



TEACHERS' AWARENESS, PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, AND FAMILIARITY WITH SOFT SKILLS AMONG GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Abstract:

Soft skills are widely recognized as essential competencies for effective teaching and inclusive educational practice. However, evidence regarding teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their professional training, and familiarity with these competencies remains limited, particularly among teachers working in general and special education. The present study aimed to investigate these dimensions among teachers in general and special education in Greece. A cross-sectional quantitative study was conducted with 240 teachers working in general and special education in Greece. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising demographic and professional characteristics, as well as items assessing teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, sources of information, level of professional training, and familiarity with soft skills. Descriptive statistical analyses were performed. The findings indicated that the vast majority of teachers were aware of the concept of soft skills. Nevertheless, fewer than half reported having received formal training in these competencies, while participants reported moderate to high levels of familiarity with soft skills. The findings highlight the need to strengthen both pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development in order to enhance teachers' understanding and effective use of soft skills in educational practice.

Keywords: soft skills; teachers; general education; special education; professional development

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1. Introduction

The evolving landscape of contemporary education has substantially transformed teachers' professional role, extending their responsibilities beyond the transmission of academic knowledge to encompass complex pedagogical, social, and emotional demands. In addition to subject knowledge and instructional expertise, teachers are expected to demonstrate a wide range of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies that enable them to address diverse learners' needs, collaborate effectively with members of the school community, and promote inclusive educational practices. Within this context, soft skills have emerged as a fundamental dimension of teachers' professional competence, contributing to effective teaching, classroom management, collaboration, and educational quality (Collie, 2020; OECD, 2021; Ouchen et al., 2022).

The importance of soft skills has become increasingly evident within contemporary educational systems, where teachers are required to foster students' academic, social, and emotional development while responding to increasingly diverse classroom contexts. Competencies such as effective communication, collaboration, empathy, self-efficacy, flexibility, resilience, and creativity enhance teachers' professional effectiveness and their capacity to establish supportive learning environments, manage classroom challenges, and implement inclusive educational practices. Consequently, the development of these competencies has become a priority in both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, reflecting the growing recognition of their contribution to educational quality and teachers' professional well-being (Gunn & McRae, 2021; Orakci, 2021; UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of soft skills in education, existing research has predominantly focused on individual competencies or on their association with specific educational outcomes. Comparatively fewer studies have adopted a comprehensive perspective by examining teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their professional training, and familiarity with these competencies, particularly among teachers working in general and special education. A more integrated investigation of these dimensions is essential for advancing the understanding of how teachers perceive and incorporate soft skills into their everyday professional practice, particularly in the context of general and special education (Ouchen et al., 2022; Hamzah et al., 2025).

Against this background, the present study aimed to investigate teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their level of professional training, and their familiarity with these competencies among teachers working in general and special education in Greece. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of teachers' preparedness to integrate soft skills into educational practice and to provide evidence that may inform the development of evidence-based pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development programmes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Soft Skills and Teachers' Professional Competence

The rapidly evolving educational landscape has substantially transformed teachers' professional responsibilities, extending their role beyond the transmission of subject - specific knowledge to encompass the development of inclusive, collaborative, and student - centred learning environments. Contemporary teachers are expected to respond effectively to increasingly diverse academic, social, emotional, and behavioural needs while maintaining productive relationships with students, colleagues, families, and the wider school community. Consequently, teachers' professional effectiveness depends not only on pedagogical knowledge and instructional expertise but also on a broad range of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and socio-emotional competencies collectively referred to as soft skills (Cinque, 2016; OECD, 2024). These competencies are now widely recognised as an essential component of teachers' professional competence and educational quality. Although the terminology varies across the literature, encompassing concepts such as transversal competencies, non-cognitive skills, life skills, and socio-emotional skills, there is broad consensus that soft skills comprise transferable competencies that facilitate effective communication, collaboration, adaptability, emotional regulation, creativity, problem-solving, and lifelong learning (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Cinque, 2016). Unlike discipline-specific knowledge, these competencies support teachers' capacity to respond flexibly to changing educational demands and to establish positive interpersonal relationships across diverse professional contexts (OECD, 2024).

Growing empirical evidence demonstrates that soft skills contribute substantially to teachers' professional effectiveness. Competencies such as effective communication, collaboration, empathy, self - efficacy, resilience, and creativity have been associated with improved classroom management, stronger teacher–student relationships, greater professional adaptability, enhanced well-being, and more effective implementation of inclusive educational practices (Collie, 2020, 2021; Orakcı, 2021; Ouchen et al., 2022). International organisations similarly emphasise that the development of these competencies should constitute an integral component of both initial teacher education and continuing professional development, enabling teachers to address the complex challenges of contemporary educational environments (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024).

2.2. Teachers' Awareness, Professional Training, and Familiarity with Soft Skills

Teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for recognising their educational value and supporting their systematic integration into teaching practice. Although soft skills have become increasingly prominent in educational research and policy, the concept itself remains inconsistently understood across educational settings. International organisations have emphasised that teachers should possess a clear understanding of soft skills as an essential component of professional competence, enabling them to respond effectively to the academic, social, and emotional demands of contemporary education (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024).

Nevertheless, empirical studies have predominantly examined the contribution of the individual soft skill to educational outcomes rather than teachers' awareness of the concept itself, resulting in comparatively limited evidence regarding educators' conceptual understanding of soft skills (Collie, 2020, 2021; Ouchen et al., 2022).

Professional training has been consistently identified as a key factor supporting teachers' development of soft skills. Both the OECD (2024) and UNESCO (2022) emphasise that these competencies should be systematically incorporated into pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development programmes to enable teachers to respond effectively to increasingly diverse and inclusive educational environments. However, existing evidence suggests that opportunities for structured professional training remain uneven across educational systems and institutional contexts (Fernandes et al., 2021; Busaka et al., 2022). Consequently, many teachers may acknowledge the importance of soft skills without having received sufficient professional preparation to understand their theoretical foundations or to further develop these competencies throughout their careers.

Teachers' familiarity with soft skills represents another important, yet comparatively underexplored, dimension of teachers' professional competence. Familiarity reflects the extent to which teachers understand the concept of soft skills and recognise their relevance within educational settings. Although previous studies have extensively investigated individual soft skills or their relationship with teacher effectiveness, well-being, classroom management, and inclusive education (Collie, 2020, 2021; Orakcı, 2021; Ouchen et al., 2022), considerably fewer studies have examined teachers' awareness, professional training, and familiarity within a unified conceptual framework. This limitation is particularly evident in research involving teachers working in general and special education, where empirical evidence remains relatively scarce.

Overall, the available literature demonstrates that, despite the increasing recognition of soft skills as an essential dimension of teachers' professional competence, important gaps remain regarding teachers' awareness of the concept, the level of their professional training, and their familiarity with these competencies. Addressing this gap is essential for informing evidence-based teacher education and continuing professional development policies and provides the rationale for the present study.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Study Design

The present study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their level of professional training, and their familiarity with these competencies among teachers working in general and special education in Greece. A cross-sectional survey design was considered appropriate because it enables the systematic examination of participants' perceptions and self-reported practices at a single point in time and facilitates the investigation of relationships among variables within a defined population (Cohen et al., 2018).

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles governing educational research. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent obtained prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional authority before the commencement of data collection.

3.2 Participants

A total of 240 teachers working in general and special education in Greece participated in the study. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling and met the predefined inclusion criteria, namely being actively employed as teachers in general and special education during the data collection period and providing informed consent to participate in the study. The sample included both male and female teachers with diverse age groups, educational qualifications, employment status, and years of teaching experience.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using a structured researcher-developed questionnaire specifically developed for the purposes of the present study and aligned with its research objectives. Prior to the main study, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing to evaluate its clarity, comprehensibility, content relevance, and overall structure. Based on participants' feedback, minor linguistic revisions were made to improve the clarity of selected items, while the content and overall structure of the questionnaire remained unchanged.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section collected participants' demographic and professional characteristics, including sex, age, educational qualifications, employment status, teaching setting, and teaching experience. The second section comprised researcher-developed items assessing teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, sources of information, level of professional training, and familiarity with the concept of soft skills. Responses were recorded using categorical response options and five-point Likert-type scales, as appropriate for each variable.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Following pilot testing and the incorporation of minor revisions, the final version of the questionnaire was administered to teachers working in general and special education in Greece. Data were collected electronically using an online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and no financial or other incentives were offered. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality and anonymity of the collected data, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. Completion and submission of the questionnaire were considered to indicate informed

consent. All data were collected and processed in accordance with the ethical principles governing educational research and applicable data protection regulations.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Prior to statistical analysis, the dataset was checked for completeness, coded, and prepared for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' demographic and professional characteristics, as well as their responses to the questionnaire. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. For Likert-scale items, descriptive statistics were used to summarise teachers' responses regarding their awareness of the concept of soft skills, level of professional training, and familiarity with soft skills. The findings are presented using tables and graphical representations, where appropriate.

4. Results and Discussion

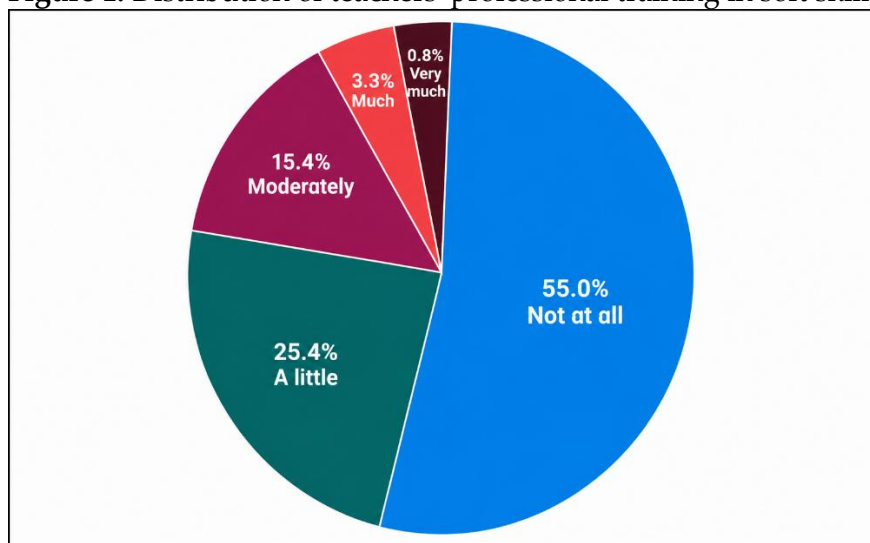
4.1 Teachers' Awareness of the Concept of Soft Skills

The findings showed that the vast majority of the participating teachers ($n = 214$, 89.2%) reported being aware of the concept of soft skills, whereas only 26 teachers (10.8%) indicated that they were not aware of the concept. The high level of awareness observed in the present study is consistent with the increasing prominence of soft skills in contemporary educational policy and research. International organisations, including UNESCO (2022) and the OECD (2024), have recognised soft skills as an essential component of teachers' professional competence and advocate their systematic integration into teacher education and continuing professional development. Similarly, Ouchen et al. (2022) reported that soft skills are receiving increasing attention within educational settings, reflecting their growing importance in contemporary teaching. Nevertheless, awareness of the concept should not be interpreted as evidence of adequate professional preparation or comprehensive understanding of soft skills. Rather, it indicates that teachers recognise the concept, while professional training and familiarity provide complementary dimensions for understanding teachers' preparedness regarding soft skills.

4.2 Teachers' Professional Training in Soft Skills

The findings indicated that fewer than half of the participating teachers ($n = 108$, 45.0%) reported having received any form of professional training in soft skills. Among those teachers, most participants ($n = 61$, 56.5%) reported that their level of professional training was a little. In contrast, 47 teachers (43.5%) reported moderately, much, or very much professional training. Specifically, 34.3% reported moderately, 7.4% reported much, and 1.9% reported very much professional training (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of teachers' professional training in soft skills

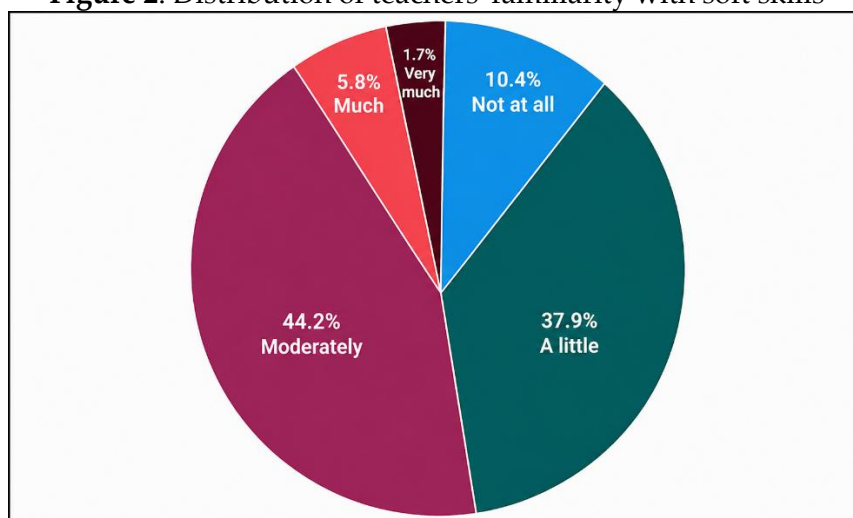


The findings suggest that, although teachers generally reported being aware of the concept of soft skills, opportunities for systematic professional training remain limited. This finding is consistent with international policy frameworks emphasising that soft skills should be systematically integrated into both pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development in order to strengthen teachers' professional competence (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024). Similarly, Fernandes et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of structured professional learning opportunities for developing teachers' soft skills, while Busaka et al. (2022) highlighted the need to strengthen teacher education programmes to better prepare educators for the development of these competencies. Consequently, the relatively low proportion of teachers reporting moderately, much, or very much professional training highlights the need for more systematic professional development initiatives focusing on soft skills.

4.3 Teachers' Familiarity with Soft Skills

The findings indicated that 124 teachers (51.7%) reported moderate to very high levels of familiarity with soft skills. More specifically, 106 participants (44.2%) reported being moderately familiar with soft skills, whereas 14 (5.8%) and 4 (1.7%) reported a high level of familiarity, respectively. In contrast, 91 teachers (37.9%) reported a little familiarity, while 25 participants (10.4%) indicated that they were not at all familiar with soft skills (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of teachers' familiarity with soft skills



Overall, the findings suggest that teachers reported moderate levels of familiarity with soft skills. Although more than half of the participants indicated moderate to very high familiarity, a considerable proportion reported limited or no familiarity with the concept. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that teachers' familiarity with soft skills varies considerably and is influenced by opportunities for professional learning and educational context (Ouchen et al., 2022). Furthermore, international organisations have emphasised that strengthening teachers' familiarity with soft skills through both pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development is essential for supporting teachers' professional competence and responding effectively to the demands of contemporary education (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024). The findings therefore highlight the need to strengthen professional learning opportunities that enhance teachers' familiarity with soft skills throughout their professional careers.

5. Recommendations

The findings of the present study have important implications for educational policy, teacher education, and future research. Although most teachers reported being aware of the concept of soft skills, fewer than half indicated that they had received any form of professional training, and a substantial proportion reported limited familiarity with these competencies. These findings suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on the systematic development of soft skills throughout teachers' professional careers.

At the policy level, soft skills should be more explicitly incorporated into both pre-service teacher education programmes and continuing professional development initiatives. Providing teachers with structured learning opportunities may strengthen not only their awareness of soft skills but also their familiarity with these competencies and their professional preparedness. Such recommendations are consistent with international frameworks emphasising that transferable competencies constitute an integral

component of teachers' professional competence and lifelong learning (OECD, 2021, 2024; UNESCO, 2022; Cinque, 2016).

Future research should employ larger and more representative samples from different educational settings and geographical regions to improve the generalisability of the findings. Comparative studies involving teachers working in general and special education, as well as longitudinal research examining changes in teachers' awareness, professional training, and familiarity over time, would contribute to a deeper understanding of teachers' professional development. Furthermore, future studies should investigate the factors associated with these dimensions, including teaching experience, educational qualifications, and participation in professional development programmes (Ouchen et al., 2022).

Overall, strengthening teachers' awareness, professional training, and familiarity with soft skills may contribute to enhancing teachers' professional competence and supporting high-quality, inclusive, and sustainable educational practice (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

5.1 Limitations

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of teachers. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability and response biases. Third, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their professional training, and their familiarity with these competencies at a single point in time and does not allow conclusions regarding causal relationships or changes over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable empirical evidence regarding teachers' awareness, professional training, and familiarity with soft skills among teachers working in general and special education in Greece.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated teachers' awareness of the concept of soft skills, their level of professional training, and their familiarity with these competencies among teachers working in general and special education in Greece. By focusing on these three dimensions, the study provides empirical evidence that contributes to a better understanding of teachers' preparedness regarding soft skills within the Greek educational context.

The findings revealed that most participating teachers reported being aware of the concept of soft skills. However, fewer than half indicated that they had received any form of professional training, while teachers generally reported moderate levels of familiarity with these competencies. These findings suggest that awareness of soft skills does not necessarily correspond to adequate professional preparation, highlighting the importance of strengthening structured opportunities for teachers' professional learning.

Overall, the study underscores the need to further integrate soft skills into both pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development programmes. Strengthening teachers' professional training and familiarity with these competencies may enhance their professional competence and better support the demands of contemporary, inclusive educational environments. It is anticipated that the findings of the present study will contribute to the ongoing discussion on teachers' professional development and provide useful evidence for researchers, teacher educators, and educational policymakers seeking to promote the systematic development of soft skills in education.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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