In this vein, Hobbs (2017) highlighted that digital narratives offer a meaningful learning context by allowing students to explore and express their experiences, thereby reinforcing communication, collaboration, and the building of learning communities.

Methodology

This original research article corresponds to a basic qualitative study oriented toward generating new knowledge and expanding existing theories, rather than toward the immediate practical application of findings (Leavy, 2017). This approach is essential for academic progress, as it enables a deep understanding of phenomena and facilitates the construction of new theoretical concepts (Rodríguez & Pérez, 2017). The study

specifically focuses on understanding how daily activities influence the development of soft skills in secondary school students.

Methodologically, the research adopts a phenomenological design and an interpretive paradigm, with the aim of understanding events in their natural context (Sanguino, 2020), drawing on participant testimony and a qualitative approach that does not require statistical data (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018). Six specialist teachers in education were selected to participate in the study, and interviews were employed as the data collection technique to gain in-depth insight into the topic under investigation (Rowland et al., 2019). Data analysis was carried out through a thematic approach, which included familiarization with the information, code generation, and detailed interpretation of identified themes. Data triangulation and the use of Atlas.ti 9.1 software were also applied to ensure consistency and credibility of the findings (Zamora, 2019).

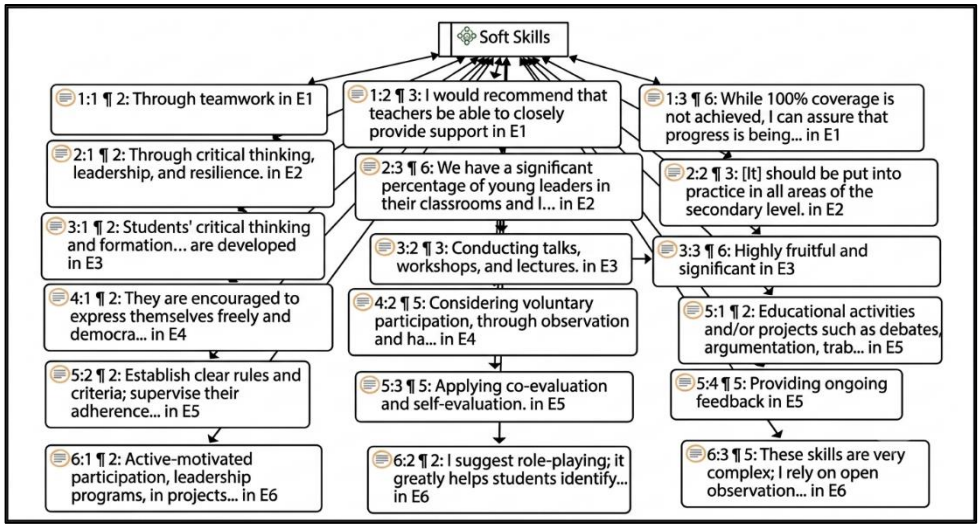
Results

The interviews conducted with six specialist teachers included ten open-ended questions. For data processing, the qualitative software Atlas.ti 9.1 was used, and the responses were transcribed in Word format. Subsequently, data coding was carried out, which allowed the research objectives to be addressed.

General objective: To analyze the soft skills of secondary school students at a public educational institution in Lurín.

Figure 1

Citation network for the soft skills category

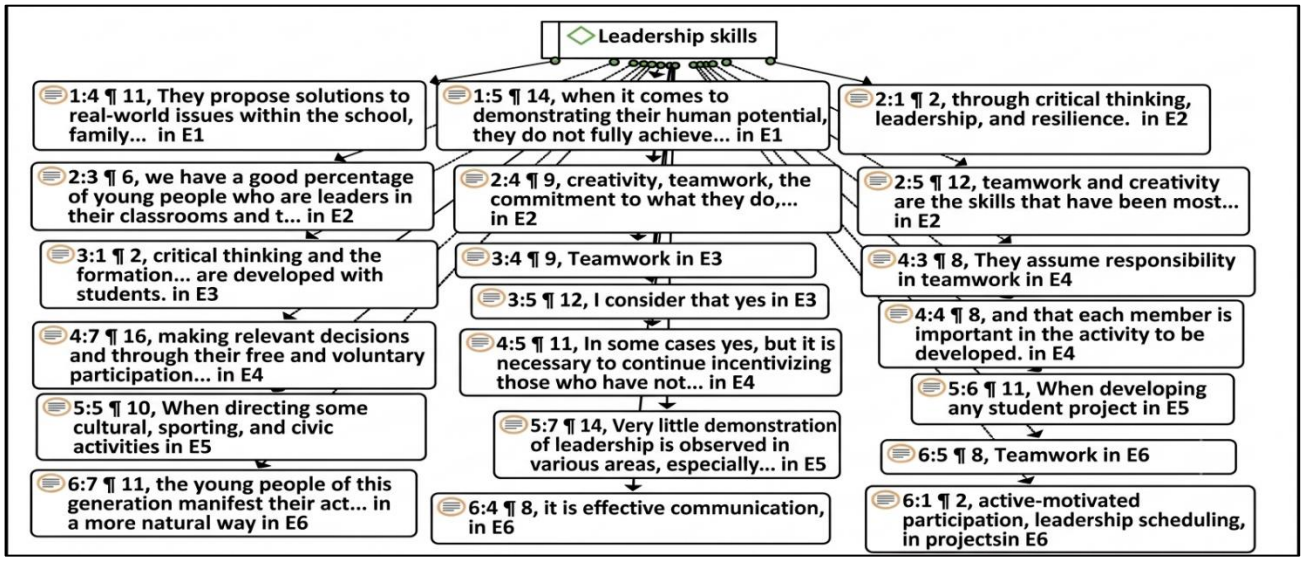


In response to the questions posed, the teachers emphasized the importance of fostering active participation and the development of critical thinking in students as fundamental aspects for strengthening soft skills. They also recommended continuous monitoring and active educator presence throughout this process. Interviewee 4 stressed the need to encourage students to express themselves freely and democratically, respecting the opinions of others and promoting critical and reflective thinking. It was also mentioned that, although soft skills are assessed through co-evaluation and critical thinking, this process has not yet been fully implemented across all curriculum areas, with significant progress observed in some areas more than in others.

Specific objective 1: To analyze the leadership skills that secondary school students at a public educational institution in Lurín have developed.

Figure 2

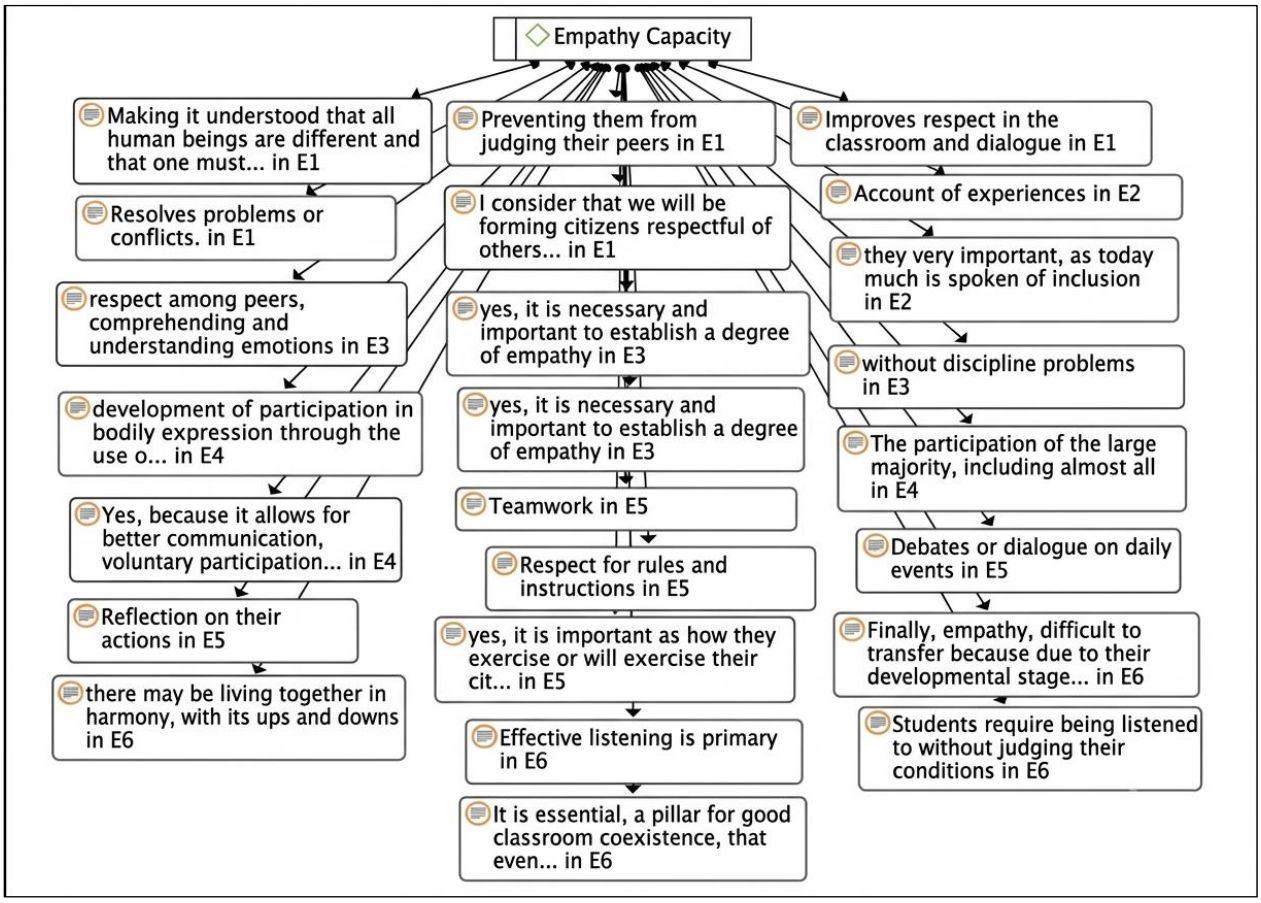
Citation network for specific objective 1



The interviewees' responses in the first part of the study revealed a consensus regarding the importance of leadership in teamwork, highlighting that a good leader knows how to take responsibility and encourage participation and group unity, as reaffirmed by Interviewee 4. However, in the second part, opinions on the effective development of leadership were divided. While some teachers observed progress, others, such as Interviewee 5, noted limited demonstration of leadership, particularly in aspects related to discipline, responsibility, and respect. In addition, Interviewee 4 mentioned that, although there are successful cases, there is still a need to foster and promote leadership among those students who have not shown significant advances.

Specific objective 2: To analyze the development of empathy in secondary school students at a public educational institution in Lurín.

Figure 3
Citation network for specific objective 2

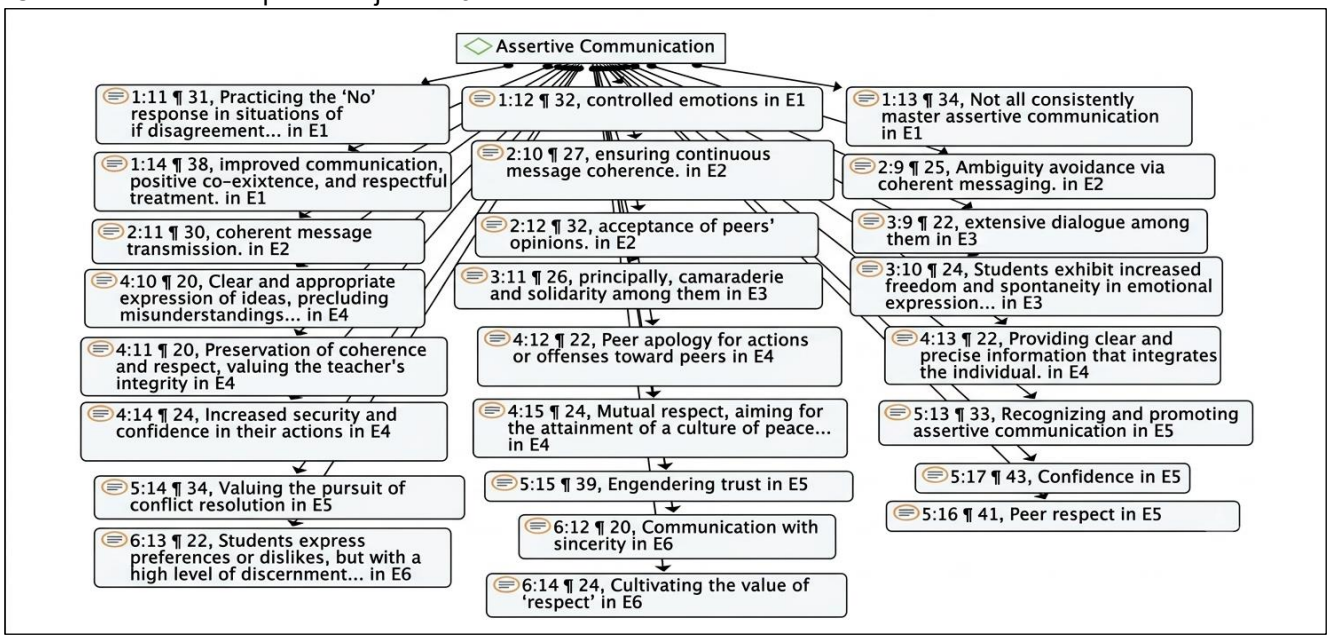


Teachers employ various strategies to strengthen empathy in students, ranging from the use of pleasant music to fostering respect for individual differences and the opinions of others. A key aspect, according to Interviewee 3, is the establishment of classroom coexistence norms that promote respect and understanding of emotions and feelings, creating an environment of trust and order. In the second part, it was highlighted that empathy contributes to a peaceful and disciplined teamwork environment, as experienced by Interviewee 3, where mutual respect prevails among students and toward the teacher. All teachers agreed on the importance of developing empathy in students, not only to improve the school environment but also to shape responsible citizens committed to the country's progress, as expressed by Interviewee 5 when referring to the relevance of exercising a conscious and responsible planetary citizenship.

Specific objective 3: To analyze the development of assertive communication in secondary school students at a public educational institution in Lurín.

Figure 4

Citation network for specific objective *3*



The teachers agreed that assertive communication in students develops through the clear and unambiguous expression of ideas and thoughts, as well as through the ability to say "no" when they disagree, without fear of potential repercussions. According to Interviewee 6, this skill is essential for adequate coexistence both in the classroom and in the family environment, and its absence can generate attitudes of lack of consideration toward others. In the second part, it was highlighted that assertive communication is manifested in clarity of expression and emotional control, contributing to mutual respect. Finally, most interviewees agreed that their students have learned to communicate confidently and to respect the opinions of others, emphasizing the value of respect as the foundation for harmonious coexistence and positive social development.

Discussions

Regarding the general objective, the teachers participating in this study emphasized the importance of active participation and critical thinking in the development of soft skills, highlighting the need for continuous monitoring, as well as the value of respect and creativity in this process. In contrast to these findings, Lozano (2022) reported that teachers do not teach soft skills or promote their development, noting that these should be strengthened from childhood. On the other hand, Silva et al. (2023) countered this position by suggesting the need to evaluate soft skills, emphasizing the benefits of virtual environments for their development. In contrast, Mendoza (2021) pointed out deficiencies in the development of these skills due to a lack of strategies, management, and resources applied by teachers. In opposition, Mozgalova et al. (2021) asserted that the acquisition of soft skills is not achieved solely through program implementation, but rather requires adequate teacher training and socio-emotional strengthening that allows these skills to be enhanced in students.

With respect to specific objective 1, the responses emphasized students' ability to assume responsibilities and initiate group work, highlighting the importance of integration and the promotion of teamwork. However, opinions were divided regarding the effectiveness of leadership demonstration: while some teachers observed progress, others noted insufficient participation and stressed the need for further guidance and support. This perception aligns with studies such as that of García-Chitiva and Correa (2023), who linked soft skills to leadership and creativity, as well as with Montañez et al. (2022), who highlighted the diversity of leadership styles among students. These contributions contrast with those of Riquelme-Castañeda and Vega-Massó (2020), who indicated deficiencies in leadership training, as well as difficulties for students in recognizing leadership styles that favor problem-solving in their student life.

Regarding specific objective 2, the results revealed that teachers employ various techniques to foster empathy, including the use of music and the implementation of coexistence norms that promote respect and understanding of individual differences. This skill contributes to the creation of a peaceful and disciplined learning environment, characterized by mutual respect between students and teachers, and is considered fundamental for

the formation of responsible and aware citizens. Mendoza (2021) underscored the need for playful strategies and adequate management to develop empathy and communication, while Alghamdi et al. (2021) and Hernández et al. (2018) highlighted the use of various methodologies and didactic strategies to strengthen this skill in the classroom. In this regard, Hernández-Prados and Sánchez-Martínez (2024) noted that empathy is one of the most difficult skills to acquire. In this sense, emotional education and the strengthening of empathy are positioned as key elements for the improvement of school coexistence; in agreement, Carbonell and Cerezo (2019) pointed out that teachers, beyond the application of techniques and strategies, should promote emotional education and empathy as pillars for positive school coexistence and a better institutional climate.

Finally, in relation to specific objective 3, the teachers agreed that assertive communication is developed through the encouragement of clear and unambiguous expression of ideas and thoughts, as well as through the ability to express disagreement without fear. They also highlighted that effective assertive communication involves speaking clearly, avoiding misunderstandings, and regulating emotions, fundamental aspects for harmonious coexistence and the social growth of students, with respect as a central value. Lozano (2022) and Kenwright (2022) emphasized the importance of developing these skills within the curriculum and through activities such as teamwork and problem-solving, while Aneva et al. (2022) suggested participation in tournaments as a strategy to improve communication and confidence in expression. In contrast, Cañas and Hernández (2019) pointed out that some teachers have deficiencies in their verbal expression with students, which can generate conflicts and negative interpersonal relationships. Along these lines, Solórzano (2018) affirmed that teachers must strengthen their communicative competencies to improve assertive communication in their pedagogical practices.

Conclusions

The importance of active participation and critical thinking in the evolution of soft skills was analyzed, underscoring the need for constant monitoring and active student involvement. Although significant progress was observed in the development of these skills, this advancement has not been achieved uniformly across all curriculum areas.

Likewise, it was evidenced that some soft skills advance more rapidly, while others require greater attention and reinforcement, indicating a differentiated and continuously evolving learning process. Regarding the leadership subcategory, it was concluded that students have developed relevant competencies in this area; however, this development is not homogeneous among all students, revealing the need to continue promoting these skills systematically.

With respect to the empathy subcategory, it was concluded that students demonstrate an adequate capacity to put themselves in others' shoes, manifested through respect and acceptance of peer relationships within the educational environment.

Finally, in relation to the assertive communication subcategory, it was evidenced that, in most cases, students managed to express their thoughts in an orderly, clear, and precise manner, with the main benefit being the strengthening of respect and harmonious coexistence in the classroom.

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