SCHOOL CLUBS FOR SOFT SKILLS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

In today's rapidly changing world, soft skills learning has become crucial for students' personal and professional development. Educational institutions can significantly provide effective learning environments for upgrading students' soft skills, including problem-solving, communication, teamwork-building, and leadership skills. In addition to conventional school subjects, involving students in extracurricular activities, such as school clubs, and extramural learning tasks can also contribute to the learning and development of these skills. Teachers can engage students in various clubs, including the citizenship club, cultural club, science club, athletic club, foreign language club, and environmental club, in most state-owned high schools across the country. This paper examines how school clubs teach and develop students' soft skills and identifies the specific soft skills nurtured within each club. The study employs a mixed-methods approach for data collection, utilizing a questionnaire to gather data on how students' involvement and participation in different clubs enhance their soft skills. Additionally, a focus group involving club coaches and leaders was used to gather information about the specific soft skills that each club promotes and highlights. The research results reveal that school clubs significantly improve students' soft skills and allow them to meet the requirements of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world community.

Keywords: school clubs, extracurricular activities, soft skills teaching and learning

1. Introduction

Soft skills have become essential for the 21st-century workplace in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. Thus, teachers should understand how to effectively teach and assess soft skills in schools as they have become crucial for the

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progress and development of educational systems worldwide. Aside from the academic curriculum, school clubs can provide an appropriate environment for soft skill learning and development. School clubs provide a low-anxiety environment where students can speak, cooperate, and participate in various activities and tasks outside the conventional educational setting. School clubs can be an effective means for students to develop key soft skills and make lasting impressions as they prepare for the 21st-century labor market (James, 2020). Many researchers and academics support this viewpoint, based on relevant studies showing that extracurricular activities and extramural learning tasks help young people develop new skills and abilities, expand their social networks, and gain confidence in interacting with others (Donnelly *et al.*, 2019). Researchers also agree that engaging and participating in planned extracurricular activities might help students enhance their social and academic performance (Balyer & Gunduz, 2012).

Students who engage in extracurricular activities in school clubs benefit academically, psychologically, and socially (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). They can profit from reduced involvement in problematic behaviors, exposure to supportive adults, facilitation of membership in pro-social groups, and the development of positive relationships with others (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Knifsend & Graham, 2011). These results are partly attributable to the constructive reinforcement of shared standards and values among participants in extracurricular activities. While participation in non-sport extracurricular activities helps students from all socioeconomic levels, participation in sports tournaments also improves academic perceptions for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Guest & Schneider, 2003).

Apart from gaining content knowledge and technical skills, students can also develop social and personal skills that support their overall growth and foster favorable attitudes toward themselves and others (Díaz-Iso *et al.*, 2020). According to Díaz-Iso *et al.* (2019), extracurricular activities allow students to change their attitudes, beliefs, and everyday conduct. Given the significance of school clubs for students, more research and empirical studies are required to understand fully how they are implemented in Morocco, particularly in secondary education. Therefore, this study focuses on the perceived skills or behaviors that students can improve by participating in school club activities. Club activities and projects refer to organized experiences outside of the classroom that, despite their seeming lack of importance, are more significant for several reasons. On the playing field, one learns lessons about teamwork, competition, and good sportsmanship (Posner, 2004). In Moroccan high schools, clubs are considered great places where students engage in cultural, musical, athletic, scientific, and environmental events and projects to develop the desired soft skills entertainingly.

In general, as stated earlier, research has confirmed that there is a positive relationship between participation in school club activities, academic achievement, and positive character traits (Eccles *et al.*, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Lipscomb, 2007). There is, however, a lack of investigation into the types of soft skills that each club nurtures in students and the extent to which students develop their soft skills through their participation in these clubs in Moroccan secondary education. Thus, this paper attempts to fill in this gap by investigating the extent to which school clubs improve high

school students' soft skills and identifying the specific skills that each club nurtures and fosters in students.

2. Literature Review

Soft skills, or interpersonal skills, are a complement to hard skills. The World Economic Forum states that the most important competencies that the labor market and businesses need in the twenty-first century are soft skills. Individuals who possess these skills are more prepared to handle challenges in life, school, and the workplace. According to Cimatti (2016), soft skills refer to personal traits, communication skills, and interpersonal skills that consolidate a person's ability to communicate efficiently and successfully with others. She adds that these skills are crucial for personal and professional success. Donnelly *et al.* (2019) explain that soft skills include leadership, teamwork, communication, and negotiation abilities. Likewise, Janusch (2017) argues that the four C's—creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—are the individual skills that businesses consider essential for success in the labor market. Furthermore, Ciciora (2009) expands on the abilities of social interaction, time management, and the capacity to recognize and empathize with others.

The value and importance of soft skills require schools to offer students the opportunity to develop these skills. Munadi (2021) affirms that school clubs could enhance five soft skill attributes. First, collaboration is regarded as one of the most important skills that students can develop to collaborate with others in several ways. In club activities, students can collaborate on collective projects to achieve a common goal. Second, clubs enable students to enhance verbal communication, non-verbal communication, and para-verbal communication skills. Tasks that foster skills like asking and answering questions, performing plays and role-plays, listening actively, and paying attention to eye contact and body language. Third, students deal with different challenges and real-life situations that they need to overcome in school clubs' activities and tasks. These activities teach students how to solve problems creatively and choose the best solutions to address challenges. Fourth, clubs nurture in students the ability to manage their time wisely to work and accomplish projects, and learn how to set priorities. Finally, yet importantly, leadership skills can be improved through extracurricular activities and extramural learning tasks. Students learn in clubs how to convince others and learn how to be leaders or followers depending on each situation (Holmes, 2014).

Many researchers confirm that engaging students in school clubs correlates with their learning and development of hard and soft skills. Learners who participate in clubs' activities and projects achieve academic success, develop their character, and assimilate easily within their school and community contexts. In other words, they develop their personal and professional skills in a friendly and inclusive environment. Many studies show that school clubs improve students' hard and soft skills. They have a positive impact on academic achievement, personality development, and social immersion.

To begin with, students' participation and engagement in extracurricular activities in school clubs significantly contribute to enhancing students' academic achievement.

Students need to be involved in other entertaining activities and not be confined to the small world of the classroom by participating in school club tasks. According to Fredricks (2011), learners who frequently take part in school club activities tend to get higher grades and scores in written and oral performances. Lipscomb (2007) argues that involvement in school club activities is associated with a 2% rise in test scores in math and science. Additionally, compared to non-participants, students who participate in activities have a 10% higher expectation of earning a college degree (Lipscomb, 2007). As a result, it is important to motivate students to participate in these kinds of activities during their academic path.

While engaging in extracurricular activities, students improve skills that help them succeed academically. First, students learn how to follow directions by playing structured games. They get the ability to pay attention to instructions and follow them to achieve an objective. Second, students learn the value of motivation and perseverance through structured activities (Fredricks, 2011). They are aware that attaining goals frequently requires effort and concentration. Third, students gain knowledge of problem-solving techniques and goal setting (Wormington *et al.*, 2012). The competencies students develop from participating in school club activities, such as following directions, perseverance, drive, goal-setting, and problem-solving, positively impact their academic performance. In general, students' academic achievement is impacted differently according to the type of club activity they participate in. For example, students who are involved in sports clubs typically score higher in math and science (Lipscomb, 2007) and literacy (Shulruf *et al.*, 2007). Thus, teachers can help learners realize their academic aims by having a better understanding of how engagement in a variety of activities affects their academic growth.

In addition to academic performance, school clubs enhance students' personality development. According to Blomfield & Barber (2009), school club activities allow students to develop self-concept and self-worth. Moreover, these clubs provide students with great opportunities to identify their interests, skills, and weaknesses (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008), which is particularly essential during the teenage phase of self-discovery (Knifesend & Graham, 2012). Enhancing students' personalities and self-concepts will increase their self-confidence and self-esteem levels. Although they are frequently evaluated and practiced in the classroom, many of the character-building skills found in school club activities are also required in the job market (Lipscomb, 2007). Students first learn setting priorities and time management skills (Burgess, 2013). Second, they improve leadership skills that will help them succeed in higher education and their professional careers (Barnett, 2008). Third, school clubs allow students to enhance their critical thinking abilities, which is very important for both intellectual and psychological development (Cristison, 2013). Finally, students are more resilient (Fredricks & Eccles, 2008) and have higher levels of self-confidence (Strapp & Farr, 2010).

School clubs allow students to develop communication, time management, leadership, resilience, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills. These traits are all vital for character development. Higher levels of self-worth are the result of participation and engagement in both academic and athletic activities (Blomfield & Barber, 2009).

Increasing students' sense of self-worth fosters a sense of belonging to their classroom, which increases their determination to thrive both intellectually and personally. Students can boost certain areas of self-awareness by identifying specific character development qualities that are practiced through involvement in particular club activities.

Engaging students in the activities of school clubs enhances their social growth, communication, and teamwork skills. Students search for a sense of belonging through their participation in club activities, which is crucial for "*providing access to the relationships and networks that influence positive outcomes for students*" (Schulruf, 2010, p. 595). Students can interact with people who share similar interests and aims through group activities, which boosts their motivation to stick with an enjoyable activity over the long run. Additionally, extracurricular activities enable learners to communicate with supportive social networks that help them avoid bad decisions in life (Veltz & Shakib, 2013). For students who lack adult support and direction in their lives, school clubs offer them mentoring and supportive help. Thus, by fostering a feeling of community, building healthy friendship networks, and establishing connections with helpful teachers, clubs help students improve their social skills.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Objectives and Questions
The purpose of this research study is to investigate the extent to which students' participation and involvement in school clubs improve their soft skills and identify the type of skills each club nurtures in students. This study was limited to one public secondary school with approximately 820 students. Teachers and students are required to take part in school clubs as part of the school's extracurricular activities. A mixed methods approach was used to answer the following research questions:

Question 1: To what extent do school clubs allow students to develop the desired soft skills in secondary education?

Question 2: What soft skills does each school club foster to ensure an effective transition into higher education for students?

This method was used to explore, through teachers' and students' perceptions, thoughts, and experiences, how school clubs affect students' soft skills performance. As for the research tools, a survey questionnaire and an exploratory focus group were combined to gather relevant data. For the focus group, predefined questions were used to generate discussion among participant teachers about the contribution of school clubs to improving students' soft skills.

3.2 Participants
The target population of this research study was high school students and teachers. The sampling technique used for selecting the population was the convenience sampling method. According to Cohen (1989), this technique depends on choosing the nearest persons to participate in a study. In this respect, 10 teachers and about 127 students from

a public high school took part in this study. The participants were contacted directly during club activities.

3.3 Research Tools

The research study used a questionnaire for students and a focus group method involving teachers/coaches to gather sufficient data about how students' participation in school clubs allows them to develop the desired soft skills, and to determine the skills each club nurtures in students. The coaches of clubs helped students complete the questionnaires and hand them in. Based on descriptive statistics, students' performances were divided into five categories: communication, problem-solving, self-awareness, leadership, and teamwork. As for the results and notes from the focus group discussion, the participants' answers were coded and analyzed to identify emerging themes.

3.3.1 Main Sections of the Questionnaire

Table 1: A detailed description of the main sections of the questionnaire

Section	Title of Section	Type of information requested	No. of Items
1	Demographics of participant students	• Age group • Gender composition • School grade • Prior participation in school clubs • Interest in school club activities	5
2	Communication skills	• Students' development of communication skills	4
	Teamwork skills	• Students' development of teamwork skills	4
	Problem-solving skills	• Students' development of problem-solving skills	4
	Self-awareness skills	• Students' development of self-awareness skills	4
	Leadership skills	• Students' development of leadership skills	4

3.3.2 Main Sections of the Focus Group

Table 2: A detailed description of the main sections of the focus group

Number of participants	10 Teachers/coaches
Total focus group time	90 minutes
Break	10 minutes
Objective	• To identify and discuss with club coaches what soft skills students could develop through participation in the activities of different school clubs.
Focus group questions	• Do students like to attend club activities? And why? • Do you think extracurricular activities should be emphasized more in our schools? • What skills do you think students develop as a result of their participation in clubs? • What soft skills were gained or enhanced through participating in the club you are coaching?

4. Results and Discussion

The results are presented and discussed in two major sections. Section 1 presents and discusses the results obtained from the questionnaire, which aims to investigate the extent to which school clubs allow students to improve their soft skills. Section 2 introduces and discusses the major themes that emerged from the focus group discussion.

Section 1: The Impact of Active Participation in School Clubs on Students' Learning and Development of Soft Skill

To begin with, this study includes 127 students from five school clubs in a public high school in an urban area. The school includes about 820 students and five school clubs coached by teachers of different school subjects. The study targeted five main clubs: the cultural club, the athletic club, the foreign languages club, the environmental club, and the scientific club. These clubs aim to enhance students' soft skills through active participation and engagement in school-based extracurricular activities and projects. Table 3 displays the demographics of participant students.

Table 3: Participants' demographics

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Age	<16	37%
	>16	62%
Gender	Male	44.09%
	Female	55.90%
School grade	Common core	37%
	1st-year baccalaureate	29.92%
	2nd-year baccalaureate	33.07%
Have you participated in any clubs before?	Yes	74.80%
	No	25.19%
Do you like the activities of clubs?	Yes	94.48%
	No	5.52%

Every member of the five school clubs filled out the questionnaire. The results show that 37% of students are under the age of 16. Their school grade is Common Core. In contrast, approximately 62% of students are older than 16 years. In terms of gender distribution, 44.09% of the participants were male, while around 55.90% were female. These results suggest that a significant number of female students were involved in school clubs. Regarding students' school grades, about 37% were in Common Core (the 1st year of secondary education), 29.92% of the participants were in 1st-year baccalaureate (the 2nd year in secondary education), and about 33.07% were in 2nd-year baccalaureate grade (the 3rd year in secondary education). It appears that 'Common Core' students are keen on joining school club activities. This might be attributed to their eagerness and desire to adapt to the new school environment. Moreover, they are not required to take regional or national exams. Another noteworthy observation was that a large majority of students (74.80%) had previously engaged in school club activities, whereas 25.19% of students

did not. Furthermore, about 94.48% of respondents enjoyed club activities and related projects, with only seven students (5.52%) expressing their dislike for them.

After presenting students' demographics, the focus will shift to the statistical results obtained from the questionnaires filled out by the students. This aims to address the study's first question: To what extent do school clubs allow students to develop the desired soft skills in secondary education? The students' questionnaire included 20 questions organised into five categories: communication skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, self-awareness skills, and leadership skills.

4.1 Communication Skills

The first skills for which students are requested to indicate their level of progress are communication skills. Please see Figure 1 for more details.
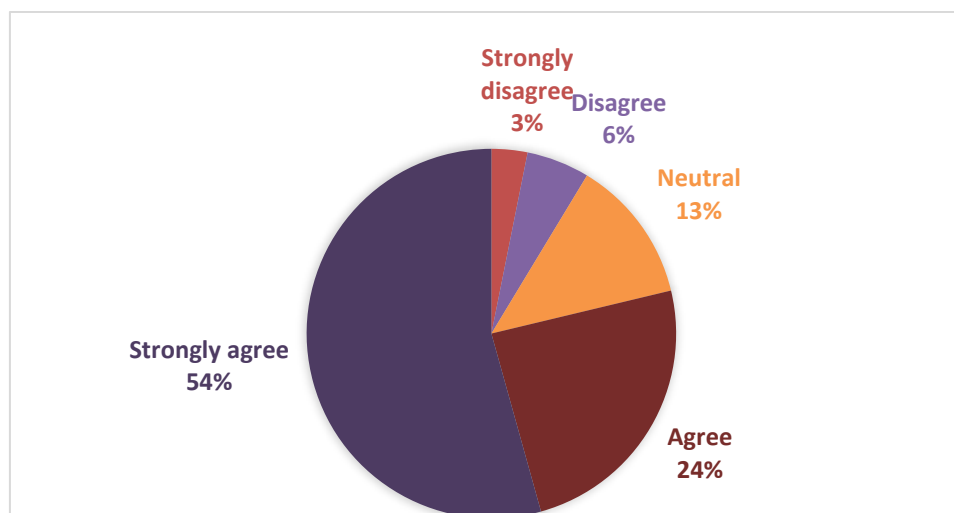
Figure 1: Students' development of communication skills

Due to participation in school club activities, most students have developed their communication skills. About 54% strongly agree that through participating in school club activities, they were able to improve skills like listening attentively and speaking confidently in public. They also developed their verbal and body language skills. Moreover, they got good grades in oral performance in different school subjects. These findings support what other researchers say about the benefits of clubs on students' soft skills and academic performance. About 24% of students reportedly agree that they have developed better communication skills, with only 3% of participants claiming that they did not improve their communication skills during school club activities.

4.2 Teamwork Skills

Based on the results displayed in Figure 2, it is seen that the majority of participants improved their teamwork skills due to their participation in school club activities. Approximately 55% agree that they have improved their collaboration skills, such as arranging school activities and engaging in school projects, working effectively with others, valuing others' contributions, following the rules carefully, and becoming

sensitive to others' needs. Moreover, about 23% strongly agree that school clubs have allowed them to enhance their cooperation abilities, with only 13% of participants reportedly believe that their teamwork skills were not reinforced by school club activities.
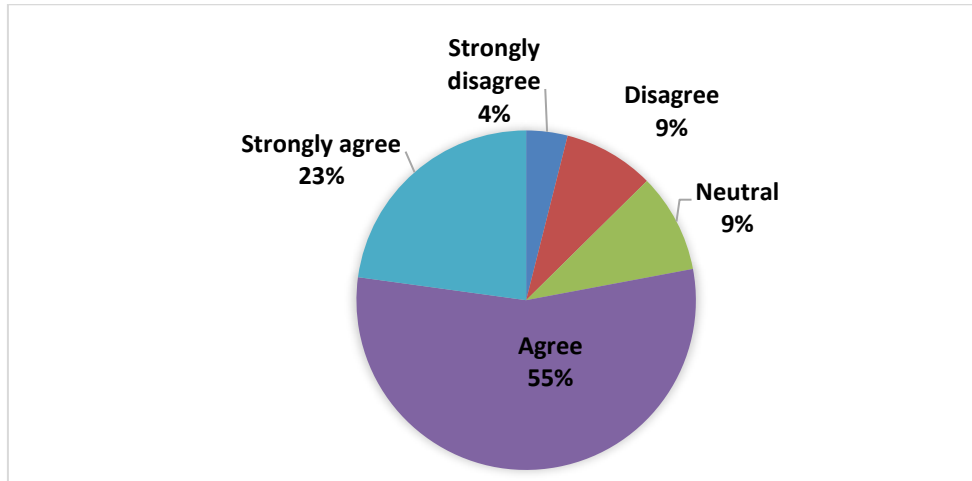

Figure 2: Students' development of teamwork skills

4.3 Problem-solving Skills

According to the results displayed in Figure 3, it can be noted that students' problem-solving skills have been improved to some extent through school club activities. However, these skills are the least developed in comparison to other skills. About 60 % reportedly believe that their problem-solving skills, such as making the difference between facts and opinions, looking at problems from different perspectives, and making the best decision, have been significantly improved. In contrast, about 39% think that their problem-solving skills did not improve following their participation in school club activities. Another important outcome is that about 28% are not aware whether their skills were enhanced or not. Therefore, it seems that higher-order thinking skills are not always easy to learn and develop.
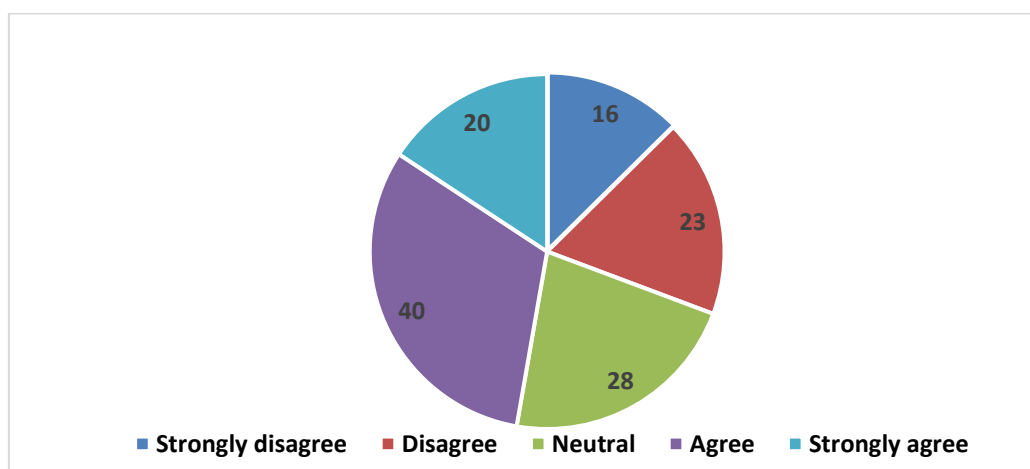

Figure 3: Students' development of problem-solving skills

4.4 Self-awareness Skills

Figure 4 illustrates that most students enhanced their self-awareness skills through participation in school club activities. Approximately 53% reported that they developed skills such as recognizing their abilities and responsibilities as citizens, raising awareness about environmental issues, and understanding the harmful effects of drugs, smoking, and skipping school. Conversely, around 20% of the students involved in these activities felt that their self-awareness skills did not improve.
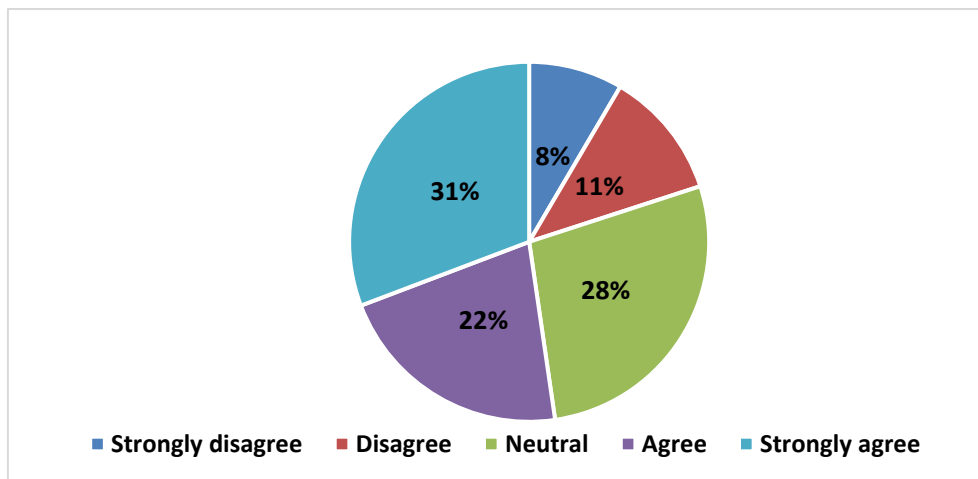
Figure 4: Students' development of self-awareness skills

4.5 Leadership Skills

As depicted in Figure 5 below, the findings indicated that a significant number of students were able to substantially enhance their leadership abilities. Approximately 52% of the respondents acknowledged that they had improved skills such as effective time management, prioritization, and conflict resolution within groups. Additionally, through their involvement in club activities, they acquired skills like constructing strong and persuasive arguments. Conversely, only 13% of the students felt that they had not experienced any growth in their leadership capabilities. Another finding was that around 35% of the participants were uncertain about whether they had improved their leadership skills or not.
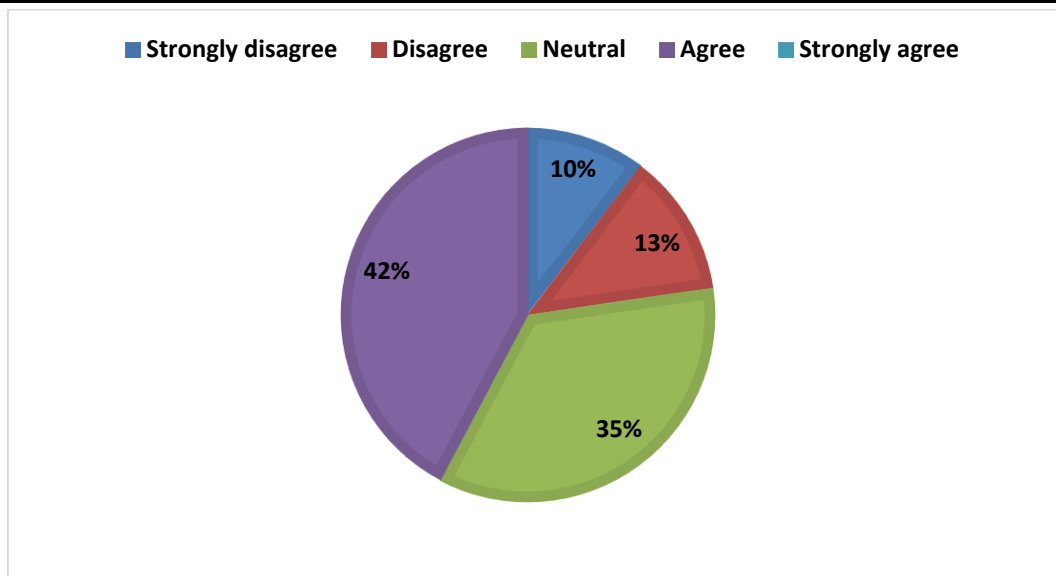
Figure 5: Students' development of leadership skills

In short, the results discussed above corroborate the conclusions of numerous researchers regarding the significant role school clubs play in enhancing students' soft skills. The extent of this enhancement varies among different skills. Students showed more significant improvement in communication, teamwork, and self-awareness skills compared to their problem-solving and leadership abilities. These findings align with previous research conducted by Shcheglova (2019), Ginosyan *et al.* (2019), Onwuka *et al.* (2019), and Foreman & Retallick (2013).

Section 2: Club Coaches' Perception and Teaching of Soft Skills.

Section two presents and discusses the emerging themes from the focus group discussion. It begins with a detailed description of the participants' demographics, followed by an analysis of the session's notes and transcripts. This analysis employs a content coding method, which involves reading the transcripts to create a list of key ideas for each question. Participants' quotes are included to illustrate each theme.

4.6 Participants' Demographics

Table 4: Participants' demographics

Gender	Male	60%
	Female	40%
Age	Under 30	70%
	Over 30	30%
	Cultural club	20%
	Environmental club	20%
School clubs	Athletic club	20%
	Scientific club	20%
	Foreign languages club	20%

Table 2 shows that the majority of the teachers leading school clubs are male, accounting for 60% of the total, while female teachers make up approximately 40%. Moreover, most teachers who coach these clubs are younger, with 70% being under 30 years old, compared to only 30% of teachers over 30 who engage in coaching. These results imply that older teachers might be less inclined to manage school clubs, which often require considerable effort and time. In contrast, newer and younger teachers are more willing to take on these roles and support students in developing their soft skills. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the participants in the focus group discussion were evenly represented, with two teachers from each club involved. The experiences of teachers in coaching school clubs highlight four significant themes, including students' motivation and interest in school clubs, the status of extracurricular activities, the target soft skills, as well as the skills that each club highlights and promotes.

5. Emerging Themes

5.1 Students' Motivation and Interest in School Clubs

The first issue addressed with the focus group was about students' motivation and interest in club activities. All teachers agreed that students enjoy participating in school clubs that reflect their interests and concerns. Participants noted that students primarily like to take part in sports events and competitions, such as football and basketball. Moreover, students enjoy cultural activities, including acting in theatrical productions, singing in choirs, and creating short films. They also participate in debate and public speaking clubs in Arabic, French, and English. Students actively participate in environmental campaigns by planting and watering trees, collecting and recycling waste, and painting murals on school walls. These activities engage high school students and indirectly enhance their soft and hard skills. One participant noted, "*School clubs encourage students to continue their education and help reduce the dropout rate and absenteeism.*" Another teacher pointed out that many students, especially from underserved neighborhoods, lack access to youth centers or recreational facilities where they can showcase their talents. She emphasized that school clubs are often the only venues where teachers can discover and nurture students' creativity and skills.

5.2 The Status of Extracurricular Activities in the School Curriculum

The second question addressed with the focus group participants aimed to explore their views and opinions about the importance given to extracurricular activities in the school where they work. The participants acknowledged that extracurricular activities have been given much attention and concern in education. However, the success and effectiveness of these clubs depend on many factors. The participants agreed that teachers' willingness and readiness to coach these clubs and the availability of materials, budget, and students' interest are fundamental elements. Moreover, the participants noted that not all teachers are willing to lead and monitor clubs for many reasons. Some teachers have full schedules and do not have enough time to participate in clubs. Other

obstacles include students' disinterest, lack of necessary technology materials, prizes, and school principals' supervision and involvement in clubs' activities.

One participant noted that education policymakers should make extracurricular activities as compulsory as school subjects to encourage both students and teachers to take part in school clubs. She added that teachers' timetables should be reduced to allow teachers to participate in leading school clubs. Another participant recommended providing teachers with appropriate training on how to design and develop relevant, good-quality activities for school clubs. Many teachers refrain from joining clubs because they lack the required skills for leading school club activities. In short, teachers agreed that school clubs offer great opportunities for students' development and growth. Thus, clear and practical guidelines should be provided for teachers and school staff to place more emphasis on extracurricular activities in high schools.

5.3 Essential Soft Skills Developed by Students in School Clubs

The third question sought to explore and identify the soft skills that school clubs help students learn and develop. The focus group discussions reveal that all the participants agree that school clubs enhance students' soft skills and hard skills. They allow students to improve their interpersonal, academic, and social skills. According to the participants' arguments and views, students involved in school clubs upgrade their self-esteem and self-awareness. The school clubs enabled students to brush up on their talents and interests. They also developed their self-confidence, which is demonstrated in the way they communicate with others in and outside school. Many students have managed to develop their active listening skills and verbal and non-verbal communication. Activities such as debating and public speaking nurture students' self-confidence and allow them to develop effective communication skills and behaviors. Besides, participation in plays and chorales helped students discover their talents and creativity. The participants also noted that students' involvement in the activities of school clubs allows them to demonstrate higher levels of motivation and engagement. Consequently, this engagement leads to higher academic performance and greater readiness to participate in classroom activities and tasks. Students were successful in developing both their hard and soft skills simultaneously. In addition, the participants confirmed that students' participation in school clubs allows them to build up and maintain relationships with colleagues, teachers, and community members, including professionals, human rights activists, and local authority officials. Students also developed the skill of working with other people from different cultural backgrounds and environments. These connections and relationships help students enhance their social skills, integrate smoothly into their social environments, and navigate social situations effectively.

5.4 The Soft Skills Promoted and Highlighted by Each Club

The last question addressed to participants in the focus group sought to identify which skills each club enhances and nurtures. All the participants agreed that students could improve their soft skills to some extent through engagement and participation in school clubs. This conclusion aligns with other findings of previous studies. According to

Fredricks & Eccles (2006), participating in school club activities gives students more chances to strengthen their interpersonal skills and create strategies for their future schooling. They have the chance to get to know and engage with encouraging peers and adults. Communicating and engaging with teachers offered additional chances for students to raise their grades and motivation to learn and build strong and healthy relationships with their coaches (Broh, 2002).

To begin with, the coaches of the foreign English language club noted that students succeeded in developing their communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership skills. This club is one of the main clubs that English and French teachers lead in schools. This club engages students indirectly in activities and tasks that allow them to develop their oral and written communication skills. The debating and public speaking competitions are widely organised in this club. Debating helps students express their thoughts clearly, develop convincing and influential arguments, and listen actively to contrasting views. Moreover, public speaking competitions also improve students' communication and presentational skills. A French teacher noted that through this club her students were able to overcome their lack of confidence and became ready to participate in classroom activities. An English teacher noted that his students were able to develop their speaking skills through their participation in debating and public speaking competitions.

Students were also able to develop more soft skills following their participation in the scientific club. Teachers of science, physics, and math usually lead the scientific club. The club frequently involves students in group projects and contests, fostering teamwork and problem-solving skills. Students learn to work collaboratively in different situations to reach a shared goal while applying their hard and soft skills in real-life scenarios. According to two participants in the focus group discussion, the scientific club enables students to develop their critical thinking skills and creativity through participation in scientific projects. Students work together and carry out some scientific simulations and experiments.

Thirdly, the athletic club enhances students' soft skills, too. According to two teachers who lead this club, students' participation in sports tournaments and competitions allows them to enhance their teamwork and resistance skills. They learn how to work hard and achieve a team goal. One participant noted that sports club activities have a positive impact on students' academic achievement. This club raises students' motivation and interest in school tasks and activities and allows them to develop a strong sense of belonging. Students love to participate in and organise local and provincial competitions. These results align with previous research, which confirmed that participation in athletic clubs was associated with higher grades and educational aspirations compared to the school performance of nonparticipants (Eccles *et al.*, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Participating in athletic clubs raises students' social standing and places them among the school's elite group (Broh, 2002).

The cultural club also allows students to develop more effective soft skills. According to the findings from the discussion with the focus group participants, students usually participate in actions like meetings, newsletter authoring, social media content

creation, and public speaking. These activities empower students and allow them to improve their communication abilities in writing and speaking, and improve their digital literacy. Besides, members learn how to successfully and convincingly explain complex issues to a variety of audiences, and become more aware of intercultural differences and global values, including respect, tolerance, voluntary work, work ethics, and cooperation. Teachers added that students who participate in the cultural club activities are given a controlled and secure environment, away from the risks of the streets. Zaff *et al.* (2003), who noted that students' involvement in extracurricular activities could develop important social and self-efficacy skills, back up these outcomes. They added that these skills provide students with a potential foundation for future civic involvement activities, like volunteering and voting.

Finally, yet importantly, several soft skills that are beneficial for both personal and professional development can be enhanced during the activities of the environmental club. Based on the discussion with the leaders of this club, students were able to develop teamwork, leadership, and social skills through their participation in extracurricular activities. A teacher noted that through participation in environmental campaigns like collecting garbage and tree planting, students improved skills and values such as responsibility, creativity, and leadership, and became more aware of global environmental issues like climate change and global warming. They also developed their project management skills by learning how to set goals and organise and complete tasks. Furthermore, students who participate in this club have become role models for the nonparticipants. This club also enhances students' academic achievement since it allows them to learn more about topics that they study in different school subjects.

6. Conclusion

In short, the examination of results from the questionnaire and focus group discussion has revealed several intriguing and relevant findings. To begin with, high school students' engagement and participation in school clubs aid in the development of both soft and hard skills. Students have shown an increasing improvement in communication, teamwork, time management, self-awareness, problem-solving, and leadership skills to varying degrees. Specifically, participation in school club activities has significantly enhanced students' communication, cooperation, and self-awareness skills. However, problem-solving and leadership skills have seen little development. Thus, extracurricular activities like school clubs can effectively contribute to the development of both interpersonal and academic communication skills and behaviors.

The focus group discussion highlighted that all participants agreed on students' enjoyment of school activities and projects. Furthermore, school clubs provide excellent opportunities for students to enhance their soft skills, positively influencing their academic performance and achievements. The discussion also pointed out that extracurricular activities receive less emphasis in the school curriculum, with a predominant focus on hard skills over soft skills.

Given the significance of soft skills in 21st-century higher education, teachers can use school clubs to foster these skills through exercises that encourage leadership, collaboration, communication, time management, self-awareness, and problem-solving. Therefore, schools should acknowledge the value of extracurricular activities and motivate both teachers and students to engage in various clubs to promote personal and professional development and ensure a smooth transition into higher education. Consequently, school clubs play a crucial role in preparing students for future challenges and real-world situations by providing a supportive and stress-free environment where they can explore and brush up on their talents and creativity.

The research findings provide valuable insights and recommendations for education policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and students to increase the benefits of school clubs. Educational policymakers should prioritize extracurricular activities in the school curriculum and allocate resources, training, materials, and budgets. Moreover, school administrators should encourage teachers to establish different clubs to ensure students from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds have opportunities to participate and develop the desired skills. Besides, teachers should design tasks and activities that focus on developing soft skills and raising students' awareness of their importance for personal and professional purposes. Finally, but importantly, incentives should be used to encourage students to participate in school clubs to enhance their soft skills. By prioritizing the role of school clubs, teachers can significantly contribute to students' personal and professional growth.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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