

Soft Skills Training to Become Professionals for Students at Samakisast Wittaya School in Sadao, Thailand

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Abstract

This community service program was conducted at Samakisast Wittaya School, Sadao, Thailand, to address the lack of students' interpersonal readiness for higher education and employment. The activity aimed to strengthen soft skills such as professional demeanor, communication, teamwork, and courteous speech. Using participatory action research integrated with community-based research, service-learning, and asset-based community development, the one-day program engaged sixty students through tutorials and rotating practice stations focusing on appearance, posture, handshake protocol, and polite expressions. The results showed high participation, improved understanding of the importance of soft skills, and observable behavioral enhancement during coached demonstrations. Tangible outputs included behavioral rubrics and photo documentation for continued use. The program concludes that a participatory, low-cost, and asset-based model effectively embeds soft-skills training into school routines and can serve as a foundation for sustained teacher-led reinforcement and future quantitative evaluation.

Keywords: *soft skills, communication, teamwork, professionalism, Thailand*

Introduction

Pesantren, or Islamic boarding schools, provide a distinctive fusion of religious and academic instruction, focusing on forming students' moral principles, self-discipline, and character. These educational establishments provide a supportive environment for pupils to develop a strong feeling of cultural identity, religious fervor, and community. In the Pesantren system, the Kyai, or religious leader, plays a crucial role in encouraging students' intellectual as well as spiritual and moral development (ILMI, 2023). Pesantren's controlled environment, which is marked by a regimented daily schedule and community living, greatly aids in the complete development of pupils by imparting virtues like moderation, honesty, and responsibility (Mardiah Astuti et al., 2023; Putri Ambarwati, 2023).

The curriculum in Pesantren aims to balance academic knowledge with traditional religious teachings, preparing students to face contemporary challenges while maintaining a strong foundation in Islamic principles (Muhamad Slamet et al., 2023; Robbaniyah & Lina, 2023). This involves integrating religious subjects into the national curriculum, enabling students to compete academically beyond the Pesantren environment (Alawiyah et al., 2023). Furthermore, Islamic education strongly emphasizes character development, emphasizing the growth of qualities like independence, simplicity, and sincerity (Mushthofa et al., 2023; Zubaidi & Ridlo, 2023).

Despite Pesantren students' unique challenges, such as adapting to communal living and maintaining a disciplined lifestyle, perseverance and sincerity are key to fully appreciating the experience (Jallow, 2023). Institutions like the Samakisast Wittaya School have implemented transformational leadership to enhance educational standards, reflecting the evolving administration of Pesantren in response to contemporary needs (Jannah et al., 2023). Despite its challenges, the Pesantren system provides a comprehensive education rooted in Islamic traditions and values, equipping students for academic success and personal growth.

Future professionals, such as Santri, must focus on acquiring a wide range of soft skills essential for workplace success. These skills include leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and effective communication. Effective communication is crucial for articulating ideas and fostering productive workplace interactions

(Rosmiati & Hendriani, 2023). Employers emphasize collaboration and teamwork because these skills foster innovation and increased efficiency in businesses (Fetahu & Lekli, 2023a; Varhata et al., 2023).

Across secondary and upper-secondary levels, many students approach graduation without the interpersonal and self-management competencies employers increasingly expect: communication, teamwork, professionalism, and problem-solving, commonly labeled “soft skills.” The consequence is a persistent school-to-work readiness gap that constrains employability even when technical knowledge is adequate. Empirical studies confirm that employers rate these non-technical competencies as decisive in hiring and early career success (Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Samakisast Wittaya School, located in Sadao, Thailand, is renowned for its commitment to high-quality education. The campus, surrounded by lush greenery, provides a tranquil learning environment. The school's dedication to academic excellence is reflected in its modern facilities and experienced faculty. Additionally, the school emphasizes extracurricular activities, allowing students to develop their talents and interests beyond the classroom. With a strong sense of community and a focus on holistic development, Samakisast Wittaya School fosters an environment where students can thrive academically and personally. In Sadao, Thailand, Samakisast Wittaya School has piloted a soft-skills training program to address this gap through briefings, interactive practice (e.g., posture, handshakes, speaking, “magic words”), and habit-formation routines. On May 22, 2024, the program engaged ~60 students and staff in the school hall, providing structured opportunities to practice professional demeanor and communication.

While community service projects are effective in teaching soft skills, there is criticism that they may not directly address urgent social issues such as healthcare, education, and poverty. Globally, employers recognize the importance of soft skills, including interpersonal, communication, and emotional and social intelligence, for career and personal growth (Fetahu & Lekli, 2023b; Rosmiati & Hendriani, 2023). The World Development Report 2019 emphasizes that complex problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability are increasingly demanded across occupations, strengthening the case for deliberate soft-skills development before graduation (World Bank, 2019).

These skills enhance employability and adaptability in a rapidly changing labor market (Tyschenko, 2023), promoting individual and societal prosperity (Nataliia, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to systematically integrate soft skills development into curricula at all educational levels to ensure higher education standards (Zubenko & Ishchuk, 2022).

Meta-evidence further shows that soft-skills capability is associated with employability outcomes and is viewed by employers as at least as important as domain knowledge. A large comparative survey documents a consistent employer–student perception gap: employers prioritize soft skills more than students do, suggesting underinvestment by learners absent explicit curricular emphasis (Succi & Canovi, 2020; Villegas, 2024).

In conclusion, while teaching soft skills is beneficial, holistic community development requires a well-rounded, integrated approach that addresses urgent and systemic community issues, supported by formal educational initiatives. This journal article explores the effectiveness of soft skills development programs at Samakisast Wittaya School and how these can be applied in community service contexts to address pressing social issues.

Peer-reviewed studies converge on several points. First, executives consistently rank communication, integrity/professionalism, teamwork, and a positive attitude among the most critical attributes for workplace success (Robles, 2012). Second, systematic reviews map a growing body of scholarship linking soft skills to graduate employability, recommending structured, practice-rich pedagogies to develop them (Villegas, 2024). Third, causal evidence, though still limited in secondary education, indicates that targeted soft-skills training can improve job-search and employment outcomes among youth (Groh et al., 2016).

Context-specific research from Thailand underscores relevance to the local schooling environment. Studies of Thai schools (e.g., Khon Kaen and Samut Prakan) highlight the need for soft skills among teachers and students and identify communication, teamwork, and problem-solving as priority domains for development. Complementary work with Thai ELT teachers shows these competencies can be intentionally integrated into classroom practice (Rongraung et al., 2014).

To effectively teach soft skills to students at Samakisast Wittaya School in Sadao, Thailand, a combination of tutorial and hands-on training sessions is employed. The method involves several structured steps to ensure comprehensive learning and practical application. The following implementation strategy is utilized: First, Needs Assessment: Conduct a thorough assessment to identify the specific soft skills needs of Samakisast Wittaya School students. This involves surveys, interviews, and consultations with educators, students, and employers to pinpoint the most critical soft skills required for their professional success.

Second, Awareness and Benefits Explanation: Explain to the students the importance and benefits of soft skills in their future careers. This step includes seminars and workshops highlighting how soft skills such as effective communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence can enhance their employability and career progression.

Third, Interactive Training Sessions: Engage students in interactive training sessions where they can discuss and practice various soft skills. These sessions are designed to be participatory, encouraging students to engage in role-playing, group discussions actively, and real-life scenarios to practice appearance, posture, handshakes, speaking, and using polite expressions or "magic words".

Fourth, Practical Exercises and Feedback: Implement practical exercises that allow students to apply what they have learned in simulated professional environments. Instructors provide continuous feedback and guidance to help students refine their skills and build confidence.

Fifth, Integration and Habit Formation: Encourage students to integrate soft skills into daily routines through regular practice and reinforcement. This step aims to make these skills a natural part of their behavior, ensuring they become ingrained in their professional and personal interactions.

By following this method, it is anticipated that students at Samakisast Wittaya School will gain knowledge and understanding of essential soft skills and develop the ability to apply them effectively in real-world situations. This comprehensive approach ensures that soft skills training becomes integral to their professional culture, preparing them for successful careers.

Methods

This community service program (PKM) was carried out on 22 May 2024 at the Samakisast Wittaya School Hall, Sadao, Thailand, in collaboration with Samakisast Wittaya School as the local partner. The activity involved approximately sixty participants, including students and teaching personnel from the school community. The training focused on enhancing students' professional demeanor and soft skills, including appearance, posture while standing or sitting, handshake etiquette, speaking, and using polite expressions or "magic words," delivered through tutorials and hands-on practice stations. The PKM adopted a participatory, interdisciplinary, and sustainable design that integrated four complementary community-engagement approaches. Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasized iterative cycles of problem identification, action, reflection, and redesign conducted with the school community to ensure relevance and shared ownership (Baum et al., 2006). Community-Based Participatory Research (CBR/CBPR) highlighted equitable collaboration among school stakeholders—leaders, teachers, and students—throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation, strengthening local capacity (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Service-Learning (SL) applied experiential learning principles combining briefing, practice, and reflection to improve student outcomes through alignment with the curriculum, student participation, and structured reflection (Celio et al., 2011). Finally, Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) built upon the school's existing strengths—committed teachers, student motivation, and available hall facilities—to co-create solutions and sustainable routines that the school could maintain independently (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

These approaches were chosen to co-design the program with the school (PAR, CBR), embed practice-oriented pedagogy (SL), and utilize existing assets for sustainability (ABCD). The implementation consisted of five interconnected stages. The first stage, Co-Planning and Needs Assessment, involved consultations with school leaders and teachers to identify priority soft skills and determine feasible delivery methods, using the school hall and schedule as in-kind resources. The second stage, Awareness and Benefit Signaling, began with a plenary session explaining the importance of soft skills for employability and school culture. The third stage, Interactive

Training and Guided Practice, allowed students to rotate among stations focusing on appearance, posture, handshake, and polite communication, supported by instructor modeling and real-time feedback. The fourth stage, Consolidation and Reflection, facilitated group discussions where students shared insights and teachers planned classroom integration. Finally, the Post-Session Integration and Follow-up stage enabled teachers to embed short posture and speaking drills in daily routines, supported by light monitoring to encourage habit formation (Lally et al., 2010).

The implementation of this program involved a clear division of roles among partners. The school partner provided the venue, mobilized participants, contributed cultural and contextual insights, and ensured ongoing reinforcement of activities. The PKM team was responsible for instructional design from educational, psychological, and management perspectives and for facilitation, measurement, and data analysis. The participants, consisting of students and teachers, played key roles as beneficiaries and co-facilitators to sustain the program beyond its initial phase.

Three leading indicators were measured to evaluate the outcomes. Soft-Skills Self-Efficacy (SSE) was assessed through a 12-item, 5-point Likert questionnaire measuring students' confidence in communication, teamwork, and professionalism, with internal consistency verified using Cronbach's α (Cronbach, 1951). Observed Behavioral Performance (OBP) was evaluated through three rubrics covering posture, handshake, and speaking, each scored by two trained raters, and reliability was confirmed using ICC(2,k) with a 95% confidence interval (Koo & Li, 2016). Practice Frequency or Habit Index (PF/H) combined weekly records of classroom micro-practices and a 4-item habit-automaticity scale to measure behavioral maintenance (Lally et al., 2010).

Data collection used pre- and post-surveys, direct behavioral observation, and follow-up mini-scales. Analyses were conducted at $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed) with 95% confidence intervals, and effect sizes were reported to strengthen cumulative findings (Lakens, 2013). Immediate effects were analyzed using paired *t*-tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, while follow-up analysis examined the relationship between practice frequency and sustained performance. Holm–Bonferroni adjustments were applied across the three OBP domains to control for multiple comparisons. With approximately sixty participants, the study had sufficient power ($> .80$) to detect moderate effects

($dz \approx 0.45\text{--}0.50$), consistent with evidence from service-learning research that structured programs with reflection and partnership yield measurable skill improvements (Celio et al., 2011).

Participation was voluntary and supervised by the school, with no identifying information collected to ensure confidentiality. Results were shared with the school as part of a continuous improvement process in line with the CBR principle of benefit sharing. The overall approach emphasized teacher-led micro-routines and the optimal use of existing school facilities, ensuring cost efficiency and sustainability (ABCD). At the same time, iterative reflection cycles (PAR) and student engagement (SL) supported internalization and long-term behavioral change.

Flagship Program: “Soft-Skills to Professionalism” Initiative

The flagship program aims to develop students’ professional demeanor, communication, teamwork, and leadership through structured, practice-oriented activities conducted within the school and extended to the broader community. This initiative is grounded in community-engagement and learning frameworks such as Service Learning (SL), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBR), and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), all of which emphasize reciprocity, partnership, and sustainability. Evidence shows that SL and socio-emotional learning programs produce measurable gains in student skills, attitudes, and academic performance (Celio et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2011). Implemented at Samakisast Wittaya School in Sadao, Thailand, with around sixty students and teachers, the pilot on May 22, 2024, included four subprograms.

Program A, the *Professional Demeanor and Communication Clinics*, enhanced individual professionalism through tutorials, rotating practice stations, and peer feedback focusing on appearance, posture, handshakes, and polite speech. Program B, the *Peer-Led Teamwork and Leadership Labs*, strengthened collaboration and leadership via role rotations and short teamwork challenges, fostering readiness for collective tasks (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Program C, the *Service-Learning “Courtesy and Care” Micro-Projects*, transferred school-based soft skills to the community through initiatives like “Greet & Guide” and “Market Day Ambassadors,” promoting civic engagement (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). Lastly, Program D, the *Teacher-*

Champion and Parent Engagement Series, empowered teachers and parents to sustain behavioral reinforcement through workshops and asset mapping (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Collectively, these programs built a participatory, sustainable model that strengthened school–community collaboration and nurtured lifelong professionalism among students.

Results

The community service program, which was conducted on 22 May 2024 at Samakisast Wittaya School Hall in Sadao, Thailand, involved around sixty students and teachers actively participating throughout the sessions. The activity followed a structured sequence consisting of an opening session emphasizing the importance of soft skills, followed by several hands-on practice stations—appearance, posture (standing and sitting), handshake etiquette, speaking, and polite expressions or "magic words"—and concluded with a reflection session.

The first outcome, Increased Knowledge, showed that students became more aware of the importance of communication, teamwork, professional demeanor, and courteous language for employability and personal growth. The discussion during the opening briefing was well-received, reinforcing the value of these skills in academic and workplace settings. This finding aligns with large-scale studies demonstrating that structured, school-based socio-emotional learning programs can improve student attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic outcomes (Celio et al., 2011).



Figure 1. Training Participants

The second outcome, Improved Skills and Observable Behavior, was evident through students' participation in rotating practical stations. They practiced maintaining a neat appearance, proper posture, effective handshakes, and polite speech while receiving real-time feedback from instructors. The practice-based and feedback-driven approach, similar to service-learning methods, has been proven to generate measurable improvements in behavioral performance and skill mastery (Celio et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).



Figure 2. Discussion & Sharing Session

Finally, the third outcome, Tangible Products, resulted in the creation of behavioral checklists and rubrics designed for both coaching and evaluation purposes. These instruments covered four domains—appearance, posture, handshake, and speaking—with performance criteria rated on a five-point scale ranging from “needs practice” to “excellent.” The design allows efficient observation and provides formative feedback while ensuring reliability through inter-rater consistency using ICC(2,k) (Koo & Li, 2016) and internal consistency with Cronbach’s α (Cronbach, 1951). Overall, the program not only enhanced participants’ soft skills but also produced standardized tools for future implementation and evaluation.

All key objectives of the PKM—including partner collaboration, participant engagement, knowledge transfer, and behavioral improvement—were successfully achieved. Tangible outcomes such as documentation, photos, and station instruments are ready for inclusion as appendices and for further quantitative validation in subsequent program cycles.

Discussion

The implementation of the soft-skills training program at Samakisast Wittaya School demonstrated that a participatory and practice-based model can effectively enhance students' interpersonal competence and professional readiness. The results confirm that experiential and reflective learning, as integrated through Service-Learning (SL) and socio-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, significantly improves not only understanding but also observable behavioral changes. This is consistent with previous evidence showing that such structured, interactive interventions foster lasting improvements in attitudes, communication, and collaboration among students (Celio et al., 2011).

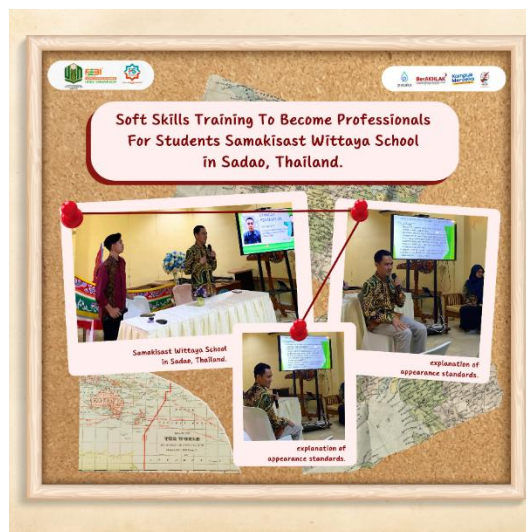


Figure 3. Explanation of Appearance Standards

Furthermore, the PKM successfully provided a bridge between community-based practice and research validation by generating measurable instruments such as rubrics and behavioral checklists. These tools ensure transparency, reliability, and the potential for longitudinal tracking of progress through Cronbach's α and ICC metrics. The activity also highlights the relevance of feedback-driven practice in building self-awareness and confidence—skills consistently identified by employers as critical for employability (Durlak et al., 2011; Robles, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Overall, all program components—from student engagement to partner collaboration—functioned synergistically to create a sustainable, low-cost, and replicable model. The integration of micro-routines (e.g., short posture and speaking drills) and teacher involvement ensures that soft-skills cultivation becomes an embedded part of school culture, aligning educational practice with real-world professional demands.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This community service program, implemented on 22 May 2024 at Samakisast Wittaya School in Sadao, Thailand, involving around sixty students and teaching personnel, successfully achieved its intended objectives. The plenary session effectively increased students' understanding of the importance of soft skills—particularly professional demeanor, communication, teamwork, and courtesy—as essential attributes for employability and everyday civility within the school environment. Furthermore, the practice-based training through rotating stations, focusing on appearance, posture, handshake etiquette, and polite speech, enabled students to directly apply what they learned through real-time coaching and peer feedback. The program also produced tangible outputs, including photo documentation and behavior-based checklists or rubrics that can serve as practical tools for teachers to reinforce and evaluate student performance continuously. Overall, the activity demonstrated that a participatory, low-cost, and asset-based model is both feasible and effective for integrating soft-skill development into school routines.

To ensure sustainability and improvement, several recommendations are proposed. For the school, it is essential to institutionalize short micro-routines such as posture and speaking drills at the beginning of classes, appoint teacher-champions to maintain rubric calibration and peer mentoring, and incorporate courtesy phrases and confident introductions into school assemblies and student activities. The use of behavioral checklists as formative tools is also recommended to monitor and measure progress. For the PKM team, future cycles should include pre- and post-assessment instruments to measure self-efficacy and observable behaviors with established reliability (Cronbach's α , ICC), conduct short-term follow-ups to evaluate habit maintenance, and expand through service-learning projects that connect classroom skills with community engagement. Additionally, the introduction

of digital micro-learning resources can facilitate teacher onboarding and student self-practice. Finally, for broader collaboration, the involvement of parents and the local community is encouraged through brief workshops that promote polite expressions, confident communication, and family-based reinforcement, accompanied by a “Professionalism Quick-Guide.” Together, these steps ensure that the program’s impact remains sustainable, scalable, and beneficial for both students and the community.

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