



## Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions of Soft Skills Acquisition by Students in Bayelsa State

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### Abstract

In an increasingly changing, skill-based global economy, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability, and emotional intelligence are essential to students' success in and out of the classroom. This study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions of students' acquisition of soft skills in secondary schools in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey method was used in the study. Secondary school teachers in Bayelsa State comprised the population in the study. 200 teachers were sampled using a multi-stage sampling technique. Eight local government areas exist in Nigeria's Bayelsa State. Four out of the eight local government areas (LGAs) in the state were selected at random. Out of the eight local government areas (LGAs) of the state, four were sampled randomly. Ten secondary schools were randomly sampled from each of the chosen LGAs to yield the forty schools. Five teachers were intentionally sampled from each school, targeting those who have taught for at least three years and know their students' academic and social behaviors. The "Teachers' Perception on Soft Skills Acquisition Questionnaire (TPSSAQ)" is a self-constructed and validated tool utilized by the researchers. A reliability coefficient of 0.86 was attained by using Cronbach's alpha. A significance level of 0.05 was used to evaluate the hypothesis. Mean, standard deviation, and independent sampled t-test statistics were used in the data analysis. The results showed that despite teachers' positive attitude towards soft skills, students' acquisition rate is low due to lack of training, limited resources, time constraints, and lack of curriculum support. The study recommends updating secondary school curriculums to include soft skills as key learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Perception, Acquisition, Soft Skills, Teachers, Students

### Introduction

The educational paradigm has changed in the twenty-first century, moving away from a narrow focus on cognitive knowledge and toward a more comprehensive strategy, which incorporate the development of soft skills. Soft skills are a collection of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and non-technical abilities that affect how people interact, communicate, and collaborate. These abilities cover traits like critical thinking, communication, teamwork, flexibility, emotional intelligence, and time management. Soft skills focus on individual traits and behaviors that influence a person's capacity for teamwork or effective communication, in contrast to hard skills, which indicate particular aptitudes or fields of knowledge that can be taught. According to the World Economic Forum (2023) and the OECD (2021), students rely on soft skills to cope with the complexities of contemporary life, as well as the shifting world of work. Beyond academics, soft skills enable individuals to integrate knowledge into practice within real-world contexts. Hard skills apply to occupations, such as the ability to draft a viable business plan, or knowledge of the applicable laws surrounding inheritances. Laws and drafting of effective business plans are all taught within the primary focus subjects. Personal traits like communication become invaluable in securing employment soon after graduating high school.

In Mugachev et al. (2023), soft skills are social and socioemotional skills that people rely on in different settings, which influence their self-esteem and career success. "Soft skills" are a sociological phenomenon linked with human emotional intelligence, defined by Onabamiro, Onuka, and Oyekanmi (2014) as characteristics such as personality, social skills, communication skills, language learning skills, interpersonal behaviors, kindness, and positivity that affect the way a person interacts with others. Soft skills contribute to hard skills, which are a part of an individual's IQ and must be utilized in order to obtain a job as well as other possible occupations. Students

with these skills can excel in their studies and nurture healthy relationships through every aspect of their life. Obilor (2019) discovered that students' academic performance in Rivers State, Nigeria, is greatly affected by soft skills such as time management, communication, and problem solving. Further, incorporating soft skills into curriculum was discovered to improve the attainment of students' skills, as research on Afghanistan's secondary education classes (Akramy & Aabid, 2024) indicates. Soft skills encompass a wide variety of skills that transcend personality traits, such as successful communication with educational and non-educational specialists; strategic planning and organization; motivation and motivation; compliance with budget and time limitations; persuading and coordinating on a diverse range of technical and non-technical matters with diverse groups; task priority and management; accommodation to changing conditions; reliability; and mentoring and team building, among others.

To make sure that these students get a balanced development and have a bright career in the future, they need to acquire professional knowledge and enhance their soft skills during college. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Labor, employers prefer emphasizing personal behavior (practical and cognitive skills) such as professionalism, communication skills (verbal, written, listening, and interpersonal), teamwork, and analytical thinking. These abilities are not only required for career success but also for personal growth and assisting society. Buchanan et al. (2020) assert that these abilities/skills enable players to improve educational quality and facilitate the continuous development of academic or career trajectories. They also enable learners to gain the skills required in the workforce. Actually, by ad evidence for vacancies, soft skills increasingly are stated as a mandatory qualification for hiring (Lyu & Liu, 2021). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the importance of education systems equipping learners with a wide range of skills such as cognitive, social, and emotional skills to equip them for future challenges in the 21st century (OECD, 2021). This integrated method of learning seeks to develop mature adults who are able to adapt to different life and working circumstances.

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering the development of soft skills among students. The degree to which they are learned and developed in the classroom depends largely on their perceptions, attitudes, and abilities. Studies show that teachers' readiness and sensitivity to soft skills are critical in the effective application of them in the classroom. For instance, research has established that teachers with high levels of consciousness and preparedness are likely to incorporate soft skills into their instructional practices, thereby enhancing students' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (Umeghalu & Obi, 2020). Obi, Ibebuikwe, and Urenyere (2024) explored teachers' perceptions about the soft skills of senior secondary three Home Economics students and their influence on career development in the Owerri Education Zone. The study identified that soft skills are a major factor in career-readiness of students and in family stability. Teachers identified that students who had well-developed soft skills had greater flexibility and problem-solving ability, which are essential in accomplishing successful careers. A Nigerian study by Adeniji and Adekunle (2020) showed that most teachers lacked the training to integrate soft skills like communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence into their teaching methods. Most teachers felt poorly equipped since opportunities for professional development were not common. In Kenya, Mutinda and Wambua (2021) found that there was an exam-oriented education system that centered on cognition and academic performance at the cost of cultivating soft skills. Teachers were being coerced to "teach to the test," with little room for creativity or the teaching of life skills. In a Ghana study, Mensah et al. (2019) observed that packed classrooms and lack of teaching materials limited the use of participatory and interactive methods necessary for the acquisition of soft skills, e.g., role-playing and group discussion.

Gender as a sociocultural construct has, for quite a long time, been of focus in educational research, albeit in academic variations in performance, behavior in classrooms, and interaction with students, all by the teacher. Implicitly, from studies, the teacher might provide the student with stereotypes or expectations based on the teacher's or the student's gender, with potential effects on the way that teachers perceive improving and showcasing students' soft skills (Tiedeman et al., 2020). In other contexts in Africa, including Nigeria, there are also gendered prejudice in practice at school. By research, it is observed that boys are often regarded as risk-taker and braver and girls as team working, being more expressive, and friendly (Kayii & Okiridu, 2020). These perceptions could affect the way teachers assess learners' progress in soft skills, especially those of social relations and leadership. In a study of mathematics teachers in the Mazabuka District of Zambia, Busaka, Kitta, and Umugiraneza (2020) conducted an examination of perceptions regarding the integration of soft skills into mathematics instruction. The findings indicated that teachers had the inclination to perceive the integration of soft skills favourably, and more importantly, these perceptions were not strongly influenced by the gender of the teachers. This suggests that, at least where mathematics teachers here are concerned, gender has no significant impact on opinions regarding the acquisition of soft skills. A research conducted by Kayii and Okiridu (2020) investigated teachers' attitudes towards incorporating soft skills in teaching Business Studies in Rivers State

secondary schools. The results showed that male and female teachers recognized the significance of soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem solving in raising learners' achievements. Nonetheless, the research also referred to challenges, such as inadequate training and institutional lack of support, in preventing the integration of these skills into the curriculum successfully. Mullola et al. (2012) carried out a study on teachers' perceptions regarding pupils' temperament, learning ability, and teaching flexibility in Finland. The research identified that teachers tended to assess the behavior and learning ability of boys negatively as opposed to girls. Interestingly, male teachers were more positive about boys than female teachers, suggesting that attitude can be influenced by the gender of both teacher and student.

Nigeria's National Education Policy emphasizes the need to produce individuals who are balanced in terms of academic knowledge alongside emotional and social skills for ensuring responsible citizenship as well as employability (FRN, 2014). Consequently, exploring teachers' perceptions of soft skill development from the gender perspective will provide insights into the equity and quality of interventions in education. It will also inform targeted interventions to reduce gender-based disparities in skill development. Against the above background, this study seeks to discover teachers' perceptions of building soft skills among secondary school teenagers in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, and whether the perceptions differ by the gender of the teachers. The findings of the research are expected to inform gender-sensitive pedagogical practices, teacher training programs, and education policy development towards integral student development

### Statement of the Problem

In the current educational setting, the acquisition of soft skills is now an essential component of overall student development. Despite this worldwide trend, the integration of soft skills into Nigerian secondary school curricula remains far from consistent, typically being undermined by examination-oriented instruction and insufficient programs for soft skills development. In Bayelsa State, these challenges are further exacerbated by socio-economic factors and poor infrastructure. The majority of secondary schools lack training courses and the resources to implement soft skills successfully in their curriculum. There is also little empirical research on secondary school teachers' perception of cultivating soft skills among students in this subject area. This perception is significant to be understood because the teachers have an important role to shape the development of such skills through their pedagogy and interaction with the students. Previous studies have established the need for teachers' readiness and positive attitudes towards integrating soft skills in their work. For instance, in Rivers State, Kayii and Okiridu (2020) showed that teachers acknowledged the importance of soft skills in shaping students but had challenges such as insufficient training and no institutional backing. In the same way, a study by Busaka, Kitta, and Umugiraneza (2020) in Mazabuka District in Zambia found that even though there is awareness of the significance of soft skills from the side of mathematics teachers, improved integration techniques in the curriculum are needed. As there has been no specific research on Bayelsa State, it is essential to study secondary school teachers' views on students' acquisition of soft skills in this state.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of secondary school teachers on the importance of soft skills acquisition among students in Bayelsa State?
2. What is the perceived level of acquisition of specific soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, emotional intelligence) among secondary school students in Bayelsa State?
3. What are the perceptions of secondary school teachers on the barriers to effective soft skill development?
4. Are there differences in teachers' perceptions of soft skills acquisition based on gender?

### Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at 0.05 significant level:

1. There is no significant difference in teachers' perceptions of soft skills acquisition among students based on gender.

### Material and Methods

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The design is suitable because it enables the researcher to gather data from a representative population to describe teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in fostering students' soft skills in a real educational setting without interfering with any variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study population consisted of all secondary school teachers in public schools in the eight Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Bayelsa State. They consisted of teachers with various subjects and levels of experience, whose perceptions would provide divergent opinions on soft skill development. There was a multi-

stage sampling approach. The first stage was the random selection of four LGAs from the eight in the state. At the second stage, 10 secondary schools were randomly selected from each of the selected LGA, giving a total of 40 schools. Lastly, five teachers were selected purposefully from each school, targeting teachers with at least three years of teaching experience and knowledge about students' social and academic behavior. In the study, 200 teachers participated. The primary instrument used to gather data was a questionnaire designed by the researcher titled 'Teachers' Perception on Soft Skills Acquisition Questionnaire (TPSSAQ)'. There were three sections in the questionnaire:

- Section A: Demographic information of the respondents.
- Section B: Questions about teachers' perceptions of the importance of soft skills.
- Section C: Questions assessing the perceived level of proficiency in some soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, flexibility, critical thinking, emotional intelligence) among students.

Response was rated on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). To ensure face and content validity, the instrument was screened by three Educational Psychology and Measurement and Evaluation scholars at the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha procedure, and the reliability coefficient of 0.86 indicated a very high internal consistency level. Data were collected by administering questionnaires directly with trained research assistants. The researchers ensured that all the ethical stipulations, such as seeking informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and ensuring voluntary participation, were adhered to strictly. Descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation were utilized in analyzing the answers to the research questions. A decision point of an arbitrary benchmark mean of 2.50 was set: a mean score of 2.50 and above was classified as "Agree," a positive attitude, and below 2.50 as "Disagree." Inferential statistics, the independent sampled t-test, were employed to determine differences in perceptions based on gender.

## Results

**Research Question One:** What are the perceptions of secondary school teachers on the importance of soft skills acquisition among students in Bayelsa State?

**Table 1: Perceptions of Secondary School Teachers on the Importance of Soft Skills Acquisition among students in Bayelsa State**

S/N	Teachers' Perception of Soft Skills Importance	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Soft skills are essential for students' academic and personal success.	3.70	0.67
2	Students need soft skills to succeed in the 21st-century workforce.	3.92	0.39
3	The school curriculum supports soft skills development in students.	3.74	0.58
4	Teachers play a vital role in fostering soft skills in students.	3.66	0.59
<b>Grand Mean</b>		<b>3.76</b>	<b>0.56</b>

Table 1 indicates secondary school teachers' views of the importance of honing the soft skills among Bayelsa State students. The mean response score of items 1-4 indicated by participants is higher than the average standard of 2.5, and that implies the respondents agreed with items 1-4. Table 1 indicates that the respondents concur that soft skills matter to allow students to succeed in the 21st-century job market; that the school curriculum supports the learning of soft skills by the students; that soft skills are needed for the students to excel academically and as people; and that teachers have an important role to help students develop soft skills. Moreover, the overall average of table 1 is 3.76, which indicates that Bayelsa State secondary school teachers lean towards having a positive attitude toward the value and effectiveness of learning soft skills among students.

**Research Question Two:** What is the perceived level of acquisition of specific soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, emotional intelligence) among secondary school students in Bayelsa State?

**Table 2: The Perceived Level of Acquisition of Specific Soft Skills among Secondary School Students in Bayelsa State**

S/N	Observation of Students' Acquisition of Soft Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation	Decision
1	Students demonstrate effective communication skills.	2.01	1.14	Low
2	Students often work well in teams or groups.	2.16	1.01	Low
3	Students can manage emotions in stressful situations.	2.05	0.81	Low
4	Students are adaptable to new learning environments and changes.	1.73	0.99	Low
5	Students solve problems creatively and logically.	1.66	0.97	Low
	<b>Grand Mean</b>	<b>1.92</b>	<b>0.98</b>	<b>Low</b>

Table 2 shows the opinions of the teachers regarding the level of certain soft skills acquired by Bayelsa State secondary school students. Table 2 shows that the mean ratings for items 1 to 5 are less than the criterion mean of 2.5, which indicates that the teachers did not agree on these items. Additionally, table 2 shows that the overall mean is 1.92, which reflects a low level. Hence, the rate of acquisition of such specified soft skills (e.g., communication, cooperation, flexibility, critical thinking, and emotional awareness) by students from Bayelsa State's secondary schools is poor.

**Research Question Three:** What are the perceptions of secondary school teachers on the barriers to effective soft skill development?

**Table 3: The Perceptions of Secondary School Teachers on the Barriers to Effective Soft Skill Development**

S/N	Teachers' Challenges in Promoting Soft Skills	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	I have received adequate training on how to teach soft skills.	1.94	0.85
2	The school provides resources for soft skills development.	1.66	0.94
3	Time constraints limit soft skills instruction in my classroom.	3.48	0.72
4	There is little support from curriculum planners on soft skills.	3.92	0.37

Table 3 shows secondary school teachers' views on the obstacles to effective soft skill development. Table 3 reveals that perceived obstacles to effective soft skill development in Bayelsa State are a lack of training in the teaching of soft skills; few resources available for soft skills development; time constraints that do not allow for the teaching of soft skills in classrooms; and little support from curriculum developers in terms of soft skills.

**Hypothesis one:** There is no significant difference in teachers' perceptions of soft skills acquisition among students based on gender.

**Table 4: Independent Sampled t-test on the Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Soft Skills Acquisition based on Gender**

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t-value	Sig (p-value)
Soft Skills Acquisition	Male	105	53.13	14.22	180	12.82	0.121
	Female	95	52.08	16.16			

The data in Table 4 illustrates how teachers' views on soft skills development vary between genders. Table 4 indicates that male students have an average score of 53.13 with a standard deviation of 14.22 while female students score an average of 52.08 with a standard deviation of 16.16. The table presents a t-value of 12.82 along with a p-value of 0.121. The hypothesis test results reveal that the p-value exceeds the alpha value of 0.05 when tested at a significance level of 0.05. The statistical analysis demonstrates that gender does not create a significant difference. Therefore, there is no significant difference in teachers' perceptions of soft skills acquisition among students based on gender.

## Discussion

The research revealed that secondary school teachers across Bayelsa State maintain a favorable view regarding the significance of students developing soft skills. Teachers confirmed the necessity of skills including communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and analytical thinking for student success in academics, personal growth, and employment prospects. Educators understand the importance of soft skills but their feedback indicates students show limited practical achievement which points to a disconnect between theory

and application. The findings of Okolie et al. support this observation. Okolie et al. (2021) reported that Nigerian educators understand the necessity of soft skills in secondary education yet structural and educational barriers prevent students from fully developing these skills. The focus of teachers on cognitive knowledge because of the pressures from exams and curriculum requirements reduces opportunities to provide direct soft skills education to students. Besides, the study revealed that teachers feel that students require more communication and collaboration skills, especially in group work and debates in class. However, soft skills such as critical thinking, emotional control, and leadership were less developed. This is consistent with the findings of Omodan and Ige (2021), where it was clear that the Nigerian education system poorly emphasizes the development of non-cognitive skills because the curriculum is outdated and there is inadequate teacher training on how to apply soft skills.

The research found that there was no statistically significant difference in the beliefs of students' acquisition of soft skills by gender among teachers. Both male and female teachers generally believed that male and female secondary school students in Bayelsa State demonstrated soft skills such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and problem solving at similar levels. This result reflects a more conscious awareness by teachers of the need for gender-free expectations and a better equilibrium between the two genders in school, where both girls and boys are treated equitably, and offered the same credit as they acquire relevant life skills. This result aligns with earlier studies, which had hypothesized teachers' non-expressional gender bias against their method of developing soft skills. For instance, Kayii and Okiridu (2020), in their study of the incorporation of soft skills in Business Studies at Rivers State, Nigeria, determined that male and female teachers had similar perceptions on the applicability and accessibility of soft skills among students' academic and social ties. Similarly, Mubita and Simui (2023), in their study in Zambia, discovered that gender did not significantly affect the views of mathematics teachers on the integration of soft skills, documenting a shift towards more inclusive practices in teaching in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the results of this research contradict results in a few developed nations where there still exist gender differences in perception. For instance, Mullola et al. (2012) found that female students tended to be more favorably evaluated by teachers in social-related soft skills (such as communication and empathy) and male students were more favorably evaluated in assertiveness and leadership. Such perceptions are usually due to conventional gender roles and stereotypes, which might unconsciously affect teachers' judgments. However, the consistency of perception seen in this study may be due to greater efforts towards education-based gender equality, government policies to ensure inclusive learning, and teacher sensitization programs in Nigeria. Moreover, UNESCO (2022) emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive pedagogy in ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to acquire the skills required for the 21st century.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the perception of secondary school teachers towards the acquisition of soft skills by students from Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that teachers are likely to have a positive attitude towards the importance and worth of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, emotional intelligence, flexibility, and problem solving. Even with this, there was a widespread fear that the actual level of proficiency in the development of skills among the students is generally low to moderate due to mainly systemic factors. The barriers established were inadequate teacher training, a test-driven curriculum, lack of teaching resources, and uneven policy implementation regarding the building of 21st-century skills. Teaching staff are aware that students sometimes exhibit soft skills, particularly during group work or practical assignments, but the absence of an efficient framework for acquiring such skills within learning environments remains a big challenge

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the study recommends that:

1. The Ministry of Education and NERDC should update secondary school curriculums to include soft skills like communication, leadership, critical thinking, teamwork, and emotional intelligence as key learning outcomes.
2. The teachers should be provided with regular and practical professional development workshops to prepare them with the tools, techniques, and evaluation tools necessary for teaching and evaluating soft skills. This will prepare the teachers to integrate soft skills into their pedagogy without any difficulty.
3. Stakeholders and authorities should offer facilities and resources, including ICT facilities, clubs, and after-school activities, that reinforce experiential learning and encourage students to develop interpersonal and problem-solving skills.
4. Educators need to be prepared to prevent gender biases in expectations and assessments of soft skill development. Promoting gender-sensitive pedagogy is critical to make sure that both male and female students are provided with equal opportunity to develop these crucial skills.

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