

Review

The Soft Skills of Special Education Teachers: Evidence from the Literature

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Abstract: The special education teacher is a key element in the development of the process of inclusive education. In this setting, soft skills have proven to be determinant in teachers' educational action. However, those that best qualify their profile have not yet been identified. Therefore, this study aims to carry out a review of scientific production between the years 2010 and 2020. To this end, articles were selected using the following databases: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. Studies have been included in the review that point out as soft skills: resilience, reflexivity, empathy, collaborative work, self-efficacy, creativity, and effective communication. Only studies that presented such criteria were included in the analysis. After the application of the eligibility criteria, seven articles were considered. From the analysis, it emerges that effective communication, collaborative work, and reflexivity stand out. There are gaps in this area in the specialized training of these teachers. Thus, it is suggested that there should be investment in this area in the training programs of the schools that certify them; and that, at the research level, instruments should be developed to evaluate the model emerging from this review.

Keywords: soft skills; inclusion; teachers of special education; teacher profile; effective communication



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1. Introduction

In addition to the major changes that have taken place in education systems around the world, innovation has also taken place regarding special education. In terms of the development of policies and practices at world level, inclusive education is one of the themes increasingly discussed [1–3]. For this reason, we currently use the best resource for a quality and equitable education: inclusion [2–5]. At world level, it has gone through moments of great change, partly thanks to the actions developed by UNESCO, previously proclaimed by the declaration of Salamanca on 10 June 1994 and also reiterated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, indispensable for the understanding of the development of inclusive education [6,7]. According to this organization, it is an “enriched form of general education aimed at improving the lives of those who suffer from various disabilities, enriched in the sense that it uses modern pedagogical methods and technical material to remedy certain types of disability” [8–10]. As Casanova [11] (p. 16) adds, it is “the provision and application of precise educational resources for all pupils, whatever their personal educational difficulties and needs, to achieve optimal individual and social development”.

In the Portuguese educational context and in accordance with the Basic Law of the Education System [12], it constitutes one of the special modalities of school education “... dedicated to those persons who cannot follow the educational system temporarily or permanently under normal conditions” (article no. 19). In parallel with these changes, other changes have emerged, and the concept of disability has become a more comprehensive and non-stigmatizing concept, that is, the concept of special educational needs (SEN). The literature of the speciality reveals that the “inclusion” is currently designated to promote

ideas and practices, as well as formations that bring the school closer to an institution that lives in the values of inclusive education [1,13]. It is a relatively recent activity, which had its origins in a systematic way in the second half of the 19th century and which, until the sixties of the 20th century, developed an activity in the field of practical knowledge, of marginal action that resulted in a segregated character [14]. Today, a new vision of special education and of parallel activity has become an integral part of general education, constituting a special modality of education as it is inscribed in the “Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo” (LBSE), of 14 October 1986, in Portugal. In recent decades, especially since the Salamanca Declaration [6], a new paradigm of an inclusive school, capable of welcoming and retaining groups of traditionally excluded children and young people, has been affirmed. This paradigm has evolved as a movement which ideally calls into question policies and practices of exclusion. Inclusive education thus aims at educational equity, which is the guarantee of equality in access, participation, and learning. In the framework of educational equity, the educational system and practices should ensure the management of diversity and adopt different types of strategies to meet the educational needs of students [15–19]. Inclusive education is education for all. It aims to reverse the path of exclusion by creating conditions, structures, and spaces for a diversity of learners, as proclaimed in the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, where it is stated that children and young people with special educational needs should have access to regular schools, which should be adapted to them through child-centered pedagogy, capable of meeting these needs [6].

Inclusive education thus reinforces the right of everyone to attend the same kind of education, guided by the principle of equal opportunities and education for all. It is a process that involves change and involves, among others: (i) valuing all pupils equally; (ii) increasing participation and reducing exclusion of pupils and cultures; (iii) restructuring policies, cultures, and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of pupils; and (iv) reducing barriers to learning and participation of all pupils regardless of their differences. This is an ongoing process of developing learning and participation for all pupils. According to Booth and Ainscow, it is an ideal that all schools can and should aspire to. Participation, according to the same authors, “means learning together with others and collaborating with them in shared educational experiences. This requires active involvement in learning and has implications for how the educational process is lived” [20] (p. 7). However, the inclusion policy for SEN students is based on factors that go beyond legislation. The question is how to make this heterogeneous reality compatible with schemes based on models not prepared to work on diversity and difference, on proposals from the perspective of homogenization [16]. The school will be inclusive when it transforms, not only the physical network, but the posture, attitudes and mentality of educators, and the school community in general, to learn to deal with heterogeneity and to live naturally with differences.

1.1. The Inclusive Teacher

The concept of inclusion or inclusive education is paramount and commonly associated with special needs education (so-called “EE”) and special needs students [7]. It emerges in the context of the European Schools and the commitment to the education of people with disabilities in the regular education network, thus seeking to support the development of education systems, create schools that can respond to all children and young people and combat exclusion [21]. Inclusion involves change. It is a continuous process of learning development and participation of all students. It is an ideal to which all schools can aspire, but which will never be fully achieved. However, inclusion occurs as soon as the learning development process begins. An inclusive school is one that is on the move [20]. It requires a restructuring of schools to meet the needs of all children and another pedagogy within the classroom and another type of teacher. In this sense, an inclusive teacher, aside from recognizing the difference, adopts a pedagogy that includes everyone, seeking to provide a differentiated teaching, and he or she organizes the activities

and interactions in such a way that each one is often confronted with enriching situations according to his or her personal characteristics and needs.

By promoting the development of diversified strategies, the teacher becomes a facilitator, a true builder of learning environments that promote personal, cultural, and social development. He or she will have to develop and manage these environments by being flexible enough to deal with the unforeseen, the uncertainty, the expression of feeling, and the doubts and fears of those who grow up, along with those who learn. The teacher must go on forming, discovering, reflecting, adapting, identifying, and imagining new ways of acting that are more appropriate and closer to the realities with which he is confronted daily. The pedagogical differentiation appears as a path in the respect for difference by providing everyone with the same opportunities. To be able to differentiate, it is necessary not to be indifferent to differences. To teach a class, it is assumed that all students can learn, but in time and in their own way; that is, each learns certain knowledge according to their own characteristics, which come from their own knowledge and their habits of thinking and acting. Attention to individual differences, whatever their origin, in an inclusive school thus requires open and flexible curricula capable of responding to the common needs of the entire school population. Differentiation, adaptation, and individualization of curricula is necessary, in line with the needs and characteristics of each student. All pupils should have the same rights and opportunities, including the right to difference and an education adapted to their needs [16].

In this sense, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE) defines the profile of inclusive teachers and identifies four core values, related to teaching and learning, for the work of all teachers in inclusive settings: (i) valuing diversity—difference is considered a resource and a value for education; (ii) supporting all pupils—teachers have high expectations of outcomes for all pupils; (iii) working with others—collaboration and teamwork as essential methodologies for all teachers; and (iv) professional and personal development—teaching is a learning activity and teachers should take responsibility for their lifelong learning [22]. These values, presented as fundamental, together with their associated areas of competence are made up of three elements: attitudes (knowing how to be and how to live together), knowledge (knowing how to know), and abilities (knowing how to do). A certain attitude or conviction requires a certain knowledge or level of understanding and then abilities (know-how) to implement that knowledge in a practical situation. For each area of competence identified, the essential attitudes, knowledge, and skills that underpin them are presented.

1.2. The Profile of the Special Education Teacher

The special education teacher (so-called “PEE”) in the Portuguese educational context constitutes one of the specific educational resources that, in the context of his specialty, supports, in a collaborative manner and in a logic of co-responsibility, the other teachers of the student in the definition of strategies of pedagogical differentiation and curricular accommodation, in the reinforcement of learning, and in the identification of multiple means of motivation, representation, and expression [1,23]. Thus, in addition to direct support (psycho-pedagogical support) in specific areas within its specialty, it provides indirect support or consultancy/mediation. His skills and profile have evolved and, if in the recent past, he was a teacher with a set of knowledge and skills that in schools facilitated the integration of pupils. Today, with the introduction of a new educational paradigm of integration for inclusion, this vision has changed. Thus, he began to direct his activity to all students with SEN whether they had disabilities [1]. Its competencies were first legally organized through a in five areas: critical analysis, intervention, training, supervision, and evaluation. However, this organization, according to some studies, proves to be little clarifying as each school interprets it in its own way. In this sense and for better clarification, the Association of Teachers of Special Education recommends that the competence profile of the PEE should be thought of in the perspective of establishing a bridge between the school we have and the school we want. It thus indicates a set of premises that define the

PEE as a collegial element of the school, a teacher who should cooperate with his colleagues, learning, teaching, and above all reflecting on what are the best models, frameworks, and materials to bring quality education to all students [1].

It should also, according to “Associação Nacional dos Docentes de Educação Especial” (ANDEE) [23], be: (i) a pedagogue who, within a pedagogical structure, is responsible for collecting, producing, and sharing information that is relevant to the education of all students; (ii) a professional in possession of intervention models that allow the school to understand, plan, execute, and evaluate inclusive models of pedagogical intervention; and (iii) a professional capable of articulating the internal and external services of the school, in a harmonic and coordinated whole, in order to achieve the best possible results. In this profile, PEE will be a professional with specialized training in one of its areas of expertise, a professional with scientific and practical knowledge in his area of expertise that will allow him to intervene, directly, in specific knowledge. Thus, for each student to progress in learning, they will essentially be a consultant, a collaborator, a supervisor, a facilitator, a co-operator, and a facilitator of practices that lead to success and quality in teaching. In short, he will be an inclusive teacher, as everyone should be, but specialized, contributing to our having a quality school where everyone learns according to their characteristics and abilities. In summary, he will be an inclusive specialist teacher, who in addition to his pedagogical and teaching skills, also known as hard skills, needs to be skilled in a set of personal and social skills that make for effective action. These skills are called soft skills.

1.3. The Soft Skills of the Special Education Teacher

The concept of soft skills has been considered in human resources, management, psychology, education, and the social sciences in general. However, some consensus has been found around the definition as a set of technical, methodological, and practical skills that is dynamically activated and manifested in performance [24–27]. Based on the concept of competence, it assumes the operationalization of a set of knowledge and attitudes in a specific situation in order to achieve specific results [28,29]. In turn, the concept of soft suggests the opposite of hard, hard skills referring to technical skills and soft skills to personal and social skills [30–32]. The concept of transferable skills is intertwined with that of soft skills, which are defined as “personality traits, goals, motivations and preferences that are valued in the labour market, at school and in many other fields” [33] (p. 451). Personal skills enable individuals to manage their own personal attributes, improve performance and sustain interpersonal relationships with others [28,33].

On soft skills, it should be noted that both the OECD and the European Union consider the development of their transversal skills to be relevant, and this is an area to be taken into account among the priorities of national training policies [33–36], being valued both in school and in the labor market and in social interaction in general. This relevance is justified by the fact that the degree of development of this type of skills predicts productivity at work, since they complement technical skills [37]. Thus, we can conclude that the challenges of the teaching career today can be more easily overcome by teachers with soft skills, in addition to the technical skills that are inherent to them. The OECD indicates the importance of teachers developing their transversal competences, and this is an area to be taken into account among the priorities of national training policies [34]. The European Commission, for its part, proposes that, in addition to promoting the development of these competences by teachers, they should also be developed by pupils, since their mastery leads to improvements in the overall teaching and learning process. This proposal is justified by the fact that these skills are acquired mainly through socio-emotional dynamics, hence the relevance of special education teachers developing soft skills in the training period as a way of enabling them to have a significant pedagogical presence in the educational community [38].

The empirical evidence also points to the fact that teachers’ pedagogical capacities are related to their transversal competences, with those who possess these capacities proving to be more pedagogically effective than those who possess only theoretical knowledge [39].

Therefore, we can conclude that the challenges of the teaching career today can be more easily overcome by teachers qualified in the field of soft skills, in addition to the technical skills that are inherent to it, thus being able to effectively manage their daily tasks in challenging contexts, such as the one presented today to special education [40]. For all these reasons, the following question has been defined: what are the soft skills that special education teachers most need to be successful in their professional activity? Thus, this study aims to identify and describe the soft skills of special education teachers.

2. Methods

In order to find the answer to the above-mentioned question and achieve the objective of this study, a review was carried out, based on theoretical and empirical studies related to soft skills in the following databases: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. Studies were included in this review if they (i) involved special education teachers; (ii) assessed the soft skills, namely resilience, reflexivity, empathy, collaborative work, self-efficacy, and effective communication; (iii) were written in English, Portuguese, or Spanish; and (iv) were published in a peer-reviewed journal over the last 20 years. Therefore, keywords in search were soft skills and special education. A pair of researchers independently extracted relevant full papers. The discrepancies between the two main reviewers were resolved through discussion with a third co-author and a final list was obtained. As shown in Table 1, a total of 33 studies were identified. From these, 26 were excluded because they did not examine soft skills in special education teachers. All those focusing on students or other professionals such as psychologists or students were excluded.

Table 1. Summary of the initial screening *.

Authors	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Non-Indexed Journals	Retention
Alexander and Byrd [41]					v	
Allala and Abusukkar [42]				v		
Bacon [43]	v					
Buehler, Comrie, Hofmann, McDonald, and Hurst [44]		v				
Burgess [45]			v			
Cantón and Garcia [46]				v		
Chong and Graham [47]	v					
Clark, Konrad and Test [48]	v					
Clark, Test, and Konrad [49]		v				
Connor, Sung, Strain, Zeng, and Fabrizi [50]	v					
Da Fonte and Boesch [51]					v	
Devereaux [52]				v		
Serrano, Dorrego Pupo, and Avila Guerra [53]					v	
Engelmann, Kappel, and Kerry-Moran [54]				v		
Espinoza, González, Castillo, and Neut [55]		v				
Guo, Dynia, and Lai [56]	v					v
Hemmeter, Hardy, Schnitz, Adams, and Kinder [57]	v					
Irvine [58]	v					v
Kart [59]		v				v
Mu, Hu, and Wang [60]	v					v
Nespor and Hicks [61]	v					
Peltier, Washburn, Pulos, and Peltier [62]		v				v

Table 1. Cont.

Authors	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Non-Indexed Journals	Retention
Pickl, Holzinger, and Kopp-Sixt [63]	v					v
Rajoo [64]					v	
Rinta [65]	v					
Demirok, Gunduz, Yergazina, Maydangalieva, and Ryazanova [66]		v				v
Schechter and Feldman [67]	v					
Shealey, McHatton, and Wilson [68]		v				
Sullivan, Sadeh, and Hourri [69]	v					
Tsaoussi [70]					v	
Voogt, Erstad, Dede, and Mishra [71]	v					
Wu-Pong, Gobburu, O'Barr, Shah, Huber, and Weiner [72]	v					
Yeni [73]	v					
Number of articles	15	7	1	4	6	7

* Note: Quartile rankings derived for each journal according to the SJR (Scimago Journal and Country Rank).

3. Results

The results obtained appear from selected articles in the ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO databases, published between 2010 and 2020 and in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria previously defined and referred to above. All these articles were within the scope of special education, from the perspective of inclusion and with special attention to professionals in this field. The objectives of the selected articles referred to some soft skills, but in an isolated way, according to Table 2. Furthermore, in the theoretical basis, the studies revealed this dispersion of models and conceptions; hence the relevance of this study, which reveals itself to be innovative and useful, both for intervention and research in this area.

Table 2. Included studies that assess soft skills.

Quote	Resilience	Reflexibility	Empathy	Collaborative Work	Self-Efficacy	Effective Communication
Irvine [58]		V	V	V		V
Pickl, Holzinger, and Kopp-Sixt [63]	V	V		V	V	V
Mu, Hu, and Wang [60]	V					
Demirok, Gunduz, Yergazina, Maydangalieva, and Ryazanova [66]						V
Peltier, Washburn, Pulos, and Peltier [62]		V		V		V
Guo, Dynia, and Lai [56]					V	V
Kart [59]				V		
Number of articles	2	3	1	4	2	5

Table 2 illustrates the seven included studies. The data collected were presented according to the order of the date of publication, highlighting the type of journal and the skills analyzed by the different authors.

According to Guo et al. [56], in an article published in the journal *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, in the quartile Q1 ranking, self-efficacy and effective communication skills are highlighted. Kart [59], in a paper published in the journal *Education Sciences*, in the quartile Q2 classification, highlights the skills of resilience and collaborative work. For Demirok et al. [66], in an article published in the *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (IJET)*, in the quartile Q2 ranking, effective communication skills are highlighted. For Mu et al. [60], in an article published in *Teaching and Teacher Education* magazine, in the quartile Q1 classification, the competence of resilience is highlighted. According to Pickl et al. [63], in an article published in the *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, in the quartile Q1 classification, the skills of resilience, reflexivity, collaborative work, self-efficacy, and effective communication are highlighted. Finally, according to Irvine [58], in an article published in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, in the quartile Q1 rating, the skills of reflexivity, empathy, collaborative work, and effective communication are highlighted.

The article by Irvine et al. [58] addresses the issue related to multicultural education and special education and focuses on the complexity of the relationship between multicultural education and special education of African Americans, students of color as belonging to an identity category, usually identity related to their disability. The authors explored areas of divergence and conflict between the two areas—special education and multicultural education, specifically issues of disproportionate representation, cultural misunderstandings, tensions between home and school, and competition—providing some recommendations that can most effectively prepare special education teachers, namely culturally responsive pedagogy and training of special educators in developing caring relationships with students while maintaining high expectations; engagement and motivation of students; selection and effective use of learning resources; and promotion and learning with family and community involvement [58]. Thus, this article distinguishes itself by explicitly referring to reflectivity, and implicitly, empathy, collaborative work, and effective communication.

The article by Peltier [62] argues that the literacy process is complex for all children, especially those with learning difficulties. It requires that their teachers have deep, extensive and flexible knowledge about teaching these skills—phonological, phonetic, and orthographic awareness. This study addresses the fundamental knowledge, perceptions, and skills in this subject, as well as their reflexive capacity. It focused on a group of 12 teachers from general and special education preparation courses. The knowledge scores of initial and special education teachers were significantly higher from pre to post-tests and significantly different when compared in a general education literacy course. Reflective ability was not a significant predictor of primary school pupil growth and declined over time. The author thus explicitly presents the soft skills of reflexivity, and implicitly discusses collaborative work and effective communication.

In turn, the article by Pickle et al. [63] argues that today, special needs teachers need, in addition to general pedagogical skills, skills to manage highly heterogeneous groups in inclusive environments. This is a qualitative study, which aims to identify knowledge skills, action, and attitudes necessary for teachers to succeed effectively. In-service training, focusing on reflection and evaluation of individual and team work, as well as the reactions of students in initial special education training, can help increase the readiness to model a reflective attitude as a crucial prerequisite for teaching success. The results of this study therefore show that teachers need to improve their skills in reflexivity, resilience, reflectivity, collaborative work, and effective communication.

The article by Guo et al. [56] is a quantitative study, using a sample of 73 early childhood special education teachers and 837 preschool children. It aimed to verify the differences in the teaching of self-efficacy of children with and without disabilities, as well as the differences in the teaching of children with different types of disabilities. The findings of these authors indicate that the self-efficacy of teachers is a significant predictor of the knowledge acquired by children. In addition, they argue that poor teacher self-efficacy in

relation to children with disabilities may constitute an additional risk factor for the school maladjustment of these children. Thus, Guo et al. [56] focus their paper on the issues of effectiveness, including self-efficacy and effective communication.

Demirok et al. [66], with a qualitative study, used a sample of special education teachers in order to verify the opinions of special education teachers regarding the use of technology to assist students with reading difficulties. Although the focus of the study is on the use of technologies in teaching reading and writing, the results show that good communication is necessary in this process and that the technologies, in addition to saving time, provide the development of persistence and motivate and focus students' attention more. In this way, the soft skills that are evident in this study are effective communication.

The article by Mu et al. [60] focuses on resilience. This quantitative study, based on an ecological perspective, investigates the role of Chinese inclusive education teachers in the process of resilience of students with disabilities. The study shows that students with disabilities suffer from multiple stress factors, which requires a great ability to find adequate resources and minimize student difficulties, as the study demonstrates, summarizing all this into the competence of resilience.

In turn, Kart and Kart [59], in a literature review study, among the skills investigated, highlight the relevance of collaborative work in promoting inclusion and they state that this is one of the factors that most influence student outcomes in an inclusive school and that negative impacts can be mitigated with policies and active collaboration between all stakeholders in the educational process. In this way, the soft skill that is evident in this study are collaborative work.

The main results of these articles will be discussed below.

4. Discussion

The reduced number of publications in the ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and PsycINFO databases that address the soft skills of special education teachers in the inclusion process reveals the lack of studies in the area and the consequent need for research in this area. In our opinion, the profile of the special education teacher should include, besides the technical skills, inherent to its specialty group, the soft skills. In this sense, our study has identified a model of six soft skills that are now described and discussed. Therefore, in accordance with the above results, and responding to the research question presented, we found that some soft skills occupy a relevant place in the teaching performance of special education teachers, highlighting effective communication, collaborative work, and reflexivity.

These results are in line with those of Allala and Abusukkar [42], which affirm the importance of soft skills and the need to post them in order to be successful in professional life and that more attention should be paid to soft skills by teachers, particularly in their initial training and throughout their lives. Thus, we can conclude that soft skills are determinant in the access and performance of special education teachers' functions.

To lead the teaching-learning processes, all education naturally presupposes competence in the field of effective communication, which consists of making common, sharing ideas, exchanging information, and interacting [51,74,75]. Most of the articles reviewed have explicit references to effective communication [56,58,62,63,66]. For example, Irvine et al. [58] state that pro-teacher training institutions need to find strategies to empower all initial teachers to be effective educators, being persistent, open-minded, reflective, and therefore good communicators. Therefore, this soft skill implies a varied set of factors as it is a complex phenomenon. The human being, communicating at various levels, involves a varied set of factors that make it possible to express what one thinks, feels, and desires, choosing a set of attitudes appropriate to each situation, according to the place and the moment [26], and all this is fundamental in the context of inclusive education where the special education teacher acts. Thus, it is concluded that in educational interaction effective communication is essential to achieve the objectives of special education.

In addition to effective communication, special education presupposes collaborative work, which consists of planning, acting, and evaluating as a team. Some of the articles analyzed have explicit references to collaborative work [58,59,62,63], which is in line with those who argue that teamwork is essential in inclusive education [76–79]. For this reason, teachers need to improve their faculty of cooperation, which consists in the ability to “operationalize knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to act together, with a view to achieving a common goal by maximizing the potential of each individual in a durable and balanced way” [26] (p. 135). Promoting collaborative work in schools means highlighting the explicit intention of each one to add value to working together, contributing something different. Naturally, this type of action has been increasingly implemented since it is duly defined in the educational projects of educational institutions. Hence, we consider it to be an essential soft skill in the training and work of special education teachers.

Reflectivity is also essential in special education, since it is necessary to analyze, plan activities, and deal constructively with uncertainty and unpredictability in order to reformulate the action. The articles analyzed that explicitly refer to this capacity are Peltier et al. [62], Pickl [63], and Irvine [58]. To be successful in inclusive education also presupposes the use of reflexive thinking, as described in literature [80–82]. In this sense, Peltier et al. [62] state that reflective activities are widely used in teacher training programs. These activities are continuously developed in order to plan for the unpredictable circumstances of daily teaching.

This ability, according to the above-mentioned authors, manifests itself in the ability to ask and to doubt, to dialogue, and to criticize. In this sense, educational action requires systematic, rigorous, and strategic reflection on the emerging problems and the appropriate plans for their sustainable resolution. It is the very unpredictability of educational situations that demands the promotion of these reflective habits as a way of educating children, young people, and adults with special needs with quality. Thus, when someone joins an education team they even need to be equipped with practical knowledge about the techniques and methods to be creative and reflective in the context of the teaching-learning process itself.

Special education presupposes the competence of resilience. The articles that focus on this theme are Mu et al. [60] and Pick [63]. The special education teacher needs the competence of resilience to deal with the adversities that his or her profession inevitably raises [60,63]. This can be defined as “the ability to operationalize knowledge, attitudes and skills in order to prevent, minimize or overcome the harmful effects of crises and adversities” [26] (p. 167). Thus, a resilient teacher, having to face a stressful or adverse situation, is able to use his personal resources by assuming the behaviors that help him to be successful in that circumstance.

Successful inclusive teachers also manifest behaviour characterised by self-efficacy [83,84]. This soft skill was referenced in the articles of Guo et al. [56] and Pick et al. [63]. It should also be noted that others do not mention it explicitly but refer to it implicitly. According to Bandura [85], self-efficacy is related to beliefs about the ability to have self-control over individual behavior and events affecting life. It is this competence that facilitates decision-making in difficult situations, since it allows one to think and evaluate circumstances, to have self-determination and flexibility in order to effectively achieve the objectives previously outlined. These data are in line with the study by Guo et al. [56], which states that there is strong evidence that teacher self-efficacy in relation to each child is an important factor to be considered in the context of inclusive education. Therefore, this soft skill will therefore be necessary in the professional performance of the special education teacher.

Special education also presupposes the competence of empathy. Among the articles analyzed in this review, the one that focuses on this theme is that of Irvine [58]. The ability to listen actively to students is also essential in inclusive education [85]. Empathy consists in the ability to “listen in order to perceive the thoughts, feelings and intentions of the interlocutor, providing an adequate understanding of the situation expressed and encouragement for similar future situations” [26] (p. 80). Thus teachers, especially those in special education, need to develop this communication skill by improving not only

verbal communication, but also non-verbal communication. This accompanies the information exchanged, through looks, gestures, and smiles, which leads the interlocutor to feel understood, accepted, and encouraged.

Thus, according to the above, we can state that we have answered our research question, since we have identified six soft skills necessary for special education teachers to be successful in their activity. However, we recognize the limitations of this study.

It should also be noted that there are some limitations to this review, in particular the existence of little scientific production on this topic. Most of the articles focus on empirical work aimed at students and not at teachers. Moreover, the methodology of the study, an exhaustive analysis, was mainly descriptive but could have been accompanied by a meta-analysis.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to contribute to the improvement of the subject in question by systematically reviewing scientific production between 2010 and 2020 to verify the soft skills most evident in this area of research. From the analysis of the articles and according to the selected soft skills—resilience, reflexivity, empathy, collaborative work, self-efficacy, and effective communication—we concluded that, although they emerge in isolation, effective communication, collaborative work, and reflexivity predominate. From the scarcity of literature in this field, and in the few articles found, no theoretical models were verified. Thus, there are some gaps in this area, not only at the level of scientific production, but also at the level of the specialized training of these teachers. As described in the literature, properly preparing professionals for these new roles and responsibilities requires the implementation of a new training model, since the challenges of the teaching career today can be more easily overcome with soft skills, in addition to the technical capacities that are inherent to it.

Within the framework of quality educational equity, education systems must not only ensure the management of diversity but also adopt a set of appropriate practices and strategies. In this context, the special education teacher has a leading role, for which they require not only innovative teaching and didactic practices and scientific knowledge inherent to his or her specialty group, but also a set of soft skills that can contribute to an inclusive education of quality and more effective. In this sense, in a truly inclusive school, its actors act with the development of all students in mind, and without the above-mentioned skills, their performance is limited, and the entire educational system is also impoverished. In the current context, the renewal of the profile of special education teachers increasingly requires the acquisition of transversal competencies that allow them to respond effectively to the challenges of schools that, by definition, must be inclusive, promoting equity, valuing diversity, teamwork, reflexivity, and resilience. It is therefore suggested that there should be investment in this area in the training programs of the schools that certify them, and that, at the research level, tools should be developed to evaluate the model emerging from this review.

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