

## **A Qualitative Study on the Role of Teacher Leadership in the Development of Soft Skills at the Undergraduate Level**

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### **Abstract**

*Teacher leadership plays an important role in developing and enhancing students' soft skills at all levels of education. These soft skills, such as communication, interpersonal skills, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving, significantly contribute to the holistic development of students. This study aimed to explore the key role of teacher leadership in promoting and developing these soft skills at the undergraduate level. A qualitative research design was employed, and data were collected from undergraduate teachers at public universities in Lahore via an interview guide using purposive sampling. The findings revealed that the majority of teachers employ different leadership strategies to create an inclusive and student-centered environment where they encourage students to think outside the box, which significantly develops their soft skills. Moreover, it was also revealed that teachers consider their leadership a driving force that motivates students to participate in different extracurricular activities, which they consider a valuable opportunity for their students to apply and advance their soft skills.*

**Keywords:** Teacher Leadership, Soft Skills, Extracurricular Activities

## **Introduction**

Teacher leadership is a frequently used term in Western schools that refers to a teacher's capability of taking decisions and their influence on their co-workers, school management and administration as well as students to enhance and elevate their teaching and learning practices (Zheng, 2023). Teachers are considered one of the patrons of change in educational institutions (Donohoo, 2018). Cooper et al., (2016) also referred to teacher leaders as the "agents of change". At the higher education level, teacher leadership not only enhances students' learning but also plays an important role in shaping and holding the organization together. Their leadership beyond the classroom not only nurtures students' holistic development but also promotes professional development among other educators (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). According to Sebastian et al., (2017), teacher leadership does not have a certain definition. However, the term is used for both individuals holding formal and informal positions (Wenner and Campbell, 2017). Teacher leadership refers to educators (formal and informal) who promote holistic development in their students by employing different leadership strategies, nurture soft skill development and also foster professional development in their peers (Oppi, Eisenschmidt, & Stingu, 2020). Fernández, (2022) refers to teacher leadership as the way teachers act according to their teaching requirements and the expectations they have from their students.

The existing literature suggests that teacher leadership plays an important role in the development of soft skills. Through different leadership styles and student-centered approaches, teachers share new and creative ideas that motivate students to think critically and creatively (Nicholson et al., 2017). Research conducted by Mansir (2021), suggested that alongside a good and dominant personality, one of the major factors that help teacher leaders to promote soft skill development in their students is that they should be aware of their students' strengths and weaknesses so they can provide guidance accordingly, which will ultimately help them to enhance and apply their soft skills in a formal environment. Furthermore, as leaders, teachers carry out many roles in an organization; for instance, manager, director, facilitator and organizer to integrate practices and activities alongside academics, including extracurricular activities that are necessary to promote soft skills development like communication (verbal

and written), teamwork skills, problem solving and critical thinking skills, leadership and creativity (Mansir, 2021). As emphasized in prior research, the main purpose of teacher leadership in education is not limited to academic development but to also developing and enhancing non-academic skills through different extracurricular activities that result in soft skills development that allows students to meet global challenges (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2024). Teachers, especially at the undergraduate level, use leadership strategies that are more collaborative in nature and help them to create an inclusive environment. Most teachers practice transformational leadership that helps them to promote motivation and collaboration among students that significantly impacts their soft skills within and outside the organization (Catrinao et al., 2022; Leo et al., 2022). Additionally, teachers practicing these leadership strategies become role models for their students that develop self-esteem and enhance their soft skills like collaboration and interpersonal skills (Rangel, 2023).

Despite the significance of the teacher leadership and its role in fostering soft skills, there is still a notable gap in examining the importance of teacher leadership role in soft skill development at the university level in Pakistan. The study seeks to describe the undergraduate teacher's perception of the role teacher leadership plays in the development of soft skills alongside academics in the public universities of Lahore.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the perceptions of teachers about the importance of teacher leadership in the development of soft skills among undergraduates?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter when developing soft skills among undergraduates?
3. How do teachers perceive the involvement of extracurricular activities in the development of soft skills among undergraduates?

### **Purpose of the Study**

Soft skills like communication, problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, and many more prepare students to overcome global challenges from personal, professional and financial perspectives. In this notion, the role of extracurricular activities and teachers' endorsement of these activities

through their leadership strategies has been well recognized at international level. However, a significant research gap existed in Pakistani literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of teacher leadership in promoting and enhancing soft skill development at the undergraduate level in the public universities. It was expected that the findings would highlight the importance of soft skills in transforming students' learning from merely earning a degree to acquiring practical life skills.

### Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach to gather in-depth insights of undergraduate teachers. According to Creswell & Clark (2018), qualitative research allows researchers to understand and explore ideas, perceptions and experiences of participants (undergraduate teachers) along with descriptive methods that help to gather first hand information in a limited time period. Purposive sampling was employed, allowing the researcher to select participants relevant to the research problem to provide rich insights Creswell & Clark (2018). Data was collected from 13 undergraduate teachers through a semi-structured interview guide carefully prepared and examined by the researcher. Later interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis technique that involves systematic procedures to identify and analyze themes emerging from qualitative data.

### Results

**Table 1**

*Description of Emerging Themes*

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1. Role of teachers in encouraging students	This theme narrates the varying perspectives of undergraduate teachers about the role they play in encouraging students to take part in ECA's.
2. Overcoming challenges to promote participation in ECA's and soft skills development	This theme reflects the challenges that undergraduate teachers face and the leadership strategies they employ in order to overcome these difficulties, promote holistic development and nurture soft skills in students.

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3. Effect of ECA's on soft skills	This theme depicts the effect that ECA's have on soft skill development at the undergraduate level.
4. Strategies to create an inclusive environment	This theme is about the significance and challenges in creating an inclusive environment taking into account individual students' needs to promote soft skill development.
5. Pushing students to leave their comfort zones	This theme portrays the leadership strategies that teachers practice in order to engage students in creative activities that foster soft skills.
6. Noteworthy contribution of ECA's to the growth of soft skills	This theme describes the noteworthy impact of different ECA's conducted by teachers themselves that enhanced students' soft skills.

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### **Role of Teachers in Encouraging Students**

The majority of participants believed and emphasized that teachers play a leading role in motivating students. Participant 4 said, "*Teachers notably encourage student participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, promoting holistic development and a well-rounded educational experience.*" Similarly, participants 5 and 7 added, "*Teachers play a crucial role in encouraging and empowering students for extracurricular activities. Their impact varies, but ideally, teachers should actively promote and support student participation in these activities to foster holistic development.*"

### **Overcoming Challenges to Promote Participation in ECAs and Soft Skills Development**

One of the major challenges faced by the teachers in encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities and building soft skills in the Pakistani context is limited resources, time management and traditional teaching. Participant two stated that "*students are focused on marks and*

have very little exposure to soft skill, and with limitations in resources it becomes even more difficult for teachers.” When asked about how she dealt with it, she said that “I use my class premises as a centre, a micro-level system.” Similarly, participant four expressed that limited resources and traditional teaching are the main problems faced by him. In order to overcome this, participant four said “I’ve integrated soft skills development into the curriculum, emphasizing their practical application. Creating awareness among students about the long-term benefits has helped overcome resistance.”

### **Effect of ECAs on Soft Skills**

Regarding the effect of ECAs on undergraduates’ soft skills, all the participants believed that these activities significantly develop confidence and give rise to curiosity and enhance leadership, teamwork, communication, problem-solving and interpersonal skills to a great extent. Participant one added that “it strengthens their emotional quotient, which is most important in today’s world”. Participant four expressed his opinions as “Extracurricular activities enhance leadership, teamwork, and communication skills among Pakistani undergraduate students by providing practical, hands-on experiences outside the traditional classroom setting, fostering personal growth and adaptability.”

### **Strategies to Create an Inclusive Environment**

The majority of participants believed that motivating students and using collaborative leadership strategies in classrooms leads to active student engagement and an inclusive environment. Some teachers also mentioned that different group activities significantly promote inclusivity and soft skills. One of the participants explained, “Collaborative projects, diverse group activities, and open communication channels create an inclusive environment that fosters soft skill development in students.” Another participant cited the importance of collaborative projects and assigning leadership roles to the students to help them to “foster open communication channels which emphasize the value of each student’s unique contributions”.

### **Pushing Students to Leave Their Comfort Zones**

Participants described active and inclusive leadership practices i.e. providing them leadership opportunities, challenging assignments and using student-centered approaches that encourage students to think outside the box. One of the interviewees emphasized on employing “*student-centered approaches rather than teacher-centered*”. She further added that confidence building “*through different activities like role plays, presentations, etc.*” usually pushes students out of their comfort zone. Some of the participants added that alongside mentorship, “*challenging assignments and role rotations encourage students to step out of their comfort zones*”, which helps them to “*embrace unique opportunities and diverse leadership roles*”. Few participants described “*peer collaboration*”, “*feedback*” and “*leadership training programs*” as the leadership strategies through which “*teachers can create an environment that motivates students to embrace challenges, try new roles, and ultimately expand their leadership capacities*”.

### **Noteworthy Contribution of ECAs to the Growth of Soft Skills**

All interviewees acknowledged that extracurricular activities remarkably contribute to soft skills development. One of the participants described how “*practical tours*” of different organizations give students “*real time experience*” that enhances soft skills. Another teacher stated that individual research on different topics enhances students' creative skills and boosts their confidence. According to her, “*Every student does his own work even if the topic has no content from other books or Google. They add their own views and research.*” Furthermore, “*worksheet presentation, movie presentation, impromptu presentation, group discussion, MUN debates*” provide students opportunities to practice already acquired skills and learn new skills. A few participants stated that the “*Tech Innovation Challenge*” not only enhanced students’ “*technical skills*” but also “*promotes teamwork, critical thinking, and effective communication, contributing significantly to the growth of soft skills among Pakistani undergraduate students.*” One participant emphasized multiple ECAs like in-service learning projects which “*foster empathy, teamwork, and communication skills*”, simulation exercises which “*enhance problem-*

*solving, leadership, and interpersonal skills”, cross-cultural exchanges “broaden students’ perspectives and encourage collaboration in diverse settings”, innovative competitions which “promote creativity, critical thinking, and teamwork”, student-run initiatives which “provide practical leadership experience”, storytelling and emotional intelligence workshops that “contribute to the development of emotional resilience, empathy, and effective communication”, and outdoor team-building activities that “encourage collaboration, problem-solving, and leadership skills in a relaxed and natural setting”.*

### **Discussion**

The research aimed to explore the significant role of teacher leadership in the development of soft skills at the undergraduate level. Six themes emerged from thematic analysis. The results depicted that teacher leadership playing a central role in motivating students to participate in activities outside the classroom. The findings are consistent with the results of the research conducted by Tawakkal et al. (2025) where it was identified that encouragement and motivation of school leaders help students to participate in different activities outside the classroom (ECAs and CCAs) that help them to build confidence and necessary soft skills like teamwork, creativity, and interpersonal skills as well as foster discipline in them.

It was revealed that several challenges teachers face to promote soft skill development through different ECAs and the ways they get over them. Findings are congruent with the research conducted by Tawakkal et al. (2025) which revealed that the institute’s budget, limited funding and resources significantly affect student participation in ECAs that ultimately limit their exposure to learning and enhancing soft skills. Another hurdle described by them was the traditional teaching where teachers usually prioritize academic achievement and excellence, which limits students’ chance and motivation to take part in these activities. Lastly, it was also revealed that academic schedules are so packed that sometimes it limits students’ participation outside the classroom. The present research identified extracurricular activities as an important factor in soft skill development.

The findings corroborate the research conducted by Belamghari (2024) in a Moroccan university, where it was found that students' involvement in extracurricular activities not only remarkably enhances their soft skills but also promote academic excellence. In addition, the present research study revealed the various leadership strategies that undergraduate teachers employ to create an inclusive environment. The results align with Belamghari (2024) research which revealed that student involvement in different activities in and outside the classroom empowers because they interact and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds and ideas that create an inclusive environment where students learn and acquire new soft skills and develop the sense of belonging.

The findings explored the ways and methods teachers encourage students to think independently and creatively outside their comfort zones. Findings concur with the results of Boonstra's et al., (2020) research, in which they described teachers usually using student-centric methods to encourage them to leave their comfort zones, engage actively and to provide them different opportunities where they can practice their skills i.e. presentations and group work. Furthermore, to make students feel comfortable and confident, teachers act as a leader and a facilitator where they provide them guidance during different activities and show them empathy and attention that also push them to think creatively (Boonstra et al. 2020). Lastly, the findings revealed the remarkable impact of extracurricular activities on students' soft skills.

The findings corresponds to Foley et al. (2022) research findings at the undergraduate level that indicated extracurricular activities significantly develop soft skills as they provide students with space to communicate, interact and collaborate with people from diverse backgrounds, work in teams/groups, networking, and enhance their sense of belonging, ownership and accountability, hence referring to ECAs as a "social learning experience" that boosts students problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal and communication skills alongside confidence. Overall findings of thematic analysis revealed that teacher leadership plays a crucial role in all aspects of promoting soft skills development among undergraduates, i.e. motivating students, integrating different leadership strategies, providing them space in and outside the classroom to apply their

skills and overcoming various challenges that limit students' exposure to soft skills. Prior research by Don et al. (2016) revealed similar results that mainspring behind students' interest and motivation in utilizing opportunities and spaces that promote soft skill development especially at undergraduate level is teacher leadership.

### **Conclusion**

Results obtained from the study indicate that teacher leadership has played a major role in fostering the development of soft skills among undergraduate students. Not only do teachers encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities, but they also use various leadership approaches to ensure a conducive learning environment that enables students to think independently and creatively. In addition to this, the results of the study indicate that extracurricular activities offer various opportunities for the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills. Despite the challenges experienced by teachers including the lack of institutional resources, financial difficulties, traditional forms of teaching, and tight academic schedules, they continue to adopt strategies that contribute to the all-round development of students.

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