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The Importance of Acquiring Soft Skills by Future Primary Teachers: A Comparative Study

Abstract

As a nation strives to meet the challenges posed by globalization, which is an issue of the information economy, its strength relies heavily on its citizens' intellectual prowess and critical thinking skills. Thus, institutions of teacher education play a key role in producing teachers who will be able to meet the needs of the time, with empathy, while promoting critical thinking, creative ability and the value system as a priority. Educating teachers to incorporate soft skills is critical for the profession's success. The term 'soft skills' refers to a wide range of personal and interpersonal attributes that are aimed at transforming the individual as well as society as a whole (Apple, 1996). The purpose of this research is to highlight the degree of preparation of future teachers in four large primary education universities in respective European countries. To achieve this, a mixed-mode technique was used by the researcher (questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) to gather information. The target group came from the teaching staff at the faculties of education in four European countries (Spain, Romania, France and Greece). Ten academics from each nation were hand-picked to participate in face-to-face interviews. At the same time, the teaching staff of the teacher training departments participated in a focus group, in groups of 5 people each. The most crucial soft skills in their teaching profession were identified to be social skills.

Keywords: higher education institutions, primary education, soft skills acquisition, teaching profession

Introduction

Graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to have both hard and soft skills. As a result, it is the obligation of higher education institutions to ensure that their graduates acquire sufficient holistic skills to be successful in their careers. However, soft skills still remain a problem for graduates, although trainee teachers must have soft skills since they will be future educators. This paper discusses the role of HEIs in developing soft skills in primary teacher graduates. The present study applied a mixed methodology to explore the respondents' soft skills development, including (a) "critical-praxial" thinking (Hurdakis, 2020) and problem-solving skills, (b) entrepreneurial skills, and (c) moral and professional ethics, based on their primary teaching program. Academic teachers from Faculties of Education in four European countries (Spain, Romania, France and Greece) are the target group.

In general, the research showed that the lecturers perceived the Faculty of Education program to have sufficiently developed their critical thinking, problem solving, entrepreneurial, moral and professional ethics skills. It is possible to improve the program in order to enhance their development of soft skills so as to enhance the standard of instruction and learning and to improve their employability.

This information can be used to develop primary teacher programs in HEIs that take into consideration the ongoing needs of stakeholders like schools and society in general, when redesigning the curriculum for Teacher Education programs.

Trainee teachers, like other graduates, require a certain set of soft skills in order to better respond to the demands of the education industry and society. Teachers must be taught soft skills so they can provide good and effective instruction (Tang, 2018; Häkkinen et al., 2017). HEIs, on the other hand, are having a hard time developing these soft skills among their students. Although lecturers recognize the need of incorporating soft skills into the curriculum, they have yet to do so in their pedagogy. This is due to a number of obstacles, including a large classroom setting, a limited amount of time, and other factors although the importance of soft skills is also acknowledged by students as well as time constraints (Ngang et al., 2015).

Community skills and character traits selected by a lecturer should include soft skills as a standard element (Tang & Tan, 2015). An excellent professor should be dedicated to his or her work and capable of taking charge. To effectively complete the obligations of the classroom, teaching is a comprehensive performance that requires a broad variety of knowledge and talents, including both kinds of skills (hard and soft) (Sakellariou & Mpesi, 2014). Teaching is a social, shared activity in which the lecturers and the students work together. Teaching style can be defined as a collection of behaviors. As a result, teaching ability encompasses more than just the simple conveyance of knowledge from lecturer to students. Instead, it is a comprehensive technique that facilitates and influences the learning process of students (Karras, 2014). Soft skills, also known as relationship and social skills, are essential for lecturers who work in a high-performance environment, eventually encouraging efficiency. They are thought to improve competency and, as a result, one's ability to support community advancement and transformation (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012). According to Almeida and Morais (2021), a HEI's most effective way of assessing students' and lecturers' future capability is through the use of soft skills.

To modify lecture methods for students, lecturers need to get comfortable with soft skills. In this dynamic learning environment, it will become more organized and operational, based on the lecturers' understanding, talents, and attitudes (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010).

According to Schulz (2008), lecturers are critical in the development of a student's soft skills. To create such human capital, it is necessary to have an education system that is well-versed and well-designed.

Literature review

Universities throughout the world are increasingly attempting to provide their graduates with specialized 'soft' skills to complement traditional 'hard' talents in order to prepare them to thrive in a quickly changing and dynamic world. While hard talents are relatively easy to define and develop, soft skills are not, despite the fact that they are increasingly recognized as equally, if not more, vital. One of the factors in the current study was the relevance of lecturers' soft skills acquisition in their teaching profession. In her article "Constructing 21st-century Teacher Education", Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford, identifies a number of characteristics of teachers, including an understanding of individual learning styles,

knowledge of socio-culturally sensitive pedagogical content, effective use of technology, a desire for lifelong learning, strong communication, and efficient activity management skills (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Similarly, Kereluik et al. (2013) highlighted three main kinds of knowledge which instructors must possess to succeed in the twenty-first century in a critical evaluation of the literature on twenty-first-century knowledge frameworks with relation to teachers and teacher educators: core content knowledge, digital literacy and cross-disciplinary knowledge are three subcategories of foundational knowledge. Problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration and creativity with innovation, are three subcategories of Meta Knowledge. Life and job skills and leadership, cultural competence and ethical-emotional awareness are three subcategories of humanistic knowledge. Similarly, according to the Pacific Policy Research Center's study of 21st Century Skills for Students and Teachers (2010):

... technology is redefining how we learn, the nature of how work is conducted, and the meaning of social interactions. [...] Much success is built on the ability to communicate, exchange, and use information to solve difficult problems, on the ability to adapt and innovate in the face of new demands and changing circumstances, and on the ability to command and develop the power of technology to produce new knowledge.

An education program's purpose should be to prepare students for a career in education. As a result, while hard skills are the most important component of the curriculum, soft skills must also be adequately incorporated for the profession to be successful (Schulz, 2008).

Higher order thinking skills (HOTS) are given a lot of focus in 21st century teaching and learning. HOTS is not a stand-alone subject; it is a skill that lectures and teachers should incorporate into their classes, which is why all teachers must be proficient in HOTS in order to develop that talent in their students. HOTS is important for future teachers and students because it is relevant to the knowledge-based economy and the development of information and communication technology (ICT), particularly in this period of globalization (Yen & Halili, 2015). Apart from possessing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities in order to include them into their teachings, this talent is also required for instructors to employ in learning management for students, which may help them better manage their classroom presence (Karras, 2014). Vital thinking and problem-solving skills are critical for educators, as can be observed. Not just as a talent to inculcate in their future students, but also in the way we currently 'build' the concept of 'citizen' in the context of education's socializing function, these skills must begin with trainee instructors (Calogiannakis et al., 2014).

Methods

Researchers collected data using a mixed mode approach (interviews and focus groups). There were four educational programs offered by various countries, and the target group was all lecturers who were teaching them. The research process started with a carefully designed focus group, of 8 people, in which 2 teachers from each country participated. The main axes that emerged from this research phase contributed to the creation of the research protocol of the final semi-structured

interview (Figure 1). In the face-to-face interviews, forty lecturers were selected in all.

During the face-to-face focus group, we were able to gather information from eight interviewees. The eight lecturers were four females (P1-P4) and four males (P5-P8).

Each of them taught teachers education in the Elementary and Pre-Primary programs. In the following section, we discuss the results of the analysis of the eight interviewees perspectives regarding the teaching profession. The result of the discussion was that soft skills are extremely important.

Figure 1



To learn more about the importance of soft skills in terms of teaching quality from professors, an interview protocol was developed with the seven questions designed for the in-depth interview. Twenty lecturers from the four participating nations participated in the pilot testing, but they were not used as samples in the real study. Three specialists independently validated the substance of the interview and the focus group technique. Content analysis was used to examine qualitative data. (Bryman, 2016).

Results

In general, this study's descriptive findings revealed that in all academic programs, academic teachers followed an identical pattern when it came to the soft skills required in their career as teachers.

The most significant soft skills in their teaching profession were judged to be “critical-praxial” (Hurdakis, 2020) thinking and problem-solving abilities. The sole variation between the four programs was leadership ability, which was discovered to be the least-required talent in teaching.

The results of the content analysis revealed that the skills required for lifetime learning differed significantly. Spain lecturers placed a higher value on lifelong learning than Greece lecturers, while French academics placed a higher value on lifelong learning than Romanian lecturers. Furthermore, there was a substantial difference in teamwork skill across Spanish, French, and Romanian instructors, with Greek lecturers appearing to require more teamwork skill than their counterparts.

Soft skills developed by lecturers are crucial to them, according to the interviewees, in order to give excellent and effective instruction, as specifically stated by P1, P3, P5, and P7.

I believe that soft skills are necessary for professors to be exceptionally skilled in all areas in order to excel in this profession. Excellence teachers' communication, critical thinking, and lifelong learning are just a few of the wonderful soft talents that may be acquired and they are the only ones who can deliver excellent teaching. (P3)

Lecturers will be able to understand the diverse students' capabilities and knowledge speeds. This ability also contributes to the development of inspired teaching. (P5)

Being a competent communicator is vital so that practical teaching and learning may take place at the same time. Lecturers need soft skills to be able to use a variety of teaching strategies with students of varying abilities or levels. (P7)

The majority of respondents said communication skills were the most important in teaching. When lecturers use a variety of teaching techniques, they can reach out to students with varying learning capacities and levels.

It's critical for us to produce exceptional lecturers who can collect, comprehend, and disseminate information to our students. (P1)

When accompanied by inspiration, communication skills will generate fascinating and operational learning senses, assisting pupils in remembering new information. (P4)

... since lecturers are only responsible for providing students with academic information. (P6)

It is the most crucial role of a lecturer to conduct the lecture during the teaching and learning process. The manner in which a lecturer delivers his or her lecture will determine whether or not students are able to keep up with the class. (P7)

The interviewees stated that having such communication abilities would be crucial in conveying operative and excellent teaching. In order to make that judgment, they relayed information on incidents such as presentations, group work, peer adjustment, active learning, open class discussion, cooperative learning, etc., in order to make that determination. Enriching and developing your career P1, P2, and P5 all mentioned the need of soft skills for professional development and enhancement.

They explained how practising good communication skills helped them advance in their careers and enrich their lives.

Soft skills are critical for lecturers to be exceptionally talented in these areas in order to excel in their careers. (P1)

It would be preferable, in my opinion, to maintain a positive qualified interface and deliver competent instruction to students. (P2)

As expressly stated by P4 and P8, the final qualitative conclusion demonstrated that soft skills acquisition is vital for professors to manage their students.

It is critical in regulating students that they be treated with more civility, especially those who are problematic. HEIs' teaching staff have to effectively deal with emotional outbursts both during and after the session. We aim to use this talent to help students manage everyday challenges and get back on track. (P4)

Each event that a professor is confronted with is unique, and lecturers must be prepared with extensive problem-solving skills in order to find the best possible answer to manage the challenges. (P8)

P4 and P6 were asked which students agreed that critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are the most essential soft skills in the teaching profession.

Soft skills are essential in every situation. However, I believe critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are the most crucial. (P4)

The most important soft skills for lecturers, in my opinion, are critical thinking and problem-solving skills. (P6)

Six of the lecturers (P1-P4, P6, and P7) thought the most crucial soft skill was communication for delivering quality and effective learning, based on the qualitative results of the eight interviewees.

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills, on the other hand, were considered as the most significant soft skills for managing students by P4 and P8. Furthermore, P1, P2, and P5 stated that lecturers can improve by practicing reverse communication skills because it aids in their job development and enrichment.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the distinct mean scores of the four HEIs programs, the results provided average evaluations of soft skill levels. Teamwork was rated as the most important soft skill mastered by lecturers in all four education programs in order to provide their students with the ability to overcome problems that arise often in joint undertakings. Lecturers generally supervised cooperative activities that drew on students' past experiences in order to help them think critically as lifelong learners. The goal was to assist students in discovering and implementing lifelong learning strategies, so that they might improve their collaborative experiences.

Meanwhile, the lecturers stressed the importance of learning communication as the most critical soft skill. They acknowledged the value of effective communication in the classroom, according to this qualitative outcome. They also understand that every student has different skills and shortcomings. A lecturer's communication abilities can also be used to propose unique and effective answers to students' difficulties (Calogiannakis et al., 2014).

Furthermore, instructors in primary education emphasized the need for developing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities as an important soft skill. Lecturers must understand their role in the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Lecturers must serve as facilitators to encourage conversation and encourage students to think freely, as well as to assist students understand that critical thinking does not always lead to the perfect solution, but rather teaches them how to respond appropriately to differing judgments and ideas (Henderson-Hurley & Hurley, 2013).

To summarize, soft skill development is usually assumed to be a natural process, with the capacity to be passed on and to develop knowledge and transformative capabilities in accordance with local obligations. The acquisition of soft skills by lecturers might affect their teaching quality and student accomplishment in order to handle the problems of globalization and societal transition (Calogiannakis et al., 2014).

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