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DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS THROUGH AN INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: Primary education needs an explicit account of how interpersonal and self-regulatory skills become usable beyond the activities in which they are taught. This conceptual article develops an integrative framework linking classroom participation, instructional support, reflective feedback, and transfer across learning contexts. A purposive narrative synthesis brings together social and emotional learning frameworks, developmental theory, transfer research, and educational measurement scholarship. The framework distinguishes opportunities to demonstrate a skill from the quality of its execution and the assistance required. Its main contribution is an account of adaptive participation: learners increasingly select and coordinate relevant actions when partners, tasks, or support conditions change. Four propositions specify how instructional alignment, contingent support, planned variation, and feedback may relate to this development. A classroom illustration and a staged validation agenda translate the propositions into observable evidence without treating them as established findings. The article argues that progress should initially be represented through profiles of action quality, support, and context rather than a single global soft-skills score. No original participant data are reported, and neither the framework nor its proposed indicators have been empirically validated. The approach offers a testable basis for designing and evaluating developmentally appropriate instruction in primary education.

Keywords: primary education; soft skills; social and emotional learning; adaptive participation; transfer of learning; formative assessment; conceptual framework.

Introduction

A child may listen carefully during a teacher-led discussion but disregard a partner's suggestion during an unfamiliar group task. Another may negotiate successfully with a friend yet remain silent when assigned a new partner. Such possibilities expose a design problem for primary education: demonstrating a social action in a familiar activity does not establish that the learner can select and adapt it elsewhere. An account of soft-skills development therefore needs to explain the relationship between classroom performance, the support that makes it possible, and use under changed conditions.

This article uses soft skills as a practical umbrella term for teachable interpersonal and self-regulatory actions that support participation in learning with others. The term does not denote a single psychological trait. Communication, collaboration, self-regulation, and responsible problem-solving provide the working domains. Their selection is deliberately limited: they make it possible to connect instructional decisions with observable classroom activity. The framework does not claim to exhaust creativity, empathy, leadership, or other constructs sometimes grouped under the same label.

Social and emotional learning provides an established basis for considering these domains. CASEL (n.d.) identifies related areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship

skills, and responsible decision-making. UNICEF (2019) places transferable skills within learning across settings and throughout life. These frameworks establish relevant purposes and content, but this article asks a more specific design question: what evidence would justify saying that a primary learner is becoming able to use a skill independently across classroom situations?

The article contributes a conceptual answer through adaptive participation, defined here as the increasingly independent selection and coordination of relevant interpersonal and self-regulatory actions as task and social conditions change. This is an organising concept for the proposed framework, not a newly validated psychological construct. The focus is on the links between opportunity, support, action quality, and context. Four propositions make these links open to empirical challenge. The intended audience includes researchers developing classroom interventions and primary teachers working with researchers to evaluate their implementation.

Conceptual approach and source selection

The study is a conceptual synthesis rather than an intervention evaluation or a systematic review. Sources were purposively selected for four functions: defining the relevant skill domains; explaining development through supported activity; distinguishing performance from transfer; and identifying measurement risks. The corpus combines international frameworks and reports with peer-reviewed theoretical articles, research syntheses, and a foundational developmental text. Official organisational pages, publisher records, accessible article texts, and indexed abstracts were consulted. No database-wide screening, exhaustive search, or formal assessment of study quality was undertaken.

The synthesis proceeded by comparing the explanatory role of each source, deriving instructional implications, and expressing the resulting links as propositions. Domain frameworks informed what classroom instruction might target; developmental and transfer scholarship informed how changes in support and context should be interpreted; measurement scholarship constrained the conclusions that observations could support. Where this article introduces tasks, indicators, or proposed study designs, these are authorial design proposals. They are not descriptions of interventions conducted by the cited authors.

This approach permits a focused theoretical contribution but limits claims about coverage and originality. The selected literature cannot establish that all competing models have been considered or that the proposed combination is uniquely superior. Its value should be judged by the clarity of its distinctions, the feasibility of its operationalisation, and the results of subsequent empirical testing. The framework is intended for primary schooling, with developmental adaptations required across grades and educational systems.

Conceptual boundaries and the evidence base

Soft skills, social-emotional competencies, and transferable skills overlap without being interchangeable. The first term is used here to organise a practical set of learning targets. Social-emotional competencies include knowledge, attitudes, and skills concerning emotions, relationships, and decisions. Transferability concerns whether learning is used beyond its original setting. A learner might know a respectful way to disagree but fail to use it in a disagreement. Conversely, a familiar conversational routine might be reproduced fluently without being adapted to a different partner's needs. Knowledge, performance, and transfer therefore require distinct evidence.

Research syntheses support investment in school-based social and emotional learning while leaving substantial work for the evaluation of specific designs. Durlak et al. (2011) reviewed 213 programmes and reported advantages over controls across several social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes. Taylor et al. (2017) reviewed follow-up effects from 82 interventions, indicating that benefits can extend beyond immediate post-intervention measurement. Cipriano et al. (2023) provided a later synthesis covering 424 studies from 53 countries. These studies concern broad school-age populations and diverse interventions; they do not establish the effectiveness of the framework proposed here.

Developmental context remains essential. Jones et al. (2019) emphasise the interdependence of social, emotional, and cognitive development and the significance of relationships and experience. The present framework adopts this orientation by treating classroom conditions as part of the explanation of performance. It does not infer a stable deficiency from a child's silence, disagreement, or need for help. Those behaviours can have different meanings depending on the task, peer interaction, language demands, and available support.

International survey evidence also needs careful interpretation. OECD (2024) reports associations between social-emotional skills and educational or well-being outcomes in a survey involving 10- and 15-year-olds; participation at age 10 was optional in the 2023 survey. Such findings neither establish causal effects nor provide direct developmental standards for younger primary learners. They support examining skill development alongside contextual conditions, while local task design and validation remain necessary.

Theoretical foundations of the framework

Vygotsky's (1978) account of socially mediated development supports distinguishing assisted activity from independent performance. Within the proposed framework, this distinction becomes a requirement to record what assistance a learner receives. A child who considers another perspective after an adult models the response is accomplishing something different from a child who initiates that action without prompting. Both observations are useful, but they warrant different interpretations. The implication for instruction is to offer support responsively and examine what happens when it changes, rather than using the mere presence of a desired action as proof of independence.

Self-regulation is relevant to participation but cannot be reduced to quiet compliance. Diamond (2013) identifies inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility as core executive functions. These processes are related to managing instructions and responses, yet executive functions are not equivalent to the social behaviours examined here. The framework therefore separates a hypothesised enabling process from the outcome being observed. For instance, keeping a partner's proposal in mind may support negotiation, but the successful negotiation itself is not a direct measure of working memory.

Transfer introduces a further distinction. Barnett and Ceci (2002) argue that claims about transfer require specification of the dimensions along which contexts differ. Accordingly, this article proposes varying classroom conditions deliberately rather than treating every new task as evidence of generalisation. A changed story topic, a changed partner, and an unsupervised situation impose different demands. The relevant change should be named before the observation and interpreted

within that boundary. Success with a new partner in the same lesson is evidence about that change, not about performance in all social settings.

Assessment should inform subsequent teaching. Black and Wiliam (1998) provide a foundation for using evidence of learning to adjust instruction. Duckworth and Yeager (2015) additionally explain why measures of personal qualities require attention to their purpose and susceptibility to bias. This article draws a practical consequence: classroom observations should initially guide instructional decisions, while stronger claims about comparisons between children or schools require additional validity evidence. A convenient score is not automatically suitable for a consequential decision.

Architecture of the proposed framework

The framework organises instruction around a target action, an opportunity to perform it, support matched to the learner's response, feedback, and a subsequent task in which a specified condition changes. These components form a revisable cycle. If a learner has no meaningful opportunity to contribute, the task must change before performance is interpreted. If an opportunity exists but the learner needs a model, the next decision concerns instructional support. If action quality is adequate in a familiar situation, the next question concerns adaptation under changed conditions.

Integration occurs at three levels. At the curriculum level, a subject-learning objective and a participation objective are designed together. At the interaction level, teacher support responds to what the learner actually does. At the assessment level, evidence is linked to a specific opportunity, support condition, and task context. None of these levels should substitute for the others. Correct subject answers cannot alone demonstrate collaboration, and cooperative behaviour cannot alone demonstrate subject understanding.

Adaptive participation is represented through three descriptive dimensions: action quality, assistance, and contextual range. Action quality concerns whether the behaviour serves the learning purpose. Assistance identifies the prompts or models needed. Contextual range records the situations in which the action has been demonstrated. These dimensions can develop unevenly. A learner may produce more thoughtful explanations while still requiring reminders, or become independent in familiar groups while struggling with new partners. A profile preserves these distinctions better than a single total score at this stage of theory development.

Table 1. Proposed connections between learning domains and observable evidence

Domain	Target action	Evidence and interpretive boundary
Communication	Clarify a partner's meaning before responding.	A relevant question or accurate paraphrase; talk frequency alone is insufficient.
Collaboration	Incorporate contributions into a shared decision.	A decision trace showing more than one learner's input; a group product alone is insufficient.
Self-regulation	Use an appropriate strategy after difficulty.	A purposeful request, pause, or re-engagement; silence alone is insufficient.

Domain	Target action	Evidence and interpretive boundary
Responsible problem-solving	Compare options and consider their effects on others.	A reason connecting an option to its consequences; agreement with the teacher alone is insufficient.

Table 1 is a proposed operational starting point, not a validated instrument. Each action needs age-appropriate wording and tasks that genuinely elicit it. For example, clarification cannot be observed meaningfully when instructions leave nothing uncertain or when a dominant peer prevents another learner from speaking. Opportunity must therefore be recorded separately from response. A missing opportunity is not evidence that the child lacks the relevant skill.

Propositions for empirical examination

Proposition 1 concerns instructional alignment. When a task requires a target social action for meaningful completion, and individual contributions are identifiable, learners should have more usable opportunities to practise that action than in group activities where one child can complete the work alone. The proposed mechanism is participation opportunity rather than group seating. A test would compare opportunity structures while holding subject content and instructional time as similar as possible. An alternative explanation is that one task is simply more engaging or easier, so engagement and task difficulty would also need to be examined.

Proposition 2 concerns contingent support. Assistance that responds to demonstrated need and is reduced when performance becomes secure should be associated with increasing independent execution on comparable tasks. Fixed prompting may produce successful activity without revealing whether the learner can initiate the action. The proposition predicts a change in the relationship between assistance and performance, not merely a higher behaviour count. It would be weakened if contingent support produced no additional independence when opportunities and task difficulty were comparable.

Proposition 3 concerns planned contextual variation. Explicit discussion of where a strategy is useful, followed by practice under specified changes in partner or task, should support adaptation to those changes more effectively than repeated performance in an unchanged setting. The claim is bounded: varying partners does not necessarily produce transfer to home or community settings. A suitable test would include tasks that differ along prespecified dimensions and document any prompts. Gains confined to the trained task would count against a broader transfer claim.

Proposition 4 concerns feedback and revision. Feedback identifying an action, its effect on joint work, and an attainable next step should help learners revise participation more effectively than general person-level praise. The proposed mechanism is clearer information about what to change. Evidence would need to show an appropriate revision during a subsequent opportunity, not just a favourable reaction to feedback. Teacher warmth, feedback frequency, and task familiarity are plausible alternative explanations and should be considered in evaluation.

These propositions are separable. A study could support the value of task alignment while finding no advantage for contextual variation, or observe improvement during instruction without maintenance afterwards. The framework should be revised accordingly. It is not protected from

disconfirmation by assuming that every unsuccessful outcome reflects poor implementation; implementation evidence and outcome evidence should be reported independently.

Classroom illustration and developmental adaptation

Consider a proposed primary science activity in which small groups decide where to place a classroom plant. The subject objective is to use relevant information about growing conditions. The participation objective is to clarify and consider a peer's reason before settling on a decision. Each learner receives an accessible piece of information, such as a picture or short statement about light or available space. The group records a choice and the reasons considered. This is an illustrative design, not an account of a completed classroom intervention.

Before group work, the teacher models a brief clarification exchange. During the activity, support depends on what happens: a visual prompt may be sufficient for one learner, while another may need an example or help accessing the information. The observer records opportunities to respond, the relevance of the response, and the assistance given. The correctness of the science explanation is recorded separately. A child should not receive a low collaboration judgement merely because reading the information was difficult.

Reflection focuses on an identifiable contribution: learners explain which suggestion affected the group's decision and how. In a subsequent mathematics activity, the teacher creates an analogous need to compare solutions, changes partners, and examines whether clarification occurs without the original prompt. Changing both subject and partner tests a combined change; it cannot reveal which dimension accounts for success or difficulty. If diagnosis is the purpose, those changes should first be introduced separately. The design thus links everyday instruction to an explicit interpretation of transfer evidence.

For younger learners, task instructions can be brief, concrete, and supported by pictures or demonstrations. Reflection may consist of selecting an example and explaining it orally. Older primary learners may compare strategies, explain why a contribution was helpful, and negotiate role allocation. These are proposed adaptations rather than fixed developmental norms. Learners within the same grade can need different support, and progression should not be inferred solely from chronological age.

Accessibility is part of the task design. A learner may clarify through speech, writing, a communication aid, or an agreed visual response when that mode preserves the intended action. If oral expression itself is the target, changing response mode changes the construct being assessed and must be acknowledged. Teachers should also distinguish disagreement from disrespect: a child can reject a proposal while accurately representing the other person's reasoning. Compliance with the most powerful participant is not the intended outcome.

Assessment design and safeguards against overinterpretation

The proposed observation record contains the target action, an identifiable opportunity, task context, assistance, response quality, and the resulting instructional decision. Coding begins with whether the child had an accessible opportunity to act. When the opportunity was absent or unclear, the record remains unclassified for that indicator. When it was present, the observer describes the response and support. This avoids conflating absence of evidence with evidence of inability.

Support categories might distinguish an explicit model, a verbal or visual reminder, and performance without an observed prompt. These are descriptive conditions rather than equal numerical intervals. Quality descriptors should be developed separately for each action, such as whether a paraphrase preserves the partner's meaning. A successful response on one task should not automatically raise a general proficiency level. Repeated observations across named contexts are needed before even a limited claim of consistency becomes reasonable.

Table 2. Evidence required for distinct interpretations of learner progress

Interpretation	Proposed evidence	What remains unestablished
Supported execution	Relevant action after a documented model or prompt.	Independent initiation.
Independent execution	Relevant action without an observed prompt on comparable tasks.	Use under substantially changed conditions.
Specified transfer	Relevant action when a prespecified contextual dimension changes.	Transfer to untested settings or demands.
Maintenance	Relevant action at a planned later observation under documented conditions.	Long-term stability beyond the follow-up period.

Teacher ratings, learner accounts, and task observations can inform one another without being treated as interchangeable. A learner's explanation may reveal why a strategy was selected, whereas an observation establishes what occurred in a particular interaction. Differences between sources should be investigated rather than resolved automatically by averaging. If a child reports confidence but rarely acts, researchers should consider whether opportunities, peer dynamics, or response demands account for the discrepancy.

For research use, observers need a shared coding manual with examples and counterexamples. Independent coding of a subset of observations can identify ambiguous categories and estimate agreement using a statistic appropriate to the data. Reliability alone is insufficient: observers may agree on a behaviour that does not represent the intended skill. Content review, examination of how children understand tasks, and evidence about alternative explanations are also necessary. The initial purpose should be improvement of instruction, not ranking children or attaching high-stakes labels.

A staged agenda for validation

The first stage should examine conceptual and contextual fit. Primary teachers, developmental specialists, and researchers can review whether each target is meaningful and whether its proposed indicator represents it. Conversations with children can reveal how instructions, pictures, and reflection questions are understood. In a study conducted in Uzbekistan, wording would need to be examined in the languages actually used by participating learners. This is a proposed adaptation requirement, not evidence about current practices in Uzbek schools.

The second stage should test feasibility and measurement. A small pilot can examine whether opportunities occur, how much observation disrupts teaching, and whether different observers distinguish support from action quality. It should document missing observations, accessibility problems, and teacher workload alongside evidence of engagement. Pilot findings would inform revision of tasks and coding rules. The sample would be chosen for this purpose; an apparently promising pilot effect should not be presented as a definitive estimate of programme effectiveness.

The third stage should evaluate the instructional propositions with a comparison design. Where feasible, random allocation at the classroom or school level could reduce contamination between conditions. An active comparison should match relevant features such as instructional time and subject content. The study should specify its primary outcome, observation schedule, and analysis before data collection. Sample-size planning should account for clustering and expected attrition rather than rely only on the total number of children.

Outcome assessment should separate the trained activity from untrained tasks and a later follow-up. Independent assessors, unaware of allocation where feasible, can reduce expectancy effects. Analysis should address baseline differences, repeated observations, and nesting within classrooms or schools. If randomisation is not feasible, a matched comparison may still be informative, but causal claims would remain more vulnerable to selection and unmeasured differences. Effect estimates should be reported with uncertainty, not only statistical significance.

The fourth stage should investigate why outcomes differ. Implementation records can distinguish the intended opportunity structure, actual support, time devoted to practice, and exposure to contextual variation. These records may explain heterogeneity, but implementation-outcome associations are not automatically causal. A component study would be needed to isolate the contribution of a specific feature. Investigating mediation would likewise require appropriate timing of measures and explicit assumptions; a correlation between a proposed mechanism and an outcome would not establish that mechanism.

Any study involving children would require appropriate institutional and school permissions, informed caregiver consent, age-appropriate child assent, and protection of identifiable records. Recording interactions would need a clear justification and proportionate data arrangements. These requirements concern the proposed empirical agenda. The present article contains no original participant data and does not claim that ethics approval, recruitment, or fieldwork has already occurred.

Discussion and limitations

The framework's central contribution is the separation of opportunity, support, and performance when interpreting soft-skills development. It shifts the practical question from whether a desired behaviour was seen to what the learner accomplished, under which conditions, and with what assistance. A second contribution is the treatment of transfer as a set of specified changes rather than a general attribute inferred from success in one activity. These distinctions connect instructional design with evidence that can support or challenge a developmental claim.

The framework also identifies an important tension between responsiveness and comparison. Good instruction adapts support to learners, whereas evaluation requires enough comparability to interpret differences. One response is to distinguish teaching episodes, where assistance is flexible,

from planned assessment opportunities with documented conditions. Assessment should remain accessible, but any adaptation relevant to interpretation must be recorded. Otherwise, apparent improvement might reflect more generous support, an easier task, or a more cooperative partner.

The theoretical scope is limited. The framework concentrates on observable classroom participation and does not provide a comprehensive account of personality, emotional experience, or relationships outside school. Behaviours can have different meanings across cultural and linguistic settings, and locally acceptable participation should not be assumed from translated wording alone. The proposed domains may also overlap empirically. Their separability and the feasibility of a profile approach require investigation.

The evidence base has further limits. Purposive selection can privilege sources compatible with the proposed synthesis, and no claim of exhaustive coverage is made. The cited meta-analyses concern programmes that differ from the present design, while the developmental and measurement literature provides principles rather than direct tests of this framework. No original effect sizes, reliability coefficients, or validation results are available. The framework should therefore be considered a researchable proposal whose usefulness depends on subsequent testing and revision.

Conclusion

Developing soft skills in primary education requires an account of how children use relevant actions when assistance and classroom circumstances change. The integrative framework proposed here treats adaptive participation as a relationship among opportunity, action quality, support, and contextual range. It connects subject tasks with explicit participation goals, responsive instruction, informative feedback, and planned opportunities to examine transfer.

Its practical implication is to build evidence from identifiable learning situations and to preserve distinctions between supported execution, independence, transfer, and maintenance. Its research implication is to test these links through clearly specified propositions and staged validation. The framework offers a basis for designing such work; it does not establish effectiveness in advance of empirical evaluation.

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