

Impact of soft skills on educational leaders and academic performance: a systematic review

Impacto de las habilidades blandas en los líderes pedagógicos y el rendimiento académico: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Through a systematic review, this research analyzes the impact of soft skills on the comprehensive development of human beings, highlighting their influence on both the performance of educational leaders and the academic performance of students. To this end, the PRISMA protocol was applied, which allowed for the identification, selection, and analysis of 21 studies published between 2020 and 2025 in the SciELO and SCOPUS databases. The results show that soft skills have a significant impact on the social, academic, and professional spheres of teachers and students. Finally, it is concluded that these non-cognitive skills are cross-cutting pillars for achieving career success, enhancing learning, and promoting sustainable emotional well-being, facilitating adaptation to change, problem solving, assertive communication, leadership, and teamwork.

Keywords: soft skills, student performance, emotional well-being.

Resumen

A través de una revisión sistemática, esta investigación analiza el impacto de las habilidades blandas en el desarrollo integral del ser humano, destacando su influencia tanto en el desempeño de los líderes pedagógicos como en el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes. Para ello, se aplicó el protocolo PRISMA, que permitió la identificación, selección y análisis de 21 estudios publicados entre 2020 y 2025 en las bases de datos SciELO y SCOPUS. Los resultados evidencian que las habilidades blandas inciden de manera significativa en los ámbitos social, académico y profesional de docentes y estudiantes. Finalmente, se concluye que estas competencias no cognitivas constituyen pilares transversales para alcanzar el éxito laboral, favorecer la mejora del aprendizaje y promover un bienestar emocional sostenible, facilitando la adaptación al cambio, la resolución de problemas, la comunicación asertiva, el liderazgo y el trabajo en equipo.

Palabras clave: habilidades blandas, rendimiento estudiantil, bienestar emocional.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental factor for human development, requiring not only technical knowledge but also the enhancement of soft skills as essential competencies for achieving academic, professional, and labor market success. In this regard, since 2018, the European Union has established regulations that incorporate socio-emotional development courses into higher education curricula, highlighting their increasing relevance in holistic education (Kargas et al., 2022). These competencies enable students to adapt to constant social changes and promote a systemic education that complements technical skills, especially in light of the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution—characterized by globalization, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence-driven automation. In this context, specific skills, or hard skills, are no longer sufficient for ensuring successful professional performance; there is a pressing need to strengthen socio-emotional skills, or soft skills (Gilyazova et al., 2021).

Researchers such as Sanmartín and Tapia (2023) emphasize that emotional regulation, positive interpersonal relationships, and constructive conflict resolution are foundational pillars of comprehensive education. Similarly, Canelón (2023) identifies adaptability, assertiveness, and leadership as the most relevant soft skills within organizational environments. These abilities not only enhance academic performance but also positively impact mental health and contribute to favorable student environments (Arace et al., 2021). This underscores the necessity for educational institutions to implement strategies that integrate both technical and socio-emotional competencies to enhance the employability of future professionals (Sánchez & Hernández, 2022).

In this vein, Cejas et al. (2023) argue that higher education must include soft skills development as a strategic element to improve employability, while Muñoz et al. (2020) highlight their role in decision-making, conflict management, and leadership. Various international studies support this perspective: in Vietnam, Ngo (2024) demonstrated that interpersonal skills foster positive relationships that benefit academic performance and job placement; in Ecuador, Machado and Rivera (2023) stress that educational leaders must enhance communication and collaborative work; in Colombia, Vieira et al. (2024) evidence the importance of communicative and leadership skills in administrative management; whereas in Mexico, Veytia and Cárdenas (2023) emphasize competencies such as stress management and positive communication. In Spain, Zapata (2023) asserts that educational innovation also entails strengthening socio-emotional skills to seize life opportunities.

Conversely, some studies highlight challenges in implementing socio-emotional development programs. Aldaz et al. (2024) reveal obstacles in planning soft skills for educational leaders, while Ferreira (2021) and Morales (2024) note that effective leadership is directly associated with the practice of these competencies, contributing to educational quality and enhancing institutional climate. Furthermore, a lack of socio-emotional skills exacerbates disruptive behaviors and limits pedagogical effectiveness (Guevara et al., 2024; Salcedo, 2023).

The theoretical foundation of soft skills is rooted in the framework of Goleman (1995), which defines them as the abilities to regulate emotions, interact assertively, and adapt to one's environment. Mateo and Rucci (2019) reinforce the necessity of developing these skills from an early age to cultivate global citizens, while Farías and Guña (2024) conceive them as a set of individual attributes—habits, personality, and social and communicative aptitudes—that facilitate effective interaction. Grover et al. (2020) and Vila et al. (2021) concur that these skills are integral to well-being and success across different life stages. Moreover, assertive communication, empathy, and conflict resolution serve to establish meaningful relationships (De Azua et al., 2020), portraying these capabilities as innate and essential for the effective execution of any task (Viquez, 2020).

The impact of soft skills has also been documented in workplace contexts. Carlos et al. (2024) illustrate their influence on employability and group performance, while Cherres et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of integrating them into university curricula alongside leadership training. Other authors, such as Falcón (2023), Rincones (2023), and Chan and Saldívar (2023), conclude that hard and soft skills are complementary in achieving organizational objectives. Similarly, Guerrero et al. (2023), Lozano (2024), and Chetilan (2024) highlight that administrators with socio-emotional skills promote effective leadership, whereas their absence undermines institutional management. In this respect, Hermoza et al. (2025) assert that educational training should integrate non-cognitive skills with technical knowledge to confront labor market challenges.

In the educational realm, enhancing these competencies empowers pedagogical leaders, improves their interactions with students, and promotes effective learning environments. Málaga et al. (2025) emphasize that their curricular integration stimulates creativity and critical thinking, which are key elements in teacher training. Moreover, Huarcaya et al. (2023) argue that educators with assertive communication, empathy, and social skills foster positive school environments and enhance coexistence. Salcedo et al. (2024) stress the importance of empathy in identifying student needs and adapting pedagogical strategies, while Varona and Ramos (2024) and Pinos et al. (2023) reinforce the significance of these competencies for adaptation to diverse contexts and social

integration. Ayala et al. (2024) and Glicería (2024) highlight their relevance for emotional regulation and academic achievement, particularly among basic education students.

Furthermore, Aguinaga and Sánchez (2020), Lozano (2022), and Ventura et al. (2024) concur that these skills—communication, teamwork, empathy, and conflict management—are indispensable for holistic education and school coexistence. Pinedo (2024) and Pinedo et al. (2024) suggest that these competencies promote participatory, tolerant students capable of managing their emotions, which positively affects educational quality.

This study evaluates four key soft skills:

Communication, defined as the clear and effective transmission of ideas, both orally and in writing (Zambrano et al., 2023; Valle et al., 2022).

Teamwork, understood as the ability to coordinate efforts and construct common goals through cooperation (Zambrano et al., 2023; Valle et al., 2022).

Leadership, which entails guiding, influencing, and anticipating situations to achieve shared objectives (Valle et al., 2022).

Problem-solving, associated with identifying, analyzing, and resolving conflicts through mutually beneficial collaborative strategies (Cordero et al., 2020).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of soft skills, gaps in the literature persist regarding their direct implications for academic and professional processes, particularly concerning the performance of pedagogical leaders. Therefore, the objective of this systematic review was to describe and analyze the development of research on soft skills, highlighting their significance in the educational domain.

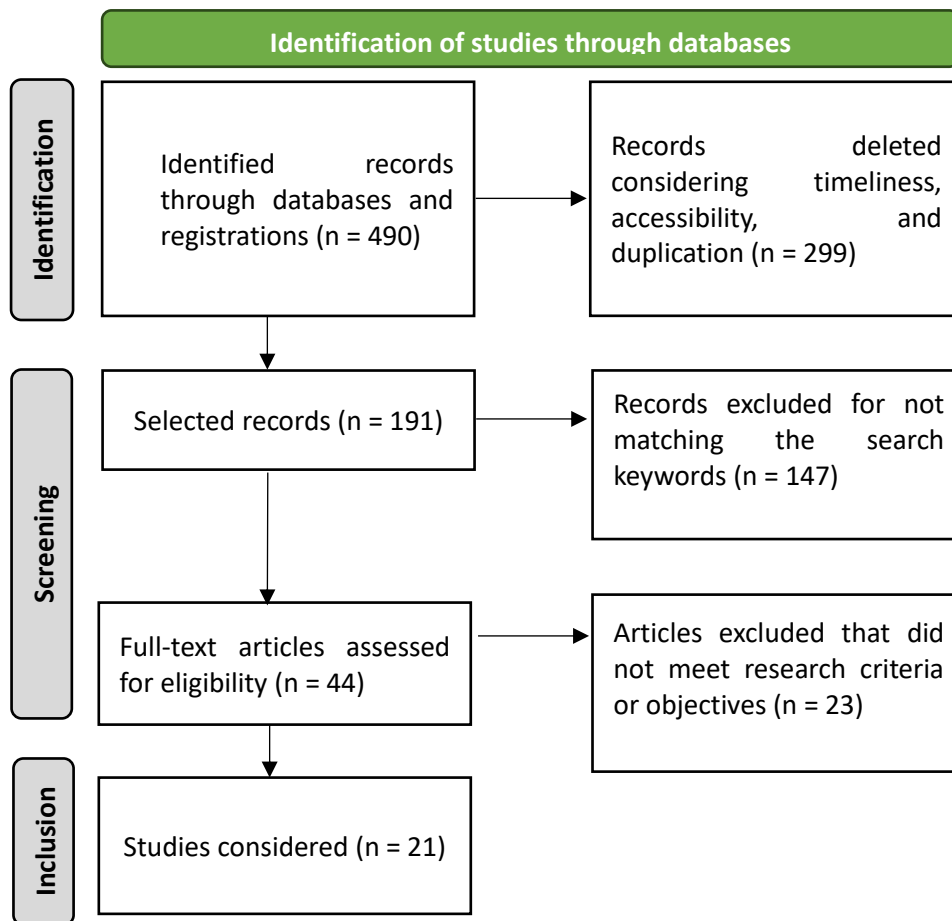
Methodology

This study corresponds to a systematic review aimed at compiling and analyzing pertinent information regarding soft skills. The literature search was conducted in primarily indexed scientific databases such as SciELO and SCOPUS, among other academic resources. The following keywords were utilized: soft skills, directive leadership, and educational quality. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were also employed to optimize the retrieval of relevant information. The process of collecting and selecting studies adhered to the guidelines of the PRISMA model, proposed by Rethlefsen et al. (2021), which serves as a rigorously planned, transparent, and replicable framework for conducting and reporting reviews.

Criteria for inclusion and exclusion were established to enhance the precision of publication selection. In total, 490 references were identified. Of these, 299 were eliminated for not meeting the established criteria (such as restricted research, opinion reports, blogs, and theses). Subsequently, after a detailed review, 147 records were discarded as duplicates or irretrievable. Finally, 23 additional studies were excluded, resulting in a total of 21 investigations deemed suitable for analysis.

The synthetic-comparative method was employed, allowing for the contrast of information from various sources to identify trends, similarities, and differences regarding soft skills. The organization of the information search and selection process is presented in Figure 1, facilitating subsequent analysis and description.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram



Note: PRISMA flow diagram developed from the SciELO and SCOPUS databases
Source: Authors' own elaboration (November 14, 2025)

Results and discussion

Following the selection and refinement process of the literature, a synthesis matrix was developed to organize, analyze, and interpret the 21 articles that were ultimately included in this review.

Table 1. Contributions of various authors regarding the impact of soft skills in the labor and educational spheres.

No.	Author(s) and Year	Methodology	Main Contribution
1	Ngo (2024)	Survey of university students (n=968)	Interpersonal skills promote positive relationships and facilitate progress in professional settings.
2	Aldaz et al. (2024)	Quasi-experimental (n=30)	Impact of soft skills on directive leadership.
3	Gilyazova et al. (2021)	Theoretical review in academic databases	Analysis of soft skills in modern education from the perspective of human capital theory and humanistic approach.
4	Guevara et al. (2024)	Quantitative (n=243)	Evaluation of a program aimed at soft skills to reduce disruptive behaviors.
5	Ingsih (2023)	Survey of university students (convenience sampling)	Connection between soft skills and labor development.
6	Salcedo (2023)	Systematic review	Soft skills minimize student stress in classrooms.

7	Canelón (2023)	Literature review and case study	Analysis of soft competencies in organizational contexts in Spain and other countries in America.
8	Kargas et al. (2022)	Correlational study	Examination of the most significant new skills and competencies needed for digital transformation.
9	Gilyazova et al. (2021)	Document review	Development of students' soft skills as means or ends.
10	Glicería (2024)	Systematic review	Importance of non-cognitive skills at the secondary education level.
11	Lozano (2022)	Theoretical review	Importance of teaching soft skills in education and the need for their inclusion in study curricula.
12	Ayala (2024)	Systematic review	Impact of fostering soft skills in basic education to enhance students' holistic development.
13	Pinedo (2024)	Systematic review	Soft skills and improved coexistence in the school environment.
14	Chetilan (2024)	Systematic review	Influence of soft skills on directive leadership.
15	Pinedo et al. (2024)	Systematic review (2021-2023)	Socio-emotional skills optimize students' competencies, reflecting educational improvement.
16	Cherres et al. (2025)	Systematic review	Relationship between the most required soft skills (effective communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving) and employability.
17	Málaga et al. (2025)	Systematic review	Soft skills contribute to guaranteeing academic and professional success.
18	Hermoza et al. (2025)	Theoretical review	Educational management and soft skills are essential in students' comprehensive training.
19	Carlos et al. (2024)	Qualitative documentary of scientific articles	Impact of skills in top management.
20	Ayala et al. (2024)	Systematic review	Impact of soft skills in basic education.
21	Ventura et al. (2024)	Bibliographic review through content analysis	Management of soft skills for the success of private educational institutions.

According to the findings from these investigations, soft skills exert a direct impact on the performance of pedagogical leaders and are essential for the overall development of students. These competencies enhance personal confidence, assertive communication, empathy, decision-making, and the ability to manage diverse situations, key aspects in both educational and workplace contexts.

The results of this review align with the conclusions of multiple authors. On one hand, Cejas et al. (2023) highlight that interpersonal skills, as part of non-cognitive competencies, facilitate adaptation to changes and challenges in the workplace, enabling efficient performance in assigned tasks. This assertion coincides with findings from Ngo (2024), Ingsih (2023), Canelón (2023), Kargas et al. (2022), Cherres et al. (2025), and Málaga et al. (2025), all of whom emphasize the necessity of integrating these skills into student training to enhance graduates' profiles in accordance with labor market demands.

Additionally, Varona and Ramos (2024) and Morales et al. (2024) argue that educational success—including managerial and operational levels—depends on the development of socio-emotional skills in both educational leaders and organizational actors. These viewpoints relate to the contributions of Aldaz et al. (2024), Gilyazova et al. (2021), Carlos et al. (2024), and Chetilan (2024), who agree that non-cognitive skills improve professional practice and strengthen collaborative work.

Further studies conducted in higher education institutions suggest that these skills should be systematically integrated into teaching-learning processes. For instance, Zapata (2023) emphasizes the crucial role of families in the development of soft skills among students. This perspective is consistent with the insights of Machado and Rivera (2023), Hermoza et al. (2025), Pinedo et al. (2024), Ayala et al. (2024), Ventura et al. (2024), Gilyazova et al. (2021), Glicería (2024), Lozano (2022), Ayala (2024), and Pinedo (2024), all of whom stress that these skills help balance technical and emotional knowledge, which is essential in a highly dynamic social and educational context.

Finally, research by Guevara et al. (2024) and Salcedo (2023) shows that in school settings, skills such as empathy, resilience, and self-esteem contribute to reducing disruptive behaviors and stress levels among students, promoting healthier and more conducive learning environments.

Conclusions

This systematic review, grounded in the analysis of recent studies on soft skills, underscores their significance as an essential component in the holistic development of learners. The findings highlight that these socio-emotional competencies not only complement technical knowledge but also serve as a fundamental pillar for students to successfully face the challenges inherent in today's educational, professional, and social environments.

Furthermore, the necessity of integrating non-cognitive skills into the educational curriculum in a transversal manner is emphasized, promoting their development across all areas of training. Competencies such as teamwork, assertive communication, and adaptability are crucial in strengthening the profile of 21st-century students and enhancing their performance in diverse contexts.

The systematic incorporation of soft skills into educational processes also contributes to fostering greater self-confidence and self-esteem among students—factors that positively impact their ability to relate to others and coexist harmoniously. Strengthening these skills benefits institutional dynamics, as it enhances collaborative work, facilitates constructive conflict management, and improves interpersonal relationships, ultimately generating higher levels of engagement and productivity at various levels of the educational organization.

Overall, the study demonstrates that soft skills are an indispensable element for the holistic formation and personal, academic, and professional success of students. Thus, their promotion should be a priority in contemporary pedagogical practices.

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