

Competence Strengthening of Hard Skills and Soft Skills of Prospective Religious Education Teacher Students through the Introduction to School Field Program (PLP) in Indonesia

Muh. Hizbul Muflihin[✉], Arif Budi Raharjo², Hanif Cahyo Adi Kistoro³, Khairul Ummah Mohamad Jodi⁴

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Profesor Kiai Haji Saifuddin Zuhri, Purwokerto, Indonesia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

³Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

⁴Open University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The Introduction to School Field Program (PLP) in Indonesia is mandatory in universities and designed to produce professional teacher candidate competencies. Each prospective teacher-student is equipped with adequate hard skills and soft skills before becoming a teacher in the school environment.

Design/methods/approach – This study used a phenomenological approach that aims to obtain an understanding of the hard skills and soft skills taught in the PLP program. Moreover, the study also explained what types of hard skills and soft skills were trained during the PLP. This phenomenological research explored the experience of prospective teacher students participating in PLP. The research data was taken through in-depth interviews with interview guidelines made for 20 PLP participating students at the two host universities in Purwokerto and the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Data analysis used data reduction, presentation, and interpretation.

Findings – The study results found that the teaching of hard skills and soft skills has been integrally applied in the program through the existing curriculum. Methods of mentoring, field practice, evaluation, and improvement have been used in the PLP program. Meanwhile, the types of hard and soft skills provided consist of ethics, communication, learning design, and evaluation making.

Research implications/limitations – The respondents of this study were limited to the coverage of two regions, namely Central Java and the Special Region of Yogyakarta, leading to the research limitation. Expanding the research location and using other quantitative research can strengthen the results of this study.

Originality/value – Future studies should further overcome the shortcomings of this program and improve to be reference for policy-making by the PLP program organizers.

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CONTACT: [✉] hizbulmuflihin@uinsaizu.ac.id

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Introduction

The modern world today is evolving rapidly, making it difficult to predict due to the impact of globalization and technological developments (Statti & Torres, 2020). This changing world has encouraged various fields to respond with their capabilities and strategies. It requires all levels of society to work together and collaborate to deal with them. The changes in economic, political, social, and religious aspects have become homework for the government, school agencies, communities, and even families. It calls for a generation that can face these challenges with their competencies. This condition is undoubtedly inseparable from the role of education (Baumann & Winzar, 2016). Education, more specifically higher education (Levi et al., 2014), needs to prepare graduates who are competent and have character, making them ready to follow the flow of change and become key players in society.

Education in the modern era plays a fundamental role in building a resilient and strong generation (Muhtadi et al., 2022). Education does not only provide scientific information cognitively to students but also necessarily can develop motor and affective abilities based on students' potential. This demand unquestionably correlates with fine and adequate teacher skills and competencies. If the teachers have good knowledge, skills, and attitudes, then education has the opportunity to create competent graduates as well (Lukman et al., 2021). More particularly, when viewed in the current condition that is increasingly advanced and developing, teachers' abilities are highly pivotal and also need to be adjusted to the current conditions and situations. Indeed, the problems faced by the current generation in modern times are increasingly complex. Preparing graduates who can meet the needs of the working world of work and their character in the form of attitudes and behaviors are two big problems in the education sector.

One of the predominant issues in preparing graduates, especially in universities, is the readiness of graduates who have been equipped with hard skills and soft skills competencies. There is a gap between hard and soft skill competencies and the needs in the unbalanced world of work (Patacsil & S. Tablatin, 2017). Mastery of this competency is crucial to show the ability of graduates based on the education and practice they have obtained. It indicates that graduates must show their strengths and excellence differ from their competitors. Mastery and knowledge of a specific field, characters, (Cahyo Adi Kistoro et al., 2021), skills in terms of technicalities, and the ability to interact with others are important aspects in hard skill and soft skill competencies.

Higher education students in the education department are prospective workers who are also required to have adequate excellence. Accordingly, they need to develop and hone hard and soft skills to become competent teacher candidates (Wibowo et al., 2020, p. 20). Hard skills and soft skills are competencies that support each other. One of the hard skills is the prospective teachers' skill in teaching students. Therefore, in addition to soft skills, mastery of hard skills is essential to become a professional and qualified teacher candidate.

Considering this condition, it can undoubtedly be understood that the teacher factor is one of the essential factors in achieving these educational goals and targets. One

of the pivotal aspects we can explore is how teachers have good competence so that the education and learning process in achieving these goals can be realized (Lestari & Purwanti, 2018). A mature and integrated preparation process is needed for prospective teachers, especially religious education teachers, when pursuing education, especially in higher education. Introduction to the School Field, hereinafter abbreviated as PLP, is a process of observation and apprenticeship performed by the students of the Bachelor's Degree of Education Program to learn the aspects of learning and education management in educational units.

A review of existing literature based on the studies' results and theories is required to support the explanation of the meaning, urgency, and aspects behind it. The description of hard and soft skills based on understanding and approach is fundamental as the basis for research.

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Modern developments demand a balance between soft skills and hard skills. Soft skills will practically lead to the ability of psychological aspects, such as discipline, motivation, and enthusiasm (Arnold, 2023). Also, this competency needs to be supported by practical skills, where prospective teacher students are proficient and can provide subject matter, design learning designs, outline and design evaluations, and others. This competence of hard skills conforms with the theory that the working world will require modern education graduates to be equipped with a wide range of skills that support their work and can understand those skills functionally.

In addition to soft skills, a good deal of literature has shown that there is a priority in the hard skill sector (Arat, 2014, p. 20). Although, at present, soft skills are heavily emphasized in students' abilities, hard skills also play a significant role in building technical skills. The rapid changes in the global world make hard skills similarly crucial for students in the current era to adjust to those changes. Nowadays, the challenges faced by the younger generation are no longer the same as before (Sobirjonovna, 2021). Today's young generation deals with more complex problems in various fields, both in the academic and professional contexts. The world of education keeps improving as the transition faced by the current young generation is increasingly complicated by the presence of the so-called VUCA phenomenon (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) (Soemitra et al., 2023). Universities are required to be able to develop student competencies that make them ready to adapt to the work environment in VUCA situations. Students in this era must be able to develop adaptability and solve problems well.

The 21st-century learning requires education graduates to become a workforce with a new paradigm that leads them to become independent thinkers, decision-makers, and solution providers to problems faced in the world of work. Students, in particular, need to integrate knowledge and skills to contribute to their future work. Practice-centered and hands-on experiential learning are among the current options for developing

competencies through problem-based learning (Hung et al., 2020), project-based learning (Vogler et al., 2018), and lecturer and student collaboration with society and industry.

So far, hard skills have been synonymous with technical abilities given to vocational schools (Ayuningtyas et al., 2015), which target graduates to be able to enter the world of work right away, such as majoring in machinery, electricity, financial administration, and gastronomy. This perception is not completely wrong. However, in the world of work, these technical skills are also needed to support one's performance. In the scope of higher education (university) that is more oriented to analytical skills and theoretical knowledge, it is also necessarily pivotal to develop hard skills, such as how to teach, manage classroom conditions, make instruments and learning methods, and more.

Equipping school graduates to be prepared for the challenges of the 21st century, which is full of uncertainties, requires education to understand the mastery of relevant skills in the future. Competency innovation is an important key to helping students remain relevant in the future world of work. Openness to change, critical thinking skills, improving the capacity and competence of soft skills and hard skills (Samani et al., 2019), adaptability, and familiarity with the real-work environment are essential keys to preparing students who are ready to face the future (Purnama, 2019). The world of education needs to carry out the above things to narrow the gap between skills and industry needs (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). Interdisciplinary learning that integrates knowledge and understanding of real-world content in the form of practice is essential. Graduates with relevant skills will have the necessary solutions to the problems faced in the world of work.

Some of the problems faced by prospective teacher graduates, especially in forming competencies, are related to the ability to plan or outline learning designs, including the preparation of materials, strategies, and media used, as well as the implementation of learning evaluations oriented to hard skills. Moreover, the ability in the form of teaching practice or material delivery is another obstacle they often face. Also, soft skills, like communication skills with students, have been another hindrance related to the delivery of subject matter. As a result, students cannot absorb the subject matter properly due to the lack of communication. This situation certainly requires the right solution before prospective teacher students graduate. Introduction to School Field is considered to be one of the ways to solve the problems that arise.

In the Indonesian education context, the Introduction of School Field (PLP) is an educational activity that is compulsory for all students, especially for those who take education department and other departments that require skills based on practical skills in the field like the banking department.

Aware of the importance of hard skills and soft skills competencies for prospective students of religious teachers and their contribution to improving the quality and quality of education graduates, this study will explore the teaching model of hard skills and soft skills and the types of hard skills and soft skills taught during the PLP. Technically, this research will answer how PLP lecturers teach aspects of hard skills and soft skills during the implementation of the PLP program and what aspects they have practiced in the PLP program.

This research based on student experience participating in the PLP program is a kind of phenomenological research. Hard skills and soft skills mentioned here are hard skills related to the ability to perform tasks directly and soft skills in general for education levels covering early age, elementary, middle, and upper levels.

Method

This study was conducted to explore in-depth information about the methods and materials provided in Introduction of School Field program. In more detail, this study's purpose is to find out the experience of prospective teacher students in obtaining the expected provision for strengthening hard skill and soft skill competencies.

This study is qualitative research that leads to a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 2009). It carried out an in-depth experience exploration following the participants in the PLP program. In particular, this study will explain how to teach hard skills and soft skills to prospective religious education teacher students who have been trained in the PLP program. Conducted for four months, from June to September 2023, this study has the target as the basis for future research, especially those that study PLP in a more quality and in-depth.

Participants

The participants of this study were 20 students participating in the PLP program in Purwokerto and Yogyakarta provinces. The participant selection was based on Creswell's opinion that phenomenological research can be conducted on heterogeneous groups of between three and twenty people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The two names of the universities used as the research subjects were given the initials U1 and U2. Meanwhile, student participants in the PLP program were given the initials S1 following the number of participants in this study. The initials used are to maintain the participant's privacy and follow the research ethics, especially when the person concerned does not want to be directly mentioned by name. Also, before collecting data, the researchers communicated with the university and participants to ensure their willingness to become respondents. The selection of the research site was also considered to meet administrative standards as the organizer of the PLP program set by the government. Table 1 shows in detail the characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Profiles

University	PLP implementation study program	Semester	Number of People	Total
U1	Pendidikan Agama Islam	3 and 5	10 Students	10
U2	Pendidikan Agama Islam	3 and 5	10 Students	10

Data collection techniques, as an important part of exploring participant information, were carried out through in-depth interview methods using interview protocols. The interviews had a time range of 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted on campus under the agreed agreement. However, there were several participants who, due to conditions collected outside the campus, were then given questions independently and in-depth. The interviews had open and general questions to explore what participants had in detail. The researchers tried to create a conducive atmosphere to make participants comfortable while answering questions. The questions that had been given were reconfirmed to the participants, and the researcher asked if there was any additional information they could provide beyond the existing questions. It was to ensure that the information left behind could be conveyed. It was due to some types of participants who answered merely according to the questions.

Data analysis

The data analysis performed in this study emphasized the data reduction process, where the data gathered from the interviews was copied back into verbatim data and separated according to important themes (Miles et al., 2014). The procedure in this data analysis was to transform the interview results into a central theme or main topic in the reduction process. It is an important process since it selects and sorts data in detail, dividing the data into the main data source or unused one. Important statements will be presented in a central theme according to the initial data separation and the basis for the result description. In the presentation process, there will be a common thread of how the process is experienced by the participants and also what is experienced by participating in the PLP program. The last stage in data analysis is to provide a thorough description and verify the data that has been obtained. The description of the research results outlines a combination of structural descriptions, namely how the process is experienced, and textual descriptions, namely what is experienced by the participants. Verification is also carried out based on the main source, namely by giving the same questions to participants. If there aren't many changes in the data, the data can become valid data. The data analysis procedure can be seen in Figure 1.

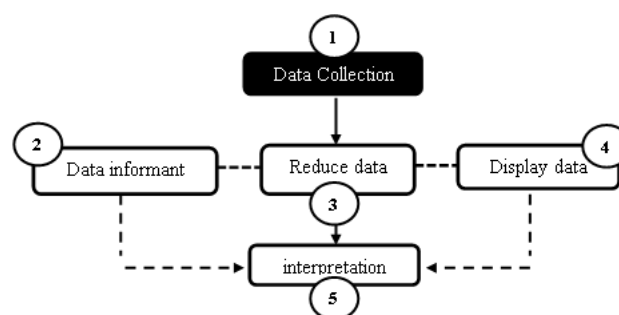


Figure 1. Data Analysis Stages

Figure 1 explains the flow of stages from data collection to data analysis. The obtained field data was then separated according to the data needed and the eliminated data. This data separation is presented in the form of themes or keywords that are considered important. Furthermore, the data will be classified in the same theme. The meaning of data interpretation is an analysis process carried out at the end that will synchronize important themes into a series of results that can be considered as a research result.

Result and Discussion

Before presenting the obtained research results, it is important to first explain the PLP commonly conducted in Indonesia. PLP is an educational program that is carried out to prepare graduates of Bachelor's Degree students in Education who will ultimately become competent teachers following the national standards. The PLP aims to give them adequate experience in the field and theory. The main goal of PLP is to equip education students with the ability to master technical and operational skills and knowledge regarding the duties and obligations of a teacher.

1. The main theme of the implementation of hard skills and soft skills in the PLP program

In the PLP program implementation, the hard skill and soft skill learning models are integrated into each course in their respective departments. A student said that *"specifically in the implementation of PLP, the lectures obtained become knowledge that must be practiced. Some lecturers of specific courses often give assignments to make presentations in front of the class. This experience turns out to be very helpful in the PLP because we can also use explanation or presentation when practicing teaching at PLP."* Another student also added that *"special provisions in the form of training before PLP are not in the course. However, the lecturers in each course usually provide examples and assignments that later can be used in PLP. For example, in the Education Administration course, the lecturer gives us the task of making a Learning Implementation Plan (RPP). It turns out that this is very helpful when becoming a teacher when we must have the ability to design learning in the classroom."*

Other students also disclosed the same information that *"PLP can actually improve the ability of hard skills and soft skills have been taught on campus. Hard skill competence, such as making learning implementation plans, learning evaluations, and time discipline, not to mention how to communicate and other aspects, are forms of learning in the field of hard skills and soft skills. Some of my fellow students experience problems since they may not pay much attention to these things. That's why, in the field, they seemed unable to run the program properly."* Other information was obtained from seventh-semester students who stated that *"The provision of hard skills and skills is not specifically obtained in lectures. Usually, lecturers of each course have a lecture design integrated into various required competencies, such as pedagogy, profession, personality, and social."*

In the learning process at PLP, hard skills and soft skills are given to students in various methods. Since it is a direct learning type, it has two programs, namely the basic

and expert. In the basic program, students are still asked to observe at school related to school culture, the implementation of learning at school, and the like. At this time, prospective teacher students are not allowed to practice teaching because they need to know the condition of the school first. In addition to observations, they are also asked to provide input about each school in the form of a response. The obstacles faced and also the findings in this basic program. The second PLP program emphasizes practical aspects. Students are asked to carry out administrative tasks, such as making learning implementation plans, recapping materials and assignments as teachers, conducting attendance recaps and student progress reports, and others. In addition, the prospective teacher students have also started to have the opportunity to teach in the classroom with the assistance of class teachers. This practice will be evaluated by the classroom teacher and then used as evaluation material for PLP supervisor lecturers.

The teaching of hard skills in the PLP program emphasizes the practical skills needed by prospective teachers, namely the ability to design lessons, carry out lessons, evaluate learning, and make reports on learning outcomes. Meanwhile, soft skills teaching highlights the affective aspect, namely ethics and prospective teachers' interpersonal relationships. This aspect is considered crucial because it shows a teacher's integrity. Therefore, lecturers and campuses, at the time of debriefing, implementation, and evaluation, often remind them of the importance of this ethics. A teacher will be an example and a role model for their students. Accordingly, maintaining the dignity of a teacher is fundamental. This condition is reflected in the student's explanation, which stated that *"the PLP supervisor and also the school represented by the pamong lecturer often give advice about the duties and obligations of teachers. Moreover, there are also attitudes and behaviors that teachers should maintain. Children or students will imitate what the teacher does"*. Another respondent added, *"In terms of dressing during PLP, we were required to dress neatly and put on our campus alma mater coat so that we can set an example for students in terms of neatness and discipline"*.

Another thing that students find difficult while performing PLP, especially in the middle or second program, is when facing students in class during teaching practice. So far, as students, they can do things as they want by not following the lecturers' wants. At the time of PLP practice, they felt that managing the class also required special skills and was not as easy as they had seen so far. This obstacle was in line with the statement of a respondent who described, *"When I practice teaching, I truly feel that it is difficult. Many students do not pay attention, and we, as teachers, need to remind them (to pay attention) over and over."* The same statement was also conveyed by another respondent, *"It turns out that patience is very important for teachers. This is a soft skill competency because you must be able to restrain yourself and understand the condition of students."*

2. The essence of teaching in the PLP program

The hard skills and soft skills teaching in the PLP program are also assisted by accompanying lecturers (supervisors). Lecturers provide opportunities for consultation and guidance when students find obstacles in the field. This helps students to find solutions

or solve these problems. Some students indeed experienced somewhat serious problems, for example, when they were asked to practice teaching and did not even dare to enter class. The accompanying lecturer would give more comprehension that made them dare to do the task. Other problems that have arisen several times related to students who carry out PLP may include students violating the rules and ethics, namely not attending school or improper dressing that does not reflect PLP participants. This was revealed by one of the respondent students who said, "There was a group of friends of mine who committed a disciplinary violation by not being present when the PLP program started. These students were reported by the school to the supervisor and given further guidance." It reflects that in the PLP program implementation, lecturers and accompanying teachers have the task of directing the students participating in the program to become professional, competent, and teachers with character.

Soft skill teaching in this PLP program can also be seen from the expected target – namely, students are able to think critically. It means that what has been carried out yet is unsuitable with the provisions and policies can be corrected and given with solutions. For instance, when teachers seem to be inadequate in drafting learning tools, they can improve it further with the knowledge they already have. One of the students of the religious education program explained, "*When we are asked to teach in class, we usually design with various learning methods according to the knowledge we get on campus. For example, when explaining certain material, we make props that are easy for students to understand. This teaching aid is one of the options for teaching methods other than usually used by teachers.*"

Another form of teaching the PLP program is student presentation activities. The teachers give opportunities to the students to present the results of their PLP activities in the form of responses. Students would tell from the beginning of the process, being introduced to school, until they completed the activity. This presentation can assess students' ability to prepare materials, communication methods, and interactive relationships with the audience. If there are still shortcomings, the lecturer will inform them and emphasize the importance of the evaluation.

The essence of the overall experience of prospective teacher students in the PLP program has answered a basic question in the study - namely, how the integration of knowledge obtained by students can be applied in the field. Also, it found what students gain when participating in PLP. Furthermore, this PLP program provides an overview of how hard skills and soft skills are carried out simultaneously. In addition to observation activities, teaching practices, and administrative tasks as teachers, students can also learn on how to interact at school. It is crucial because the competence of prospective professional teachers is not just about mastering cognitive ability or knowledge but also the necessary affective and psychomotor competencies.

Based on the interview results, it was also found that the hard and soft skills given to students are in the form of teachings about ethics, independence (self-reliance), discipline, responsibility, critical thinking, innovativeness, teaching ability, teaching design, and learning evaluation instrument making. All of these aspects are activities that can develop and strengthen the competence of prospective teacher students in the field of

hard skills and soft skills. The process of hard skills and soft skills teaching in the PLP program can be seen in Figure 2.

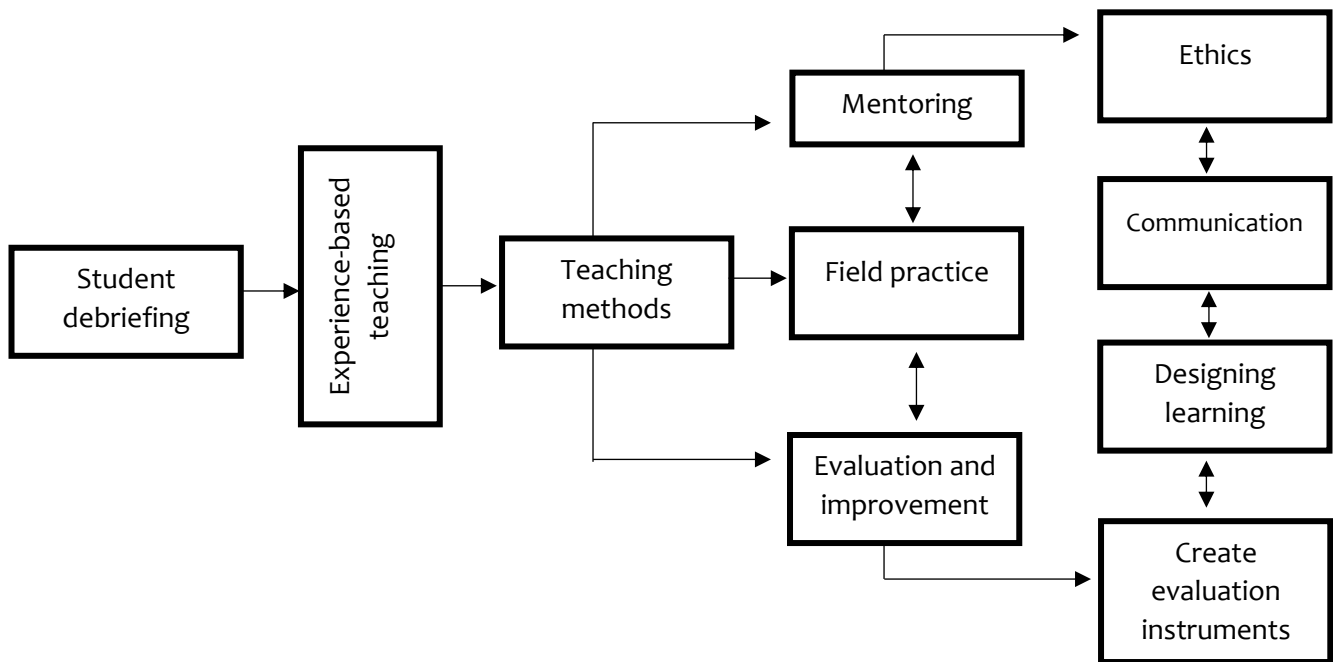


Figure 2. Stage of hard skill and soft skill teaching

Mastery of hard skills and soft skills is pivotal for the students of prospective religious teachers. Therefore, it needs to be taught well to them. The teaching results in the PLP program found that the teaching used an integration model in each field and course that has been taught. The PLP program is part of the curriculum in the education study program and a compulsory course (Null, 2011). This teaching and debriefing model for prospective teachers is also supported by previous studies. The PLP program included in the curriculum has become one of the solutions for developing student competencies. The results of other studies also stated that learning hard skills and soft competencies is very important to equip university graduates who will enter the world of work (Strang, 2022). This program is also more suitable because it provides direct opportunities in the form of field practice. Student mastery related to hard and soft skill competencies is also inseparable from the role of lecturers who provide knowledge during learning in each course. Therefore, practical and experiential teaching (Gross & Rutland, 2017) is necessarily required to provide information and knowledge for students.

A preceding study on competencies conducted by Riyanti (2016) also supports the results of this research, where soft skill competencies are one of the essential elements in supporting work. More particularly, teachers who have adequate skills in terms of soft skills will be able to carry out good learning (Wulandari, 2022). Hard skills also greatly support a person's ability to carry out their work. Mastery of skills and other technical abilities inherently will make it easier for them to perform their duties. It is, especially in the era of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) which is very dynamic in its

changes (Soemitra, 2023), hard skill competencies are urgently needed. A person's skills based on previous experience and practice can be a provision to face changes that occur at any time.

However, this study also found problems in the field where some students did not follow the predetermined rules and regulations. It indicates that those students do not understand the importance of this PLP program for their sake. Violations, in terms of discipline by coming to school late, asking for frequent permits during activities, and not doing the duties of the teacher, were part of the violation. The treatment given to these students is usually by providing assistance, both by teachers and field supervisors. It is a form of education for them to learn about the importance of attitude and ethics in carrying out their duties. Moreover, what is more important is how ethics becomes a soft skill competency that must be possessed by prospective teacher students.

Another aspect taught in this PLP program is communication (Anderlini et al., 2012). Students who have soft skill competencies can be seen from the ability to interact and communicate with others (Cason & Mui, 2014). One of the indicators is the ability to talk to others. This communication ability is crucial because the prospective teacher students have to transfer their knowledge to students when they become real teachers in the future. The process of transferring this information can run well if communication goes smoothly. Students can easily understand the material if the teacher conveys it in good communication language. Another aspect that needs to be considered is the word choice in communication. Prospective teacher students must be able to distinguish between informal and formal speech. It means that when they are conducting learning, informal language is needed as a requirement. Teachers cannot provide informal language because it does not follow the rules and regulations that apply in the education world.

In addition to ethics (Mohamed, 2014) and communication in the field of soft skills, no less important thing to teach is the hard skill ability - namely, designing learning. This ability takes the form of making a learning implementation plan for students that contains the competency targets to be achieved, the material taught, the media provided, the division of learning duration, and the creation of learning evaluations. This ability is essential because teachers, in the future, must be able to calculate the time or lesson hours of each subject with the material to be delivered. The selection of media and learning tools is also crucial to facilitate students' understanding, especially for religious materials that are mostly abstract.

Another technical ability in hard skills that prospective teacher students need to master is implementing the evaluation of learning outcomes (Kesuma et al., 2020). Teachers must be able to make appropriate instruments for evaluation. Not only making the instrument but also being able to carry out the evaluation process. The results of this evaluation are very important as a form of guidance to know the learning achievement. More importantly, evaluation can be a reference for teachers or even schools in carrying out follow-up action plans for improvements in education that have been carried out. The evaluation can also be a solution to the problems faced during classroom learning.

Regarding all the above aspects, we can summarize an important finding that the skills and competencies of prospective students for religious education teachers can be built or developed through the PLP program in collaboration with partner schools. PLP activities require students to be able to interact well with all stakeholders in the school environment. The logical consequence of this activity is that students will obtain a wide range and diverse experiences, in which this knowledge and direct experience can be a provision (resource) for them in the future.

Conclusion

This study has explained the prospective teacher students' experience while participating in the PLP program in the context of developing and strengthening hard skills and soft skills. This study examined in more in-depth the teaching model in the PLP program. Teaching through this program has been considered effective in nurturing and developing students' knowledge about conditions, situations, and problems in schools related to teaching-learning activities. Also, this study found the use of various teaching methods in the context and learning objectives. Assistance (mentoring or coaching) methods, field practices, evaluations, and improvements are important parts of the smooth conditioning of this PLP program. The proven fruitful results of this program in general are truly helpful in developing student competencies outside campus learning. For future improvement, the upcoming studies can be improved with more comprehensive and in-depth research results. This is an important effort to improve the quality and service of PLP program organizers in the future. Based on the findings, this study still has gaps in both methodological and content. Further research can be strengthened by using quantitative methods that can strengthen the data empirically. Research studies from the aspect of content or material can also be strengthened based on other variables that are considered to have a role in supporting the competence of prospective teachers, such as interest in becoming a teacher or other variables.

Declaration

Authors' contribution statement

MHM designed the initial research in the form of research ideas, problem identification, field data collection, and analysis of results; ABR strengthened the literature review; HCAK validated data, collected data, interpreted data, and completed articles; and KHMJ completed linguistics and literature reviews.

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