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A Contextual Framework for Soft Skills Development among Novice Teachers in the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

The professional growth of teachers serves as a key mechanism to drive curriculum transformation and pedagogical methods which develop student abilities in soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and critical thinking. The research presented here is an evidence - based framework to enhance novice secondary school teachers' delivery of such soft skills education. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), the Maldives experiences significant teacher attrition rates in secondary education due to teacher dissatisfaction and burnout, which could be alleviated through gaining the relevant soft skills. The proposed framework combines international teaching methods from Finland, Singapore, and Australia with local solutions to manage the challenges of insufficient mentorship and restricted professional development opportunities. The novelty of the proposed framework lies in combining interactive strategies, reflective practices, and structured mentorship into an integrated model tailored to under- resourced contexts. The framework will be implemented through four sequential phases: (1) qualitative needs assessment, (2) framework co- design and development, (3) pilot testing and empirical validation, and (4) iterative refinement, using Design-Based Research (DBR) principles, and a pragmatic paradigm. It is expected to increase novice teachers' confidence in integrating collaboration, communication, and emotional intelligence in their teaching methods, while also enhancing student participation through project-based and interactive learning methods.

1. INTRODUCTION

The educational environment of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like the Maldives requires novice teachers in the first three years of their teaching career to be actively learning towards becoming an accomplished teacher. This requires them to be innovative and creative, to address modern classroom demands, whilst working within existing institutional limitations. The Maldivian national curriculum has adopted a competency-based approach to school education, through its 2015 national curriculum

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framework which expects teachers to teach communication skills, critical thinking skills, creativity, and innovation to the students (Maldives Ministry of Education, 2015).

Research on Maldivian pre-service teacher preparation programs shows a major gap in the integration of soft skills into the preservice training curriculum (Mohamed & Abdul-Rahman, 2017; Ahmed & Ibrahim, 2021). As Zahir (2022) notes, the preservice teacher training frameworks in the Maldives are still very much focused on subject content and traditional pedagogy with little incorporation of socio - emotional and interpersonal skill development. This reinforces the need for beginning teachers to continue professional development in soft skills as they enter the teaching force. The high rate of turnover from Maldivian secondary schools' stems from novice teachers who lack essential conflict resolution abilities, collaboration, and communication skills needed to manage parents, maintain student interest, and fulfil school requirements.

This challenge creates negative effects on student learning outcomes, as teacher turnover has been shown to negatively affect student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013), while working against the national education goals established in the Maldives Education Sector Plan (2019) and the National Curriculum Framework (2015), which focuses on teaching soft skills for career readiness and holistic student development.

Supportive administrators and fellow teachers can function as guides and guardians in their initial entry into teaching. However, school staff may not have the knowledge and skills to support innovative future-ready teaching, incorporating soft skills into school curricula. Adaptability, emotional resilience, and effective communication are essential soft skills for preparing both teachers and students to succeed in future-ready environments (OECD, 2021).

In this concept paper, soft skills are identified as lifelong learning skills, collaboration and teamwork skills, problem-solving, and transformational leadership skills as given in the above Professional Standards for teachers. Additional to these skills, in a needs analysis for this project, teachers themselves had identified advanced communication skills, conflict management, and time management as essential skills to achieve the above expectations.

This paper develops a context-responsive framework which aims to enhance soft skills development for novice secondary school teachers in the Maldives. The framework draws its foundation from Design-Based Research (DBR), and uses professional development models from Finland, Singapore, and Australia to develop a framework tailored to the Maldivian context. The mentorship model in Finland demonstrates benefits for island systems that span multiple geographical areas. At the same time, Singapore's Teacher Growth Model (TGM) provides a framework for teacher leadership development, and Australia shows how social-emotional learning (SEL) can be successfully integrated into national standards. The program contains specific elements that meet the Maldivian requirements for distributed mentorship and sustained professional development, and curriculum-based competencies.

The proposed framework combines experiential learning with reflective practice, peer teaching, and structured virtual and physical mentorship to address institutional limitations, and geographic challenges which are typical of Small Island States (UNCTAD, 2024; Ramkissoon & Joseph, 2024). The proposed conceptual framework and embedded action research contributes to the wider conversation about equitable skills-based teacher education, and reflective teacher practice, in the Global South.

The following questions guided this concept paper:

i. What changes in teacher practices can better equip novice teachers to foster soft skills in 21st-century classrooms, particularly within a small island developing state context?
ii. Which teaching methods and support structures are most effective in helping novice educators integrate soft skills into their teaching?

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iii. What should a practical teacher professional development framework include to support development and enactment of soft skills curricula by novice secondary teachers in their classroom teaching?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Models for Soft Skills Integration in Teacher Training

The most effective teacher professional development models focus on experiential learning combined with mentorship and collaborative approaches. Professional development programs that include project- based learning (PjBL), cooperative learning and social-emotional learning (SEL) have demonstrated effectiveness (María, Esteve-Faubel, Chust-Pérez, & Botella-Quirant, 2025). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) program enhances emotional intelligence and academic engagement when teachers receive proper training (Lin & Lin, 2023).

The implementation of mentorship programs proves most beneficial for novice teachers who want to develop their soft skills abilities. The research by Carvalho and Vilaça (2024) shows that mentorship helps teachers with classroom management and communication while Tierney et al. (2022) discovered that these initiatives lead to better collaboration and student engagement. The combination of experiential strategies including internships and classroom simulations provides preservice teachers with practical experiences that boost their confidence according to Boyd et al. (2009) and Zuniga (2019).

The project-based learning (PjBL) approach fits within both personal and social constructivist theories of learning, where knowledge is constructed through active engagement in inquiry with other like-minded learners, on a topic which is meaningful, relevant and of interest to the learners, working both independently and collaboratively. PjBL enables teachers to develop innovative and creative solutions. Working together as teams towards the production of a finished product, a design, or a simulation, and presenting their product enables teachers to use creativity, communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability (Ravitz, Hixson, English, & Mergendoller, 2012; Yang, Skelcher & Gao, 2021). The research conducted by Sviatko (2023) and Aifan (2022) demonstrates that teachers who use soft skills in their curriculum delivery achieve better academic results and develop stronger people skills. These educational approaches teach teachers the skills needed for modern workplaces, which creates a natural progression from academic to professional environments (Thornhill-Miller et al. 2023).

2.2 Challenges Faced by Novice Teachers in Implementing Soft Skills

New teachers encounter significant challenges when they attempt to use their theoretical knowledge in classroom teaching. For novice teachers, the transition from preservice education to classroom practice proves challenging as they must combat classroom management, curriculum delivery, student socio-emotional development, and soft skills implementation (Flores & Day, 2006; Hobson et al., 2009). Research suggests that teacher education programs focus on pedagogical content knowledge, with exceptionally low emphasis given to embedding interpersonal and emotional competencies for curriculum enactment, thereby creating an intensified “reality shock” for new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

The Maldivian secondary school teachers face additional obstacles since the preservice practicum training lasts only five weeks and novice teachers receive inadequate mentoring while having to deal with limited resources and academic support, especially in remote island schools that are spread across the country (Hassan, 2018; UNESCO, 2020; Safri & Jamaludin, 2024).Having to work in remotely located small island communities also limits the opportunities for novice teachers as they need to collaborate and innovate with peers from other schools. This professional isolation is compounded by underdeveloped soft skills such as communication, negotiation, and teamwork, as well as insufficient autonomy in decision-making which, collectively heighten stress, undermine classroom engagement, and increase the risk of burnout (Kazemi Malekmahmoudi et al., 2024; Rajewicz, 2025).

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2.3 Empowering Novice Educators through Integrated Strategies for Soft Skills Development

To address the concerns of novice teachers, professional development programs need to be designed to incorporate fundamental soft skills which include the 4Cs of creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, which are known as meta- competencies, together with adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Thornhill-Miller et al, 2023). A successful support system needs to combine interactive learning with reflective practice, mentorship, and continuous professional development to learn new skills.

2.4 Mentorship and Professional Development as Core Enablers

Research supports the implementation of soft skills for novice teachers through mentorship as an effective strategy. The research by Carvalho and Vilaça (2024) demonstrated that formal mentoring programs improved both classroom organisation and the implementation of soft skills such as emotional intelligence and student teamwork. Through individualised mentorship, novice teachers get the support they need to turn experience-based learning that complements theoretical foundations. The research by Limberg et al. (2021) and Tierney et al. (2022) confirmed that professional development (PD) programs which use collaborative learning, project-based methods, and social-emotional learning (SEL) are effective in building teacher confidence and improving instructional quality.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's transformative SEL-focused PD initiative further established that systematic training in emotional intelligence, flexibility, and collaboration can yield improved teacher and student outcomes (Tierney et al., 2022). Creating a school culture that supports experimentation, reflection, and innovation is equally vital for sustained growth (Lozano et al., 2022).

2.5 Interactive and Experiential Pedagogical Approaches

The development of teamwork skills together with problem-solving abilities and communication competencies depends on interactive educational approaches that include peer teaching, group projects, and project-based learning (PjBL). Martinez (2022), and Dighliya (2025) highlighted that group-based learning tasks increase student engagement while developing leadership abilities and real-world challenge readiness. Aifan (2022) reported that cooperative learning methods simultaneously enhance both interpersonal abilities and academic achievement.

Teacher professional development programs should include experiential learning activities through internships, university-based group learning, and classroom simulations to give novice educators practical experience. The research by Boyd et al. (2009) and Zuniga (2019) revealed that these approaches enhance teacher confidence and readiness through the development of practical skills in real-world settings. Reflective tools such as journaling, sharing learning, and peer feedback enable continuous improvement through their development of self-awareness, adaptability, and empathy (Ball & Ladson-Billings, 2020).

2.6 Continuous Professional Development and Collaborative Partnerships

Teachers need ongoing professional learning through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) initiatives to develop soft skills which they can apply in changing educational environments. Research indicates that CPD programs which focus on local needs, digital pedagogies and social-emotional competencies produce the most significant impact (Aithal & Aithal, 2023; Joseph, 2024). The most effective programs guarantee that professional development stays relevant to classrooms and maintains sensitivity to context while matching real-world teaching environments.

The integration of soft skills becomes more effective when universities and schools work together to match teacher training programs with actual classroom requirements. The proposed feedback systems, co-designed workshops, and structured practicums from Teo et al. (2021) and Gopinathan (2008) enable novice educators to practice soft skills in real-world settings, while also allowing institutions to enhance their training design.

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A comprehensive approach must be implemented to empower novice teachers in developing soft skills through mentorship programs, interactive learning experiences, continuous professional development, and institutional collaboration. The effectiveness of integrated approaches becomes evident through international practices which include SEL-based training in Canada and project-based models in the United States. These methods when adapted to the Maldivian environment will enable novice educators to move forward with assurance while developing classrooms that incorporate soft skills throughout regular teaching activities.

2.7 Alignment of Challenges and Framework Components

The proposed framework directly addresses three main professional development challenges which include insufficient mentoring opportunities; weak collaboration between teachers; and training programs that fail to develop schools' and teachers' capacity in curriculum and instruction design, to meet local needs in resource poor contexts, especially where soft skills training expertise may be limited and costly.

As shown in Table 1, each CPD challenge is mapped to a specific strategy within the proposed framework. For example, peer teaching structures respond to the lack of collaborative opportunities, while journaling and feedback protocols support emotional resilience and reflective growth. Only those components that directly respond to soft skills deficits and structural barriers are prioritised to ensure contextual fit.

Table 1. Alignment of Challenges and Framework Components

Challenges Identified	**Component**
Lack of structured mentorship for novice teachers	Structured mentorship programs linked to continuous CPD
Examination-oriented teaching limiting skill-based learning	Interactive pedagogies such as project-based learning and journaling to be introduced to students
Resource scarcity and limited training tools	Culturally adapted, low-tech simulations and localised role-plays
Geographic teacher isolation across islands	Virtual mentorship and group learning using digital platforms
Limited real-world classroom exposure during preservice training	Extended sharing of classroom-based experiences, school-university collaboration
Inadequate development of emotional and social skills	Reflective journaling, peer feedback, and SEL-informed CPD

2.8 International Frameworks and Models for Designing Teacher Practices to Enhance Soft Skills

Comparative analysis of international teacher development systems reveals that all systems prioritise the integration of soft skills. The Finnish education system uses research-based practicum and mentorship programs while Singapore supports growth through continuous professional development, and leadership pathways. Australia integrates Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and interpersonal skills into national standards. The United Arab Emirates focuses on internships and applied learning. These models are described below.

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2.8.1 Finland's Model: Research-Based Practice and Mentorship

The National Core Curriculum of Finland requires students to develop critical thinking skills, communication, self-expression skills in every subject area (Hautamäki et al., 2023). The teacher education system in Finland focuses on practical learning and mentorship which helps new educators develop soft skills through reflective teaching and classroom immersion (Sahlberg, 2011).

2.8.2 Singapore's Teacher Growth Model (TGM): Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

The TGM in Singapore emphasises emotional intelligence, professional identity, and continuous growth (Tan, 2018). It provides structured pathways to support the development of reflective practitioners with strong interpersonal and leadership capabilities. Workshops and CPD support the integration of soft skills into classroom instruction.

2.8.3 Australia's Standards: National Curriculum Integration

The Australian national curriculum teaches soft skills through its Professional Standards for Teachers which require teachers to demonstrate collaboration, personal, social capability, and critical thinking (AITSL, 2011). Teachers demonstrate these competencies by joining ongoing learning communities (Modi, 2023).

2.8.4 UAE's Applied Learning Approach

The United Arab Emirates supports practical skill development through internships and experiential teacher training programs. The UAE national curriculum includes mentorship programs, emotional intelligence training, and inquiry-based learning methods. The approach employs interactive pedagogy, deliberate practice, and mentor-guided reflection cycles to develop communication, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. The UNICEF (2020) reports that access inequalities between urban and rural schools continue to be a problem.

The research-based practicum in Finland focuses on developing long-term partnerships between schools and universities while using peer mentoring as a professional development tool. The Teacher Growth Model in Singapore uses a step-by-step CPD framework to develop both leadership skills and professional identity of teachers. The AITSL standards in Australia include SEL-like competencies, and the country relies on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for development. The UAE relies on resource-intensive internships to focus on applied learning as its main approach.

The models present essential limitations because mentoring requires substantial financial backing, while leadership development focuses on administrative work instead of teaching effectiveness. PLCs require teachers to spend time immersing themselves in new learning, applying, and trialling the new learning within the classroom, which can be impossible without effective time management and flexible scheduling across the school. Internships in other classes or in other schools, and face- to -face collaborative training workshops need significant financial resources.

The Australian framework shows how to integrate soft skills throughout the entire teacher competency framework, making teachers accountable to implement soft skills within classrooms. The analysis demonstrates that Finland's peer mentorship system combining virtual and on-site mentorship with research-based autonomous teaching methods matches the needs of remote, geographically dispersed small island schools found in the Maldives. Singapore's Teacher Growth Model for continuous professional learning provides a leadership-focused model which works well for constructing professional development pathways for novice teachers. The UAE model demonstrates potential through its extensive internships and teacher training programs, yet its massive funding and infrastructure limitations reduce its applicability to the Maldivian situation, whilst its curriculum for emotional intelligence training and inquiry-based learning

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resonates with the needs of the Maldivian teachers, and national curriculum expectations. Development of teacher autonomy and innovation to address the changing demands of modern classrooms through continuous professional learning in soft skills is an identified gap in professional development standards for Maldivian teachers.

None of the above four models explicitly integrate scalable soft skills pedagogy into novice teacher training within severe resource shortage contexts. The Maldives as a Small Island Developing State faces challenges in delivering in-person mentorship and PLC time because of geographic dispersion, limited staffing, travel time, and associated costs. Hence a hybrid, low-tech, blended virtual and on-site mentorship with explicit curriculum-enactment cycles is more transferable than any single model. The proposed framework incorporates four professional development features which can be adapted to Small Island Developing States; (1) virtual and on-site blended mentorship and coaching, for dispersed geographic areas, (2) culturally adapted low-tech project-based activities and simulations, (3) structured reflective journaling supported by sharing of learning and peer feedback, and (4) integrating new learning into immediate classroom instruction through critical curriculum inquiry and enactment, with modelling and feedback by the mentors using continuous professional development pathways designed for island- based schools. The resulting framework creates a system which trains novice teachers to become reflective practitioners who engage in developing the four key competencies of creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration for the purpose of their own professional development and for integrating these competencies into their own curriculum enactment within classrooms. The goal is for teachers to engage in lifelong learning and inquiry, so that they can make learning relevant and meaningful for the students, whilst meeting national curriculum standards and expectations. The framework links preservice training to vital soft skills required in 21st-century Maldivian classrooms through structured mentorship and interactive pedagogy whilst enabling teachers to engage in continuous professional development and collaborative practice.

The current SIDS research focuses on either student transferable skills or pre-service reform; however, it does not provide adequate support for novice in-service teachers who need (i) soft-skills pedagogy integrated with critical curriculum inquiry and enactment; (ii) mentorship programs designed for teachers that function in remote locations; and (iii) assessment systems and tools for teacher performance and school-based evaluation. The Maldivian Novice Teacher Soft Skills Framework (MNTSF) addresses these three gaps.

The framework provides five main components which include (1) a blended mentorship structure that combines virtual and on-site support for teachers working on islands, (2) low-tech project-based learning (PjBL) and culturally grounded simulations, (3) teachers use journals and peer-feedback protocols as structured reflection tools, (4) the curriculum follows national standards through critical inquiry and enactment cycles, and (5) the DBR validation toolkit includes indicators, instruments, and feasibility checks.

The following Design-Based Research (DBR) roadmap will direct the methodical validation and improvement of the framework to achieve both contextual appropriateness and empirical evidence.

3. PROPOSED VALIDATION PLAN: DESIGN-BASED RESEARCH (DBR ROADMAP)

The research design follows a conceptual framework so the DBR stages function as a theoretical lens to create and validate the framework for the Maldivian educational context. This paper proposes a four-phase DBR roadmap that will guide future validation of the framework. The study adopts Design-Based Research (DBR) as its methodology to develop and refine a teacher training framework which focuses on soft skills education for new teachers in the Maldives. The DBR methodology serves as a practical intervention method which connects theoretical knowledge to practical educational settings through ongoing teamwork and multiple rounds of feedback (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). This approach proves effective for solving

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intricate educational challenges that exist in limited-resource areas with scattered populations such as Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The DBR methodology for this study consists of four sequential phases (see Figure 1) which enhance both the framework's empirical foundation and its contextual adaptability and scalability.

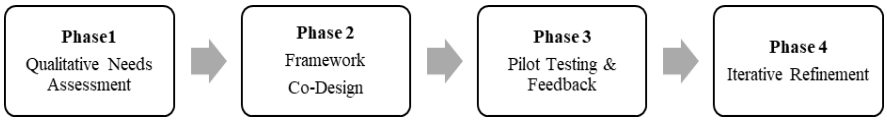

Fig. 1. Framework Development Roadmap

3.1 Phase 1: Qualitative Needs Assessment

The first stage requires developing interview protocols, observation checklists, curriculum evaluation rubrics, and survey instruments to evaluate the difficulties novice teachers encounter when implementing soft skills. The first phase will evaluate the current drivers and barriers for teachers to develop their own soft skills and for soft skills curriculum enactment in classrooms. The tools will help gather qualitative and documentary data to define the framework's content and scope in the future.

The participants for the initial introductory phase will include thirty novice secondary school teachers who teach in either atoll-based or Male' based schools, together with an additional six to eight school leaders and mentors from the same schools. Purposive sampling will be used to select teachers from three distinct categories of secondary schools (urban city, island capital, and remote island school), keen on developing their own soft skills, lifelong learning skills, and developing critical curriculum inquiry skills. Teachers who demonstrate aptitude for critical reflection and curriculum innovation will be prioritised to ensure a sound model is developed.

School leaders and supervising mentors will be invited to participate in both the needs analysis and in the follow-up phases to obtain triangulated insights, and to identify vertical and horizontal strategies for designing a soft skills curriculum for novice teachers and to identify mechanisms to facilitate novice teachers' own learning within classrooms, through curriculum enactment.

3.1.1 Data collection for the needs analysis phase of framework development

For the needs analysis, data will be collected on gaps in curriculum, instruction, and in teacher preparation for curriculum enactment in soft skills.

(i) Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to explore teachers' views about soft skills, existing gaps and required support.

(ii) Schemes of work, unit plans, lesson plans, and classroom instruction evaluation rubrics will be assessed for current instructional practices regarding both cognitive, and non-cognitive interpersonal and socio-emotional skills instruction employed by the participating teachers.

(iii) National teacher education curricula and policy frameworks will be analysed to identify strengths and gaps in the provision of interpersonal and socio-emotional training for both preservice and novice teachers.

(iv) National curriculum framework and subject curriculum documents will be analysed to identify where soft skills can be integrated into the curriculum.

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3.2 Phase 2: Framework Co-Design and Development

This stage will bring together teachers, teacher educators, teacher-mentors, soft-skills trainers, policy experts, and school leaders to co-design a framework based on Phase 1 findings. Six to eight non-teacher participants, including curriculum experts, teacher mentors, and school leaders, will participate in design workshops, to ensure a ratio of one mentor for every six teachers for the collaborative, project- based learning project.

Core Components:

(i) Interactive pedagogy (e.g., peer teaching, project-based learning)
(ii) Reflective and experiential practices (e.g., journaling, feedback protocols)
(iii) Structured mentorship systems (e.g., CPD alignment, virtual mentorship)

The teachers' ability to critically analyse the secondary curriculum documents including the national curriculum framework and national standards, to plan for and enact curricula in interpersonal and socio-emotional skills will be identified through reflective journaling, lesson plan annotations, observation of group sessions, and observation of classroom instruction throughout the project.

Teacher collaboration and decision-making skills will be utilised to decide the duration of the project based soft skills curriculum development and enactment; duration of group sessions, and locations for the sharing and feedback sessions, with a target of at least one group session for each four weeks of the planned six-month framework development project.

At least two classroom observations will be made for each teacher, early on and towards the end of the project, based on professional development need and target identification by each participating teacher. Lesson plan annotations based on self-identified strengths and next steps for learning will be utilised to identify continuous professional development needs of the teachers.

A design team consisting of six to eight soft-skills experts (ideally from the same schools as the teachers) will create and refine the initial soft skills curriculum for teacher professional development. The framework elements will be revised and modified based on identified teacher needs. All strategies will undergo testing for contextual appropriateness through adjustments of PjBL schemes of work and unit plans developed by teachers. Cultural and contextual testing will also occur by adapting PjBL examples to locally relevant curriculum themes. The framework elements will be iteratively reviewed for local relevance and operational feasibility.

3.2.1 Implementation Specifics – (Framework Co-Design and Development)

The co-design stage will incorporate interactive strategies through systematic implementation in professional development programs. The peer teaching sessions will take place in groups of four to six novice teachers under the guidance of a mentor who will have each teacher present a mini lesson every four weeks. The training sessions will teach specific soft skills (communication and conflict management) which teachers must apply to their subject teaching before participating in organised peer assessment discussions. The project-based learning (PjBL) method requires teams of five to seven teachers to create interdisciplinary projects which tackle actual classroom obstacles such as sustainability projects and community-based problem-solving initiatives. Teachers will implement their developed projects in their classrooms before assessing the results and presenting findings at monthly workshops.

Reflective practices will move past basic journaling activities. The teachers will use specific prompts to guide their reflection such as "How did I demonstrate collaboration during today's class?" or "Which student behaviours showed their level of engagement or disengagement with soft skills activities?" The peer feedback process will use a set format which requires teachers to identify one positive aspect and one development opportunity and one potential enhancement for their practice. The reflective records will

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directly contribute to the framework development process through continuous improvement of the model based on teacher experiences.

3.3 Phase 3: Pilot Testing and Empirical Validation

The draft PjBL framework will be implemented over a 6-month period in three secondary schools (urban city, atoll capital, and remote island).

Participants: thirty novice teachers and six mentor teachers.

3.3.1 Data Collection

(i) Likert-scale surveys measuring confidence in teaching soft skills before and after implementation.
(ii) Student feedback on lesson engagement and observed skill application.
(iii) Mentor logs and review notes on classroom implementation and teacher progress.
(iv) Focus group discussions with teachers and mentor's post-implementation.

Quantitative and qualitative data will be triangulated to assess feasibility, relevance, and perceived effectiveness.

3.4 Phase 4: Iterative Refinement

The framework will undergo revisions to improve clarity, adaptability and scalability based on evaluation findings.

(i) At least two stakeholder workshops will be conducted to discuss evaluation results. The sessions will incorporate lifelong learning skills, critical curriculum inquiry and curriculum enactment, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, time management, teamwork and collaboration strategies, advanced communication, and role modelling by teachers, planning for emotionally intelligent teaching and adaptability.

(ii) The final adjustments will incorporate user feedback together with context constraints and emerging needs (e.g., tech limitations or institutional policy shifts).

(iii) This phase will also produce recommendations for national-level policy alignment and potential integration into national in-service teacher education curricula, and pre-service teacher training curricula in teacher training institutions.

An outcome of this phase will be a policy brief together with specific recommendations which can be incorporated into national teacher education programs and shared with the National Institute of Education.

3.4.1 Methodological Considerations and Limitations

The Design-Based Research (DBR) approach provides methodological flexibility and responsiveness to classroom realities which makes it appropriate for educational framework development. However, it also presents certain limitations.

Firstly, while the framework draws from international best practices, its findings require specific adaptation when transferring to low-resource or geographically isolated settings because of the Maldivian education system's island-based geography and exam-driven culture. Thus, the context-specific adaptation of DBR requires sustained stakeholder collaboration and long-term engagement to execute its iterative design cycles. Furthermore, the implementation of such a model across the Maldives requires extensive planning and robust institutional backing.

Consequently, the success of future implementation phases will depend on the availability and commitment of trained mentors, the strength of school–university partnerships, and technological

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infrastructure, particularly in remote islands. These factors must be addressed during subsequent phases of framework testing and validation.

3.5 Key Implementation Strategies Tailored for the Maldives

3.5.1 Culturally Grounded Role-Plays and Scenarios

The teaching methods will use role-plays and low-tech simulations to present real-life school situations common in island communities. The scenarios will cover topics identified by participants as relevant and meaningful, such as project-based learning within STEM subjects, managing multi-grade classrooms, effective communication with parents in close-knit communities, conflict resolution in culturally sensitive ways, role modelling soft skills (e.g., collaboration and communication), formative assessment and peer feedback techniques, and management of student collaborative work. The group sessions will incorporate direct teaching of soft skills curriculum planning and instruction techniques to the participating teachers.

3.5.2 Curriculum enactment using Project-Based Learning (PjBL)

The PjBL activities will be based on real-life issues that are relevant to the Maldives. This includes student-led awareness campaigns on climate resilience, community-based waste reduction initiatives, cross-curricular projects on marine conservation, fisheries science, and sustainable entrepreneurship. It can also include social justice projects such as influence of media on students' identity construction, utilising opportunities for educational achievement, incorporating local culture and history in literacy education. These projects aim to develop lifelong learning skills, communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and collaboration skills among students, while making learning personally relevant.

3.5.3 Virtual Mentorship for Remote Islands

The framework addresses teacher isolation in remote islands through virtual mentorship programs linking new teachers with experienced mentors and soft skills experts via digital platforms. This approach provides continuous professional support and guidance regardless of location. Where financially feasible, arrangements will be made for face-to-face group sharing, learning, and feedback sessions.

3.5.4 Localised Reflective Practices

The program will encourage teachers to maintain reflective journals throughout the continuous professional development in soft skills initiative. Participation in peer observation groups which practice respectful dialogue about teacher identity, teacher interest, professional strengths, target areas for skill development, effective classroom management for student - led project-based learning, challenges in integrating soft skills into the curriculum and how to overcome them will be covered. In addition, it will cover formative and summative assessment of project-based learning, reporting to parents, meeting student individual needs, and inclusion. The training modules will have integrated reflection tools which focus on emotional regulation, classroom inclusivity and student engagement. Teachers will be trained to effectively use curriculum planning, lesson evaluation, and annotation techniques to identify professional learning and to identify gaps in their own knowledge and skills, as well as on how to use journaling as an action-research technique.

3.5.5 Partnerships Between Teacher Training Institutions and Island Schools

The development of contextualised field experiences needs strong collaboration between teacher training institutes and schools. The implementation of soft skills by novice teachers in real classroom settings will be possible through structured classroom visits by mentors, extended coaching sessions, and effective peer teaching observations with constructive feedback. The National Institute of Education provides project-

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based inquiry learning modules which enable postgraduate teachers to participate in CPD in small group shared learning activities.

The proposed conceptual framework for soft skills development of novice, secondary teachers in the Maldives is illustrated in Figure 2 as a visual representation which demonstrates how culturally relevant training together with reflective practices and support systems create soft skills development for novice teachers.

Figure 2 Proposed Framework for Developing Soft Skills in Maldivian Novice Teachers, Integrating Localised Training, Reflection, and Support Systems.

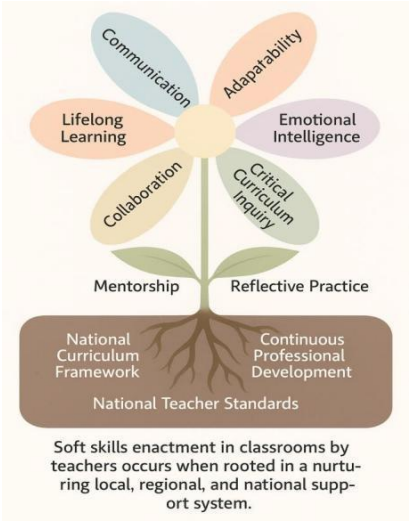

Fig. 2. Proposed Framework for Developing Soft Skills in Maldivian Novice Teachers, Integrating Localised Training, Reflection, and Support Systems.

3.6 Evaluation and Feedback

The evaluation process will run for six months according to the Design-Based Research (DBR) framework. The data collection process will take place during three distinct phases. The initial data collection point will assess novice teachers' preparedness and their current soft skills implementation methods at the beginning of implementation. The mid-phase will gather formative feedback through teacher reflection reports, peer observation records, and mentor log entries to support immediate adjustments. The final phase will use summative data from post-implementation surveys, classroom observations, and stakeholder feedback to assess the framework's effectiveness and its ability to fit different contexts and scale up.

The evaluation will focus on three key objectives.

(i) To measure changes in novice teachers' ability to implement soft skills instruction
(ii) The assessment of student engagement and observed soft skills development in classrooms.
(iii) To gather teacher feedback on the framework's usability, contextual fit, and scalability potential.

3.6.1 Evaluation Tools and Indicators

The evaluation process aims to obtain feedback from teachers and mentors about the framework's practicality and its potential for expansion. Each indicator links to data collection sources. The student self-

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assessment tool assesses their abilities in teamwork, their communication and problem-solving skills. The mentor observation checklists evaluate teachers' ability to incorporate soft skills strategies into their classroom instruction. The reflective logs and annotated lesson plans show teachers' development in self-awareness and adaptability. The classroom observation rubrics monitor student participation during peer-led activities. Focus group protocols, implementation diaries, and stakeholder interviews help assess framework usability and integration simplicity.

3.6.2 Triangulation and Reliability

The evaluation method depends on triangulation to confirm its results. The evaluation strategy will include data from teacher surveys, mentor logs, student self-assessments, and classroom observations to identify common patterns of change. In addition, it will combine mentor reports about teacher group task implementation with student self-assessment results and teacher feedback about classroom group management (see Table 2). The combination of different perspectives produces trustworthy results that show how interactive teaching approaches, together with reflective practices, impact both teaching staff and their students.

Table 2. Evaluation Indicators and Tools

Key Outcome Area	**Indicators**	**Key data inputs**
Teacher Practice Change	Increased use of soft skills pedagogy - Growth in self-reflection and confidence	Pre/Post Likert-scale surveys - Reflective teaching logs - Mentor feedback checklists
Student Engagement & Soft Skills Use	Student participation in peer-led tasks - Ability to communicate, collaborate, and problem-solve	Classroom observation rubrics - Student self-assessment forms
Framework Usability & Feasibility	Teacher and mentor feedback on implementation - Ease of integration in schools	- Teacher and mentor feedback on implementation - Ease of integration in schools - Focus group protocols - Implementation diaries - Stakeholder interview guide - Stakeholder interview guide

3.6.3 Fidelity and Reliability

Mentors will maintain consistency using two assessment tools: a session observation rubric for peer-teaching or PjBL workshops and a classroom fidelity checklist for observations. The mentors will perform a short norming process to enhance their agreement through the video recording of two lessons before they start their observations. The mentors will verify teacher adherence to the reflection prompts, feedback protocol through periodic journal and lesson annotation spot-checks, which include one strength, one development opportunity, and one enhancement.

3.7 Data Analysis

The analysis of quantitative data through Likert surveys will employ descriptive statistics and paired t-tests to evaluate changes in teacher confidence and pedagogical strategies from pre-intervention to post-intervention.

The analysis of qualitative data, including reflective logs, annotated lessons, unit plans, and focus group discussions, will use thematic analysis to identify patterns related to the five soft skill areas, which include collaboration, communication, adaptability, lifelong learning skills, and emotional intelligence.

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The research will implement triangulation to validate findings through the combination of multiple assessment tools including teacher portfolios of reflective practice, journal entries, lesson plan evaluations, interview data, session observation notes, mentor evaluations, teacher, and student feedback.

4. ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The project aims to enhance novice teachers' implementation of fundamental soft skills including communication, collaboration, emotional intelligence, lifelong learning, adaptability, and problem-solving in their daily teaching activities. The framework delivers organised training, mentorship programs, and reflective learning exercises. The framework incorporates role-modelling, case study scenarios, and inquiry-based learning as teaching methods to boost teacher self-confidence and professional competence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

The second significant outcome involves students becoming more engaged while developing competencies of the 21st- century. The implementation of soft skills through project-based and interactive approaches in instruction will lead students to show higher motivation, critical thinking abilities and adaptability which prepares them for contemporary workplace needs (Batra, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

The framework supports national education reform through its evidence-based and context-specific approaches to enhance teacher education at the systemic level. The framework serves as a valuable model for both the Maldives and other small island and South Asian contexts because it meets international benchmarks (Ministry of Education, Maldives, 2019; Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

5. DISCUSSION / CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The paper presents practical, system-facing solutions which include a blended mentorship system, low-tech project-based learning (PjBL), explicit reflection tools, curriculum-enactment cycles, and a DBR validation toolkit that meet SIDS requirements and national standards.

The proposed framework enhances teacher education reform discussions by showing how customised approaches can embed soft skills education into standard classroom instruction. The research addresses the educational circumstances of geographically spread-out learning environments with scarce resources which prevail in the Maldives through its investigation. The framework implements operational teacher change methods through interactive pedagogy, reflective exercises, and structured mentorship which suit Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The framework enables policy alignment through its support for teacher capacity-building as described in the Maldives National Curriculum Framework (2015) and the Education Sector Plan (Ministry of Education, 2019). The framework enhances existing teacher training systems by providing useful tools that help develop 21st-century skills which support both school-based innovation and national educational reform goals.

The model presented here could be adapted and piloted in other SIDS such as Sri Lanka, Fiji, or Mauritius, where teacher shortages and curricular rigidity mirror Maldivian challenges. ASEAN countries with decentralised education systems could also benefit from the teachers' critical curriculum literacy, virtual mentorship, and reflective pedagogy features.

This research contributes to a growing body of knowledge on how localised adaptations of global pedagogical ideas can enhance education systems in the Global South. The research will generate a policy brief containing recommendations for national teacher education programs which will be distributed to the National Institute of Education during Phase Four. The research structure through its sequential phases offers a methodological framework which future empirical studies can use to validate their operations.

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6. LIMITATIONS AND CONTEXTUAL CONSTRAINTS

The implementation of soft skills in professional education for novice teachers encounters two well- known challenges which are relevant to the Maldivian context. The first challenge is the test -results- oriented accountability mechanisms in schools, and the lack of expectation for measurement of students' socio-emotional and soft skills development in formal assessment and reporting to parents. These two factors hinder curriculum enactment for interpersonal skills development and socio-emotional learning.

The second challenge is the lack of organised institutional support and funds for remote and specialist mentorship in atoll-based schools. Research indicates that soft skills can be incorporated into required coursework through structured experiential modules which support curriculum targets without adding to instructional time (Joseph, 2024). Virtual mentorship platforms, community-based reflection, and mobile learning tools have proven sustainable in similar low-resource environments (Mohamed & Shareef, 2020).

The inability of one-off professional development workshops to empower teachers to critically engage with the curriculum and to adapt the curriculum to meet both the community and individual students' needs is an ongoing concern in the Maldives. The proposed framework provides an appropriate approach to novice teacher development through using critical curriculum inquiry and curriculum enactment mechanisms for teachers to engage with curriculum documents and expectations, while incorporating their own interest and teacher identity into their lesson planning and instruction.

While the proposed framework offers a contextually grounded pathway for novice teacher development, its implementation in the Maldives faces systemic challenges. Remote island educational facilities will have challenges because they do not have reliable digital infrastructure, sufficient internet connectivity, and instructional devices, which obstruct the continued delivery of technology-based mentorship and reflective practices. Moreover, the predominance of traditional pedagogies and the limited preparation of mentors and facilitators may constrain the adoption of interactive, learner-centred soft skills training (Mohamed & Shareef, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2021).

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research develops a locally suitable theoretical framework which enables novice Maldivian secondary teachers to teach 21st-century soft skills effectively in their classrooms. The framework can be implemented to develop teacher capacity through experiential learning, reflective pedagogy, and structured mentorship to enhance student engagement.

The framework offers culturally responsive approaches with international best practices to develop a flexible model which can be used for education reform in SIDS and other under-resourced contexts while addressing three common barriers to soft skills integration which include geographic isolation, limited mentorship systems and curriculum rigidities.

The framework can also be used to study the long-term effects through longitudinal studies that track teacher development and student results across multiple school years. Research studies that compare different regions of Maldives would help determine how successful implementation varies according to available resources. Research conducted in other Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and South Asian nations would help improve the framework for wider implementation while developing region-specific best practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Hidaya Mohamed Zahir conceptualised the key idea, performed literature search, data curation, formal analysis, and writing up the original draft. Faizah Abd Majid and Ani Mazlina Dewi Mohamed supervised the research progress, providing guidance throughout the review work. Aminath Waseela contributed to reviewing, editing formatting the paper. All authors have reviewed and approved the last version of the manuscript.

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