



Diversify thematic organization, extracurricular activities to improve the effectiveness of social skills education for junior high school students



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ABSTRACT

This article proposes an essential solution to improve the quality and effectiveness of social skills education for students at public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, which is the fastest developed city in Vietnam that is demanding better human resources coming out from schools, by analyzing the status quo of managing and conducting these educational activities in 20 schools across the city via mixed-method data collections. The authors approached issues and created that solution from the perspective of practical school leadership and management, due to the fact that most of the recent studies about social skills education focused on concepts and assessment of social skills, or educational practices to deliver and train these skills to students. Based on the concrete theories about the correlation between school leadership and educational effectiveness, as well as the strengths and drawbacks of targeted schools and Vietnamese education, the managerial solution proposed is diversifying thematic organizations and extracurricular activities about social skills for students.

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1. Introduction

The definitions of social skills mentioned in previous studies depend on different perspectives and approaches of the authors, there have been several key concepts as below:

Approach from mental health: [Cillessen and Bellmore \(2014\)](#) stated that: Social skills are the ability to function successfully in a social environment of a person. According to these authors, people with low social skills will have difficulty interacting with others, limiting their opportunities to form and maintain good friendships with friends and thus limiting their social relationships. People with low social skills may not cope with stressful life events during their participation in social activities, increasing adverse effects.

Approach from the aspect of social behavior: When studying students' social skills in a school environment, [Daraee et al. \(2016\)](#) defined: "Social skills are behaviors that allow individuals to interact in an influential way and avoid unwanted reactions".

The authors argue that social skills "have their roots in cultural and social backgrounds and include behaviors such as pioneering new relationships, asking for help, and making suggestions to help the others".

Approaching in terms of student competencies: Wrote in the book "Teaching Social Skills to Youth", [Dowd and Tierney \(2016\)](#) defined social skills as tools that allow people to communicate and learn, ask for help, satisfy the need appropriately, get along with people, make friends, develop healthy relationships, protect themselves and in general, be able to interact with society harmoniously. Also, in this regard, research on the heterogeneity in social skills when students start in grade one, [Lamont and Van Horn \(2013\)](#) argued that social skills are "a term used to describe a set of skills that increase an individual's effectiveness in social situations". [Gresham et al. \(2001\)](#) gave a similar definition: "social skill (or social competence) refers to the ability of a person who has social competence in a given situation". These definitions have oriented towards education, and social skills are tools to achieve that goal.

Approaching in terms of education at preschool age: When investigating social skills education for 5-6 years old children, [Nguyễn and Hoàng \(2016\)](#) gave the definition: "Social skills are abilities that help people perceive, behave, communicate and adapt, succeed in society." Furthermore, "These skills are

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related to language using, the capacity of social integration, the expression of attitudes and behaviors that applied to human-to-human communication or the interaction of people with society, community, collective, or other organizations" (Nguyễn and Hoàng, 2016). According to Đặng and Trần (2021), social skills are human skills, which exist together with other skills to form human social capacity. Therefore, "Social skills are skills that are directed towards and applied directly to relationships, situations, processes and public social life to help individuals perceive, behave, communicate and adapt the successful and effective social response to a certain extent".

Social skills exist in the form of activities in certain social activities of people. In other words, social skills are the methods of human activity in the related social environment (family, school, community) to perceive, adapt and behave in society successfully-a form of activity aimed at realizing an individual's relationships with people based on mastering the method of implementation and applying social knowledge and experiences appropriate to conditions and circumstances (Huang et al., 2018).

The above concepts have something in common; social skills synthesize many different factors of social behaviors in the human's social environment, which focuses on the following factors: social awareness, social adaptation, behavior in communication situations, creating social relationships. The social cognitive factor is a condition for skill formation. The social adaptability factor is the skill's goal orientation. The behavioral factor in communication situations and the relationship-building factor is the expression of the skill. All these factors represent the human interaction skills to achieve success in society. In terms of this goal, social skills are practical communication skills based on perceived results of social values.

Based on domestic and foreign scholar's concepts and definitions of social skills, on the concretization and generalization of the elements of competence, the author proposes the concept of social skills as the synthesis of many different factors of social behavior in the social environment of people, which focuses on the following factors: Social awareness; social adaptation; behave, interact and communicate in social situations; create and maintain social relationships towards success in human social activities.

Currently, there are not many studies on the social skills or social competence of students in Vietnam in general or in Ho Chi Minh City in particular. From the 2000s onwards, there have been many private organizations organizing life-skill training activities in Vietnam, notably in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. However, these organizations only operate sporadically and combine with some schools to organize activities for students, mainly through seminars or organizing field trip activities (at the end of the school year) without the concrete

conceptual frameworks to guide these educational activities.

Since 2010, many schools have become accustomed to organizing social skills training activities for students, but these programs are mainly integrated with the topics of the Ministry of Education or according to the contents of the local Youth Union. Not many schools have a breakthrough in building content and organizing it methodically in the long term. Many schools are still quite confused about implementing social skills education, and lacking methods to diversify teaching content and activities leads to students' low social competence. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the awareness of schools related to the need to diversify the methods of organizing thematic and extracurricular activities, thereby proposing managerial measures to help improve the effectiveness of social skills education for junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City.

Specifically, the measures this article proposed are distinct from previous educational solutions in the same field, because the authors focused on the aspects of school leadership and management, rather than teachers' activities. This approach is based on the concept that better leadership and management in schools lead to significantly better school effectiveness (Scheerens, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005).

The article begins with clearly defining the definition of social skills to show the inclusiveness of many constitutive factors, thereby showing that practicing social skills is not just about teaching one but must be a combination of many factors. The second part will present the research methodology and results of the authors' empirical study on social-skill educational solutions in junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, followed by the third part containing authors' recommended measures, then the limitations and the last part is the conclusion.

2. Research

2.1. Participants

Although it is a large city and an economic - cultural-social center in the South, Ho Chi Minh City is also a multi-economic-layered administration with a diverse administrative structure, various abundant production types, high deviation in the people's intellectual level. For general education, the diversity of schools also leads to a qualitative difference between schools, including public junior high schools. Therefore, in order to properly assess the reality of diversity in social skills education methods for students in public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City, the author selected a stratified sample include 14 schools in the metropolitan city district, four schools are in the suburban districts, and two schools are in the rural districts (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Chosen participants are a total of 2033, including 407 teachers, 56 educational

managers, and 1570 grade 8 students (select 2 classes per school).

Among these 20 selected schools, there are four special schools that meet advanced standards according to the trend of international integration and have enough facilities and specific annual plans to organize social skills education activities.

2.2. Measure

This study is part of a more extensive study that the author has conducted to build a complete model of managing social skills education activities for junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City. In this study, identifying the need to diversify contents and organizational methods is focused on analysis, thereby helping readers have an overview of the current situation.

The survey is designed to determine the frequency and effectiveness of organizing social skills education activities that schools are implementing. In particular, the content proposed by the author includes form diversification, method diversification, and the coordination of educational forces.

Besides, to describe the statistics and determine the level of variation to determine the mean

(arithmetic mean of the observations) and the median-which is the sorted statistical value. From small to large, we set the Likert scale at five different levels: 1=Very Unimportant, 2=Unimportant, 3=Neither Important nor Unimportant, 4=Important, and 5=Very Important (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The software used to run the survey data is The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.

2.3. Results

The data are shown in Table 1. did show the present evaluation of social skills education activities for public junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City. In the ordinary social skills education activities for students, two activities: Through school psychology counseling to teach social skills for students and integrated through active teaching methods are at the top of the average threshold. While at an adequate level, the two forms of Integrating into the subject and integrating through active teaching methods are less effective. The most appreciated form of regularity and effectiveness is cooperation with students' parents (Eduformtx6= 3.62; EDUFORMhq6=3.58); Next is the experiential extracurricular activities organization.

Table 1: Summary table of evaluation of forms of social skills education activities for public junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City

Forms of social skills	Regularity		Efficiency level	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
EDUFORM1	2.72	0.50	2.59	0.63
EDUFORM2	2.61	0.56	2.52	0.60
EDUFORM3	3.04	0.79	3.14	0.75
EDUFORM4	3.08	0.80	3.07	0.78
EDUFORM5	2.61	0.59	2.71	0.56
EDUFORM6	3.62	0.48	3.58	0.49

EDUFORM1: Integrating into subjects or educational activities; EDUFORM2: Integrated through active teaching methods; EDUFORM3: Incorporated into class activities; EDUFORM4: Organizing extracurricular activities; EDUFORM5: Through school counseling; EDUFORM6: Coordinate with students' parents

While choosing forms of educational activities in Vietnamese schools nowadays is the authority of school leaders, teachers of various subjects can choose different methods to combine with forms of education in order to equip students with social skills. Therefore, choosing a suitable method for social skills education is essential to help students

achieve high efficiency in social skills education activities. That is the reason why the combinations between forms and methods should be smooth. In order to clarify the status quo of appropriate methods that teachers utilized to educate social skills, the authors conducted the second survey which results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The current situation of the method of social skills education activities for students

Educational methods	Regularity		Efficiency level	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
Presentation	3.11	0.74	3.48	0.50
Conversation	2.46	0.73	2.93	0.70
Team work	3.67	0.50	3.72	0.44
Games/activities	2.60	0.78	2.91	0.76
Role-playing	2.79	0.82	2.94	0.82
Student's project	3.59	0.49	3.48	0.50
Problem solving	3.59	0.49	3.60	0.48

Regarding frequency, the minor methods teachers choose are the conversational method 2.46 and the game method 2.60, which are below the average threshold. Teachers rarely use this method because it may not be suitable for junior high school students, or they think it is not suitable for equipping them with social skills. The two frequently used

methods are the role-play method 2.79 and the presentation method 3.11. The remaining three methods at a practical level are the problem-solving method 3.59, the project method 3.59, and the highest is teamwork 3.67.

At the level of effectiveness, teachers selected methods of conversation, role-playing, and games

that were only average 2.61-3.40. The remaining methods are at the effective threshold (from 3.41 to 4.2), in which the highest in the group work method is 3.72, followed by problem-solving 3.60. When equipping children with social skills, they have to practice and apply them to be effective. Therefore, choosing the method of group work that will be most effective is also consistent with equipping social skills for junior high school students.

In the teamwork method, 69.4% of teachers choose regularly; the remaining 28.9% performed occasionally; 1.7% rarely. Thus, more than 30% of teachers do not choose this method, even though it is effective in social skills education. Problem-solving methods fall between sometimes and often 40.8% and 59.2%, and other methods rarely, sometimes

greater than often. It reflects why the level of social skills of students in public schools is not high. Similarly, so is the level of efficiency.

In order to justify the fact that both education forms and educational methods should be conducted more frequently to improve their effectiveness in social skills education, the authors also considered the correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness for both the applications of forms and methods of organizing life skills education for students. Data in Tables 3 and 4 show these results respectively. If changing 1 point of frequency, the effectiveness will change by 0.507 (for educational method) and 0.344 (for educational method) on a 5-point scale.

Table 3: Correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness of social skills education forms for students at public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City

Pearson correlation	1
1. EDUFORMtx	-
2. EDUFORMhq	0.507**

Note: **= The correlation is significant at 0.01 level; 2 tales. EDUFORMtx= 0.507**; EDUFORMhq=0.507 **; EDUFORMtx: the regularity of education forms; EDUFORMhq: the efficiency of education forms

Table 4: Correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness of educational methods for students at public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City

Pearson correlation	1
1. EDUMETHODtx	-
2. EDUMETHODhq	0.344**

Note: **= The correlation is significant at 0.01 level; 2 tales. EDUMETHODtx= 0.344**; EDUMETHODhq=0.344 **; EDUMETHODtx: the regularity of education methods; EDUMETHODhq: the efficiency of education methods

Besides, Table 5 shows that the level of coordination with teachers' forces when implementing social skills education is quite good, in which it is best to cooperate with students' parents. In regularity, teachers coordinate at least with teachers or school staff, which will make it difficult to organize activities because it involves much integrating or using facilities and how to organize social skills education when implementing

interdisciplinary combinations. When several teachers were interviewed for confirmations and elaborations of the data, it was shown that this survey result is entirely correct, reflecting the current reality in schools that the coordination and synchronous support in social skills education activities is not high. Similar to the level of this problem's effectiveness, teachers also rated the lowest among the three coordination groups.

Table 5: Assessment of the degree of coordination between educational institutions in social skills education activities for middle school students in Ho Chi Minh City

Coordination between E-I	Regularity		Efficiency level	
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation
SB/YY	3.37	0.81	3.40	0.82
TEACHER/STAFF	3.33	0.80	3.41	0.82
Parents	3.72	0.44	3.74	0.43

Note: SB/YY: school board/youth union; TEACHER/STAFF: teachers/staffs

Similarly, the authors analyzed the correlation between the regularity and effectiveness in education force coordination and presented the

results in Table 6 Suppose changing 1 point of regularity, the efficiency increases by 0.821 (on a 5-point scale).

Table 6: Correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness of the coordination of educational institutions at public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City

Pearson correlation	1
1. COR.FORCEtx	-
2. COR.FORCEhq	0.821**

Note: **=The correlation is significant at 0.01 level; 2 tales. COR.FORCEtx= 0.821**; COR.FORCEhq=0.821 **; COR.FORCEtx: the regularity of coordination of educational institution; COR.FORCEhq: the efficiency of coordination of educational institution

Synthesizing the analysis of the Pearson correlations between the frequency and the effectiveness of social skills education activities for public junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh

City in terms of educational methods, forms of education, and coordination of educational institutions, the authors made a comparison in Table 7.

Table 7: Compare the correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness of the aspects that can be improved in the current social skills education activities

Aspects of social skills education activities	Pearson correlation between the regularity and the effectiveness
Educational methods	0.34
Educational forms	0.50
Coordination	0.82

It can be deduced that among three aspects, increasing the frequency of coordination between the educational forces will give the most effective growth of social skills education activities. In the analysis above, we also mentioned that the weakest stage in the current coordination is between the educational institutions within the school, not outside the school. It is both a current drawback, as well as a “sweet-spot” to develop simple, low-cost solutions that bring fast, abundant and sustainable results in social skills education activities at public junior high schools in Ho Chi Minh City. This result justified the strong correspondences among effectiveness of educational practices and the leadership of the schools which include frequent planning, management, cooperation, and collaboration inside and outside of the schools (Scheerens, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005).

3. Discussion

The social skills education activity for students in junior high school is an educational activity like other activities but is not specified as a specific subject in the 2018 General Education Program. To improve the quality of education in developing students' capacity, the principal may include other educational content in the educational program and the Ministry of Education and Training regulations but ensure the objectiveness of the general education program curriculum in 2018. Therefore, to bring the content of social skills education to students into the school and organize its activities, the principal needs to select the necessary contents; Prioritizing in limited time and using appropriate forms of measures will be practical for social skills education activities for students.

Through extracurricular topics and appropriate afterschool activities, students will consolidate, supplement, and expand their knowledge. Depending on the actual situation of each school, focus on topics for implementation. The form is not only in the homeroom activities but also under the flag, extracurricular activities. Through topics that help students have self-management in self-training and performing well in activities organized by the school, the Youth Union. Turn training into self-training. From the place of implementation according to the plan to the point of self-developing the activity plan, self-organizing, adjusting activities, implementing the plan, and self-assessing the performance results for themselves and the students.

Principals of junior high schools need to implement the following measures to diversify thematic organizations and extracurricular activities

to improve the quality of life skills education activities for students:

- Firstly, we now all have a guide to thematic activities; However, the topics are not necessary or attractive, so it is difficult to stay in students' hearts after each sharing or learning content. Therefore, if we choose inspirational topics to exchange with students like some schools are doing, it will positively affect social skills. After that, each student will maintain the content through articles, personal shares, things to say. That will help them express their initial feelings and practice other social skills.
- Secondly, the principal organizes consultation on each content of social skills education for students. After that, the Steering Committee for social skills education discussed with the pedagogical council and selected the skill groups' necessary contents to teach and equip for students. Different grades need different skills, and different schools will also have very different needs. The school needs to listen and select the content that is in line with the student's wishes and the school's orientation, and then they will find their own needs are met, and their receptive state will be better and more positive. Some schools have appropriately selected thematic content according to grade levels, and the effectiveness of social skills equipment is better than it used to be.
- Thirdly, exploit the potential of students' parents to carry out social skills education through co-creation. After receiving the attention and consensus of the forces and subjects involved in social skills education activities in the school, the Principal should pay attention to the vast and diverse resources from parents of students. They work in many industries and occupations, have many life experiences, and understand which skills their child needs. Organizing a co-creation day for parents of classes to select content and teach social skills to students is essential. Thus, we have both human resources, financial resources, and companionship in assessing students after being equipped with social skills.
- Fourthly, social skills education through example. Schools not only conduct teaching or practice but also need to show them examples in life. Skills aimed at perfecting human behaviors, especially at their age, need examples to perfect themselves. The exchange with typical students in training, experience, sports, music... is necessary. Letting this content remain in the children, it is necessary to maintain the images and content of the exchanges immediately after all classroom

activities or from the content in school's examinations.

In addition, the most crucial role model for students is the teacher in the school. Each teacher always influences students' behavior, thinking, and perceptive ability, from everyday communication skills that also help them adjust to solving problems in life. In many schools, teachers who behave skillfully are the spiritual support for the children.

Fifthly, promote the role of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in extracurricular activities and organization of emulation movements. Some programs organized by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union now have many changes, much towards equipping social skills to meet the legitimate interests of students in studying, living, and entertainment. Through specific activities, the student's subject role will be promoted, oriented for students to consciously absorb and apply to the activities of the student community. The school needs to promote the campaign and gradually create an emulation movement among students in the morale of 03 responsibilities: responsibility to self, family, and society.

4. Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Firstly, the research design utilized self-reported Likert scale surveys to collect data about awareness of current social skills education from teachers and educational managers at the targeted schools, which was convenient to cover a large scale of topics in a limited time but affected significantly by participants' own perspectives and biases. Secondly, there has not been a survey on parents of students, who play an important role in coordination with schools in educating social skills. Thirdly, most of the hypotheses and measures of this study focused on the cognitive aspect of social skills, while the effective and behavioral aspects are also critical. Lastly, the proposed measure has not been tested by longitudinal experimental research. The authors hope that the new studies in the future of the same field can address these limitations.

5. Conclusion

Social skills are a combination of many different social behavior factors in a human's living environment towards success in social activities. Currently, the social skills of junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City are only at an average level. Diversifying thematic organization and extracurricular activities is one of the managerial measures to improve the quality of life skills education activities for junior high school students in Ho Chi Minh City that school leaders and teachers can adopt.

However, to let this measure be effective, it is necessary to ensure several conditions such as:

1. autonomy mechanism of junior high schools;
2. educational forces who have a good awareness of social skills education for students;
3. school-staffs and teachers must master students' learning ability, activity interests, and relationships to build an educationally meaningful working environment, fully equipped with facilities and suitable training programs following the content and plan set out.

These conditions require the cooperation and solidarity of all educational forces and the entire education system from central to local levels.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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