

A Study on The Soft Skills of Pre-Service Teachers*

Reyhan Ağçamⁱ

Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Univesity

Adem Doğanⁱⁱ

Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam Univesity

Abstract

Soft skills refer to the skills, competencies, and characteristics that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour instead of to formal or technical knowledge. While they are necessary to ensure a person's success, these skills are not easily demonstrated through a CV, diploma, or certificate and can only be evaluated by specialists. Soft skills cover proficiencies such as communication, problem-solving, time-management, teamwork, and leadership, and are considered essential, especially for teachers as they stand at the very heart of the teaching and learning process. This particular research was motivated to investigate the soft skills of pre-service teachers attending teacher training programmes at state universities in Turkey. In line with the research objective, the data were gathered through the soft skills survey adapted from the Brookings Soft Skills Report Card. The participant responses to the five-point items were quantitatively analysed through SPSS 21.0. The research findings indicated that pre-service teachers significantly differ in their perceived soft skills regarding major and seniority; however, no correlation was found between these skills and gender. This research is hoped to contribute to the existing literature on teacher training via the practical implications developed based on its results.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Pre-Service Teachers, Teacher Training

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ⁱ **Reyhan Ağçam**, Assoc. Prof. Dr., English Language Teaching, Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University

Correspondence: reyhanagcam@gmail.com

ⁱⁱ **Adem Doğan**, Assist. Prof. Dr., Faculty of Education, Department of Basic Education, Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University, ORCID: 0000-0001-6952-7415

INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented that the social and economic welfare of countries is largely determined by their qualified labour force and thus education. A growing body of research has indicated a positive correlation between economic development of a country and quality of education at various levels (Woolhouse & Cramphorn, 1999; Lewin, Little, & Colclough, 1982; Öztürk, 2005; Yi-ping, 2007; Tilak, 2010; Hanushek, & Woessmann, 2010; Osmankovic, Jahic, & Sehic, 2011; Breton, 2012; Misra, 2013; Khan, Omar-Fauzee, & Daud, 2015; Mishra, 2016; Saviotti, Pyka, & Jun, 2016; Hanushek, & Woessmann, 2020). Considering the teacher's indispensable role in educational processes, it can be concluded that the socio-economic welfare state of a country plays a large role in the presence of effective teachers at different educational levels. In a similar vein, the existing literature provides evidence for the influence of teacher quality and competencies on student success (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2000; OECD, 2005). In a study conducted in South African schools, Fleischmann (2013) found that teachers who are perceived as 'excellent' exhibit superior intrapersonal behavioural, interpersonal conceptual, and interpersonal affective soft skills. The 2005 OECD report highlighted that "teachers are now expected to have much broader roles, taking into account the individual development of children and young people, the management of learning processes in the classroom, the development of the entire school as a 'learning community', and connections with the local community and the wider world" (OECD, 2005, p. 3). The report further introduced teacher responsibilities at four levels: (i) individual student level (initiating and managing learning processes, responding effectively to the learning needs of individual learners, and integrating formative and summative assessment), (ii) classroom level (teaching in multi-cultural classrooms, new cross-curricular emphases, and integrating students with special needs), (iii) school level (working and planning in teams, evaluation and systematic improvement planning, ICT use in teaching and administration and management, and shared leadership), and (iv) level of parents and the wider community (providing professional advice to parents and building community partnerships for learning) (p. 3). Beyond the acquisition of field-specific content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, fulfilment of these roles indisputably involves competence in soft skills, which refer to 'the skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge' (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253). Even though they contribute to 85% of one's success (Wats & Wats, 2009), these skills are not easily demonstrated by CV, diploma or certificate and can only be evaluated by specialists like psychologists (Pop, 2014). Yet, they are considered essential especially for the teachers who stand at the very heart of teaching and learning processes because they cover such skills as communication, problem-solving, time-management, teamwork and leadership (Bunchberger, Campos, Kallos & Stephenson, 2000; Pachauri & Yadav, 2014; Riedler & Eryaman, 2016; Ünsal & Çetin, 2019; Çetin & Sadık, 2020; Çetin & Ünsal, 2020). In that regard, much research has been conducted with such purposes as indicating the significance of these skills for teacher training and revealing the factors that influence the development of these skills in pre-service and in-service teachers. Kara and Çam (2007) suggested that using creative drama in the course of "Development and Learning" contributes to the development of collaborative and self-management skills in pre-service teachers and enables them to initiate and maintain interaction with others. Seven and Yoldaş (2007) found no correlation between the soft skills of pre-service classroom teachers and their gender. In a similar study, Girgin, Çetingöz and Ekinci-Vural (2011) reported no correlation between soft skills and gender in pre-service teachers although they noted that male students got higher scores than female students in the dimension of affective control. Conducting a study with the participation of two groups of pre-service Turkish teachers, Çetinkaya (2011) reported that the teachers generally held positive views on their own communication skills and that a statistically significant correlation was found between the groups regarding gender and seniority in favour of female and less senior pre-service teachers, respectively.

In a more recent research, Bozgün and Pekdoğan (2018) concluded that pre-service teachers differ in their social skills regarding such variables as gender, department, seniority and family income. The researchers reported that male students, students studying science teaching and classroom teaching, and those in their third year have higher social skills than female students, students who

study pre-school teaching, psychological counselling and guidance, and second year students, respectively.

Ngang et al. (2015) attempted to identify critical issues in soft skills development through teaching professional training and found that larger class sizes, being too academically focused, and insufficient period of training lead to failure in soft skills development. As a solution, the researchers proposed the use of an embedded model to ensure integration of soft skills in every course design. Balakrishan and Anbuthasan (2016) noted that the rural and urban teachers differ significantly in their team-building skills and that state and private school teachers differ significantly in oral communication, computer skills, organisational ability, leadership and team-building skills. Türkan, Aydoğan and Sezer (2016) reported a correlation between the soft skills of prospective pre-school teachers and seniority in higher education. Lavilles and Robles (2017) indicated a significant relationship between teachers' soft skills proficiency level and school performance in the Philippines. Likewise, Pumacayo-Quispe (2018) reported a direct correlation between teachers' soft skills and the organisational climate in Peru. Romero-Cobeña (2019) evaluated the soft skills of teachers in Ecuador and concluded that teachers play important roles as trainers of people and always maintain good management in the quality of education provided within the educational unit. The study also noted that teachers reflect parents within the school by instilling respect and safety in the student so that excellent results are reflected in their performance. Peabody (2019) stated that school administrators interpreted soft skills as being the decisive factor in effective teaching and that they shared the importance of teachers building connections with their students through their positive relationships, which included the ability to recognise, understand, and manage their emotions and the students' emotions for the benefit of student learning. In a quantitative research conducted in Peru, Guzmán-Britto (2019) found significant differences between the soft skills of teachers in public educational institutions. De Paniza (2019) conducted a project on the development of soft skills of teachers and teaching directors in Colombia and recommended the integration of a subject on soft skills from preschool to high school curricula. Similarly, Streltsova and Ivanova (2020) underlined the need for purposeful work on the development of soft skills of teachers in Russia.

The present study was an attempt to scrutinise Turkish pre-service teachers' views on their soft skills. More specifically, it was intended to reveal whether they significantly differ in these skills regarding gender, seniority and major. Accordingly, the following research questions were raised:

1. What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers on their soft skills?
2. Do pre-service teachers significantly differ in their perceived soft skills regarding *gender*?
3. Do pre-service teachers significantly differ in their perceived soft skills regarding *seniority*?
4. Do pre-service teachers significantly differ in their perceived soft skills regarding *major*?

METHOD

Research model

The scanning model was adopted in this descriptive research. These models are utilised to describe a past or present case as it is (Karasar, 2012) and allow researchers to collect large-scale data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

Participants

The universe of the research was comprised of pre-service teachers enrolled in various teacher training programs at state universities in Turkey during the 2019-2020 academic year. Accordingly, a total of 540 undergraduate students attending four state universities in Turkey were selected using the

easily accessible sampling and participated in this quantitative research (Female: 79%, Male: 21%). Their majors are illustrated in Figure 1.

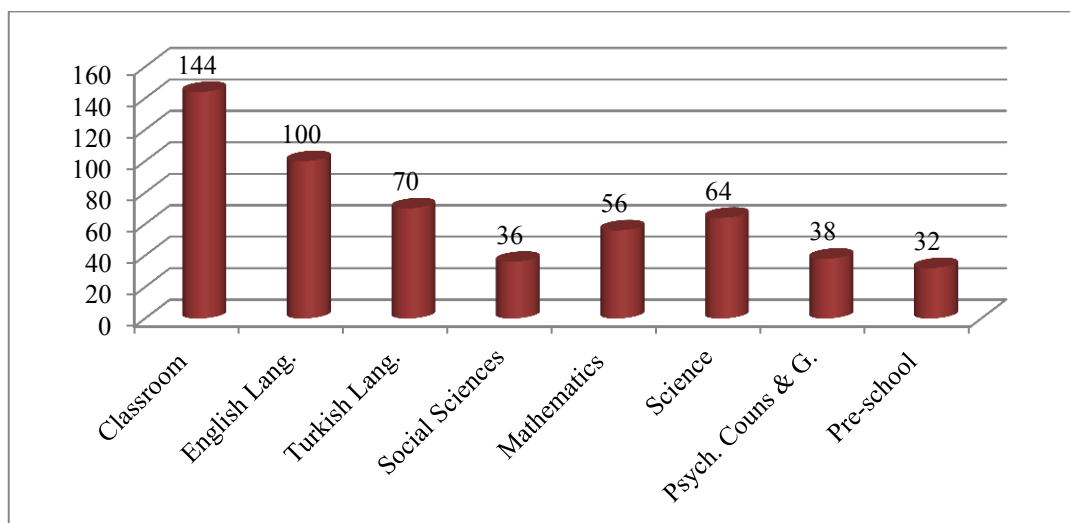


Figure 1. Teacher training programmes attended by the participants

As depicted in Figure 1, the participants receive training on how to teach different subjects on completion of their undergraduate education. The adequacy of sample size was confirmed by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy (.957: exceeding the recommended value of .60) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 with a mean age of 20.8. At the time of data collection, they were enrolled in different levels (from freshmen to senior) within eight teacher training programmes (first year/freshmen: 18%, second year/sophomore: 22%, third year/junior: 26%, fourth year/senior: 34%).

Data collection and analysis

The research data were electronically gathered through the Soft Skills Survey adapted from *the Brookings Soft Skills Report Card* (Whitehurst, 2016). The survey utilised in this research was composed of two sections: (i) demographic info (age, gender, major, and year) and (ii) Likert items scaled from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The latter was designed to elicit pre-service teachers views on their own soft skills in four categories, as described in Whitehurst (2016, p. 4): (i) *Social skills* (including how a student interacts with other students), (ii) *Self-management* (observable manifestations of what has been referred to as executive functions or self-regulation, i.e., the student's ability to take control over what would otherwise be automatic reactions by planning, focusing attention, reframing experiences, and using mental tools), (iii) *Academic social skills* (both social and cognitive and play an ancillary role in carrying out traditional academic tasks, e.g., the ability to work independently), and (iv) *Approaches to learning* (including such things as the student's engagement in school, pleasure in learning, and anxiety about performance).

Item validity was assured by obtaining expert opinions from two faculty members with specialisations in curriculum and instruction and Turkish teaching. The form was piloted with five students who would not participate in the research and finalised when no problem was reported during the process. Subsequently, the reliability was approved by Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha=0.95$) and that 58.9% of the total variance was explained in four dimensions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Total variance explanation

| Component | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings | | | Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings | | |
|-----------|---------------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % | Total | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 13,953 | 43,604 | 43,604 | 13,514 | 42,231 | 42,231 | 13,953 | 43,604 | 43,604 |
| 2 | 2,130 | 6,656 | 50,260 | 1,628 | 5,087 | 47,319 | 2,130 | 6,656 | 50,260 |
| 3 | 1,468 | 4,586 | 54,846 | 1,065 | 3,327 | 50,645 | 1,468 | 4,586 | 54,846 |
| 4 | 1,301 | 4,065 | 58,911 | ,825 | 2,577 | 53,222 | 1,301 | 4,065 | 58,911 |

Participant responses to the survey items were quantitatively analysed through SPSS 21.0 to determine whether they significantly differed in their perceived soft skills regarding the variables of gender, major, and seniority. Lastly, statistical results were tabulated including frequency, arithmetic means, and standard deviation scores. The following section covers the research results and discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question investigated pre-service teachers' views on their soft skills. The statistical findings are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre-service teachers' views on their soft skills

| Categories | x | Min. | Max. | sd |
|------------------------|--------|------|------|--------|
| Social skills | 4,0419 | 1,50 | 5,00 | ,68707 |
| Self-management | 4,1449 | 1,00 | 5,00 | ,72617 |
| Academic social skills | 4,2421 | 1,00 | 5,00 | ,78250 |
| Approaches to learning | 3,7653 | 1,38 | 5,00 | ,70223 |
| Total | 4,0486 | 1,22 | 5,00 | ,63383 |

The findings indicated that the participants generally held positive views on their soft skills, which largely coincides with Çetinkaya (2011) who reported similar results in a previous study with Turkish pre-service teachers. It is seen that their perceived academic social skills are relatively higher than self-management, social skills, and approaches to learning, respectively. That is, they felt most confident with carrying out traditional academic tasks, followed by executive functions and/ or self-regulation, interaction with others, and engagement in school. This might be attributed to the nature of education they received prior to higher education and the national testing system in Turkey, which requires students to achieve high scores on secondary school and university entrance exams in order to further their educations in high quality institutions. Both exams are composed of multiple-choice items designed to evaluate comprehension skills rather than productive skills including verbal and non-verbal communication skills, self-management skills, and social skills even though these skills are, to some extent, highlighted in the relevant school curricula. This situation, not surprisingly, has likely forced many students to develop traditional academic skills such as the ability to work independently rather than the ability to take part in pair-work or group work activities that could contribute to the development of their social and interactional skills by requiring them to communicate with other students. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this result, it is considered useful to outline their responses across the afore-mentioned categories. Responses to the category of *social skills* are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Pre-service teachers' views on their social skills

| | | Str. disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Str. Agree |
|--|---|---------------|----------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1- I provide my peers with positive feedback. | N | 10 | 17 | 75 | 139 | 299 |
| | % | 1,9 | 3,1 | 13,9 | 25,7 | 55,4 |
| 2- I offer help or assistance to my peers when needed. | N | 10 | 7 | 57 | 105 | 361 |
| | % | 1,9 | 1,3 | 10,6 | 19,4 | 66,9 |
| 3- I usually initiate interactions with my peers. | N | 19 | 80 | 210 | 137 | 94 |
| | % | 3,5 | 14,8 | 38,9 | 25,4 | 17,4 |
| 4- I participate in discussions with my peers. | N | 12 | 24 | 95 | 176 | 233 |
| | % | 2,2 | 4,4 | 17,6 | 32,6 | 43,1 |
| 5- I have a good sense of humour and share amusement with my pers. | N | 13 | 31 | 107 | 138 | 251 |
| | % | 2,4 | 5,7 | 19,8 | 25,6 | 46,5 |
| 6- I have enough friends. | N | 21 | 43 | 102 | 118 | 256 |
| | % | 3,9 | 8,0 | 18,9 | 21,9 | 47,4 |
| 7- I can lead my group (I can carry out leadership activities). | N | 26 | 56 | 112 | 128 | 218 |
| | % | 4,8 | 10,4 | 20,7 | 23,7 | 40,4 |
| 8- I can engage in inappropriate social behaviour, e.g., aggression. | N | 303 | 110 | 67 | 20 | 40 |
| | % | 56,1 | 20,4 | 12,4 | 3,7 | 7,4 |

As seen in Table 3, the participants' perceived social skills could be evaluated as being moderately high; however, a more detailed analysis of their responses to the items revealed that they did not feel confident enough with some of their social skills. Namely, they disagreed or remained undecided with regard to *initiating interaction with peers* (57%), *leading the group* (36%), *having enough friends* (31%), *having a sense of humour* (28%), *participating in discussions* (24%), and *providing positive feedback to peers* (19%). These results are thought-provoking as they indicate that some of participants did not feel confident in interacting with others at the desired level even though teachers are expected to be competent in interactions, especially with their students, colleagues, and parents. This might stem from the fact that the participants in concern are unwilling to interact with others simply because they are not social or initiative in nature and that they were not evaluated on such competences while being recruited to the teacher training programmes they are enrolled in. Furthermore, their responses imply that some of them might display inappropriate social behaviours such as aggression (23%). This particular finding also sounds alarming especially when considering that teachers are expected to be role models for students and to aid in resolving possible conflicts among them.

The second category of the survey required the participants to state their views on their self-management skills. The related results are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Pre-service teachers' views on their self-management skills

| | | Str. disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Str. Agree |
|---|---|---------------|----------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1- I can control my anger. | N | 24 | 69 | 141 | 164 | 142 |
| | % | 4,4 | 12,8 | 26,1 | 30,4 | 26,3 |
| 2- I accept and obey the legitimate rules. | N | 14 | 17 | 70 | 147 | 292 |
| | % | 2,6 | 3,1 | 13,0 | 27,2 | 54,1 |
| 3- I compromise with others to avoid conflict. | N | 8 | 26 | 81 | 183 | 242 |
| | % | 1,5 | 4,8 | 15,0 | 33,9 | 44,8 |
| 4- I respond in socially appropriate ways to criticism from others. | N | 8 | 26 | 79 | 216 | 211 |
| | % | 1,5 | 4,8 | 14,6 | 40,0 | 39,1 |
| 5- I can handle teasing and social provocations. | N | 21 | 60 | 165 | 144 | 150 |
| | % | 3,9 | 11,1 | 30,6 | 26,7 | 27,8 |
| 6- I cooperate with others. | N | 8 | 14 | 72 | 132 | 314 |
| | % | 1,5 | 2,6 | 13,3 | 24,4 | 58,1 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|-----|-----|------|------|------|
| 7- I maintain attention to tasks. | N | 8 | 17 | 62 | 125 | 328 |
| | % | 1,5 | 3,1 | 11,5 | 23,1 | 60,7 |
| 8- I am respectful to teachers and staff. | N | 7 | 8 | 44 | 52 | 429 |
| | % | 1,3 | 1,5 | 8,1 | 9,6 | 79,4 |

As in the case of *social skills*, the responses to this category pointed out that the participants held moderately positive views on their *self-management skills*. For instance, 90%, 84% and 83% of them stated that they respect teachers and staff at school, maintain attention to tasks and cooperate with others, respectively. These percentages are promising as teachers should display such intended behaviours. Yet again, their responses to certain items in this category are quite alarming as they indicated that they may fail to *handle teasing and social provocations* (46%), *to control their anger* (43%), *to respond in socially appropriate ways to criticism from others* (21%), *to compromise with others to avoid conflict* (21%), or *to accept and obey the legitimate rules* (19%). These findings might result from the fact that they were not evaluated on social and interactional competences in the university entrance exams or subjected to any tests that assess psychological resilience.

The third category of the survey was designed to elicit the participants' views on their academic social skills which are considered to play a supplementary role in carrying out traditional academic tasks such as working independently and using appropriate study skills. Table 5 lays out the results in this category.

Table 5. Pre-service teachers' views on their academic social skills

| | | Str. disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Str. Agree |
|---|---|---------------|----------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1- I can work independently. | N | 9 | 11 | 64 | 93 | 363 |
| | % | 1,7 | 2,0 | 11,9 | 17,2 | 67,2 |
| 2- I complete assigned tasks on time. | N | 11 | 29 | 87 | 119 | 294 |
| | % | 2,0 | 5,4 | 16,1 | 22,0 | 54,4 |
| 3- I listen to and carry out teacher directions. | N | 8 | 19 | 65 | 117 | 331 |
| | % | 1,5 | 3,5 | 12,0 | 21,7 | 61,3 |
| 4- I produce work of acceptable quality for my ability level (assignment, presentation, project etc.) | N | 8 | 18 | 73 | 166 | 275 |
| | % | 1,5 | 3,3 | 13,5 | 30,7 | 50,9 |
| 5- I bring required materials to school. | N | 6 | 32 | 69 | 144 | 289 |
| | % | 1,1 | 5,9 | 12,8 | 26,7 | 53,5 |
| 6- I arrive at school on time and without undue absences. | N | 20 | 32 | 86 | 147 | 255 |
| | % | 3,7 | 5,9 | 15,9 | 27,2 | 47,2 |
| 7- I ask for assistance as needed, ask questions (to teachers/ peers). | N | 13 | 32 | 86 | 128 | 281 |
| | % | 2,4 | 5,9 | 15,9 | 23,7 | 52,0 |
| 8- I use appropriate study skills. | N | 8 | 28 | 99 | 167 | 238 |
| | % | 1,5 | 5,2 | 18,3 | 30,9 | 44,1 |

The responses showed that participants tended to have moderately positive views on their academic social skills. Namely, 84% and 83% of them stated that they can work independently and that they listen and carry out teacher directions, respectively. However, some of them were not confident enough on items such as *arriving at school on time and avoiding undue absences* (26%), *using appropriate study skills* (25%), *asking assistance as needed and asking questions to their teacher/ peers* (24%), *completing the assignments on time* (24%), and *bringing the required materials to school* (20%). In other words, at least one out of five pre-service teachers did not feel confident with carrying out their basic responsibilities as students. These findings raise significant questions about those who will train future students and expect them to carry out the responsibilities they currently do not and who will undertake such other responsibilities in the not-too-distant future.

The last category of the survey was composed of items designed to obtain the pre-service teachers' views on their approaches to learning (e.g., student's engagement in school, pleasure in learning, and anxiety about performance). The analysis results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Pre-service teachers' views on their approaches to learning

| | | Str. disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Str. Agree |
|--|---|---------------|----------|-----------|-------|------------|
| 1- I enjoy the school. | N | 35 | 41 | 139 | 153 | 172 |
| | % | 6,5 | 7,6 | 25,7 | 28,3 | 31,9 |
| 2- I take on challenging tasks. | N | 19 | 53 | 138 | 168 | 162 |
| | % | 3,5 | 9,8 | 25,6 | 31,1 | 30,0 |
| 3- I am confident with my abilities. | N | 12 | 32 | 108 | 156 | 232 |
| | % | 2,2 | 5,9 | 20,0 | 28,9 | 43,0 |
| 4- I work hard. | N | 28 | 76 | 189 | 162 | 85 |
| | % | 5,2 | 14,1 | 35,0 | 30,0 | 15,7 |
| 5- I am anxious and fearful with my courses. | N | 84 | 82 | 138 | 140 | 96 |
| | % | 15,6 | 15,2 | 25,6 | 25,9 | 17,8 |
| 6- I am involved with extracurricular school activities. | N | 59 | 97 | 135 | 11 | 138 |
| | % | 10,9 | 18,0 | 25,0 | 20,6 | 25,6 |
| 7- I am aware of settings I can work harder. | N | 8 | 18 | 65 | 113 | 336 |
| | % | 1,5 | 3,3 | 12,0 | 20,9 | 62,2 |
| 8- I am aware of my learning style (auditory, visual etc.) | N | 11 | 21 | 57 | 108 | 343 |
| | % | 2,0 | 3,9 | 10,6 | 20,0 | 63,5 |

As is suggested in Table 6, the participants did not feel as confident with their approaches to learning as their social skills, self-management skills, and academic social skills. For instance, only 31% of them did not feel anxious and fearful with the courses, while 46% of them were confident about working hard and getting involved in extracurricular school activities. In addition, only half of the participants stated that they enjoyed school, while 39% and 28% did not feel confident with taking on challenging tasks and their abilities, respectively. These findings point out an undesired level of anxiety, especially in the learning environment they are involved in. Furthermore, they indicate that many participants do not obtain pleasure from their schooling, which is likely to decrease their motivation and sense of school belonging and adversely affect their academic progress and success.

The second research question probed whether they significantly differ in their perceived soft skills with respect to gender. The independent samples t-test results indicated no significant difference between the female and male pre-service teachers in this concern ($p > 0.05$). This particular finding overlaps with those reported in Seven and Yoldaş (2007) and Girgin, Çetingöz and Ekinçi-Vural (2011) while contradicting with Bozgün and Pekdoğan (2018). The third research question investigated whether they differ in their perceived soft skills regarding seniority. The results of Tukey's HSD multiple comparisons of means are illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Pre-service teachers' views on their soft skills regarding seniority

| Grades | N | x | SS | Source of variance | Sum of squares | sd | Mean of squares | f | p |
|---------|-----|--------|------|--------------------|----------------|-----|-----------------|-------|-------|
| Grade 1 | 98 | 4,0354 | ,706 | Between group | 5,853 | 3 | 1,951 | | |
| Grade 2 | 116 | 3,9896 | ,604 | Within group | 210,689 | 536 | ,393 | 4,963 | 0,020 |
| Grade 3 | 142 | 3,9294 | ,709 | Total | 216,541 | 539 | | | |
| Grade 4 | 184 | 4,1848 | ,519 | | | | | | |

The results here reveal that the participants' perceived soft skills are influenced by their seniority in higher education. The post-hoc test results showed a statistical difference in favour of

senior students against junior and sophomore level students ($p < .05$). This finding largely coincides with Türkan, Aydoğın and Sezer (2016) who previously reported such a correlation between the prospective pre-school teachers' soft skills and the grade they were enrolled in and Bozgün and Pekdoğan (2018) who stated that 3rd year pre-service teachers have higher soft skills than 2nd year students, yet contradicts with Çetinkaya (2011) who noted that freshmen students have higher soft skills than senior students. On the other hand, as far as the three groups are concerned, it might be concluded that the length of study in higher education increases the perceived soft skills of pre-service teachers. The relatively higher scores of freshmen in comparison to 2nd and 3rd year students might be accounted for due to the less challenging nature of the first-year curriculum in comparison to the curricula of higher years. Besides, the distance education process implemented in the latest semester due to COVID-19 could also have had an impact on these results. Particularly, the latter could have eased responsibilities such as arriving to school on time, bringing necessary instructional materials to school, taking on challenging tasks, and working hard. In addition, the anxiety faced by some students in some face-to-face courses would have been reduced thanks to distance education. In a similar fashion, the participants did not experience those negative feelings during the assessment and evaluation procedure since they did not take the tests online. Instead, they were provided a considerable amount of time to respond to the test questions and/ or to prepare the assigned projects during the assessment periods (e.g., approximately one week). This might also have reduced their test anxiety and increased their perceived soft skills.

The final research question analysed the existence of a statistical difference between groups in terms of major. Accordingly, mean scores of the groups' perceived soft skills were compared through analysis of variance and Tukey's HSD multiple comparisons of means, respectively. The statistical findings are provided in Table 8.

Table 8. Pre-service teachers' views on their soft skills regarding *major*

| Major | N | x | SS | Source of variance | Sum of squares | sd | Mean of squares | <i>f</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----|--------------|------|--------------------|----------------|-----|-----------------|----------|-------------|
| Classroom Teaching | 144 | 4,132 | ,540 | Between group | 10,509 | 7 | 1,501 | | |
| English Lang. Teaching | 100 | 3,903 | ,755 | Within group | 206,032 | 532 | ,387 | 3,877 | 0,00 |
| Turkish Lang. Teaching | 70 | 3,964 | ,635 | Total | 216,541 | 539 | | | |
| Social Sciences Teaching | 36 | 4,293 | ,499 | | | | | | |
| Mathematics Teaching | 56 | 3,847 | ,658 | | | | | | |
| Science Teaching | 64 | 4,242 | ,609 | | | | | | |
| Psychological Couns. & Guidance | 38 | 4,044 | ,623 | | | | | | |
| Pre-school Teaching | 32 | 4,011 | ,553 | | | | | | |

As shown in Table 8, participants studying social sciences teaching, science teaching and classroom teaching had higher soft skills than those studying other majors. This could be attributed to the fact that these programmes have a multidisciplinary structure and include more practice-based courses that require group work and communication among students while the other programmes are designed for teachers who will be teaching unique subjects and offer more theoretical rather than practice-based courses. For instance, the social sciences teaching programme simultaneously offers field-specific courses with different scopes such as geography, history, and anthropology while the science teaching programme offers practice-based courses in biology, chemistry and biology. Similarly, the classroom teaching programme contains a variety of practice-based and group work-oriented courses such as teaching literacy, mathematics, social sciences and physical activities, and drama. From this viewpoint, it would be unexpected to see that participants enrolled in pre-school teacher training programmes, which also have multidisciplinary structures and offer practice-based courses requiring collaboration and interaction among students, do not have as high soft skills as those who attending the three programmes in concern. It was not indeed when considering the fact that most

of them were freshmen who had not taken practice-based field-specific training courses at the time of data collection. Therefore, that the participants studying English language teaching, mathematics teaching, psychological counselling and guidance, and Turkish language teaching had relatively lower soft skills could be accounted for by the fact that these majors do not have a multidisciplinary structure and offer less practice-based courses. These findings coincide with Bozgün and Pekdoğan (2018) who previously found that pre-service science and classroom teachers have higher social skills than those who were enrolled in the programmes of pre-school teaching and psychological counselling and guidance.

CONCLUSION

The current research primarily investigated Turkish pre-service teachers' perceived soft skills and whether they significantly differ in this respect regarding gender, seniority and major. The results indicated that they statistically differ in their perceived soft skills in terms of seniority and major, while no correlation was found between these skills and their gender. Namely, fourth year students had more positive views on their soft skills than second- and third-year students. The freshmen, on the other hand, were found to be more confident with their perceived soft skills than sophomores and juniors. This may be attributed to the distance education practices due to COVID-19 which eased their responsibilities and reduced anxiety they would likely have encountered during face-to-face education. As for the dimension of major, it was revealed that the pre-service teachers who were enrolled in programmes with multidisciplinary structures and more practise-based courses such as classroom teaching, social sciences teaching, and science teaching had statistically higher soft skills than those which offered more theoretical courses without significant student collaboration and interaction.

The research also demonstrated that pre-service teachers generally hold positive views of their own soft skills and that they are most confident with academic social skills, followed by self-management, social skills, and approaches to learning. However, a more detailed analysis of their responses to the individual items evidenced that varying percentages of them do not feel confident enough to interact and negotiate with others, to lead a group, to handle teasing and social provocations, to control their anger, to arrive at school on time and avoid undue absences, to complete the assigned tasks on time, to bring the instructional materials to school, to take on challenging tasks, and to get involved in extracurricular school activities.

It is noteworthy that the results reported here were elicited from the respondents own personal views on their soft skills; hence, it is quite possible for them to possess higher or lower levels of soft skills in reality. Nonetheless, the research results indicate a need for studies to improve the soft skills of pre-service teachers as they are expected to become role models to their future students and thus should be competent in initiating and maintaining interaction with other people, negotiating conflicts especially among students, leading groups, working hard, and fulfilling their other responsibilities.

Based on the current findings and the existing literature, the researchers strongly recommend that the requirements for teacher training programmes should be extended to evaluate the social and interactional competences as well as psychological resilience of applicants. In that regard, Bozgün and Pekdoğan (2018) underline the necessity of more comprehensible tests to recruit students into these programmes. In addition, the factors that might have decreased the pre-service teachers' confidence in certain points could be explored through well-structured interviews to be held with the participants who display lower soft skills. Subsequently, events such as seminars and conferences could be organised to overcome any factors deemed to impede the development of their soft skills. For instance, seminars could be regularly held by experts with in-depth specialisation in educational psychology whereby they could provide the pre-service teachers guidance to improve their soft skills. In addition, the pre-service teachers' academic social skills could be improved through student orientation seminars held at the beginning of each academic year to inform them about their rights and responsibilities in higher education (e.g., carrying out instructions, avoiding undue absences, timely completion of the assigned tasks, and bringing the required materials to school). Furthermore, the

current teacher training curricula should be revised to include more communicative- and practice-based courses that enable students to collaborate with others. In a similar vein, instructors are recommended to increase in-class interaction through pair-work and group-work activities, to encourage the students to participate in extracurricular school activities (e.g., social responsibility projects), to assign students responsibilities based on their interests and competences, to increase student self-awareness, and to create non-threatening learning environments to reduce anxiety and increase motivation. Likewise, as noted by Kara and Çam (2007) who previously reported that using creative drama improved the prospective teachers' collaborative and self-control skills and enabled them to initiate and maintain interaction with others, its use might be suggested during classes as long as it serves the instructional goals and objectives. Lastly, de Paniza's (2019) suggestion could be extended to integrate a course designed to improve soft skills into the higher education curriculum, particularly in teacher training programmes.

This particular study is confined to the investigation of soft skills of a limited number of pre-service teachers attending teacher training programmes at state universities in Turkey. It is also confined to analysis of data obtained through the Soft Skills Survey adapted from the Brookings Soft Skills Report Card (Whitehurst, 2016). Further studies might be conducted with a larger sampling to investigate their soft skills using other data collection tools such as structured or semi-structured interviews whereby the participants' views could be analysed through content analysis to gain a deeper insight into the concern. Similarly, soft skills of the pre-service teachers attending state and private universities could be investigated in a further comparative research to see whether they significantly differ. Alternatively, in-service and pre-service teachers' soft skills might be compared to see whether and how real teaching practices affect the development of these skills.

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