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Soft skills: enhancing reflexivity, a soft skill among trainee teachers at CRMEFs in Morocco

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Abstract

This study highlights the importance of soft skills for students in the professional sphere, emphasising their complementary role to the technical skills required for the roles for which they are being trained. The article stresses that soft skills, such as communication, teamwork and conflict management, are a key determinant of professional success and individuals' adaptability in a constantly changing world.

In the specific context of trainee teachers at the Regional Centres for Education and Training Professions (CRMEFs), the study places particular emphasis on reflective thinking, regarded as a key skill for analysing, evaluating and improving their teaching practices. It therefore calls on trainers to systematically integrate training in soft skills into academic programmes, in order to prepare future teachers not only to meet the challenges of the profession, but also to engage in a process of continuous learning, ensuring their personal and professional development.

Keywords: Soft skills – reflective thinking – professional world – training – effectiveness.

Introduction

The growing integration of information and communication technologies into the field of education has led to an increased need to develop not only digital skills, but also soft skills and reflective thinking among teachers. This development highlights the importance for university lecturers to possess an adequate level of digital skills, soft skills and reflective thinking in order to meet the demands of teaching in higher education.

Due to the rapidly changing professional landscape, soft skills play a crucial role in recruitment processes. Employers assess candidates' potential by placing particular emphasis on their ability to communicate effectively, exercise leadership, demonstrate creativity, solve problems, show empathy, and adopt a reflective approach – that is, to analyse and continuously improve their practices. This trend reflects the growing recognition of the importance of soft skills in professional success, as these qualities are essential for adapting to the changing demands of the labour market and succeeding in an increasingly complex and diverse professional environment.

1. Definition of soft skills

Several studies have examined the concept of soft skills. Cimatti (2016) points out that the lack of a consensus definition makes it difficult to understand soft skills. Stein & Barth (2016) agree with this view. A well-known definition of soft skills, attributed to James Heckman, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2000, describes them as precursors to success in life. This definition highlights a direct correlation between soft skills and individuals' personal and professional achievements (Cinque, 2015). Soft skills are essential competencies that are not necessarily acquired through technical academic training, but rather through practical experience and continuous personal development. Unlike technical skills, which are often specific to a particular field, soft skills are interpersonal and behavioural qualities that can be applied in a variety of personal contexts. These skills include, amongst others, effective communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, time management, the ability to adapt to change and to demonstrate empathy. Although they can be reinforced through academic training and professional development programmes, soft skills are generally acquired and improved through practice, social interaction and constructive feedback. In short, these skills are essential for success in today's professional world, as they foster harmonious working relationships, effective communication and the ability to adapt to the changing demands of the professional environment (LAGHAZAL et al. 2021) and (OURRACHE, RABHI, 2022).

Every researcher or expert addressing this topic contributes to the diversity of perspectives by offering their own interpretation or definition of what soft skills are. The literature identifies a variety of concepts associated with this notion, including: 'interpersonal skills', human skills, social and relational skills, and emotional skills, behavioural skills, as well as cross-cutting skills.

Crucially, it should be noted that cross-cutting skills draw on a set of fundamentally human and interpersonal qualities. According to recent work by Briec DU ROSCOËT et al (2022, p.7), a relatively comprehensive definition of these skills is emerging: they encompass *"all skills that do not fall within the realm of strict knowledge, nor technical or professional skills, that is to say, those centred on a specific practice or professional field (...). The development of soft skills stems from lived experience, whether or not this takes place within a formal learning setting, and their application combines certain cognitive, volitional, social or emotional abilities."*

It is emphasised that soft skills constitute a dynamic and interconnected set of abilities and attitudes that foster both individual and collective development, enabling individuals to navigate, interact with and shape their environment in order to bring about change. These skills incorporate cognitive processes such as the ability to generate ideas, solve problems and demonstrate mental flexibility, as well as conative elements such as motivation and open-mindedness. They also encompass emotional and relational aspects such as empathy, communication and collaboration. Taken together, these skills enable individuals to respond effectively in uncertain contexts and when faced with new situations, thereby highlighting the importance of adaptability.

2. Types of soft skills

The literature offers a varied perspective on the concept of soft skills, with a marked diversity in the definitions and frameworks available. Aline SCOUARNEC (2020) highlights the existence of several soft skills frameworks, including those of the World Economic Forum, the OECD and Elene4work. These major frameworks present a wide range of skills, but also show differences in the terms used to define them, making it difficult to formalise them into precise definitions.

Among the many available frameworks, the 3.0 by Aline SCOUARNEC (2020) deserves particular attention. It brings together the cross-cutting skills considered to be common to all professions. This framework is the result of a forward-looking approach based on an in-depth study of existing frameworks, carried out in collaboration with human resources professionals. This collaboration enabled the selection of twenty key cross-cutting skills, essential in the professional world, and the development of an innovative training programme aimed at jobseekers.

This 'Competence Framework 3.0' model is based on a grid structured into four main areas, encompassing the cross-cutting skills essential for professional success and personal development:

- **2.1. Self-awareness:** encompasses skills aimed at strengthening self-awareness and self-assessment, such as presence, self-confidence, motivation, boldness and a reflective mindset, enabling individuals to analyse and continuously improve their behaviour and practices, to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, and to transform professional experience into continuous learning (Schön, 1983).

- **2.2. Understanding the professional world:** includes the skills required to adapt to and navigate the professional context effectively, notably cognitive flexibility, critical thinking, open-mindedness, analytical thinking and the ability to reflect on professional practices in order to make informed decisions based on pupils' needs (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).
- **2.3. Interpersonal relationships:** encompasses the skills that facilitate the development of constructive relationships with others, such as emotional intelligence, active listening, team management, a service-oriented approach, collaboration and the ability to adopt a reflective stance in professional interactions.
- **2.4. Professional performance:** encompasses the skills required to adopt an innovative and effective approach at work, including judgement and decision-making, complex problem-solving, oral and written communication, negotiation, and the use of reflective thinking to evaluate and optimise one's own actions and those of the team.

Taken together, these areas highlight that teachers' professional development is not limited to the acquisition of technical know-how, but also relies on the mastery of cross-cutting skills and the reflective capacity to analyse, adjust and refine one's teaching practices.

3. Reflexivity: a key driver of professional development

Reflectiveness refers to an individual's ability to take a step back from their actions, analyse their decisions and reflect on their practices in order to continuously improve them. In the context of trainee teacher education, particularly within the Regional Centres for the s of Education and Training Professions (CRMEFs), this skill is of paramount importance. It enables future teachers to assess the effectiveness of their teaching strategies, identify their strengths and limitations, and adapt their teaching to the specific needs of their pupils.

Reflectiveness is not limited to one-off self-assessment, but constitutes a dynamic and ongoing process, integrated into the professional practice and development of trainee teachers. It fosters critical thinking, informed decision-making and the development of essential soft skills, such as communication, empathy and the management of complex situations. As part of teacher training at the Regional Centres for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF), the development of a reflective mindset enables the analysis of teaching practices,

the evaluation of decisions made and the adaptation of teaching approaches to pupils' varied needs. According to Schön (1983), the 'reflective practitioner' learns to transform experiences into learning opportunities by proactively adjusting their practices. Korthagen and Vasalos (2005) also emphasise that reflexivity helps teachers align their personal values with their teaching actions, thereby strengthening their commitment, autonomy and professional effectiveness. Recent research indicates that teachers capable of practising reflexivity develop greater adaptability, manage complex situations more effectively and plan their teaching activities more independently (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Integrating this skill from the outset of teaching placements is therefore a strategic lever for enhancing the quality of teaching and preparing future teachers to thrive in a constantly changing educational environment.

4. Some recommendations for strengthening the soft skills of trainee teachers at the CRMEF

A first step in developing non-technical skills among trainee teachers is to raise their awareness of the importance of these skills and the potential consequences of any shortcomings in these areas. Trainee teachers should be encouraged to improve their cross-curricular skills using various methods, such as reading specialist literature, taking part in supplementary workshops, or getting involved in activities and organisations that promote personal development, such as debating societies, Toastmasters groups focused on public speaking, or scientific societies offering presentations and discussions. A more structured approach could involve incorporating dedicated modules on soft skills into the CRMEF training programme. For example, activities involving research and the presentation of findings in class, or modules on communication, time management, conflict resolution, cultural awareness and self-management, have proved particularly effective.

An integrated pedagogical approach involves combining the teaching of technical and non-technical skills, without requiring major changes to the curriculum. This can take the form of changes to the way courses are delivered: more frequent group discussions, oral presentations by trainees, and the use of specific methodologies such as De Bono's thinking techniques or neuro-linguistic programming. A presentation at the Namibia Polytechnic, led by Professor Rob Krueger, illustrates this principle by reversing the traditional focus of lectures: the emphasis is placed on acquiring soft skills through the subject content. For example, a mathematics course can be structured by first identifying the soft skills to be developed, and then adapting the mathematical content to

support this objective. This approach simultaneously improves the effectiveness and appeal of the courses.

The active involvement of trainee teachers in preparing and delivering oral presentations on their area of specialisation helps to develop essential skills: public speaking, time management, presentation, argumentation and the ability to answer challenging questions. Collaborative work is encouraged through the participation of peers as members of the assessment panel, who evaluate the presentations using detailed assessment grids that take into account clarity, mastery of the subject, visual quality and the ability to captivate the audience. This approach enables trainee teachers not only to receive constructive feedback, but also to develop their own assessment skills and their ability to provide constructive criticism. It fosters a collaborative learning environment where everyone contributes to mutual improvement and the consolidation of the cross-cutting skills essential to the teaching profession.

Conclusion

The professional development of trainee teachers today relies on a combination of technical skills, cross-cutting skills and a strong capacity for reflection. The Competence Framework 3.0 highlights the importance of four complementary – self-awareness, understanding of the professional world, interpersonal relationships and professional performance – in which reflexivity plays a central role. It enables teachers to analyse their practices, identify their strengths and areas for improvement, and adapt their teaching strategies to the varied needs of pupils, thereby contributing to more inclusive and effective teaching.

In the context of the CRMEFs, the integration of reflexivity and soft skills into trainee teachers' training not only fosters their autonomy and critical thinking, but also their ability to manage complex situations and to innovate in the face of contemporary challenges in education. Acquiring these skills prepares teachers to adapt to rapid changes in the education system, to promote inclusion and to contribute actively to the success of all pupils. Thus, reflexivity is not merely a tool for personal analysis, but constitutes a genuine lever for the transformation of teaching practice and for the sustainable development of high-quality education, capable of meeting the demands of the professional world and the needs of society.

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