PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: A FOCUS ON SOFT AND DIGITAL SKILLS

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Abstract

In modern times as society becomes more and more digitized, the demand for digitally experienced school leaders emerges, imposing new approaches to the integration of digital technologies into education. Moreover, in the twinkling of the 21st century, the working conditions in the environment of schools constantly transform and consequently, the requirements of school managers are still increasing. A clear need for school leaders to develop not only digital but soft skills as well has emerged since they are seen as competent to successfully manage human resources in school environments. Also, school administrators are seen to meet the demands of globalized, accountability, and competitiveness in educational settings. School leaders if equipped with such skills they are required to create a framework for the development of innovation, communication, and efficiency so that “new” schools can be brought into line with global education standards. The question arises is how well school leaders are equipped with such skills in order to drive their educational organizations to their full potentials.

This paper presents an overview of recent literature resources concerning the scientific field of soft and digital skills. The various dimensions of those skills, as “core skills” of the 21st century in educational settings, are explored so that school managers can respond to the challenges of modern educational reality. The aim of the present literature review is to develop a conceptual framework that reflects the key aspects of soft and digital skills. Then, the most significant dimensions of soft skills for school leaders are discussed, with reference to complementary digital skills as they are extensively referenced in international studies.

The review of the literature leads the co-authors to end up in the categorization of the most important skills of the 21st century that are nowadays considered necessary for school managers; interpersonal/social skills, personal skills, organizational skills, psycho-emotional skills, and digital skills.

The findings of this study may have certain implications for those who decide to design and develop collaborative professional development courses or online training programs for school leadership. Additionally, this paper could be useful for educational administrators who may reflect and decide to concentrate on developing such skills not only for themselves but for the human resources in their school.

Keywords: Soft skills, digital skills, competencies, professional development, school leaders, school leadership.

1 INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is marked by the extensive use of digital technologies, which are embodied in a plethora of ways at all levels of education. This is because education is recognized as one of the key drivers for ensuring competitiveness and prosperity in the era of globalization. In view of this perspective, educational systems worldwide in their attempt to improve their ability to innovate, take advantage of the dynamics of digital technologies and become modernized to keep pace with the current digital reality. All participants who take part in the educational process should be guided in the development of their digital identity by broadening a range of digital skills, which should introduce to their school unit. Also, they should be empowered with soft skills that characterize our relationships with other people and the way we approach life and work.

Soft skills are distinguished from technical skills (hard skills) that are considered as a prerequisite for obtaining a job. Nowadays, in order to respond to modern requirements, school administrators should have developed both hard and soft skills, as well as digital skills, since a new approach for school
leadership arises. More flexible, creative and inspired leaders are required, who will be ready to offer guidance to those involved in the educational process and promote innovative ideas.

The purpose of this overview is to explore the conceptual definitions of “digital skills”, “digital competencies”, “digital literacy”, and “21st-century skills” and subsequently examine their similar concepts so as to find their interrelationship. Digital literacy is explored as a political priority for the development and enhancement of digital citizenship. Additionally, the review aims at a thorough analysis of the concept of “social skills” that school leaders should be empowered with. In recent years, the value of soft skills has been recognized and is widely discussed in the literature for education [1], [2], business administration [3], health [4] and a great number of other scientific fields. Despite the significance of 21st-century skills for workplace success, research about the development of skills in the field of education is at an embryonic stage.

This study focuses mainly on soft and digital skills and analyses the main trends, highlighting the necessary skills for school leaders. The research questions that guide this literature review are the following:

1st research question: What concepts are used to describe the skills of the 21st century that school leaders are required to hold in a modern school environment?

2nd research question: What soft and digital skills are highlighted in the literature as necessary for being a successful school leader?

2 METHODOLOGY

Initially, the two researchers developed a predefined review protocol to minimize the researchers’ bias as much as possible. We searched mainly for empirical studies and systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses, the data of which were studied, correlated, categorized and analyzed for conclusions. Those studies were mostly published in scientific journals and international conferences and referred to skills either in the title or in the abstract. Furthermore, scientific articles have been retrieved from reliable search engines, online databases and online libraries (e.g. Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, EBSCO, PsycINFO, Scopus, ERIC, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Sage). The keywords used to find the relevant sources were: “digital skills”, “digital competencies”, “digital literacy”, “skills of the 21st century”, “soft skills” and “hard skills”, combined with the words “school leaders” and “school administrators” using the Boolean “AND”. The titles and summaries of the related articles were reviewed so as to be consistent with the inclusion criteria of the review. The pre-determined criteria for selecting and integrating the studies in the present review are as follows:

- empirical researches, scientific papers, official political documents of international organizations, as well as articles of literature reviews and meta-analytic papers were included
- literature sources published between the years 2006 and 2017 were included, most of which were published in the last three years since the researchers’ intention was to thoroughly study the most up-to-date surveys
- the texts had to be published in the English language
- the participants in the empirical surveys had to be adults and even school leaders
- the review included soft and digital skills, which are necessary tools for the transformation of a manager into a school leader.

The selected articles were analyzed by using the qualitative technique of content analysis, which leads to the coding of the main category and several subcategories. It is worth noting that the study of surveys that follow a mixed methodological design provides high-quality data due to the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. Also, there seems to be no bias and although the majority of the studies were written in Europe, this is simply the result of the systematic review and selection process.

3 RESULTS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid advances in technology and its increasing use at educational institutions lead to a reassessment and change of roles and responsibilities of school administrators. “New generation” school leaders should be equipped with the appropriate skills of the 21st century to promote new,
flexible and innovative models in the educational community. For this reason, schools need leaders with skills who will be able to run the school organization and make it competitive.

In order to analyze the concept of soft and digital skills, it is necessary to conceptually define the term “skills”. According to [5] the term “skills” is a complex concept that includes the cognitive functioning of the knowledge base, mood characteristics, special environmental knowledge, and past experience. Skills are developed gradually through practice and involve cognitive processes and manipulation of knowledge. Therefore, skills imply possession and access to certain knowledge and behavioral sequences directing individuals to specific performance.

3.1 The concept of digital skills

3.1.1 Digital skills/digital competence

The promotion of New Technologies (N.T.) in education both at the classroom level and educational management is the core of educational changes. However, although N.T. is the foundation of innovation in education, they are not capable of leading to educational change. Numerous terms can be detected in modern literature to determine the content of the term “digital skills”. In most cases, the concepts related to N.T. consist of the main parts (ICT, Internet, multimedia) combined with a specific knowledge perspective (skills, literacy, competence) [6]. These concepts refer to the basic skills of using computers or Internet technology.

The concept linking digital skills and professional development has been portrayed as “digital career literacy”. [7] developed the concept of digital career literacy, which combines digital skills and professional development. Digital technologies include the ability to use the web environment to search for contacts, find answers to questions and create a positive professional reputation for promoting professional development [8]. Consequently, digital skills are directly related to the usage of N.T. and Internet in everyday school reality.

In view of the above, over the last decade, the interest of scientific research has focused on digital skills. The literature is concentrated on education policy papers in which digital competence is perceived as a concept for change and development [9], or on articles with a research-based orientation [10], [11]. In political reports, the term digital competence is found to be a core competence, while educational research considers it a relatively new term that has not yet been clearly defined. Digital competence has evolved into a key concept in academic and formal policy debates about the kind of skills citizens have to possess in order to be ready for their integration into the Society of Knowledge. The OECD analysis suggests that the demand for learning and promoting general digital skills, as measured by the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) has increased in the majority of countries [12]. The National Research Council in the United States has identified three broad areas in terms of the skills required to be held by any citizen: (a) the field of knowledge (cognitive processes, knowledge, creativity); (b) the intrapersonal field (intellectual transparency, ethics in work, self-confidence), and c) the interpersonal field (teamwork, collaboration, leadership). Interestingly, this classification corresponds to an OECD work department that aims to identify skills which are vital to social progress and prosperity [13]. According to this classification, in addition to cognitive skills, other skills such as social and emotional skills (soft skills) incorporating work with others, managing emotions and achieving goals.

Several terms are found in modern research to describe the term digital skills and digital competencies. Initially, the term digital competence still refers to the broad concept of technological skills. Digital competence is considered as an evolving concept that is explicitly related to the development of digital technology and the political aims and aspirations of digital citizenship in the Society of Knowledge. [14], as well as [15] integrate digital competence as part of technological programming, thus referring to the effective use of technology. [16] extends the above definitions, arguing that digital competence is required to use digital media to learn and develop a democratic and participatory culture in the Society of Knowledge.

[10], in their literature review, resulted in a total of 34 terms describing digital competence. The most popular terms are digital literacy, digital literacy skills, new literacies, new literacy skills/practices, media literacy, media literacy skills, multiliteracies, and digital competence/competency. [17] attempting to integrate digital skills perceives digital competence as a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, abilities, strategies, and awareness that are required in the use of technology and digital media to perform tasks, such as solving problems, communicating, managing information, collaborating, creating and sharing content and building knowledge in an effective, efficient,
appropriate, critical, creative, autonomous, flexible, ethical way for work, leisure, participation, learning, and socializing with other people. The researcher focuses on a comprehensive integration of numerous skills demonstrating a macroeconomic level of the citizen who is active in various sectors of society. Furthermore, she proposes a framework that includes the following digital competencies needed for the 21st-century citizens: i) information management, ii) collaboration, iii) communication and sharing, iv) creation of content and knowledge, v) ethics and responsibility, vi) evaluation and problem-solving and vii) technical operations. In addition, digital competence is defined as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that motivate learners to use digital media to engage, work and resolve problems independently and in collaboration with others in a critical, responsible and creative way [6]. This definition refers to the ability of learners to collaborate through N.T. and employ their critical thinking, and that is the reason why digital competencies are required to be developed by educational staff and school leaders.

The skills of the 21st-century are characterized as skills that enable participation in learning communities emerging within a networked society [18]. [10] after taking into consideration the diversity of skills, the ways in which the concept was delineated in political papers and research and the different fields of application they concluded in a comprehensive definition and suggested that digital competence consists of the skills and practices required to use N.T. in a meaningful way and as a tool for learning, working and leisure time, understanding the essential phenomena of digital technologies in society as well as in one’s own life, and the motivation to participate in the digital world actively and responsibly. This is a broad definition, as it includes technical elements, meaningful use of digital technologies at work and everyday life, critical evaluation, motivation to participate and commitment to digital culture.

The study of the existing literature makes it clear that it is not possible to have a single conceptual definition of digital competence due to the different visual perceptions of each scholar and because of the rapid transformations in the use of the technologies. However, despite researches conducted on digital competence in educational settings, the knowledge about digital competencies associated with school leadership is limited. Therefore, additional surveys related to the digital skills of school leadership should be carried out.

3.1.2 Digital literacy: a broader concept

Digital technologies are not new tools but they certainly assist in performing tasks faster and more efficiently. Instead, they have contributed to the existence of communication by extending communication networks and the ways in which people connect. Scholars of the field find it imperative to integrate technologies into educational management and refer to the concept of “digital literacy”. The prominent place given to digital literacy is not surprising since technological progress over the last twenty years has been a pivotal matter for the education policymakers and has been a catalyst for economic and social changes in school education. In addition, digital literacy has been recognized by international educational institutions and national governments as one of the political priorities and as part of a broader debate on skills of the 21st-century.

The holistic view of [19] for a successful digital citizen presents the view that a high level of digital literacy is needed referring to the skills, knowledge, and understanding required for the use of N.T. and the media for creating and sharing concepts. It also refers to the knowledge of how specific communication technologies affect the ability to analyze and evaluate knowledge available on the web. Digital literacy, therefore, does not only concern the ways in which technologies are used, but it is a more complex concept that involves changing the culture of using technologies and requires more detailed thought processes, such as analysis and evaluation. [20] presented the results of two surveys conducted in secondary schools in Portugal on identifying the digital profile of school leaders and its link to the implementation of pedagogical practices involving technologies. Findings have shown that school leaders have developed encouraging leadership attitudes with regard to the pedagogical use of technologies by encouraging educators and students to innovate. In the context of Portugal, it is important to mention the economic crisis, which acts as an impediment for such education policies, which do not always promote innovations.

[21] proposed a theoretical framework that includes four types of skills: operational, formal, informational and strategic Internet skills. Technologically literate leaders should have specific knowledge, ways of thinking and action, as well as opportunities to interact with technology in the educational environment. In a later study, the same model included five types of Internet skills: operational skills, navigation information skills, social skills, creative skills, and mobile skills [22]. This definition focuses on the technical aspects related to the content provided by the Internet. [23]
consented to this view and argued that digital media education should include technical, socio-cultural, communication and political skills and aim at personal empowerment and positive social change. In this way, it is expected that transformation will be achieved in modern schools.

Furthermore, digital literacy is seen as a political priority in education systems and sometimes as part of a wider agenda leading to the adoption of 21st-century skills. The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2015) can be perceived as a wider theoretical framework of studies that serves as a catalyst for the implementation of skills for constructing cooperative partnerships between education, leaders, and society. The framework is segregated into learning and innovation skills (creativity, innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, cooperation), life and career skills (flexibility, adaptability, initiative, self-determination, social and intercultural skills, productivity, responsibility) and literacy skills (information, media, technological literacy). Regarding technology literacy, learners are considered to explore and use technologies to communicate and collaborate with others, and to share new ideas and information. In an effort to develop a national consensus on technology standards for educational leaders, the International Society for Technology in Education (iste) presented models for school leaders to support digital literacy through rich technology environments [24]. Among the standards, the learning culture is stressed, according to which school leaders create, promote and maintain a dynamic learning culture for the digital age. Another standard is the promotion of digital citizenship since school leaders are required to guide pupils to become citizens of the digital world.

### 3.1.3 Soft skills: conceptual clarifications

The workplace in today’s era is considered a complex multidimensional environment in which a variety of skills, including “hard skills” and “soft skills”, as mentioned in the literature, is considered vital. These skills interact and complement each other to ensure the successful completion of the objectives of an educational organization. Technical skills include practical skills, theoretical knowledge, professional knowledge, tools and techniques that enable leaders to take responsibility for the school unit they are leading. Technical skills related to knowledge acquired through education, training or experience [25]. It is the theoretical foundation and practical training a person need to have to successfully perform any planned work, so it is not enough just to have the technical skills to prosper in a leadership position.

Technical skills are the backbone of social skills. However, the concept of social skills still lacks an inclusive definition because the concepts of social skills vary between the scientific fields they appear [26]. In recent literature, the most frequent terms used are social skills, applied skills, 21st-century skills, non-technical skills, lifelong skills, basic skills, behavioural skills, non-cognitive skills, general skills, employability skills, life skills, entrepreneurial skills, transferable skills, transversal skills, and interpersonal skills. In the presented study the terms soft skills or skills of the 21st century are going to be used alternatively. Research on soft skills involves examining skills in specific environments and identifying general competencies in the workplace, in which soft skills are necessary to achieve high performance of workers [27].

Despite the heterogeneity in the use of the term, according to [28], soft skills have as a common purpose the improvement of personal development, participation in learning and success in employment. [27] in their systematic literature review have recognized concepts similar to the concepts of soft skills and in order to describe these concepts, they focus on functional definitions of concepts related to soft skills (Table 1):

| Skills: | The ability to access knowledge from a domain-specific base and use that knowledge to perform an action or carry out a task |
| Dispositions: | Individual qualities, relatively stable over time, that influence behavior and actions performed as part of an individual’s skill set |
| Attitudes: | A positive or negative judgment, based in part on emotion, about an outside entity |
| Beliefs: | An acceptance that certain factual evidence is true, informed by an individual’s own values |
| Values: | General standards or principles that guide behaviors among varying situations and to which individuals feel a strong commitment |
Soft skills are interpersonal (socio-emotional) skills necessary for personal development, social participation and success in any workplace and act as an integral part of a person's personality [29]. Soft skills refer to personality traits, attributes and high levels of commitment to work, elements that differentiate one leader from another [30]. Such skills attributed to leadership are emotional intelligence, good communication, problem-solving, group work and a multitude of others. These are interacting and complementary skills to ensure the successful completion of the goals of the leader and the educational organization.

[31] claimed that soft skills are personality traits of a person that enhance personal self-esteem and people's interactions. Thus, leaders tend to manage themselves and their own feelings first and later their relationships with others. Most researchers agree that soft skills are usually complementary to the hard skills needed to excel as a leader [32]. Balancing these two -soft and hard skills- is responsible for the recognition and professional development of a recognized leader of education.

[33] referred to the non-cognitive skills that allow individuals to succeed in public life, workplaces, and other social contexts, with particular reference to the field of education. According to the scholar, soft skills include features that are not directly represented by cognitive skills but by socio-emotional or behavioural characteristics that are not fixed personality traits and are associated with the educational process that is either grown during school life, either contribute to the development of cognitive skills or both.

[2] explored the relationship between leaders' soft skills and school improvement in Malaysian schools. The researchers concluded that managers do not underestimate leadership soft skills because they recognize their significant impact on improving schools. As a result, school leaders urged to enact their soft skills in school life leadership practice to achieve school improvement. More generally, hard skills are considered less important if compared to the various forms of soft skills [34]. Irrespective of the heterogeneity of the term, [35] claimed that soft skills are considered transferable and fundamental skills that are crucial to employment and individual development.

Soft skills are those that differentiate managers who act as administrators of school management, from the real leaders who are concerned about ensuring the school's good impression. These are leaders who are not interested in their personal well-being, but primarily in the professional development of educational staff working in the school. Such leaders are those who are equipped with patterns, principles and values tend to guide, influence and inspire others and feel strong commitment [27]. Additionally, they are oriented towards human relationships, get the human resources to work for the realization of the vision and goals of the school organization and are distinguished for their innovative attitude and their willingness for change.

So it is useful for school leaders of the new generation to be equipped with the appropriate soft skills to make the educational organization competitive and to maximize their own abilities but also they employ the potentials of teachers and students of the school organization.

### 3.1.4 Trends of skills of the 21st century for school leaders

Social skills for school leaders are a critical part of organizational success, but their mapping is not an easy task since there is no unanimity among researchers as to which skills are appropriate for school leaders. It is certain that modern educational environments require highly qualified leaders with innovatory tendencies that are facing increasingly complex tasks. The need for a new generation of leaders is also highlighted by the European Commission, which suggests some of the key skills that leaders of the new generation [36] need to have:

- Skills of learning, assimilation and constant updating of knowledge, as well as creating new knowledge.
- Alert, meaning the ability to keep track of developments so that there is complete awareness of the latest trends.
- Adaptability, namely readiness to accept and manage change.
- Constant experimentation and ability to constructively use potential failures and their ability to turn them into a valuable learning experience.
- Interdisciplinary skills and integration of different fields to seek common solutions to complex problems, which is best achieved in a collaborative environment.
[37] highlighted the challenge of school leaders to achieve students' preparation to meet their expectations for the future. One of the challenges faced by school leaders is to meet the needs of today's students to be equipped with the appropriate skills for their subsequent careers in a globalized society. [38] tried to clarify soft skills, since they initially formed 58 different lists, including over 400 skills. After grouping these competencies they came up with two main categories, communication skills (e.g. active listening, non-verbal communication, etc.) and relationship building skills (e.g. cooperation, coordination, conflict resolution, negotiation, social influence, self-presentation, etc.).

[39] investigated the relationship between digital skills and skills of the 21st-century. They concluded that 21st-century skills are not necessarily supported by the use of N.T. but consist of a core of seven basic skills, namely technical skills, information management, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. In parallel, they identified five relevant skills: ethical awareness, cultural awareness, flexibility, self-direction, and lifelong learning.

[1] focused on soft skills, especially on the ability of educational leaders to collaborate. School leaders use their scientific knowledge and management skills to manage their schools by stressing on communication skills to develop organizational consciousness and continual improvement of the school unit. They are called to emphasize progressive management to ensure that school staff is ready to cope with change and transformation through cooperation, aiming at a positive change in attitudes and behavior of teachers. Finally, [1] compose a theoretical framework proposing eight components of leadership skills such as: (i) communication and presentation, (ii) leadership, (iii) teamwork; (iv) analytical thinking and creative problem solving; v) professionalism and ethics; (vi) learning; (vii) use of ICT; and (viii) development of interpersonal relationships.

Most studies have demonstrated that social skills can include any concepts of cognitive and analytical skills, emotional skills, organizational ability, interpersonal skills, and personal skills. Any researcher attempting to organize a program on soft skills development should keep in mind previous attempts to conceptualize and classify soft skills and take into consideration the particular contexts and unique case for such a program. Such an effort should lead to clear expectations for the classified skills and the interrelations between them. Based on the review of the literature, the two co-authors concluded to a categorization of the skills of the 21st-century, which are deemed to be of great importance for school leaders (Table 2).

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4 CONCLUSIONS

The 21st-century can be described as the century of the technology revolution and as an era of digital information. This century gives many opportunities for progress and innovation in the educational sector. That is the main reason why school leaders should develop skills that will enable them to take advantage of these opportunities both in their personal and professional lives. In this paper, we tried to
present the concepts of the skills required for the success of school administrators in managing schools and highlight the most significant skills as derived from current literature.

Soft skills are personality traits, attitudes, values, standards, and capabilities of each person. Nonetheless, it is difficult to find an inclusive definition of soft skills since it is a multifaceted concept that includes a combination of cognitive, behavioral and emotional elements. In a highly competitive educational environment, continuing professional development on issues of communication, problem-solving, conflict management, cooperation, leadership, and many others is more than a necessity. In today's demanding educational workplace, soft skills are the most important aspects of school leadership that school leaders should invest in. Soft skills are those that will give an “added value” to distinguish and contribute to job success.

Additionally, there is also an ambiguity between the uses of the terms digital skills, digital competence, and digital literacy and there appears to be no convergence of researchers on the conceptual delimitation of those terms. The way in which the international frameworks organize the components of the 21st-century skills varies and differences are found with regard to the content of the term digital literacy. In the original texts, digital refers to simple document processing and information distribution, while in more recent documents digital skills are incorporated into the skills of the 21st century. In other words, digital literacy is a broader concept if compared to digital skills. Generally, this review concluded in a categorization of the skills needed for succeeding in school environments: interpersonal skills, personal skills, organizational skills, psycho-emotional skills, and digital skills.

Educators, policymakers, researchers, program designers, and many others who are looking for best practices to prepare school leaders so as to maximize school efficiency and incorporate digital technologies into curricula may find this paper interesting and useful. In a world of the information revolution and rapid technological progress, the long-term goal is school leaders to act as promoters of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, creativity, and innovation and as amplifiers of innovations. This objective can be achieved if they are properly prepared and trained to develop or improve digital and soft skills, which can be taught through training programs. That could be seen as a challenge for designers of online collaborative professional development programs and school leaders’ training programs. Also, this paper could be useful for educational leaders who may reflect and concentrate on developing such vital skills not only for themselves but for the human beings in their school.

However, although there seems to be a lot of online training programs for the development of soft and digital skills in many fields, more online training programs still need to be performed for school leaders in order to be provided with the necessary skills of the 21st-century to cope with their diverse role in educational organizations.

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