



SCHOOL PROMOTION OF SOFT SKILLS AND TEACHERS' CLASSROOM PRACTICES: EVIDENCE FROM GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Abstract:

Soft skills are widely recognised as essential competencies for effective teaching and learning in contemporary education. While schools are expected to promote these competencies systematically, teachers play a central role in integrating them into everyday classroom practice. Nevertheless, research examining both school promotion of soft skills and teachers' classroom practices remains limited. This study aimed to explore general and special education teachers' views on school promotion of soft skills and to examine the frequency with which they incorporate the seven core soft skills into their classroom practice. The present article reports findings from the quantitative phase of a broader sequential explanatory mixed-methods study. The analyses focused on researcher-developed questionnaire items addressing school promotion of soft skills and teachers' classroom practices. The findings indicate that teachers did not perceive soft skills as being systematically promoted within contemporary schools. In contrast, they reported frequent use of all seven examined soft skills in their classroom practice, with empathy, collaboration, creativity, and effective communication emerging as the most frequently implemented competencies. Overall, the findings indicate a divergence between teachers' views on school promotion of soft skills and their reported classroom practices. The study underscores the importance of strengthening the systematic promotion of soft skills within school settings and highlights the need for educational policies and professional development initiatives that support their effective integration into teaching and learning.

Keywords: soft skills; school promotion; teachers' views; classroom practices; general education; special education

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1. Introduction

Soft skills have become a central focus of contemporary educational research, reflecting the growing recognition that effective teaching extends beyond subject knowledge to encompass the interpersonal, social, and emotional competencies required to support students' holistic development and respond to the increasingly complex demands of contemporary education. A growing body of research has demonstrated that teachers' soft skills contribute substantially to instructional effectiveness, positive classroom relationships, students' academic and social-emotional development, inclusive educational practices, and teacher well-being (Cinque, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Their importance has been further reinforced by international educational frameworks, which recognise social and emotional competencies as essential for lifelong learning, active citizenship, inclusion, and sustainable development (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Consequently, strengthening teachers' soft skills has emerged as a strategic priority for improving educational quality and preparing schools to address the diverse learning and social needs of contemporary classrooms. Against this background, the present study investigates teachers' views on the promotion of soft skills within contemporary schools and the extent to which these competencies are reflected in their everyday classroom practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Promotion of Soft Skills

Schools play a pivotal role in promoting soft skills by providing structured learning environments in which these competencies can be intentionally fostered through teaching, social interaction, and everyday school experiences. Their development extends beyond formal curricula and requires a whole-school approach that embeds soft skills within school culture, classroom practices, interpersonal relationships, and leadership (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2024). Previous studies have shown that school environments characterised by supportive relationships, collaboration, inclusion, and active student participation create favourable conditions for the development of social and emotional competencies while enhancing students' engagement, well-being, and overall educational outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2024). Consequently, the promotion of soft skills should be regarded as an essential dimension of educational quality and school improvement rather than as an isolated instructional objective.

2.2 Teachers' Role in Fostering Soft Skills

Within this context, teachers are recognised as the primary agents responsible for translating educational priorities into meaningful classroom experiences. Beyond delivering academic content, they foster soft skills through their instructional practices, classroom interactions, and relationships with students, thereby creating learning

environments that promote communication, collaboration, empathy, creativity, resilience, flexibility, and self-efficacy. Previous research has consistently shown that teachers' soft skills are associated with instructional quality, inclusive education, positive classroom climate, student engagement, and students' social-emotional development (Collie, 2020, 2021; Aldrup et al., 2020). Consequently, the successful promotion of soft skills depends not only on educational policies and curricula but also on teachers' capacity to integrate these competencies systematically into everyday teaching.

2.3 Previous Empirical Research

Empirical research has predominantly examined teachers' soft skills in relation to teaching effectiveness, classroom climate, teacher well-being, inclusive educational practices, and students' academic and social-emotional development. Other studies have focused on the effectiveness of professional development programmes designed to strengthen these competencies and support their integration into educational practice (Aldrup et al., 2020; Collie, 2021; OECD, 2024). Collectively, these studies provide substantial evidence regarding the educational value of teachers' soft skills. Nevertheless, most previous research has focused either on individual soft skills or on their associations with educational outcomes, while considerably less attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions of how schools promote these competencies and the extent to which they are reflected in everyday classroom practice.

2.4 Research Gap and Aim of the Study

Despite the growing body of research on teachers' soft skills, limited empirical evidence is available regarding teachers' views on the extent to which contemporary schools promote soft skills alongside the frequency with which these competencies are implemented in classroom practice, particularly across both general and special education settings. Examining these dimensions concurrently may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between school-level promotion of soft skills and teachers' reported instructional practices. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explore general and special education teachers' views on school promotion of soft skills and to examine the frequency with which they implement the seven core soft skills in their classroom practice.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Study Design

The present study employed a quantitative descriptive research design and forms part of a broader sequential explanatory mixed-methods study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Although the overall research integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate teachers' soft skills, the present article reports findings exclusively from the quantitative phase. Specifically, the analyses were based on researcher-developed questionnaire items examining teachers' views on the promotion of soft skills in

contemporary schools and the frequency with which they implement the seven core soft skills in their classroom practice. This approach enabled a focused examination of these two dimensions across general and special education settings.

3.2 Participants

A total of 240 primary education teachers participated in the study. The sample comprised an equal number of general and special education teachers, including 60 general education kindergarten teachers, 60 special education kindergarten teachers, 60 general education primary teachers, and 60 special education primary teachers. Participants were recruited from public primary schools in Rhodes, Greece, using purposive quota sampling, which ensured balanced representation across the four professional groups while aligning with the objectives of the broader mixed-methods study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Eligible participants were actively employed in general or special education settings during the data collection period and had direct classroom teaching responsibilities. Teachers who were not actively teaching or were employed outside the geographical area of the study were not included. The final sample consisted of 207 women (86.2%) and 33 men (13.8%), with a median age of 38.5 years. Permanent (50.8%) and substitute teachers (49.2%) were almost equally represented. Participants also varied in their educational qualifications and teaching experience, resulting in a heterogeneous sample that reflected diverse professional backgrounds. A summary of the participants' demographic and professional characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic and professional characteristics of the participants ($N = 240$)

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Female	207	86.2
Male	33	13.8
Education setting		
General education	120	50.0
Special education	120	50.0
Teaching level		
Kindergarten	120	50.0
Primary school	120	50.0
Employment status		
Permanent	122	50.8
Substitute	118	49.2

3.3 Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used for data collection. The instrument comprised two sections. The first section included a researcher-developed questionnaire designed to collect demographic and professional information and to examine teachers' views on soft skills, including the extent to which contemporary schools promote soft skills and the frequency with which teachers implement the seven core soft skills in their classroom

practice. The second section consisted of seven validated psychometric scales assessing self-efficacy, resilience, cognitive flexibility, empathy, perceived communication competence, collaboration, and creative personality. For the purposes of the present study, two researcher-developed items were analysed. The first assessed teachers' views on the extent to which contemporary schools promote soft skills, with responses recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The second assessed teachers' reported frequency of using seven soft skills in their teaching practice—effective communication, collaboration, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, resilience, empathy, and creativity—using the same five-point response scale (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = quite, 4 = very, and 5 = very much).

Although these scales formed part of the broader mixed-methods study, they were not analysed in the present article. The researcher-developed questionnaire was developed following an extensive review of the relevant literature and was piloted with 20 teachers representing the four participant groups included in the study. The pilot phase evaluated the clarity, comprehensibility, and overall flow of the questionnaire and resulted in only minor wording revisions before its administration in the main study. The finalised version of the questionnaire was subsequently administered to the main sample.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during the 2023–2024 academic year from public primary schools in Rhodes, Greece. Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval from the Department of Primary Education of the University of the Aegean, following Decision No. 11/31.01.2024 of the Department Assembly and the recommendation of the Departmental Ethics Committee. Eligible teachers were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of the research. All participants provided informed consent before participation and completed the questionnaire anonymously. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Frequencies, percentages, and descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise teachers' views on the promotion of soft skills in contemporary schools and the frequency with which they reported implementing the seven core soft skills in their classroom practice. These analyses were appropriate for addressing the study's research questions and for providing a clear description of teachers' responses.

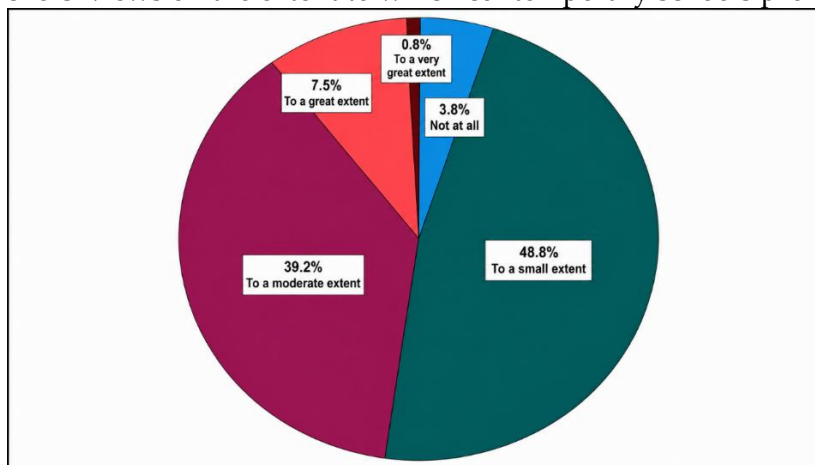
4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Teachers' Views on the Promotion of Soft Skills in Contemporary Schools

Teachers' views regarding the extent to which contemporary schools promote soft skills are presented in Figure 1. Overall, 47.5% of participants reported that contemporary

schools promote soft skills at least to a moderate extent, whereas 52.5% indicated that these competencies are promoted only to a small extent or not at all. More specifically, 48.8% reported that soft skills were promoted to a small extent and 3.8% indicated that they were not promoted at all. In contrast, 39.2% reported that soft skills were promoted to a moderate extent, 7.5% to a great extent, and only 0.8% to a very great extent (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teachers' views on the extent to which contemporary schools promote soft skills



The present study examined general and special education teachers' views on the promotion of soft skills in contemporary schools and the frequency with which they reported implementing the seven core soft skills in their classroom practice. Overall, the findings revealed a notable discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of school support for soft skills and their reported classroom implementation of these competencies. While a slight majority of teachers perceived that contemporary schools promote soft skills only to a limited extent or not at all, they nevertheless reported frequent use of these competencies in their everyday teaching.

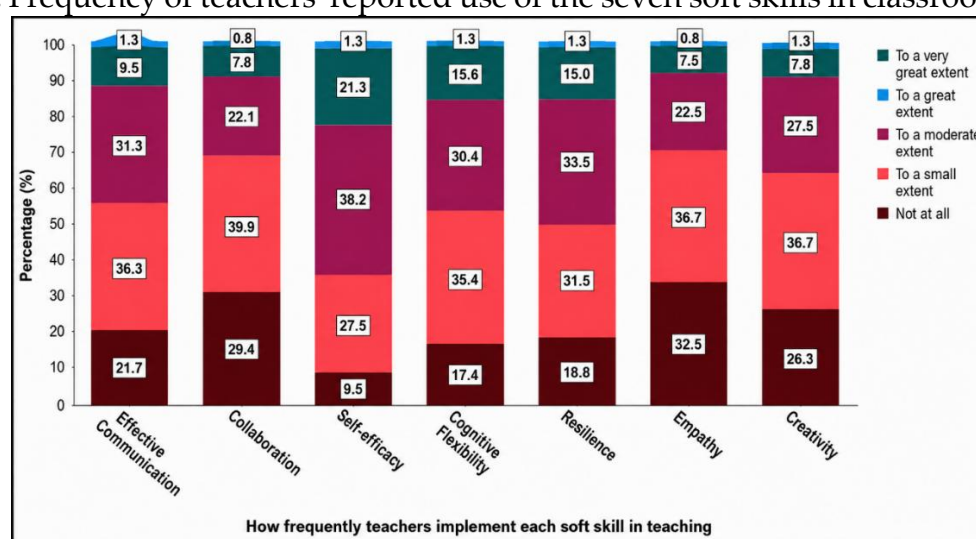
One of the most important findings of the present study is that more than half of the participating teachers believed that contemporary schools promote soft skills only to a limited extent or not at all. This finding suggests that, despite the growing recognition of soft skills as a key educational priority, their systematic promotion within school settings may not yet be fully reflected in everyday educational practice. Similar concerns have been reported in recent international studies, which indicate that the implementation of social-emotional competencies is often constrained by organisational, structural, and systemic factors (OECD, 2021; Taha et al., 2024). In this respect, UNESCO (2022) emphasises that the effective promotion of soft skills requires their systematic integration into the broader school culture rather than their treatment as isolated educational initiatives.

4.2 Frequency of Teachers' Reported Use of Soft Skills in Classroom Practice

Teachers reported frequent use of all seven soft skills examined in this study in their classroom practice (Figure 2). The highest combined rates of reported use (responses of

fairly often, very often, and very frequently) were observed for empathy and collaboration, both reaching 95.8%. Although the combined rates were identical, the response distributions differed. Empathy recorded the highest proportion of very frequently responses (36.3%), whereas collaboration showed the highest proportion of very often responses (42.9%). Creativity ranked third, with a combined reported use rate of 92.5%, followed by effective communication (91.3%). Cognitive flexibility (83.8%) and resilience (83.3%) also demonstrated high levels of reported use. Self-efficacy showed the lowest combined rate among the seven competencies; nevertheless, 76.3% of teachers reported using it at least fairly often in their classroom practice (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frequency of teachers' reported use of the seven soft skills in classroom practice



A second important finding of the study is that teachers reported frequent use of all seven soft skills examined in this study in their classroom practice, with empathy and collaboration emerging as the most frequently reported competencies, followed by creativity and effective communication. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that interpersonal and social-emotional competencies constitute fundamental dimensions of effective teaching and are closely associated with inclusive classroom environments, positive teacher–student relationships, and students' academic and social-emotional development (Mansfield et al., 2016; OECD, 2024).

The particularly high reported use of empathy and collaboration may reflect teachers' recognition of the importance of supportive relationships, effective communication, and cooperative learning within contemporary classrooms (OECD, 2024). These competencies have consistently been identified as essential for promoting inclusion, responding to student diversity, and fostering positive classroom climates (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2024). Likewise, the high reported use of creativity and effective communication may indicate that teachers perceive these competencies as integral components of everyday teaching rather than as supplementary educational practices (Cinque, 2016; OECD, 2024).

Although self-efficacy showed the lowest reported frequency of use among the seven competencies, more than three-quarters of participants reported using it at least fairly often in their classroom practice. This finding indicates that all seven soft skills examined in this study are represented, albeit to varying degrees, within teachers' reported instructional practices.

These findings reveal an important discrepancy between teachers' reported classroom practices and their perceptions of school-level support for soft skills. Although teachers reported integrating soft skills extensively into their everyday teaching, they perceived that their systematic promotion was not yet sufficiently supported within the broader school context. This discrepancy highlights the need for more coherent institutional strategies that embed soft skills within school culture, teaching practices, and professional development. Strengthening such support may facilitate a more systematic and sustainable integration of soft skills into everyday educational practice (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

5. Recommendations

The findings of the present study suggest several recommendations for educational practice, policy, and future research. Given the discrepancy identified between teachers' reported use of soft skills and their perceptions of school-level support, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening the systematic promotion of these competencies within contemporary schools. Schools should adopt a whole-school approach that integrates soft skills across curriculum design, classroom practice, school culture, and collaborative learning. Rather than being addressed through isolated activities, these competencies should become an integral component of everyday educational practice, supported by coherent institutional strategies (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

Teacher education and professional development programmes should place greater emphasis on the systematic development and application of soft skills. Continuous professional learning, mentoring, collaborative learning communities, and reflective practice may strengthen teachers' capacity to integrate competencies such as empathy, collaboration, creativity, effective communication, resilience, cognitive flexibility, and self-efficacy into everyday teaching (Cinque, 2016). At the policy level, educational authorities should support schools through coherent educational frameworks, appropriate resources, and sustained professional development that facilitate the systematic integration of soft skills into educational practice.

Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, and multiple sources of evidence, including classroom observations, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' use of soft skills across different educational contexts. Although the present study provides valuable insights, its findings should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. The study was conducted within a single geographical region and relied on self-reported data, which

may limit the generalisability of the findings and may not fully reflect actual classroom practices. Moreover, the present article reports only the quantitative phase of a broader sequential explanatory mixed-methods study. Future research integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence may further illuminate teachers' perceptions and reported use of soft skills across diverse educational settings.

6. Conclusion

The present study explored general and special education teachers' views on the promotion of soft skills in contemporary schools and examined the frequency with which they reported using the seven core soft skills in their classroom practice. The findings revealed that teachers perceived the promotion of soft skills within contemporary schools as limited, while simultaneously reporting frequent use of these competencies in their everyday teaching, particularly empathy, collaboration, creativity, and effective communication.

These findings indicate a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of school-level support for soft skills and their reported classroom practices. Although teachers reported integrating soft skills extensively into their teaching, they perceived that their systematic promotion is not yet sufficiently reflected within the broader school context. Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from both general and special education settings and by examining school-level promotion of soft skills alongside teachers' reported classroom practices. These findings contribute to a better understanding of how soft skills are currently supported at the school level and reported within everyday teaching practice.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the Author

Aikaterini Vrachna, PhD, is a primary school teacher. She received her PhD from the Department of Primary Education, University of the Aegean, Greece. Her research interests include teachers' soft skills, teacher professional development, inclusive education, general and special education, social-emotional learning, educational

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