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Empowering Educators: The Crucial Importance of Soft Skills in Teaching Today

May 15, 2024 por [Sanna Ruhalahti](#) - [Virpi Heinonen](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

When was the last time you experienced the profound impact of someone truly listening to you with empathy and understanding? Perhaps it was a colleague, a fellow student, a friend or even a relative. The simple act of being listened to can be eye-opening, revealing how small actions can foster empathy.

At the same time, in this dynamic era of digital transformation, our world is evolving at an unprecedented pace. It demands a surge in education and skills to meet the burgeoning need for collaboration and interaction. As educators, we are at the forefront of this evolution, tasked with cultivating new competencies to thrive in an ever-changing societal and learning landscape.

So, how can we, as educators, respond to this challenge and foster the essential skills of tomorrow in Latin America and the Caribbean? Let's explore together.

What Are The Teacher's Soft Skills?

In the realm of skill sets, we often hear about 'soft skills'—traits that complement our cognitive abilities and technical knowledge, often contrasted with 'hard skills.' Soft skills are the personal qualities that underpin effective teaching, fostering not just professional growth but also personal development. They encompass a spectrum of communication abilities and uphold ethical standards in our work.

Teaching, as a noble profession, involves more than just imparting knowledge; it's about refining and nurturing skills that enable effective transmission of knowledge. This process equips educators with the competencies vital for successful teaching. A teacher's expertise extends beyond subject matter proficiency; it involves understanding diverse learning needs and employing the most effective instructional strategies.

In essence, soft skills form the backbone of teaching excellence, ensuring educators can engage and empower learners across diverse contexts. On the other hand, soft skills and their skillful use also play an important role in maintaining a thriving school community.

In this blog post we approach teachers and educators' soft skills divided into three areas.

1. Interpersonal skills: When looking at an educator's *interpersonal* skills, they are understood as the skills we use every day when communicating and interacting with other people, both individually and in groups. The skills cover a wide range of skills, although

many focus on communication, such as listening, questioning, and interpreting body language.

2. **Intrapersonal skills:** consist, for example, of an educator's self-awareness, resilience, perseverance, and reflection. These, in turn, contribute to interpersonal skills.

3. **Socio-emotional skills:** provide a basis for action that helps educators build relationships with their students, manage different situations, and successfully implement social and emotional learning. Some define social-emotional competencies as skills that enable individuals to perform specific tasks, such as identifying and managing emotions and coping successfully with conflict. Socio-emotional skills and knowledge include behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components, which are intertwined in pedagogical practice.

Socio-Emotional Skills Should Be Used Daily In Our Interactions

During the years of educational cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), Finland has often been cited as a model for its comprehensive approach to education and socio-emotional development. Some of the factors contributing to Finland's success in this area include equitable education, a holistic approach to education that values not only academic achievement but also personal growth and well-being, rigorous teacher training, an emphasis on play, and supportive policies.

One of the recent studies is based [on Barbadian Trinidadian and Tobagonian teachers' socio-emotional development experiences](#) in 2022. This self-paced training was based on a Finnish research-based innovation of the [digital open badge-driven learning](#) approach and was organized by Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland). The training program was funded by the Inter-American Development Bank from its Social Development Fund.

Each participant had to earn at least five out of seven digital open badges (i.e., empathy, critical thinking, positive attitude, adaptability, integrity, openness to diversity, and self-awareness) to earn the socio-emotional pro meta badge. All skills demonstrations were linked to the teacher's daily professional routines, activities, and behaviors. Skills were assessed manually by the Finnish teacher educator. In total, 170 teachers earned the meta badge.

The study indicated that the teachers participating in the training program recognize the importance of socio-emotional aspects in the teaching and learning processes. The socio-emotional skills were valued as an opportunity to integrate into teaching and learning. As one teacher reported:

'I can use social-emotional skills training with my students by inserting them into my lesson plans.'

They further revealed that socio-emotional skill training has the greatest impact on teacher-student interaction and that such skills should be integrated into daily teaching activities to support student's personal growth and learning in a school community:

'This allows me to cater and tailor my lessons and social and emotional lessons in a more detailed manner.'

The integration of socio-emotional skills should be seen as a broader meaning in education. Teachers pointed out that socio-emotional skills have a wider impact:

‘Students would be motivated to be willing to show empathy to each other and to understand the need to become emotionally intelligent.’

The results showed that awareness of the socio-emotional skills is supporting learning for life:

‘Students will become overall better persons and future employees or employers as they put skills like integrity into practice’.

In addition, when developing future teachers’ professional development programs, the results suggest that all development begins with the teacher’s own self-awareness toward socio-emotional skills.

Brazilian Teachers Valued the Importance of Socio-Emotional Skills

Another study in the field of [teacher education compared soft skills](#) between three countries, Brazil, Finland, and Vietnam, representing three continents with different social, economic, and cultural aspects.

This study concluded that Brazil, Finland, and Vietnam differed significantly in their views of soft skills based on this analysis. Participants from Brazil and Finland considered socio-emotional skills to be statistically significantly more important than those from Vietnam. In addition, the participants from Brazil considered interpersonal skills to be significantly more important than the respondents from Vietnam, but the statistical difference between Finland and Vietnam was only apparent for some components of interpersonal skills. Participants from Finland rated intrapersonal skills as statistically significantly more important than respondents from Brazil and Vietnam. The Brazilian and Vietnamese educators considered socio-emotional skills to be the most important, whereas the Finnish educators considered intrapersonal skills to be the most important.

However, more research is needed, for example, on the social assumptions, thinking, and reasons behind these results. However, the study provides some guidelines for developing the skills of Brazilian teachers, for example.

Next steps for improving teacher’s soft skills in teachers from Latin America and the Caribbean

Based on our years of experience developing and working in the LAC region, the next steps should focus on professional development programs, considering the diverse backgrounds and contexts of teachers and students in the region. An important theme is to foster a supportive school environment by promoting a positive school culture, the well-being of teachers, and opportunities for peer collaboration and mentorship. The socio-emotional well-being of students has re-emerged as an issue of interest in education systems and schools and is seen as part of the holistic development of students. Advocate for the integration of soft

skills learning into education policies at national and regional levels. Also, by supporting the school's community-level engagement, the region can achieve positive results.

Continuous dialogue and research-based development will ultimately lead to empowered educators, student success, and better societal outcomes. There is still a need for more talk, awareness, and a collective willingness to develop the importance of soft skills.

The wider the repertoire of social skills teachers have, the better their relationship with students, as a socially skilled teacher can be more effective in encouraging good communication between students, as well as being an example of good social performance.

We believe that efforts to improve soft skills development in Latin America and the Caribbean can benefit from adopting elements of Finland's holistic and equitable approach to education, which is a call to all of us to create environments where education harmoniously integrates pedagogical excellence and socio-emotional well-being.

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