

## Soft Skills in Counseling Children with Special Needs

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to examine the soft skills needed to counsel children with special needs in schools. This study uses a qualitative method with literature review. The soft skills examined in this study include the skills needed to implement counseling for various children with special needs, which must be trained by undergraduate students majoring in guidance and counseling and psychology. Based on the results of the study, in order to train soft skills for counseling children with special needs, there needs to be an integration of counseling practicum courses in collaboration with several disability communities and schools that have children with special needs, so that the counseling practicum process can be more factual with the needs in inclusive schools. The soft skills that need to be trained in counseling children with special needs are the ability to empathize, the ability to solve problems with diverse student disabilities, and effective communication.

**Keywords:** Soft Skills, Counseling, Children with Special Needs

### INTRODUCTION

One indicator of a developed country is that its citizens are supported by adequate quality education. Currently, the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions is increasing. The largest increase was in 2023 with an 8% jump from the previous year, followed by a 7% increase in 2024. This steady increase indicates the growing interest and accessibility of the public to higher education. Based on data obtained from the Higher Education Database (PDDikti) of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology in 2024, the number of students enrolled in public and private universities throughout Indonesia was 9,967,487. The number of registered students consists of diploma one, diploma two, diploma three, diploma four, bachelor's, master's, doctoral, specialist, and professional programs (PDDikti, 2024).

However, the increasing number of students is not matched by the absorption of educated workers. The Indonesian Central Statistics Agency reported on the employment situation in Indonesia in February 2025 that the unemployment rate reached 7.28 million people with an open rate (TPT) of 4.76% (Central Statistics Agency, 2025). Based on this data, the absorption of educated workers is still low, resulting in a high unemployment rate among university graduates. Findings from the International Labor Organization (2024) identify two main types of mismatches: qualification mismatch (education level is not appropriate) and skill mismatch (skills possessed are not in line with job requirements). Thus, these findings indicate a gap between the education system and the world of work in Indonesia, where college graduates are not fully in line with the needs of the job market, which is consistently identified in various employment reports and analyses.

The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology responded to the International Labor Organization (ILO) report by encouraging the implementation of an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) curriculum

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in Indonesian universities. The policy on the implementation of OBE in all universities in Indonesia is stipulated in Permendikbudristek Number 53 of 2023, which was issued on August 16, 2023. The objective of this curriculum is to focus on learning outcomes (what students know and are able to do after graduation), which includes not only academic knowledge (hard skills) but also attitudes, values, and non-technical skills (soft skills). This ensures that graduates have skills that are relevant to the needs of the world of work.

Soft skills are very important in careers that require interaction with other people (Spencer, 2015). Sonmez (2015) defines soft skills in terms of people skills as skills that are very important for everyone because people do not live alone and always strive to connect effectively with others. Soft skills are also attributes that individuals must possess, such as communication, negotiation skills, team building, ethics, problem solving, adapting theory to practice, time management skills, and the ability to understand and work with a diverse group of people (Sloane & Miller, 2016; Gheytsi et al., 2014).

Soft skills are also an important part of the competencies of guidance and counseling teachers who are currently facing challenges in implementing inclusive education, with the task of providing counseling services to children with special needs in regular schools. Some children with special needs are highly emotional, which can lead to aggressive behavior, while others have a very low level of academic understanding compared to their peers, visual impairments, and deafness. These conditions require empathy, skilled communication, and patience in solving problems during counseling services. This is because counselors need to understand their cognitive, emotional, and social conditions more comprehensively, thus requiring in-depth intervention in counseling services.

Several efforts in handling children with special needs in regular schools include training to improve the collaboration skills of teachers in inclusive schools (Rosita et al., 2022), counseling training for guidance and counseling teachers based on FQoL in assisting parents who have children with special needs (Rosita et al., 2022), and training on the professional competence of guidance and counseling teachers in the implementation of inclusive education (Ginting et al., 2024). Some of these training programs are conducted outside of student learning activities and even after they become teachers in schools. Therefore, these efforts need to be integrated with the higher education curriculum to improve the soft skills of Guidance and Counseling undergraduate students. Based on this background, this study will examine the role of soft skills needed to provide counseling to children with special needs.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method in the form of a literature review. A literature study is research that uses books and other literature as the main object, which is related to the values, culture, and norms that develop in the social situation being studied (Sugiyono, 2010; Rosita et al., 2020). This method uses descriptive analysis to provide a clear, objective, systematic, analytical, and critical description and explanation. The purpose of this study is to examine the soft skills needed in counseling children with special needs.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Soft skills are attributes that individuals must possess, such as communication, negotiation skills, team building, ethics, problem solving, adapting theory to practice, time management skills, and the ability to understand and work with the diverse cultures of a group of people (Sloane & Miller, 2016; Gheytsi et al., 2014). According to Sonmez (2015), soft skills are defined in terms of people skills as skills that are very important for everyone because people do not live alone and always try to connect effectively with others.

American scientists have proven that 75-85% of professional success depends on soft skills and only 25-15% on hard skills (Nelson-Jones, 2002). Gruzdev et al. (2018) found that when recruiting university graduates, employers look for specific knowledge and professional skills, including: personal qualities of prospective employees, often referred to as dynamism, willingness to learn, and readiness to start small.

Teaching soft skills in higher education is very possible through special training programs and embedded through their integration into every existing discipline or course (Subramaniam, 2013; Cimatti, 2016). Higher education institutions must know what skills and knowledge students need in the workplace and how to encourage the acquisition of that knowledge. Grummon (1997) points out that in the past, training for specific jobs and trades was the responsibility of vocational education, while training for managerial or professional jobs was the task of higher education institutions.

Houghton and Proscio (2001) indicate that there are several lessons that should be included in training programs. Soft skills training should be integrated throughout the curriculum; teams of participants should complete assigned tasks; role-playing in various company positions should be used; and workplace discipline should be included in all areas of training. Brown (2002) states that teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking should be taught in the context of the students' social world. By placing students in work situations, workplace learning experiences can highlight the development of general skills while developing work or technical skills. In addition, participation in social, community, and religious organizations allows for experimental learning in the community, and this can help college graduates build soft skills (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Therefore, social learning that occurs routinely without direct intervention supports the conclusion that involvement in communities or good organizations can facilitate and help improve soft skills among individuals (Kolb, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

One of the soft skills that needs to be improved by undergraduate students in the Psychology and Guidance and Counseling study programs is soft skills in counseling. Often, students only learn counseling practices in laboratories provided by the campus and bring in subjects who are willing to be counseled, and cases related to counseling children with special needs are very rare. Therefore, the problems that arise during the counseling process are limited to cases involving adults. Thus, there is a need to integrate counseling practicum courses in collaboration with several disability communities and schools that have children with special needs, so that the counseling practicum process can be more realistic in terms of the needs of inclusive schools.

According to Paisley & Borders, (1995), counseling in schools is a comprehensive program. Therefore, the individual counseling process can have a significant impact on improving students' understanding. This is because counselors strive to improve students' attitudes by interacting with them face-to-face over a certain period of time to bring about improvements in students' thinking, attitudes, and behavior. However, counseling children with special needs requires trained soft skills because they have different needs from regular students.

The first soft skill required when counseling children with special needs is empathy in cognitive and emotional aspects. Cognitive empathy is the ability to recognize the emotions of students with special needs, while emotional empathy is the ability to share the emotions of students with special needs (Rosita et al., 2024). Students' ability to have good empathy for students with special needs requires direct contact with students with special needs by visiting inclusive schools, special needs schools, or disability communities. This is expected to enable students to provide empathetic social support and have good control over their interaction patterns. Thus, students can project themselves into the situation of children with special needs, making the counseling more inclusive.

To support inclusivity in counseling students with special needs, in addition to empathy, the second soft skill required of students is the ability to solve problems with a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of student disabilities. This is because one disability condition can have different characteristics and problems. For example, students with dyslexia are at risk of anxiety and feeling depressed due to their low academic achievement (Willcutt & Pennington, 2000), but this condition is different from that of regular students because children with dyslexia have low academic achievement not because they are lazy to study but because they have reading difficulties that affect their understanding of the material presented by the teacher. In fact, according to data from the International Dyslexia Association (Rosita & Annisa, 2022), other common problems experienced by people with dyslexia include (1) learning to speak, (2) learning letters and their sounds, (3) organizing written and spoken language, (4) memorizing facts and numbers, (5) reading fast enough to understand, (6) following and understanding longer

reading tasks, (7) spelling, (8) learning foreign languages, and (9) doing math operations correctly. However, currently, many students still do not understand the learning disabilities in students caused by dyslexia, which is the main factor contributing to low learning achievement in children (Rosita & Annisa, 2022). Therefore, when counseling children with dyslexia, it is necessary to first ensure that students understand how to identify the specific needs that will be addressed in each aspect.

Identification of problems faced by children with special needs must be carried out before the children receive counseling. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate more project-based courses into schools with observation and interview assignments, because the material in class correlates the understanding gained from theory with the actual problems faced by children with special needs in schools. Accurate problem identification can improve soft skills for problem solving in counseling sessions because students have a comprehensive understanding of the diversity of student disabilities.

Soft skills in problem solving also need to be supported by a third soft skill, namely effective communication, in order to facilitate the counseling process to run optimally. Effective communication in counseling sessions with children with special needs needs to pay attention to the delivery of sentences during the counseling session, namely by not emphasizing the counselor's high expectations for rapid change in the process of dealing with behavioral problems. Therefore, during counseling, it is necessary to give appreciation with proportional praise for changes in the behavior of children with special needs in each counseling session. The need to give appreciation with praise during counseling sessions needs to be proportional because for most children it may reinforce the desired behavior, but for some children with special needs, such as some children with selective mutism, praise and attention may not be positive reinforcers. Research shows that children with selective mutism (SM) are often very sensitive to all social observations, including praise, which can inadvertently increase their anxiety and feelings of embarrassment. This sensitivity stems from the fundamental nature of SM as an anxiety disorder associated with a fear of speaking in certain social situations (Renk et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on a review of the research literature, in order to support inclusivity in counseling practices for children with special needs, it is necessary to train undergraduate students in guidance and counseling soft skills that are integrated into counseling practicum courses in collaboration with several disability communities and schools that have children with special needs, so that the counseling practicum process can be more relevant to their needs. The soft skills that need to be trained include the ability to empathize, the ability to solve problems with diverse disabilities among students, and effective communication.

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