

INVESTIGATING THE INCORPORATION OF SOFT SKILLS INSTRUCTION IN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: A CASE STUDY OF A PRIVATE SCHOOL IN LEBANON

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JOSEPH E. MATTA

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Notre Dame University - Louaize

Faculty of Humanities

Department of Psychology, Education and Physical Education

We hereby approve the thesis of

JOSEPH E. MATTA

Candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Psychology

Dr. Simon A. Abou Jaoude,

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Joseph Tannous
Committee Member

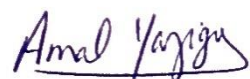


First Reader



Dr. Amal Yazigy

Committee Member



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Abstract

Soft skills have been the subject of much discussion and trending lately. Much research has been done on the relationship between partaking good soft skills and being a better employee. This could be especially true in the field of education, as the process of expectation and planning of the learning experiences showed to improve with the significant development of soft skills of the teachers. In Lebanon, very few studies are conducted on the role of soft skills in those entering the workforce. This research aims to bridge that gap by assessing the knowledge, perceptions, and behaviors of Lebanese high school students and teachers on soft skills. To study this potential strategy, a case study design was adopted. A questionnaire was administered to 76 high school students and another questionnaire to their teachers at a Lebanese private school. It assessed the understanding of a number of selected highly sought-after soft skills: entrepreneurship, teamwork and collaboration, goalsetting, time management and communication. Results demonstrated that 65.79% of high school students reported lack of knowledge and benefits of soft skills due to the fact that the implementation of such skills within lesson plans in schools is still limited. In addition, findings showed that 38.6% of students displayed confusion between the definition of soft and vocational skills, and they were not applying them in their everyday lives. On the other hand, all teachers reported familiarity with soft skills and implementation in their lesson plans whenever possible. Nonetheless, 88% were not highlighting the usage of this approach in their teaching practices, which resulted in a discrepancy between the teachers' knowledge and the students' perceptions. Implications of these findings recommend that the school system needs to investigate closely the possibility of equipping high school students with soft skills for their future jobs and the necessity of teachers to incorporate them in their teaching experience.

Key terms: soft skills, education, job market, entrepreneurship, teamwork, goal setting, communication, time management.

Introduction

As a professional HR practitioner, I have interacted with many people who were not capable of communicating their thoughts and ideas effectively. I have interviewed potential candidates for different positions, and they openly expressed that their biggest weaknesses were showing up to work on time or shifting gears and directions as needed. I have worked with employees who were not able to give and receive constructive criticisms on social media platforms, and this has greatly affected their personal lives as well. These and many other scenarios left me wondering: how is it that there are so many individuals lacking the essential skills? How is one able to progress in a professional arena without mastering some of these skills? At what age should these skills be introduced? A decade ago, individuals who had an outstanding academic record with added work experience were well sought after in the marketplace. However, today hard skills and experience are not sufficient for the ingress and escalation in the corporate world. With this fact so obviously presented in my work, I have come to realize that an attempt should be made to investigate the importance of soft skills and to focus on the youth, the workplace, and future professionals. To be successful, one needs to be more than just expertise in a given specialty. Hence, a better understanding of what “soft skills” are is required and what should be taught to the individuals is necessary to enhance their future professional outcomes (Baker & Obrien, 2017).

Soft skills, also known as life skills, are defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a collection of mental, personal, and interpersonal abilities that allow the individual to critically make decisions, solve problems, construct interpersonal relationships, empathize with others, as well as lead a happy and healthy life (UNESCO, 2018). As opposed to “hard skills,” which are more related to the individual’s theoretical knowledge and specific training, soft skills are more dependent on the

individuals' ability to interact with others, work as part of a team, and create social bonds and relationships (Albandea & Giret, 2018).

In today's competitive job market, hard skills on their own do not guarantee a position. Companies are starting to look beyond the person's technical knowledge and academic skills, and they are focusing more on the individual's interpersonal traits and work characteristics (Glaittli, 2018). Such skills can include, but are not limited to, communication, teamwork, leadership, entrepreneurship, professionalism, self-awareness, problem solving, amongst others (Greene, 2016). Moreover, as opposed to hard or technical skills, which are used in specific work contexts, soft skills fit any work setting, a quality which gives the employee an even more prominent role in this time and age, in an era of technological advancement (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010). However, since soft skills are less tangible than and cannot be measured like the hard skills, researchers are having a hard time calculating the economic returns of soft skills (Fan, Wei, & Zhang, 2016).

In addition to the workplace challenges, studies show that schools do not prepare their students sufficiently for the rigors of college work, let alone prepare them for life after university. Greene (2016) believes that this deficit has urged curriculum designers and school educators in recent years to rethink of different ways to revitalize school instructions, with the hopes of better equipping students with the necessary skills for life and work after school. However, preparing students for university and career success requires a much more developed curriculum that does not only focus on theoretical knowledge. The latter academic skills are paramount in one's future job indeed, but employers perceive a gap in the graduates' competencies rather than content. Today's employers are observing a clear lack of soft skills when recruiting fresh graduates, and much of the blame is being directed towards their school education. In fact, since 1999, Green et al. have noted the importance of soft

skills in the recruitment phase, especially the ones that are related to relationships, attitudes, and motivation, which the recruiters see just as -if not more- important than technical skills for the work environment (Green, 1999, as cited in Albandea & Giret, 2018).

Individuals develop soft skills mostly through socialization and interacting with others, along with learning their values, attitudes, and actions. Socializing and building new relationships are, thus, fundamental elements for this development. It comes as no surprise that just as teenagers' thoughts, emotions, and identities are becoming more complex during the adolescence period, their social relationships are becoming more complex as well. Indeed, teenagers can develop on both the academic and personal levels in middle school, which makes said institutions a great place to incorporate soft skill development in the school day-to-day activities (Greene, 2016).

Moreover, Levasseur (2013) believes that the development of soft skills is greatly enhanced through hands-on or practical experience (Levasseur, 2013, as cited in Glaittli, 2018). By incorporating these skills in the middle and high school educational curriculum, educators are not only focusing on the academic aspect of education –or the technical skills only; nonetheless, they are also preparing their students for great opportunities after graduation (Greene, 2016). Furthermore, Bersin (2019) juxtaposes hard skills and soft skills, and he conveniently claims that “hard” skills are soft because they are always in a constant state of change and are more or less easy to acquire, whereas “soft” skills are hard since they are much more difficult to learn and take great effort to obtain.

It is interesting to look at the evidence of our study. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, youth employment is not regarded in the best light (International Labour Organization, 2015), and researchers estimate youth unemployment to be over 21%, in a region that has the highest youth population shares in the world (World Bank, 2017).

More specifically in Lebanon, economy lags in comparison to other countries of similar status, mainly due to serious deficiencies in the dynamics of the labor market (Nauffal & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2017). In fact, youth unemployment is high in Lebanon, and the highest unemployment rates occur within the 20-24-year age category, i.e., fresh university graduates (Abou Jaoude, 2015). Recently, many universities in Lebanon have focused more and more on their students' academic and career objectives, on having a more structured content, and working on skill development, as they aim to create better employees and prepare them for today's job market and workplace. Responding to this challenge, these universities have adopted a very important strategy to integrate technical and professional knowledge as well as soft skills training in their yearly curricula (Nauffal & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2017).

However, delaying the introduction of students to soft skills until university level has many drawbacks, and it should be considered the optimal choice to adopt. It is true that most students start to think about their professional lives at universities the most, yet it is worth noting that soft skills are not only a necessity for the job market in the future; they are essential skills that the individual needs to showcase or lean on in their everyday life. Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, and others are encountered in the students' lives since low grades at school. This means that delaying their introduction to students until university –and sometimes, until even later—deprives the students of an essential attribute of their personal and academic development.

The Lebanese Educational System

In Lebanon, getting an education is mandatory until the ages of 11 or 12, which is equivalent to grade 6 (Loo, 2017). However, even though nearly 95 percent of children attend schools, compulsory education has not been properly implemented on all Lebanese grounds, especially in poor rural areas. It is true that public schools are available in almost every part

of Lebanon, yet the Lebanese authorities have heavily neglected public educational institutions, and this has created a great gap between the public and the private sectors of education. As such, people who can afford paying for private schools usually do not opt for public institutions because of the better educational services and higher quality that they receive in the private sector (Loo, 2017).

The formal educational system in Lebanon is mostly divided into three cycles: the primary cycle that lasts for six years, the intermediate cycle that consists of three years, and the secondary cycle that expands over three years. Once students are done with their primary education, they can either pursue the intermediate and secondary program or the technical or vocational training program, which was started in Lebanon in the late 1940s. However, no equilibrium exists between the two educational sectors, as the number of schools responsible for providing technical and vocational services represents less than 12 percent of the total number of educational institutions in Lebanon, and only 9 percent of the total number of students are enrolled in such programs (Loo, 2017). This discrepancy between the academic and technical sectors may very well explain why there is a tendency to prioritize technical skills over soft skills. Needless to say, this affects the students negatively, as both skills are essential for their personal and professional development.

Lebanese classrooms mostly employ traditional teaching methods, as most teachers rely on lecturing, assigning students homework to do at home, and then correcting the assignments in the classroom. Consequently, little active participation is required of the students who mostly sit there and passively receive the information from their teachers. In some courses, oral recitation is used as the main source of grading, which means that students are asked to simply memorize the facts and events. It is worth noting, however, that this is mostly the case in public schools. Many private institutions are gearing towards using more

interactive teaching methods, in hopes of increasing student engagement in the instructional process (Loo, 2017). Again, this might be another reason as to why newer approaches that emphasize the importance of soft skills are yet to be implemented within school curricula.

In a local context, Jinane Maksoud and Nada Kobeissy conducted, in collaboration with the Lebanese American University (LAU), the Capstone Project, a project that aims to assess the situation of soft skills with public high school students in the South and North of Lebanon. The administered surveys investigated the set of skills that the students thought they needed but did not have. As such, Maksoud and Kobeissy noticed a great deficiency in the following skills: “Time management, Research, Public speaking, Communication, Decision making, Conflict resolution, Tolerance and accepting others, Teamwork, Project planning, Fundraising, Entrepreneurship, Taking Initiative, Civil Engagement, Community Service, Advocacy, Professionalism, and Leadership” (Maksoud & Kobeissy, n.d.).

This is an important finding, and it highlights several issues in the Lebanese educational field. First, given that the study was conducted in Lebanese public schools, it is apparent that such skills are clearly not tackled or reinforced enough in the public educational sector. Second, in their discussion, Maksoud and Kobeissy highlighted the lack of implementation of such skills in the curriculum, and they were aware of the inability of some schools to invest in soft skills and, as such, recommended the reliance on private workshops outside of school. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of the study, which tackled only public schools, no information was presented on the situation of soft skills in private schools in Lebanon.

Fortunately, soft skills have gained much more attention in recent years and have sparked the interest of many individuals who are aware of the importance of soft skills and wish to spread awareness on this topic, especially with the absence of official awareness

campaigns or programs led by the Lebanese government. Some of these initiatives include “Waznat” which offers training programs to be given to students in conjunction with their academic life at school. “Injaz” also works with schools to provide private trainings on work readiness, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and others. However, private institutions offer these initiatives instead of them being implemented within every school curriculum.

Another private initiative is offered by the researcher himself as a way of inspiring the youth to become more invested in soft skills and understand what is required of them in the job market. As such, “Tik Talk”, a series developed by the researcher himself, tackles, in its three seasons, the most important notions that students and future employees should be aware of, such as how to prepare for a job interview, how to write a proper resume and motivation letter, what to do in case one cannot immediately find a job upon graduation, and many other topics. Hence, the researcher believes that these topics, which are unfortunately not widely discussed at schools and universities, should be presented to the youth, especially during these critical times when unemployment rates are rapidly increasing.

Rationale

Seeing how competitive the Lebanese job market has become and how the youth unemployment rates are dangerously on the rise, it is now more important than ever to work on equipping future employees and entrepreneurs with the necessary skills that will help them stand out in their future careers and lives in general. These fresh graduates plan to enter the workforce making use of these skills that would help them form the impression that they are there to be hired. These soft skills in Lebanon are usually taught in separate training sessions or, if given at schools, they are taught as a one-day scale workshop that usually focuses on one skill at a time. It is worth mentioning that we have visited some of the research done on the integration of soft skills in university curricula, and it will be presented in the following

part of the paper; however, to date, no research was conducted to assess the provision and acquisition of soft skills at the school level.

Having in mind the aforementioned scenario, this research aimed to answer the following questions: Are intermediate and secondary students familiar with the concept of soft skills? If so, how much do they use these skills in their everyday lives? Are they aware of their importance in their future professional lives? If they are not already familiar with these skills, are they willing to learn more about them? How do they perceive such skills in the first place? Thus, this research aims to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of both middle and high school students and teachers regarding soft skills and their incorporation in school curricula. The study explored whether or not these students and teachers believe that it is important to be introduced to these skills and what their possible benefits and/or drawbacks might be.

Literature Review

The available literature on the importance of soft skills and their presence in the job market is ever-growing, as this is a relatively recent topic that has gained the interest of many researchers, educators, and economists in the last 10 years. Research on soft skills has divergent results, but most studies tend to agree that said skills have a great effect on the individual's personal, academic, and professional lives, with some even mentioning that they have become an indispensable part of one's professional journey.

The following part of the research paper –or its literature review– will be divided into four sub-headings. The first heading presents a general overview of the importance of soft skills and the various reasons for their increasing importance in recent years. The second heading offers a detailed explanation of the five soft skills that this research is concerned with –those being entrepreneurship, teamwork and collaboration, goal setting, time management, and communication, as well as an explanation as to why these five skills in particular were chosen. The third heading of the literature review focuses on the relationship between soft skills learning and success in the teaching profession. Additionally, the last heading gives a broad survey of different studies conducted in recent years on soft skills and their incorporation within various institutions and work atmospheres, with the purpose of investigating the benefits of learning soft skills for future career success at the school level.

Importance of Soft Skills

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]'s publication, *Trends Shaping Education* (2013), “skills have become the global currency of twenty-first century economies” (OECD, 2013). If this was the case seven years ago, then one can safely predict that the importance of the development of individual skills in building and shaping businesses and economies has grown even larger today. It is worth

noting, however, that some skills may play a more important role in this growth compared to others, and this is usually dictated by the corporations' needs.

Soft skills have become a subject of increased interest in life-long learning. Muir (2019) asserts that they should not just be called "soft skills"; instead, they need to be called "essential skills" since they have become necessary to succeed in the modern job world. Workers are not being treated well at their jobs and are sometimes being fired because they are not being coached how to work with other people before starting their jobs; thus, they struggle with not having enough confidence and team spirit to work in groups, which ultimately affects their performance at work. In addition, young workers are sometimes reproached for not having vision, i.e., a clear visualization of the outcome of their actions, which according to Muir (2019), is the result of the educational system that is mostly based on memory and rote learning.

Similarly, Bersin (2019) believes that we should stop talking about "soft" skills, and he asserts that they should be called "power" skills. Bersin claims that the necessary skills for the future are not technical; instead, they relate to the individual's behaviour. This is not to say that Bersin completely negates the importance of hard skills; however, he believes that technical skills are easier to learn compared to soft skills, which take much more effort to develop and master. In addition, Muir (2019) explains that, with 92% of hiring managers claiming that soft skills are today just as important –if not more important– than hard skills, it becomes clear how urgent it is for schools and universities to start incorporating these skills within their curricula. Studies show that once students are taught these skills, they will display more confidence, creativity, critical thinking, as well as team spirit, and they will be regarded as hardworking collaborators (Muir, 2019).

Decades ago, having a university degree would guarantee a good job through which the graduate could climb the career ladder. However, today, the economic and career landscapes are changing at an extremely fast rate, marked by informational evolutionary revolution, which should generate the development of a more thoughtful and balanced approach to education (Gaines & Mohammed, 2013). This new way of education should ensure that all graduating students moving from high school to university or a new career have acquired rigorous content knowledge as well as how to apply it successfully (Gaines & Mohammed, 2013). In the late years of the 20th century, much attention was drawn to the need for the academic curricula to work on and improve the students' soft skills. In 1991, various sophisticated strategies were recommended to be introduced for the production of common competencies. In the United Kingdom, education centers were advised to focus on and enhance the following eight skills: a) managing and developing self; b) working with and relating to others; c) communicating; d) managing tasks and solving problems; e) applying numeracy; f) applying technology; g) applying design; and, finally, h) creativity (Pereira & Costa, 2017) to address the workplace landscape shifts.

This is reflected in the many studies that have taken place in recent years and which have shown that equipping students with skills that go beyond the academic scope can open the door for them to various future opportunities. Numerous reports have also revealed the increasing importance of soft skills in the 21st-century workplace (Gaines & Mohammed, 2013). Their findings have also indicated that employers ranked the importance of life skills such as leadership and communication higher than the technical skills such as reading comprehension and mathematics (Gaines & Mohammed, 2013). This is also reflected in the teaching field. Although previous research reported that the most important aspects of teachers' skills were classroom structure (Ames, 1990), curriculum planning (Mayer, 1992), and classroom management (Rosenholtz, 2018), recent researchers are shifting their focus

from those aspects of teaching and are focusing on the quality of the teacher-student relationship –mainly soft skills.

In fact, Hes (2017) believes that there are numerous reasons as to why soft skills are, today, more important than ever. First, technical skills are not truly effective on their own. For instance, a salesperson, no matter how knowledgeable they are of the qualities and specifications of their products, will not be very successful if they do not possess the necessary interpersonal skills needed to manage and retain their clients (Hes, 2017). Similarly, Bogunovic (2019) explains that although technical skills are extremely important in the workplace, a number of soft skills that will help the individual push their technical skills even further must supplement them.

Second, Hes (2017) believes that technical skills are easier to learn and acquire than soft skills, as they can be easily taught and mastered over certain period of time. On the other hand, soft skills are much harder to develop because they are greatly associated to the individual's character, having little to do with their knowledge and expertise. Thus, soft skills can make an individual stand out when compared to other candidates with similar academic background as them. The scenario of the 21st-century workplace is highly interpersonal, requires, and values, modern skills such as listening, collaborating with others, presenting ideas, and communicating with team members.

This has become even more important now with the constant developments that the education field and pedagogy have been going through, whether internationally or on a local level. A key emerging idea from many platforms at the World Economic Forum in 2016 is that changes in educational and learning environments are necessary to help people stay employable in the labor force of the future. In response to these changes, educational

institutions are investing in helping their students develop skills that enhance career-development prospects and aligning with sustainability objectives.

How does that affect fresh graduates and future job seekers? In recent years, new talks about a so-called “skills gap” have emerged, discussing the discrepancy in work opportunities offered to individuals who possess certain skills and those who do not. It was shown that it was not simply a lack of jobs, but it was more often a lack of skilled workers (Spring, 2015). In South Africa, for example, high unemployment rates were observed because low-skilled jobs such as mining and farming shrunk in comparison to newer jobs that necessitated more skills from the worker. Researchers noted that ‘unemployment among the less-skilled and/or less-experienced workers ballooned . . . High-skilled workers have seen their employment share and their real wages increase as industries, and the economy as a whole, shift towards more skilled workers’ (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007). This is very important, as this shift cannot only be noticed in South Africa; even in Lebanon, the agricultural sector has been struggling, and more job opportunities in the tertiary sector are offered. Many unskilled jobs are disappearing and making way for skilled ones, and the Lebanese youth needs to keep up with those changes. In other words, this has turned into a modern “survival of the fittest” scenario.

Review of Soft Skills

The American National Association of Colleges and Employers [ANACE] lists the following skills as the ones that are needed the most in the twenty-first century by businesses and corporations. First, entrepreneurship and the leadership mind-set are mentioned as top required skills, as companies look for individuals with creative ideas and the ability to lead a group. Second, most corporations also want a person who can work in a team and has the ability to respect the team structure. Third, in order for individuals to be able to work in a

team, they should also know how to verbally communicate with their co-workers or people from outside the company. The fourth skill is the ability to solve problems and think of them in a critical way. Finally, another soft skill that should be highlighted is the ability to organize, prioritize work, and manage one's time, which is also a crucial skill that is required of the twenty-first-century worker (ANACE, 2014).

A quick look at the available literature on the various soft skills and their importance and status in the market field was already introduced in previous paragraphs. Moreover, the most commonly discussed skills in the workplace: entrepreneurship, teamwork and collaboration, goal setting, time management, and communication. The best way to address this requirement is to take full advantage of these soft skills in order to provide the employers with a deeper insight into their potential employees. An interesting approach would be to present a general overview of each of the aforementioned skills, along with their importance in today's job market.

During the last decades in many societies, the opinion on soft skills has changed considerably. Maksoud and Kobeissy's study clearly states that the participants of their project were aware that they needed the aforementioned skills, such as entrepreneurship, teamwork, collaboration, goal setting, time management, and communication, but they did not receive any training at school or were not exposed to those skills by their teachers. Therefore, these skills were selected as a follow-up investigation to what Maksoud and Kobeissy mentioned in their study. Before going any further in debating the importance of soft skills, two questions have to be clarified: "Are Lebanese students interested in that same set of skills? Are they aware of their importance in their personal, academic, and professional lives?" These basic questions are not easy to answer because the perception of what a soft skill is differs from context to context.

Entrepreneurship

One of the most sought-after soft skills in today's job market is entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship, in its most basic definition, is the act of creating a business with the ultimate purpose of generating a profit. However, in its more modern sense, entrepreneurship became synonymous with solving big problems in order to transform the world. Thus, entrepreneurs seek to make the world a better place for everyone (Ferreira, 2019). The Centre for American Entrepreneurship [CAE] (2017) states the following as the main benefits for developing entrepreneurship as a soft skill. First, entrepreneurship improves productivity, as productivity is highly boosted by the factor of efficiency, or the way the factors of production are assembled. Research has shown that entrepreneurship and the formation of new businesses are key components of efficiency and are thus pertinent for the improvement of productivity. Second, since an entrepreneur is always on a quest to come up with new ideas and solutions to the different problems he or she encounters in life, his or her innovation plays a crucial role in the process of creation. Entrepreneurship, then, drives innovation and the creation of something new or improved, which ultimately boosts productivity as well. This enhancement in productivity greatly translates into the creation of new jobs and a reduction in the percentage of unemployment in a given society (CAE, 2017).

Teamwork and Collaboration

The broad mixture in the workplace is the reason why collaboration and teamwork have become essential skills to have not only career-wise, but also in every aspect of life and the process of socialization. Duszynski (2019) believes that it is teamwork and collaboration that "differentiate good companies from exceptional ones," as they are paramount for employers today to appreciate the concerted efforts of their employees to achieve their common goals. What is important to note about these two skills is that although they seem like an easy task, they do not just imply "working together." In fact, many elements ensure

the foundation of a secure basis for collaboration in a workplace. For instance, establishing a clear role to each team member, listening actively, giving and receiving constructive feedback, reaching a final consensus and mutual agreement, apologizing for any missteps, amongst others are necessary to achieve good teamwork and collaboration (Doyle, 2019). Thus, when assessing these two soft skills, it is important to look at and evaluate their constituting elements.

Goal Setting

The process of goal setting is usually defined as specific and realistic reminders of the future achievements that one wishes to realize. Those can either be long-range goals (ones that one achieves throughout one's career and lifetime), or intermediate goals (ones that one achieves in the near future), or short-range goals (ones that one might start achieving today) ("Goal Setting", n.d.). Elliot and McGregor (2001) divided goals into three types. A mastery goal is associated with the individual's intention of mastering something; for example, aiming to learn how to play the piano is considered a mastery goal. On the other hand, a performance-approach goal is one where the individual tries to outperform others; for instance, wanting to get higher grades than your classmates is a performance-approach goal. Finally, a performance-avoidance goal is a goal emerging from the desire to avoid performing more poorly than others do; for example, a student might say, "My goal in this class is to avoid performing poorly". It is very important for the individual to set smart goals because the process offers a great number of benefits. Setting goals can help the individual visualize the most important tasks that he or she must focus on. This will also provide them with a sense of direction and timeframe that they need to keep track of their goals, point out their strengths, and fix their weaknesses ("Goal Setting", n.d.).

Time Management

No matter how technical the field of work is, time management is another extremely important soft skill that employers have been requiring of their employees in recent years. Being one of the skills most valued in the workplace, time management acts as a major role in organizing the company's work and boosting its productivity. Andrews (2016) states the following as the three main benefits of hiring employees with effective time management skills. First, time management speeds up the process of decision making in the company, as it clarifies the options, outcomes, and best choices for the employees to make before taking action. Decisive employees manage themselves better and do not need constant supervision from their superiors.

Second, when the employee manages his or her time effectively, they become more aware of prioritizing and working out what really needs doing and which ones to postpone. By being able to paint the entire picture and focus on the urgent matters that demand immediate attention, employees have an easier time completing their tasks. Third, time management is crucial in high-pressure situations because employees are better equipped to process their thoughts and tasks in a timely manner. All of these qualities eventually lead to the development of a much more efficient team, which in turn boosts the company's productivity levels to their most desired levels (Andrews, 2016).

Communication

Contessa (2019) defines communication skills as the necessary tools for the individual to successfully communicate with others, convey his or her ideas, and work well in teams. Such skill is fundamental regardless of a job position, as verbal and non-verbal communication come into play in every work atmosphere. An individual with good communication skills is one who understands the link between verbal and non-verbal

communication. When we communicate verbally, we do not only use language; communication requires listening, eye contact, and body language, and any struggle in one of these areas might result in miscommunication (Beqiri, 2017). For instance, effective body language, such as physiognomy and posture, complements greatly the speaker's verbal communication and improves the listener's understanding of whatever message the speaker is trying to convey. In addition, possessing excellent communication skills is today more important than ever because it makes the person a competitive job candidate and the customers appreciate nothing more than being listened to and understood by the company that they are working with (Beqiri, 2017). While communication relies on practice, it is certain that it may be increased and refined.

Life Skills in Lebanon

In its 2018 report, the UNESCO has detailed the situation of life skills in Lebanon and how they are being taken care of by the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE). The CERD believes in the importance of global education for all generations, which is one of the 2030 Education sustainable development goals, and it emphasizes on improving student textbooks in order to develop their critical thinking and discipline. The CERD has also acknowledged the importance of improving the teachers' qualifications as well and the quality of their development by establishing adult programs that focus on life skills and citizenship education (UNESCO, 2018).

In addition, the MEHE also reaffirmed its mission of improving the existing textbooks and infusing them with interactive methods in order to develop a generation of students with strong critical thinking skills. The MEHE also promised that more focus would be given to different life skills that range from communication, self-management, and time management.

Working with the UNESCO and various international NGOs, the MEHE has recently introduced several life skills programs. Although this is a very important first step in the introduction of such programs to the educators and the society as a whole, most of these programs were administered to refugees and underprivileged Lebanese people. Because of this decision, the implementation of such programs within school curricula remains challenging up until this date (UNESCO, 2018).

Soft Skills and Teaching

Crucial skills of the most effective teachers are very different from those twenty years ago. The complexity and rapid evolution of knowledge that teachers are expected to transmit in order to be effective are growing tremendously. Teachers today are expected to be acquainted with both the technical and the soft skills, and research has shown that there is a positive relationship between knowing these skills and standing out in the teaching profession (Tang et al., 2014).

Teachers who are more familiar with soft skills are usually better at creating a positive teaching environment (Lee, 2011). They work with their students to generate friendly relationships, appreciate their work, and develop their sense of belonging and duty. If the student is not performing really well, a good teacher does not throw the blame on them; instead, the teacher is able to trace back the reasons for this lack and provide the necessary help to the student. As such, a compassionate teacher is one who understands their students' struggles with learning and works on elevating the students' level and performance (Lee, 2011). This can only be achieved if the teacher possesses specific qualities such as compassion, understanding, and emotional intelligence, all of which can be strengthened thanks to a better understanding of soft skills.

Lee's belief that a connection between having good soft skills and being a good teacher can be seen in many studies. For example, in a review of research into teaching contexts, Tang et al. (2014) have conducted a series of studies in which they aimed to examine the association between soft skills learned by teachers and their excellence in teaching. Their 2014 study was concerned with the impact of leadership soft skills on the development of human capital at schools. Having focused on the eight components of leadership soft skills –collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiatives, leadership ability, personal development/coaching, personal effectiveness/mastery, planning and organizing and presentation skills– Tang and his co-researchers (2014) noticed that these are essential to achieve what the educational institution aims to accomplish for its students and teachers. Moreover, educators who are good communicators, intelligent, and skillful in managing and planning classrooms can greatly benefit from these skills as a way of improving school performance even more.

There is a direct support of this finding in another study conducted by Tang et al. (2015), in which the researchers focused on four soft skills, namely teamwork, critical thinking, leadership, and communication. Their analysis showed that these four skills were positively linked to excellence in teaching, particularly critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The researchers concluded that soft skills should be instilled in teachers' lesson plans with the intention of creating excellence and effective teaching practice. Moreover, soft skills are an extremely effective addition to hard skills, and they are great help for teachers looking to improve their capability of organizing their work. Both teamwork and communication skills were found to be the most desired in teaching jobs, not only for educators to be aware of them, but also to teach them to their students during their lessons (Tang et al., 2015).

What can be done, however, in the case where the teachers are not familiar with the concept of soft skills at all? Kankorn, Pongtorn, and Sujanya (2014) conducted a study whose main objective was to work with primary school teachers and develop their soft skills during their first two years of work. The training program emphasized the following skills: 1) communication skills 2) thinking skills and problem-solving skills 3) teamwork force 4) life-long learning and information management 5) innovation development, 6) ethics and professionalism and 7) leadership skills. Data collected at the end of the program was quite telling; more than 80% of the teachers witnessed improvements in the aforementioned skills, and this was observed in their classwork and lesson planning. Other improvements were also noticed in the teachers' skills, as they exhibited better communication and presentation skills and teacher leadership as well. There was surprisingly much evidence that the outcomes also affected the students, who were much happier with their teachers' learning and classroom management (Kankorn, Pongtorn, & Sujanya, 2014).

Trends in Incorporating Soft Skills

The education system's consistence with the needs of the labour market raises doubt about the university education and its role in forming the skills needed to lead a successful work life to face present and future challenges. Many studies have been conducted on incorporating soft skills in educational institutions around the world; yet, their results are not conclusive and often contradict each other. The majority of the studies agree with respect to the soft skills development and its impact on the people's professional and personal lives.

Pereira and Costa's study (2014) on undergraduate students aimed at collecting, exploring, and analysing these students' opinion regarding the importance of including soft skills training in their university curricula. They focused on four main areas: a) training for autonomy; b) training for communication; c) training for socio-emotional responsibility; and

d) specific training with transversal importance. Results have shown that the participants were appreciative of the variables of learning autonomy the most and the management of emotions the least, which is in line with what the labour market demands regarding commitment and responsibility. What Pereira and Costa failed to recognize, however, was the universities' reluctance towards changing their curricula and focusing more on the students' soft skills. As interpersonal relationship is at the basis of the functioning of organizations, universities are called to equip fresh graduates on how to handle work conflicts and how to overcome them. Since the management of emotions was also highlighted, Pereira and Costa (2014) emphasized the importance of implementing diverse pedagogical practices and focused on interpersonal relationships, communication, and personal development.

While Pereira and Costa's study targeted undergraduate students, what is the situation of fresh graduates? In more recent years, Albanea and Giret (2018) conducted a study on 1,291 newly graduates in France, in which they aimed to study the effects of soft skills on these graduates' earnings. They examined the graduates' experience within their work context, as well as other aspects of their personal and professional lives. The results of their study were quite telling of the importance of soft skills in the job market. According to this research, soft skills were indeed one of the reasons for the variance in pay amongst these French graduates. Even though the student's degree and their field of study affected the individual's wage, soft skills such as communication, self-esteem, risk taking, and perseverance also influenced these young people's wages, even when the researchers have controlled all other possible social variables and human capital (Albanea & Giret, 2018). This study clearly indicates that soft skills account for a proportion of the remuneration of these graduates.

Moreover, Albandea's and Giret's analysis (2018) indicates that this effect is mostly present in the top end of the wage distribution, which suggest that soft skills are essential for graduates aiming to attain the highest skilled jobs. In fact, Albandea and Giret concluded their research with a very interesting finding. Based on the results of their study, they have noticed that two labour markets are available for the post-graduates: one that offers the highest positions and best-paid jobs, but which requires, alongside the diploma, various academic and non-academic skills; and another which gives access to less well-paid jobs, but at the same time only requiring certain diploma and experience.

In this connection, Glaittli (2018) investigated the benefits of offering high school juniors and seniors soft skills training, which consisted of eight 30-minute weekly group sessions. For the purpose of her study, she focused on the following skills: communication, goal setting, collaboration, work ethic, time management, and different employability skills such as job applications and resumes, and interview skills. Each session consisted of an introduction to the soft skill, various examples, practice and application, homework, and journal responses to the session. The results indicated that the "Soft Skills Training program" helped the participants and increased their knowledge and abilities regarding these skills, especially the ones related to creating a resume and preparing for a job interview (Glaittli, 2018).

Moreover, Glaittli (2018) found that participants who had great desire to use the soft skills ended up being more motivated. In addition, goal setting was also a very beneficial skill to be taught, as students were able to set several classroom-focused goals, as well as numerous ones following their high school graduation. Another finding that was discussed in the study was the impact of emotional health on the students' soft skill use and confidence: the students have reported an improvement in their confidence level after participating in the

training. Being cited in hundreds of studies, Glaittli's study could be considered a great reference regarding the incorporation of soft skills in high schools, as not only does it provide a way of implementing them in school curricula, but it also gives insight on the process and possible limitations of such projects.

While it is very important to investigate the perspectives and attitudes of people in the educational field, it is also essential to see how business companies look at soft skills. Deloitte (2018), a multinational company providing audit, tax, consulting, enterprise risk and financial advisory services, has published its seventh millennial survey on the future of Generation Z individuals, particularly in relation to their jobs and work opportunities and the possible threats that they might face in an increasingly complex world. Industrialization, development in robotics, artificial intelligence, political upheavals, amongst other factors have greatly modified the nature of work, all of which have consequently made the millennial generation feel uneasy about their future and unprepared to take on various work opportunities.

The main problem that young workers are complaining about is their lack of confidence and interpersonal skills, thriving to seek businesses that would help them develop soft skills that are becoming more important as jobs evolve. However, although technology occupies a great part of the job market today, young workers lack specific guidance that goes beyond how to use that technology. In their view, today's businesses do not give enough attention to nurturing the different life skills that an employee ought to have when stepping into the work atmosphere (Deloitte, 2018). Thus, it is very important for educators and schools to be aware of the most important skills that are needed in today's job market and implement them within their curricula and school activities.

Such positive results, however, were not apparent in every study conducted on the impact of soft skills. Groh, Krishnan, McKenzie, and Vishwanath (2016) researched the impact of training 1,347 female graduates and admitting them into a training group consisting of a 45-hour soft skills training course. In contrast, a control group was not admitted into such training. Six, fourteen, and twenty-seven months later, surveys were administered to examine the effect of this program on the lives of the female graduates. Although a highly professional trainer gave the course, the researchers noticed that the training did not have any significant impact on employment outcomes of these young women neither over short term nor over medium term. However, when examining the non-employment outcomes, Groh et al. (2016) found that in the short term, the training did appear to have made the participants more optimistic about the future and have reduced restrictions on their mobility.

Soft Skills and the Covid-19 Pandemic

It is safe to claim that the Covid-19 pandemic had devastating effects on businesses, industries, the education field, and many other parts of our society. However, while some believe that lockdown has been extremely challenging, others saw it as the perfect opportunity to develop soft skills. York (2020) believes that lockdown has pushed people to the brink, and, as such, they developed their adaptability skill. As the nature of the work environment continues to change, employees had to quickly adjust to new tools that they may have never used before. It turned into a huge responsibility for them to reach the same level of productivity as before while relying on a set of unfamiliar tools. Consequently, collaborative work and teamwork had to shift too and adapt to this new style of work.

Lukins (2020) agrees with York and presents her own set of skills that she believes are essential in a post-coronavirus world. On top of this list sit the leadership skill and the communication skill, both of which go hand in hand in a changing world that is constantly

relying on messages being conveyed correctly. Other needed skills include critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and creativity and innovation. The Covid-19 pandemic became an opportunity for individuals, whether students or employees, to refine their soft skills and develop them in ways that help them keep up with all the changes that have been occurring recently.

On the other hand, experts at McKinsey Accelerate claim that skill gaps need to be closed in 3 to 5 years, or this will greatly affect customer satisfaction and experience. As such, a big number of employees need either full reskilling or partial reskilling, and this was especially noticeable during the Covid-19 pandemic, where unskilled labour could not deliver great results. Consequently, McKinsey Accelerate emphasize the expansion of the following four skills that they believe will yield the most promising results: a) digital skills to work in a new digital environment; b) cognitive skills to ensure redesign and innovation; c) social and emotional skills to guarantee adequate collaboration and teamwork, as well as team management; and finally, d) adaptability and resilience, both of which are not only crucial during these challenging times, but will also be essential during other crises.

Moreover, with the changing nature of learning, it is very important to consider different ways to develop soft skills in an online setting. Thacker (2020) believes that with online learning, one cannot simply neglect the noncognitive side of learning for students, which is also known as soft skills. Thus, he proposes that teachers or educators can always follow the traditional ways of working with soft skills, but they need to conduct additional modifications to fit with this new online setting. Correctly applied, one way of doing so is to focus on extra-curricular activities for students, such as attending private workshops, teaming up for group projects, or even applying for online internships. This approach will

automatically increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of a course on developing students' own personal skills without sacrificing time from school sessions.

Research Gap

Having surveyed the available literature regarding the importance of soft skills and their impact on the university students' professional and personal lives, it becomes obvious that there is a growing need for training programs that teach soft skills. However, despite their popularity, empirical evidence is still hard to obtain regarding the effectiveness of such programs, which is mainly due to the nature of the soft skills (Groh, Krishnan, McKenzie, & Vishwanath, 2016). Moreover, although there is evidence linking life skills to employment, it is less clear how beneficial these 2- or 3-week employment programs would be. In developing countries in particular, soft skills and vocational skills have often been interchangeable and are presented together in workshops; thus, the effect of the soft skills on their own is yet to be measured (Groh, Krishnan, McKenzie, & Vishwanath, 2016).

Although some studies were conducted in the Middle East to investigate the impact of soft skills on the students' future lives, they were mainly concerned with university students. Their scope rarely covered teachers' opinions as well, which created a great gap in this particular topic. Furthermore, studies in Lebanon are even scarcer, as most workshops offering sessions on soft skills are given by private training institutions and are rarely at school ground. Many Lebanese schools offer extracurricular activities such as environmental programs, cultural trips, Model United Nations (MUN) opportunities, amongst others, and some even host workshops that focus on soft skills. However, no research was hitherto conducted exploring the students' knowledge and teachers' opinions when it comes to learning and teaching life skills. This study, hence, aims to focus on the two main parties of

the educational system, the students and the teachers, and it attempts to answer the following research questions.

Research Questions

- What are the knowledge, perceptions, and behaviours of middle and high school students regarding soft skills learning?
- How aware are these students of the importance of soft skills in their learning in their classes, and how important do these students perceive soft skills learning?
- What are the schoolteachers' perceptions regarding the benefits and/or downsides of implementing soft skills in their classrooms?
- Are the soft skills as incorporated by the teachers recognized and acknowledged by the students?

Methodology

This part of the paper presents an overview of the methodological design adopted as well as the study population chosen for the study. The sampling method, the instruments of research, and analytical that were used for the analysis of the results are presented as well. Finally, the researcher went over the various ethical considerations that were taken in order to ensure the respect of the guidelines of research.

Study Design

This study is a case study of a Lebanese private school, and a quantitative research design was adopted to collect the data from both the students and the teachers. For the first part of the study, quantitative data was collected from self-administered online surveys sent to the students by the researcher himself. On the other hand, the second part of the study included an online questionnaire for the teachers to fill regarding their own experience with and perceptions of soft skills. A systematic sampling was used for the purpose of this research, determined by the researcher and the advisor.

Setting

The research took place at Al-Manar Modern School. Al-Manar Modern School, a private school, originally founded in Qubbay in 1985. Currently having more than 550 students, the school structure is divided into 4 departments (kindergarten, elementary, intermediate, and secondary), Al-Manar School is located in Ras-El-Matn in Mount Lebanon District. In addition to its emphasis on the academic development of its educational staff members, Al-Manar Modern School focuses on the continuous professional development of its teachers, who meet weekly with coaches and coordinators to discuss various skills and different developmental strategies. This asset makes it convenient for the purpose of this research.

The researcher chose to administer the surveys at Al-Manar Modern School because it provides its teachers and students with various workshops and extra-curricular activities aiming toward their continuous professional development. Teachers (and sometimes students) usually attend workshops that deal with the following topics: Classroom Management, Differentiated Teaching Strategies, Lesson Plan Development, Character Education, Learning Disabilities, Project-based Learning, Authentic Learning, Leadership, and Emotional Intelligence. Thus, it is safe to assume that teachers and students at Al-Manar Modern School are more or less aware of the concept of soft skills and may have been acquainted with it at some point in their school years.

Study Population

Participants in the study were students and their teachers from Al Manar Modern School. Quantitative data was collected from students in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 through self-administered surveys that were filled online by the respondents. Quantitative data was also collected from 9 teachers of grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 through an online self-administered questionnaire using a Google Docs form.

The reason that led to the selection of this population and not others is that it is during this time period or age that students begin to think of their future professional lives. Students of grades 9, 10, and 11 will have to make a choice soon as to which track to pick (whether scientific or literary) based on their future plans. It is during the year of grade 12 that students decide which major they want to pursue at university. In this sense, it obviously has a direct impact on their future presence in the job market. Thus, this study targets students that are the most concerned with career development.

Instruments of Measurements

For the purpose of this study, a self-administered online questionnaire was adopted. A self-administered questionnaire is a questionnaire that is meant to be filled by the respondents without the intervention of the researcher. Two questionnaires were sent by e-mail to both students and teachers to fill online, with emphasis on knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes towards soft skills. A self-administered questionnaire for students was formulated in English. Participants were asked first about their sociodemographic information and then their knowledge, perceptions, and behaviour regarding various soft skills, such as Entrepreneurship, Communication, Teamwork and Collaboration, Goal Setting, and Time Management. The questionnaire included knowledge, perceptions and behaviour questions. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

A self-administered online questionnaire for teachers was formulated in English. The questionnaire includes a set of questions, some closed-ended and others open-ended, about the teachers' knowledge and perceptions of soft skills. The questionnaires were put together by the researcher himself; however, due to the scarcity of the sources and research tools that are used to assess soft skills, some of the questions were inspired by the literature review.

It is worth noting that the researcher decided to formulate a questionnaire that is short in length. Research in this aspect discusses that the length of a questionnaire is important because it can directly affect response rates, survey costs, and data quality (Lavrakas, 2008).

Validation of the Questionnaires

It is an edge for a researcher to prepare his own questionnaire and a challenge to integrate all the necessary information needed to address the research questions. The researcher opted to make a research questionnaire that would fit the current study. First, colleagues were asked what they think about the topic. Likewise, he met with experts -

professors at university and teachers at schools- to deepen his understanding of the significance of my study. Furthermore, as the questionnaire was being prepared, the researcher considered the guidance of his advisor to identify the possible variables to make sure that they are codable. The content of the questionnaires was primarily based on the research questions.

This research-made questionnaire needed to undergo the face - validation process. To do so, the researcher conducted a pilot survey using a sample of population that included a colleague at work, a professional at a university, a respondent from the population understudy, a professional in the field, and a student. The aim of this pilot survey was to check the appropriateness of questions to the target population, the correctness of the instructions to be followed, and most importantly, whether or not the questionnaire fulfils the objective of the study. After obtaining and analysing the feedback of the respondents to the pilot survey, the questionnaires were revised accordingly. This type of internal validity could be assessed by comparing questionnaire responses with objective measures of the study to which they refer.

The most important step in the validation process was sending the survey to a statistician. The chances, again, suggested by the professional were considered. The overall format of the questionnaires remained unchanged (Appendices 2 and 4) demonstrating adequate reliability and validity.

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, the researcher was granted permission by the school administration to administer the surveys to students of grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. A token of appreciation goes to Al-Manar Modern School's high school principal, Ms. Jinane Karamah Chayya, for facilitating the contact between the researcher and the participants.

Data collection took place in two phases. In the first phase, students and teachers of grades 9, 10, 11, and 12 were informed about the study through a letter sent to them by the administration. The letter explained the purpose of this study in clear simple terms, detailed the questions that will be answered, and asked the students and teachers to complete the survey. This letter documented the participant's agreement to take part in the study.

In the second phase, the researcher sent the online surveys to both the students and the teachers. Participants were assured about the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collection process. Students or teachers who wished to opt out of the study were allowed to do so at any time. The average time allocated for the self-administered questionnaire was estimated to be approximately 15 minutes.

Data Management and Analysis

The data collection, handling, and management plan plays an important role within a research project. The researcher himself was in charge of data entry and checked for duplicate, missing, or conflicting data as well as implausible or illogical answers from the questionnaires. When ambiguity about the correct value persisted, improbable value was re-coded into “missing”. All data was merged, cleaned, and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21. Simple descriptive statistics with means, proportions, and frequency distributions was also conducted. Initially, 100 students and 10 teachers were meant to fill the questionnaires; however, after data collection and analysis, the researcher ended up with 76 students and 9 teachers.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, the researcher followed ethical guidelines such as respecting the participants' rights to confidentiality and anonymity. Names were not mentioned in the study nor demanded in the surveys. The students were given a form detailing the purpose of

this research study and their role as participants as part of the administered surveys. A similar letter was presented at the beginning of the teachers' survey as well, in which a detailed description of the study was mentioned as well as their role in the study.

Furthermore, students and teachers who did not wish to partake in the survey were allowed to do so with no repercussions whatsoever.

Results and Discussion

With the help of the data collection instruments and procedure described in the previous part, a large body of data was obtained. This part attempts at a systematic presentation and analysis of the data collected. It thus utilizes tables and graphs to present both the quantitative and the qualitative data from the participants in a more comprehensible style. The following part of the paper presents the results and discussion of the students' and teachers' surveys.

Students' Survey

a. Demographic Characteristics:

A total of 76 students completed the online survey, with 52.63% of the respondents being female and 47.37% being male. The mean age of respondents is 15.04 with a standard deviation of 1.18 and with the youngest student being 13 and the oldest being 17. The majority (59.21%) were from Grades 9 and 10. The distribution of students by their demographic characteristics is presented in the following table.

Table 1-Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents (n=76)

	Freq.	Percentage
Gender		
Female	40	52.63%
Male	36	47.37%
Grade		
9 th	22	28.95%
10 th	23	30.26%
11 th	16	21.05%
12 th	15	19.74%
Age		
13	8	10.53%
14	16	21.05%
15	28	36.84%
16	13	17.11%
17	11	14.47%

b. Students' Knowledge of Soft Skills

When the students were asked if they had ever heard of the concept of soft skills, 65.79% respondents reported they were not acquainted with this concept. The same pattern was observed between female and male students and across the different grades, and there was no significant difference among males and females or among the different grades. After being introduced to the UNESCO definition of soft skills, defined as a “collection of mental, personal, and interpersonal abilities that allow the individual to critically make decisions, solve problems, construct interpersonal relationships, and empathize with others”, the students were asked if soft skills are harder to master than technical skills. 69.74% respondents reported that soft skills are harder to master than technical skills, with slightly more female students (75%) than male students (65%) reporting so. This finding indicates that students might be familiar with the concept of soft skills; however, they may have not been introduced to the term itself.

When asked if soft skills are synonymous to vocational skills, 38.16% of students incorrectly responded with “yes”, and 44.74% reported that they do not know the difference. Students of higher grades (Grade 11 and 12) were less likely (29.03%) to believe that soft skills are the same as vocational skills than their younger counterparts (Grade 9 and 10) (44.44%). This is a common misconception that previous research raised this concern. People often mistake soft skills with vocational skills, as they consider that the latter is anything studied outside the realm of usual academic setting of schools and universities.

Grade 11 and Grade 12 students (51.61%) were also more likely to report that they do not know the difference between soft skills and vocational skills than their younger counterparts (Grade 9 and Grade 10) (40.00%). The overwhelming majority of the students (90.79%), regardless of gender and grade, recognized that today's job market requires the individual to possess soft skills. However, a significant number of respondents (64.47%)

erroneously reported that soft skills are innate and cannot be taught. Surprisingly, this misconception becomes more commonly accepted as one moves up the class grades. This belief is held by 45.45% of Grade 9 students, 56.52% of Grade 10 students, 75.00% of Grade 11 and an overwhelming 93.33% of Grade 12 students.

Table 2-Table Representing Students' Answers to Survey Items Related to Soft Skill Knowledge

	Yes	No	I don't know	Total
Have you ever heard of the concept of soft skills?	34.21%	65.79%	-	100%
Soft skills are harder to master than technical skills.	69.74%	14.47%	15.79%	100%
Soft skills are also known as vocational skills.	38.16%	17.11%	44.74%	100%
You are born with certain soft skills that cannot be learned	64.47%	27.63%	7.89%	100%
Today's job market requires the individual to possess a certain set of soft skills.	90.79%	5.26%	3.95%	100%

To test their understanding of soft skills, students were presented with a set of skills and were asked to only select soft skills. The majority of the respondents were able to identify the majority of the correct answers, with the responses most likely to reflect their understanding being “creativity” (93.40%), “leadership” (88.10%), “communication” (88.10%), “teamwork” (85.50%), and “problem solving” (84.20%). The soft skills that students were least likely to recognize were “flexibility” (65.70%) and “entrepreneurship” (59.20%). Conversely, even though most students (44.74%) reported not knowing the difference between soft skills and vocational skills, only a minority of students mistakenly selected vocational and hard skills. The most common mistake was data analysis (selected by 26.30% of the participants) followed by accounting (11.80% of the participants). This finding might show a lack of understanding of the concept of vocational skills as well. It is not surprising, as most students in Lebanon follow the traditional academic setting in which

vocational and soft skills are rarely –if ever—mentioned. Thus, very few students know the difference between all skills.

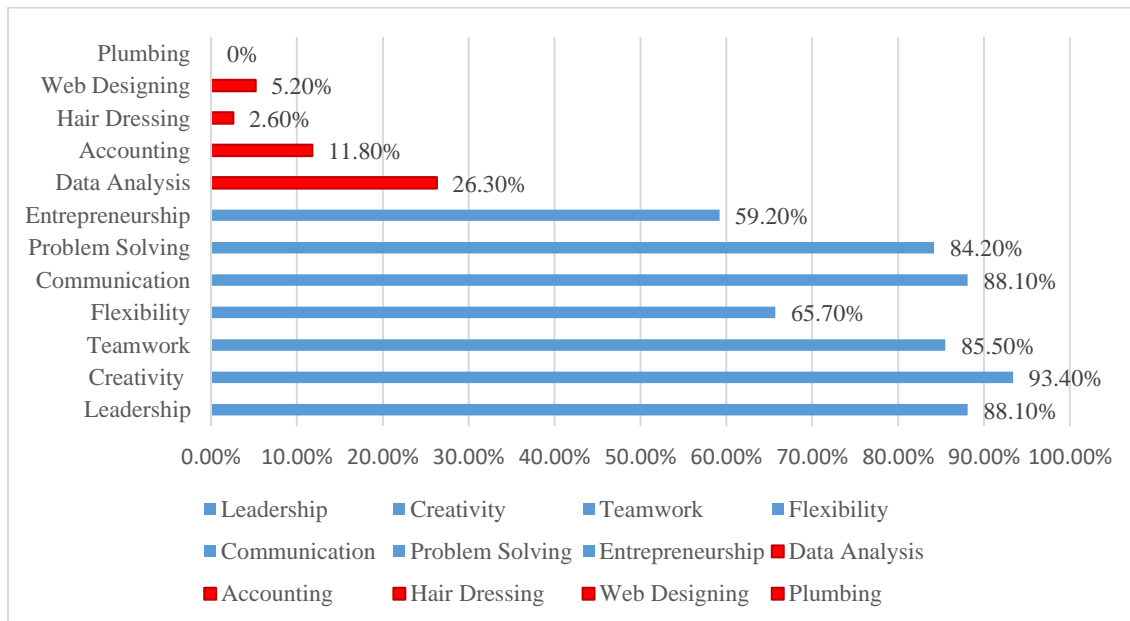


Figure 1- Bar chart representing the percentage of students who considered the following skills as soft skills (n=76), with the blue color representing soft skills and the red color representing vocational skills

c. Students' Practices and Behaviors

Students were asked a set of general questions to assess to what extent their learning environment encourages them to use and develop their soft skills. The majority of the students (92.10%) reported that they are given at school the opportunity to work with their classmates in teams. Data disaggregation by grades reveals that grade 12 students are the least likely to be given teamwork opportunities, with 26.67% of Grade 12 student reporting not being offered any group work opportunity. One possible explanation for this outcome is that schools, Grade 12 teachers, and even the students themselves might be more concerned about their official BACC II exams and be done the entire curriculum on time, which hinders any opportunity for group projects. In addition, during these challenging times of COVID-19, and because of the changing nature of learning, most schools and educators have prioritized

finishing the curriculum, and very few opportunities were given to students to perform in teams.

The option of distant learning has also limited the ability of students to work in groups. If students are present in the same room, they will not be given the same opportunities to work in teams due to the different health measures that need to be respected.

Regarding goal setting, a highly significant number of the students (85.53%) stated that they set goals at the beginning of the year and that they are working on achieving them. Gender-disaggregated data reveals that male respondents (91.67%) are more likely to practice goal setting than their female counterparts (80.00%); however, the difference is not significant. Across the different school grades, goal setting was only practiced by 72.73% of grade 9 students compared to 91.30%, 87.50% and 93.33% of grade 10, 11 and 12 students respectively. In terms of creativity, the overwhelming majority (93.42%), across gender and grade, stated that they are taught to think outside of the box when working on solving problems. Finally, the overwhelming majority of students (93.42%) reported that they are allowed to express their opinions freely in class. However, it is worth noting that more girls (10.00%) than boys (2.78%) reported not being able to express themselves freely in a classroom setting. This finding can be understood as the fact that some girls might feel intimidated to express themselves in public, as they fear the judgment of the opposite gender (Sullivan, 2002). By looking at the grade-disaggregated data, it appears that students have more freedom to express themselves in class as they move up in grades, with 86.36% of Grade 9 answering in the affirmative to this question compared to the totality (100%) of Grade 12 students

Table 3-Table representing students' responses to general statements about their learning environment, disaggregated by Gender

	Among Female Participants	Among Male Participants	Among All Participants
In your class, you are given the opportunity to work together as classmates in teams.			
Yes	90.00%	94.44%	92.11%
No	10.00%	5.56%	7.89%
You set goals at the beginning of the year and work on achieving them.			
Yes	80.00%	91.67%	85.53%
No	20.00%	8.33%	14.47%
You are taught to think outside of the box when working on solving problems.			
Yes	95.00%	91.67%	93.42%
No	5.00%	8.33%	6.58%
You are allowed to express your opinion freely in class.			
Yes	90.00%	97.22%	93.42%
No	10.00%	2.78%	6.58%
Total	100	100	100

Table 4- Table representing students' responses to general statements about their learning environment, disaggregated by Grade

	9 th Graders	10 th Graders	11 th Graders	12 th Graders	Among All Participants
In your class, you are given the opportunity to work together as classmates in teams.					
Yes	95.45%	100%	93.75%	73.33%	92.11%
No	4.55%	-	6.25%	26.67%	7.89%
You set goals at the beginning of the year and work on achieving them.					
Yes	72.73%	91.30%	87.50%	93.33%	85.53%
No	27.27%	8.70%	12.50%	6.67%	14.47%
You are taught to think outside of the box when working on solving problems.					
Yes	95.45%	91.30%	93.75%	93.33%	93.42%
No	4.55%	8.70%	6.25%	6.67%	6.58%
You are allowed to express your opinion freely in class.					
Yes	86.36%	95.65%	93.75%	100%	93.42%
No	13.64%	4.35%	6.25%	-	6.58%
Total	100	100	100	100	100

To further explore the extent to which students practiced specific soft skills, they were presented with a series of statements describing practices related to entrepreneurship, communication, teamwork, time management and goal setting, and they were asked to specify how frequently they practice those actions.

i. **Entrepreneurship**

The first set of statements presented to students corresponded to entrepreneurship, which was interestingly the soft skill that the students were least likely to recognize. When asked if they prefer being their own boss, students were approximately evenly split in three camps, with 34.21% saying “always”, 34.21% saying “often,” and 30.26% saying “sometimes”. Data disaggregation by gender and grade revealed more interesting distributions. Female respondents (40.00%) stated that they always prefer being their own boss while male respondents (41.67%) stated that they often prefer it. Moreover, the majority of the responses from Grade 9 (77.27%), grade 10 (78.26%), and grade 11 (68.65%) students are concentrated in the “always” and “often” category compared to 40.00% of Grade 12 students.

This is an interesting finding because it confirms what Ayres, Sawyer, and Dinham (2004) believe. It illustrates that while younger students might be struggling for independence, it appears that Grade 12 suddenly find themselves confronted with many responsibilities at the same time: preparing for the official exams, worrying about applying for different universities, feeling concerned about having to look for a job in just few years. Students of lower grades, however, do not share the same fears –at least not to the same extent.

The majority of the students are at least often curious. In fact, male respondents (47.22%) reported being “always” curious and in constant search of discovery, compared to only 30.00% of the female respondents. Similarly, the majority of respondents, regardless of gender and grade, responded that when faced with difficulties, they look for alternatives and new solutions at least “often” (47.37% for “always and 35.54% for “often”). Finally, most students (40.79%) stated they often find it easy to motivate others to work with them. Gender disaggregation of the data showed comparable percentages for males and females saying

“always” (33.33% versus 32.50%, respectively); however, only 25.00% of male respondents said “often” compared to 55.00% of female respondents. This finding again might be linked to the societal pressure that is usually placed on men to keep their emotions to themselves, especially with the restrictions that are usually imposed on male-male friendships (Flynn, Hollenstein, & Mackey, 2010).

ii. Communication

Another set of statements presented to the students were centred on communication skills. It is worth remembering that the majority of students previously stated that they are allowed to express their opinions freely in class. Respondents (42.11%) said that they rarely ask for their teachers’ assistance when they need help with an assignment. The reasons as to why some students find it hard to ask for their teachers’ assistance should be addressed further. Interestingly, 55.00% of the female students said that they rarely ask their teachers for help, double the percentage of male students (27.78%) who reported the same. Data disaggregation by grade shows that older students (Grade 11 and Grade 12) are far less likely to ask for their teachers’ help than their younger counterparts (Grade 9 and 10). In fact, 54.83% of Grade 11 and Grade 12 students reported rarely or never asking compared to 37.77% of Grade 9 and Grade 10 reporting the same. This finding can be linked to the fact that students of higher grades believe that they should be more autonomous at that age; as such, they would rather find a solution on their own than ask for their teachers’ help (Miserandino, 1996).

Respondents (42.11%) said they always talk things out with their friends in case of a disagreement. Half of female students (50.00%) and one third of the male students (33.33%) reported “always” doing so. Almost half of students (51.32%) reported that they always actively listen to the person they are having a discussion with rather than think of what they will say next. However, data disaggregation by gender revealed that only 40.00% of female

students chose “always.” Meanwhile, male respondents selected “always” (63.89%). Finally, 44.74% of the respondents stated they can often express their ideas clearly.

iii. Teamwork

The next set of statements presented to students refers to the soft skill of teamwork, which the majority of the students (92.11%) stated is a skill that they have an opportunity to practice at school. Slightly more than half of the students (56.58%) reported never having any problem working with others to complete a project. It appears that male students expressed more easiness with teamwork activities than their female counterparts, as 69.44% of boys reported being always comfortable with teamwork versus only 45.00% of girls stating so. It also appears higher grade students felt less comfortable with group work, as the percentage of students decreased from 63.64% in Grade 9 to 46.67% in Grade 12. The overwhelming majority of students (92.11%), regardless of gender and grade, stated that when they are participating in group work, they “always” give others the chance to talk and share their opinions.

By pairing this finding with the fact that Grade 12 had fewer opportunities to do teamwork, one possible explanation is that grade 12 are more concerned with graduating and finding university programs and are preoccupied with official exams. These are all individual endeavours which could be stressful and time consuming. This concern makes teamwork more difficult and more likely to be perceived as inconvenience. Interestingly though, students of higher grades who are less likely to complete a group project are also less likely to assume personal responsibility (as shown before).

Slightly more than half (52.63%) of the respondents stated that they always reconsider their ideas after receiving constructive criticism or feedback from the group, with a gender-disaggregated data of 55.00% of female students and 50.00% of male students. However, the

higher the grade, the less likely students were ready to accept constructive criticism: 63.64% of Grade 9 said that they would always reconsider their ideas after they receive feedback compared to only 40.00% of Grade 12 students. This finding can be explained that most students in higher grades start to view themselves as adults; thus, they have a harder time accepting criticism, as they would attend to the larger structure of power and privilege (Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2003).

A significant number of respondents (73.68%) reported that they like to share responsibility with others in their group. Data segregation by gender revealed that 80.00% of female students always like sharing responsibility with others in the group compared to 66.67% of male students. Moreover, the large majority of students from higher grades (87.50% of Grade 11 and 86.67% of Grade 12 students) stated that they always prefer sharing responsibility compared to 59.09% of Grade 9 and 69.57% of Grade 10 students. This confirms the previously shown findings that show that students of higher grades are less likely to hold responsibilities on their own, as opposed to the majority of grade 9 students who like to act more independently.

iv. Time Management

Half of the students reported that they could often turn in their assignments on time; the same pattern was observed more or less among male and female students and across the different grades. Only 17.11% of the students reported that they always finish their homework before engaging in other activities like watching TV or playing video games. Gender-disaggregated data revealed that 42.5% of female students' answers were concerted in "always" (17.50%) and "often" (25.00%) compared to 55.56% of the male participants' ("always" (16.67%) and "often" (38.89%). When asked how often they think they can manage their time effectively, most of the boys (41.67%) replied with "always" compared to only 17.50% of the girls. Finally, the majority of the students (72.37%) believed that good

time management always yields better results. Data disaggregation by gender revealed no difference of opinion between female and male students. It also appeared that older students were more likely to hold this position with 80% of Grade 12 students selecting “always” compared to 68.18% of Grade 9 students. This data difference can be explained that grade 12 students have many more responsibilities than grade 9 students do. They are more aware of the importance of time management as a skill to have in real life to helping them complete tasks as early as possible without compromising on the quality of work.

v. **Goal Setting**

The final set of statements pertained to the soft skill of goal setting, to which the majority of students (85.53%) had previously stated that they practice at the beginning of every school year. Students (42.11%) reported often setting short-term goals that they can complete in a few weeks; however, approximately 14.48% of the students reported rarely or never doing that. It would be interesting to investigate the factors that might affect this decision: Is it something related to their family life? school life? personal issues? Data disaggregation by gender and grade did not reveal differences in practices between female and male students or across the grades.

Moreover, 31.58% of the students reported always making long-term goals that they can complete in a year or so; however, 27.63% of respondents also reported rarely or never doing so. Despite that, the significant number of respondents (68.42%), regardless of gender or grade, believed that setting goals for themselves is important even though they do not all practice it. Finally, respondents (63.16%) believed that goal setting would always help them manage their tasks better. In fact, 60.00% of girls and 66.67% reported that goal setting always improves task management. Looking at the grades, data shows that 50.00% of Grade 9, 69.57% of Grade 10, 56.25% of Grade 11, and 80.00% of Grade 12 students selected “always” in response to this question. This finding could be considered a good indicator.

Even though students do not fully practice the skill of goal setting, they are aware of its importance and might actually be ready to develop it further if need be at school or future jobs.

d. Students' Attitudes Regarding Soft Skills Learning

When it comes to looking at the attitudes of students regarding learning about soft skills, the overwhelming majority of students (90.79%) reported that they believe that learning about soft skills at schools is of importance. 80.00% of female students considered it as very important compared to 38.89% of male students. The majority of Grade 9 (72.73%) and Grade 12 (80.00%) stated that learning about soft skills at school is very important compared to only 43.48% and 50.00% of Grade 10 and 11 students, respectively. This students' attitude towards soft skills is very promising. If schools are to play their part in strengthening that link, they must benefit from this promising attitude to integrate the soft skills that contribute to both university and workplace success.

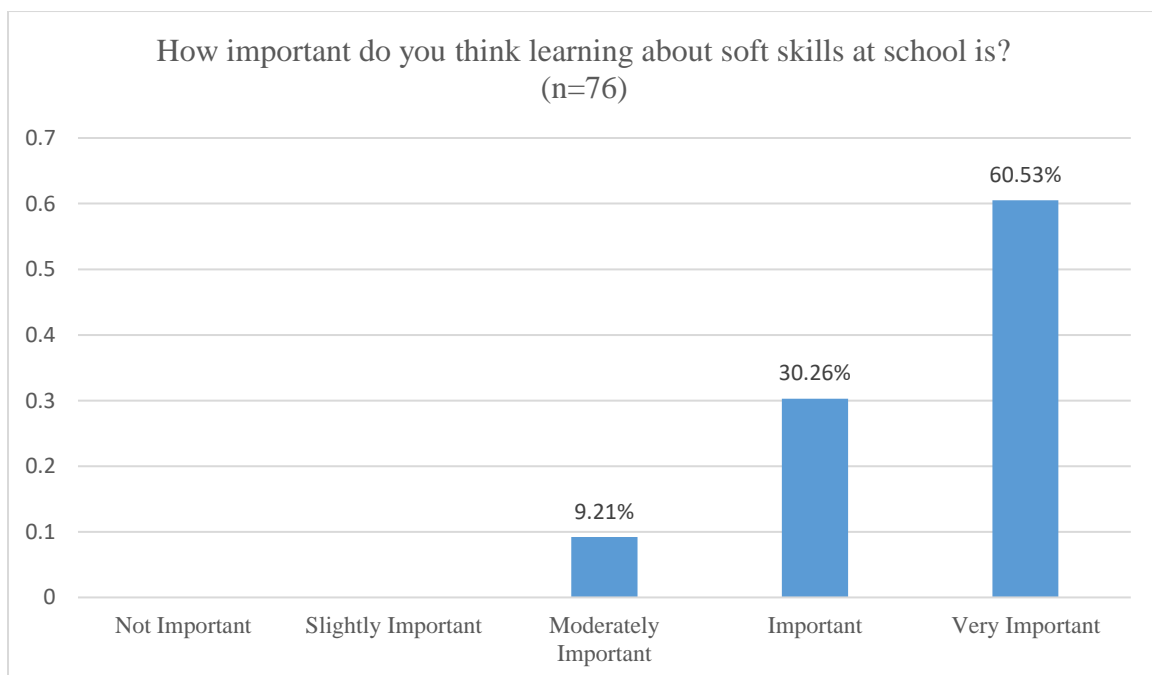


Figure 2-Bar Chart representing the students' perceived importance of learning soft skills at school

When asked how important they think it is for their teachers to possess soft skills, a significant number respondents (69.74%) reported that it is very important. The majority of the male students (72.22%) and female students (67.50%) shares this opinion. It is also shared by 72.73% of Grade 9, 65.22% of Grade 10, 68.75% of Grade 11, and 73.33% of Grade 12 students. It is worthy to note that the majority of grade 12 students agree that it is important for their teachers to have soft skills. This opinion comes from students on the verge of looking for a job in the near future.

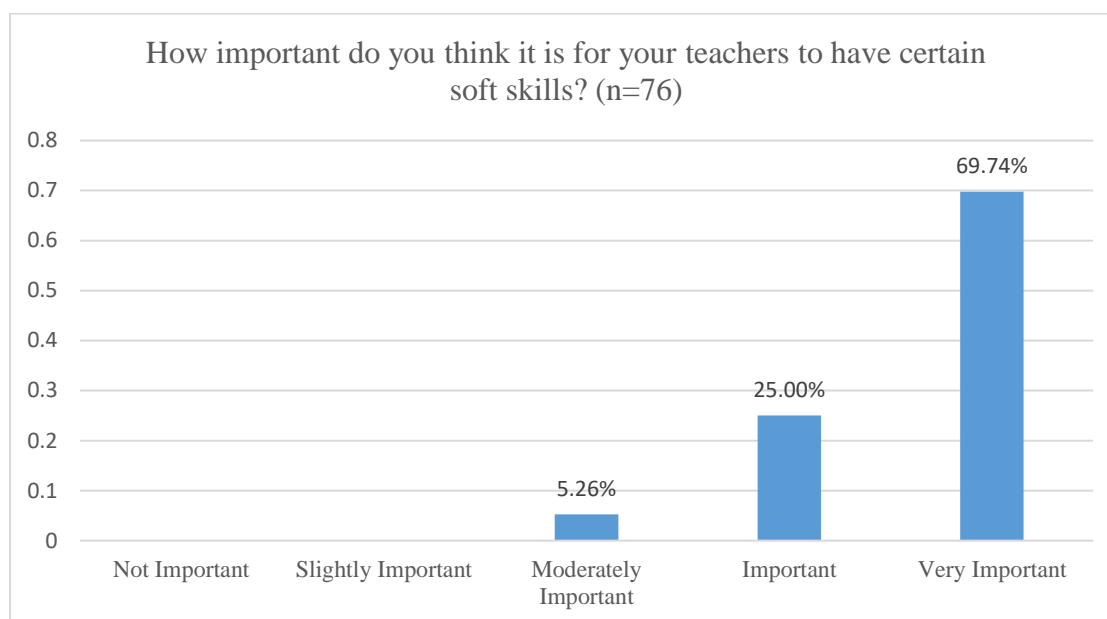


Figure 3-Bar Chart representing students' perceived importance of having teachers who have soft skills

When asked how important they think it is for their learning experience to incorporate in the curriculum soft skills, 61.84% respondents reported that they find it very important. Data segregation by gender revealed that while this position is held by 82.50% of the female students, it was only held by 38.89% of male students. Data segregation shows that 63.64% of Grade 9, 52.17% of Grade 10, 75.00% of Grade 11, and 60.00% of Grade 12 find this integration of soft skills to be important.

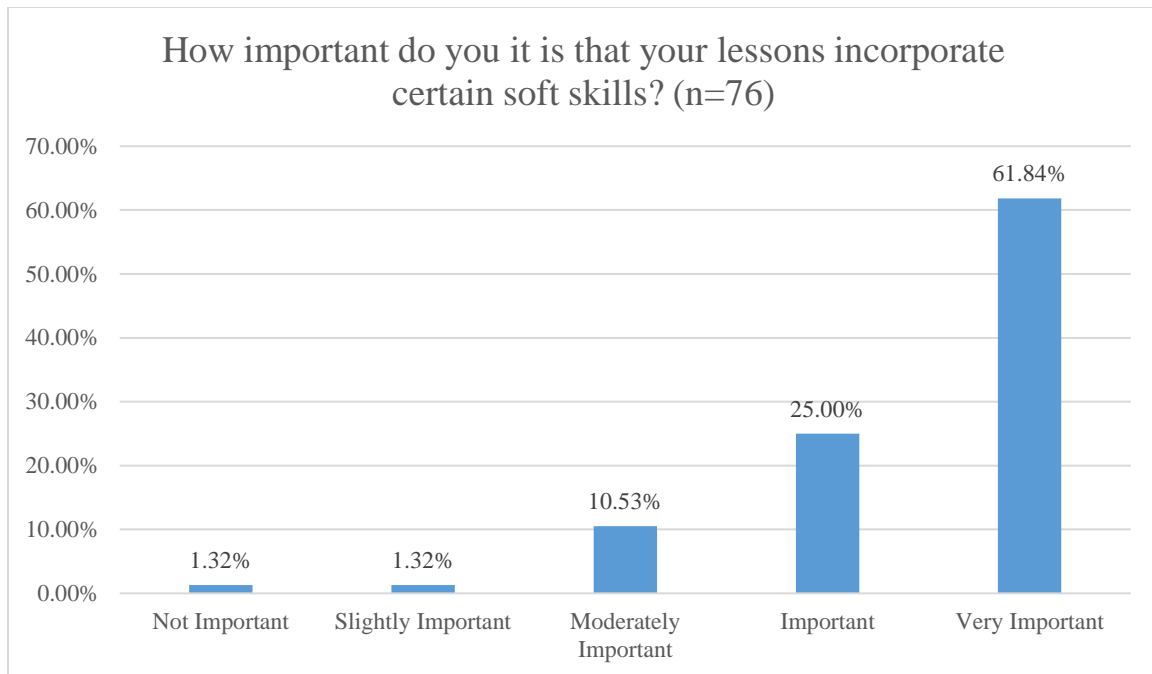


Figure 4-Bar Chart representing students' perceived importance of having certain soft skills

Teachers' Survey

Defining Soft Skills

In total, 9 teachers completed the online teacher survey. All the teacher participants reported being conversant with the concept of soft skills. When asked about how they became acquainted with soft skills, 8 out of 9 participants claimed through personal research, 3 out of 9 commended school workshops, and 2 teachers mentioned private workshops. This finding supports the idea that knowledge of the concept of soft skills was introduced from workshops and personal endeavours. There was a consensus among the teachers that soft skills are essential in today's job market. When asked about their understanding of "soft skills" as teachers, the majority of responses considered that they were personal attributes and skillsets that improve performance and potential employability of young individuals. The specific soft skills highlighted by teachers were communication skills (mentioned 5 times), social skills (mentioned 3 times), emotional intelligence (mentioned 3 times), critical thinking

(mentioned once) and problem solving (mentioned once). One of the responses focused on the long-term societal impact that the teacher envisions concerning soft skills; they explained, using their own words: *“Soft Skills are those that reinforce my educational vision which is to create active citizens and leaders for change who can use all what they learn in school to develop their nation sustainably.”* Such narration clarifies the perception of the teachers who responded to the surveys and who are actually aware of the recent trending of soft skills and the important skills to focus on in today’s classrooms.

Integrating Soft Skills in Lessons

When asked if they had previously introduced their students to soft skills, the majority of the teachers (88.89%) stated that they had applied and incorporated specific soft skills in their teaching practices. Teachers mentioned that they incorporate team-working activities and encourage their students to think outside the box. The majority (8 out of 9) set different goals for their students to achieve throughout the year. To understand to what extent students are free to express themselves in class, teachers were asked whether their decision in class is always final and students cannot contradict them. 8 out of 9 teachers denied this claim; one was unsure.

This is an imperative finding, and a promising one as well, to see that teachers have already introduced their students to soft skills in class. However, if we compare these answers to the students’ answers, it becomes clear that there is a possible gap in how the information is transmitted from the teachers to their students. Many students failed to define or identify certain soft skills presented in class. As such, it is very important for teachers to convey such information to their students to clearly inform them of the skills being applied during the lesson and their utility since 61.84% of the students believed that it is very important for their teachers to incorporate soft skills within their lesson plans.

When asked to elaborate on the instances when they incorporated soft skills within their lesson plan, one teacher mentioned goal setting through lesson planning: *“For every chapter, I set a goal to be achieved in the end of each session.”* Other responses mentioned project-based learning, team building exercises, partnerships with non-governmental organizations on school projects as means of incorporating teamwork and collaboration skills in their teaching. To improve the students’ communication skills, some ideas that were mentioned included public speaking exercises, class debates, and developing campaigns. Two teachers explained that they teach their students how to manage their stress; as one of them explains: *“I make sure to discuss with them each session how to control their stress and manage it in order to boost their performance.”* To help the students become good leaders and decision-makers, teachers emphasized the importance of incorporating exercises that invite students to think critically and outside of the box and behave ethically and responsibly. Finally, one of the teachers reported helping develop their students’ entrepreneurship skills by asking them to come up with business ideas that solve problems in society. Such activities also help them work on different soft skills, as they put it: *“Through such activities they acquire life skills such as communication skills, team building, and critical thinking skills.”*

Teachers who had previously introduced soft skills into their lessons reported that their students were more likely to engage with them when they employed soft skills in lesson plans and that their students use the newly acquired soft skills in their classwork. This is in line with most research on soft skills that states, when used during the learning process, soft skills facilitate the understanding of the concepts by the students and their retention in the students’ memory.

The teachers were also asked to elaborate on the benefits and downsides of incorporating soft skills in lessons. The teachers agreed that the benefits of introducing soft

skills and creating opportunities to develop them in the classroom outweigh the negatives. Incorporating soft skills in lesson planning increased students' engagement in the classroom. Indeed, this approach creates a healthier and more energetic learning environment, resulting in better outcomes and improving the performance of students. Often when designing lessons, teachers were deliberate about identifying and communicating skill goals to students. Learning about time management, stress management and goal setting also measures the students' work more efficiently and productively. Moreover, not only does learning communication skills help students "find their voice", as one teacher put it, but it also allows for healthier interpersonal communications and better conflict management. Through such exercises, students acquire important life skills that make them more prepared to enter the labour market.

On the other hand, the main shortcoming that was discussed by the teachers was the need for better planning to incorporate soft skills exercises into the traditional lesson plan. This is an indicator to what extent the Lebanese curriculum is overcharged with unnecessary material: teachers have hard time planning their lessons because they have much to cover, in a limited time to meet the timeline of the BACC II official exams. Moreover, two teachers mentioned that soft skills are harder to master than hard skills and different students have different needs and are at different levels in certain skills. Students may not acquire the skills they are being taught in the limited timeframe that they have. As one of the teachers explains: *"I think if a student is overemotional, or is an over thinker, he or she may not be able to use soft skills adequately."* The mentioned themes are presented in table 5 below:

Table 5- Table representing teachers' perceived benefits and downside of incorporating soft skills in lesson planning

Benefits of Soft Skills in Lesson Planning	Downsides of Soft Skills in Lesson Planning
Increased Student Engagement	Extra planning

Increased Student Motivation	Harder to master than hard skills
Healthier Interpersonal Communication	Differ greatly from one student to the other
Improved Student Performance	
Increased student efficiency and productivity	
Healthier and more energized learning environment	
Better preparation for the real world and the labour market	

Teachers were then asked to specify to what extent they stress on the following set of skills in their lesson plans. A score of 0 is associated with “Do not stress at all”, 1 for “Slightly Stress”, 2 for “Somewhat Stress”, 3 for “Much” and 4 for “Stress A Great Deal.” Accordingly, the scores for each skill were calculated. The skills that teachers found most beneficial were communication, leadership and problem solving; the skill that was least stressed on is entrepreneurship. This result is understandable, as the first three skills are easy to incorporate in a variety of lesson plans. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, requires some additional work and effort to be implemented within a regular session, and most of the time teachers cannot afford losing too much time on such preparations. It is important to remember, though, that time spent on teaching these skills will not be lost, as those who are best armed with strong soft skills are most likely to excel.

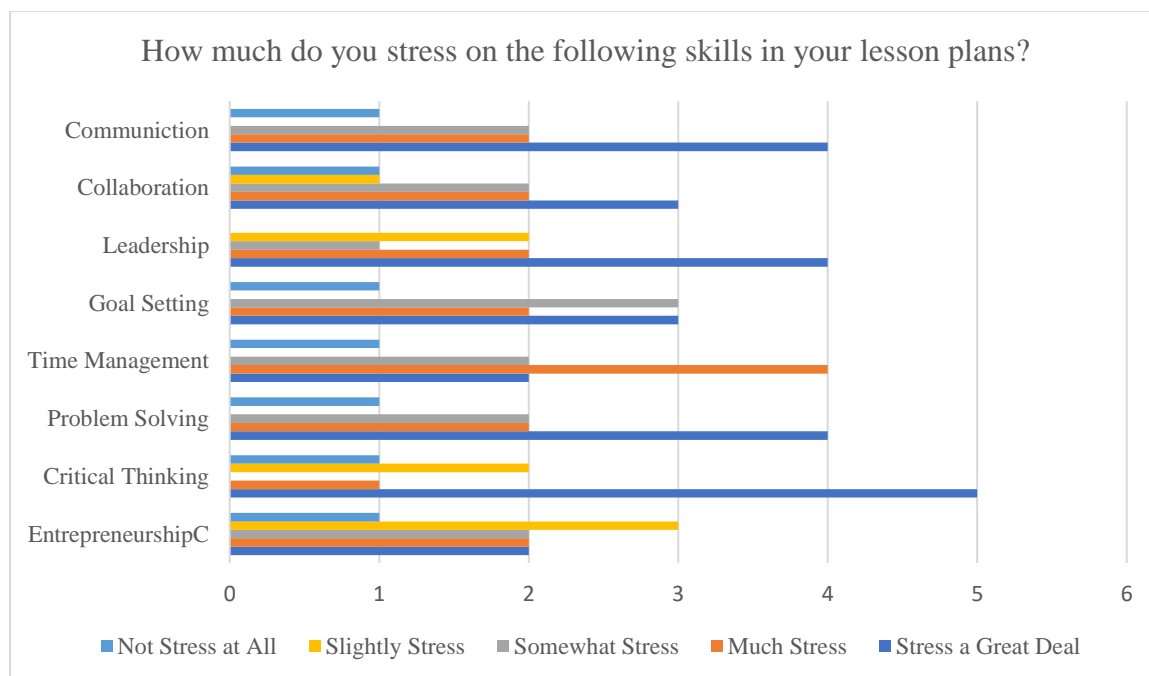


Figure 5-Bar chart representing the extent to which teacher stress on the following soft skills in their lesson planning

Table 6-Table representing the calculated scores associated with each soft skill

Soft Skill	Score
Communication	26
Collaboration	25
Leadership	26
Goal Setting	24
Time management	24
Problem Solving	26
Critical Thinking	25
Entrepreneurship	21

Finally, only 2 out of 9 teachers (22.22%) reported that they believe the disciplines that they teach at school benefit their students more than other life skills. In fact, 4 teachers disagreed with that statement, and 3 were unsure about the validity of this statement. When asked if they would be interested in attending workshops in the future on soft skills, the majority (77.78%) found them beneficial to their career development. The other 2 teachers stated that they were unsure. One reason for that decision might be the fact that workshops are usually given outside of school schedule. To them, the timing may be inconvenient, as

they also need to prepare their lesson plans for the upcoming session and finish school work at home.

Limitations

As with any research project, this thesis has gone through a number of limitations that may have affected the process of writing the paper, conducting the surveys with the students and the teachers, and obtaining the anticipated results and in general influenced the interpretation of the findings from the research.

Those shortcomings include –but are not limited to—the following:

1. One of the earliest limitations of this study is the October 17th uprising which erupted more than a year ago and brought unexpected challenges for the educational institutions in general and this research in particular. Most schools had to close during the last three months of 2019 because of sudden roadblocks and outbreaks of the protests, which obviously affected the researcher's ability to visit the designated schools for data collection. On the other hand, schools had to make up for the loss of school days, and many prioritized teaching over any extra-curricular activities, which also meant that they were not ready to dedicate any time from their teaching sessions to allow for the administration of study questionnaires.

2. Another current challenge to this research has been the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on the administration of the instruments of measurement. Initially, the questionnaires were supposed to be administered by the researcher himself and in-person at school. Many researchers have discussed the value of the researcher to be present at the time of the administration; however, because of the series of lockdowns that took place since March 2020, this was not possible for the researcher to perform the research planning. As a result of this unparalleled education disruption, the questionnaires had to be done online,

which, was not very convenient. Because of the nature of the questionnaires, the response rate could have been higher with both students' surveys and teachers' surveys, and the open-ended questions that were included in the teachers' questionnaire would have resulted in more significant data had they been part of semi-structured interviews. Finally, had the questionnaires been administered in-person, the researcher himself would have checked for any missing information or incorrect data, and he would have encouraged the participants to complete the missing parts and answer any questions that the students or teachers might have had or clarify any confusion.

3. The third drawback of this research was the fact that although the response rate was relatively high (especially in the case of the students' surveys, where 76 students out of 100 submitted a response), the number of respondents could have been higher, which would have resulted in more significant results and less bias. This is especially true in the case of teachers' surveys, where only 9 teachers submitted a complete survey. Some surveys of teachers were incomplete or not as detailed as the researcher hoped they would be to reflect the true value of the work. Again, this is linked to the fact that the questionnaires were administered online, with the researcher being unable to closely monitor the answers or maybe probe the teachers into presenting more detailed answers to the questions.

4. The fourth limitation of this study is related to the body of literature available on the topic of soft skills. It is true that this topic is trending lately in Lebanon and the Middle East; however, no substantial research was done. Although the researcher was able to find studies conducted on the effects of soft skills in the development of the students, educators, and the job market, very few studies were conducted in a more local context. In addition, because of the scarcity of the resources, the researcher was unable to find, in any of the reviewed studies, a questionnaire that can be used for the purpose of this thesis. The researcher had to construct his own questionnaires which were validated by the pilot study

done and the statistician mapping the questions in the questionnaires to the thesis research question

5. Another limitation of the research is the fact that only one private school was investigated for reasons mentioned earlier and beyond the control of the researcher . Originally, the researcher contacted several schools to for data collection from their students and teachers; however, the researcher ended up conducting it at Al-Manar school only. The results that the researcher obtained from the surveys, though significant, cannot yield the desired results. Based on some of the research that was previously cited in the literature, it is worth noting that the situation of soft skills can differ from grade to another, from one school to another, and from one area to another. Future research on soft skills in the educational system may attempt to establish a comparison between students and teachers at private schools and public schools, and students and teachers from different areas in Lebanon, and those in rural areas compared to students and teachers in urban areas.

Recommendations

Based on the previous studies presented in the literature review and the results and analysis of the students' and teachers' surveys of this research, recommendations can be provided to three agents: teachers, educational institutions, and the Government, regarding the best course of action to incorporate soft skills in schools. Those recommendations are presented as follows.

1. Teachers should introduce their students to the different soft skills in tandem within their focus on technical or hard skills. The latter will remain of great importance, especially that they can be clearly defined and measured; however, with the changing face of the job market and the world in recent years, those same hard skills are no longer enough to ensure a profitable career nor a successful

personal life. They need to be coupled with a set of soft skills to allow the students to enter the job market.

2. Teachers should ensure that their integration of soft skills within their lesson plans is as clear as possible for the students. Although many teachers claim to use regularly soft skills in their teaching practices, students may not identify the skills used in class nor their uses. Teachers are required to notify their students during the class session of the soft skill and about its impact on the learning process.
3. Teachers should devote some additional time during the preparation of their lesson plans to include the necessary soft skills. While some teachers may regard that this is too time-consuming, it is worth noting that this integration may not be done during every session. For instance, students could work on their long-term goals at the beginning of the year and on their short-term goals at the beginning of every month; they could work in teams on group projects once or twice during the semester. What is even more important is the fact that soft skills may be addressed in several courses; teachers of different subjects can work on developing a specific skill each. This maximizes the introduction of the number of skills to students and lowers the workload of the lesson plan preparations. Although this might require additional coordination between the teachers, once that is set, the process becomes much more efficient.
4. Private and public educational institutions should start introducing their students to the different soft skills by possibly collaborating with private training institutions that offer workshops on soft skills and assistance in that regard. Although this is not the ultimate solution, it could be a first step in introducing their students to these skills while planning to incorporate the concept of soft skills in the curriculum.

5. Educational institutions should require teachers to develop at least one soft skill with their students in their teaching practices. This is not an overbearing requirement, as the chosen skills may be distributed among the different teachers and subjects. The schools can also run a summative assessment at the end of the year to study the effects in the students' personal, academic, and professional lives before and after soft skills were introduced.
6. Ultimately, educational institutions should create a course on soft skills like any other subject. This course may be scheduled weekly in the students' calendar. In this course, students will develop their knowledge on said skills and become more intrigued to learn more about them. HR practitioners or experts in the field, instead of by the teachers themselves, may give this course. This approach would ensure that the information provided to the students comes from a credible source and does not overwhelm the teachers even more, with the objective of sustainable development.
7. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) should require every school to incorporate the acquisition of soft skills into its curriculum. Moreover, should teachers have some issues fitting those discussions during their sessions, then they can be given during extra-curricular activities, such as workshops, projects, public speaking competitions, and others. This may be done during the planning phase of incorporating them on board in the curriculum.
8. The Ministry should institute a course on soft skills with identifiable learning objectives and incorporate it within the official school curriculum. Schools will then have to abide by the Ministry's decision and commit specific time every week to teach their students soft skills with the necessary application. This approach is beneficial because students will learn about soft skills on a regular

basis instead of relying on intermittent knowledge that is acquired from workshops.

9. Private Institutions should also collaborate with educational institutions and offer students the chance to take part in extra-curricular programs that will benefit them greatly. For instance, these programs can include summer internships for students and field visits that will allow them to experience the workplace before even graduating.

Conclusion

With the huge developments that have occurred in recent years in the field of education and the job market, one cannot simply remain rooted in an old system of skills and values that no longer cuts it. The looks and feels of the workplace have changed dramatically. On the contrary, one should be equipped with the necessary skills before he/she can venture into the job market. Educators, schools, and the government can play a very important role in preparing students, the future employees, to the challenges that await them in their professional life.

Every person possesses soft skills, the strength of which vary depending on the individual. Soft skills should no longer be regarded as a luxury or as a second thought; they should become a necessary requirement in the job market. People who still choose to focus on developing their technical skills will be left behind during the employment process. These can be easily taught and perfected. However, soft skills, according to research, were proven to be on the list of requirements of some of the biggest employers in the world. They are more challenging to develop and learn. Consequently, in Lebanon, with the challenging economic situation shrinking job opportunities even further, only a select few will be able to withstand these difficulties. The job market has started adopting the concept of the “survival

of the fittest”, and, in this case, the “fittest” would be the one that is able to hone their technical skills to the required degree without ignoring the development of their soft skills during that process.

As an HR practitioner myself, I deal with possible future employees on a daily basis, and I found invariably that hiring an employee with advanced soft skills can have a significant impact on an organization’s ability to function effectively. If the employee already knows how to build good relationships with people, communicate effectively with them, work collaboratively in teams, and manage their time properly, then this creates a healthy work environment that will benefit both the employees and the employer. If the employees are already equipped with these skills, then it will save a lot of time and resources for the company, which can then be invested in other projects, mainly the improvement of the employee well-being, and many others. According to the annual Deloitte’s 2020 Global Human Capital Trends Report, executives now consider soft skills are equally or more important to hire than technical skills. They foster employee retention, improve leadership and build a meaningful culture. Why wait until the student reaches the workplace? why not rail the climb to the top as early as school year? That is the problem, and this is the challenge.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Form Presented to the Students

Dear Student,

Thank you for taking the time to fill the following survey.

My name is Joseph Matta, and I am a Master's student at Notre Dame University (NDU), pursuing an MA degree in Educational Psychology.

In recent years, soft skills have become a crucial asset of your qualifications for various occupations in the job market, so much so that some employers value them even more than technical skills. Thus, investigating their importance and necessity in the school curricula can be the first step in this process.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate your knowledge, perceptions, and behaviors regarding a specific set of skills. You are asked to fill a survey that includes a set of questions tackling various aspects of the concept in question.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence. There are no known risks resulting from your participation and no direct benefit from your participation is expected. There is no cost to you except your time. The instrument will take about 15 – 20 minutes to complete.

Please note that you are not asked to provide us with any information regarding your identity. Thus, your results will remain anonymous, and the information that you provide through your survey will be kept secure by the researcher himself.

Thank you for your time and your willingness to help.

Sincerely,

Joseph Matta

Appendix 2: Survey Administered to Students Assessing Their Knowledge, Perceptions, and Behaviours of Soft Skills

Gender: Male / Female

Age:

Grade:

Dear Student,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project. Kindly follow the instruction at the beginning of every section of the survey.

Section 1: Knowledge

In the first section of the survey, you are kindly asked to answer a set of questions that aim to evaluate your knowledge of soft skills.

Instructions: Below is a list of various statements. You are asked to choose either Yes, No, or I don't know.

1. Have you ever heard of the concept of “soft skills” before? Yes / No

Soft skills, also known as life skills, are defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a collection of mental, personal, and interpersonal abilities that allow the individual to critically make decisions, solve problems, construct interpersonal relationships, empathize with others, as well as lead a happy and healthy life (UNESCO, 2018).

2. Based on the definition presented above, soft skills are harder to master than technical skills. Yes / No / I don't know
3. Soft skills are also known as vocational skills. Yes / No / I don't know
4. You are born with certain soft skills that cannot be learned. Yes / No / I don't know
5. Today's job market requires the individual to possess a certain set of soft skills. Yes / No / I don't know
6. In class, you are given the opportunity to work together in teams. Yes / No
7. You set goals at the beginning of the year and work on achieving them. Yes / No
8. You are taught to think outside of the box when working on solving problems. Yes/ No
9. You are allowed to express your opinion freely in class. Yes / No
10. Which of the following skills do you think count as soft skills? (Select all possible answers)

Leadership

Creativity

Teamwork

Flexibility

Communication

Accounting

Data Analysis

Hairdressing

Web Designing

Plumbing

Problem Solving

Entrepreneurship

Section 2: Perceptions and Behavior

This section will assess your perceptions and behaviors regarding a specific set of soft skills.

Instructions: Below is a list of statements. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements, on a scale from Always to Never.

I prefer being my own boss.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I am curious, and I am continually in search of discovery.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

When faced with difficulties, I look for new alternatives and new solutions.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

It is easy for me to motivate others to work with me.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

When I need help on an assignment, I think of asking my teachers for assistance.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

When I disagree with my friends, I am willing to talk things out with them.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

When discussing a topic with someone, I actively listen to him or her instead of thinking of what I will say next.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I express my ideas clearly.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I have no problem working with others to complete a project.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

When working in a group, I give others the chance to talk and give their opinion.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I adjust my ideas after receiving constructive feedback and criticism from the group.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I like to share responsibility with others in my group.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I turn my assignments on time.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I finish my homework before participating in other activities like watching TV or playing video games.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I think I can manage my time effectively.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Good time management yields better results.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I make short term goals that I can complete in few weeks.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I make long-term goals that will take a year or longer to complete.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

I think that setting goals for myself is important.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Goal setting helps me manage my tasks better.

Always Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Finally, please provide us with your opinion on the following statements with 1 being “not important” and 5 being “very important”.

How important do you think learning about soft skills at school is?

1 2 3 4 5

How important do you think it is for your teachers to have certain soft skills?

1 2 3 4 5

How important do you think it is that your lessons incorporate certain soft skills?

1 2 3 4 5

Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix 3: Form Presented to the Teachers

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for taking some time to fill the following survey. My name is Joseph Matta, and I am a Master's student at Notre Dame University (NDU), pursuing an MA degree in Educational Psychology.

Purpose of my thesis: I chose to work on the knowledge and perceptions of students and teachers regarding the necessity to incorporate soft skills in the learning curriculum. Students and teachers of The Al-Manar Modern School were identified as potential candidates for my study.

Procedure: The below survey contains open-ended and close-ended questions, all aiming to assess your perception of soft skills and whether or not you see any benefits or inconveniences to their incorporation within school curricula. You are asked to fill the survey online and send it back to the researcher

Please note that your participation is voluntary, and your answers will remain confidential and will not be shared with the school under any circumstances; thus, you are only asked to provide your gender.

Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix 4: Online Questionnaire Administered to the Teachers

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project. Kindly follow the instructions at the beginning of every section of the survey.

Gender: Male / Female

Part 1

Instructions: Below is a list of close-ended questions. Please select **one** answer to each question.

1. Are you familiar with the concept of soft skills? Yes / No
2. If yes, how did you become familiar with the concept? If no, please skip to part 2 of the survey.
 - a. Personal Research
 - b. School Workshops
 - c. Private Workshops
 - d. Other:
3. Soft skills are essential in today's job market. Yes / No

Part 2

Soft skills, also known as life skills, are defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a collection of mental, personal, and interpersonal abilities that allow the individual to critically make decisions, solve problems, construct interpersonal relationships, empathize with others, as well as lead a happy and healthy life (UNESCO, 2018).

Instructions: Below is a list of statements. Based on the definition presented above, you are asked to choose and circle either Yes or No.

1. I have introduced my students to soft skills before. Yes / No
2. I incorporate some soft skills in my classroom. Yes / No
3. I am ready to attend workshops on soft skills. Yes / No
4. I think that what I teach at school benefits the students more than other life skills. Yes / No
5. Students are more likely to engage with me when I employ soft skills in my lessons. Yes / No
6. Students use their newly acquired soft skills in classroom activities. Yes / No

7. I incorporate teamwork activities and have students work together in teams. Yes / No
8. I help students set different goals that they work on achieving throughout the year. Yes / No
9. In class, my decision is always final. Students are not allowed to contradict it. Yes / No
10. I help my students to think outside of the box. Yes / No

Part 3

Instructions: Below is a list of soft skills. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “totally”.

How much do you stress on the following set of skills in your lesson plans?

Communication	1	2	3	4	5
Collaboration	1	2	3	4	5
Leadership	1	2	3	4	5
Goal Setting	1	2	3	4	5
Time Management	1	2	3	4	5
Problem Solving	1	2	3	4	5
Critical Thinking	1	2	3	4	5
Entrepreneurship	1	2	3	4	5

Part 4

Instructions: Below is a list of open-ended questions. You are kindly asked to share your answers.

- 1) As a teacher, how would you define soft skills?
- 2) As a teacher, can you provide me with any instances when you incorporated any soft skill within your lesson plan?
- 3) As a teacher, can you think of any benefits for the incorporation of soft skills in the classroom setting?
- 4) As a teacher, can you think of any downsides for the incorporation of soft skills in the classroom setting?

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