



## **Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Effectiveness: Insights from Irish Post-Primary School Leaders**

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### **Abstract**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognised as a critical component of effective school leadership, yet its practical role in shaping leadership outcomes remains underexplored, particularly within the Irish post-primary context. This study investigates how emotions influence leadership practices and outcomes, focusing on school leaders' perceptions of EI and its integration into leadership styles. The research aims to examine the interplay between emotional intelligence, emotional labour, and leadership effectiveness, and to identify strategies for embedding EI within leadership development. A qualitative design was adopted, employing semi-structured interviews with ten senior leaders (principals and deputy principals) from diverse post-primary schools in Ireland. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. Four overarching themes emerged: Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Labour, Emotion Management, and Leadership Style. Participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of EI, emphasising empathy, self-awareness, and relationship-building as central to effective leadership. Emotional labour and display rules were identified as significant challenges, particularly during crises. Authenticity and trust were highlighted as essential for fostering positive school cultures. Transformational leadership was frequently cited as an aspirational style, strongly linked to high EI. The findings underscore the pivotal role of emotional intelligence in navigating the complexities of school leadership. Leaders who effectively manage emotions and lead with authenticity are better equipped to create inclusive, resilient, and high-performing school environments. The study advocates for the integration of EI training into leadership preparation and continuous professional development, alongside mentoring and coaching initiatives.

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## **Introduction**

School leadership is unavoidably emotional. Decisions made by principals and deputy principals reverberate through staffrooms, classrooms, and the wider community, shaping the climate in which teaching and learning occur. Contemporary scholarship and practice increasingly acknowledge that leaders' capacity to recognise, understand, and regulate emotions, both their own and others', is central to effectiveness (Goleman, 1995; Wang, 2021). In school settings specifically, more than seventy percent of principals attribute their effectiveness to emotional intelligence (EI) skills (Miller, 2020), reflecting a growing consensus that the "soft" side of leadership such as empathy, relationship-building, self-awareness, and authenticity which drives "hard" outcomes such as staff engagement, instructional quality, and student achievement (Beavers, 2020; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Despite this recognition, the practical role of emotions in leadership remains under-examined within the Irish post-primary context. Much of the extant literature privileges structural, managerial, or policy lenses, with fewer empirical accounts of how Irish school leaders actually experience and mobilise emotions in their daily work. Building on international theory and evidence, this study addresses that gap by exploring senior leaders' perceptions of EI and the ways positive and negative emotions shape leadership outcomes in Irish post-primary schools.

The chapter sets the stage for the inquiry by outlining the educational and system context, clarifying the aims and research questions, and providing an overview of the thesis structure.

## *Context of the Study*

Effective leadership in schools depends as much on emotional competence as on administrative skill (Morrison, 2021). Positive emotions such as enthusiasm, empathy, hope, can energise staff and students, strengthen collaboration, and cultivate trust (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Conversely, unaddressed negative emotions like stress, frustration, anger can erode morale, inhibit professional learning, and destabilise school culture (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). EI, broadly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in self and others, equips leaders to navigate this terrain (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995). Leaders with high EI tend to foster strong relationships, demonstrate judicious self-regulation, and lead with empathy and authenticity (Brackett & Katulak, 2006; Day & Leithwood, 2007).

A second, related construct known as emotional labour (EL) captures the effort required to display emotions in line with organisational expectations (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). School leaders regularly negotiate implicit "display rules": remaining calm under pressure, projecting confidence in crises, or tempering personal grief to provide stability for others. The benefits of skilful EL include coherence, reassurance, and continuity; its costs can include strain, burnout, and diminished well-being if enacted rigidly or inauthentically (Humphrey, 2012; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

Within Ireland, EI is increasingly visible in policy and professional frameworks. Looking at Our Schools (LAOS, Department of Education, 2022) positions social and emotional competencies as foundational to high-quality learning and leadership. National surveys underscore the pivotal role of principals and deputy principals in sustaining the system's stability amid intensifying demands (Arnold & Rahimi,

2022), while Whole School Evaluations often highlight strong leadership as a cornerstone of school effectiveness (Hislop, 2017). Yet practical guidance on how leaders might cultivate EI, enact EL sustainably, and integrate these with leadership styles remains emergent, especially for post-primary schools navigating complex, diverse contexts.

This study responds to these needs by examining Irish leaders' lived experiences of emotions in leadership relating to what they understand EI to be, what emotions they feel compelled to display or conceal, how they manage emotional demands, and how these dynamics interact with leadership styles (e.g., transformational, distributed, participative).

#### *Aims, Research Questions, and Contribution*

This study seeks to deepen understanding of the emotional dimensions of school leadership within Irish post-primary education. Specifically, it examines how senior leaders perceive and enact emotional intelligence (EI) and emotional labour (EL), and how these processes influence leadership outcomes and professional learning. While international scholarship increasingly acknowledges the significance of emotions in leadership, empirical evidence from the Irish context remains limited. Addressing this gap, the research foregrounds leaders' lived experiences and explores the interplay between emotional competence, leadership style, and organisational culture.

The inquiry is guided by two primary research questions:

1. How do school leaders conceptualise and apply emotional intelligence in their leadership practice?
2. In what ways do positive and negative emotions shape leadership outcomes in post-primary schools?

To extend this focus, the study also considers several subsidiary questions:

- How do leaders describe and negotiate emotional display rules within their schools?
- What connections do they perceive between EI and transformational leadership?
- What gender-related dynamics, if any, influence the emotional work of leadership?
- What opportunities and challenges arise when integrating emotions into leadership theory and practice?
- What implications follow for professional development, mentoring, and policy in Ireland?

By addressing these questions, the research makes four key contributions. First, it provides contextualised, practice-proximate evidence on EI and EL in Irish school leadership, enriching international literature with local insights. Second, it illuminates how leaders balance authenticity with organisational display rules- a tension that shapes trust, school culture, and instructional improvement. Third, it clarifies perceived links between EI and transformational leadership, offering a grounded account of the leadership behaviours Irish principals and deputy principals aspire to enact. Finally, it informs leadership preparation and continuing professional development (CPD), strengthening the case for standalone EI modules, structured mentoring, and reflective spaces that support sustainable emotional practice.

### *Positioning Key Concepts*

To ensure conceptual clarity, three constructs underpin this analysis:

- Emotional Intelligence (EI): The ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Goleman, 1995). Core dimensions include self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and relationship management.
- Emotional Labour (EL): The effort required to display emotions consistent with organisational norms during interpersonal interactions (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). In schools, this often entails projecting calm and confidence, particularly during crises.
- Transformational Leadership: A style characterised by inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration—frequently associated with emotionally attuned practice (Bass, 1985; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

### *Delimitations and Assumptions*

The study focuses exclusively on Irish post-primary schools and senior leaders (principals and deputy principals). Adopting an interpretivist stance, it privileges participants' subjective accounts as valid and necessary for understanding how EI and EL operate in real-world contexts. While these perspectives cannot claim universal generalisability, they offer rich insights into the emotional dynamics of leadership.

Emotions are not peripheral to leadership; they are constitutive of it. In the complex and high-stakes environment of Irish post-primary education, leaders' ability to navigate emotional demands is critical for fostering inclusive, resilient, and high-performing school cultures. By interrogating how leaders understand and enact EI and EL and situating these practices within broader leadership frameworks such as transformational leadership, this study aims to inform theory, practice, and policy in ways that strengthen the emotional foundations of educational leadership.

## **Literature Review**

### *Framing the Emotional Turn in Educational Leadership*

Leadership in schools is inherently emotional. Daily decisions taken by principals and deputy principals shape relationships, culture, and learning over time. Contemporary theory positions emotion as constitutive, not ancillary of educational leadership, integrating cognition and affect in the enactment of influence (Fullan, 1998; Lee & Day, 2011). A broad research stream now examines how emotions operate in leaders' work, with particular attention to emotional intelligence (EI) which is the capacity to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions, and to emotional labour (EL) which is the effort involved in displaying emotions aligned with organisational expectations (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989; Goleman, 1995). Recent research examines how negative leadership behaviours related to stress, anxiety and emotional wellbeing emerged in school contexts, illustrating links between leadership practice and emotional outcomes for staff (Snow, Hickey, Blom, O' Mahony and Mannix-McNamara, 2021). In parallel, analyses of leadership styles increasingly foreground the

emotional substrate of transformational, distributed, and participative approaches (Bass, 1985; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Lakomski & Evers, 2010; Wang, 2021).

Despite this cumulative scholarship, empirical accounts from Irish post-primary schooling remain sparse. Policy instruments emphasise social and emotional competencies (Department of Education, 2022), national surveys underline the centrality of school leaders for system stability (Arnold & Rahimi, 2022), and inspectorate reports routinely cite leadership quality (Hislop, 2017). Yet detailed, practice-proximate evidence on how Irish leaders understand EI, enact EL, and connect emotional work to leadership outcomes is limited. This review synthesises international and Irish literatures, clarifies key constructs, and identifies gaps that motivate the present study.

### *Conceptualising Emotions in Leadership*

#### ***Emotional Intelligence: Models, Measures, Critiques***

The modern EI construct has roots in social intelligence (Thorndike, 1920; Gardner, 1983) and was formalised by Salovey and Mayer (1990), later elaborated into a four-branch ability model—perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotion—operationalised via the MSCEIT (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004). Mixed models, notably Bar-On's EQ-i, treat EI as an array of non-cognitive competencies spanning stress management, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and mood (Bar-On, 1997, 2007). Goleman's widely disseminated framework translates EI into workplace competencies—self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness/empathy, and relationship management—popularised through leadership practice (Goleman, 1995, 1998, 2004).

Critiques highlight conceptual breadth and measurement variance across EI models (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, 2004), with concerns that some instruments assess broader social skills rather than emotion-specific abilities (McEnrue & Groves, 2006; Fambrough & Hart, 2008). Nevertheless, across models, studies frequently associate higher EI with enhanced leader–follower relations, conflict resolution, motivation, and climate building (George, 2000; Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). In school settings, EI is consistently tied to empathic practice, self-regulation under pressure, and relational trust (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2019).

#### ***Emotional Labour and Display Rules***

Emotional labour refers to the effort required to align felt and displayed emotion with role expectations (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). In schools, implicit display rules often prescribe calmness, confidence, and care—especially in critical incidents—creating a tension between authenticity and stability (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Chang, 2020; Miller, 2019). The benefits of skilful EL include coherence and reassurance; risks include strain and burnout when leaders must consistently suppress felt emotion, particularly in high-stakes contexts (Hochschild, 1983; Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Kariou et al., 2021). Recent accounts contend that transparent, appropriately bounded emotional expression during crises can sustain trust better than rigid optimism (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020; Côté, 2017).

#### ***Emotion Management, Authenticity, and Trust***

Emotion management—shaping which emotions are experienced and expressed—is foundational to leadership practice (Gross, 1998; Matsumoto, 1990). In schools, leaders' early responses often set the tone for subsequent interactions, underscoring the value of measured, reflective engagement (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). Authenticity—alignment of action with values—supports trust and performance but does not entail unfiltered emotion; rather, it requires congruent, context-sensitive expression (Rogers, 1961; Goffee & Jones, 2005; Lynch et al., 2022). Relational trust, in turn, depends on openness, availability, and sustained listening which are practices that underpin teacher efficacy and collaborative culture (Beatty & Brew, 2004; Smith & Johnson, 2023).

### **Emotions and Leadership Processes**

Emotions shape leaders' decisional frames, risk perception, and motivational dynamics (Lerner et al., 2015; Keltner, 2017). Positive affect can catalyse collaboration, creativity, and persistence; unmanaged negative affect can erode morale and impede instructional improvement (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Leaders' vulnerability, when purposeful and bounded, may promote mutual understanding and collective efficacy (Crawford, 2007; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008), whereas transactional climates can leave leaders and teachers emotionally disconnected (Leithwood et al., 2006). In short, emotion is a mechanism through which leadership influences commitment, professionalism, and teacher self-efficacy (Rizvi, 2008; Thoonen et al., 2011).

### **International Perspectives and Cultural Variation**

Cross-cultural studies show both universality and variability in emotion expression and perception. While basic emotions are widely recognised, norms regarding display and regulation vary, influencing leadership practice and reception (Hareli, Kafetsios & Hess, 2015). Communication styles, conflict resolution preferences, and motivational drivers differ across contexts; emotionally intelligent leaders adapt with cultural sensitivity, especially in diverse school settings (Connelly & Gooty, 2015; Wang, 2021; O'Sullivan, 2019). International training programmes increasingly include EI components to equip leaders with empathy, resilience, and authenticity in complex environments (Wang, 2021).

### **The Irish Policy and Practice Context**

The LAOS framework (Department of Education, 2022) embeds social and emotional competencies within standards for teaching and leadership, signalling system-level recognition of EI's value. Surveys of Irish principals and deputy principals highlight the intensifying demands of leadership and the central role leaders play in sustaining school stability and wellbeing (Arnold & Rahimi, 2022). Whole School Evaluations often describe leadership as a driver of school improvement (Hislop, 2017). Yet there remains a practice gap regarding how EI is cultivated, how EI is enacted sustainably, and how emotional work intersects with leadership styles in post-primary schools. Mentoring, coaching, and CPD provisions are variably developed, and evidence on effective EI-focused training for Irish leaders is limited (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Berkovich & Ori, 2017).

### **Emotional Intelligence in Educational Leadership**

Studies consistently link higher EI to stronger relationships, effective communication, and resilient leadership under pressure (Brackett & Mayer, 2003; Bradberry & Greaves, 2009). Leaders with high EI are more likely to foster supportive climates, improve teacher job satisfaction, and influence student outcomes indirectly through culture and collaboration (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2004; Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2019). Importantly, EI is developable through reflective practice, coaching, and feedback loops, although learning may be contingent on baseline aptitude and sustained effort (Goleman, 2004, 2006). Ongoing debates concern whether ability-based and mixed models capture distinct constructs and how best to assess change in EI over time (Zeidner et al., 2004; McEnrue & Groves, 2006).

### **Leadership Styles and the Emotional Substrate**

Transformational leadership which is described as inspirational motivation, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, often co-occurs with elevated EI, given its reliance on attuned relational work (Bass, 1985; Walumbwa et al., 2008; Wang, 2021). Evidence suggests that emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to frame challenges constructively, cultivate hope, and empower staff, thereby strengthening teachers' motivation and performance (Berkovich & Ori, 2017; Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018). Nonetheless, causal pathways remain complex: emotionally intense environments marked by conflict, change, and ambiguity demand careful regulation; without it, even transformational intent can falter (Schmidt, 2010; Lakomski & Evers, 2010). Distributed and participative approaches similarly depend on trust, empathy, and measured decisiveness—emotional competencies at the core of effective collaboration (Sergiovanni, 1992; p.8 perspective cited in thesis).

### **Gendered Dimensions of Emotional Work**

Gender norms shape expectations regarding emotion display in leadership. Female leaders frequently confront a double bind: empathy and care are valued, yet assertiveness may be penalised (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Lewis & Smith, 2017). Male leaders may feel pressure to suppress emotion to align with norms of stoicism (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). These patterns are largely socialised, rather than biologically determined (Chaplin, 2015). Emerging scholarship and practice increasingly recognise the value of emotionally attuned leadership across genders and advocate for inclusive environments where leaders can express and manage emotions authentically and effectively (Fotuhi, Figueira & Chatterjee, 2012; Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). Additionally, Lafferty (2021, p.46) states that 'apart from the external consequences of social judgement, individuals may also suffer internally from failure to adhere to expectations.' However, these expectations are shifting. Within Irish schools, accounts suggest that expectations are shifting, with empathy and relational capability now more widely appreciated as leadership strengths; still, gendered display rules persist in some contexts and warrant further empirical examination (P3, P4, P7, P10 perspectives cited in thesis).

### **Synthesis and Conceptual Framework for the Study**



This review indicates that emotions play a pivotal role in educational leadership through three interlocking mechanisms: (1) competence (EI: perceiving, understanding, regulating emotion; building relationships and trust), (2) performance (EL: negotiating display rules, balancing authenticity and stability, managing strain), and (3) style (e.g., transformational, distributed, participative—each with distinctive emotional demands and affordances). Contextual factors—culture, gender norms, school setting (e.g., DEIS), and crisis conditions—shape how these mechanisms operate and with what effects (Hareli et al., 2015; Department of Education, 2022).

Guided by this synthesis, the present study employs a qualitative, interpretivist lens to investigate four domains that emerged prominently in the literature and in preliminary scoping: Emotional Intelligence; Emotional Labour; Emotion Management (including authenticity, experience, trust); and Leadership Style (including gender and transformational leadership). The intent is to generate practice-proximate insights from Irish post-primary senior leaders' lived experiences, clarifying how emotions are understood and enacted and why they matter for leadership outcomes.

### **Gaps and Directions**

International evidence links EI to effective leadership and identifies EL as both necessary and potentially costly when rigidly enacted. Leadership styles with strong relational components—particularly transformational leadership—appear to benefit from emotionally attuned practice. In Ireland, policy frameworks foreground social and emotional competencies, yet empirical accounts of how leaders cultivate EI, negotiate display rules, and translate emotional work into sustained improvement are limited. This gap warrants small-scale, qualitative inquiry that centres practitioners' voices and contexts, thereby informing leadership preparation, CPD, mentoring/coaching infrastructures, and school-level strategies for sustainable emotional practice (Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Wang, 2021; Berkovich & Ori, 2017).

The next section details the interpretivist methodology adopted for this purpose, including participant selection, semi-structured interviewing, and thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), alongside measures to enhance credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist design to explore how emotions shape leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools. The interpretivist paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' lived experiences (Merriam, 2009; Cohen et al., 2018). Given the study's focus on emotional intelligence (EI), emotional labour (EL), and leadership style, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing the nuanced, context-dependent meanings that school leaders attribute to their emotional work.

The research questions guiding the inquiry were:

1. What are school leaders' perspectives on emotional intelligence in leadership?
2. How do positive and negative emotions influence leadership outcomes?



Subsidiary questions examined emotional display rules, links between EI and transformational leadership, gendered dimensions of emotional work, and implications for professional development.

### *Sampling and Participants*

A purposive convenience sample of ten senior leaders—six principals and four deputy principals, was recruited from diverse post-primary schools, including DEIS and non-DEIS contexts. Inclusion criteria required participants to hold a senior leadership position and have at least five years' teaching experience. Variation in gender, school type, and leadership tenure was sought to enhance the richness of perspectives. While the sample size limits statistical generalisation, it aligns with qualitative research conventions prioritising depth over breadth (Mason, 2010).

### *Data Collection*

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility in eliciting detailed accounts while maintaining comparability across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Jamshed, 2014). Twelve open-ended questions, informed by the literature review, probed participants' understanding of EI, experiences of emotional display rules, strategies for emotion management, and perceptions of leadership style. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, a GDPR-compliant platform, and lasted between 35 and 70 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were offered transcript review, though none requested amendments.

### *Analytic Approach*

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following six iterative phases:

1. Familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Systematic coding of meaningful segments using colour-coding in Word.
3. Collation of codes into candidate themes.
4. Review and refinement of themes for coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Definition and naming of themes and subthemes.
6. Production of an analytic narrative integrating data extracts and interpretation.

A semantic approach was adopted, privileging participants' explicit meanings rather than latent constructs. Themes were not predetermined but emerged inductively, guided by the research questions. Four overarching themes were identified: Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Labour, Emotion Management, and Leadership Style, each with associated subthemes (e.g., empathy, authenticity, trust, gender, transformational leadership).

### *Ensuring Rigour*

Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data, systematic coding, and peer debriefing with an educational leadership researcher. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a consistent interview protocol, while confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling to

monitor researcher assumptions. Transferability was facilitated by providing thick description of context and participants. These strategies align with qualitative quality criteria (Cohen et al., 2018).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Education and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2021\_01\_13\_EHS). Participants received detailed information sheets and signed informed consent forms. Confidentiality was assured through pseudonymisation and removal of identifying details. Data were stored securely on encrypted institutional servers. The principle of *primum non nocere* guided all interactions, with sensitivity to potential emotional discomfort during interviews; participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage.

### *Limitations*

The study's small, regionally concentrated sample constrains generalisability. Self-reported data may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Providing interview questions in advance, while ethically appropriate, may have influenced responses. These limitations are acknowledged in interpreting findings and underscore the need for complementary research using larger, more diverse samples and mixed methods.

### *Summary*

This methodological approach—interpretivist, qualitative, and inductive—enabled an in-depth exploration of how Irish school leaders perceive and enact emotional intelligence and emotional labour within their leadership practice. The next section presents the thematic findings derived from this analysis.

## **Findings**

### *Overview*

This section presents the thematic analysis of interviews with ten senior leaders—six principals and four deputy principals—from Irish post-primary schools. The study explored how emotional intelligence (EI), emotional labour (EL), and emotion management shape leadership practice and outcomes. Four overarching themes emerged: (1) Emotional Intelligence, (2) Emotional Labour, (3) Emotion Management, and (4) Leadership Style, each comprising subthemes that illuminate the lived realities of school leadership.

### *Theme 1: Emotional Intelligence*

Participants consistently recognised EI as central to effective leadership. Their accounts reflected a nuanced understanding of EI's core dimensions—self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management—echoing Goleman's (1995) framework. Leaders described EI as "recognising and understanding your own emotions and the emotions of others" (P3), emphasising its role in navigating challenges and motivating staff.

### *Empathy*

Empathy emerged as a defining feature of emotionally intelligent leadership. Leaders viewed empathy as “standing in another person’s shoes” (P4) and “understanding where people are coming from” (DP1). While most considered empathy learnable, one deputy principal argued it was “innate... down to the person” (DP5). Empathy was linked to trust-building and conflict resolution, reinforcing its significance for relational leadership.

#### Relationships

Strong interpersonal relationships were portrayed as the bedrock of school culture. Leaders stressed that “if you can form positive relations with people, things tend to follow” (DP9), whereas fractured relationships were seen as difficult to repair: “It’s very easy to squeeze out the toothpaste, but very hard to put it back in” (P6). These insights underscore the relational dimension of EI as critical for sustaining collaboration and morale.

#### Self-Awareness

Self-awareness was described as essential for regulating emotions and modelling composure. Leaders highlighted the need to “manage my own emotions... and understand that other people carry emotion as well” (DP5). This reflexivity enabled leaders to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively, aligning with literature on EI as a predictor of adaptive leadership.

#### Theme 2: Emotional Labour

The interviews revealed the pervasive expectation that leaders maintain emotional equilibrium, often at personal cost. Participants spoke of the pressure to “stay calm as possible” and “not let things affect you” (DP9), likening the role to being “robotic” in emotional restraint.

#### Display Rules

Leaders described implicit norms governing emotional expression, particularly during crises. “You cannot sit down with the staff and cry... you have to show strength” (DP1). Yet some challenged these norms, advocating vulnerability as a form of authentic leadership: “There’s massive power in saying, ‘Actually guys, I don’t know what’s happening here’” (P4). These accounts highlight the tension between organisational expectations and human emotionality.

#### Theme 3: Emotion Management

Emotion management was framed as both a skill and a survival strategy. Leaders frequently invoked the metaphor of “the duck under water”—calm above the surface, frantic beneath (P3, P7). Strategies included compartmentalisation, reflective pauses, and maintaining “a calm exterior” even when internally unsettled.

#### Authenticity

Authenticity surfaced as a valued yet contested ideal. Leaders aspired to “bring yourself to the job” (P7) and “stay true to your values” (P3), while acknowledging the difficulty of reconciling authenticity with display rules. This paradox reflects broader debates on authentic leadership and emotional transparency.

#### Experience and Trust

Several participants linked emotional regulation to experience: “With age comes experience... you become more in control of your emotions” (DP5). Trust-building practices, such as open-door policies and active listening, were cited as mechanisms for fostering psychological safety and teacher agency.

#### Theme 4: Leadership Style

Leadership styles were described as fluid, evolving from autocratic to democratic and coaching orientations over time. Transformational leadership emerged as aspirational: “I try to get people to come with me for an idea... transformational leadership will come in there” (P6). Participants associated transformational practice with empowerment, optimism, and collaborative problem-solving, particularly in challenging contexts such as DEIS schools.

#### Gendered Dimensions

Gender norms influenced emotional expectations. Female leaders reported heightened emotional investment and caregiving roles, while male leaders were perceived as more compartmentalised (P4, P7). Although participants noted shifting norms, stereotypes persisted, warranting further inquiry into gendered emotional labour.

#### Summary of Findings

Collectively, these findings underscore the centrality of emotional competence in school leadership. EI enables leaders to cultivate empathy, sustain relationships, and manage complex emotional landscapes. EL and display rules impose constraints that leaders navigate through adaptive emotion management strategies, often balancing authenticity with organisational expectations. Leadership styles, particularly transformational, are deeply intertwined with emotional capacities, while gendered dynamics shape the emotional terrain of leadership practice.

### Discussion

#### *Interpreting the Findings*

This study examined how emotions shape leadership practice in Irish post-primary schools, focusing on emotional intelligence (EI), emotional labour (EL), emotion management, and leadership style. The findings underscore that emotions are not peripheral but central to leadership effectiveness, influencing decision-making, relationships, and organisational culture. Four themes emerged- EI, EL, emotion management, and leadership style, each revealing complex dynamics that both enable and constrain leadership practice.

#### *Emotional Intelligence as a Leadership Resource*

Consistent with international literature (Goleman, 1995; Brackett & Mayer, 2003), participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of EI, identifying self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management as critical competencies. Leaders described EI as “recognising and understanding your own emotions and the emotions of others,” linking these skills to trust-building and conflict resolution. This aligns with research positioning EI as a predictor of effective leadership and positive school climate (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Wang, 2021).

#### *Empathy and Relational Leadership*

Empathy emerged as a hallmark of emotionally intelligent leadership. Leaders viewed empathy as essential for understanding staff perspectives and fostering inclusion, echoing Bar-On's (1997) emphasis on interpersonal sensitivity. While some participants perceived empathy as innate, others framed it as a skill that can be cultivated through experience and reflection. This tension mirrors debates in EI scholarship regarding dispositional versus developmental models (Zeidner et al., 2004).

#### *Self-Awareness and Regulation*

Self-awareness was repeatedly cited as foundational for managing emotional responses under pressure. Leaders acknowledged the importance of regulating their own emotions to model composure and stability, a finding consistent with Gross's (1998) emotion regulation theory. Notably, participants highlighted the criticality of "first reactions" in shaping subsequent interactions, reinforcing the performative dimension of leadership emotions (Beatty, 2000).

#### *Emotional Labour and Display Rules*

The study illuminates the pervasive expectation that leaders maintain emotional equilibrium, often at personal cost. Participants described implicit display rules requiring calmness and strength, particularly during crises: "You cannot sit down with the staff and cry... you have to show strength." These norms reflect Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour and resonate with research on the strain of sustained emotional regulation in educational leadership (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

However, findings also suggest a shift toward valuing vulnerability and authenticity. Several leaders challenged rigid display norms, arguing that acknowledging uncertainty can build trust: "There's massive power in saying, 'Actually guys, I don't know what's happening here.'" This aligns with emerging scholarship advocating for emotionally transparent leadership as a trust-building mechanism (Côté, 2017; Lynch et al., 2022).

#### *Emotion Management: Authenticity and Experience*

Emotion management was framed as both a skill and a survival strategy. Leaders invoked the metaphor of "the duck under water"—calm above the surface, frantic beneath—capturing the hidden labour of emotional regulation. Authenticity surfaced as a valued ideal, yet participants acknowledged the tension between being "true to oneself" and adhering to organisational expectations. This paradox reflects broader debates on authentic leadership, suggesting that authenticity is negotiated rather than absolute (Goffee & Jones, 2005).

Experience was perceived as a moderator of emotional competence. Participants linked emotional control to professional maturity, echoing evidence that EI develops through accumulated practice and reflection (Miao et al., 2017). Trust-building strategies such as open-door policies and active listening—were cited as mechanisms for fostering psychological safety and teacher agency, reinforcing the relational dimension of leadership.

#### *Leadership Style: Transformational Aspirations and Gendered Dynamics*

Leadership styles were described as fluid, evolving from autocratic to democratic and coaching orientations over time. Transformational leadership emerged as aspirational, associated with empowerment, optimism, and collaborative problem-solving. This finding corroborates research

linking EI to transformational behaviours (Bass, 1985; Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018), suggesting that emotionally intelligent leaders are better positioned to inspire and mobilise staff toward shared goals.

Gendered dimensions of emotional work were evident. Female leaders reported heightened emotional investment and caregiving roles, while male leaders were perceived as more compartmentalised. Although participants noted shifting norms, stereotypes persisted, echoing literature on gendered expectations in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These dynamics warrant further inquiry, particularly regarding their implications for leadership development and wellbeing.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

The findings have significant implications for leadership preparation and professional development. First, they underscore the need to integrate EI training into leadership programmes, moving beyond technical competencies to include emotional literacy, empathy, and resilience. Second, mentoring and coaching structures should explicitly address emotional labour and authenticity, providing reflective spaces for leaders to navigate the tension between display rules and personal integrity. Finally, policy frameworks such as Looking at Our Schools (Department of Education, 2022) could operationalise EI competencies within leadership standards, ensuring alignment between policy rhetoric and practice.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study's small, regionally concentrated sample constrains generalisability. Self-reported data may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. Future research should adopt mixed-method designs, incorporating longitudinal measures of EI development and exploring intersections with gender, culture, and organisational context. Comparative studies across jurisdictions could illuminate how cultural norms shape emotional display rules and leadership practice.

### *Conclusion*

Emotions are not ancillary to leadership but rather they are constitutive of it. In Irish post-primary schools, emotionally intelligent leadership fosters trust, collaboration, and resilience, while unmanaged emotional demands risk burnout and organisational fragility. By foregrounding the emotional dimensions of leadership, this study contributes to an emerging discourse that positions EI and emotion management as core competencies for sustainable educational leadership. The challenge and opportunity lies in embedding these insights into policy, practice, and professional learning, ensuring that leaders are equipped not only to manage systems but to lead with empathy, authenticity, and emotional acuity.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *Summary of the Study*

This study explored the role of emotions in school leadership within Irish post-primary education, focusing on emotional intelligence (EI), emotional labour (EL), emotion management, and leadership style. Using a qualitative, interpretivist design, semi-structured interviews with ten senior leaders illuminated how emotional competencies shape leadership practice and outcomes. The findings affirm

that emotions are not peripheral but integral to leadership effectiveness, influencing decision-making, trust-building, and organisational culture.

### *Key Insights*

Three overarching insights emerge:

#### 1. Emotional Intelligence as a Core Competency

Leaders demonstrated a strong conceptual grasp of EI, emphasising self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management as essential for navigating complex interpersonal dynamics. EI was linked to transformational leadership behaviours, reinforcing its role in fostering collaboration and school improvement.

#### 2. Emotional Labour and Authenticity

Participants highlighted the tension between organisational display rules and authentic emotional expression. While composure and strength were expected, leaders increasingly recognised the value of vulnerability and transparency for trust-building, challenging traditional norms of emotional suppression.

#### 3. Experience, Trust, and Leadership Style

Emotional regulation was perceived as developing through experience, with trust-building practices such as open-door policies and active listening which are emerging as critical for teacher efficacy and organisational resilience. Transformational leadership was widely regarded as aspirational, underpinned by emotional acuity and optimism.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings underscore the need to embed emotional competencies within leadership development frameworks. Specifically:

- **Leadership Preparation:** Incorporate EI training into postgraduate and induction programmes for principals and deputy principals, emphasising empathy, resilience, and authentic communication.
- **Continuous Professional Development (CPD):** Develop targeted CPD modules on emotion management and EL strategies, including reflective practice and coaching.
- **Mentoring and Coaching:** Establish structured mentoring systems that address emotional dimensions of leadership, providing safe spaces for dialogue and support.
- **Policy Alignment:** Operationalise EI within national frameworks such as Looking at Our Schools (Department of Education, 2022), ensuring coherence between policy aspirations and leadership practice.



### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should build on these findings by adopting broader and more rigorous designs. First, studies could examine the impact of targeted emotional intelligence (EI) interventions on leadership effectiveness and leader wellbeing, assessing both short-term and sustained outcomes. Second, there is a need to explore the gendered dimensions of emotional labour within leadership, particularly across diverse school contexts, to understand how social norms and organisational expectations shape emotional practices. Third, longitudinal research would provide valuable insights into the developmental trajectory of EI and its evolving relationship with leadership style over time. Finally, comparative studies across cultural settings could illuminate how cultural norms influence emotional display rules and leadership behaviours, offering a more global perspective on emotionally intelligent leadership.

### **Limitations**

This study's findings should be interpreted in light of the limitations. The small, regionally concentrated sample restricts the generalisability of results, and reliance on self-reported data introduces potential recall bias and social desirability effects. To strengthen validity and reliability, future research should employ mixed-method approaches and draw on larger, more diverse samples. Such designs would enable triangulation of data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between emotions and leadership practice.

### **Conclusion**

Emotions are constitutive of leadership, shaping how leaders influence, inspire, and sustain school communities. In an era of increasing complexity, emotionally intelligent leadership offers a pathway to resilience, trust, and transformational change. Embedding emotional competencies into leadership preparation and professional learning is not optional, it is imperative for cultivating inclusive, high-performing educational environments.

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