

Soft skills in education: An approach to holistic and meaningful learning

Habilidades blandas en la educación: Un enfoque para el aprendizaje holístico y significativo

Competências transversais na educação: uma abordagem para uma aprendizagem holística e significativa

Grisel de la Concepción Soto Grau*

Abstract

In the context of a global scenario facing a technological explosion and impacted by numerous social, economic and political factors, it is necessary to adapt education to contemporary challenges. The fundamental premise is the urgency of forming new generations capable of being empathetic, supportive and aware, for that we must change, from our classrooms, the way of conceiving education, this is the purpose of this article: to provide strategies for the development of soft skills necessary in the integral development of individuals. Education that focuses on the development of these skills prepares students for personal and professional success, enabling them to function effectively in an increasingly complex and changing world. Within this framework, a literature review and the analysis of own experiences were carried out and contrasted with each other to propose a series of strategies and activities to achieve the development of these skills in students. The article advocates a significant evolution in education, proposing concrete measures to nurture essential skills that go beyond academic knowledge. With the implementation of the proposed strategies, a comprehensive and meaningful education is guaranteed.

Keywords: soft skills, holistic, meaningful learning, education, competencies, integral development.

Resumen

En el marco de un panorama mundial que enfrenta el estallido tecnológico e impactado por numerosos factores sociales, económicos y políticos se hace necesario adaptar la educación a los desafíos contemporáneos. La premisa fundamental es la urgencia de formar nuevas generaciones capaces de ser empáticas, solidarias y conscientes, para eso debemos cambiar, desde nuestras aulas, la

How to cite:

Soto, G. (2025) Soft skills in education: An approach to holistic and meaningful learning. *Revista Iberoamericana de educación*, 9 (1).

Received: May, 2024
Approved: October, 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31876/rie.v9i1.284>

<http://www.revista-iberoamericana.org/index.php/es>

Magister, Instituto Tecnológico Superior
Edwards Deming gsoto@deming.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4000-2989>

forma de concebir la educación, este es el propósito del presente artículo: proporcionar estrategias para el desarrollo de las habilidades blandas necesarias en el desarrollo integral de los individuos. La educación que se enfoca en el desarrollo de estas habilidades prepara a los estudiantes para el éxito personal y profesional, permitiéndoles desenvolverse efectivamente en un mundo cada vez más complejo y cambiante. En este marco, se realizó una revisión bibliográfica y el análisis de experiencias propias que fueron contrastadas entre sí, para proponer una serie de estrategias y actividades con vistas a lograr el desarrollo de dichas habilidades en los estudiantes. El artículo aboga por una evolución significativa en la educación, proponiendo medidas concretas para nutrir habilidades esenciales que van más allá del conocimiento académico. Con la aplicación de las estrategias propuestas se garantiza una educación integral y significativa.

Palabras clave: Habilidades blandas, holístico, aprendizaje significativo, educación, competencias, desarrollo integral.

Resumo

No contexto de um cenário global que enfrenta uma explosão tecnológica e sofre o impacto de inúmeros fatores sociais, econômicos e políticos, é necessário adaptar a educação aos desafios contemporâneos. A premissa fundamental é a urgência de formar novas gerações capazes de serem empáticas, solidárias e conscientes, para isso devemos mudar, a partir de nossas salas de aula, a forma como concebemos a educação, este é o objetivo deste artigo: fornecer estratégias para o desenvolvimento de soft skills necessárias no desenvolvimento integral dos indivíduos. Uma educação centrada no desenvolvimento destas competências prepara os alunos para o sucesso pessoal e profissional, permitindo-lhes funcionar eficazmente num mundo cada vez mais complexo e em mudança. Neste âmbito, foi efectuada uma revisão da literatura e uma análise cruzada das experiências dos autores, de modo a propor um conjunto de estratégias e actividades para o desenvolvimento destas competências nos alunos. O artigo defende uma evolução significativa na educação, propondo medidas concretas para desenvolver competências essenciais que vão para além do conhecimento académico. Com a implementação das estratégias propostas, garante-se uma educação holística e significativa.

Palavras-chave: Soft skills, holística, aprendizagem significativa, educação, competências, desenvolvimento integral.

INTRODUCTION

The term education is linked to the history of mankind, it appears with the formation of the first human group, making necessary the transmission of the acquired knowledge to the following generations, thus the first pedagogical ideas arise, but not Pedagogy as a science. According to Gadotti “Education is the most human practice if one considers the depth and breadth of its influence on the existence of men. Since the emergence of man it has been a fundamental practice of the species, distinguishing the cultural way of being of men from the natural way of existence of other living beings”.

Throughout its evolution, this process has undergone great modifications, from an elitist and religious education to an education centered on the imposition and memorization of dictated contents, up to the current education oriented to the construction of knowledge by the student. Until very recently, priority was given to the transmission of academic information, only the so-called hard skills were developed in students, which, according to Villa, “refer to the knowledge that is developed through education: degree courses, studies, languages, technology management, among other issues. They are developed through education and are proven through certificates, diplomas and/or evaluations”.

In this increasingly globalized, convulsive, innovative and changing world, education cannot be limited only to transmitting an accumulation of academic content, but must be aimed at preparing students to face everyday life, thus achieving a holistic and meaningful learning, which is achieved, to a large extent, through the development of soft skills that go beyond traditional subjects. What are soft skills?

“Soft skills are all skills related to emotions.” (Zumba Hidalgo et al., 2020)

According to what Sampaollesi stated “Today, it is not enough to have professional knowledge to exercise a successful professional and work role. On the contrary, soft skills are necessary to know how to exploit that background one has”.

Soft skills have become a key factor in achieving both personal and professional success; they are those that relate to the abilities that allow you to interact effectively with others, solve problems, make decisions and adapt to change. They encompass a series of personal attributes that facilitate effective and positive interactions with others, such as communication skills, teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and resilience, among others. For their part, Maturana and Guzmán express that:

Indeed, at present, the challenge to the school institution has been expanded, under the new scenario, glimpsed in the framework of the recent world order, prevail as constants, new problems demanding subjects adaptable to change, with the ability to creatively meet the challenges of their immediate environment (academic, labor, social, cultural, political, economic, environmental). This demanding horizon requires - beginning at a very early age - the harmonious and complementary integration of new skills into the school curriculum. (p. 3).

In their analysis of the subject, Lozano Fernandez et al. state that: While it is very important to value people for their knowledge and intellectual contributions in the labor field, it is also important to have social skills; the latter are not taken into account to assume a position as a leader in an educational institution because, on many occasions, the lack of empathy or weak management in decision making have caused difficulties in leadership or classroom management in an educational institution. Therefore, it is important to develop these skills in order to create an environment in which students can solve problems, relate and coexist properly with those around them. The development of this type of skills in students allows them to achieve success in the academic environment and in the labor market, improve their interpersonal relationships, communicate assertively, adapt to different environments and work effectively as a team, in short, become more responsible and committed people who contribute to social welfare.

However, although the benefits of these skills for the integral development of individuals are evident, there are institutions and teachers who do not include them in their planning. This idea is reinforced by Lorenzo in his book *Educación emocional en la escuela* (Emotional education in the school), when he states that: On the other hand, those who fulfill the function of teaching, teachers, do not carry out specific planning to work on soft skills in the classroom, despite the fact that it is proven that the teaching of these skills has positive effects for learning, personal well-being and in general for life.

The insertion, in academic planning, of activities that guarantee the development of soft skills in students is fundamental and should occur naturally through the different activities that are developed in classes and, why not, outside of them. The main objective of this article is to propose strategies that allow the development of soft skills to achieve meaningful and holistic learning in our students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research was carried out from a qualitative approach through the analysis and relation of concepts, from the socio-educational criterion. No numerical or statistical data were used, but qualitative variables, points of view and opinions of various authors, collected through bibliographic-documentary review.

The type of research applied is bibliographic-documentary, through the selection, organization and triangulation of information from reliable sources related to the subject.

The analysis and interpretation of texts was selected as the ideal technique to approach a research of these characteristics. In addition, the technique of triangulation of results was applied, to favor critical analysis and obtain significant conclusions; and the file, for the arrangement and management of sources and bibliographical references. For the process of selection and organization of references, a search log was used, using reliable and verifiable sources of known and renowned authors; for the arrangement of the bibliography, bibliographic cards were used and, finally, for the construction of these citations and references, the APA 7 standard was applied.

RESULTS

In an effort to ensure a comprehensive education, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Ecuador has proposed an adjustment of the curriculum based on various competencies, with emphasis on the development of communication and socioemotional skills and, of course, soft skills.

The agency describes the adjustment as follows: This process is the product of a methodological design, taking regional experiences, through reforms that include the search for the design of a competency-based graduation profile for students, which becomes a curricular reference for the Educational System. It contributes to the promotion of a quality education oriented to the future and adapted to the needs of children and adolescents to achieve their comprehensive development in each educational cycle, enhancing their skills within the framework of the guarantee of rights, establishing clear and relevant criteria that allow knowing what should be learned from a perspective that rescues the ability to know how to know, how to do, how to be, how to live together; in each of the areas and levels in a comprehensive manner. According to the Learning Competency Curriculum Framework, these competencies are divided into three learning areas:

- Foundational Area, where the linguistic, logical-mathematical and socioemotional communicative competencies converge.)
- The Integrating area, which encompasses the competencies that allow relating with others, promoting self-knowledge and social change and includes competencies such as Global Citizenship and Cultural Awareness, Cultural and Artistic Appreciation and Development, Sustainable Development and Environment, and Physical Activity, Sports, Wellness and Healthy Living.
- The Innovative area, which is related to the skills to understand the natural world where we live and the ability to transform it in a sustainable way where the competencies of Entrepreneurship and Financial Management, Digital competencies, Scientific and Technical competencies and Metacognition (learning to learn) are developed.

How to develop soft skills in the classroom? Soft skills must be learned from the cradle, but strictly speaking, in educational institutions it is the teacher who at this time stands as a guide in the teaching-learning process and should be an example for the student. A teacher who is not capable of being resilient, working in a team or being empathetic, what will he/she teach his/her students? Will they be able to face the challenges of the 21st century?

Long ago, the classroom ceased to be the stage of the “juggler teacher”, who limited himself to reciting and demonstrating his profound knowledge of the subject, to become a space for mutual learning, a place where the student is understood and motivated to improve himself as a citizen of the world. Fostering these skills involves considering the whole person, physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially.

Holistic learning seeks to develop all dimensions of the person, not just academic intellect. Soft skills play a crucial role in this approach, as they enable students to actively engage with their environment, understand social complexities, and adapt effectively to diverse situations. This approach shows soft skills as an interrelated set, whereby, the development of one skill can contribute to the development of others. Soft skills, such as empathy and collaboration, foster understanding, appreciation and respect for the experiences of others, this not only strengthens relationships, but also broadens students' perspective, enriching their understanding of the world around them. Among these skills is creativity, which allows students to approach challenges with an innovative mindset, so integrating activities that foster creativity prepares them not only in academic

content, but also in finding unique and original solutions. According to Morejón: “Creativity in education is educating for change and forming people rich in originality, flexibility, vision, initiative, confidence. It develops people who love risks and are ready to face the obstacles and problems that arise in their lives, both at school and in their daily lives”.

Soft skills cultivate adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges. Students gifted with these skills have the ability to face difficulties with confidence and learn from adverse experiences. Including the development of soft skills in education links learning to practical, real-life applications, ensuring more meaningful and lasting learning. These skills should be integrated into the curriculum, as conceived in the new Ecuadorian curriculum, which implies that they should be addressed not as an isolated topic, but as part of all areas of knowledge, achieving interdisciplinarity. In addition, we must provide opportunities for students to practice soft skills in real situations, to achieve this they can work on projects (ABP project-based learning), participate in workshops and socioemotional dynamics (SEL). A positive and supportive learning environment must be ensured, students need to feel safe and supported to be able to take risks and learn from their mistakes. Students must understand the importance of these skills and their application in everyday life (Metacognition).

To achieve meaningful learning, a variety of strategies can be promoted such as connecting content to students' personal experiences, for example, students can write and discuss how they have used conflict resolution skills to solve a problem in their personal lives. We should use real examples and relevant contexts promoting an attitude of tolerance, empathy and working for the community.

The following are suggested activities that can be adapted to different educational levels and areas of study. By integrating them into the curriculum, educators can contribute significantly to the integral development of students.

- Debate: allows the development of assertive communication, oral expression skills, active listening and argumentation. Through them, students should be motivated to respect the opinions of their peers, also encouraging teamwork and inclusion. Regarding the contributions of this skill to the holistic education of students, Max Murath, as quoted in , states that: “it improves critical thinking skills, as well as logical and analytical thinking; it allows improving intellectual skills, improves oratory, helps in forming attitudinal

skills.”

- Collaborative projects: encourage cooperation, teamwork and joint problem solving.

In relation to this topic, Zepeda Hurtado et al., , in their article conclude that, “Based on the results obtained, the present research confirms that AOP encourages active learning, where the student participates in the construction of disciplinary knowledge and the development of soft skills.”

- Case study: According to González : It is the empirical investigation of a phenomenon from which it is desired to learn within its real everyday context. The case study is especially useful when the limits or borders between phenomena and context are not entirely evident, so multiple sources of evidence are required. With this type of activities students develop their analytical skills, the use of ICT is an invaluable support, although the accessibility to them should be assessed and the respective measures should be taken to achieve the participation of all participants. (p. 140).

- Socratic Seminar: this activity encourages critical reflection on various topics. In addition to promoting the active search for knowledge, students with greater academic difficulties should be taken into account and an accompanying program should be suggested where empathy and teamwork are encouraged. In the analysis of the results of their research, Betancourt Zambrano et al. state that:

Statistical evidence showed that there was an increase in critical thinking skills developed through the intervention program using the Socratic discussion technique. The work strategy was simple but effective, knowledge was generated through questions and counter-questions that allowed the reorganization of thinking. (p. 162).

- Brainstorming session: encourages creativity and the generation of innovative solutions, active listening and respect, no idea is bad, we achieve a final consensus where everyone has contributed. Referring to this novel tool, Legaz Pérez states that: “Our results show a high degree of satisfaction on the part of the university student, who has perceived this tool as something novel and valuable in their training and in the acquisition of knowledge in their university education.” (p. 144)

- Role simulation:

Role-playing is an active learning technique in which a situation representing real life is simulated. Students can learn difficult concepts by simulating a scenario where they must apply those

concepts. allows them to develop adaptability by assuming different perspectives and facing unexpected situations. Empathy definitely plays a role in this context: the student must put himself in the shoes of another person, real or fictitious, and manage to understand his situation. This type of activity promotes creative problem solving.

- Leadership projects: this activity allows the development of leadership, delegation and motivation skills. With this type of activity they learn to develop empathy, identify and understand in depth the problems of their environment, think critically, communicate effectively, form a team, work collaboratively developing a new leadership model, manage projects, solve problems and reflect on their successes and failures.

- Community Service Projects (Service-learning): According to Tapia : “is an educational methodology -or philosophy- that underlines the value of solidarity school activities in service to the community, and develops their educational potential by connecting them to formal learning.” This strategy promotes empathy by working to improve the lives of others. It is ideal for encouraging the educational unit to reach out to the family and the community.

- Reflection journal: this activity allows students to evaluate their own strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement (self-knowledge). Criticism and self-criticism, teamwork and respect are encouraged. In relation to this activity Fandos states that: “The experience of telling in the diary what one does, what feelings it produces and telling it to oneself makes it possible that later one can read it with a benevolent or critical attitude, but having the opportunity to reconstruct what the activity has been.” (p. 52) For the process of developing soft skills to be successful, educators must be prepared; first of all, they must recognize the importance of these skills in the integral development of the student and the difference they can make in them; in addition, the planning process of the activities focused on this purpose must be thorough and selective, taking into account the demands of the new globalized society and the labor market, followed by a process of constant feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

Once the study variables have been analyzed, it can be concluded that soft skills play a fundamental role in the formation of integral individuals prepared to face the world. Focusing the educational process around these skills not only improves the quality of social

interactions, but also enriches the learning process. Education that embraces soft skills not only prepares students for academic success, but also to be responsible citizens and valuable contributors to society. Holistic and meaningful learning is achieved when students not only acquire knowledge, but also develop the skills necessary to meet life's complex and dynamic challenges. Furthermore, it is possible to infer that, with the objective of developing soft skills in students, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education established a new curriculum based on competencies, which guarantees holistic and meaningful development. Finally, it is concluded that, the current classroom is faced with the task of preparing students for a constantly changing world, so it must constitute a dynamic space where not only academic knowledge is imparted, but also nurtures the integral development of students, focusing on the acquisition and application of soft skills. Debate, Socratic Seminar, Brainstorming Session, among others suggested, are effective and motivating strategies that develop such skills.

REFERENCES

- Arriagada, I. (26 de octubre de 2018). Grupo Educar. Obtenido de Debates: una manera de desarrollar habilidades blandas en tus alumnos: <https://www.grupoeducar.cl/noticia/debates-una-manera-de-desarrollar-habilidades-blandas-en-tus-alumnos/#:~:text=Debates%2C%20habilidades%20blandas&text=Los%20beneficios%20son%20que%20%E2%80%9C%E2%80%A6,ayuda%20en%20formar%20habilidades%20actitudinales%E2>
- Betancourth Zambrano, S., Insuasti Quevedo, K., & Riascos Portilla, N. (2012). Pensamiento crítico a través de la discusión socrática en estudiantes universitarios. *Revista Virtual Universidad Católica del Norte*, 162.
- Fandos, T. B. (2008). El diario reflexivo como herramienta de autoaprendizaje en la formación de enfermería. *ELSEVIER*, 52.
- Gadotti, M. (2003). *Historia de las ideas pedagógicas*. Ciudad de México: Siglo XXI editores.
- González, W. O. (2013). El estudio de casos: una vertiente para la investigación educativa. *Educere*, 140.
- Legaz Pérez, I., Gutiérrez González, L., & Luna Maldonado, A. (2017). Brainstorming como recurso docente para desarrollar

- competencia investigadora. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, 144.
- Lorenzo, I. R. (2013). EDUCACIÓN EMOCIONAL EN LA ESCUELA: ACTIVIDADES PARA EL AULA, DIRIGIDAS A NIÑOS DE 8 A 9 AÑOS - TOMO 3. México, DF: Alfaomega.
- Lozano Fernández, M., Lozano Fernández, E., & Ortega Cabrejos, M. (2022). Habilidades blandas una clave para brindar educación de calidad: revisión teórica. Scielo.
- Maturana Moreno, G., & Guzmán Chitiva, F. (2019). LAS COMPETENCIAS BLANDAS COMO COMPLEMENTO DE LAS COMPETENCIAS DURAS EN LA FORMACIÓN ESCOLAR. *EURITMIA*, 3. Obtenido de LAS COMPETENCIAS BLANDAS COMO COMPLEMENTO DE LAS COMPETENCIAS DURAS EN LA FORMACIÓN ESCOLAR .
- Ministerio Educación República del Ecuador. (2023). Marco Curricular Competencial de Aprendizajes. Quito: Ministerio de Educación Ecuador.
- Morejon, J. B. (2000). Creatividad en la educación: Educación para transformar. *Psicología científica*.
- Sampaollessi, L. (22 de agosto de 2022). Aulica. Obtenido de Habilidades Blandas para Garantizar el Éxito Laboral: <https://www.aulica.com.ar/habilidades-blandas/>
- Tapia, M. N. (2001). La solidaridad como pedagogía: El “aprendizaje-servicio” en la escuela . Buenos Aires: Ciudad Nueva.
- Villa, F. (26 de julio de 2023). LinkedIn. Obtenido de Habilidades duras y blandas ¿qué son y por qué son tan importantes para estudiantes de la escuela secundaria?: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/habilidades-duras-y-blandas-qu%C3%A9-son-por-tan-para-de-la-fernando-villa/?originalSubdomain=es>
- Zepeda Hurtado, M., Cardoso Espinosa, E., & Cortés Ruiz, J. (2020). El aprendizaje orientado en proyectos para el desarrollo de habilidades blandas en el nivel medio superior del IPN. *RIDE. Revista Iberoamericana para la Investigación y el Desarrollo Educativo*.
- Zumba Hidalgo, S., Quinde Tenemea, J., Lata Tigre, S., & Espinoza Alvarez, C. (2020). La importancia del fomento de las habilidades blandas en la educación. *Revistas UNAE*, 35.

