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Interculturalism and School Leaders: The Contribution of Soft Skills

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Abstract: This small-scale qualitative research study seeks to explore the perceptions of twelve (N=12) primary school teachers on the soft skills they consider school principals should possess in order to effectively manage the cultural diversity of their students. Data collection took place in February 2025 and participating teachers were selected by applying the purposive convenience sampling technique. The construction of the questionnaire was primarily based on the SOSTRA "Soft Skills Training and Recruitment in Adult Education" (2019) scale. The findings indicate that teachers consider that school leaders should be equipped with soft skills that can contribute to the development of an inclusive school open to interculturalism and diversity.

Keywords: interculturalism, soft skills, school leaders, cultural diversity, training.

Introduction

Rapidly changing technological and demographic changes dictate the need to redefine the profile of school leaders in order to meet the new demands of their complex role. The concept of skills is an important reference point and debate at both international and national level, in the sense that investing in appropriate skills is strongly linked to productivity and effectiveness (Wyant et al., 2018). Skills have both cognitive content, as they require the use of reasoning and creative thinking, and



practical content, as they involve the application of know-how, methods, materials and tools (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2023). Similarly, they constitute patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviours (UNESCO, 2018), and they are inextricably linked to an individual's ability to survive, evolve, adapt and thrive (European Commission, 2019).

Hager's (1994) typology describes cognitive skills (critical thinking and problem-solving strategy), interpersonal skills (empathy, communication, active listening), emotional skills that fall within the logic of emotional intelligence (self-awareness, self-regulation), technical skills (expertise, technology) and psycho-kinesthetic skills (creativity, adaptation, behavior). In this respect, an important distinction between skills is the categorization of skills into hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are applicable in a limited number of occupational settings and describe specific qualities for the practice of an occupation, such as operations analysis, operation and control, operations monitoring, technology design, programming, quality control analysis, troubleshooting, equipment selection, repair and installation (O*NET as cited in Panagiotopoulos et al., 2023).

On the counterpart of hard skills, we can mention soft skills, for which there has been a growing interest since the beginning of the 21st century, as they are highly transferable and linked to the harmonious interaction and communication of individuals in today's multicultural environments (Palaologou & Karanikola, 2023; Palaologou et al., 2025). Soft skills include communication, courtesy and ethics, integrity, positive attitude (optimism, enthusiasm, encouragement, joy, self-confidence), professionalism, responsibility, teamwork, work ethic, resilience, intercultural awareness (respect and acceptance of diversity), decision-making, problem solving and crisis management, stress management, adaptability, negotiation, accountability, perseverance and patience, respect, motivation and initiative, as well as personal development to enrich knowledge and skills (Gibert et al., 2017; Robles, 2012; SOSTRA, 2019). In this vein, Goleman (2011) proposes the clustering of soft skills into personal skills, which determine how well we handle ourselves and our emotions, and social skills, which determine how well we handle our relationships with others, with an emphasis on communication skills, empathy, remaining calm and managing conflict, cooperation and teamwork, as well as the appropriate management of diversity (Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2025).

In light of this, at the leadership level, effective leaders should possess the appropriate intrapersonal competencies that include passion and drive, self-awareness, creativity and ethics, interpersonal skills that include active listening, inclusion, motivation for growth, respect and the art of inquiry, and socio-emotional skills that include integrity, positive attitude, critical thinking, empathy and openness (Leithwood et al., 2019; Palaologou & Karanikola, 2023; SOSTRA, 2019). In general, the effectiveness of education leaders depends significantly on the shared vision they set at the school level, the values, principles and culture they aim to promote and foster (UNESCO, 2024).

Research Aim and Research Questions

In Greece, migration and refugee flows in recent years have been intense, with the number of refugees exceeding 160,000, while in 2015 alone, approximately 860,000 refugees arrived in our country. The total number of refugees in Greece in 2024 was 62,119, while the total arrivals to date for 2025 are 16,290 (Greece-UNHCR Data Portal, 2025). Education can undoubtedly play a major role in building inclusive societies by adopting more equitable education systems that "ensure that all young people can develop their talents and reach their full potential regardless of their background" (European Commission/EACEA/EURICE, 2020, p.13). In light of this the present study aims to explore the perceptions of twelve (N=12) primary school teachers on the soft skills they believe that their school



principals should possess in order to effectively manage the cultural diversity of their students. In particular, participants were asked to answer the following questions:

- How do they define soft skills?
- What soft skills do they consider that aspiring principals should possess in order to respond more effectively to the current educational context?
- Do they consider that the cultivation of soft skills contributes to more effective management of cultural diversity in the modern school? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

The qualitative methodology was followed and the semi-structured interview tool was used. Data collection was conducted in February 2025 and the participating teachers were selected using purposive convenient sampling technique. The construction of the questionnaire was primarily based on the SOSTRA "Soft Skills Training and Recruitment in Adult Education" (2019) scale and was based on four axes: a) demographic-professional data; b) definition of soft skills; c) soft skills and school principals (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and socio-emotional); and d) soft skills and cultural diversity managing. All participants were briefed on the research topic, and everyone was assured that anonymity and reliability would be respected (Babbie, 2021). The data was processed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Research Results

With regard to the demographic and professional data of the participants, it was found that they all worked in primary education in the Region of Western Greece during the academic year 2024-2025. Specifically, eight (8) were teachers, and four (4) were English language teachers. In terms of gender, seven out of twelve were female, their ages ranged from 28-55 years old, their work experience was between 3-26 years and they all had teaching experience with students from different cultural backgrounds.

As for the conceptual clarification of the term "soft skills", participants stated that they were generally familiar with the concept of skills as mandatory "skills workshops" have been introduced in our country's schools by the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports. Thus they defined soft skills as those skills that help individuals to cooperate (P1), communicate (P3), respect and accept difference (P5), have empathy and positive thinking (P8), work in teams (P11), adapt to the current demands of school and develop principles and values (P12).

In the question "What soft skills do you think modern principals should possess in order to respond more effectively in the current educational context", the participants were supported by the researcher in distinguishing soft skills into interpersonal, interpersonal and socio-emotional. Thus, in terms of the intrapersonal skills that school principals should possess, participants focused on ethics, honesty, integrity, accountability, non-discrimination, equity, fairness and self-evaluation, while they did not highlight the skills of positive energy and enthusiasm and redefinition as defined by the SOSTRA (2019) scale. Specifically:

P5. "Principals should behave in a fair manner and not discriminate against any teachers, parents or even students."

P9. "Accountability, integrity and honesty to set the right example for others and to create a culture of equality and inclusion."



P3: "First they should evaluate their own behaviour, knowledge, skills, and practices and then evaluate teachers and students."

In the category of interpersonal skills of principals, teachers highlighted communication, active listening, meaningful interaction, motivating and encouraging teachers to improve and develop, treating teachers equally and fairly, and recognizing the talents of all contributors to the organization.

P7: "Modern managers should be more open to new ideas and innovations. They should listen to all "voices" and opinions and show more trust in colleagues... we should generally feel welcomed and that our work is recognized."

P4: "My experience from the various schools I have worked in shows that in recent years, principals have higher formal qualifications, are more communicative and interact better with the school community."

However, some participants argued that despite the fact that these skills are of major importance, they are not always visible in the school setting. Two participants in particular state that:

P8: "An important soft interpersonal skill is equal and fair treatment, but unfortunately it is not always observed. In my school there are many small sub-groups - for example, young colleagues - older colleagues - who are not treated equally by the school leader."

P11: "The promotion of cooperation is unfortunately not encouraged by the school management."

In the area of socio-emotional skills, the participating teachers emphasized the ability to adapt the behaviour of managers according to the particularities and needs that shape the school climate, the value of empathy and sensitivity, optimism, motivation and support of colleagues, ethics and the ability to resolve conflicts. Specifically:

P1: "Principals should possess a value system that is visible in their daily behaviour... to behave fairly, to understand their colleagues and to put themselves in their shoes in difficult times."

P2: "We need a principal who is proactive, supportive, innovative and with positive energy... the teacher's work is becoming increasingly difficult and demands are increasing... various problems with parents and children often arise, such as domestic violence, conflicts, low learning outcomes..."

Regarding the fourth axis of the research, the participating teachers as a whole acknowledged the contribution of soft skills to the effective management of interculturality and the resulting diversity, as interculturally engaged educators and principles have developed soft skills, such as active listening, empathy, willingness to adapt to the cultural and linguistic needs of learners, acceptance and respect for diversity, freedom of expression, reflection on individual and social stereotypes and prejudices and differentiation of teaching. Nevertheless, they argued that both teachers and school leaders need to be adequately trained in skills related to conflict management, communicating with parents of students who bring different linguistic and cultural capital, and addressing some prejudicial and racist attitudes.

P8: "Intercultural competence is based on values, principles and attitudes that essentially refer to soft skills. I refer mainly to empathy, inclusion, respect and democracy."

P10: "Of course, soft skills also contribute to better managing diversity ... after all, I think intercultural skills are soft skills."



P12: "The implementation of skills workshops in our school has helped us to work on soft skills, to embrace students who are from other countries, to listen to them more, to develop relevant projects and initiatives..."

P7: "They do help us to understand diversity but I think that this understanding remains at a theoretical level and practically I am not sure if we really manage diversity effectively... I think we all need further targeted education and training."

Conclusions

This small-scale qualitative research highlights important findings about the need to cultivate and promote soft skills. Participating teachers, without necessarily being knowledgeable about the various typologies of soft skills, define them experientially, evaluating them as particularly important. They look for and highly value the ability of education leaders to demonstrate empathy, credibility and integrity, to be supportive, to empower teachers and the school community, to take action, to promote professionalism and personal development of teachers. The aforementioned skills are promoted as essential skills of emotional intelligence, according to Goleman (2011). Awareness of emotions helps the school leader to create healthy constructive relationships with school staff and the wider community and foster collaboration (Bouchamma et al, 2019; Palaiologou et al., 2025). Also, individuals who behave ethically and honestly cultivate a sense of trust, demonstrate intellectual humility, which means that they acknowledge their limits and limitations, admit that they do not know everything but have the willingness to learn and develop (The European Commission Framework for Researchers, 2025). Equally important is the skill of intercultural communication, which is recognized as a major soft skill that can contribute to improving relationships, fostering mutual empathy and understanding, negotiation and active listening (Aguilar 2024; Dowdall et al., 2021; Karanikola & Panagiotopoulos, 2025; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

Regarding the findings of soft skills surveys with the SOSTRA tool (2019), conducted in adult education organizations in Finland, Poland, Italy, Romania and Spain, the dominant soft skills that emerge are respect for others and openness to diversity, while in a similar survey on soft skills conducted by Palaiologou and Karanikola (2023) on 159 undergraduate students and student teachers in Greek universities, respect for others, openness to diversity and ethics are identified as the most important skills, while the less important skills are the art of exploration, adaptation and passion/self-motivation. In short, empowering school leaders with these soft skills can contribute to the development of an inclusive school that embraces cultural diversity and recognizes cultural diversity as an asset and promotes equal participation of all in the educational process.

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