



Research article

INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL SKILLS PERFORMANCE IN GREEK PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER

Stergiani Zygopoulou, PhD student

***Department of Psychology, SWU "Neofit Rilski", Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria.**

Email: azigopoulou@yahoo.gr

Abstract

Objective: Teachers' soft skills can be a key element of their teaching competence.

Purpose: to examine the role of demographic characteristics in elementary teachers' soft skills performance.

Methods: The study was quantitative and cross-sectional, with within-subjects measures, with the use of a modified version of Kantrowitz's Soft Skills Performance Questionnaire. Four out of the 7 clusters of soft skills performance were selected for incorporation, οι οποίες αφορούσαν communication/persuasion skills, leadership/organization skills, interpersonal skills, and political/cultural skills.

Results: The sample of the study consisted of N = 220 elementary teachers from public schools in different regions of Greece. Demographic characteristics had significant effects on teachers' soft skills performance toward supervisor/organization expectations/standards, particularly years of service (3 out of 4 skills dimensions), but also education (2/4 dimensions) and age (1/4 dimensions). Gender did not significantly affect median scores on the four clusters of soft skills.

Conclusion: As the research on teachers' soft skills is limited, it is necessary to investigate them further in the future.

Key words: Greece, demographic characteristics, primary school, social skills, teachers

Introduction

Although the concept of "soft skills" concerning the workplace has been frequently used in research in the fields of business, medicine and IT (Fernandez-Sanz et al., 2010), however, in the field of education it remains a relatively new field of research. According to Muir and Davis (2004), soft skills can be described as "*attitudes and behaviors displayed in interactions among individuals that can affect the outcome of such encounters*" (p. 96). In turn, Crosbie (2005) argues that although these soft skills can be acquired and developed, for them to become 'skills', continuous practice and development are necessary.

One of the basic characteristics of the nature of teaching is the existence of highly interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the soft skills of teachers can be considered a key element of their teaching competence. The research aims to examine the role of demographic characteristics in teachers' soft skills performance regarding their communication/persuasion skills, leadership/organization skills, interpersonal skills, and political/cultural skills.

Methods

Design

The design of the study was quantitative and cross-sectional, with within-subjects measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Specifically, it utilized the quantitative research approach, collecting data through the use of a self-report questionnaire, which is a psychometrically valid and reliable instrument.

Sample

The sample of study consisted of $N = 220$ elementary teachers from public schools from different regions of Greece. The sampling method used was one of opportunity, based on availability of appropriate potential participants, given recourse constraints for the realization of this research project (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Specifically, potential respondents were approached through the academic and occupational contacts of the researcher.

Instruments

A structured questionnaire was utilized for the collection of data, which included two sections. The first section regards general demographic and background information for the description of the sample. This section included the items of age, gender, studies/training, years of teaching and teaching specialty.

The second section assessed teachers' soft skills through the use of a modified version of Kantrowitz's Soft Skills Performance Questionnaire (SSPQ, Kantrowitz, 2005). For the purposes of the present study, four out of the 7 clusters of soft skills performance were selected for incorporation. These, selected in alignment with the aims of the research, were communication skills (13 questions), interpersonal skills (22 questions), leadership/organization skills (20 questions), and political/cultural skills (13 questions). Furthermore, responses were collected only for skills performance according to supervisor/organization standards, given that performance comparison with co-workers was not within the scope of the research. Overall, 68 items were included, that correspond the four soft skills performance clusters. The measurement scale used is Likert-type and includes the following response categories: 0 = no basis for judgment, 1 = does not meet standard at all, 2 = partly meets standard, 3 = meets standard, 4 = exceeds standard, 5 = greatly exceeds standard.

Procedure

Participants were approached through the academic and professional contacts of the researcher, through the use of telephone, email and social media platforms (Facebook). Elementary school teachers from different regions of Greece completed and returned the questionnaires during the period of January 2023 to March 2023.

Statistics

The statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics was used for the statistical analysis of the results. Data were inputted and coded in the software and descriptive and inferential analyses were performed. In the descriptive analysis, frequencies and percentages were calculated for the demographic/work characteristics of the sample, and median values, as well as means and standard deviations, were reported for the 68 items of the questionnaire, as well as for the resulting four dimensions of the study. Cronbach reliability indexes were calculated for each of the four subscales of the study, as well as for the total scale of skills performance as per performance standards.

To test the hypothesis Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used, with the demographic and occupational characteristics as independent variables, and the four clusters of skill performance according to organization standards as dependent variables. Specifically, Mann-Whitney tests were used for gender, as it is a dichotomous variable, while Kruskal-Wallis tests were used for age, years of service and studies/training, which contained more than two response categories.

Results

Demographic Information

Most participants were female (76%), and participants' age ranges varied between 22-30 years (22%), 31-40 years (30%), 41-50 years (30%), and 51-60 years (18%). Approximately one in two teachers had received a postgraduate degree (49%), with another 48% having graduated from university; 3% of the sample held doctorate degrees. Many teachers of the sample were elementary teachers (46%), with 10% teaching foreign languages and another 10% teaching informatics. Seven percent were physical education teachers (7%), while 19% of the sample reported that they had other specialties. Participants' years of service as teachers varied; specifically, 18% had up to 5 years' experience, 29%

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had 6-10 years of experience, 31% had 11-20 years of experience, 16% had 21-30 years of experience, and the remaining 6% had more than 30 years of service (Table 1).

Table 1: *Demographic and occupational characteristics of the sample of teachers (N = 220)*

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	54	24.5
	Female	166	75.5
Age	22-30	48	21.8
	31-40	66	30.0
	41-50	66	30.0
	51-60	40	18.2
Studies/Training	University degree	106	48.2
	Postgraduate	108	49.1
	Doctorate	6	2.7
Specialty	Elementary teacher	100	45.5
	Foreign language	22	10.0
	Physical education	16	7.3
	Music	10	4.5
	Informatics	22	10.0
	Artistic	8	3.6
	Other	42	19.1
Years of service	0-5	40	18.2
	6-10	64	29.1
	11-20	68	30.9
	21-30	36	16.4
	30+	12	5.5

Gender did not have a statistically significant effect on either communications skills ($U = 4358$, $p = 0.760$), interpersonal skills ($U = 4426$, $p = 0.890$), leadership skills ($U = 4116$, $p = 0.367$), or political skills ($U = 4138$, $p = 0.396$).

Age had a statistically significant effect on political/cultural skills ($H = 14.74$, $p = 0.002$). All other Kruskal-Wallis tests were non-significant. Participants over 50 years old had the lowest score in political/cultural skills. Participants aged between 41-50 years and below 31 years had the highest political skills scores, with those with an age between 31-40 in the third place.

Furthermore, studies/training had a statistically significant effect on communication skills ($H = 6.31$, $p = 0.043$) and political/cultural skills ($H = 6.21$, $p = 0.045$). Specifically, holders of Master's degrees reported higher communications skills and political skills compared to Bachelor's degree graduates.

Finally, years of service had a statistically significant effect on communications skills ($H = 10.34$, $p = 0.035$), leadership skills ($H = 9.84$, $p = 0.043$), and political skills ($H = 18.21$, $p = 0.001$) (Table 2).

Table 2: *Effect of years of service on the dimensions of the study*

	Communication Skills	Interpersonal Skills	Leadership/ Organization Skills	Political/ Cultural Skills
Kruskal-Wallis H	10.344	7.503	9.838	18.211
df	4	4	4	4
p	.035	.112	.043	.001

Specifically, participants with up to 5 years of service, and with 11-20 years of service, had higher scores in communications skills, leadership skills and political skills, compared to participants with 6-10 years of service and over 20 years of service.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of demographic characteristics on the soft skills performance of primary school teachers. According to the results of the survey, it appears that there is no significant difference in teachers' soft skills performance between the two genders. However, other demographic characteristics had significant effects on teachers' soft skills performance. In particular, age showed a statistically significant effect on political/cultural skills. In addition, the level of studies/training had a statistically significant effect on some of the soft skills, and in particular, the higher the level of studies, the higher the reported communications skills and political skills. Finally, years of experience showed an equally significant correlation with communications, leadership skills, and political skills.

This study is not without limitations, the main ones being related to the small sample size and the choice of convenience sampling. In addition, the analysis focuses exclusively on the influence of sociodemographic variables that may affect the self-concept of soft skills.

As the research on teachers' soft skills is limited, it is necessary to investigate them further in the future, both concerning the influence of demographic characteristics and the degree of influence they have on the different categories of soft skills on each other.

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