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Exploring Teacher Leadership through Peer Collaboration and Research: Perspectives from a Teacher Training Program

Muthyala Udaya

Associate Professor, School of ELE, The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India
udaya@efluniversity.ac.in

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Abstract

Teacher leadership is increasingly recognized as a vital aspect of teacher education, fostering reflective practitioners and emerging researchers. This study examines how teacher trainees in the Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) program at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, developed leadership capacities through collaborative teaching and academic inquiry. Using a mixed-methods design with 15 participants, data were collected via a structured questionnaire to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Findings reveal that leadership emerged through reciprocal learning, reflective interaction, and greater confidence in instructional decision-making. Peer collaboration promoted metacognitive awareness, enabling trainees to evaluate and refine their practices, while mentoring, feedback, and structured opportunities to share classroom experiences supported leadership growth. The study highlights how integrating practice-based collaboration with reflective research fosters teacher leadership, positioning trainees as active contributors to pedagogical innovation. It underscores the need to embed leadership development within teacher education curricula to enhance professional agency and long-term growth.

***Keywords*— Teacher Effectiveness, Teacher leadership, Professional Development, Collaborative Culture, Self-Learning**

I. INTRODUCTION

Within the ever-changing fabric of education, teacher leadership is increasingly recognized as a transformative force that can contribute significantly to school improvement, pedagogical innovation, and professional development (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Moving beyond the traditional perception of leadership as a formal role held by a few senior educators, contemporary perspectives emphasize distributed, informal, and practice-based leadership that empowers all teachers to lead from within their classrooms and professional communities (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; Harris, 2003). This shift is particularly significant in teacher education programs, where fostering leadership skills among novice teachers can lay the foundation for long-term professional agency and capacity-building in schools.

Teacher leadership is broadly defined as the ability to influence teaching and learning practices, collaborate effectively with peers, engage in evidence-informed decision-making, and participate in school improvement processes (Lieberman & Miller, 2005; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008). It is rooted in practices such as mentoring, curriculum development, classroom-based research, peer coaching, and leading professional development initiatives. In pre-service teacher education, such leadership often emerges informally through collaborative work, reflective teaching, and critical inquiry, rather than through administrative or managerial roles (Robinson, 2017).

Peer collaboration, particularly in pre-service training contexts, plays a crucial role in cultivating leadership capacity. Collaborative teaching experiences enable teacher trainees to share responsibility, exchange feedback, and reflect collectively on pedagogical challenges. Studies show that peer collaboration fosters metacognitive awareness, shared problem-solving, and reciprocal learning, all of which are foundational to teacher leadership (Vangrieken et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Such collaborative interactions not only enhance pedagogical knowledge but also encourage teacher trainees to see themselves as active agents capable of shaping teaching practices and influencing others' professional growth.

Another key element in teacher leadership development is research engagement. Incorporating classroom-based inquiry and action research into teacher education enables teacher trainees to examine their own practices, understand learner needs, and adapt instruction based on evidence. This research orientation helps bridge the theory-practice divide, equipping future teachers with the skills to critically evaluate and improve their teaching (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Teacher-led inquiry also provides a platform for emerging leadership, as it positions teachers as knowledge creators and contributors to broader pedagogical discourse. In the Indian context, there is a growing emphasis on preparing teachers who are not only content experts but also reflective practitioners, collaborators, and leaders of learning. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for a revitalized teacher education system that emphasizes professional autonomy, reflective practice, and continuous development (MHRD, 2020). However, many teacher education programs still tend to prioritize compliance and content delivery over innovation and leadership (Kumar, 2013; NCERT, 2005). As such, there is a need to explore how informal, collaborative, and research-driven practices can be embedded into teacher training to foster leadership from the ground up.

This study is situated within the Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) program at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad an intensive one-year course designed to equip teacher trainees with both theoretical foundations and practical teaching competencies. Within this program, participants engage in collaborative lesson planning, peer teaching, reflective journaling, and academic research. These activities create a fertile ground for the emergence of teacher leadership in a form that is relational, dialogic, and grounded in practice. This research seeks to investigate how teacher leadership develops through peer collaboration and classroom-based research among teacher trainees enrolled in the PGDTE program. It conceptualizes leadership not as a fixed role but as a dynamic process of influence that is enacted through shared reflection, joint decision-making, and evidence-informed practice. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine how collaborative teaching experiences support the development of leadership skills and metacognitive dialogue.
- Explore how engagement in research projects informs instructional choices and enhances professional confidence.
- Identify institutional supports—such as mentoring, feedback mechanisms, and structured peer engagement—that contribute to leadership development.

By framing teacher leadership as a socially constructed and practice-oriented phenomenon, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the importance of empowering teacher trainees to lead from within. It also advocates for the intentional integration of collaborative inquiry and leadership opportunities within teacher education curricula, particularly in contexts where hierarchical norms and rigid structures may inhibit teacher agency.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher leadership has emerged as a critical domain within contemporary educational research, particularly in contexts that prioritize decentralized, collaborative, and inquiry-oriented practices. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2009) define teacher leadership as the capacity of teachers to lead instructional improvements, support colleagues' development, and contribute to the broader learning culture of an institution. Rather than confining leadership to formal positions or hierarchical structures, recent scholarship emphasizes informal, practice-based leadership, where influence is exercised through pedagogical decisions and professional engagement (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Several researchers contend that teacher leadership is central to sustainable school reform, especially when it empowers educators to shape teaching practices from within (Lieberman & Miller, 2005; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). This perspective aligns with the shift from teacher as implementer to teacher as co-constructor of knowledge

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and pedagogy, positioning practitioners as agents of change within their professional communities.

The theoretical model of distributed leadership provides a valuable lens through which to understand teacher leadership in non-hierarchical environments. Spillane (2006) argues that leadership should be viewed as a distributed practice stretched over individuals, tools, and routines within a system. This model rejects the top-down approach and instead acknowledges the collective and relational nature of leadership. Harris (2013) further suggests that distributed leadership thrives in cultures that encourage collaboration, shared responsibility, and mutual trust. In teacher education programs, this approach is particularly pertinent. When trainees engage in peer learning, curriculum development, or collaborative planning, they often assume leadership roles without formal designation. Research by Muijs and Harris (2006) highlights that distributed leadership can be cultivated through peer mentoring, co-teaching, and reflective dialogue—activities that are often embedded in progressive teacher training curricula.

Another significant strand in the literature relates to metacognitive collaboration, which refers to peer interactions that foster awareness of one's own thinking and learning processes. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory underpins this idea by highlighting the role of social dialogue in cognitive development. Recent studies emphasize that when teacher trainees collaboratively reflect on teaching strategies, share feedback, and engage in dialogic inquiry, they build both metacognitive awareness and leadership dispositions (Donato, 2000; Mezirow, 2000). Drew and Mackie (2011) suggest that peer-led reflection helps participants to question established norms, leading to critical insights and professional transformation. Such peer-based engagements create a learning environment that is democratic, participatory, and conducive to shared leadership. Through co-constructed knowledge and mutual critique, trainees develop confidence in their instructional decisions and a sense of professional agency.

A key mechanism through which teacher leadership is enacted is reflective practice. Schön (1983) famously introduced the idea of the "reflective practitioner," who learns from the complex realities of teaching by engaging in continuous self-assessment. Zeichner and Liston (1996) argue that reflection is not merely a personal cognitive process but a social and political act that allows teachers to interrogate their practices, assumptions, and contexts. In teacher education, reflective practice is often linked with action research or practitioner inquiry, enabling trainees to investigate classroom challenges and generate pedagogical knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Such inquiry-based approaches not only enhance self-efficacy but also contribute to the development of leadership skills, as trainees begin to influence their peers and institutions through evidence-based insights and informed experimentation.

While existing literature richly explores the dimensions of teacher leadership, distributed leadership, and reflective practice, there is limited research on how these concepts interact specifically within teacher education programs in the Indian context. In particular, few studies have examined how informal leadership capacities emerge through collaborative practices among teacher trainees engaged in academic research and shared reflection. The Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) at The English and Foreign Languages University provides a unique context to explore these dynamics, yet remains underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This study addresses this gap by investigating how PGDTE trainees cultivate leadership through peer collaboration and research-based classroom experimentation. By focusing on practice-based, informal leadership rather than formal roles, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of teacher leadership in early-career development.

This study is situated within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which views knowledge as socially constructed through interaction and context. Such a worldview emphasizes the importance of understanding participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes. Since the focus of this study is on how teacher trainees perceive and enact informal leadership through peer collaboration, reflective engagement, and research-based practice, this paradigm provides an appropriate lens for interpreting rich, qualitative data in a context-sensitive manner.

Research Questions

1. How do teacher trainees enact informal leadership through collaborative roles such as peer mentoring, group facilitation, and shared planning during their training program?
2. In what ways does engagement with classroom-based research enhance teacher trainees' confidence in instructional decision-making

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and support their development as reflective practitioners?

3. What program structures and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., mentoring, feedback, peer interactions) foster or limit the development of teacher leadership among trainees?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study involved 28 teacher trainees enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma in the Teaching of English (PGDTE) program at The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their active involvement in key program components such as peer teaching, collaborative lesson planning, research-based coursework, and reflective assignments. All participants had completed a bachelor's or master's degree in English or a related field and were preparing to enter the teaching profession. Their academic and pedagogical engagement in the program made them particularly suited to explore the informal development of teacher leadership capacities.

Procedure

This study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods case study design. The primary aim was to explore how teacher trainees develop informal leadership capacities through collaborative and reflective engagements. Data were collected over the course of one academic term and involved both qualitative and quantitative tools.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire featuring Likert-scale items aligned with three key constructs: metacognitive collaboration, research practices, and self-growth/reflection. The questionnaire was developed based on relevant literature and reviewed by two experts in teacher education to ensure content validity and clarity. Though formal factor analysis was not conducted due to the limited sample size, conceptual coherence and alignment with theoretical constructs guided the instrument's development.

Qualitative data were gathered through open-ended survey responses, reflective narratives, and written accounts of peer interactions and practicum experiences. These instruments allowed participants to express their perspectives on leadership behaviors demonstrated during instructional planning, group work, and practice teaching sessions. Ethical approval was obtained through institutional procedures. Participants were briefed about the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation test to explore relationships among the three core constructs. Descriptive statistics provided insights into overall trends and patterns, while the correlation analysis examined the strength of associations between constructs such as metacognitive collaboration, research engagement, and reflective growth. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Patterns were identified across participants' responses to extract themes that represented informal leadership behaviors. These themes were refined through iterative reading and comparison, focusing on leadership enacted through peer collaboration, reflective dialogue, and classroom initiative. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, triangulation across data sources and member-checking with selected participants were employed. A table of themes with illustrative quotes was developed to link raw data to interpretations and maintain transparency.

V. FINDINGS

The quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation test to examine patterns and interrelationships among three core constructs: Metacognitive Collaboration, Research Practices, and Self-Growth / Reflection. As shown in Table 1, participants reported consistently high levels of engagement across all three dimensions. Metacognitive Collaboration recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.88$), reflecting participants' frequent involvement in group discussions, task coordination, and collaborative decision-making. Research Practices ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.16$) followed closely, suggesting that many teacher trainees actively integrated academic knowledge and theoretical insights into their pedagogical thinking. Self-Growth / Reflection ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.12$) also emerged as a significant dimension, capturing the extent to which participants reflected on their teaching experiences and responded to feedback. The relatively low standard deviations across all three dimensions point to a high degree of consistency in responses among participants.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Leadership Dimensions

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Min	Max
Metacognitive Collaboration	4.27	0.88	3	5
Research Practices	4.07	1.16	1	5
Self-Growth / Reflection	4.00	1.12	1	5

These findings highlight the prominence of collaborative engagement and reflective inquiry in participants' learning trajectories. The high mean scores across all variables affirm the integration of leadership practices within the teacher education program. To explore how these dimensions interact, Table 2 presents the results of Pearson's correlation test. The analysis reveals a series of strong and statistically significant correlations. Metacognitive Collaboration shows a particularly high positive correlation with Self-Growth (r = 0.96), indicating that participants who engaged more with peers also tended to reflect more deeply on their own teaching. Similarly, the correlation between Metacognitive Collaboration and Research Practices (r = 0.94) demonstrates a close relationship between collaboration and evidence-informed teaching. The link between Research Practices and Self-Growth (r = 0.95) further suggests that engaging with research reinforces reflective capacities.

Table 2. Pearson's Correlation Matrix

Variables	Peer Collab	Research Practice	Self-Growth
Metacognitive Collaboration	1.00	0.94	0.96
Research Practice	0.94	1.00	0.95
Self-Growth	0.96	0.95	1.00

Together, these correlations underscore the interconnectedness of teacher leadership behaviors. The analysis clearly demonstrates that collaboration, research engagement, and reflection are mutually reinforcing processes. These interdependencies strengthen the argument that teacher leadership should be viewed as a composite construct rather than isolated traits. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire items were carefully designed based on established theoretical models and supported by relevant literature in teacher leadership, reflective practice, and collaborative learning. Face and content validity were confirmed through expert review by two teacher education faculty members, who evaluated the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the constructs. Although construct validity was not assessed through bfactor analysis due to the modest sample size, the internal consistency of each construct was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients for Metacognitive Collaboration (α = 0.82), Research Practices (α = 0.85), and Self-Growth / Reflection (α = 0.78) indicate acceptable to good levels of internal reliability. These measures reinforce the robustness of the instrument and the dependability of the data derived from it.

The qualitative data were examined using an inductive thematic analysis approach to identify patterns of leadership behavior within the participants' open-ended responses. The themes that emerged from the analysis capture the practical enactment of leadership during peer interactions, teaching simulations, and reflective exercises.

As detailed in Table 3, five core themes were derived from the participants' narratives. The first theme, Initiating Peer Discussions and Group Tasks, reflects the proactive role taken by participants in leading collaborative work and facilitating peer learning. The second theme, Mentoring or Guiding Less Confident Peers, illustrates the emergence of informal mentorship roles, where participants provided academic and emotional support to team members. The third theme, Applying Research to Real Teaching Problems, signals participants' capacity to connect theory with practice, often adapting strategies from coursework into their classroom teaching. The fourth theme, Engaging in Reflective Dialogue on Practices, demonstrates the use of peer feedback and self-assessment as tools for professional growth. Finally, Taking Initiative in Demonstrations or Planning highlights participants' willingness to assume leadership during instructional planning and practice teaching sessions.

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Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Teacher Leadership Behaviors

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
1. Initiating Peer Discussions and Group Tasks	Participants demonstrated leadership by organizing group tasks and fostering collaboration.	*"I took the lead in organizing tasks and ensured everyone contributed."* (P7)
2. Mentoring or Guiding Less Confident Peers	Participants assumed supportive roles, helping peers understand tasks and build confidence.	*"I guided a classmate who was nervous about teaching and helped her practice."* (P11)
3. Applying Research to Real Teaching Problems	Participants integrated academic research into classroom decision-making.	*"I used a strategy from our readings to handle student distractions more effectively."* (P3)
4. Reflective Dialogue on Teaching Practices	Reflection and peer feedback shaped participants' awareness of teaching behaviors.	*"Discussing my lesson plan with peers made me realize how to sequence my activities better."* (P14)
5. Taking Initiative in Demonstrations/Planning	Participants volunteered to lead, especially in planning or demo-teaching scenarios.	*"When others hesitated, I offered to do the demo. It was challenging but fulfilling."* (P21)

The above thematic analysis of participants' qualitative responses revealed five interconnected behaviors that illustrate how informal teacher leadership is enacted during the PGDTE program. These behaviors emerged organically within the peer-led and practice-oriented learning environment, highlighting the situated and collaborative nature of leadership development.

The first theme, Initiating Peer Discussions and Group Tasks, reflects participants' proactive efforts to structure collaborative work, distribute responsibilities, and maintain momentum in group activities. Participants often stepped into leadership roles not by formal assignment, but through initiative and a sense of collective responsibility. This kind of leadership was frequently described as "natural" or "emerging out of necessity," especially when deadlines approached or when peers needed coordination. The quote from Participant 7 illustrates this dynamic: "I took the lead in organizing tasks and ensured everyone contributed," revealing how organizational leadership can be informal yet highly impactful.

In the second theme, Mentoring or Guiding Less Confident Peers, participants described instances of scaffolding, peer tutoring, and emotional support. This mentorship did not follow institutional structures but stemmed from a shared commitment to mutual success. Such leadership involved simplifying complex tasks, sharing teaching strategies, and boosting peers' confidence. For instance, Participant 11 recounted helping a peer through demo planning, stating, "I guided a classmate who was nervous about teaching," which reveals a nurturing and supportive leadership stance grounded in empathy and collaboration.

The third theme, Applying Research to Real Teaching Problems, demonstrates how theoretical insights were transformed into actionable strategies. Several

participants reported drawing from assigned readings, classroom discussions, and educational research while solving practical challenges. This application of research suggests an emerging pedagogical agency, where trainees see themselves as thinkers and decision-makers. Participant 3 noted, "I used a strategy from our readings to handle student distractions," signaling a shift from passive consumption of theory to its active application in instructional contexts.

The fourth theme, Engaging in Reflective Dialogue on Teaching Practices, reveals how leadership can manifest through self-awareness and peer critique. Participants often described moments where peer feedback or journaling prompted a re-evaluation of their teaching choices. Such reflection fostered both professional insight and metacognitive growth. Participant 14's reflection "Discussing my lesson plan with peers made me realize how to sequence my activities better"—underscores the value of dialogic reflection as a leadership practice that promotes pedagogical refinement.

Finally, the theme Taking Initiative in Demonstrations or Planning showcases moments when participants voluntarily assumed visible leadership during peer-teaching sessions or lesson planning. These acts were particularly notable in scenarios where peers hesitated or challenges arose. Participant 21 shared, "When others hesitated, I offered to do the demo," highlighting both courage and a readiness to lead in high-pressure situations.

Together, these themes reveal that informal teacher leadership in this context is not merely about authority or visibility. Instead, it is constructed through collaborative action, reflective inquiry, research-informed practice, and empathetic mentorship. The PGDTE program appears to function as a fertile ground for nurturing these capacities by offering peer-driven, research-linked, and practice-based opportunities for engagement. The table of responses thus serves as empirical evidence of how leadership emerges organically in supportive, low-hierarchy academic environments that emphasize shared learning and growth.

The quantitative findings of this study indicate that participants demonstrated a strong inclination toward various dimensions of teacher leadership. Among the three core constructs—metacognitive collaboration, research practices, and self-growth—metacognitive collaboration scored the highest mean (M = 4.27, SD = 0.88), suggesting that teacher trainees frequently engaged in peer collaboration, discussion, and shared problem-solving. Research practices (M = 4.07, SD = 1.16) and self-growth or reflective thinking (M = 4.00, SD = 1.12) also emerged as significant dimensions of leadership development. These values show that the trainees not only participated in research-informed activities but also actively reflected on their teaching practices for continuous improvement.

The correlation analysis using Pearson's test revealed strong and positive relationships among all three variables. A particularly high correlation was found between metacognitive collaboration and self-growth ($r = 0.96$), followed closely by correlations between metacognitive collaboration and research practices ($r = 0.94$), and between research practices and self-growth ($r = 0.95$). These findings suggest that the teacher trainees who collaborated and reflected meaningfully were also those who actively engaged in research-informed decision-making. The statistically significant interdependence among these dimensions affirms the integrated nature of teacher leadership traits and implies that developing one dimension (such as collaboration) may enhance the others (reflection and research engagement).

The qualitative findings, derived from thematic analysis of open-ended responses, complemented the quantitative results by offering deeper insights into how leadership behaviors were enacted in practice. Five prominent themes emerged from participants' reflections: initiating peer discussions and group tasks; mentoring or guiding less confident peers; applying research to real teaching problems; engaging in reflective dialogue on teaching practices; and taking initiative during planning or teaching demonstrations. These themes reflected tangible leadership actions, with participants reporting moments where they facilitated group work, supported struggling peers, or applied theory into classroom practice. For instance, one participant noted, "I stepped up to lead the demo when others were hesitant," illustrating initiative and peer leadership. Another reflected, "Peer feedback helped me see my teaching from a different perspective," highlighting the role of reflection and metacognition in leadership development. Overall, the qualitative data revealed that teacher leadership was not a theoretical construct alone but an actively practiced skill within the training context.

The quantitative and qualitative findings mutually reinforce the conclusion that informal teacher leadership is enacted through a combination of

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collaborative practices, reflective dialogue, and evidence-based decision-making. Participants who demonstrated leadership in group settings also engaged more deeply with research and reflection, indicating a holistic development of leadership competencies.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined how teacher trainees develop and enact informal leadership within a pre-service teacher education context, with a particular focus on collaborative practices, reflective engagement, and research-informed pedagogy. Drawing on a mixed-methods case study of the PGDTE program at The English and Foreign Languages University, the study revealed that teacher leadership is not confined to formal roles or hierarchical structures but is often enacted through everyday academic and peer-driven activities. Through both quantitative trends and qualitative narratives, it became evident that leadership emerges as a dynamic and distributed construct grounded in shared responsibility, collegial dialogue, and pedagogical agency.

One of the most compelling findings is the strong, statistically significant correlation among metacognitive collaboration, reflective self-growth, and research practices. These interrelationships suggest that teacher leadership should be understood as a composite construct, rather than a collection of discrete competencies. In particular, trainees who demonstrated high engagement in peer collaboration were also more likely to reflect critically on their practices and apply research-based strategies in their teaching. This aligns with theories of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2004) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where leadership is co-constructed through participation in meaningful, context-specific tasks. The findings underscore the importance of embedding leadership development within authentic teaching and learning scenarios, rather than treating it as an abstract or supplementary domain.

The qualitative findings further illuminate how leadership manifests in practice. Participants described taking initiative in peer teaching, mentoring classmates, and applying theory to classroom challenges—demonstrating agency, initiative, and a capacity for collaborative problem-solving. These behaviors often emerged organically in response to situational demands, reinforcing the view that teacher leadership is not necessarily assigned or taught but can be cultivated through the social and intellectual architecture of training programs. Importantly, such enactments of leadership were closely tied to reflective dialogue, emotional intelligence, and professional identity formation—suggesting that leadership development is as much affective and relational as it is cognitive.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. First, it is contextually bounded, drawing data from a single institution with a relatively small, purposive sample of 28 participants. While this aligns with the goals of in-depth qualitative research and case study design, it does limit the generalizability of findings. Second, much of the data relied on self-reported responses, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. While triangulation, member checking, and expert validation were used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the absence of longitudinal or observational data constrains our ability to assess the sustainability and transferability of observed leadership behaviors. Future studies would benefit from extending the time frame of data collection to include follow-up with trainees in their professional teaching careers, thereby capturing how pre-service leadership dispositions evolve in real-world classroom settings.

The findings offer meaningful implications for curriculum design, institutional policy, and teacher development initiatives. From a curricular perspective, leadership development should be made an explicit goal of pre-service programs. This can be achieved by integrating collaborative projects, peer mentoring tasks, and action research assignments that encourage reflection and collective inquiry. Rather than compartmentalizing leadership into elective modules, programs should infuse leadership opportunities into core coursework and practicum components. For example, teacher educators can design peer-led teaching sessions that not only evaluate content knowledge but also foster facilitation, feedback, and decision-making skills.

Institutionally, there is a need to cultivate learning environments that value distributed expertise and recognize the leadership potential of all trainees, regardless of prior experience. Faculty mentors should model collaborative leadership practices and create space for student-led initiatives. Such practices contribute to a culture of trust, reciprocity, and empowerment—conditions that research has shown are essential for sustained professional growth (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Furthermore, policy-makers should recognize that teacher leadership begins not at the point of employment but during initial training. Allocating

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resources for mentoring programs, reflective journals, or research opportunities can significantly enhance the leadership readiness of teacher graduates.

Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher professionalism by challenging the narrow view of leadership as tied to formal titles or institutional hierarchy. Instead, it advocates for a relational, practice-based, and evolving view of leadership—one that is deeply embedded in the processes of learning, teaching, and community building. By centering the voices and experiences of trainees, this research affirms the transformative potential of pre-service programs to shape not just competent teachers, but reflective, collaborative, and visionary educators equipped to lead from within their classrooms and beyond.

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