



Integrating Social-Emotional Learning and Trait Theory in Understanding Student Leadership: A Conceptual Framework

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: September 04, 2026 Revised: October 03, 2026 Accepted: October 08, 2026 Available Online: October 13, 2026 Keywords: social-emotional learning; personality traits; Five-Factor Model; student leadership; leadership development; conceptual framework; mediation. Corresponding author: Amara Ejaz Email: amaraejaz2018@gmail.com	Leadership development has become a major focus for higher education authorities. Although the need for leadership is clear and significant, the psychological mechanisms through which university students can develop effective leadership remain unclear and, despite widespread commitment from higher education departments, are not yet fully understood. Two key research debates continue in parallel: personality traits and social-emotional skills; yet, they are rarely integrated. This paper bridges that gap by introducing a comprehensive conceptual model in which personality traits serve as a psychological mechanism mediating the connection between social-emotional competencies and student leadership practices. SEL competencies are based on the CASEL five-factor framework, and personality traits are based on the Big Five model. In this paper, it is proposed that SEL competencies, when strengthened through various social and academic experiences, develop into more stable, trait-like characteristics. These traits then serve as a foundation for specific leadership behaviors. We discuss this model in the context of student leadership development theory and outline its implications for higher education practices and future research, including an upcoming empirical test of the proposed model.

Introduction

Leadership development has become a major focus for higher education authorities. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have incorporated leadership dynamics across all educational activities: curriculum, Course curricula, mission statements, co-curricular activities, and student affairs (Astin & Astin, 2000; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

Student leadership has well-established theoretical bases (Komives et al., 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2014), but the number of studies published on student leadership in the past century is less than 300 (Zhang, Thien, & Ahmi, 2025). Even with the worldwide recognition of leadership for university students, the importance of the leadership development process is undermined. Research over 70 years on leadership development program concluded the Higher education institutions (HEIs) have focused on leadership development practices but are less concerned about the effectiveness of these programs (Reyes, Dinh, Lacerenza, Marlow, Joseph, and Salas, 2019; Dopson, Ferlie, McGivern, Fischer, Mitra, Ledger, and Behrens, 2018). The psychological mechanism for university

students that can help them grasp effective leadership needs to be understood for better planning and implementation of leadership development programs. Historically, researchers worldwide observed leadership in three paradigms: traits approach, skills-based approach, and behavioral approach (Northouse, 2021), although they have been developed significantly over time into various new theories. Most of the leadership theories treat leadership as an outcome to predict, and do not pay attention to question the psychological process that connects students' underlying competencies to observable leadership behavior.

There are two separate research debates that directly relate to this question. The first debate, rooted in personality and trait psychology, has generated an enormous amount of evidence connecting the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality to leadership emergence and effectiveness (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Zaccaro, 2007). The second one is grounded in the social-emotional learning (SEL) literature and formalized in the widely recognized CASEL framework, which views emotional and social competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as teachable skills that can be learned and developed through instruction and experience (CASEL, 2020; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). While these two bodies of literature have evolved mostly in parallel, they have not been formally integrated yet. Specifically, existing research often overlooks whether, or how, social-emotional competencies and personality traits work together. Whether consecutively, interactively, or as substitutes in influencing leadership behavior.

This paper addresses that gap and introduces a conceptual model in which personality traits are considered as a psychological mechanism on which social-emotional competencies and student leadership practices connect. This integrated model of these three variables actually has its roots in theory. Social-emotional skills are acquired by students over time through ongoing experiences in social and academic settings. And personality traits act as a base to convert skills into practices.

Before presenting the integrative model and discussing its implications. The relevant literature on social-emotional learning (SEL), trait theory, and student leadership will be discussed consecutively.

Social-Emotional Learning: The CASEL Framework

Social-emotional skills (SES) are practical life skills, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and performance-based abilities, that are crucial to an individual's overall development. When incorporated into academic activities, they influence lifelong attitudes, values, behavioral patterns, self-esteem, resilience, and a well-rounded perspective on life (Zulfqar, Syed, and Latif, 2019).

It enables individuals to understand and manage emotions, regulate feelings, build balanced relationships, make meaningful life decisions, and plays a central role in holistic development across the lifespan (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) proposed the framework of five interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). It is a widely recognized framework among several available theoretical models for its balanced focus on all dimensions of the skills and competencies. It provides a more comprehensive and unified perspective compared with age-specific or personality-based models. (Li & Liu, 2026).

At the core of this literature is the premise that these are teachable competencies and can be developed and shaped through teaching, practice, and social interactions. This approach differentiates the social-emotional skills from personality traits significantly. As Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) claimed, many experimental and longitudinal studies suggest SEL is not merely some set of interrelated factors; rather, it is considered a core for individual development, including educational success, job prospects, mental health, and significant improvements in behavior and adjustment (Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley, 2015; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011). A distinguished study by Guerin, Oliver, Gottfried, Gottfried, Reichard, and Riggio (2011) was conducted on individuals from age 2 to 29. They revealed that social skills in adulthood wholly mediated the link between adolescent extraversion and adult leadership potential. This finding clearly positions social skills as a developmental forerunner in the development stages toward leadership, rather than just a solid trait that happens to coexist with it. Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) additionally supported that the outcome of social-emotional skills-based interventions unfolds over time and even strengthens with passing years.

Personality Traits as a Psychological Mechanism

The distinction underlying the claim that personality traits are the psychological mechanism is that social-emotional competencies are seen as learnable skills that can be developed, while personality traits are generally viewed as more stable characteristics (Yoon et al., 2024).

Soto, Napolitano, and Roberts (2021) define social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) skills as abilities that show what a person can do while thinking, feeling, and behaving; personality traits, by contrast, reflect what a person actually does. OECD's framework also supports this approach and deals with social-emotional skills as a teachable, flexible, and context-sensitive set of skills in contrast to fixed personality traits (Kankaraš & Suarez-Alvarez, 2019). Duckworth and Yeager (2015) reported that academic interventions can directly influence social-emotional competencies, which can develop over time, whereas personality traits are only slightly changeable.

A large number of longitudinal studies reported personality traits as consistent throughout life (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Meanwhile, the literature also shows gradual changes through ongoing life experiences and carefully planned interventions. (Roberts et al., 2017). This aligns with the cybernetic view that traits develop partly through reinforcement of repeated patterns of skilled behavior (DeYoung, 2015). In a recent study, Yoon et al. (2024) discovered that social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) skills offered additional predictive power over the Big Five personality traits when it came to forecasting academic success. This report also concluded that skills and traits are closely linked, but these are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably. Thus, these two terms must be used separately like in this proposed model.

Five-Factor Model (FFM) comprises five key traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability (which is basically the opposite of neuroticism). This model is a very prominent framework for understanding the unchanging individual differences in personality (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 2008). Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) conducted a meta-analysis and concluded that traits from the Five Factor Model FFM, especially extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, and low neuroticism, are strongly linked to leadership development and the effectiveness of leadership in its role; however, extraversion is the most dominant trait in this regard. Zaccaro's (2007) emphasized the perspective that leadership should not be viewed as an isolated trait. Rather, it is a combination of dispositional, intellectual, and motivational factors that determine the leaders' behavior in a variety of contexts. Similarly, DeYoung's (2015) reported that personality traits are not fixed characteristics; Rather, they are stable abilities emerged from an individual's unique pattern of psychological functioning, evolved overtime and, influenced by changing lifelong experiences.

Meanwhile, researchers reported that social and emotional skills, when practiced and strengthened through experiences like peer interaction, academic engagement, and co-curricular activities, can turn into stable characteristics (O'Donnell and Robins, 2004; Roberts and Wood, 2006; Roberts et al., 2017; Lüdtke, Roberts, Trautwein, and Nagy 2011) observed similar results with approximately 2000 German students from high school to university level, and found that personality traits thoroughly changed in response to the specific life events and experiences students undergo during their academic period. They further reported that university is not only a site of expression for personality traits. Rather, it functions as a base for measurable trait development. This perspective is relatively new and grounded in contemporary personality development theory, as the old view of personality observed personality traits as constant and unchanging (Wrzus & Roberts, 2017).

These studies project personality traits as a key psychological mechanism for individual development. Thus, it can be concluded that personality traits can be a basis for connection between social-emotional skills and leadership practice. The social-emotional competencies framework provides a set of core skills; traits act as a foundation, and skills are expressed as leadership practices in the real world.

Leadership Practices in Student Populations

The concept of leadership varies significantly across educational settings and organizational levels. In established organizations, simply stepping into authority is considered leadership. Though, student leadership evolves through multi-dimensional experiences of social interactions and a journey of self-discovery (Komives et al., 2005).

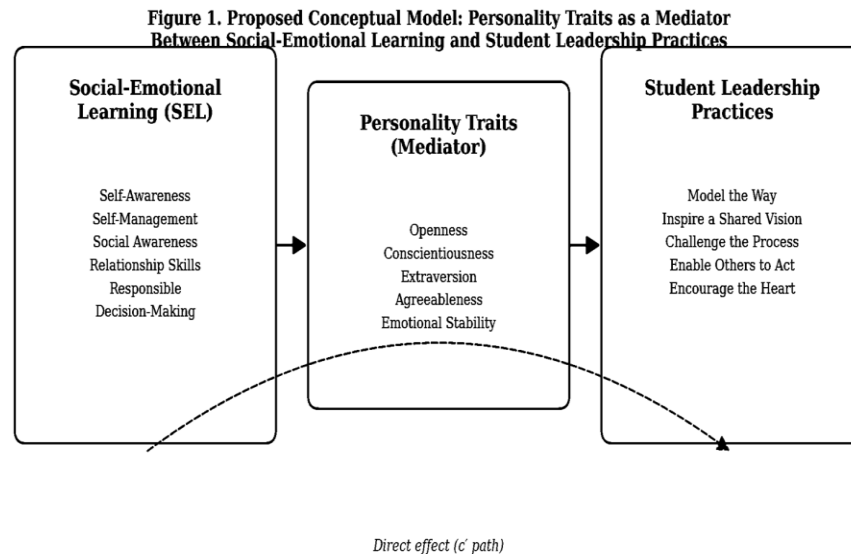
This approach aligns with the previously discussed conclusion that university students are in a dynamic, ongoing phase of their social-emotional and personal development, making them predominantly suitable for a model that perceives leadership as a result of evolving psychological processes instead of a static set of traits.

Kouzes and Posner (2014) introduced the framework of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. This framework is very prevalent for understanding students' leadership behavior. Their extended work on the development of tools like the Student Leadership Practices Inventory conceptualized student leadership more comprehensively. The whole work, including the five-practice framework, fits well with the current model because it sees leadership not as a fixed trait but as a collection of actual practices. These Practices are

hypothesized in this conceptual framework to be influenced by a student's social-emotional skills and their inherent personal dispositions.

The Integrative Model

Figure 1 portrays the proposed conceptual framework model.



Extracting from previous discussion and a thorough literature review, the conceptual model proposes social-emotional skills (CASEL Framework) as the independent variable, personality traits as a mediating factor, and student leadership practices as the dependent variable. This conceptual framework provides a base and works as a baseline study for PhD research. This model demonstrates two separate pathways. The first, an indirect (mediated) pathway, postulates that SEL competencies influence leadership practices by first shaping personality traits, which then affect leadership behavior (represented as paths a and b in traditional mediation notation). The second pathway, a direct one (the c' path, shown as a dashed line in Figure 1), suggests that SEL competencies can also impact leadership practices in ways that personality traits alone don't fully explain.

This model leads to several testable research questions and hypotheses, including identifying the relationship between the independent (SEL) and dependent (SLP) variables. And the influence of the mediating factor (personality traits) on these two variables.

Implications and Future Research Directions

The proposed model presented in this paper has considerable implications for higher education authorities both theoretically and practically. First, it provides a mechanism through which social-emotional skills lead to leadership practices. Second, it provides the conceptual basis for incorporating social-emotional skills-based interventions in leadership development programs. Third, it will shift the focus from a simple cause-and-effect relationship to a more comprehensive approach that highlights intervening dispositional processes. Meanwhile, as researchers have discovered, there is less focus on the effectiveness of leadership development programs (Reyes, Dinh, Lacerenza, Marlow, Joseph, and Salas, 2019); this conceptual framework shows a pathway to assess effectiveness through social-emotional skills and mediating factors, such as personality traits. Lastly, this conceptual model recognizes that social-emotional skills, cultivated through ongoing repeated patterns, can initiate long-lasting change in personality that reinforces leadership practices.

Additionally, this model brings together the two important variables, social-emotional skills and personality traits, not separately but collectively. Well-supported by the literature, it provides a defensible position for researchers who want to assess students' leadership potential.

As a conceptual framework, this model is not only descriptive, but it can be assessed empirically. All three variables have standard measures. Five-Factor Model, generated by Big Five theory, the CASEL framework, and students' leadership practices have established scales. Findings after the implementation will be shared in an upcoming paper.

Conclusion

This paper introduced a conceptual framework that establishes a connection among social-emotional skills, students' leadership practices, and personality traits. It considered personality traits as a psychological mechanism through which social-emotional competencies and student leadership practices connect. This integrated model of these three variables is rooted in theory. Social-emotional skills are acquired by students over time through ongoing experiences in social and academic settings. Personality traits act as a base to convert skills into practices. Thus, this model provides an understanding of how university students evolve into leaders. The development of student leadership in higher education has become imperative. This study has provided a practical way to connect compulsory factors for this purpose.

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