

Soft Skills: A Core Competency for 21st-Century Teachers

Charneet Kaur Sandhu

Research Scholar, Shri Shankaracharya Professional University, Bhilai

Dr Neeta Pandey

Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Head of Department of English, Shri Shankaracharya Professional University, Bhilai

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.04.2026.p17217

<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.04.2026.p17217>

Paper Received Date: 16th March 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 16th April 2026

Paper Publication Date: 22nd April 2026

ABSTRACT

The role of teachers in the 21st century has expanded beyond the traditional boundaries of content delivery due to rapid technological advancements, diverse learner needs, and progressive educational reforms such as India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Contemporary teachers are expected not only to possess sound pedagogical and subject knowledge but also to demonstrate a wide range of soft skills that enable them to create engaging, inclusive, and learner-centered educational environments. This conceptual review paper examines essential soft skills for teachers, including communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, leadership, creativity, and time management. The paper highlights the significance of these competencies in enhancing teaching effectiveness, classroom management, professional growth, and student learning outcomes. It further emphasizes the integration of soft skills into teacher education and continuous professional development programmes to prepare educators for dynamic and complex educational settings. Strengthening teachers' soft skills is vital for realizing the holistic and competency-based vision of education outlined in NEP 2020.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Teacher Competencies, 21st-Century Teachers, Emotional Intelligence, NEP 2020, Communication Skills

1. Introduction

Education in the 21st century is marked by digital transformation, multicultural classrooms, inclusive education practices, and an increasing emphasis on holistic learner development.

Teachers today are no longer mere transmitters of knowledge; rather, they function as facilitators, mentors, collaborators, and reflective practitioners. While subject expertise and pedagogical

knowledge remain essential, they are no longer sufficient to address the complex academic, emotional, and social needs of modern learners.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes teacher empowerment, social-emotional learning, competency-based education, and continuous professional development. In this evolving educational landscape, soft skills—interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive competencies—have emerged as core requirements for effective teaching. These skills enable teachers to manage diverse classrooms, foster positive learning environments, and support learners' academic and socio-emotional growth. This paper conceptually reviews the importance of soft skills for 21st-century teachers, examines recent literature, and highlights their relevance, application, and integration into teacher education.

2. Concept of Soft Skills

Soft skills are non-technical, transferable abilities that influence how individuals communicate, interact, adapt, and respond to professional challenges. Unlike hard skills, which are measurable and task-specific, soft skills are behavioral and attitudinal, playing a crucial role in long-term professional effectiveness.

Essential soft skills for teachers include:

- **Communication Skills:** Clear expression, active listening, empathy, and constructive feedback.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** Self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, motivation, and relationship management.
- **Adaptability:** Flexibility in responding to curriculum changes, learner diversity, and digital learning environments.
- **Collaboration:** Teamwork with colleagues, administrators, parents, and the community.
- **Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving:** Analyzing classroom challenges and making informed instructional decisions.
- **Leadership:** Guiding students, mentoring peers, and contributing to institutional growth.

- **Creativity and Innovation:** Designing engaging lessons and fostering creativity among learners.
- **Time Management and Organization:** Effective planning, prioritization, and stress management.

These competencies shape classroom climate, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and support holistic education.

Table 1. Essential Soft Skills for Teachers: Definitions, Classroom Applications, and Alignment with NEP 2020

Soft Skill	Definition	Classroom Application	Alignment with NEP 2020
Communication Skills	Ability to convey ideas clearly, listen actively, and provide constructive feedback	Promotes student participation, clarity of instruction, and positive teacher–student relationships	Supports learner-centered and interactive teaching
Emotional Intelligence	Ability to recognize, understand, and manage one’s own emotions and those of others	Enhances classroom climate, empathy, conflict resolution, and student well-being	Strengthens social-emotional learning and holistic development
Adaptability	Capacity to adjust to changing curricula, learners’ needs, and technological environments	Enables inclusive practices, flexible instruction, and digital integration	Encourages experiential learning and teacher autonomy
Collaboration	Ability to work effectively with colleagues, parents, and stakeholders	Fosters teamwork, professional learning communities, and shared decision-making	Emphasizes collaborative culture and institutional development
Critical Thinking & Problem-Solving	Ability to analyze situations and develop effective solutions	Supports inquiry-based learning and reflective teaching practices	Aligns with competency-based and critical-thinking-focused education

Leadership	Ability to guide, inspire, and influence students and peers	Encourages student motivation, mentoring, and school improvement initiatives	Reinforces teacher empowerment and leadership development
Creativity & Innovation	Capacity to design engaging lessons and adopt innovative pedagogical strategies	Enhances learner engagement, creativity, and experiential learning	Promotes innovative pedagogy and joyful learning
Time Management & Organization	Ability to plan, prioritize, and manage instructional responsibilities efficiently	Improves lesson planning, classroom flow, and reduces teacher stress	Supports professional efficiency and sustainable teaching practices

Source: Compiled by the author based on Goleman (1998), Trilling & Fadel (2009), OECD (2018), and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

3. Need for Soft Skills in 21st-Century Teaching

Contemporary classrooms are characterized by diverse learning abilities, multicultural and multilingual contexts, technology-enhanced instruction, and a strong focus on life skills and socio-emotional learning. Teachers are expected to personalize instruction, integrate digital tools, collaborate with stakeholders, and support students’ emotional well-being.

Soft skills enable teachers to address these challenges effectively. NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic education, experiential learning, critical thinking, and teacher autonomy—goals that cannot be achieved without strong interpersonal and emotional competencies. Thus, soft skills are essential components of professional teaching competence.

4. Review of Literature

4.1 Communication and Emotional Intelligence

Goleman (1998) identified emotional intelligence as a critical factor influencing professional success, often surpassing technical expertise. Recent studies (2023–2025) consistently indicate a strong positive relationship between teachers’ emotional intelligence and their communication effectiveness, classroom management, and student engagement. Teachers with high emotional

intelligence demonstrate enhanced empathy, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation, contributing to supportive classroom climates and improved student outcomes.

Contemporary conceptual models of teacher emotional competence emphasize emotion recognition, regulation, and responsiveness as key predictors of teaching effectiveness, teacher well-being, and professional sustainability. Emotional intelligence also mediates other competencies, including adaptability, collaboration, and leadership, highlighting its foundational role in professional teaching.

4.2 Soft Skills in Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Recent research emphasizes integrating soft skills systematically into teacher education programmes. Studies examining teacher educators' perceptions indicate consensus that soft skills significantly influence teaching effectiveness, professional identity formation, and problem-solving abilities among prospective teachers. Empirical studies reveal positive correlations between soft skills such as adaptability, critical thinking, and communication, and teaching confidence, classroom preparedness, and professional efficacy.

Qualitative syntheses aligned with global educational goals highlight communication, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and leadership as essential competencies for future educators (İnce, Hevedanlı, & Meylani, 2025). However, challenges such as limited assessment frameworks, insufficient curricular integration, and institutional resistance underscore the need for structured approaches.

4.3 Adaptability, Collaboration, and Technology Integration

OECD (2018) underscores adaptability and collaboration as key competencies for educators navigating rapidly evolving educational systems. Recent studies show that teachers with strong soft skills are more effective in implementing learner-centered and technology-enhanced pedagogies, fostering autonomy, teamwork, and critical thinking among students.

Soft skills also support teachers' professional growth when responding to technological change and culturally diverse classrooms (Rawat & Dhawan, 2025).

4.4 Leadership, Critical Thinking, and Holistic Education

Trilling and Fadel (2009) argue that educators must model critical thinking, creativity, and leadership to prepare learners for complex real-world challenges. Recent literature emphasizes teacher leadership as crucial for school improvement, innovation, and learner empowerment.

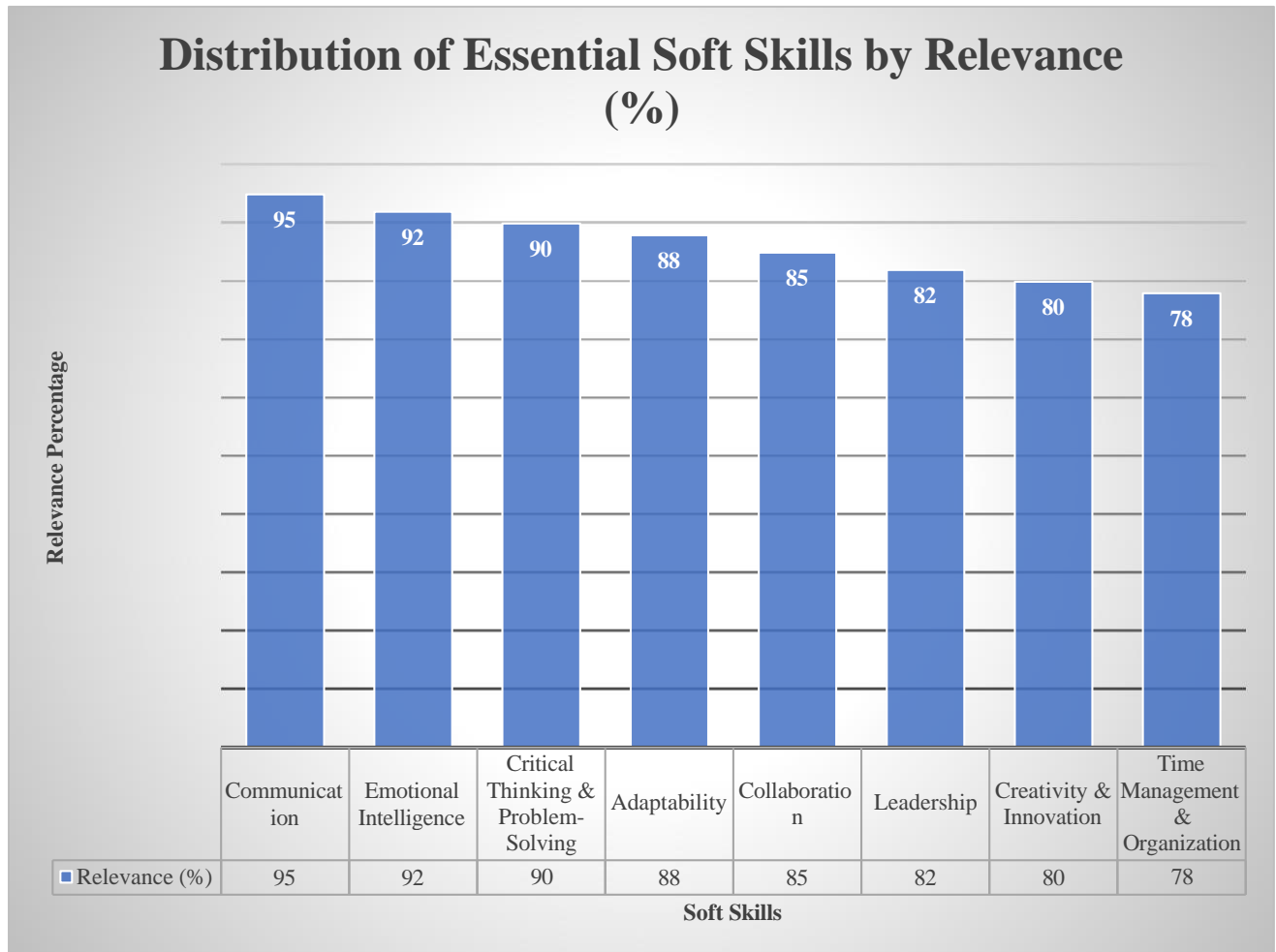
Teachers who demonstrate leadership and critical thinking foster inquiry-based, student-centered learning environments that promote holistic development.

Systematic reviews of socio-emotional learning research (2024–2025) confirm the growing importance of socio-emotional competencies for both teachers and learners. Despite this, there is limited longitudinal and large-scale research on systematic implementation of soft skills in the Indian context.

Recent empirical evidence highlights practical relevance: Sahar, Ullah, and Hussain (2024) found mastery of soft skills positively correlates with improved work performance among primary school teachers. İnce, Hevedanlı, and Meylani (2025) identified core soft skills (communication, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence) as essential for 21st-century teachers and linked them to Sustainable Development Goals. Rawat and Dhawan (2025) reported a strong association between soft skills and teaching adaptability among teacher trainees.

5. Figures

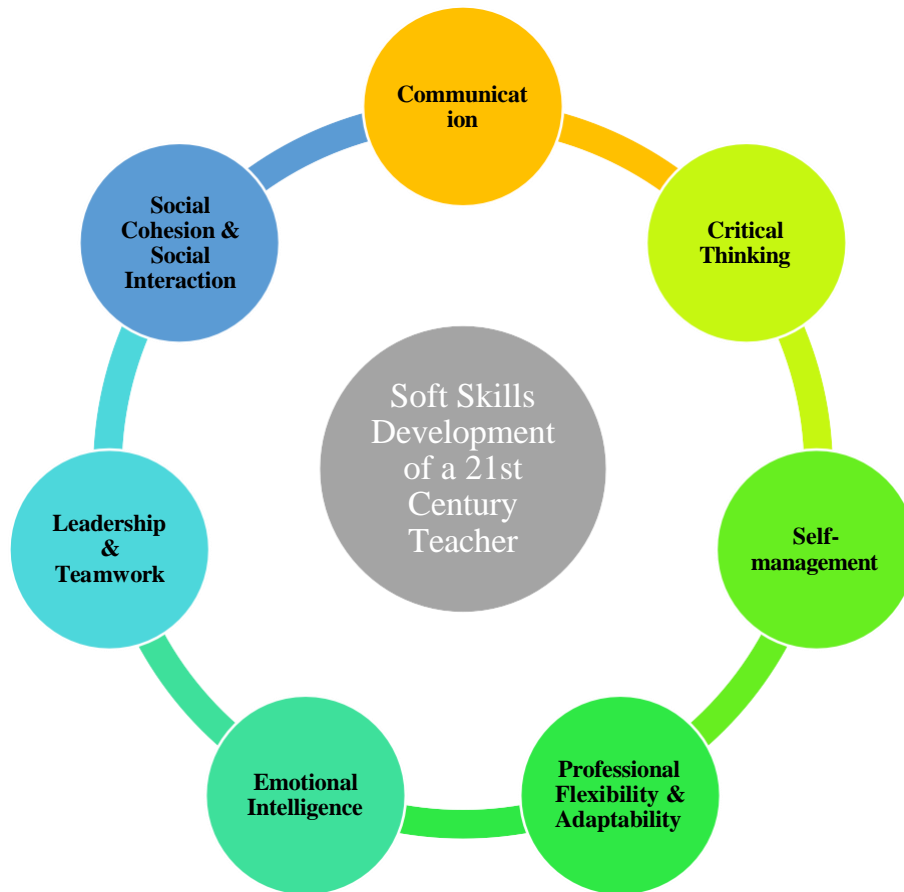
Figure 1. Distribution of Essential Soft Skills by Relevance for 21st-Century Teachers



critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, leadership, creativity, and time management.

(Note. Relevance scores are conceptually derived from literature synthesis; n = not applicable.) **Source:** Developed by the author based on Goleman (1998), OECD (2018), Trilling & Fadel (2009), and NEP 2020.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Teacher Soft Skills and Student Outcomes



This diagram presents the teacher at the center, supported by eight essential soft skill pillars—communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, leadership, creativity, and time management. These interconnected competencies contribute to enhanced teaching effectiveness and positively influence student outcomes -- Student Engagement, Holistic Development, Academic Achievement, Socio-Emotional Growth, Lifelong Learning Skills, aligning with NEP 2020.

Source: Author’s conceptualization based on Goleman (1998), Trilling & Fadel (2009), OECD (2018), and NEP 2020.

6. Educational Implications

- Integrate structured soft skills training into pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes.

- Promote reflective practice, mentoring, and collaborative professional learning communities.
- Recognize soft skills in teacher appraisal systems and professional growth frameworks.
- Encourage lifelong learning and self-directed professional development among educators.

These measures align with NEP 2020's vision of empowered, reflective, and competent teachers.

7. Conclusion

Effective teaching in the 21st century requires more than content knowledge and pedagogical expertise. Soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and leadership are essential for addressing contemporary educational challenges. Integrating these competencies into teacher education and professional development is critical for realizing the holistic and competency-based goals of NEP 2020. Strengthening teachers' soft skills enhances teaching effectiveness, professional well-being, and student learning outcomes.

Future research may empirically examine the impact of structured soft skill training on teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

8. References

- Sahar, S., Ullah, N., & Hussain, M. (2024). Endowing teachers: The insightful effects of soft skills on work performance of primary school teachers. *Annals of Human and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 401–411.
- İnce, H., Hevedanlı, M., & Meylani, R. (2025). Developing 21st-century soft skills in teachers: A qualitative synthesis aligned with sustainable development goals. *İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 11(1), 103–152.
- Rawat, R., & Dhawan, S. (2025). Exploration of soft skills among teacher trainees in relation to their teaching adaptability. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 38(6), 119–131.
- Goleman, D. (1998). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.
- OECD. (2018). *The future of education and skills: Education 2030*. OECD Publishing.
- Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2009). *21st century skills: Learning for life in our times*. Jossey-Bass.
- National Education Policy 2020. Government of India.