

THE INTERPLAY OF TEACHERS' SOFT SKILLS: CREATIVE AND INTERCULTURAL EXPRESSION, CRITICAL THINKING AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Rasa Didziulienė, Nijolė Ciuciulkiene, Egidijus Stancikas, & Rita Miciulienė
Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy (Lithuania)

Abstract

Teachers' soft skills are increasingly recognized as key determinants of effective teaching and high-quality educational practice. Creativity, intercultural competence, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence enable teachers to respond to evolving educational contexts, foster inclusion, and build meaningful relationships. However, these competencies are typically examined as discrete constructs, limiting understanding of their interaction and highlighting the need for an integrated, system-oriented perspective. This study is based on a sample of 1800 secondary school teachers in Lithuania. The findings reveal consistent positive relationships among all examined competencies. Emotional intelligence emerges as a central component, strongly associated with both creative expression and critical thinking, while intercultural expression relates to engagement with diverse perspectives. By demonstrating the systemic interdependence of key competencies, the study challenges fragmented approaches to teachers' soft skills and supports a shift toward integrative models of professional competence, in line with the P21 Framework and the OECD Learning Compass 2030.

Keywords: *Teachers' soft skills, creative and intercultural expression, critical thinking, emotional intelligence.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary education is characterized by increasing complexity, uncertainty, and diversity, placing new demands on teachers' professional competence. Competencies such as creativity, intercultural competence, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence are widely recognized as essential for navigating diverse classrooms and fostering inclusive environments. However, they are predominantly conceptualized and measured as distinct constructs, which risks oversimplifying the interactive nature of teaching practice. This fragmentation is also reflected in influential policy frameworks, including the P21 Framework and the OECD Learning Compass 2030, which emphasize multiple competencies but provide limited insight into interaction. Consequently, the systemic nature of teachers' soft skills remains insufficiently examined. This study aims to investigate relationships among key competencies and explore their functioning as an integrated system within teachers' professional practice.

2. Theoretical framework

Contemporary education, shaped by globalization, cultural diversity, and rapid social change, requires teachers to mobilize integrated systems of professional competence rather than isolated skills (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). Within this context, creativity, intercultural competence, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence are increasingly conceptualized as interdependent dimensions of teachers' soft skills (Barrett, 2018). However, despite this recognition, empirical research has predominantly examined these competencies separately, leaving interrelationships insufficiently explored.

Creativity is conceptualized as a socially embedded and generative process of meaning-making emerging through interaction with cultural and contextual environments (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Beghetto, 2023). In educational practice, it enables teachers to reinterpret perspectives and construct inclusive learning experiences. In this regard, creativity is closely intertwined with intercultural competence, as both involve engagement with diverse perspectives through openness, dialogue, and reflexive understanding (Barrett, 2018; OECD, 2022). These competencies underpin participation in multicultural societies and support cultural awareness in lifelong learning (OECD, 2022). *Critical thinking* operates as a key mediating cognitive dimension, enabling teachers to question assumptions, systematically evaluate knowledge, and

make informed decisions in complex and uncertain contexts (Facione, 1990). It further supports reflective self-development processes understood as continuous and dynamic meaning-making across personal, epistemological, and social dimensions. *Emotional intelligence* functions as an integrative mechanism connecting cognitive, social, and affective domains of teacher competence. It is conceptualized as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions, as well as to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior (Mayer et al., 2016). Research highlights its central role in teachers' professional functioning, well-being, and relationships in educational settings (Dolev & Leshem, 2017; Frenzel et al., 2021), as well as its contribution to the development of reflective and adaptive professional identity (Lozano-Peña et al., 2021). From this perspective, teachers' soft skills constitute an interdependent competence system in which creative, critical, intercultural, and emotional processes are co-constructed in practice. This perspective challenges fragmented approaches to teacher competence and provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing their interplay.

3. Methodology

The study employed a quantitative design to examine the interplay among teachers' soft skills as an integrated competence system. Empirical data were collected in 2026 using a structured questionnaire administered to secondary school teachers ($N = 1800$) across Lithuania. The research instrument consisted of previously validated psychometric scales. Specifically, 14 items were drawn from the Critical Thinking Questionnaire (CTHQ) (Kobylarek et al., 2022), 12 items were adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Gómez Yepes et al., 2023) and 12 items based on Soh (2000) were used to assess teachers' creative behaviour, conceptualized in this study as an empirical indicator of creative expression. In addition, a Social and Emotional Competencies Scale (Yoder, 2022) was included. These scales have been validated across diverse cultural contexts, supporting their appropriateness for the present study. The internal consistency of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with values of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable (Watkins, 2021). Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Descriptive statistics, including means (M) and standard deviations (SD), were calculated to characterise the study variables. As the data distributions approximated normality, parametric tests were employed. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to assess relationships among the variables, and multiple linear regression analysis was performed to estimate the associations between teachers' creative behaviour and intercultural sensitivity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence. Standardized beta coefficients (β) were used to interpret effect sizes, and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics of teachers' soft skills are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of teachers' soft skills.

Variables	M	SD
<i>Emotional intelligence</i>	4.23	0.47
<i>Critical thinking</i>	4.15	0.55
<i>Creative expression</i>	4.10	0.53
<i>Intercultural expression</i>	3.92	0.64
Note. $N = 1800$		

The results (Table 1) indicate relatively high levels of all examined competencies. Emotional intelligence demonstrated the highest mean score ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.47$), followed by critical thinking ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.55$) and creative expression ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.53$). Intercultural expressions showed the lowest mean ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.64$), as well as the greatest variability among respondents.

Table 2. Pearson correlations among teachers' soft skills.

Variables	1	2	3	4
<i>Emotional intelligence</i>	-			
<i>Critical thinking</i>	0.53			
<i>Creative expression</i>	0.42	0.46	-	
<i>Intercultural expression</i>	0.59	0.56	0.48	-
Note. $N = 1800$; $p < 0.001$				

Pearson correlation analysis results are presented (Table 2). The correlation matrix reveals a network of statistically significant positive interrelationships among all examined competencies ($p < 0.001$), with emotional intelligence demonstrating the strongest associations. These findings confirm the interplay of teachers' soft skills as an integrated and interdependent competence system.

Table 3. Multiple regression analysis predicting creative expression.

Predictor	β	p
Emotional intelligence	0.41	$p < 0.001$
Critical thinking	0.29	$p < 0.001$
Creative expression	0.18	$p < 0.001$
Note. $R^2 = 0.52$; $N = 1800$		

Multiple linear regression analysis revealed that emotional intelligence was the strongest predictor of creative expression ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), followed by critical thinking ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and intercultural expression ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$). The model explained a substantial proportion of variance in creative expression ($R^2 = 0.52$), indicating that teachers' soft skills function as an interconnected system. These findings provide empirical support for understanding teachers' soft skills as a coherent and interrelated competence system.

5. Discussion

The findings provide empirical support for conceptualizing teachers' soft skills as an integrated and interdependent competence system. Emotional intelligence emerged as the central competence, demonstrating the strongest associations and predictive power, which is consistent with prior research (Mayer et al., 2016; Dolev & Leshem, 2017; Frenzel et al., 2021). The relationship between critical thinking and creative expression supports theoretical perspectives linking analytical and generative processes in teaching (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Beghetto, 2023). Intercultural expression was also significantly related to all competencies, confirming its embedded and relational nature (Barrett, 2018). Overall, the results challenge fragmented approaches to teacher competence and highlight the importance of integrated competence development. However, the use of self-reported data and the cross-sectional design limit causal interpretation. Future research should explore longitudinal approaches to examine the dynamic development of these competencies.

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that teachers' soft skills function as an integrated competence system, with emotional intelligence as a central component. The findings challenge fragmented approaches and support the need for integrative models of teacher competence. Further research should examine how these competencies develop in different educational contexts.

References

- Amabile, T. M., & Pratt, M. G. (2016). The dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations: Making progress, making meaning. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 36, 157–183.
- Barrett, M. (2018). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Beghetto, R. A. (2023). *Creative thought and action in educational contexts*. Routledge.
- Dolev, N., & Leshem, S. (2017). Developing emotional intelligence competence among teachers. *Teacher Development*, 21(1), 21–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1207093>
- Facione, P. A. (1990). *Critical thinking: A statement of expert consensus for purposes of educational assessment and instruction (The Delphi Report)*. The California Academic Press.
- Frenzel, A. C., Daniels, L. M., & Burić, I. (2021). Teacher emotions in the classroom and their implications for students. *Educational Psychologist*, 56(4), 250–264.
- Yoder, N. (2022). *Self-assessing educator social and emotional competencies and instruction (refreshed)*. American Institutes for Research.
- Kobylarek, A., Błaszczewski, K., Ślósarz, L., & Madej, M. (2022). Critical Thinking Questionnaire (CTHQ): Construction and application of a critical thinking assessment tool. *Andragogy Adult Education and Social Marketing*, 2(2), 1–10.
- Mayer, J. D., Caruso, D. R., & Salovey, P. (2016). The ability model of emotional intelligence: Principles and updates. *Emotion Review*, 8(4), 290–300. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073916639667>
- Soh, K. C. (2000). Indexing creativity fostering teacher behavior: A preliminary validation study. *The Journal of Creative Behavior*, 34(2), 118–134. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2162-6057.2000.tb01203.x>
- OECD. (2022). *OECD learning compass 2030*. OECD Publishing.
- UNESCO. (2024). *Reimagining education: Futures of learning*. UNESCO Publishing.