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## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BRAZIL, FINLAND AND VIETNAM: SOFT SKILLS FOR ADULT EDUCATORS

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### Abstract:

This study contributes a unique standpoint with its comparative case analysis concerning educators' soft skills. The topic is compared among three countries: Brazil, Finland and Vietnam, representing three continents with different social, economic and cultural aspects. This comparative quantitative case study aimed to examine the different attitudes and soft skills of adult educators ( $n = 355$ ) through an online survey in Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. The focus was on identifying the most important soft skills from the adult educators' points of view and the differences concerning those skills among the three countries. The study offers practical recommendations for teachers and teacher education development by which to further develop educators' skills, in response to skill preparation for students in the fast-changing study and working environment demands. This study concluded that Brazil, Finland and Vietnam differ considerably in their views on soft skills as based on the present analysis. The participants from Finland regarded the intrapersonal skills as most important, whereas, for the respondents from Brazil and Vietnam, the socioemotional skills were regarded as most important. Furthermore, participants from Brazil and Finland regarded the socioemotional skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. At the same time, the participants from Brazil regarded the interpersonal skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam, but between Finland and Vietnam statistical difference was apparent only on some components of the

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interpersonal skills. There is still a need for further research regarding teachers and educators' soft skills and the reasons behind the different views of their importance.

**Keywords:** adult educator, comparative analysis, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills socioemotional skills, soft skills

## 1. Introduction

Globally, the ongoing process of major digitalization transformation requires the field of education to prepare to deal with the resulting changes for the twenty-first century (Pettersson, 2018). Teacher education, both in higher and vocational education, faces challenges when attempting to bridge education and the needs of the world of work, in which digital technology use increasingly demands new kinds of skills that need to be integrated into the curricula (cf. Ruhalahiti, 2019).

Personality characteristics are often called "*soft skills*," in contrast to cognitive abilities and technical knowledge, which are called "*hard skills*" (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Soft skills are necessary qualities for becoming a qualified teacher, and they contribute to the development of one's personality while sharpening a series of communication skills and strengthening one's commitment to ethical work behaviour (Mathews & Reddy, 2018). As a profession, teaching consists of transferring, enhancing, and developing knowledge and skills, all of which result in acquiring the competencies necessary for the successful execution of the profession. Teachers must be competent in their core teaching subject and well-grounded in the relevant knowledge about the most effective ways to teach that subject to diverse learners.

While the importance of soft skills has been recognized throughout the world, the terminology used to refer to these skills varies from country to country. Soft skills for teachers consist of discourses in various strategies in the form of the contemporary skills needed for teachers around the globe (Applied Educational System, 2016). An ongoing emphasis on soft skill learning represents one of the foremost cultural shifts (Kamin, 2013) and is an established teaching staff development component (Junrat et al., 2014; Kamin, 2013; Schulz, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2018). The need to enhance teachers' soft skills has caused concern among many countries in the world, while the need for soft skills is recognized as important for teachers and should be included in teacher education and teacher development programmes (Jazeel, 2016). The more comprehensive the repertoire of teachers' skilled social behaviours, the better their relationship with students, since a socially skilled teacher can be more effective at stimulating good communication between students, in addition to being an example of good social performance (cf. Meireles, 2009; Reyes Manrique, 2016; Tang, 2018; Topal & Uzoglu, 2020).

At present, countries around the world have various methodologies and approaches to both the assessment and teaching of soft skills, hence a comparative study approach brings new and holistic view of the global situation regarding soft skills. This study focuses on the teachers' soft skills, which are yet to be widely studied (Cinque, 2016). This research is linked to the Soft Skills Training and Recruitment of Adult

Educators (SOSTRA) project, funded with support from the European Commission, under the ERASMUS+ program. The project aims to identify the need for and importance of soft skills in European Adult Education. Häme University of Applied Sciences (HAMK) was coordinating the project. In addition, the research bridges a link to the EMVITET project (Erasmus+ Capacity building) by collaborating with Vietnamese soft skills developers and researchers.

The study examines teachers' soft skills in three countries, on different continents, specifically, in Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. This study addresses two specific research questions: first, what soft skills are the most important skills from the adult educators' point of view, and secondly, what differences are there regarding these skills between the three countries. In the literature review we have focused on the three countries and partly continentally. We examined answers from participants ( $n = 355$ ) from Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. This paper can serve as a foundation for building future qualitative and quantitative research studies between the included countries.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Soft skills in Education

The concepts and definition of soft skills vary, and it must be noted that the term does not have a consensus of definition. Skills are conceptualised differently among different disciplines, educational contexts, countries, and continents. According to Cinque (2016), we are lacking a clear terminology due to the absence of a common language. There are different ways of referring to soft skills, different definitions, and ways of classifying and clustering them. Each study seems to use its own set of definitions, which are given explicitly or implicitly, through examples. Soft skills are indicative of social competence, since they affect the way the individual deals with others in the process of interaction (Almeida et al., 2017).

In Vietnam, these skills are applied in the form of soft skills, transversal skills, or life skills (Tran, 2019, p. 1). At the same time in Brazil, they are mostly denominated as general, emotional, social, or transversal skills (Vieira-Santos et al., 2018), whereas in Finland, soft skills are seldom studied, and there are no commonly agreed definitions. Most of the current research focuses on students' social competence and generic skills (Tynjälä et al., 2016; Jääskelä et al., 2018). In Spain and Germany, for example, the relevant skills are referred to as general competencies and in France as transversal competencies, while the United Kingdom applies such terms as key skills, core skills, life skills, transferable skills and cross competencies (Cinque, 2016). When discussing and researching soft skills, it is important to be aware of these definitions and not to oversimplify the concept.

To establish a deeper definition of soft skills, we first need to understand how widely this context is understood. Soft skills, to varying degrees, are defined as personality traits, social gracefulness, fluency in language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014). According to Soares et al. (2009), soft skills are important skills when improving social interaction in teaching. Silva et al. (2016) points

out that soft skills are fundamental elements in the learning and teaching process, especially for strengthening relationships between teachers and students and in the process of acquiring knowledge. In Cedefop's (2015) framing, soft skills are a set of non-technical skills and knowledge that underpin successful participation in work. Furthermore, they are non-job specific and closely connected with personal attributes and attitudes and social and management abilities.

In the European Union (EU) funded SOSTRA project, adult educators' soft skills were defined as 'transferable personal attributes and abilities that enable them to interact effectively and harmoniously with others both at intra- and inter-personal and at socio-emotional level' (SOSTRA, 2018). This definition and subdivision seem to be in line with the descriptions of several studies (cf. Kechagias, 2011; Padhi, 2014; Ricchiardi & Emanuel, 2018). An individual's *interpersonal* skills are the ability to interact effectively with other people (Angeles, 2012); in other words, the skills we use every day when we communicate and interact with other people, both individually and in groups. Interpersonal skills cover a wide range, though many are centred on communication, such as listening, questioning, and interpreting body language (cf. Silva et al., 2016; Parry & Hayden, 2015). Closely related, *intrapersonal* skills consist of self-awareness traits and how individuals learn to cope with the world around them. Intrapersonal skills foster interpersonal skills (Angeles, 2012). Interpersonal communication refers to the different types of verbal, non-verbal and physical actions or expressions that people use when communicating with each other. *Socioemotional* skills provide a ground disposition that helps teachers form supportive relationships with their students, effectively manage their classrooms and successfully implement social and emotional learning (Jennings, 2011). According to Hankala's (2013) research, adult educators' socioemotional skills are closely intertwined with reflectivity, and these skills are important factors for well-being and adaptability. Some define socioemotional competencies as skills that enable individuals to accomplish particular tasks, such as recognising and managing their emotions and coping successfully with conflict.

Following Pasqualotto and Löhr (2015) since the mid-twentieth century, different authors have argued that activities aimed at developing soft skills related to professional practice should be part of the tertiary education, so teachers can formally learn how to deal with adverse situations in the workplace and personal and professional contexts. They further state that when teachers are provided opportunities for the development of soft skills, they will have greater resources to cope with the challenges they face in school, increasing the likelihood of remaining in the profession.

### **2.1.1. Soft Skills in Brazil and Brazilian Teacher Education**

As stated above, there is no conceptual consensus about soft skills' terminology in Brazil, but we mention here some related research on that subject. The concept of educational *social skills* seems to be widely used in the Latin America. Social skills are understood as a skills which are intentionally aimed to promote the development and learning with others in formal or informal situations (cf. Del Prette & Del Prette, 1998; Reyes Manrique, 2016), applicable not only to teacher–student relationships but also to other formal and

informal contexts. This definition is basically functional: social skills are called educational because of the effects they produce or the likelihood of generating changes in the students' behavioural repertoire, characterising a process that should be fed by these effects. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the social attribution of the role of educator and the issuance of certain behaviours is not enough, although some may be more likely to be effective. Although not explicitly considered in the definition, the effectiveness of social performances characterised as educative social skills presupposes the appropriate use of nonverbal (gestures, facial and body expressions) and paralinguistic (speech volume and form, clarity, fluency, emphasis, etc.) components (Del Prette & Del Prette, 2008).

Alarcão (2007) stated that teachers must develop their competences to learn how to learn to better help students. In fact, she asserted that teachers have many responsibilities, and perhaps one of the most important is self-knowledge, since it is what stimulates or develops their personal and professional development.

Del Prette and Del Prette (2008) described a System of Educative Social Skills (SESS), with classes and subclasses suitable to the tasks of parents, teachers and any person committed to the promotion of development and learning. They found that Brazilian teachers have a rich social abilities repertoire and that they attribute significant importance to affectivity in the learning process, but these variables are not related to each other. Concerning teachers' conceptions, it was found that 77.14% conceived friendship and respect as affective factors in the teacher-student relationship and that these factors enable learning. Additionally, those authors found that 36% of teachers understand that negative attitudes on the part of the teacher can hinder student learning, and for 30% of them, the difficulty of expression on the part of the teacher can also be a mechanism that hinders student learning.

Reis et al. (2012) found that most of the sampled teachers presented an elaborate repertoire of social skills since teachers are professionals who use social skills to perform their role as mediators between knowledge and the student (Silva et al., 2016). The results of a study by Reis et al. (2012) also showed that teachers have a rich repertoire of social skills and attach significant importance to affectivity in learning, but these variables were unrelated. Silva et al. (2016) conducted a literature review about social skills among teachers and concluded that teachers need to present good social skills, since they are directly related to a healthy work environment and improved quality in the training of students.

Wyler and Raiser (2014) showed that there are many studies being developed in the area of social skills (e.g., training and development of teachers' social skills) and that the National Curriculum Parameters incorporate the idea of such skills, though not exactly in the same terms. They claimed there were no specific practices that consider techniques of social skills in the continuing education of teachers in their sample.

Almeida et al. (2017) investigated the social skills of teachers to verify if these contribute to teachers' performance. Their results denote a poor repertoire of social skills, which concerns self-control of aggression. However, teachers strike a balance between resources and deficits of the analysed repertoires. The authors concluded that by

stimulating the development of their skills, teachers could be examples for their students, valuing behaviours such as taking initiative, cooperating with colleagues, giving feedback, fighting for their own rights and expressing feelings.

Vieiria-Santos et al. (2018) examined how the expression 'educative social skills' is used in Brazilian research literature and identified different situations in which it was used. Those authors also reported that in Brazil there are more empirical than theoretical studies on the subject and with a predominance of reporting tools for data collection. They identified just one standardised scale but a diversity of instruments of research and a concentration of publications around a few research groups.

Cintra and Prette (2019) evaluated the efficacy and effectiveness of a blended in-service teacher training program on social skills as well as the relationships between teachers' characteristics (e.g., age, time since graduation, professional self-evaluation and educational conceptions), variables of process (e.g., performance on assessments and management of the virtual environment) and the obtained results (social skills' performance and knowledge). Participants answered a standardised inventory and questionnaires before, during and after the program. As a result, the authors highlighted an improvement in social skills' knowledge and performance and correlations between the three sets of variables, both negative (e.g., the involvement and performance in the program with management of the virtual environment, time since graduation, professional self-evaluation and performance of social skills) and positive (e.g. between assertive skills and class management).

### **2.1.2. Soft Skills in Europe and Finnish Teacher Education**

At present, in Europe, there are several different ways to define soft skills and classify and categorise them. Notably, EU countries have different methodologies and approaches to the teaching and assessment of soft skills. Such skills can be identified with some differences among the different presented categories, in particular among '*generic skills*', '*key skills/competences*' and '*basic skills*' (Cinque, 2016). Cinque (2016) defines generic skills (also referred to as *generic attributes*, *key skills and core competencies*, (cf. Virtanen & Tynjälä, 2019) as skills that are applicable and useful in various contexts; in addition, skills can be supposedly transferred among different work occupations. Generic skills include soft skills and additional abilities, such as literacy, numeracy, technology use and so on. On the other hand, *key competencies* refer to the outstanding importance of and applicability to the various areas of human life (educational and occupational, personal and social). These adjectives, such as 'generic' and 'key', are often seen as synonyms. This definition is widely used in Austria, Belgium, Denmark and Germany, for instance. *Basic skills*, on the other hand, are seen as sub-skills for generic or key competencies that are instrumentally essential in a given culture for every person and job; in particular, we use 'basic' skills to communicate with one another and for continuous learning (Cinque, 2016). In a recent study, Cedefop (2020) emphasised the importance of increasing teaching generic, twenty-first century and transversal skills. However, in Europe, limited research on preparing soft skills for teachers and educators has been conducted.

In the Finnish context, several studies related to teachers' social competence and generic skills exist, but without referring to soft skills. On the institutional level, Jääskelä et al. (2018) examined what type of general models can be identified in higher education regarding the development of generic skills. They named four models: specialist, science-based renewal, project-based integrative and a model of networked culture. The study stated that those models serve as analytical tools that help higher education institutes examine their existing practices and develop new ones. A few years earlier, Tynjälä et al. (2016) studied how social competence and other generic skills can be developed in teacher education using a pedagogical model called integrative pedagogy. In terms of social skills, student-teachers reported learning of domain-specific skills, generic academic skills, skills for acting creatively in different situations and development of independence. This pedagogical model was seen as feasible for teacher education.

In the field of professional and vocational teacher education, there is a paucity of related research. Competences are defined, but there is no national consensus, and as Tapani and Salonen (2019) noted, the competencies of vocational teachers are fragmented. In the latest research, teachers mentioned neither soft skills nor generic skills. Specific soft skills are acknowledged as an important part of vocational and professional teachers' competencies. Mostly, these are itemised as guidance, ethical, interaction, communication and self-awareness skills (cf. Mahlamäki-Kultanen et al., 2019) and dialogical competence (cf. Aarnio, 1999; Ruhalahti, 2019; Vänskä, 2018). When considering teachers' dialogical competence, Aarnio (2012) identifies a very close link to intra-, interpersonal and socioemotional skills. Many soft skills can be observed through a deeper understanding of dialogical competence. Ryökkynen et al. (2019) suggest in their research that there are needs to investigate more in the teacher and student dialogue.

### **2.1.3. Soft Skills in Asia, Vietnam and Vietnamese Teacher Education**

In Asia, soft skills' investigation has been active in recent years. In the early years of the twenty-first century, interest in the field of soft skills and other related skills has been evolving in the Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) countries. In Asian countries, there is an increasing demand for skilled labour (World Bank, 2015), while high economic growth rate brings a need for new skills (Pham, 2013).

When focusing on Asian countries, we can highlight certain research. For example, in Thailand, recent quantitative research reveals teamwork and lifelong learning skills were the most important soft skills acquired by lecturers. This study revealed that the important aspects of soft skills' acquisition were the delivery of effective and quality teaching and career development, in addition to the enrichment and managing of student skills (Tang, 2018). Rongrraung et al. (2015) found that innovation development in soft skills was the skill that showed the first behavioural level. Teachers' self-evaluation shows that inexperienced teachers have established teamwork force skills, ethics and professionalism and leadership skills in the workplace. At the same time, innovation, communication and thinking and problem-solving skills were the most obvious shortfalls.

In Malaysia, the extent of soft skills has been integrated into teacher education from the novice teachers' perspectives. One study concluded that novice teachers were concerned about the insufficient soft skills acquired from teachers' training in order to support them in their workplace (Ngang et al., 2015). According to Tang and Tan (2015), ethics, morality and professional skills were the second least desired soft skills after entrepreneurship, as stated by 250 novice teachers. Tang et al. (2015) stated that the failures of soft skills' development were the result of large class size, academic focus, and insufficient periods of exercise. Furthermore, their findings showed that those teachers possessed the four soft skills, namely, teamwork/collective work skills, communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills and leadership skills. These skills were positively linked to excellence in teaching.

In contrast, recent research in India has revealed that secondary level teachers have an average level of soft skills. Research resulted in a significant difference in the soft skills of secondary level teachers with respect to their gender and the type of institutions, but there was no significant difference in the soft skills of secondary level teachers with respect to their locality (Mathews & Reddy, 2018). A study in China showed the importance of soft skills and including them as an essential component of teachers' training programs. Especially critical thinking, communication skills, team building, time management, positive attitude and body movement are important teacher skills. The research revealed strong empirical support from other studies that these soft skills are not included in the main curriculum. Teaching practice especially lacks this component, which negatively impacts teachers' performance; not only that, it also impacts on teacher-student relations and professional relations among teachers as well as on the outcomes of educational objectives. These findings are in line with other countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand (Kazimi et al., 2018).

In Vietnam, the labour market is undergoing significant changes as a result of the downsizing and restructuring of the public sector and particularly the rapid increase of private and foreign direct investment enterprises (Tran, 2010). Within this context of a changing labour market, previous research by Vietnamese and foreign researchers shows that Vietnamese graduates lack basic soft skills, such as communication, problem analysis and solving, fail to apply their existing skills and knowledge in the workplace and need retraining for employment (Mai, 2018; Tran et al., 2014; Tran, 2013). Most universities and colleges in Vietnam are indeed aware of the importance of specifying forms of graduate attributes, including soft skills requirements. However, research evidence suggests that embedding soft skills' development into the curriculum and training soft skills for teachers is still far from satisfactory (or not very efficient) (Nguyen, 2018). Soft skills in the Vietnamese context are known as transversal skills or life skills, which have been referred to as the most popular and widely used terms (Dao, 2014; Tran, 2012). Ho et al. (2020) clarified that soft skills are related to 'language use, socialized ability, the attitudes and behaviour applied in the communication between people. Some skills can be considered soft skills, such as: communication skills, teamwork skills, leadership skills, public speaking skills, conflict solving skills, understanding and empathizing skills,

negotiation skills, sales skills, team building skills, influencing skills, listening skills, and wisely refusing skills' (cf. Dao, 2014).

In practice, in 2011, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam issued Circular No. 66/2011/TT-BGDĐT regarding integrating communication skills in the training programs at the technical secondary level. Since then, such communication skills have been taught in schools as an elective module with two credits (Ho et al., 2020). Additionally, the regulation of the management of life skills' education as extracurricular activities appeared in Circular No. 04/2014/TT – BGDĐT dated February 28, 2014 by MOET, which raised the importance of soft skills preparation for students and teachers in Vietnam.

Recently, government organisations and educational institutions in Vietnam have been in a race to prepare for teacher education in soft skills. For example, the Institute for Human Resources Training and Development and General Directorate of Vocational Training have organised many soft skills' training courses for teachers with the purpose to integrate skills such as learning to learn, self-leadership and personal branding, initiative and enterprise skills, planning and organising skills, listening skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork and negotiation skills (Anh Quang, 2019; Institute for Human Resources Training and Development, 2020).

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1. Participants, data collection and analysis**

The aim of this comparative questionnaire study was to assess and compare the views about soft skills of adult education professionals among teachers and teacher educators in Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. Adult education professionals were invited to participate online in the questionnaire (MS Forms) and were reached through email and educators' communities on social media. Participation in this study was on a voluntary (voluntary response sampling) basis. The demographics of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

From Brazil 119 (M=54, F=65), Finland 115 (M=29, F=86) and Vietnam 121 (M=35, F=84, N/A=2) persons participated in the study. The majority of the participants from Brazil (N=63) and Vietnam (N=78) were between 31 and 40 years old, whereas the majority of the Finnish participants (N=49) were 51 to 60 years old. Most of the Brazilian (N=61) and Vietnamese (N=58) participants were educators in higher education in the public sector, whilst the majority of the Finnish participants (N=75) were adult educators from the public sector.

**Table 1:** Demographics of the participants

	<b>Brazil</b>	<b>Finland</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>
<b>Participants</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>121</b>
Male	54	29	35
Female	65	86	84
Gender: other	-	-	1
Gender: no answer	-	-	1
Under 30 years	3	1	12
31-40 years	63	8	78
41-50 years	38	44	28
51-60 years	11	49	3
Over 60 years	4	13	-
Adult educator	34	75	46
Educator in higher education	61	10	58
Education management staff	3	9	4
Social educator	3	4	2
Human resources staff (education)	7	2	2
Teacher educator	11	15	9
In private sector	16	34	18
In public sector	102	75	97
Freelancer	1	5	6

Data were gathered through an online questionnaire developed in the SOSTRA project. Target groups were adult educators and teachers, teacher educators, human resources staff in educational institutions and managers in Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. Questionnaires were distributed by institutional email lists and through educators' social media communities. The participants received a 40-item questionnaire from which the first five questions concerned the demographics of the participants and 35 questions concerned the soft skills under investigation. The questionnaire was designed with questions on a five-point Likert scale response format. Participants categorized a list of 35 soft skills as not important (1), slightly important (2), important (3), very important (4) or extremely important (5). The questions were divided into three subcategories according to the SOSTRA project's soft skills' definition: 8 *socioemotional skills* (adaptability, integrity, positive attitude, commitment, tolerance, openness to diversity, critical thinking and empathy), 13 *interpersonal skills* (active listening, asking questions, assertiveness, observation, negotiation, collaborative thinking, use of body language, respect for others, motivating for development, team working, inclusiveness, problem-solving and building mutual understanding) and 14 *intrapersonal skills* (self-leadership, passion and self-motivation, ethics, self-consciousness/self-awareness, self-confidence, objective thinking, resilience, curiosity, patience, self-distance, selflessness, perseverance, courage and creativity). The original questions were translated into Portuguese, Finnish and Vietnamese.

This study used a comparative case approach to analyse and synthesize similarities, differences and patterns across the three countries. To compare the means between the three different countries, the main statistical approach was one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) which was carried out with the IBM Statistics SPSS 22 analysing

program (Statistical Package of Social Sciences SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The data had some missing values (Brazil 43, Finland 37 and Vietnam 100 from 12 425 amounting to approximately 1.4 % from the soft skills' data) and the missing values imputation was conducted in a two-step process through the Expectation-maximization (EM) Algorithm (Ho, 2014). The first step, E (expectation), involved imputation of the missing observations by predicted scores in a series of regressions followed by the second step, M (maximization), in which the imputed dataset was submitted for a maximum likelihood estimation. This two-step process was repeated until the M step was reached with a stable solution (Ho, 2014), thereby producing realistic estimates of variance and avoiding, for example, overly good or impossible matrices (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The one-way ANOVA analysis was used in this study to investigate the means of the three countries' responses and to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences. Pairwise comparisons were performed using Bonferroni or Games-Howell adjustment where necessary. Reliability for the soft skills questionnaire was tested for internal consistency and corrected item-total correlations through Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

#### **4. Results**

This study investigated what soft skills are the most important skills from the adult educators' point of view and what differences there are regarding these skills between Brazil, Finland and Vietnam. The questions had been organized so that socioemotional skills consisted of 8 aspects (adaptability, integrity, positive attitude, commitment, tolerance, openness to diversity, critical thinking and empathy), whereas the interpersonal skills consisted of 13 aspects (active listening, asking questions, assertiveness, observation, negotiation, collaborative thinking, use of body language, respect for others, motivating for development, team working, inclusiveness, problem-solving and building mutual understanding) and the intrapersonal skills, 14 aspects (self-leadership, passion and self-motivation, ethics, self-consciousness/self-awareness, self-confidence, objective thinking, resilience, curiosity, patience, self-distance, selflessness, perseverance, courage and creativity). To see whether the three larger subcategories could be made into three sum variables, Cronbach's alpha tests were performed to discover how closely related or correlated the aspects of the skills were. From each of the three skills' subcategories (socioemotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal), two sum variables were created according to their correlations (Table 2).

**Table 2:** The sum variables of this study

Subcategory	Subgroups	Skills
Socioemotional skills	Socioemotion 1 <i>a</i> = 0.713	Adaptability Integrity Positive attitude Commitment
	Socioemotion 2 <i>a</i> = 0.762	Tolerance Openness to diversity Critical thinking Empathy
Interpersonal skills	Interpersonal 1 <i>a</i> = 0.860	Active listening Asking questions Assertiveness Observation Negotiation Use of body language Teamwork Problem solving Building mutual understanding
	Interpersonal 2 <i>a</i> = 0.732	Collaborative thinking Respect for others Motivation to develop Inclusiveness
Intrapersonal skills	Intrapersonal 1 <i>a</i> = 0.814	Self-leadership Passion Self-motivation
	Intrapersonal 2 <i>a</i> = 0.889	Self-confidence Objective thinking Resilience Curiosity Patience Self-distance Selflessness Perseverance Courage Creativity

When exploring the socioemotional skills with principal component analysis, variables were nicely divided into two internally consistent groups: adaptability, integrity, positive attitude and commitment (*a* = .713), and tolerance, openness to diversity, critical thinking and empathy (*a* = .762). From interpersonal skills, those positively correlated were active listening, asking questions, assertiveness, observation, negotiation, use of body language, teamwork, problem solving, building mutual understanding (*a* = .860), and collaborative thinking, respect for others, motivation to develop and inclusiveness (*a* = .732). Intrapersonal skills had positively correlating self-leadership, passion and self-motivation, ethics and self-awareness/self-consciousness (*a* = .814), and self-confidence, objective thinking, resilience, curiosity, patience, self-distance, selflessness, perseverance, courage and creativity (*a* = .889).

A post-hoc test using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction showed the several statistically significant differences between the six soft skills' sum variables within each country, indicating that the participants of the same country considered some soft skills significantly more important than others (see Table 3). When multiple t-tests are used, the risk level alpha does not stay in the selected level (for instance, 0.05) without corrections. Bonferroni correction is a very common, although slightly conservative method. Although it would not be the right choice in every comparison (based on the test for homogeneity of variance), critical test values were computed here using Bonferroni corrections. They are 2.998 (alpha = 0.05 and df = 114) or 3.499 (alpha = 0.01 and df = 114) or 4.14 (alpha = 0.001 and df = 114). Because the number of observations was almost the same in every country, no other degrees of freedom were used.

**Table 3:** Mean values of sum variables and statistically significant differences and effect sizes between another sum variable within each country

<b>Brazil (N=119)</b>					
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.dev</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Effect size d</b>
<b>Socioemotion 1</b>	4.46	0.49			
Interpersonal 1	4.21	0.53 (0.39)	6.96	< .001	0.64
Intrapersonal 1	4.30	0.56 (0.44)	3.88	< .001	0.36
Intrapersonal 2	4.10	0.57 (0.48)	8.16	< .001	0.75
<b>Socioemotion 2</b>	4.52	0.48			
Interpersonal 1	4.21	0.53 (0.42)	7.98	< .001	0.73
Intrapersonal 1	4.30	0.56 (0.54)	4.25	< .001	0.39
Intrapersonal 2	4.10	0.57 (0.53)	8.61	< .001	0.79
<b>Interpersonal 1</b>	4.21	0.53			
Interpersonal 2	4.43	0.42 (0.54)	- 4.46	< .001	0.41
<b>Interpersonal 2</b>	4.43	0.42			
Intrapersonal 2	4.10	0.57 (0.60)	5.97	< .001	0.55
<b>Intrapersonal 1</b>	4.30	0.56			
Intrapersonal 2	4.10	0.57 (0.38)	5.87	< .001	0.54
<b>Finland (N=115)</b>					
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.dev</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Effect size d</b>
<b>Socioemotion 1</b>	4.42	0.50			
Interpersonal 1	4.11	0.49 (0.46)	7.07	< .001	0.66
Intrapersonal 1	4.71	0.53 (0.45)	-7.07	< .001	0.65
<b>Socioemotion 2</b>	4.37	0.53			
Interpersonal 1	4.11	0.49 (0.42)	6.57	< .001	0.61
Interpersonal 2	4.51	0.43 (0.47)	-3.39	.001	0.32
Intrapersonal 1	4.71	0.53 (0.59)	- 6.33	< .001	0.59
<b>Interpersonal 1</b>	4.11	0.49			
Interpersonal 2	4.51	0.43 (0.39)	- 11.22	< .001	1.05
Intrapersonal 1	4.71	0.53 (0.47)	- 13.81	< .001	1.29
Intrapersonal 2	4.44	0.64 (0.52)	- 6.80	< .001	0.63
<b>Interpersonal 2</b>	4.51	0.43			
Intrapersonal 1	4.71	0.53 (0.53)	- 4.05	< .001	0.38
<b>Intrapersonal 1</b>	4.71	0.53			
Intrapersonal 2	4.44	0.64 (0.55)	5.32	< .001	0.50
<b>Vietnam (N=121)</b>					

Variable	Mean	Std.dev	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect size <i>d</i>
<b>Socioemotion 1</b>	4.18	0.68			
Socioemotion 2	3.90	0.73 (0.65)	4.68	< .001	0.43
Interpersonal 1	3.95	0.64 (0.62)	4.05	< .001	0.37
Intrapersonal 1	3.92	0.76 (0.74)	3.79	< .001	0.34
Intrapersonal 2	3.78	0.65 (0.63)	6.95	< .001	0.63
<b>Interpersonal 1</b>	3.95	0.64			
Intrapersonal 2	3.78	0.65 (0.43)	4.30	< .001	0.39
<b>Interpersonal 2</b>	3.94	0.71			
Intrapersonal 2	3.78	0.65 (0.48)	3.69	< .001	0.34

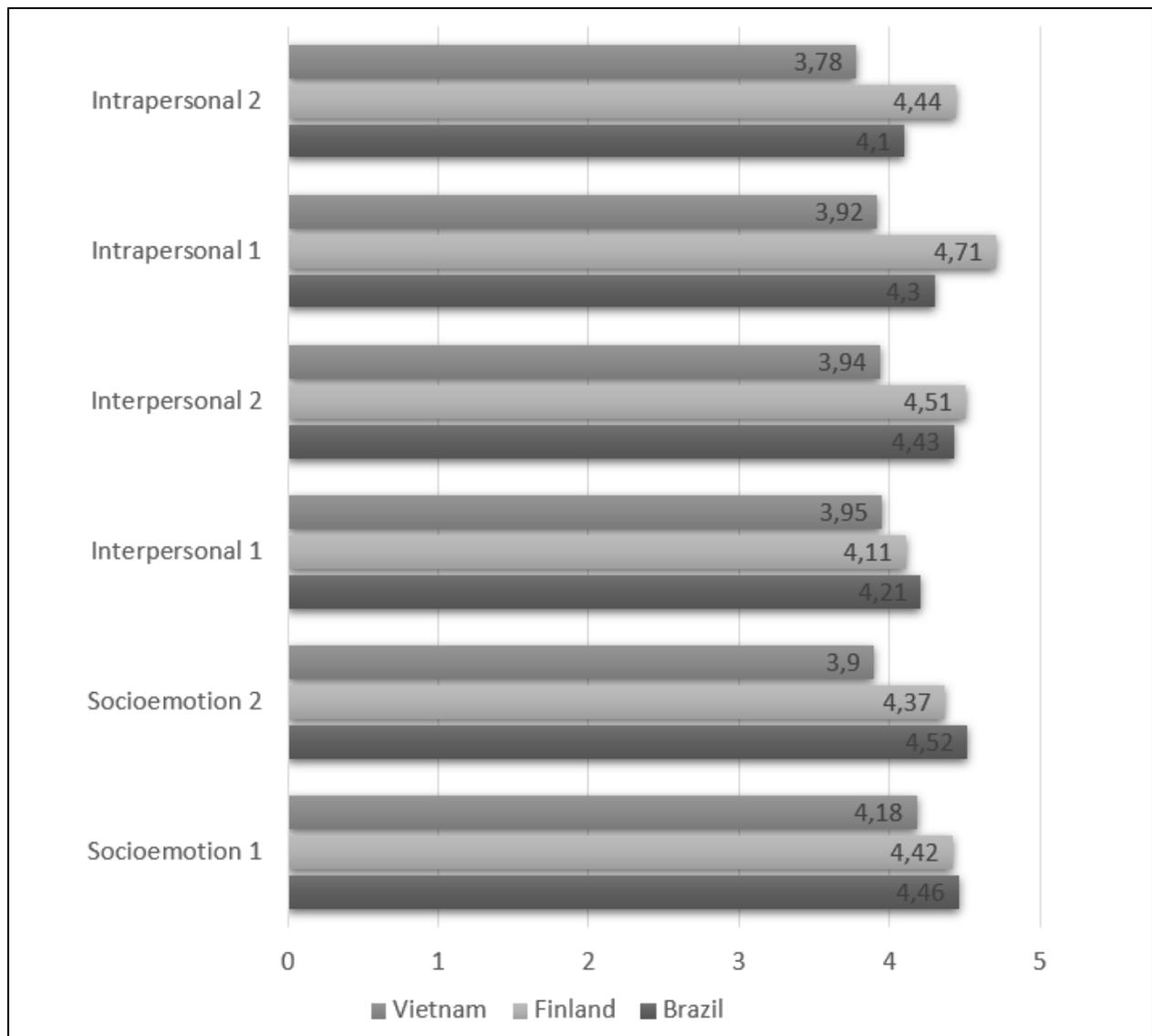
The participants from Brazil considered the soft skills from the socioemotional sum variable Emotion 2 most important (mean=4.52, SD= .48) and this was statistically significantly different from the third most important soft skills of the sum variable, Interpersonal 1 (mean=4.21, SD= .53). A repeated-measures t-test found this difference to be significant, ( $t(118)=7.98, p < 0.001$ ). The comparison between Emotion 2 (mean=4.52, SD= .48) and Intrapersonal 1 (mean=4.30, SD= .56) as well as Intrapersonal 2 (mean=4.10, SD= .57) revealed that Emotion 2 was considered statistically significantly more important than Intrapersonal 1 skills ( $t(118)=4.25, p < 0.001$ ) and Intrapersonal 2 skills ( $t(118)=8.61, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, Emotion 1 (mean=4.46, SD= .49) skills were considered significantly more important than Intrapersonal 1 skills ( $t(118)=3.88, p < 0.001$ ) and Intrapersonal 2 skills ( $t(118)=8.16, p < 0.001$ ) as well as the Interpersonal 1 skills ( $t(118)=6.96, p < 0.001$ ). The Interpersonal 2 (mean=4.43, SD= .42) skills were considered significantly more important than the Interpersonal skills 1 ( $t(118)=4.47, p < 0.001$ ), and the Intrapersonal 1 skills more important than the Intrapersonal 2 skills ( $t(118)=5.87, p < 0.001$ ).

The participants from Finland considered the soft skills from the Intrapersonal 1 sum variable most important (mean=4.71, SD= .53) and these skills were statistically significantly different from the third most important soft skills of sum variable, Intrapersonal 2 (mean=4.44, SD= .64) at ( $t(114)=5.32, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, Emotion 1 (mean=4.42, SD= .50) skills were considered significantly more important than Intrapersonal 1 skills ( $t(114)=7.00, p < 0.001$ ) and Interpersonal 1 skills ( $t(114)=7.07, p < 0.001$ ). The soft skills of sum variable Emotion 2 (mean=4.37, SD= .53) were also considered statistically significantly more important than the Interpersonal 1 (mean=4.11, SD= .49) skills ( $t(114)=6.57, p < 0.001$ ), however significantly less important than Intrapersonal 1 skills ( $t(114)=6.33, p < 0.001$ ). The Interpersonal 1 skills were considered significantly less important than the Intrapersonal 1 skills ( $t(114)=13.81, p < 0.001$ ), and the Intrapersonal 2 skills ( $t(114)=6.80, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the Interpersonal 2 (mean=4.44, SD= .64) soft skills were considered significantly more important than the Interpersonal 1 skills ( $t(114)=4.05, p < 0.001$ ).

The participants from Vietnam considered the soft skills from the Emotion 1 sum variable most important (mean=4.18, SD= .68), and these skills were statistically significantly different from the second most important soft skills of sum variable, Interpersonal 1 (mean=4.18, SD= .68) at ( $t(120)=4.05, p < 0.001$ ) and from Interpersonal 2

(mean=3.94, SD= .71) at ( $t(120)= 3.62, p < 0.001$ ) and Intrapersonal 1 (mean=3.92, SD= .76) at ( $t(120)= 3.79, p < 0.001$ ) and from Intrapersonal 2 (mean=3.78, SD= .65) at ( $t(120)= 6.95, p < 0.001$ ) skills. The skills of sum variable were considered significantly more important than those of Emotion 2 (mean=3.90, SD= .73) skills ( $t(120)= 4.68, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the Intrapersonal 2 skills were significantly less important than the Interpersonal 1 skills ( $t(120)= 4.30, p < 0.001$ ) and the Interpersonal 2 skills ( $t(120)= 3.69, p < 0.001$ ). There was no evidence of a statistically significant difference between the other pairs.

When comparing the means of each of the six sum variables between Brazil, Finland and Vietnam, the variances were not all equal and this has been taken into account when doing pairwise comparisons, and where necessary the Bonferroni adjustment has been made. Mean values for each sum variable for each country are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Mean values for each sum variable and each country

Concerning the sum variable of Emotion 1 (Brazil mean 4.46, Finland mean 4.42, Vietnam mean 4.18), there was a statistically significant difference between the countries means as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=8.69, p < .001$ ). Eta squared confirms the moderate effect at .047, and adjusted R squared = .042. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Brazil ( $p = .001$ ) and from Finland ( $p = .006$ ) regarded the Emotion 1 skills statistically significantly (Finland borderline) more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. There was no statistically significant difference between Finland and Brazil ( $p = .784$ ). When comparing the different countries' results concerning the sum variable of Emotion 2 (Brazil mean 4.52, Finland mean 4.37, Vietnam mean 3.90), there was a statistically significant difference between the countries as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=35.07, p < .001$ ). Eta squared confirms the average-to-large effect at .166, and adjusted R squared = .161, confirming a larger difference with the results of Vietnam than in the results of Emotion 1. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Brazil ( $p < .001$ ) and from Finland ( $p < .001$ ) regarded the Emotion 2 skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. There was no statistically significant difference between Finland and Brazil ( $p = .064$ ).

When comparing the different countries' results concerning the sum variable of Interpersonal 1 (Brazil mean 4.21, Finland mean 4.11, Vietnam mean 3.95), the differences between countries seem small, however, there is a statistically significant difference between the countries as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=6.62, p = .002$ ). Eta squared confirms the small effect at .036, and adjusted R squared = .031. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Brazil ( $p = .002$ ) regarded the Interpersonal 1 skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. There was no statistically significant difference between Finland and Vietnam ( $p = .074$ ) or between Brazil and Finland ( $p = .314$ ). When comparing the different countries' results concerning the sum variable of Interpersonal 2 (Brazil mean 4.43, Finland mean 4.51, Vietnam mean 3.94), there was a statistically significant difference between the countries as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=39.37, p < .001$ ). Eta squared confirms the largest effect so far, at .183, and adjusted R squared = .178. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Brazil ( $p < .001$ ) and from Finland ( $p < .001$ ) regarded the Interpersonal 2 skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. There was no significant difference between Finland and Brazil ( $p = .264$ ).

When comparing the different countries' results concerning the sum variable of Intrapersonal 1 (Brazil mean 4.30, Finland mean 4.71, Vietnam mean 3.92), there was a statistically significant difference between the countries as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=46.50, p < .001$ ). Eta squared confirms an even larger effect than before, at .209, and adjusted R squared = .204. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Finland ( $p < .001$ ) regarded the Intrapersonal 1 skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Brazil and Vietnam. There was a statistically significant difference also between Brazil and Vietnam ( $p < .001$ ), with the Brazilian respondents regarding the Intrapersonal 1 skills more important than did

the Vietnamese respondents. When comparing the different countries' results concerning the sum variable of Intrapersonal 2 (Brazil mean 4.10, Finland mean 4.44, Vietnam mean 3.78), there was a statistically significant difference between the countries as demonstrated by one-way ANOVA ( $F(2, 352)=33.61, p< .001$ ). Eta squared confirms an average effect at .160, and adjusted R squared = .156. The Games-Howell post-hoc test showed that the respondents from Finland ( $p< .001$ ) regarded the Intrapersonal 2 skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Brazil and Vietnam. There was a statistically significant difference also between Brazil and Vietnam ( $p< .001$ ), with the Brazilian respondents regarding the Intrapersonal 1 skills more important than did the Vietnamese counterparts.

## 5. Discussion

The increasing emphasis on soft skills' learning and development represents one of the foremost cultural shifts of the last half century (cf. Kamin, 2013; Schulz, 2008). The aim of this paper was to conduct a comparative analysis between Brazil, Finland and Vietnam to address the posed research questions of what soft skills are the most important skills from the adult educators' point of view, and what differences are there regarding these skills between the three countries.

The target group of this study comprised a representative sample of adult education and teaching professionals from three countries. Respondents' age groups show that Brazilian and Vietnamese adult educators and other teaching-related staff are younger than are those from the Finnish sample. This result follows the national adult education profession and teaching staff age groups. For example, Brazilian teachers are around 41 years old on average (INEP, 2017). In contrast, in Finland, 55% of vocational, education and training (VET) teachers are over 50 years old (Finnish National Board of Education, 2017), and the average age of teachers is generally 52.3 years (Avainta, 2017). However, in Vietnam, the average age of teachers is 39 years (OECD, 2019). The age group of respondents is reflected in the age profile of teachers and educators.

For analysis of the three subcategories of soft skills, namely, those of socioemotional, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, the subcategories were examined for whether, within their respective aspects, there were any correlated aspects of the skills that could be made into sum variables. The results suggested that, from each of the three subcategories, two smaller subgroups were made according to their positive correlations. Hence, for the sake of the analysis, the socioemotional skills were divided to subgroup Socioemotion 1, which included adaptability, integrity, positive attitude and commitment, and subgroup Socioemotion 2, which included tolerance, openness to diversity, critical thinking and empathy. From the subcategory interpersonal skills also two subgroups were created, and in subgroup Interpersonal 1, positively correlated skills were active listening, asking questions, assertiveness, observation, negotiation, use of body language, teamwork, problem solving, and building mutual understanding. In subgroup Interpersonal 2, positively correlated skills were collaborative thinking, respect for others, motivation to develop and inclusiveness. In the third subcategory of soft skills

concerning intrapersonal skills, the subgroup Intrapersonal 1 included self-leadership, passion and self-motivation, ethics and self-awareness/self-consciousness, whereas the subgroup Intrapersonal 2 included self-confidence, objective thinking, resilience, curiosity, patience, self-distance, selflessness, perseverance, courage and creativity.

The analysis revealed several similarities and differences within and between the three countries. The comparative analysis within the countries revealed that, for the Brazilian adult educators, the greatest importance from soft skills have the socioemotional skills, particularly from subgroup Socioemotional 2, as well as from Interpersonal 2 skills. The least important skills for the Brazilian educators were Intrapersonal 2 skills. In Finland, the comparative analysis revealed that the educators considered the Intrapersonal 1 skills to be the most important, with the Interpersonal 2 skills not far behind. The Finnish educators considered the Interpersonal 1 skills to be the least important. The Vietnamese counterparts generally evaluated all skills as slightly less valuable when compared to the evaluations from Brazil and Finland, however, the Vietnamese educators felt that the Socioemotional 1 skills were the most important, whereas they ranked the Intrapersonal 2 skills the least important.

When comparing the results between countries, the participants from Brazil and Finland regarded the Socioemotional skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam. Also, the participants from Brazil regarded the interpersonal skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Vietnam, but between Finland and Vietnam statistical difference was apparent only on some components of the interpersonal skills. At the same time, the participants from Finland regarded the Intrapersonal skills statistically significantly more important than did the respondents from Brazil and Vietnam. Among the Brazilian and Vietnamese educators, the socioemotional skills were regarded most important, whereas the Finnish counterparts regarded the intrapersonal skills as most important.

Reflecting on the results of this study, the comparison to earlier studies is difficult as this is the first comparative study of this magnitude. The results from Brazil show the importance of socioemotional and interpersonal skills, which have been highlighted in previous studies on the performance of educators' roles as mediators between knowledge and the student (cf. Almeida et al., 2017; Silva, 2016; Reis et al., 2012). Skills—such as tolerance, openness to diversity, critical thinking, empathy, collaborative thinking, respect for others, motivation to develop and inclusiveness—are seen as important skills when developing educators' soft skills.

The Finnish educators' highly ranked skills moderately follow those basic skills that are taught during professional and vocational teacher education. These highly valued intrapersonal skills—such as ethics, self-awareness, self-leadership and self-motivation, consciousness, passion, collaborative thinking, respect for others, motivation to develop and inclusiveness—are seen as common ground for a Finnish teachership (cf. Mahlamäki-Kultanen et al., 2019). The findings confirm Hankala's (2013) research, which shows that adult educators' socioemotional skills are closely intertwined with intrapersonal skills, and these skills are seen as important factors for well-being, coping and adaptability.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the majority of adult educators recognized the importance of socioemotional and interpersonal skills preparation for teachers, and results are in line with previous research (cf. Mai, 2018; Tran et al., 2014; Tran, 2013; Tran, Ruhalahiti & Korhonen, 2021). Specifically, skills such as adaptability, integrity, positive attitude, commitment, active listening, asking questions, teamworking, problem solving, assertiveness, observation, and building mutual understanding are crucial and integrated into their teaching and learning. These skills play an important role in shifting the learning styles of Vietnamese students, known as passive learners, influenced by traditional teaching methods over the past years. With thorough preparation for the required skills mentioned above, Vietnamese teachers might step closer to the skill set required in the digitalized age (cf. Tran et al., 2021). When considering the similarities between the three compared countries, we can see that there are soft skills that connect teachers worldwide, as in, for example, the Socioemotional 1 skills that were considered important by all participants, with the means from each country valued at over 4.

This study has some shortfalls, and we can consider the scarce amount of research on teachers' soft skills as one; this is the first comparative study on the subject, hence comparing this to other studies is difficult. In addition, there are not globally shared and researched definitions for soft skills, nor for subskills. Furthermore, it must be noted that the definition of "adult educators" and the structure of teacher education varies among the countries presented in this study.

The study produced consequential knowledge about educator's soft skills in three continents, however, it shows a significant differences between these selected countries. The results of this unique study ground educational development and should be explored further in the teacher education programmes nationally and globally.

## **6. Recommendations**

There is still a need for further research regarding teachers' and educators' soft skills and the reasons behind the different views of their importance. In future studies, it would be beneficial to investigate what kind of cultural and educational scripts are affecting results. Further empirical studies could identify how different age groups view the importance of soft skills and how teaching experience or age affects one's thinking. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate which soft skills are positively linked to the excellence of teaching or to deeper learning outcomes (cf. Ruhalahiti et al., 2018). Additionally, there is still a need for deepening qualitative and quantitative research concepts related to soft skills.

In conclusion, we highly recommend the development of teacher education programmes to develop teachers' soft skills, avoiding large class size, excessive academic focus and an insufficient period of exercise (cf. Tang et al., 2015; Ruhalahiti, 2019). When developing future teacher education programmes, it will be more important than ever to pause and rethink: what does it mean to be an educator today and in the future? What skills and knowledge are needed?

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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