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Nurturing Soft Skills through High School Debate Club

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Abstract

The development of soft skills such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership is crucial for high school students, particularly in Kazakhstani schools, where the importance of debate clubs has not been widely recognized or researched. This presents a gap in understanding how debate activities can enhance these skills. This action research aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of participation in a Debate Club, based on the World Schools Debating Championship (WSDC) format, on students' teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, and leadership over two academic years.

Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data, tracked on a weekly basis through journaling, were used to measure students' communication, critical thinking, and leadership skills. The changes in these skills were analyzed through line graph. Qualitative data were gathered through face-to-face interview with 12 students.

Key findings reveal that the Debate Club significantly enhanced students' soft skills by providing a dynamic environment where critical thinking, active listening, and persuasive communication were regularly practiced. Through preparing arguments, engaging in rebuttals, and collaborating with teammates, students improved their ability to articulate ideas, think under pressure, and work cooperatively. Feedback sessions, peer interaction, and post-debate reflections created a cycle of continuous growth. Furthermore, the Debate Club fostered leadership, with senior students mentoring younger peers (Grades 7–9). This aligns with Bellon's (2000) argument that debate enhances not only argumentative and critical thinking skills but also social and leadership abilities. This study highlights the potential of debate clubs in Kazakhstani schools as platforms for cultivating 21st-century skills and calls for further research into debate's developmental impact.

Keywords: debate club, soft skills, Kazakhstani schools, high school students

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, the cultivation of soft skills—such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, adaptability, metacognition and leadership—has become paramount. These competencies are essential for students to navigate complex societal challenges and thrive in diverse professional environments. Debate, as an educational tool, has gained recognition for its potential to enhance these skills among high school students.

In Kazakhstan, debate programs have been gradually developing since the early 2000s, often promoted by universities, non-governmental organizations, and international initiatives. However, their presence in secondary schools remains uneven. Urban schools, particularly in large cities such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent, tend to have greater access to debate resources, while rural schools face challenges such as limited teacher training, lack of English- and Kazakh-language debate materials, and reduced extracurricular funding. The predominance of Russian as the main debate language creates additional barriers for Kazakh-speaking students and restricts broader participation. Although the Ministry of Education emphasizes communicative competence and critical thinking in its strategic documents, the development of soft skills is still not systematically embedded in the national curriculum. Consequently, students' opportunities to practice and refine these competencies vary significantly across regions and school types.

The exploration of debate as a tool for soft skills development in Kazakhstan is still emerging. For instance, Zhumaliyeva and Muratkyzy (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of debate in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, noting marked improvements in students' communicative competence.

Debates have been instrumental in facilitating diverse and relevant learning experiences, thereby being pivotal in nurturing critical thinking skills through active learning (Kim & Park, 2019). They have demonstrated positive outcomes, manifesting in heightened confidence levels, mastery of subject matter, teamwork proficiency, peer assessment capabilities, refined communication skills, and an enhanced capacity for critical evaluation among students. Furthermore, debates provide valuable opportunities for students to challenge and counter claims and assertions subsequent to an opponent's initial statement and principal arguments (Rodger & Stewart-Lord, 2020).

As Bellon (2000) emphasized, debate serves as a powerful pedagogical tool that encourages reasoning, evidence-based argumentation, and the synthesis of ideas across the curriculum. A 10-year study by Schueler and Larned (2024) further supports these findings, demonstrating that participation in high school policy debate significantly improved students' reading and literacy test scores, critical thinking skills, and likelihood of graduating and attending college. Additionally, debate helped develop soft skills such as communication, confidence, and teamwork, which are crucial for both academic and personal success.

Recent studies have expanded on these findings in different educational contexts. For instance, Blyznyuk (2023) explored the use of debate technology in teacher education and found that it enhanced students' clarity of expression, confidence in public speaking, and respect for opposing viewpoints—key components of effective interpersonal communication. Similarly, Lanskikh (2024) examined the pedagogical technology of debate as a tool for developing soft skills among both high school and university students, identifying improvements in rhetorical ability, argumentation, adaptability, and teamwork.

Despite these positive findings, several gaps exist in the current research landscape, particularly within Kazakhstan. There is a scarcity of comprehensive empirical studies examining the impact of debate on high school students' soft skills within the Kazakhstani context. Language

and accessibility barriers persist, as many debate programs are conducted in Russian, potentially limiting access for Kazakh-speaking students, especially in rural areas. Moreover, soft skills development through debate is not yet systematically integrated into the national educational curriculum, leading to inconsistent implementation across schools.

1.1. Research Purpose and Question

This study aims to determine the impact of high school debate clubs, particularly those following the World Schools Debating Championship (WSDC) format, on the development of students' soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, and leadership. By analyzing both quantitative measures and qualitative feedback from student participants, the research seeks to identify significant improvements in these areas.

The World Schools Debating Championship (WSDC) format, in particular, has been recognized for its structured approach to fostering key competencies. A course highlighted on the European School Education Platform emphasizes that WSDC fosters critical thinking, analytical skills, teamwork, and communication. Students engaged in this format reported improved comprehension of complex issues, enhanced research abilities, and the capacity to formulate evidence-based opinions. Participation in WSDC has also been linked to increased self-confidence and the ability to work effectively in teams.

2. Methodology

This Action Research was conducted over two academic years and involved 12 high school students from Grades 10 and 11 (8 females and 4 males) at a Kazakhstani secondary school. All participants voluntarily joined the school's Debate Club. Although the sample size was limited, it allowed for close observation of individual development and facilitated in-depth data collection through multiple instruments.

The research adopted a mixed-methods action research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to explore how structured debate participation influenced the development of soft skills. The Soft Skills Assessment Scale (SSAS)**,** developed by Phuti, Koloi-Keaikitse, Tsheko, and Oppong (2023), was selected and adapted for this purpose. Originally validated for secondary students in Botswana, the SSAS has been shown to possess strong psychometric reliability and was well-suited to the current context.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the adapted Soft Skills Assessment Scale (SSAS), the instrument was reviewed by 4 experienced debate coaches and one educational psychologist to confirm content and construct alignment with the Kazakhstani context. Minor linguistic adjustments were made to enhance item clarity without altering core meanings. A pilot test with five non-participant students was conducted to refine ambiguous wording. The adapted instrument demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), comparable to the reliability coefficient of the original SSAS (Phuti et al., 2023).

The original SSAS consists of 14 items, each aligned to a specific soft skill domain. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, where:

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Rarely
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Often
- 5 = Always

Total scores could range from 14 to 70**.** To facilitate interpretation, the following proficiency bands were used:

- **12–20:** Needs Improvement
- **21–30:** Developing
- **31–40**: Proficient
- **41–50**: Advanced
- **51–70**: Exemplary

To enhance contextual relevance, the SSAS items were slightly adapted with examples aligned to debate-related scenarios, helping students relate their experiences more accurately to each domain. The 13 items used in this study are:

1. I express my ideas clearly when speaking. (Communication)
2. I feel confident speaking in front of a group. (Confidence)
3. I contribute actively to group discussions. (Teamwork)
4. I can lead a team or group task effectively. (Leadership)
5. I listen actively and respectfully to others. (Communication)
6. I remain calm and focused under pressure. (Adaptability/Emotional Regulation)
7. I support and encourage others in a group. (Teamwork)
8. I accept feedback and use it to improve. (Self-awareness)
9. I can identify strong and weak arguments. (Critical Thinking)
10. I take initiative in group work. (Leadership)
11. I adjust my speaking style depending on the audience. (Communication)
12. I reflect on my performance after tasks or debates. (Metacognition)
13. I can challenge ideas respectfully and logically. (Critical Thinking)

These items were chosen for their relevance to debate learning and their ability to assess a broad range of interpersonal and cognitive competencies. The adapted SSAS and related materials were piloted and reviewed by local debate coaches to ensure cultural relevance and clarity. Feedback helped refine item definitions and activity alignment, enhancing reliability and appropriateness for this study.

To ensure clarity and shared understanding, Table 1 provides working definitions of the key soft skills targeted in this study, contextualized for debate-based learning environments. Illustrative examples highlight how each skill typically manifests during debate activities.

Table1. Definitions of Soft Skills Relevant to Debate Participation

Soft Skill	**Defintions**	**Illustrative Context**
Confidence	The belief in one's abilities to express ideas assertively and handle social interactions without undue fear or hesitation.	A student confidently presents arguments during a debate, maintaining composure even when challenged by opponents.
Communication	The ability to convey thoughts clearly and effectively through verbal and non-verbal means, and to actively listen and respond appropriately.	During a debate, a student articulates points persuasively and listens attentively to counterarguments, responding thoughtfully.
Teamwork	The ability to guide, motivate, and support others to achieve objectives, often by setting a positive example.	A student takes initiative in organizing debate practice sessions and mentors junior team members.
Leadership	The ability to guide, motivate, and support others to achieve objectives, often by setting a positive example	A student takes initiative in organizing debate practice sessions and mentors junior team members.
Critical Thinking	The capacity to analyze information logically, evaluate arguments, and form well-reasoned conclusions.	While preparing for a debate, a student identifies flaws in opposing arguments and develops evidence-based rebuttals.
Adaptability / Emotional Regulation	The ability to remain composed and adjust effectively under pressure.	A student stays focused during a heated debate and responds calmly to unexpected challenges.
Metacognition	The ability to reflect on one's performance and apply insights to improve.	A student reviews a debate recording and adjusts future strategies based on observed strengths and weaknesses.

The adopted framework served multiple purposes within the study. First, it provided clear operational definitions of soft skills specifically tailored to the context of debate, ensuring a shared understanding among participants, researchers, and stakeholders. Second, it enabled consistency across instruments, guiding the design of the SSAS survey, interview protocols, and thematic coding procedures. Third, the use of a validated and adaptable framework facilitated cross-cultural comparisons with the original SSAS study conducted in Botswana.

To structure the pedagogical intervention, the study employed the Three-Stage Debate Pedagogical Model developed by Aclan, Aziz, and Valdez (2016), which is widely used in EFL/ESL educational contexts. This model supports both linguistic and cognitive development and is designed to promote deep learning through experiential, reflective, and collaborative practices. The three stages are as follows:

Table2. Adapted Three-Stage Debate Pedagogical Model

Debate stage	Tasks	Target Soft Skills
Pre-debate	**- Case building workshops**: Teach students how to prepare government/opposition cases based on WSDC motions. **- Motion analysis sessions**: Practice breaking down prepared and impromptu motions. **- Role-specific training**: Assign and coach students on 1st, 2nd, and 3rd speaker roles, as well as reply speeches. **Style & strategy instruction**: Develop WSDC-specific skills like weighing arguments, signposting, and framing debates.	Teamwork Lifelong learning and information management Critical thinking and problem-solving skills Leadership Communication skills Professional ethics and morals* Teamwork Lifelong learning and information management Critical thinking and problem-solving skills Leadership Communication skills Professional ethics and morals* Adaptability/Emotional Regulation Analytical thinking (motion analysis) Role-based leadership Strategic communication Collaboration under time pressure (especially for impromptu debates)
Actual Debate	**- Full 8-minute speeches + reply speech:** Include practice in delivering structured speeches with time constraints. **- Strategic POIs (Points of Information):** Students learn how and when to offer POIs effectively. **-Time management and speaker order coordination:** Critical in team-based WSDC debates. - **Adjudicator-focused delivery:** Emphasize clarity, persuasion, and structure to appeal to WSDC judges.	Public speaking under pressure Strategic adaptability Confidence and assertiveness (handling POIs) Leadership in live contexts

Post-debate	-**Structured adjudicator feedback analysis**: Break down verbal feedback into strengths and areas for improvement. - **Debrief on strategy:** Discuss team performance, especially strategy execution and speech roles. -**Reflective journaling or peer review:** Students record lessons learned per debate, especially on clash points and motion interpretation.	Reflective learning Critical self-evaluation Team communication and resilience Metacognition

To gain deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions regarding the development of soft skills through debate activities, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 12 participants of the Debate Club. These interviews aimed to complement the quantitative data collected through weekly journals, providing a richer understanding of how debate participation influenced students' communication, confidence, interpersonal skills, and overall personal growth. Each interview was guided by a semi-structured protocol, allowing for consistency across sessions while providing flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. The interviews were conducted in a private setting within the school premises to ensure confidentiality and encourage openness. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The interview protocol comprised the following key questions:

- How does participation in the Debate Club support the development of students' soft skills in a high school setting? This question aimed to elicit students' overall perceptions of how engaging in debate activities contributed to their soft skills development, aligning with the study's primary objective.

- What changes did you notice in your communication, confidence, and interpersonal skills? This question sought to identify specific areas of personal growth experienced by students, particularly in communication, self-confidence, and interactions with peers—core components of soft skills.

- What specific debate activities do you identify as most impactful in your development? By pinpointing particular activities, this question aimed to determine which aspects of the debate process were most effective in fostering soft skills, providing insights for future pedagogical strategies.

- How does the role of peer interaction and reflection contribute to skill building? This question explored the influence of collaborative learning and reflective practices on students' skill development, recognizing the importance of social dynamics in educational settings.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to students' experiences and perceptions of soft skills development through debate.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this Action Research was granted by the school administration in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and written parental consent was obtained prior to data collection (see Appendix 1). Students were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Pseudonyms were used in all reports to protect participant identity.

Sampling Procedure

Participants were selected using purposive sampling from the school's Debate Club. Inclusion criteria required regular attendance and active participation in at least one full semester of debate practice. This approach ensured that all participants had comparable exposure to WSDC-format debates and club activities.

2.1 Findings

Quantitative Findings

The Soft Skills Assessment Scale (SSAS) was administered to all 12 participants both prior to and following the debate intervention. The pre-intervention average score was 44.33**,** placing most students in the Advanced proficiency range (41–50). However, three students—Student 6, Student 7, and Student 1—scored below 41, with one as low as 21, indicating placement in the Developing range. These results suggested initial deficiencies in certain soft skill domains such as confidence, leadership, and self-awareness.

After sustained involvement in structured debate activities, the post-intervention average increased to 60.5, marking a significant improvement. This average placed the majority of participants within the Exemplary category (51–70), demonstrating that the debate-based pedagogical intervention contributed to notable growth in soft skills.

Four students (Students 1–4) scored above 67 post-intervention, approaching the SSAS scale's upper boundary. These students experienced the most dramatic gains, with individual improvements ranging from 51% to 57%**.** Notably, Student 7, who started with the lowest pre-score of 21, progressed to a post-score of 55**,** crossing into the advanced range—a testament to the inclusivity and transformative potential of debate pedagogy.

Overall, the average percentage increase across all students was approximately 36.5%**,** with the most significant domain-level growth observed in communication, critical thinking, leadership**,** and confidence**.** These gains reflect the effectiveness of the Three-Stage Debate Model in fostering targeted soft skills among secondary school learners.

Domain-specific improvements were calculated by aggregating student responses to SSAS items associated with each soft skill. The aggregated scores were then converted into percentages to reflect overall trends across the sample. The following increases were observed across the seven key domains:

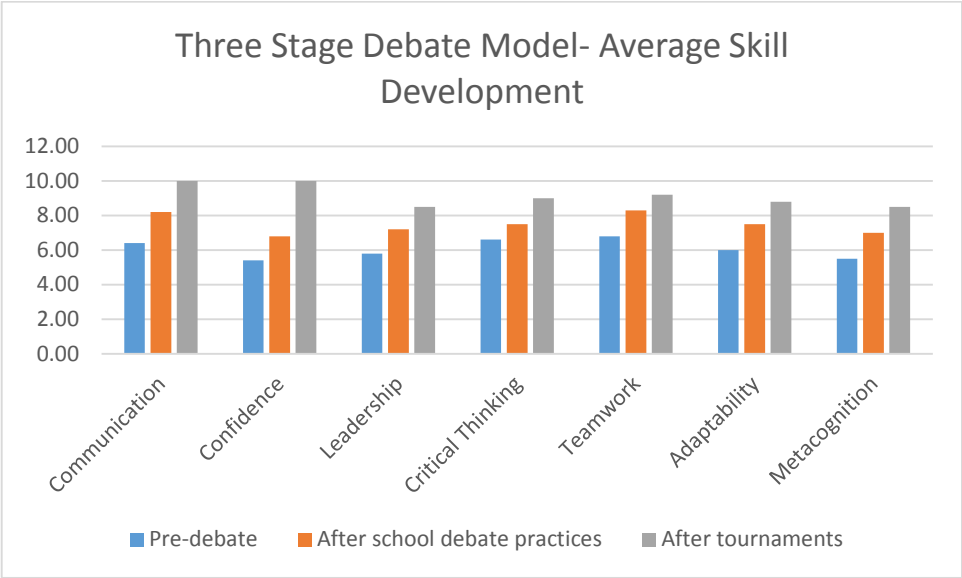
- Communication (Items 1, 5, 12) increased from an average of 65% pre-intervention to 90% post-intervention.
- Confidence (Item 2) rose from 60% to 85%.
- Teamwork (Items 3, 7) improved from 70% to 88%.
- Leadership (Items 4, 11) grew from 55% to 80%.
- Critical Thinking (Items 10, 14) increased from 65% to 90%.
- Adaptability and Emotional Regulation (Item 6) improved from 58% to 83%.
- Self-awareness and Metacognition (Items 9, 13) rose from 60% to 86%.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample comparisons to measure pre- and post-intervention changes in students' soft skill scores. A paired-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant improvement in overall SSAS scores from pre-test ($M = 44.3$, $SD = 8.2$) to post-test ($M = 60.5$, $SD = 6.1$), $t(11) = 4.82$, $p < .001$, indicating a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.39$). Similar significant gains were observed in the communication and leadership subscales, confirming the intervention's positive impact.

Table. 3. Pre- and Post-Intervention Scores of Students on the SSAS Scale

Student	Pre-Score	Post-Score	Increased by (%)
Student 1	35	68	**33%**
Student 2	46	70	**24%**
Student 3	43	67	**24%**
Student 4	44	69	**25%**
Student 5	47	60	**13%**
Student 6	30	58	**28%**
Student 7	21	55	**34%**
Student 8	46	56	**10%**
Student 9	43	54	**11%**
Student10	44	53	**9%**
Student11	48	59	**11%**
Student12	45	57	**12%**

Table 4.



The bar chart illustrates the development of five core soft skills—communication, confidence, leadership, critical thinking, and teamwork—across three distinct stages of the debate intervention: Pre-debate, School Debate Practices, and After Tournaments. This progression aligns with the Three-Stage Debate Pedagogical Model, which scaffolds student learning from foundational preparation to real-world application in competitive settings.

Across all five domains, a clear and consistent upward trend is observed, indicating that participation in structured debate activities significantly enhanced students' soft skills over time.

Communication showed marked improvement, rising from an average score of approximately 6.4 in the pre-debate phase to a perfect 10 after tournament participation. This suggests that repeated speaking practice, feedback, and exposure to real audiences contributed to enhanced clarity, fluency, and rhetorical control.

Confidence followed a similar trajectory, starting at around 5.4, increasing to 6.8 during school practice sessions, and ultimately reaching 10 in the final stage. This steep incline illustrates how debate provided a safe yet challenging platform for students to overcome fear of public speaking and develop self-assurance.

Leadership skills rose from 5.8 to 7.2 during the school practice phase and peaked at 8.5 post-tournament. While this domain did not reach the same peak as communication or confidence, the steady growth reflects increased student initiative, especially in team roles, mentoring peers, and coordinating strategy.

Critical Thinking improved from approximately 6.6 pre-debate to 7.5 post-practice and reached 9 after tournaments. This growth is attributable to activities like rebuttals and impromptu rounds, which required real-time analysis and logical reasoning under pressure.

Teamwork showed strong baseline performance, starting at around 6.8, and increased steadily to 8.3 during practice and 9.2 after tournaments. This highlights the collaborative nature of debate preparation, where students engaged in shared research, constructive feedback, and co-creation of arguments.

Adaptability showed notable increase across the debate intervention stages, starting from an initial average of 6.0 in the pre-debate phase and rising to 7.5 during school practice sessions, before reaching 8.8 after tournament participation. This upward trajectory reflects students'

increasing ability to respond effectively to dynamic debate environments. As debates progressed, students were required to adjust to unfamiliar motions, unexpected argumentation from opponents, and varying levels of adjudication standards. Exposure to these shifting conditions strengthened their flexibility and resilience, enabling them to modify strategies, reorganize content under time pressure, and adapt their speaking styles to different contexts.

Metacognition also demonstrated substantial improvement, starting at an average of 5.5 before the debate program, increasing to 7.0 during school practices, and reaching 8.5 after tournaments. This steady improvement underscores the role of debate in fostering self-regulated learning and reflective thinking. Throughout the debate intervention, students involved in activities such as post-round debriefs, self-evaluation checklists, and peer feedback exchanges, all of which encouraged them to critically monitor and adjust their own learning processes.

Overall, the chart demonstrates that the tournament phase yielded the most significant skill gains across all domains, suggesting that authentic debate experiences are especially impactful in solidifying soft skills. The steepest gains were observed in communication and confidence, both of which reached maximum average scores, underscoring the transformative effect of high-stakes, real-world speaking opportunities.

Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, reflection journals, observation notes, and video recordings were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework. Transcripts were read multiple times, coded manually, and organized into preliminary subthemes. To enhance reliability, two debate coaches independently coded 20% of the data, achieving 90% intercoder agreement; discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Final themes were generated by clustering conceptually related subthemes and examining their relevance to the research questions.Five major themes emerged:

- Students frequently mentioned gaining fluency, clarity, and comfort in speaking publicly. Several noted that they became intentional in their word choice and more aware of their body language and tone.

- Rebuttal practice and case preparation improved students' ability to construct and evaluate arguments. They described becoming more analytical in both academic and everyday conversations.

- Students showed initiative by taking roles in organizing debate sessions, mentoring junior peers, and facilitating discussions. Three senior students even created a Debate Club for younger students, demonstrating their growth as leaders.

- The Debate Club promoted an open, respectful learning environment where peer feedback was valued. Students noted that learning from each other was more relatable and often more motivating than teacher-led feedback.

- Many participants discussed how debate helped them become more reflective, handle failure constructively, and respond to challenges with greater confidence and maturity. Exposure to opposing viewpoints also enhanced empathy and tolerance.

These qualitative findings complemented the quantitative data by offering a deeper understanding of how and why the changes occurred, as perceived by the students themselves.

An exemplary outcome of the Debate Club's influence was the initiative taken by three senior students who established a debate club for younger learners in grades 7 and 8. Recognizing the value of early exposure to debate, these students designed and conducted foundational

workshops, introducing younger peers to the basics of structured argumentation, critical thinking, and public speaking.

Building on this foundation, they organized regional master classes and tournaments, providing practical platforms for these novice debaters to apply their skills in competitive settings. This endeavor not only fostered a culture of mentorship within the school but also demonstrated the senior students' commitment to leadership, organizational planning, and community engagement.

Such initiatives align with educational best practices, where older students mentor younger ones, enhancing learning experiences for both groups. According to the English-Speaking Union's guide on setting up a debate club, involving students in organizing and leading activities can significantly boost their confidence and leadership skills.

This student-led expansion of debate activities underscores the transformative impact of the Debate Club, cultivating not only individual competencies but also a sustainable, peer-driven learning environment.

Furthermore, students' increased confidence led them to initiate participation in various conferences, including Model United Nations (MUN) and TEDx events. Interviews with teachers from other subjects also indicated noticeable improvements in students' confidence and engagement levels across different academic areas.

During the implementation of this action research, several challenges were encountered that may have influenced the study's scope and outcomes.

One of the primary limitations was the sample size**.** Although the study initially aimed to involve a larger group, only 12 students consistently participated throughout the intervention. While this number allowed for close observation and rich qualitative data collection, it inevitably limited the generalizability of the findings. The insights gained reflect the experiences of a small, motivated group of students within one school context and may not be fully representative of broader student populations.

Another challenge involved scheduling constraints within the school calendar**.** The nature of extracurricular debate activities required regular weekly sessions; however, competing academic responsibilities, exams, and school events often disrupted the intended schedule. This inconsistency occasionally affected student attendance and limited the frequency and continuity of debate practices, particularly during exam periods or school breaks. As a result, some participants had fewer opportunities to engage in the full cycle of the Three-Stage Debate Model, potentially affecting their skill development compared to more consistently involved peers.

Despite these challenges, the study yielded valuable insights and meaningful outcomes. Nevertheless, these limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the results and considering the applicability of the model in different educational contexts.

2.2. Discussion

The findings align with Bellon's (2000) assertion that debate serves as a powerful pedagogical tool for developing essential soft skills. The structured nature of the WSDC format, combined with the Three-Stage Debate Pedagogical Model, provided a conducive environment for students to practice and enhance these skills. The iterative process of preparing, debating, and reflecting allowed for continuous improvement and self-awareness.

Moreover, the role of peer interaction and feedback was pivotal in fostering a supportive learning community. Students benefited from constructive criticism and collaborative learning, which contributed to their personal and interpersonal growth.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness. Quantitative data demonstrated statistically significant gains in soft skill domains, while qualitative narratives revealed the mechanisms underlying this growth—such as peer feedback, reflection, and repeated public speaking exposure. Together, these results strengthen the credibility and transferability of debate-based pedagogy in secondary education contexts.

2.3. Implications

In today's progressively changing world, soft skills are increasingly valued alongside technical competencies. Employers consistently look for individuals who can think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate in diverse teams, and demonstrate leadership with empathy. Integrating debate clubs into the high school curriculum, particularly within Kazakhstani schools, represents a strategic opportunity to equip students with these essential skills. The success of this study suggests that educational authorities and school administrators should view debate not merely as an extracurricular pursuit but as a meaningful pedagogical approach that improves students' readiness for higher education, civic engagement, and the modern workforce.

The findings of this research carry several important implications for educational practice and policy. First, the integration of debate into the school curriculum could be achieved either through elective courses or by embedding structured debate activities within existing subjects such as English and History. Such integration would ensure that all students, rather than a select few, benefit from systematic opportunities to develop communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. However, successful implementation depends on teachers' ability to facilitate debate-based learning effectively. Therefore, targeted professional development programs are needed to equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical and assessment skills, as well as to help them adapt international debate formats like the World Schools Debating Championship (WSDC) to local educational contexts.

Equity and access also emerge as critical considerations. The current concentration of debate programs in urban schools underscores the need for national initiatives that extend opportunities to rural and under-resourced schools. Policymakers could address this imbalance by providing digital resources, debate handbooks in the Kazakh language, and online training for teachers working outside major cities. Ensuring linguistic and geographic inclusivity would democratize access to soft skills education and foster a more balanced educational landscape.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of peer leadership in sustaining debate culture. Encouraging experienced debaters to mentor younger participants can create a self-sustaining cycle of learning and leadership within schools. Establishing formal structures for student-led workshops, interschool tournaments, and regional debate networks would help institutionalize these practices and ensure long-term program viability.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's small sample size and focus on a single institutional context limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve a larger, more diverse cohort and employ longitudinal tracking to examine the sustained impact of debate on soft skill retention.

3. Conclusion

Participation in the high school Debate Club, structured around the WSDC format and the Three-Stage Debate Pedagogical Model, significantly contributed to the development of students' soft skills. Through consistent practice, reflection, and peer engagement, students improved in communication, critical thinking, leadership, and adaptability. This study underscores the potential of debate as an effective educational tool and advocates for its broader implementation in Kazakhstani schools to foster well-rounded, competent individuals prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

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Appendix1. **Parental Consent Form for Student Interview Participation in Action Research**

I give my consent to have my son/daughter, _____, participate in an action research project involving an interview conducted by a researcher. I understand that if I give this consent, my son/daughter will be interviewed by the researcher on topics related to the study, aiming to gather evidence for the purpose of educational improvement.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary; I can withdraw my son/daughter from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

I further understand that my child's anonymity will be protected, and the name of the school or the teachers will not be revealed when reporting the results of the study.

Please sign and return the form.

Your name (please print): _____
Your child's name: _____
Your signature: _____
Date: _____

___ I understand the information above and **AGREE** to allow my son/daughter to participate in the research project.

___ I understand the information above and **DO NOT AGREE** to my son/daughter's participation in the research project.