Research Article

Leading with Emotion: Emotional Intelligence and Its Influence on Leadership Effectiveness among School Leaders in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in shaping leadership effectiveness among school leaders in higher education within the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas, Philippines. While much of the existing literature centers on EI in basic education and corporate settings, this research addresses a critical gap by focusing on how EI is understood, applied, and perceived by leaders within the higher education context. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 16 school leaders selected through purposive sampling, the study reveals that emotional intelligence is not merely a personal trait but a strategic leadership asset. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify core patterns in leadership behavior. Participants highlighted self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy as essential competencies for effective decision-making, conflict resolution, and relationship-building. Findings indicate that emotionally intelligent leadership fosters psychological safety, strengthens organizational culture, and supports resilience in times of crisis. This study underscored the importance of integrating EI into leadership preparation programs as a vital response to the evolving demands of educational leadership.

Keywords: Adaptability; Emotional Intelligence; Performance; Team Dynamics; Team Reflexivity

1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI), introduced by Goleman [1-2], refers to the ability to recognize, understand,

and manage one's own emotions and those of others. It is widely acknowledged as a vital component of effective leadership, often considered more influential than traditional cognitive intelligence in determining leadership success. Goleman [2] emphasized that emotionally intelligent leaders are more adept at navigating interpersonal dynamics, motivating teams, and fostering a positive organizational culture. In educational settings, where leaders face emotionally charged decisions and high-stakes environments, EI has become increasingly central to leadership research and practice.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the impact of EI on leadership in basic education. For instance, Strickland's [3] qualitative study highlighted that school leaders who exhibit high levels of emotional awareness and regulation tend to build more effective and collaborative teams. Similarly, Farooq et al. [4] found that private school principals in Lahore perceived EI skills—particularly empathy and emotional control—as essential to maintaining healthy relationships and promoting staff performance. While these studies provide valuable insights, they are largely situated within the basic education context.

In the field of higher education, the discussion on EI and leadership has expanded, though it remains relatively underexplored. Unlike basic education, higher education leadership operates within a unique context of academic freedom, shared governance, and high stakeholder autonomy. In this environment, leaders often cannot rely solely on authority but must use the influence derived from emotional intelligence to build consensus. Mohammed [5] investigated university leaders in the United Arab Emirates and found that emotionally intelligent leadership significantly contributes to inclusive environments and psychological safety among academic staff. Ellis [6] reinforced this, noting that emotionally intelligent higher education administrators are better equipped to handle conflict, make sound decisions, and promote organizational collaboration. Moreover, Lescano [7] established that there is a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and leadership performance. School heads with high EI scores performed better in areas such as conflict resolution, staff motivation, and communication. These leaders were also seen as more approachable and capable of handling challenges with composure and empathy. Williams [8] added that women leaders in education who possess strong EI often exhibit greater adaptability and leadership effectiveness, suggesting the cross-contextual relevance of emotional competencies.

Further studies have emphasized the role of EI in leadership development and organizational performance. Quinlan [9] advocated for embedding EI training in leadership preparation programs for higher education leaders, while Nosratabadi et al. [10] connected cultural intelligence and EI to institutional success. In the context of emotionally demanding work environments, Wilkinson [11] illustrated the often-overlooked emotional labor school leaders endure, pointing to the necessity for emotional resilience. Additionally, Urick et al. [12] found that emotionally intelligent leadership served as a buffer against burnout and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovations such as emotionally enriched feedback systems through artificial intelligence [13-14] also reflect the growing intersection between technology and emotional awareness in educational settings.

Despite the growing body of literature on EI and leadership, there remains a clear gap in understanding how school leaders in higher education specifically comprehend, apply, and perceive the influence of emotional intelligence in their leadership roles. Much of the existing research has centered either on primary and secondary school settings or generalized administrative contexts, leaving the lived experiences of higher education leaders underrepresented. To address this gap, this study aims to:

1. Explore how school leaders in higher education understand and apply emotional intelligence in their leadership roles.

2. Examine how school leaders in higher education perceive the influence of their emotional intelligence on their effectiveness as leaders.

The study hopes to generate meaningful insights that can inform leadership development programs and support emotionally intelligent practices in higher education institutions.

2. Literature

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a pivotal construct in understanding effective leadership and instructional success across educational contexts. Defined broadly as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and utilize emotions constructively, EI plays a crucial role in shaping leaders' interpersonal relationships, decision-making, and organizational outcomes. Theoretically, this study is grounded in Goleman's [1, 2] mixed model of EI, which conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a set of competencies—specifically self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—that drive leadership performance.

Over the past decades, a growing body of local and international research has underscored EI's significant contribution to enhancing leadership efficacy, teacher resilience, school climate, and instructional performance. These competencies are particularly relevant in the Philippine educational landscape, where cultural and organizational nuances uniquely shape leadership dynamics. For instance, research by Quiblat and Quirap [15] highlights how emotional awareness intersects with Filipino work values such as discipline, respect, and social responsibility. Exploring EI offers valuable insights into how educational leaders navigate these complex emotional and social environments.

In higher education, the role of EI in leadership and faculty performance is evident. Jacoba et al. [16] found strong positive correlations between faculty emotional quotient and teaching performance, with higher EI linked to improved classroom management and student engagement. Garcia and Maniago [17] identified a connection between EI and conflict management styles among Filipino middle managers in higher education institutions. Their findings showed that emotionally intelligent managers favor constructive conflict-resolution strategies that preserve institutional harmony. Martinez et al. [18] revealed that college instructors in Cebu with higher EI demonstrated significantly better work management skills, including time management and collaboration. Their research also noted that demographic factors like age and experience did not predict EI levels, indicating that emotional competencies may develop independently of professional tenure.

Coleman and Ali [19] explored EI among higher education professional services teams during organizational disruptions, emphasizing the necessity of emotional competencies to promote resilience, mental health, and collaboration among non-teaching staff. De Los Santos [20] expanded on faculty leadership by showing that emotionally intelligent faculty-turned-administrators improved employee morale and reduced turnover, highlighting EI's institutional benefits beyond classroom teaching.

2.1. Emotional intelligence and instructional efficacy

Emotional intelligence (EI) has become increasingly recognized as a key factor in instructional effectiveness and teacher performance. Pilvera et al. [21] demonstrated a remarkably strong positive correlation between EI and instructional efficacy among Grade 6 Values Education teachers in Davao del Sur. Their findings highlight how emotionally intelligent educators manage classrooms better, understand student needs, and foster engaging learning environments, situating EI as a crucial pedagogical asset. Supporting this, Villa and Valle [22] found that EI dimensions—especially self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy—positively predict teacher resiliency in Cagayan de Oro. These competencies help teachers cope

with occupational stress, emphasizing EI's role as an internal emotional resource that supports sustained teaching performance. Escarlos and Santillan [23] extended the discussion by demonstrating the combined effect of emotional intelligence and digital literacy on professional competence among basic education teachers. Their study suggests that the multidimensional nature of teaching today requires both emotional and technological competencies to adapt effectively to evolving educational demands.

2.2. Emotional intelligence in school leadership and organizational climate

Numerous studies underline the positive influence of EI on leadership behavior and school climate. Sibugan [24] reported that school heads in Antique Province who exhibited high EI and strong instructional leadership competencies significantly contributed to positive school climates. Emotionally intelligent leaders foster collaborative environments, motivate teachers, and sustain professional relationships, all key ingredients of effective school management. In a related study assessing school heads in Laguna, Alitagtag [25] found that while leaders possessed average EI levels paired with functional leadership, targeted professional development was crucial for enhancing emotional competencies to achieve greater impact.

Furthermore, Yulianti, Chaidir, and Irawan [26] found that emotional intelligence significantly shapes how leaders make decisions, build trust, and maintain team cohesion. Leaders who demonstrated self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation reported higher levels of cooperation and morale within their teams. The study emphasized that EI contributes to relational harmony and adaptive leadership responses in dynamic environments. Estrellan and Loja [27] corroborated these findings by identifying a significant positive relationship between principals' EI and leadership behavior in Sultan Kudarat. Both self-assessments and teacher evaluations confirmed that emotionally intelligent principals are more empathetic, strategic, and ethical.

Salip and Quines [28] further demonstrated that EI fully mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and organizational climate among public school teachers. Their study affirms that authenticity alone does not suffice for effective leadership; emotional regulation and awareness are critical for fostering supportive and productive work environments. However, findings are not always uniform. Callo and Asilo [29] reported contrasting findings where an inverse relationship was observed between EI and pedagogical leadership among 132 Philippine school heads. They attributed this to the moderating effects of professional identity and perfectionism, suggesting that excessive emotional involvement or self-critical tendencies may undermine leadership effectiveness if not properly balanced.

2.3. Emotional intelligence, leadership styles, and organizational learning

Chandra [30] found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership among academic leaders in higher education, noting that leaders with higher EI demonstrate inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—hallmarks of transformational leadership. Additionally, San Gabriel [31] concluded that emotional intelligence greatly influences leadership behaviors that contribute to effective school management. Specifically, EI was linked to behaviors such as transformational leadership, participative decision-making, and responsiveness to stakeholders' emotional needs. The study recommends incorporating EI development in leadership training programs.

Kaur and Hirudayaraj [32] proposed the 4I Framework (Intuiting, Interpreting, Integrating, Institutionalizing) to explain how EI fosters organizational learning, allowing leaders to recognize emotional cues, interpret complex social dynamics, and align team behavior with institutional goals. Soliman et al. [33] provided empirical evidence from a Western context linking EI with institutional productivity and staff well-being, further underscoring the strategic value of emotionally intelligent leadership at systemic levels.

2.4. Emotional intelligence in crisis leadership and emerging technologies and leaders

Urick, Kaufman, and Steiner [12] emphasized EI's buffering effect during crises, showing that emotionally intelligent educational leaders helped mitigate staff stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing empathetic support and managing uncertainty effectively. This requirement for emotional adaptability extends to the digital realm. Alsaiari et al. [13] demonstrated how emerging technologies, such as generative AI, can support EI development by providing leaders with emotionally enriched feedback mechanisms to improve interpersonal effectiveness. Finally, Aquino, Orozco, and Marasigan [34] investigated university student leaders in Laguna and found that higher EI levels correlated with greater leadership self-efficacy. This highlights the importance of nurturing emotional competencies early, reinforcing the need to embed EI development in student leadership training programs.

The extensive literature reviewed affirms that emotional intelligence is a cornerstone of effective educational leadership and instructional performance. Research consistently demonstrates that higher EI among educators and leaders correlates with improved teaching efficacy, resilient coping mechanisms, positive organizational climates, and transformational leadership behaviors. In the Philippine context, studies highlight the interplay of cultural values and professional identities in shaping EI's influence, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive development programs.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of school leaders in higher education regarding their understanding, application, and perceptions of emotional intelligence in their leadership roles. A qualitative design is appropriate for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings and contextual interpretations that participants assign to their emotional and professional experiences [35].

Phenomenology, in particular, is well-suited for this study as it seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences with emotional intelligence within the real-life complexities of leadership. This approach allows the researcher to delve deeply into how emotional competencies are internalized, interpreted, and enacted in the day-to-day leadership practices of higher education administrators [36].

Qualitative inquiry is essential in unpacking not just what emotional intelligence is, but how it is perceived and operationalized in leadership settings, especially in non-Western or underrepresented contexts like the Philippines. Patton [37] asserts that qualitative methods are ideal for studies aiming to capture rich, detailed descriptions of how human behavior is shaped by individual perceptions and social environments—making it particularly fitting for leadership and emotional intelligence studies.

3.2. Population and sampling

The participants of this study were sixteen (16) school leaders currently serving in various higher education institutions across the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas regions in the Philippines. These individuals hold key leadership positions such as college deans, department chairs, associate deans, academic directors, or university administrators who are directly involved in instructional leadership, faculty management, and organizational decision-making.

The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to deliberately select individuals who possess specific knowledge or experience relevant to the phenomenon under study [37]. This method ensures that the participants can provide rich, meaningful insights

on how emotional intelligence is understood, applied, and perceived within their leadership practices in higher education. The sample size of sixteen was determined by the principle of data saturation; data collection ceased when no new themes emerged from the interviews, which was confirmed after the fourteenth participant.

To be included in the study, participants must be (1) currently employed as school leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines; (2) must have served in a leadership role for at least two years; (3) must be directly involved in faculty supervision, program planning, or instructional leadership; and (4) must be willing to participate in an in-depth interview and to share reflections on their leadership experiences is essential. The participants came from diverse HEI contexts—such as private or public institutions to ensure a broad range of perspectives. These criteria are designed to ensure that all participants possess substantial and relevant experience and can provide meaningful insights into how emotional intelligence influences leadership effectiveness. Demographic and background information was obtained during the initial recruitment and screening process to confirm eligibility and ensure sample diversity. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	7	44%
	Female	9	56%
Age Range	30–39 years	4	25%
	40–49 years	8	50%
	50+ years	4	25%
Highest Degree	Master's Degree	6	37.5%
	Doctorate Degree	10	62.5%
Years in Leadership	2–5 years	5	31%
	6–10 years	7	44%
	11+ years	4	25%
Institution Type	Public HEI	8	50%
	Private HEI	8	50%

3.3. Instrument

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument. The guide was designed to elicit in-depth narratives and reflections from higher education school leaders regarding their understanding, application, and perceived influence of emotional intelligence in their leadership roles. The semi-structured format allowed for a balance between consistency in questioning and flexibility to probe deeper based on participants' responses.

The construction of the interview questions was informed by themes and frameworks from previous qualitative studies on emotional intelligence in educational leadership. For example, Strickland [38] developed open-ended questions to explore emotional competencies such as empathy, self-regulation, and social awareness among school leaders. Similarly, Forsyth et al. [39] created a qualitative instrument aimed at understanding how university administrators and managers apply emotional intelligence in professional relationships and communication.

The interview guide was reviewed by experts in educational leadership and pilot-tested with two non-participating school leaders to ensure clarity, alignment with the research objectives, and relevance to the higher education context.

The **Table 2** below presents the instrument of this inquiry:

Table 2. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview questions	Participants
To explore how school leaders in higher education understand and apply emotional intelligence in their leadership roles.	1. How would you define emotional intelligence in the context of your role as a school leader? 2. Can you share a specific situation where your emotional intelligence guided your leadership decision? 3. What practices or habits do you use to stay emotionally aware and responsive as a leader?	Higher Education School Leaders
To examine how school leaders in higher education perceive the influence of their emotional intelligence on their leadership effectiveness.	In what ways do you think emotional intelligence contributes to your effectiveness in leading a school? 2. How does your ability to manage emotions help you handle conflicts or difficult situations? 3. What indicators or outcomes make you believe that emotional intelligence strengthens your leadership?	

3.4. Data gathering procedure

The data collection for this study employed a structured yet flexible approach to ensure the depth and authenticity of participants' responses while upholding ethical research standards. Before initiating the data gathering, the researcher obtained approval from the Ethics Review Committee of the host institution and secured formal permission from the higher education institutions (HEIs) where participants were employed. A letter of invitation and informed consent form were sent to potential participants, clearly outlining the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality protocols, and their voluntary right to withdraw at any time.

Using purposive sampling, sixteen (16) school leaders were selected based on the established inclusion criteria. These participants were contacted through email and professional networks, with emphasis on those directly involved in academic leadership and with a minimum of two years of experience in higher education. Upon securing consent, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience. Specifically, ten (10) interviews were conducted via video conferencing platform to accommodate geographical constraints, while six (6) were conducted face-to-face. For the virtual interviews, participants were requested to keep their cameras on to allow the researcher to document non-verbal cues, and additional time was allocated at the start of the call for rapport-building to ensure psychological safety despite the digital medium. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guide to allow for probing deeper into relevant responses, with all interviews audio-recorded (with consent) to ensure accurate transcription. Field notes were also taken to document non-verbal cues and contextual details.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participant identities were anonymized using codes (e.g., P01, P02) to maintain confidentiality. These transcripts and audio files were securely stored in encrypted digital folders accessible only to the researcher. To further ensure credibility, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts through member checking, and any clarifications or corrections were incorporated into the final transcripts. Participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts with no

substantive changes required. This comprehensive and ethical data collection process provided a solid foundation for the in-depth analysis of the study.

3.5. Data analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were examined through thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's [40] six-phase framework: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This approach, widely used in qualitative research, enabled the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns while honoring the depth and context of participants' perspectives.

The researcher began by transcribing and thoroughly reviewing each interview transcript to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses. Through open coding, key statements related to emotional intelligence and leadership were identified. These codes were then grouped into categories and synthesized into broader themes that reflected the core of the participants' experiences as school leaders. An inductive approach was used, meaning codes were generated directly from the data rather than fitting them into a pre-existing coding frame.

Consistent with Moustakas' [41] phenomenological approach, the researcher engaged in bracketing to set aside personal biases and preconceptions, thereby ensuring a more authentic and objective interpretation of participant narratives. This involved the researcher maintaining a reflexive journal to consciously document and set aside their own assumptions and prior experiences as an educator, allowing the participants' lived experiences to emerge clearly. The analysis aimed to uncover shared meanings and fundamental structures that revealed how emotional intelligence shaped leadership practices in the context of higher education.

To establish trustworthiness, the researcher adhered to Lincoln and Guba's [42] criteria—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Strategies such as member checking, maintaining an audit trail, and peer debriefing were employed to verify interpretations and strengthen the rigor and reliability of the findings.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Prior to their participation, each respondent was provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality. Only those who signed and returned the consent form were included in the study. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms or participant codes (e.g., P01, P02) were used in all transcripts, data files, and written reports, and institutional affiliations were likewise anonymized. All recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher, with no identifying information disclosed at any stage.

The study posed minimal risk, focusing primarily on leadership experiences and perceptions of emotional intelligence. Nevertheless, the researcher remained attentive to potential emotional discomfort during reflection and allowed participants to skip questions or withdraw at any time. Participation was entirely voluntary, and it was clearly communicated that involvement or non-involvement would have no bearing on their professional standing or institutional relationships.

Throughout the study, the researcher upheld transparency, neutrality, and honesty, bracketing personal biases in line with phenomenological principles to maintain objectivity in data interpretation. Furthermore, the research proposal received ethical clearance from the Ethics Review Committee of the researcher's institution, ensuring adherence to national and institutional ethical standards.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore how school leaders in higher education understand and apply emotional intelligence in their leadership roles.

Question No. 1. How would you define emotional intelligence in the context of your role as a school leader?

1.1. Emotional Intelligence as Self-Regulation in High-Stakes Decision-Making

11 out of 16 school leaders emphasized emotional intelligence as the ability to manage their own emotions—especially under pressure. They acknowledged that being aware of their emotional responses helps them avoid rush decisions and maintain professional composure, especially when dealing with internal conflicts, emergencies, or parent complaints. Self-regulation, for them, ensures clarity and fairness in leadership. It is important to distinguish this internal regulation from external conflict resolution; participants viewed this theme specifically as the internal discipline required to prevent personal emotions from clouding professional judgment.

> "There were multiple instances when I found myself at the edge of frustration—especially with one faculty member who repeatedly missed submission deadlines for course outlines and grading sheets, despite multiple reminders. It became a pattern that affected not only our office's workflow but also the students' academic progress. I remember sitting across from him, knowing I had to confront the issue directly. But instead of reacting impulsively or raising my voice, I took a moment to ground myself. Emotional intelligence, for me, is that exact moment— the ability to regulate my emotions, to acknowledge the irritation, but choose to respond in a way that's firm yet composed. I expressed my concern, laid out the consequences, and invited him to share his side. That conversation ended with accountability, not animosity, and I believe that was only possible because I managed myself first." (P04)

1.2 Emotional Intelligence as a Tool for Building and Sustaining Positive School Culture

9 out of 16 leaders described emotional intelligence not just as a personal skill, but as a powerful influence on institutional culture. They emphasized that a leader's emotional tone—whether positive or negative—often cascades through the organization, shaping the behaviors, attitudes, and morale of faculty, staff, and even students. When leaders consistently demonstrate optimism, openness, empathy, and emotional maturity, it fosters an environment where collaboration, mutual respect, and psychological safety can thrive. This intentional modeling of emotional intelligence, according to the participants, helps establish a more human-centered and responsive academic community.

> "When I first stepped into a leadership role, I thought I had to keep a certain distance to be respected—formal, reserved, all business. But I started noticing how much people appreciated simple things like being asked how their day was going or being greeted with a smile. So, I made a shift. I started asking about their families, checking in when someone looked down. That shift in behavior changed everything. I realized people respond better when they know you care. Emotional intelligence taught me that authenticity isn't a weakness—it's a bridge. It builds trust and invites people to work with you, not just for you." (P07)

Question No. 2. Can you share a specific situation where your emotional intelligence guided your leadership decision?

2.1 *Regulating Emotions During Conflict to Maintain Team Cohesion*

11 out of 16 school leaders said that emotional regulation plays a critical role in effective leadership, particularly during moments of interpersonal conflict or institutional stress. This finding highlights the external application of emotional intelligence, where leaders actively use their emotional awareness to de-escalate tension between others. School leaders shared how they consciously managed their emotional reactions—not to suppress feelings, but to redirect them in ways that fostered respect, clarity, and productive outcomes. Many emphasized that emotional intelligence enabled them to pause, reassess, and respond in ways that diffused tension, preserved relationships, and sustained team cohesion.

> "During the peak of the COVID transition, the faculty were understandably overwhelmed—angry even—about the rapid changes in teaching modalities and workload expectations. In every consultation, I made it a point to stay calm, to acknowledge their frustrations without absorbing the tension. I became the emotional anchor they needed. Instead of feeding the stress, I chose to be their safe space. I believe it was that consistency and emotional steadiness that helped hold the team together during such an uncertain time." (P12)

2.2 *Leading with Empathy in Decision-Making*

10 out of 16 participants highlighted the central role of empathy in leadership, particularly when faced with situations involving personal hardship or emotional distress among students, faculty, or staff. School leaders consistently emphasized that emotional intelligence, when guided by empathy, enabled them to look beyond rules and performance metrics to consider the human stories behind each challenge. Instead of applying rigid responses, they exercised compassion and context-aware judgment, resulting in more humane and supportive decisions. For these leaders, empathy was not a sign of leniency, but a strategic and ethical choice that fostered trust, morale, and long-term growth within their institutions.

"We had a senior faculty member whose performance suddenly declined—missed deadlines, incomplete syllabi, low engagement. The usual protocol would've been to issue a memo or warning, but I felt something was off. I invited him out for coffee, and in that informal setting, he opened up. He was grieving the recent death of his brother and didn't know how to cope while still fulfilling his duties. That moment reminded me that leadership isn't just about enforcing standards—it's about recognizing the person behind the role. We gave him space and support, not sanctions. A few weeks later, he was back on track, more committed than ever. Empathy turned a potential HR case into a moment of healing and renewal." (P02)

Question No. 3. What practices or habits do you use to stay emotionally aware and responsive as a leader?

3.1 *Active Listening and Seeking Feedback from Others*

14 out of 16 school leaders highlighted the deliberate practice of active listening and soliciting feedback as vital components of their emotional intelligence. They described these habits as essential tools that keep them attuned to the feelings and perspectives of their colleagues and staff, helping them move beyond their own assumptions. By paying close attention not only to spoken words but also to tone, body language, and unspoken cues, these leaders deepen their understanding of the emotional undercurrents within their teams. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of welcoming honest feedback—even when it challenges their self-perceptions—as a way to grow emotionally and foster trust.

"I've learned that leadership isn't just about making decisions or setting directions; it's also about understanding how my behavior impacts others. That's why I make it a regular practice to ask my team for honest feedback on how I manage my emotions and how I come across as a leader. It's not always easy to hear. Sometimes, they tell me I can be too blunt or that I seem distant when I'm under pressure. At first, it stung, but over time, I realized that taking this feedback seriously—without getting defensive—is what helps me grow. It pushes me to be more self-aware and to check myself before reacting impulsively. This openness has deepened my connection with my team, built trust, and made our communication more genuine. I believe that when a leader shows vulnerability and willingness to improve, it encourages others to do the same." (P09)

3.2 *Prioritizing Work-Life Balance and Emotional Well-being*

8 out of 16 participants acknowledged that maintaining emotional responsiveness at work is deeply connected to how well they care for their own emotional well-being outside the workplace. They emphasized that setting clear boundaries between work and personal life, engaging in meaningful hobbies, and spending quality time with family are vital strategies to recharge and build resilience. These practices not only reduce the risk of burnout but also enhance their capacity for empathy, patience, and presence during professional interactions. Leaders recognized that emotional intelligence requires ongoing self-care, allowing them to show up fully for others without becoming overwhelmed.

"Running has become much more than just a form of exercise for me—it's my way to reset and find balance amidst the constant demands of leadership. During the week, I often carry a mix of stress, frustration, and sometimes doubt about tough decisions I've had to make. When I'm out on the trail or the road, pounding the pavement with nothing but my own breath and footsteps, it's like a mental detox. The physical exertion forces me to focus solely on the present moment, which helps clear my mind of clutter. It's during these runs that I find myself reflecting on difficult situations with more clarity, gaining new insights or simply letting go of negative feelings. By the time I return home or to the office, I'm emotionally recharged, calmer, and better equipped to engage with colleagues and students in a more patient and empathetic way. It's a small but vital part of how I sustain my emotional well-being." (P14)

Research Objectives 2. To examine how school leaders perceive the influence of their emotional intelligence on their leadership effectiveness.

Question No. 1. In what ways do you think emotional intelligence contributes to your effectiveness in leading a school?

1.1 *Enhancing Communication and Relationship Building*

13 out of 16 participants emphasized that emotional intelligence is fundamental to effective communication and the cultivation of strong, positive relationships within their academic communities. They explained that EI equips them to engage authentically with faculty, staff, and students, creating an environment of trust and openness. This relational foundation, they believe, is essential not only for day-to-day interactions but also for fostering collaboration and collective commitment toward institutional goals. Leaders highlighted that their ability to perceive and respond appropriately to the emotional climate enables clearer, more empathetic communication, which ultimately supports more effective problem-solving and

decision-making. This capacity to connect on a human level is often described as the cornerstone of their leadership success.

> "One of the key skills I've developed over the years is the ability to 'read the room'—to tune in not just to what people are saying, but to their emotions, body language, and underlying tensions during meetings or discussions. Early in my leadership journey, I often found that conversations would stall or become defensive because I wasn't fully aware of the emotional undercurrents in the room. Over time, I learned to pause, observe, and sense when anxiety, frustration, or hesitation was present—even if it wasn't openly expressed. This awareness now guides me in choosing my words and tone carefully, adapting my approach depending on the mood and energy of the group. I make it a point to create an atmosphere where people feel safe and respected, which encourages openness and honesty. When team members feel truly heard and validated, they become more willing to participate in constructive dialogue, share diverse viewpoints, and work collaboratively toward solutions. I've witnessed firsthand how this emotional attunement can transform difficult conversations from confrontations into opportunities for growth and problem-solving, strengthening both relationships and institutional effectiveness." (P05)

1.2 *Improving Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution*

7 out of 16 school leaders emphasized that emotional intelligence is a vital tool in managing conflicts and making well-rounded decisions that balance both emotional and practical considerations. Participants shared that being emotionally aware allows them to step back and pause before reacting impulsively to challenging situations. Instead of focusing solely on the surface issues, they strive to understand the underlying emotions driving conflict, which helps them address root causes more effectively. This thoughtful approach not only reduces unnecessary escalation but also promotes outcomes that are acceptable and fair to all parties involved. Leaders observed that this emotional and rational balance enhances their credibility, fosters organizational harmony, and encourages collaborative problem-solving.

> "When faced with tough decisions—like when we had to reorganize departments to address budget cuts—I made it a point to think beyond just the operational impact. I knew that any change like this would affect people's workloads, roles, and even their sense of job security. Early in my career, I saw how leaders who focused only on policies and numbers often lost the trust of their teams, which made implementation even harder. So now, I make it a priority to consider how these decisions will affect people emotionally—their concerns, anxieties, and morale. Emotional intelligence helps me weigh the human side alongside the practical factors. It's not always easy to find the right balance, especially when the stakes are high, but I've learned that being transparent, empathetic, and open to feedback earns the respect and trust of faculty and staff. Because they feel cared for, they're more willing to engage in the process and support the change. That trust makes it much easier to move forward as a united team." (P08)

Question No. 2. How does your ability to manage emotions help you handle conflicts or difficult situations?

2.1 *Navigating Difficult Conversations with Empathy and Intent*

12 out of 16 participants shared that emotional intelligence played a pivotal role in helping them navigate emotionally charged conversations with grace and fairness. Rather than reacting impulsively or avoiding confrontation, these leaders emphasized the importance of regulating their own emotions to remain fully present and empathetic. They described situations such as terminating employment, addressing student complaints, and correcting problematic behaviors as some of the most emotionally taxing aspects of their roles—but also moments that tested and revealed the depth of their emotional maturity.

> "Letting go of a long-time staff member due to a university-wide restructuring was one of the most painful experiences I've had as a leader. I had worked with her for years, knew about her personal struggles, and even met her family during university functions. Delivering that news felt like I was personally hurting someone I cared about. I had to take time beforehand to compose myself—not to become distant or robotic, but to ensure that I communicated with honesty and dignity. I spoke slowly, made space for her emotions, and reassured her that this decision wasn't a reflection of her worth. I cried after the meeting, in private. But during that moment, I owed it to her to be clear, composed, and above all, compassionate." (P03)

2.2 *Modeling Emotional Regulation as a Leadership Standard*

10 out of 16 participants underscored the performative and symbolic aspect of their emotional conduct, especially in high-stress environments. For these school leaders, emotional regulation is not merely a personal coping mechanism—it is a leadership expectation. They understood that how they carry themselves in moments of tension sets a precedent for the entire institution. Their composure becomes a mirror through which others learn how to navigate conflict, express disagreement respectfully, and maintain professional decorum. In this way, emotional regulation becomes a silent but powerful form of leadership modeling.

> "Early in my career, I wore my emotions on my sleeve—anger, stress, even tears. People noticed. Some staff told me privately that it made them anxious because they didn't know what version of me they were going to get. That was a wake-up call. I started journaling, meditating, and reflecting on my emotional triggers. Now, even in challenging conversations, I stay grounded. It's not just for my peace of mind; I do it because I want to create an emotionally safe space for my team. When I am steady, they feel safe—and that's the culture I strive to build." (P11)

Question No. 3. What indicators or outcomes make you believe that emotional intelligence strengthens your leadership?

3.1 *Positive and Trust-Based Relationships*

12 out of 16 participants emphasized that emotional intelligence reveals itself most clearly in the quality of relationships they build within the academic community. For them, leadership rooted in empathy, active listening, and respectful communication fosters an environment where people feel seen, heard, and valued. Emotional intelligence, in their view, is not abstract—it is tangible in the daily exchanges that gradually build trust. That trust, once established, becomes the bedrock upon which collaboration, dialogue, and institutional growth are built.

> "There was a time during a planning meeting when one of my staff members respectfully challenged a decision I had made about class scheduling. In the past,

moments like that would be rare—people often just nodded along, even if they had concerns. But that day, she spoke up in front of the team, and others joined the discussion. I remember feeling a quiet sense of pride, not defensiveness. It struck me that emotional intelligence isn't just about staying calm—it's about creating the kind of environment where people feel safe enough to speak their minds. That moment reminded me that trust had taken root, and it made me feel like we were truly moving forward as a team. To me, emotional intelligence becomes visible when people feel safe enough to challenge me. My team isn't afraid to say, 'I don't agree with this approach,' and I welcome it. That level of openness doesn't happen overnight—it grows when people know they won't be punished for being honest. I take that as a sign that trust is in place, and that we're growing together." (P15)

3.2 *Better Decision-Making and Conflict Outcomes*

10 out of 16 Many participants shared that emotional intelligence allowed them to pause and think before reacting, especially in high-pressure or emotionally charged situations. Instead of making impulsive decisions, they became more mindful of how their actions would affect others. This self-awareness helped them consider different perspectives, read the emotional tone of the room, and approach conflicts more calmly. As a result, they experienced fewer misunderstandings, smoother resolutions, and decisions that were not only effective but also respectful of the people involved.

"There was a tension-filled meeting between two senior faculty members over class assignments. Old me might have stepped in with a quick verdict just to stop the argument. But now, I've learned to approach things differently. I let them talk, watched their body language, and managed my urge to interrupt. Later, in one-on-one conversations, I asked each of them reflective questions instead of assuming who was right. That approach diffused the tension. What surprised me was how both of them later thanked me for handling it fairly. That wouldn't have happened if I acted on impulse." (P01)

To provide a clear overview of the findings, the data analysis revealed distinct themes regarding the definition and application of emotional intelligence. Table 3 illustrates the thematic map developed from the analysis, linking specific participant codes to the broader themes identified.

Table 3. Thematic Map

Core Theme	Sub-Themes	Sample Codes/Keywords
Self-Regulation	Managing Pressure	"Ground myself," "Regulate emotions," "Avoid rushing"
	Professional Composure	"Firm yet composed," "Internal discipline"
Institutional Culture	Emotional Modeling	"Cascades through organization," "Emotional tone"
	Authenticity	"Bridge not weakness," "Greeting with a smile"
Conflict & Cohesion	Emotional Anchor	"Safe space," "Steady," "Diffusing tension"
Empathy in Action	Human-Centered	"Person behind the role," "Context-aware," "Healing"

5. Discussion

Emotional intelligence (EI) is widely recognized as a key factor in effective leadership, especially in education where leaders face complex challenges. This study explored how higher education school leaders understand and apply EI in their roles and how school leaders perceive the influence of their emotional

intelligence on their leadership effectiveness. Unlike basic education, higher education leadership operates within a unique context of academic freedom, shared governance, and high stakeholder autonomy. Consequently, this study fills a critical theoretical gap by demonstrating that in HEIs, where top-down command is often ineffective, EI functions as a vital currency for influence and consensus-building.

The responses from the 16 participating higher education school leaders reveal a nuanced and multifaceted conception of EI that extends beyond individual emotional awareness to encompass its influence on organizational culture and decision-making.

The results of the first objective revealed that a dominant theme among 11 out of 16 participants was the central role of self-regulation, particularly in navigating emotionally charged situations. Leaders acknowledged that being aware of their emotions—especially frustration, stress, and disappointment—enabled them to respond with composure and fairness rather than impulsivity. This aligns with Goleman's [2] original framework, which highlights self-regulation as a core component of emotional intelligence, essential for effective leadership.

Leaders described emotionally intelligent decision-making not as an absence of emotion, but as an intentional process of emotional management to ensure clarity, accountability, and relational respect. One school head's account of handling repeated professional misconduct with calm firmness exemplifies the practical application of emotional intelligence as a tool for principled leadership rather than emotional avoidance.

This finding is supported by Lescano [7] and San Gabriel [31], who both found that school leaders with high EI are more adept at resolving conflict and making sound decisions under pressure. Furthermore, Yulianti et al. [26] emphasized that emotionally intelligent leaders tend to make decisions that are not only rational but also sensitive to interpersonal dynamics, fostering greater trust and cooperation within their teams.

Nine participants described EI as not just an individual competency but a cultural influence that permeates institutional dynamics. Leaders expressed that their emotional tone—whether empathetic, optimistic, or disengaged—sets the tone for the broader organizational climate. This observation is consistent with Goleman's [2] assertion that emotionally intelligent leaders possess a "resonance effect," where their emotional state influences the collective mood and motivation of the team.

The data illustrates how simple acts of emotional awareness—greeting staff warmly, inquiring about their well-being, or showing concern—build psychological safety and trust, critical factors in school performance. This insight mirrors the findings of Sibugan [24] and Estrellan and Loja [27], who noted that emotionally intelligent principals significantly contribute to positive school climates by fostering respect, collaboration, and psychological resilience.

San Gabriel [31] further reinforces this idea, indicating that emotionally intelligent leaders adopt participative and responsive behaviors, which in turn promote a more inclusive and motivated workforce. Similarly, Ellis [6] emphasized that emotionally intelligent administrators foster collaboration and reduce workplace tension, especially in complex environments like higher education.

When asked about specific leadership situations, 11 school leaders emphasized emotional regulation during conflict as critical to sustaining team cohesion. This reinforces Urick et al.'s [12] finding that emotionally intelligent leadership served as a protective buffer during the COVID-19 crisis, helping teams manage stress and maintain unity.

The idea of being an "emotional anchor" is central to emotionally intelligent leadership in crisis and everyday tensions. A novel insight from this study is the characterization of the leader as this "anchor"—a role that goes beyond mere management to become a stabilizing psychological force. In the Philippine context, where social harmony is culturally paramount, the leader's ability to absorb tension without retaliating serves a dual function: preserving professional stability while honoring cultural expectations. Farooq et al. [4] similarly found that private school principals who displayed emotional control were more effective in maintaining healthy professional relationships and organizational balance. The data also supports Wilkinson's [11] concept of emotional labor in educational leadership, where managing one's emotional expression is both a leadership responsibility and a source of burnout risk. Leaders in this study clearly demonstrated that EI is not about suppressing emotion, but about channeling it constructively to sustain relationships and institutional stability.

Ten participants shared instances where empathy influenced leadership decisions. These cases illustrate strategic compassion, where understanding the personal context of faculty or staff resulted in more humane, yet effective, responses. Rather than relying on disciplinary measures, emotionally intelligent leaders offered support and time—actions that resulted in improved morale and performance. This aligns with Williams [8] who observed that emotionally intelligent women leaders showed greater adaptability and effectiveness through empathetic responses.

Empathy, in this context, is seen as an ethical leadership choice, not a sign of weakness. This reflects the findings of Yulianti et al. [26], who showed that EI competencies such as empathy and emotional regulation directly contribute to trust-building and team cohesion. Mohammed [5] also found that empathetic leadership fosters inclusive and psychologically safe environments in higher education—critical attributes in managing today's diverse academic communities.

A striking 14 out of 16 leaders cited active listening and feedback-seeking as core practices to remain emotionally attuned. This confirms the findings of Jacoba et al. [16], who noted that high EI among faculty correlated with increased engagement and classroom management—both of which require deep listening skills.

Seeking feedback, especially when it challenges one's leadership style, was perceived by participants not as a threat but as a growth opportunity. This aligns with Quinlan's [9] recommendation to embed EI in leadership training programs, particularly emphasizing self-awareness and interpersonal sensitivity as tools for growth and reflection.

Finally, eight leaders emphasized that emotional responsiveness is linked to personal emotional well-being. Practices like exercise, hobbies, and family time were seen as essential to recharge and stay emotionally effective at work. This echoes Coleman and Ali's [19] finding that emotionally intelligent leaders and staff maintain better mental health and workplace collaboration during disruptions.

This also resonates with Martinez et al. [18], who emphasized that emotional competencies—more than demographic traits—help leaders manage stress, collaborate effectively, and sustain performance. Likewise, De Los Santos [20] highlighted that emotionally intelligent leaders reduce staff turnover and promote morale, outcomes likely linked to sustained emotional balance.

The results affirm that emotional intelligence is deeply embedded in the day-to-day leadership of school heads in higher education. School leaders define and apply EI through self-regulation, empathy, active listening, and emotional modeling—not only to lead effectively but to shape the emotional climate of their institutions.

The findings of the second objective revealed that EI profoundly shapes leadership practices by enhancing communication, relationship-building, decision-making, and conflict management—key areas that underpin effective school leadership.

The majority of participants highlighted that emotional intelligence is fundamental to establishing authentic connections within their academic communities. Leaders emphasized that their ability to "read the room," attune to emotional undercurrents, and respond empathetically fosters a climate of trust, openness, and psychological safety. This environment encourages honest dialogue and collaboration, enabling more constructive problem-solving and shared commitment to institutional goals.

These insights align closely with Goleman's [2] foundational theory, which stresses that emotionally intelligent leaders excel in navigating interpersonal dynamics and cultivating positive organizational cultures. Similarly, Ellis [6] and Mohammed [5] demonstrated that emotionally aware higher education leaders promote inclusivity and psychological safety, which are critical for collaborative academic environments. Lescano [7] further corroborated this by finding strong positive correlations between EI and leadership performance, particularly in communication and staff motivation. The participants' emphasis on authentic engagement and relational trust echoes these empirical findings, confirming EI's pivotal role in effective leadership communication.

More than half of the participants identified EI as a vital asset in balancing emotional and practical considerations during decision-making, especially in conflict or change scenarios. Leaders shared how their emotional awareness helps them pause before reacting, consider the feelings behind conflicts, and pursue resolutions that are fair and empathetic. This nuanced approach not only diffuses tension but also preserves trust and fosters collective ownership of solutions.

These narratives mirror findings by Strickland [3] and Farooq et al. [4], who emphasized that emotional regulation and empathy enable school leaders to manage conflicts constructively and maintain healthy professional relationships. Garcia and Maniago's [17] research in higher education similarly noted that emotionally intelligent managers prefer collaborative conflict strategies that sustain institutional harmony. This balanced decision-making reflects Goleman's [1] assertion that emotional self-regulation underpins responsible leadership behavior, supporting both organizational goals and human needs.

Participants overwhelmingly described how managing their emotions helps them handle difficult conversations—such as staff terminations or student complaints—with composure and compassion. They recognized that emotional intelligence involves being fully present and empathetic, allowing them to communicate honestly yet respectfully, even in painful moments.

This resonates with Urick et al. [12], who documented the buffering effect of EI during crises, noting that emotionally intelligent leaders provide empathetic support and reduce stress in challenging situations. Likewise, San Gabriel [31] emphasized that emotionally responsive leadership behaviors, such as empathy and participative decision-making, contribute to effective school management. The participants' experiences demonstrate the human dimension of leadership where EI facilitates dignity, trust, and healing even amid organizational difficulties.

Ten participants underscored that their emotional composure in stressful moments serves as a model for the entire institution. Their ability to regulate emotions publicly not only preserves their own well-being but also sets the tone for respectful discourse and professional behavior among staff. This symbolic aspect of EI establishes a culture where others learn to manage their emotions constructively.

Such findings complement Wilkinson's [11] work on emotional labor in school leadership, highlighting the necessity for resilience and emotional self-control. It also reflects the transformational leadership traits identified by Chandra [30], where leaders inspire and intellectually stimulate teams through emotional stability. The participants' deliberate cultivation of emotional regulation underscores EI's broader role in shaping organizational culture and leadership norms.

Participants viewed emotional intelligence as most evident through positive, trust-based relationships and improved decision-making outcomes. Twelve leaders pointed to the quality of relationships—marked by open communication, mutual respect, and psychological safety—as a clear sign that EI is working effectively. Ten others noted that their increased ability to pause, reflect, and consider emotions during conflicts leads to more respectful and effective resolutions.

These observations are consistent with Yulianti, Chaidir, and Irawan [26], who found that EI significantly enhances trust, cooperation, and morale within leadership teams. Lescano's [7] findings also support the notion that high EI correlates with better conflict resolution and communication, leading to improved leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, Salip and Quines [28] emphasized that emotional regulation mediates authentic leadership's impact on organizational climate, highlighting EI's indispensable role in sustaining supportive work environments.

The findings of this study affirm the centrality of emotional intelligence to effective leadership in higher education. Consistent with extensive research, participants demonstrated that EI enhances communication, fosters trust, improves decision-making, and facilitates conflict management. These emotional competencies enable leaders not only to navigate the complexities of academic institutions but also to create inclusive, resilient, and collaborative organizational cultures. This study contributes valuable insights into how EI functions as both a personal skill and a collective resource within higher education leadership—areas that remain underexplored and ripe for further research and development.

Based on these findings, higher education institutions should move beyond treating EI as a "soft skill" and integrate it into formal leadership frameworks. Specifically, HR departments should incorporate behavioral EI assessments during the hiring process for Deans and Directors to evaluate candidates' capacity for self-regulation and empathy. Furthermore, institutions should establish peer-mentoring circles where senior leaders can model "emotional anchoring" strategies to junior administrators, facilitating the transfer of these tacit emotional competencies.

5.1. Limitations and future research

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study utilized a purposive sample of 16 school leaders within the from institutions within the Zamboanga Peninsula and Western Visayas, which, while sufficient for phenomenological saturation, limits the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts or educational systems. Second, the data relies on self-reported perceptions, which carries the risk of social desirability bias—participants may have portrayed their leadership in a more favorable, emotionally intelligent light than is practiced. Future research should address these gaps by employing mixed-methods designs that include subordinate ratings to triangulate leader self-assessments.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the profound and multifaceted influence of emotional intelligence (EI) on leadership effectiveness in the context of higher education. Drawing from the voices of sixteen school leaders, it becomes clear that EI is not merely an internal attribute but a strategic leadership capability that

deeply informs how leaders think, act, and relate. Their lived experiences affirm that emotional intelligence—rooted in self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—guides leaders in building trust, resolving conflict, and creating psychologically safe school environments.

The findings affirm that emotionally intelligent leadership is integral to fostering a respectful, inclusive, and collaborative institutional culture. Participants consistently emphasized that by practicing emotional self-regulation and empathy, they were able to lead with composure, encourage open communication, and support both staff and students through challenges. Emotional intelligence became a lens through which ethical decisions were made and relationships were strengthened, enabling leaders to model behaviors that promote dignity and accountability across the organization.

Critically, this study moves beyond the theoretical to demonstrate that for higher education administrators, EI is a practical currency for influence. Their descriptions reflect a deliberate, values-driven approach to leading—with sensitivity to their own emotional triggers and an attunement to the emotional needs of others. School leaders perceived this adaptability not just as a soft skill, but as an essential contributor to institutional resilience, allowing them to stay grounded in high-pressure situations and maintain clarity in communication.

However, it is important to contextualize these findings within the Philippine setting, where cultural values such as pakikisama (social harmony) deeply influence leadership expectations. While the specific expressions of EI may vary across cultures, the core finding—that emotional regulation buffers against institutional stress—offers valuable insights for the broader higher education landscape.

Ultimately, this study bridges the gap in literature by offering context-specific insights into the value of emotional intelligence among higher education leaders. In a landscape marked by rapid change and rising expectations, emotionally intelligent leadership emerges as a vital response to institutional complexity. Therefore, it is recommended that higher education institutions move beyond ad-hoc training and formally integrate EI coaching into the onboarding process for new academic leaders. Furthermore, institutions should implement longitudinal tracking of these programs, evaluating their impact on institutional climate via mixed-method approaches to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and ethical leadership.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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