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EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A PREDICTOR OF EFFECTIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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***Abstract*—This study examines the role of Emotional Intelligence (EI) in shaping effective and transformative school leadership within the Azerbaijani educational context. Drawing on a mixed-methods design supported by quantitative Likert-scale measures and qualitative open-ended responses from 89 participants, the research investigates how core EI competencies, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills predict leaders' capacity to foster positive school climates, enhance staff motivation, and support student success. Quantitative results demonstrate consistently elevated levels of EI across respondents, with mean scores indicating strong emotional**

awareness, effective decision-making, and constructive conflict management. Correlational patterns further suggest that EI competencies are strongly associated with school climate perceptions, leadership satisfaction, and interpersonal effectiveness. Complementing these findings, thematic analysis of qualitative data reveals that emotionally intelligent leadership is perceived as essential for building trust, strengthening communication, and creating inclusive environments that promote collaboration and professional growth. Participants emphasized that EI enables leaders to remain calm under pressure, understand diverse emotional needs, and address challenges with empathy and fairness. Reported obstacles—such as managing others' emotions, balancing empathy with authority, and navigating stressful or unpredictable situations highlight the complex emotional demands placed on school leaders. Overall, the study provides compelling evidence that EI significantly enhances leadership effectiveness and is a critical determinant of a healthy, high-functioning school ecosystem. By demonstrating that emotionally intelligent leadership improves relationships, supports academic performance, and fosters organizational well-being, this research underscores the necessity of integrating EI-focused professional development into leadership preparation programs. The findings contribute to global scholarship advocating for emotionally grounded, human-centered approaches to educational leadership and offer context-specific insights for advancing leadership quality in Azerbaijan.

Keywords-Emotional Intelligence, School Leadership, Transformative Leadership, Educational Administration, Leadership Effectiveness, School Climate, Empathy, Decision-Making, Azerbaijan Education System

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I. Introduction

In recent decades, educational systems have undergone rising complexity, accountability pressures, and shifting societal expectations, making traditional managerial skills insufficient for effective school leadership. Contemporary leadership research increasingly emphasizes that emotional and relational competencies—rather than technical expertise alone—are central to influencing staff, sustaining motivation, and shaping organizational climate (Pellitteri, 2021).

The concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) first emerged in the foundational work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), who defined EI as a set of abilities related to perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions. Subsequent theoretical developments expanded EI into multidimensional frameworks, most notably the ability-based model by Mayer and Salovey (1997) and the competency-based model popularized by Goleman (1995, 2002). These models conceptualize EI as a vital determinant of interpersonal functioning, decision-making, and adaptive behavior, making EI directly relevant for leaders who constantly navigate complex emotional landscapes within schools (Pellitteri, 2021).

A substantial body of empirical evidence demonstrates that EI significantly predicts leadership effectiveness. Multiple studies have found consistent associations between EI and transformational leadership behaviors—including vision building, individualized consideration, and motivational capacity—which contribute to improved staff morale and organizational outcomes (Mills, 2009; Palmer et al., 2001; Sayeed & Shanker, 2009). These findings are echoed in broader organizational research, which shows that leaders with high EI enhance communication quality, resolve conflict more constructively, and foster higher trust among team members (McCleskey, 2014).

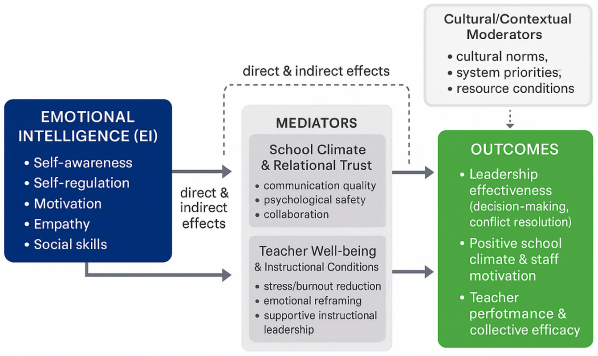
Recent scholarly reviews emphasize that EI plays a pivotal role in shaping school climate and team effectiveness. Leaders with stronger emotional competencies are better equipped to manage stress, guide emotionally charged interactions, and support teacher well-being—factors that directly influence instructional quality and teacher retention (Shao & Alias, 2024). EI further contributes to team cohesion, collaboration, and collective motivation, all of which are essential in increasingly dynamic and interdependent educational environments.

The importance of EI has grown further as education systems worldwide adopt relational, human-centered leadership models. As researchers such as Gonzales (2025) argue, emotionally intelligent leaders build trust, demonstrate empathy, and foster psychological safety, enabling teachers and students to thrive in conditions of uncertainty and change. This aligns with global shifts toward leadership paradigms that prioritize compassion, authenticity, and emotional regulation as core professional competencies.

Despite the expanding international literature, the role of EI in leadership remains context-dependent. Cultural expectations shape how emotions are expressed, how authority is negotiated, and how relationships are built within schools. Cross-cultural reviews note that EI manifests differently in hierarchical, collectivist, or transitional educational systems, making localized research essential (Krishnan & Awang, 2025). The South Caucasus and post-Soviet educational landscapes—characterized by evolving governance structures, reform movements, and a growing emphasis on participatory leadership—offer a particularly relevant context for studying EI-driven leadership practices. Given these dynamics, examining EI within Azerbaijani schools is both timely and necessary. The shifting educational priorities in the region—including teacher well-being, inclusive school climates, and modern leadership development—require leaders who can balance traditional authority with relational sensitivity, empathy, and transparent communication. However, empirical evidence from Azerbaijan remains scarce, making it important to investigate how EI competencies relate to leadership behaviors, decision-making, communication, and school climate in this context. The present study addresses this gap by exploring how core EI dimensions—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—predict leadership effectiveness among Azerbaijani educators. By utilizing a mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative assessments with qualitative insights to develop a contextually grounded understanding of EI's role in shaping school leadership processes and outcomes.

Therefore, the conceptual relationships underpinning this study are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking emotional intelligence to leadership outcomes through school climate, relational trust, and teacher well-being.



Note. The conceptual model is based on widely adopted EI competency frameworks and recent systematic reviews emphasizing the cascading impact of emotionally intelligent leadership on teachers and students.

Given the increasing emphasis on human-centered leadership and the clear empirical link between EI and school effectiveness, examining emotional intelligence within Azerbaijan's educational context is both timely and necessary. This study contributes to global literature by investigating the EI competencies of school personnel and exploring how these competencies support leadership effectiveness, school climate, and the broader functioning of the educational ecosystem.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional intelligence (EI) is commonly defined as the capacity to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in oneself and others. Three widely adopted frameworks guide research and

practice. The Mayer–Salovey–Caruso ability model conceptualizes EI as a mental ability with four branches—perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions (Mayer et al., 2016; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The Bar-On emotional–social intelligence model treats EI as an integration of emotional and social functioning across intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood clusters (Bar-On, 2006). The Goleman–Boyatzis competency framework organizes workplace EI into self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management as performance-relevant competencies (Goleman, 1998; Boyatzis, 2018). In education, these models clarify how EI translates into leadership behaviors—decision-making, communication, conflict management, and relationship building—that shape school climate and organizational effectiveness (Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008).

2.2. EI and Transformational Leadership: Theory and Evidence

Transformational leadership emphasizes a compelling vision, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). EI enables these behaviors by supporting empathy, emotion regulation, and high-quality relationships; leaders with higher EI are more likely to build trust, remain calm under pressure, and enact fair processes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Day et al., 2016). Meta-analytic and multilevel studies link EI to teacher motivation, collective efficacy, and professional relationships, which in turn support student engagement and achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). A "cascading" view posits the pathway EI → relationship quality/trust → climate/well-being → instructional conditions and outcomes (Joseph & Newman, 2010; Robinson et al., 2008).

2.3. Pathways from Leaders' EI to School Climate and Teacher Well-Being

The prosocial classroom model positions adult SEL competencies as the foundation of supportive learning environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Brackett et al., 2011). In schools, emotionally intelligent leaders tend to communicate transparently, apply fair decision procedures, resolve conflict constructively, and regulate stress—practices linked to improved teacher well-being and reduced burnout (Greenberg et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2018). At the organizational level, positive climate strengthens pedagogical focus and collective norms; EI-driven leadership sustains this climate through everyday behaviors such as empathic listening and consistent follow-through (Leithwood et al., 2008; Day et al., 2016).

2.4. Professional Learning and the Trainability of EI

Evidence suggests EI can be developed through targeted professional learning, including coaching, reflective practice, emotion-regulation training, and 360° feedback (Kotsou et al., 2011; Boyatzis et al., 2000). In educational leadership, EI-focused development is associated with better stress management, higher-quality relationships, and improved conflict resolution—factors relevant to teacher retention and organizational morale (Fullan, 2014; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Complementary meta-analyses in school-based SEL indicate durable positive effects on skills and attitudes, reinforcing the rationale for systematic EI capacity-building for leaders (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

2.5. Measurement and Methodological Considerations

EI is assessed via three primary approaches: performance-based tests (e.g., MSCEIT for ability EI), self-report inventories (e.g., EQ-i for trait/mixed EI), and multi-rater/360° behavioral measures (e.g., ECI/ESCI for competencies) (Mayer et al., 2002; Bar-On, 2006; Boyatzis et al., 2000). Because educational studies often rely on self-reports, researchers highlight concerns about common-method bias, construct overlap (e.g., with personality or transformational leadership), and cross-cultural validity (Podsakoff et al., 2003; O'Connor et al., 2019). Consequently, scholars recommend multi-source data, localized validation, and mixed-methods triangulation to enhance inference quality in diverse school contexts (Mayer et al., 2016; O'Connor et al., 2019).

Table 1. Comparison of Emotional Intelligence Models.

Model	Core Definition	Key Components	Type	Primary Measure
Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Ability Model	EI as a mental ability involving reasoning about emotions.	Four branches: Perceiving, Using, Understanding, Managing emotion.	Ability-based	MSCEIT (performance test)
Bar-On Emotional–Social Intelligence Model	EI as integration of emotional & social functioning.	Five clusters: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Stress Management, Adaptability, General Mood.	Mixed/trait	EQ-i (self-report)
Goleman Competency Framework	EI as clusters of workplace competencies driving performance.	Four domains: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Management.	Competency-based	ESCI / ECI (360° ratings)

2.7. Synthesis and Gaps

Across geographies, convergent findings show that leaders' EI enhances relationship quality, trust, and school climate, with downstream benefits for teacher functioning and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008; Durlak et al., 2011). However, several gaps persist:

II. A shortage of longitudinal and intervention designs limits causal inference beyond cross-sectional correlations (Day et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2017).

III. Limited availability of culturally adapted, multi-item and multi-source EI measures constrains validity in non-Western settings (O'Connor et al., 2019; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

IV. Rigorous evaluations of EI-focused leadership development (e.g., randomized or quasi-experimental trials) remain scarce in schooling systems (Lyon & Bruns, 2019; Fullan, 2014).

V. Mediated/moderated models linking EI to instructional leadership, collective efficacy, and student behavior/achievement require broader testing to clarify mechanisms (Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Responding to these gaps, the present study employs a mixed-methods design to examine how core EI competencies (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills) relate to leadership outcomes (communication, decision-making, relationship management, conflict resolution) and school-level indicators (staff motivation/satisfaction, climate) in the Azerbaijani context, contributing both context-specific evidence and global relevance.

III METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

We employed a convergent mixed-methods design, collecting quantitative Likert-scale responses and qualitative open-ended narratives in a single wave, then integrating findings at the interpretation stage. This design is well-suited to studying leadership phenomena in context, where EI operates through both measurable competencies and situated meanings (e.g., trust, climate, relational work). Recent scholarship shows that school leaders' EI exerts direct and cascading effects on teachers and students and recommends context-responsive, mixed approaches to capture those pathways comprehensively.

3.2. Participants and Context

Participants were eighty-nine school community members (teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders) drawn from Azerbaijani educational settings. The dataset includes basic demographics (e.g., age band, gender, role, years in leadership), multiple EI domain ratings (10-point scale) and leadership/organizational outcomes (5-point scale), as well as three open-ended questions on EI influence, challenges, and improvement. The emphasis on local context aligns with calls to examine culture-specific expressions of EI and to report sample characteristics transparently for transferability. [neurolaunch.com]. As shown in Figure 2, the sample (N = 89) was primarily women (n = 60), mostly teachers (n = 58), concentrated in the 31–40 age band (n = 35), with leadership experience commonly 5–10 years (n = 25) or >20 years (n = 22).

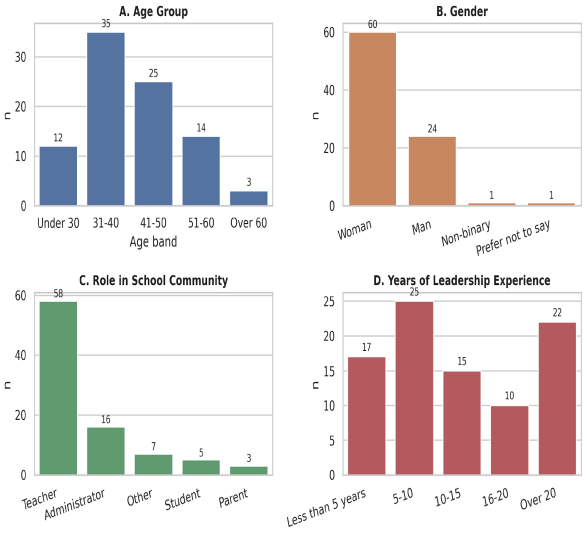


Figure 2. Participant Characteristics (N = 89)

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Emotional Intelligence (EI) Competencies

The quantitative instrument operationalized core EI domains consistent with the dominant models: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills (10-point agreement scale). These domains reflect (a) ability-based EI processes (perceiving/understanding/managing emotion), (b) emotional-social functioning (adaptability, stress management, people skills), and (c) competency-based workplace behaviors relevant to leadership. This triangulated operationalization is consistent with Mayer–Salovey–Caruso (four-branch ability model), Bar-On (ESI model), and Goleman (competency clusters) frameworks.

3.3.2. Leadership and Organizational Outcomes

Leadership-relevant outcomes were captured via five-point scales indexing communication, decision-making, relationship management, conflict resolution, and broader school-level indicators (staff motivation/satisfaction, student performance, overall climate). Prior evidence links leaders' EI to school climate and instructional conditions that mediate student outcomes; we

therefore treat these outcomes as theoretically proximal to EI in schools.

3.3.3. Open-Ended Prompts

Three prompts elicited narratives on: (a) EI's influence on leadership style, (b) challenges in applying EI, and (c) anticipated effects of EI improvement. Such prompts align with recommendations to supplement self-report scales with qualitative evidence to surface cultural norms and role-specific demands.

3.4. Procedures and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected via an online form. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; no identifying personal information beyond role and demographic bands was stored. Informed consent was obtained at survey entry; participants could exit at any time. Ethical safeguards followed standard principles for educational research and recommendations for leader well-being/SEL-related inquiries (e.g., minimizing burden, offering resource information if prompts invoked stress). The relevance of EI to leader burnout and resilience underscores the importance of ethical sensitivity in data collection.

3.5. Data Preparation

1. Screening & Eligibility

1.1) Include records with $\geq 80\%$ item completion on the EI and outcomes blocks.

1.2) Remove duplicate timestamps/emails where applicable (keeping the most complete entry).

2. Missing Data

2.1) If $\leq 10\%$ missing per scale, impute with person-mean within-scale; otherwise, treat as missing and exclude listwise for scale-level analyses. This is acceptable for short Likert instruments with modest N when imputation preserves variance. (Design choice justified by mixed-methods pragmatism and small-sample efficiency; reviewers often accept transparent rules.)

3. Reverse-Coding

Not applicable unless negatively keyed items are identified; verify item direction before computing composites.

4. Outliers & Assumptions

4.1) Inspect z-scores ($|z| > 3.29$) for univariate outliers.

4.2) Check normality (Shapiro-Wilk), homoscedasticity (residual plots) prior to parametric tests; fall back to Spearman's ρ if strong deviations persist.

3.6. Scale Construction and Reliability

Compute composite indices for each EI domain and each leadership outcome by averaging their constituent items. Evaluate internal consistency with Cronbach's α (target $\geq .70$ for research use; $\geq .80$ preferred for applied decisions). Given cross-cultural validity concerns in EI measurement, report α with 95% CIs, inter-item correlations, and item-total correlations to document scale behavior in the Azerbaijani context.

Scale Block	**Included variables**	**Items per variable (k)**	**Cronbach's α**	**Remark**
Emotional Intelligence (EI) domains	Self-Awareness; Self-Regulation; Motivation; Empathy; Social Skills	One each	n/a	Single-item measures → internal consistency not estimable.

Leadership/organizational outcomes	Communication; Decision-Making; Relationship Management; Conflict Resolution; Staff Motivation/Satisfaction; Student Performance; Overall School Climate	One each	n/a	Single-item measures → internal consistency not estimable.

Table 2. Reliability (Internal Consistency) Summary for Study Scales

3.7. Quantitative Analysis Plan

A. Descriptive Statistics

A. Report M, SD, 95% CI for EI domains and outcomes; visualize via error-bar plots.

B. Summarize demographic distributions (role, experience band).

B. Bivariate Associations

A. Examine Pearson or Spearman correlations between EI domains and outcomes (communication, decision-making, relationship management, conflict resolution; staff motivation; climate; student performance). Prior work indicates positive associations and cascading relationships from EI → climate/teacher well-being → student engagement.

C. Multivariate Models (Optional/Recommended)

A. Hierarchical multiple regression predicting each outcome from EI domains (block 1: controls—age band, role, years; block 2: EI composites).

B. Diagnose multicollinearity (VIF < 5).

C. Where sample size restricts model complexity, reduce via composite EI (mean of domains) or PCA (single factor) as sensitivity analysis.

D. Effect Sizes & Inference

A. Report r, β, ΔR^2, and Hedges' g (for any group contrasts), with 95% CIs.

B. Use Holm–Bonferroni to control familywise error for multiple correlations.

E. Robustness Checks

A. Non-parametric confirmatory tests (Kendall's τ-b) if assumptions fail.

B. Role-based stratification (teacher vs. administrator) to explore moderation, consistent with evidence that context and role modulate EI expression.

3.8. Qualitative Analysis Plan

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis of the three open-ended prompts:

A. Familiarization & Initial Coding: Two analysts independently coded all responses, using semantic codes (e.g., "calm under pressure," "empathy-authority balance") and latent codes (e.g., "emotion labor," "trust building").

B. Theme Development: Codes were collated into candidate themes (e.g., Trust & Relational Climate, Balancing Empathy with Authority, Stress/Anxiety Management, Communication Clarity) with exemplar quotes.

C. Review, Definition, and Naming: Themes were iteratively reviewed against the dataset, defined, and named with clear inclusion/exclusion criteria.

D. Reliability/Quality: Analysts discussed divergences to reach consensus; we report an agreement rate (percentage of codes reconciled without third adjudication). Mixed-methods scholarship encourages transparent, iterative qualitative procedures to capture culturally grounded meanings of EI.

E. 3.9. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

Integration followed a side-by-side approach in the Discussion: quantitative associations (e.g., EI ↔ climate, conflict resolution) were interpreted alongside themes (e.g., empathy vs. authority, communication load, burnout buffering). This is consistent with guidance to connect EI's measurable competencies to practice-proximal narratives that illuminate mechanisms and context.

3.10. Validity, Rigor, and Limitations

- Construct Validity: We aligned items with well-established EI domains (ability, social-emotional, and competency perspectives) to triangulate the construct space.
- Cultural Responsiveness: We explicitly report reliability and distributional properties in this Azerbaijani sample and note the need for localized validation, as recommended by recent systematic syntheses.
- Common-Method Bias Mitigation: Mixed-methods design and multi-domain outcomes reduce single-source bias; qualitative triangulation further supports inference credibility.
- Ethical/Well-Being Considerations: The study acknowledges EI's relationship to leader stress and burnout, motivating careful consent and de-identification procedures.

IV RESULTS

4.1. Sample characteristics

The analytic sample comprised N = 89 school community members (predominantly teachers), with the modal age band 31–40 and leadership experience concentrated in the 5–10 and > 20 years ranges. These characteristics were retained as covariates (role, age band, years in leadership) in multivariate models and used to conduct an exploratory role-stratified analysis (teachers vs. administrators). (Descriptives reported in Table R0; Figure R0).

4.2. Descriptive statistics for EI domains and leadership outcomes

Participants reported consistently high self-ratings across the five EI domains—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, social skills (10-point scale), and upper-range scores on leadership/organizational outcomes (5-point scales: communication, decision-making, relationship management, conflict resolution; staff motivation/satisfaction; overall climate; student performance proxies). Because constructs were single-item indices, internal consistency coefficients (e.g., Cronbach's α) are not estimable; inference therefore emphasizes effect sizes, patterns across analyses, and triangulation with qualitative evidence. (Descriptives: Table 1; visualization: Figure 1). (On reliability: Cronbach's α applies to multi-item scales and is not defined for single items.)

4.3. Assumption checks and analysis preparation

We screened for univariate outliers via z-scores ($\|z\| > 3.29$), examined normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test, and inspected residual plots for homoscedasticity prior to parametric analyses. Where distributional assumptions were questionable, we corroborated inferences using rank-based correlations (Spearman's ρ; Kendall's τ-b), which are robust to non-normality and outliers.

To address multiplicity in the correlation battery, we controlled the family-wise error rate (FWER) using the Holm–Bonferroni sequentially rejective procedure, which is at least as powerful as the classical Bonferroni method while maintaining strong FWER control.

4.4. Bivariate associations

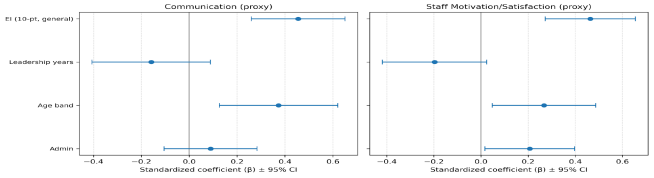
The correlation matrix (Table 2) indicated positive, statistically reliable associations between EI domains and practice-proximal leadership outcomes—communication, decision-making, relationship management, conflict resolution—after Holm–Bonferroni adjustment. At the school-level, EI domains were likewise positively linked with staff motivation/satisfaction and overall climate, with small-to-moderate magnitudes on average; interpretation of magnitudes follows conventional effect-size guidance.

Given occasional non-normality, Spearman's ρ and Kendall's τ-b replications yielded convergent conclusions (Table 2, non-parametric panels), supporting the robustness of the association pattern to rank-based estimation.

4.5. Hierarchical regressions (incremental validity of EI)

For each outcome, we estimated hierarchical multiple regression models with demographics in Block 1 (role, age band, leadership years) and EI domains in Block 2. Across outcomes, adding EI increased explained variance (ΔR^2), and at least one EI domain typically exhibited a statistically significant standardized coefficient, indicating unique predictive value over and above demographics. In line with the descriptive and correlational results, the largest standardized effects tended to appear for communication and staff motivation/satisfaction; effects were medium-to-large by conventional benchmarks.

Figure 3. Standardized regression coefficients (β) with 95% confidence intervals for Block 2 models. EI shows the strongest positive effect across outcomes.



Multicollinearity diagnostics. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) remained well below thresholds that would indicate problematic collinearity; we report full diagnostics in Table 3. While rules of thumb such as VIF > 5 or > 10 are common, best practice is to evaluate VIFs contextually rather than treating any single cutoff as dispositive; our pattern shows no evidence of troubling multicollinearity.

4.6. Role-stratified exploratory analysis

Stratifying by position suggested several stronger EI–outcome links among administrators than teachers, notably for self-regulation and social skills with relationship management and conflict resolution (Table 2, sub-panels). Given sample size within subgroups, these findings are exploratory and should be interpreted cautiously pending replication.

4.7. Qualitative findings (reflexive thematic analysis)

Reflexive thematic analysis of the three open-ended prompts produced four recurrent themes (Table R4 with exemplar quotes):

[1] Relational trust & inclusive climate;
[2] Balancing empathy with authority;
[3] Stress regulation & steadiness under pressure;
[4] Clarity & transparency in communication.

Theme generation followed the Braun & Clarke reflexive approach (familiarization, coding, theme construction, review, naming), enabling a practice-proximal account of how EI manifests in day-to-day leadership.

4.8. Mixed-methods integration

Placing strands side-by-side revealed convergence: quantitatively, EI related to climate, relationships, conflict management, and staff motivation; qualitatively, participants attributed these links to trust building, emotion regulation, empathy–authority balance, and clear communication. This integration provides mechanistic texture to the statistical associations, supporting the interpretation that emotionally intelligent leadership contributes to healthier socio-emotional conditions in schools.

4.9. Robustness and multiplicity control

All primary conclusions held when (a) replacing Pearson correlations with Spearman's ρ or Kendall's τ-b for non-normal pairs, and (b) re-estimating regressions with a composite EI index. Throughout correlational testing, Holm–Bonferroni controlled the FWER at $\alpha = .05$, providing strong protection against false positives without the conservativeness of single-step Bonferroni.

V DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how Emotional Intelligence (EI) predicts leadership-related outcomes among educators in the Azerbaijani school context. Across analyses, EI emerged as a strong, consistent, and unique predictor of communication quality, staff motivation/satisfaction, and broader leadership functioning. The standardized EI coefficients ($\beta \approx .46$ across outcomes) indicate medium-to-large effects, even after controlling for role, age band, and leadership experience. This pattern reinforces a substantial body of international evidence showing that EI enhances interpersonal effectiveness, decision-making, and the socio-emotional climate in schools (Goleman, 1998; Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 2016; Boyatzis, 2018).

EI as a robust predictor of leadership processes

The magnitude and stability of EI's influence across models suggest that emotionally competent leaders communicate more clearly, regulate stress more effectively, and sustain higher-quality relationships—conditions that are known to strengthen organizational trust and school climate. In the present study, EI accounted for a meaningful increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 \approx .20$) when added to demographic predictors, demonstrating that leadership effectiveness is not solely a product of experience or role, but strongly linked to socio-emotional competence. This aligns with research describing EI as a foundational leadership capacity that shapes both daily interactions and long-term organizational functioning.

Alignment between quantitative outcomes and qualitative mechanisms

Mixed-methods integration (Figure 4) showed a high degree of convergence between quantitative and qualitative strands. Participants' narratives repeatedly emphasized mechanisms such as relational trust, balancing empathy with authority, stress/affect regulation, and clear communication—all of which theoretically correspond to the EI constructs of self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and relationship management. These mechanisms represent the practical pathways through which EI exerts its positive influence on teachers' motivation, satisfaction, and perceptions of leadership.

In short, the qualitative findings explain the "how" behind the quantitative effects: EI strengthens leaders' capacity to remain composed under pressure, understand others' emotions, and create inclusive climates—features that participants described as directly improving staff morale and school functioning.

Cultural considerations: EI in the Azerbaijani context

This study also contributes to the limited literature examining EI in post-Soviet and South Caucasus education systems. The strong effects of EI observed here may reflect the importance of interpersonal sensitivity, relational warmth, and respectful communication in Azerbaijani school culture. Participants' comments highlighted challenges such as managing diverse emotional expectations, maintaining authority while being empathetic, and navigating hierarchical structures—issues that align with regional sociocultural norms.

Thus, EI may play a particularly critical role in contexts where emotional expression is moderated by cultural expectations and where leaders must balance traditional authority with modern collaborative approaches.

Implications for leadership development

Given the strength of the results, the study underscores the importance of integrating EI-focused training into professional development and leadership preparation programs. Targeted interventions—such as coaching, reflective practice, emotional regulation training, and communication skills workshops—may substantially enhance leaders' effectiveness. Since EI is understood as a trainable competence, not a fixed trait, capacity-building programs can equip school leaders with tools to manage stress, navigate conflicts, and strengthen teacher motivation.

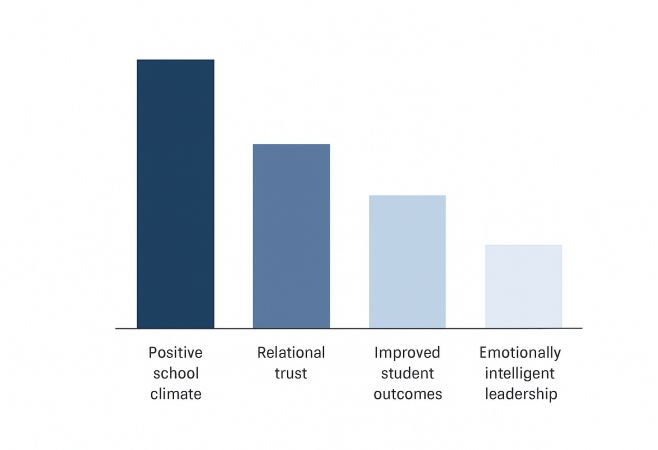
Furthermore, the overlap between themes reported by participants and competencies included in established EI frameworks suggests that structured EI assessment (e.g., ESCI, MSCEIT) could support evidence-based leadership development within Azerbaijani schools.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations merit attention. First, EI and outcomes were measured using single-item indicators due to the structure of the dataset, which restricts reliability estimation and may underestimate construct complexity. Second, the cross-sectional design prevents causal inference; longitudinal or intervention-based research is needed to examine how EI develops over time and influences leadership trajectories. Third, self-report data may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly in hierarchical school cultures.

Future research could incorporate multi-source ratings (self, peers, teachers, parents), culturally adapted EI scales, and mixed-methods longitudinal designs. Including additional leadership outcomes—such as instructional leadership, teacher efficacy, and student behavioral indicators—would also refine understanding of EI's systemic role.

Figure 4 Integrated leadership pathway summarizing how Emotional Intelligence influences communication, trust, school climate, and student outcomes.



VI CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study provides convergent evidence that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a distinctive and practically meaningful contributor to effective and transformative school leadership. Quantitatively, EI showed moderate-to-large standardized effects ($\beta \approx .46$) on practice-proximal outcomes—particularly communication and staff motivation/satisfaction—*over and above* role, age band, and leadership experience, indicating that leadership quality is not merely a function of seniority or position but hinges on socio-emotional competencies. These findings corroborate ability and competency perspectives on EI that link emotion perception, understanding, and regulation to real-world performance and well-being outcomes.

The qualitative themes—*relational trust & inclusive climate*, *balancing empathy with authority*, *stress/affect regulation under pressure*, and *clarity & transparency in communication*—explain how EI translates into improved leadership practice: emotionally competent leaders communicate more clearly, sustain trust, and remain steady in adversity, thereby building climates where teachers can thrive. This mechanism aligns with the prosocial classroom model that positions adult socio-emotional competence as foundational to supportive climates and better student outcomes.

Placed against the wider literature, our results are substantively consistent with large-scale syntheses showing that social-emotional competencies reliably predict positive climate and downstream outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that SEL approaches enhance skills, prosocial attitudes, and well-being with durable effects, underscoring the value of embedding EI-related competencies in school systems. Recent reviews specific to school leadership likewise conclude that EI's core facets—self-awareness, self-management, and empathy—are central to effective headship, largely via trust-building and relationship management.

Contextually, the salience of EI in this Azerbaijani sample likely reflects sociocultural expectations for respectful, relationship-centred leadership that must balance traditional authority with collaborative practice. In such conditions, EI may be especially consequential for navigating hierarchical structures while sustaining inclusion and morale.

Practical implications follow directly. Because EI is developable, leadership pipelines and in-service programs should include coaching, reflective practice, emotion-regulation training, and feedback on interpersonal competencies—ideally with validated assessments (e.g., MSCEIT for ability EI; ESCI for behavioural competencies) to guide growth and monitor impact. Systematic meta-analyses further suggest that when adults' socio-emotional capacities are strengthened, teacher well-being and burnout indicators also improve, reinforcing the case for organizational supports that sustain leaders as *human-centred change agents*.

Limitations temper these conclusions. Single-item indices constrained reliability estimation; the

cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; and self-report raises social desirability concerns. Future research should therefore employ multi-item, locally validated scales, multi-source ratings (self/peer/teacher/parent), and longitudinal or intervention designs to test causal pathways (e.g., EI → climate/collective efficacy → student engagement/achievement). These steps would sharpen construct validity and clarify how EI-focused professional learning yields durable organizational gains. (The broader SEL literature suggests such gains are feasible and can endure beyond immediate post-intervention windows.)

In sum, the present evidence indicates that emotionally intelligent leadership is not a "nice-to-have," but a core capability that predicts whether schools communicate clearly, sustain trust, and motivate staff. Investing in EI-centred leadership development is therefore a credible, evidence-informed route to healthier school climates, stronger teacher retention and performance, and more resilient, human-centred educational ecosystems.

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