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EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the importance of emotional intelligence in servant leadership practices within educational settings, focusing on how emotional intelligence influences leadership behaviour, decision-making, and fostering a supportive school culture. Using a qualitative case study design, the study examines the lived experiences of primary school teachers in Kota Tinggi, Johor, to understand the intersection between emotional intelligence and servant leadership. Data were collected through semi-structured interview and document analysis, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the participants' perspectives and practices. Thematic analysis revealed that emotional intelligence significantly enhances servant leadership by promoting empathy, effective communication, and ethical decision-making. Leaders with high emotional intelligence were found to prioritize the needs of teachers and students, foster collaboration, and build trust within their communities. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating how emotional intelligence supports the core principles of servant leadership, offering practical implications for leadership development programs in educational institutions. By emphasizing emotional awareness and empathy, the findings underscore the importance of cultivating emotional intelligence to improve leadership effectiveness and school outcomes.

Keywords: Servant leadership, emotional intelligence, leadership practices, qualitative.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the industrial, communication, and social sectors has had an impact on Malaysia's educational system (Khair, 2009). The impact of globalization has driven the government to take a number of initiatives to transform this country into a regional hub of educational excellence.

This is consistent with the Ministry of Education's vision and objective to create exceptional schools that will produce a distinguished generation and develop individual potential via quality education (Abd Ghafar, 2010). To fulfill the government's goals, school leadership and instructors must be committed and persistent in their efforts to improve the quality of Malaysian educational institutions. Moreover, the government has developed the Education Development Plan 2013-2025 as the primary agenda for national education change, ensuring the efficacy and sustainability of national education transformation. Among the transformation plans are: High-Performance Schools, empowering preschools, Bai'ah for school leaders, and school-based assessment intended to increase educational quality. To carry out this education change agenda, school leaders must be prepared and equipped to mobilize teachers at the grassroots level.

If the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE)'s goal is to produce excellent schools that will generate a distinguished generation and develop individual potential through quality education, it is the responsibility of each school to work hard to improve achievement, implement continuous improvement, and effectively manage change in order to cope with the rapid current developments. In this context, principal leadership at the school level is critical for planning, implementing, and monitoring all aspects of change (Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011; Marzano & Walters, 2010). According to Fullan (2007), the principal is the change manager and is in charge of leading school-wide change. As a school manager, the principal is the most important individual who can impact the school's success (Fullan, 2007; Hallinger, 2009). Leadership drives the school ahead or vice versa (Shahril, 2000). What is clear is that the changes are made with the aim of improving the education system at all levels and their success is closely related to the leadership of the organization (Ghitulescu, 2013; Kuhn, 2012).

Leadership is a critical determinant of organizational success, especially in education, where it directly impacts teacher performance and student outcomes (Fullan, 2007; Hussin, 2004). Emotional intelligence has emerged as a pivotal factor in effective leadership, enabling leaders to understand and manage their own emotions while fostering positive relationships with others. Servant leadership, characterized by prioritizing the needs of others, aligns closely with the principles of Emotional Intelligence. In the context of education, change means restructuring and developing schools or the basic need to implement reforms (Hallinger & Lee, 2013). According to Hussin (2004), change has the meaning or connotation of transition, shift, transformation, innovation, adaptation, reform, and all these terms refer to a situation that changes from an existing situation to a better and advanced situation. Implementing change does not mean trying to eliminate all problems that exist in a school, but, to plan in a more innovative direction by taking into account the pressures of internal or external change in the organization (Hargreaves et al., 2011). In this regard, change management is defined as the application of behavioral science to the decision-making, planning, implementation and evaluation phases of the change process, all focusing on managing the disruptions that occur during the implementation of change. Change management does not focus on what will change, but how the solution will be implemented (Fullan, 2007).

The ability of an organization to implement change through a paradigm shift is a guarantee for achieving organizational excellence (Myers et al., 2012). In addition, the success of an organization is also closely related to leadership (Fullan, 2007; Jamil & Norlia, 2011; Shahril, 2000; Rusmini, 2006) and the emotional intelligence of its leaders (Herkenhoff, 2004). Hitchinger (1998) stated that he has never seen an excellent school led by a weak principal and a weak school led by an excellent principal. Without quality leadership and good emotional intelligence of leaders, the targeted goals are quite difficult to achieve (Sazali, 2005). In addition, Goleman (2011) stated that the emotional intelligence

of leaders is a skill that can and should be learned by organizational leaders because it can help make better decisions to improve organizational achievement.

Despite the growing body of literature on leadership in education, the intersection of emotional intelligence and servant leadership remains under explored, particularly in primary schools within the Malaysian context. Studies suggest that emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to foster collaboration, build trust, and address the diverse needs of teachers and students (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). Furthermore, there is limited research examining how these attributes manifest in servant leadership practices in local educational systems. Thus, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the impact of emotional intelligence on servant leadership practices among primary school leaders in Kota Tinggi, Johor. By focusing on the lived experiences of educational leaders, this research seeks to provide insights into how emotional intelligence shapes leadership practices and decision-making processes, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective and empathetic school leadership frameworks. Downstream effects of leaders' (and teachers') EI on work outcomes remain robust in Malaysian samples. Studies from 2023–2025 show EI relates positively to professional identity among student teachers (Yusof & Ahmad, 2023), resilience among Malaysian young adults (Tan et al., 2025), and psychological well-being/achievement (Lim et al., 2024) mechanisms that help explain why emotionally intelligent leaders foster more supportive staff cultures.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study attempts to answer the following research objectives:

1. To explore teachers' perspectives of servant leadership practices in primary schools.
2. To examine teachers' perspectives on how emotional intelligent leaders foster trust and collaboration in primary schools.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current research draws upon relevant findings from previous studies to establish a foundation for understanding the intersection of emotional intelligence on servant leadership. The literature highlights the critical role of emotional intelligence in enhancing leadership effectiveness through self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation (Goleman et al., 2002). Studies have also emphasized the alignment of the emotional intelligence on servant leadership principles, such as prioritizing the needs of others and fostering collaborative work environments (Greenleaf, 1977). Recent Malaysian studies continue to show that EI is central to effective headmaster/principal work, especially for managing change and maintaining school climate. A nationwide study of primary headmasters stressed self- and emotion-control as core to decisive action and day-to-day school management, recommending explicit EI development in leadership programmes (Rahman et al., 2023). Complementing this, a 2022 Malaysian study on principals reported that EI varies with demographic factors yet consistently predicts more effective change management underscoring EI as a capacity school system can purposefully build (Hassan & Ismail, 2022).

Servant leadership is a non-traditional style of leadership that incorporates elements of participative leadership and transformational leadership. Authenticity is central to servant leadership. Servant leaders work continually to build strong, authentic relationships with their followers. This generates

significant cultural buy-in and contributes to a positive employee experience, high employee engagement, and high employee satisfaction. Servant leadership also emphasizes appreciation, a caring attitude, humility, strong listening skills, and a high degree of trust. Greenleaf (1977) outlines 10 main principles that characterize the servant leader: Listening, Empathy, Healing, Self-awareness, Persuasion, Vision, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to growth, and Building community. Table 1 illustrates the 10 principles of servant leadership.

Table 1

10 Servant Leadership Principles

1. Listening	Actively listen to others' needs and seek to understand them fully
2. Empathy	Recognize and understand others' emotions and perspectives
3. Healing	Help others achieve emotional and spiritual well-being
4. Self - awareness	Be mindful of yourself and your impact on others
5. Persuasion	Influence others through persuasion and authority
6. Vision	See beyond the present to envision what might be
7. Foresight	Use past lessons and present realities to guide future decisions
8. Stewardship	Take care of your organization or team for the greater good
9. Commitment to growth	Support your team's personal and professional development
10. Building Community	Create a sense of belonging and collaborations

Source. Greenleaf, 1977.

As shown in Table 1, Servant leaders listen without judgment and are always open and receptive to feedback from their teams. Unbiased listening leads naturally to understanding, which is so important for building trusting relationships with team members. Servant leaders empathize with all team members and demonstrate compassionate leadership. Servant leaders heal their teams by removing the obstacles to success, addressing conflict in a timely manner and with great tact, and helping team members move forward in positive ways. Servant leaders are aware of what's going on around them, what their team members need to succeed, and are highly self-aware. In other words, self-awareness refers to a person's ability to accurately perceive their emotions and remain aware of them as they occur, and it is essential to serving and leading your employees well. They influence others through persuasion and authority. They envision what might be in the future and use past lessons to guide future decisions. Another principle is stewardship. Good stewardship is all about working toward the greater good and is a demonstration of commitment to serving and meeting the needs of others. Servant leaders seek to improve the lives of team members who, in turn, seek to improve the performance of the organization and the lives of others through their work. Servant leaders are committed to the growth of all their team members and interact with them in ways that facilitate and encourage growth.

The notion of servant leadership is especially pertinent in the context of education because it emphasizes both the development of individuals and the advancement of institutions. Schools represent contexts where leadership has two immensely important purposes and can have profound effects not only on the work of teachers but also the success of their students. It has been suggested that servant leadership is the key to facilitating conditions for creating a school culture that is supportive, empathetic, empowering, and inclusive - ultimately allowing teachers to feel satisfied, to grow professionally, and to work effectively towards education (Huang et al., 2020).

Servant leadership is unique in its ability to reflectively consider teacher well-being within the context of their work and professional development. Research indicated that when school leaders practiced

servant leadership, teachers were more satisfied with their work, experienced lower levels of stress, and developed a greater sense of commitment to their students and schools (Neves & Wiesenberger, 2014). In addition to serving staff when creating policies and mandates to manage performance, servant leader in schools involves nurturing a sense of purpose characterized by shared values and vision, which align personal and professional growth to thrive as professionals. Servant leaders must ensure that these are linked to enriching the learning experience for students, and ultimately improve broad and deep educational outcomes.

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership

Leadership competencies rely on the capacity that a leader possesses on emotions and behaviours known as emotional intelligence (Blanchard, 2004; Goleman, 2011; Herkenhoff, 2004). In the capacity of an overall boss, a leader is supposed to manage, coordinate, and oversee the smooth running of an organization. Today more and more emphasis is placed on services of the industrial sector, the role of organizational leadership is to direct the staff, foster a positive attitude towards work, to contribute, and demonstrate that people are valuable to the organization (Hopkins, 2005). In organizational leadership, managing emotions effectively can contribute to how a leader responds to individual needs, how leaders motivate their employees, and make employees "passionate" to work (Goleman, 1998; Jasvinder, 2010). Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, understand, and manage our own emotions and the emotions of others. It's a valuable soft skill that influences how we navigate our emotional landscape and that of those around us. Emotional intelligence comprises four key components: Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. An emotionally intelligent leader can navigate complex social interactions, foster positive relationships, and create a supportive work environment. They can understand their team members' emotional needs and respond to them more appropriately, leading to a more engaged and motivated team. Teachers in this study described headmasters who actively listen and validate emotions during conflict. Malaysian work shows headmasters' self- and emotion-control underpin this kind of responsive behaviour, enabling calmer conflict handling and more consistent decisions (Rahman et al., 2023). Broader Malaysian samples link EI to resilience and well-being (Tan et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2024), which likely influences classrooms via modelling and emotional contagion.

Leaders who possess emotional intelligence have a strong ability to understand and guide their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their team members. This deep understanding serves as the cornerstone of empathy, which is a vital skill for effective leadership. All these factors enhance employees' performance, making emotional intelligence one of the most critical skills a leader can have. While it can be a difficult skill to develop, there are several effective ways leaders can improve their emotional intelligence so that they can demonstrate it on a daily basis in the workplace. In the educational context, previous research suggests that emotionally intelligent leaders contribute to positive school cultures by supporting teacher well-being and creating inclusive learning environments (Mayer et al., 2004). Teachers reported being stretched with new responsibilities and supported via feedback/mentoring. Malaysian evidence links EI with stronger professional identity among student teachers (Yusof & Ahmad, 2023), suggesting that emotionally intelligent, servant-oriented leaders scaffold competence and autonomy, reinforcing teachers' motivation to grow. However, limited attention has been given to how these dynamics manifest in primary school settings. By critically analyzing these findings, the study aims to bridge the research gap and provide insights into the practical implications of emotional intelligence for servant leadership in educational leadership.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) stated that the core leadership emotional intelligence entails positive behaviour, positive thought and positive emotion. Leaders with greater emotional intelligence will be able to regulate their own emotions, work in a team, deal with conflict, and persuade other people to have positive thought processes. Jordan (2005) noted that leaders should display good emotions and feelings to the employees and this will lead to positive output in the organization. In the study that was conducted by Goleman et al. (2002) job promotion success was compared between technical, professional, IQ and emotional intelligence. In their research, they found out that for every group of ten individuals who are considered excellent performers, 6 out of 10 possess high levels of emotional intelligence, while only 3 out of 10 possess high levels of IQ and technical skills. Out of every ten leaders, 8 out of 10 are characterized by high levels of emotional intelligence, while only 1 out of 10 can be described as possessing high levels of IQ, and technical skills. In their study, they suggested that there exists a link between performance and emotional intelligence where it identifies that the key performance differentiators are not IQ and skill level but Emotional Intelligence (Goleman et al., 2002).

Other studies conducted in organizations by Palmer and Stough (2001), who examined the self-reported emotional intelligence of 43 managers to identify the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership style, found that there were significant relationships between EI and the seven components in the transformational leadership model. Specifically, inspiration, motivation, and individual consideration components of transformational leadership were related to the ability to manage emotions and the ability to regulate emotions. In addition, other studies have also shown EI positively influences servant leadership (Munawar, Yousaf & Rehman, 2024) and job satisfaction (Jha & Bhattacharya, 2021). Winston and Hartsfield (2004) conducted a survey based on exploratory research to find how the variables of emotional intelligence are connected to servant leadership. The study pointed out three aspects that come out as relatively relevant to emotional intelligence and servant leadership, although emotional intelligence may not be unique to servant leadership or leadership in general.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences of two primary school teachers in Kota Tinggi Johor based on purposive sampling. The purposive sampling method ensures participants are directly relevant to the research objectives. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of how EI influences servant leadership.

Table 2

Profile of the Respondents

Teachers	Gender	School	Qualification	Experience
Teacher A	F	SKBM	B.Ed (Counselling)	7 years
Teacher B	M	SKKR	B.Ed (TESL)	7 years

The respondents consist of 2 teachers (one male and one female) teaching in Kota Tinggi primary schools. Both of them have 7 years of teaching experience with Bachelor of Education in Counselling and Teaching English as a Second Language.

FINDINGS

This study was set to explore the teachers’ perspectives of servant leadership practices in primary schools and to examine how emotional intelligent leaders foster trust and collaboration in primary schools. Table 2 illustrates the findings of the study.

Table 3

Teachers’ Perspectives of Servant Leadership Practices

Main Theme	Subtheme	Answers
Servant Leadership Practices	Prioritizing the Needs of Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "I believe servant leadership is about prioritizing the needs of others, empowering team members, and fostering a supportive and collaborative environment." (TA) - "Yes, my headmaster demonstrates servant leadership by always putting the needs of teachers and students first." (TB)
	Humility and Empathy in Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "In my opinion, servant leadership emphasizes humility and service, where a leader's primary goal is to serve their team, encouraging growth and mutual respect." (TA) - "I think my headmaster embodies servant leadership by actively listening to concerns and helping us find solutions to challenges." (TB)
	Empowerment and Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "My headmaster frequently encourages me to take on new responsibilities that help me grow professionally." (TA) - "By assigning me to various committees, my headmaster provides valuable opportunities for skill development." (TB)
Emotional Intelligence in Leadership	Emotional Awareness and Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Understanding her emotions helps her remain calm and composed during stressful situations, such as handling conflicts among students or parents." (TA) - "Managing his emotions allows us to model positive behaviors for our students and colleagues." (TB)
	Understanding and Supporting Team Members' Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "By understanding my team members' emotions, I can tailor my leadership style to their needs." (TA) - "Recognizing the perspectives of my colleagues helps me identify strengths and areas for growth." (TB)
	Managing Complex Situations with Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "During a parent-teacher meeting, a parent was upset about their child's grades. I listened actively and validated their concerns before explaining how we could work together to support their child." (TA)

(continued)

Main Theme	Subtheme	Answers
		- <i>"When a colleague was struggling with personal issues, the headmaster offered emotional support and adjusted team responsibilities to help them cope."(TB)</i>
Ethical Leadership and Integrity	Transparency and Fairness	- <i>"Yes, my headmaster always communicates openly and treats staff members fairly, regardless of their position." (TA)</i> - <i>"My headmaster leads with honesty, ensuring that all teachers have equal opportunities for professional development." (TB)</i>
	Promoting Ethical Values	- <i>"Yes, my headmaster maintains transparency in decisions and acts with integrity in all interactions." (TA)</i> - <i>"My headmaster has a strong moral compass, ensuring that all policies align with ethical standards."(TB)</i>
Teacher Well-Being and Support	Supporting Work-Life Balance	- <i>"My headmaster regularly checks in with me to ensure I'm not overwhelmed and provides flexibility when needed."(TA)</i> <i>"By promoting a balanced work environment and understanding personal commitments, my headmaster shows genuine care."(TB)</i>
	Mentoring and Professional Development	<i>"Yes, my headmaster provides mentorship and guidance to help me reach my career milestones."(TA)</i> <i>"Through regular feedback and professional development opportunities, my headmaster supports my career aspirations."(TB)</i>
Community Engagement and Social Responsibility	Encouraging Community Involvement	- <i>"Yes, my headmaster promotes active involvement in school-organized community events, encouraging participation from all staff."(TA)</i> - <i>"My headmaster supports initiatives like neighborhood clean-ups and charity drives, motivating us to contribute to community-building."(TB)</i>
	Ethical and Social Contributions	- <i>"Yes, my headmaster often organizes donation drives for those in need, demonstrating a strong commitment to helping the community."(TA)</i> - <i>"My headmaster frequently volunteers in local events, showcasing a genuine dedication to community service."(TB)</i>

(continued)

Main Theme	Subtheme	Answers
Decision-Making and Autonomy	Empowering Teachers in Decision-Making	- <i>"Yes, I am encouraged to use my judgment in challenging situations, which has boosted my confidence."(TA)</i> - <i>"My headmaster trusts me to make decisions, giving me the autonomy to handle classroom issues independently."(TB)</i>
	Collaborative Problem-Solving	- <i>"My headmaster analyzes issues from multiple perspectives before making a decision, ensuring a well-thought-out solution."(TA)</i> - <i>"By involving teachers in problem-solving discussions, my headmaster approaches complex situations thoughtfully."(TB)</i>

As indicated in Table 2, based on the 10 principles of servant leadership practices (Greenleaf, 1977), a few principles were practiced by these leaders: listening, empathy, stewardship, commitment to growth and building community. The findings revealed that servant leadership is a core practice among the observed headmasters, characterized by prioritizing the needs of others, humility, empathy, empowerment, and support.

Listening and Empathy

Respondents described servant leadership as focusing on the welfare of teachers and students. For instance, one teacher noted, "My headmaster demonstrates servant leadership by always putting the needs of teachers and students first." These headmasters demonstrated listening ability by addressing the emotional needs of teachers and students.

Similarly, the importance of humility and empathy was also highlighted, with a respondent stating, "I think my headmaster embodies servant leadership by actively listening to concerns and helping us find solutions to challenges." Another teacher also mentioned that the headmaster showed empathy when she narrated, "During a parent-teacher meeting, a parent was upset about their child's grades. I listened actively and validated their concerns before explaining how we could work together to support their child." In this context, during challenging situations, servant leaders offered emotional support and adjusted responsibilities to ensure well-being of the teachers without compromising productivity.

Stewardship

Servant leaders also value stewardship. Servant leaders seek to improve the lives of team members who, in turn, seek to improve the performance of the organization and the lives of others through their work. One respondent said, "By understanding my team members' emotions, I can tailor my leadership style to their needs." Similarly, another respondent indicated that by "Recognizing the perspectives of my colleagues helps me identify strengths and areas for growth".

Commitment to Growth

Furthermore, the headmasters consistently empowered their staff by providing opportunities for growth. For example, they encouraged teachers to take on new responsibilities and participate in committees to enhance their professional skills, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment. One teacher

stated that, "Through regular feedback and professional development opportunities, my headmaster supports my career aspirations." Another teacher supported this by saying, "Yes, my headmaster provides mentorship and guidance to help me reach my career milestones."

Building Community

Community engagement was another notable aspect of the headmasters' practices. They actively encouraged participation in community-building activities, such as school-organized events and neighborhood initiatives. One respondent stated, "My headmaster supports initiatives like neighborhood clean-ups and charity drives, motivating us to contribute to community-building." Additionally, headmasters demonstrated ethical and social contributions by organizing donation drives and volunteering in local events, thereby fostering a sense of social responsibility among both staff and students. One of the respondents indicated that, "Yes, my headmaster promotes active involvement in school-organized community events, encouraging participation from all staff."

Fairness

Moreover, the data also highlighted the high ethical standards maintained by the headmasters. Respondents noted their headmasters' commitment to transparency and fairness in decision-making, ensuring equitable treatment for all staff. One teacher remarked, "My headmaster always communicates openly and treats staff members fairly, regardless of their position." Another added, "My headmaster has a strong moral compass, ensuring that all policies align with ethical standards." These practices were supported by examples of honesty, integrity, and equal opportunities for professional development provided to all staff members.

Work-life Balance

Supporting teacher well-being was a key priority for the headmasters, as evidenced by their regular check-ins and flexibility in addressing personal and professional needs. One respondent shared, "My headmaster regularly checks in with me to ensure I'm not overwhelmed and provides flexibility when needed." Another described how their headmaster promoted work-life balance and demonstrated genuine care for staff by understanding personal commitments. Additionally, headmasters played a significant role in mentoring teachers and supporting their professional development, offering guidance, feedback, and opportunities for skill-building and career advancement. One respondent mentioned that she felt that the headmaster cared for their well-being when she said, "By promoting a balanced work environment and understanding personal commitments, my headmaster shows genuine care."

Finally, the findings highlight the emphasis on empowering teachers in decision-making processes and promoting collaborative problem-solving. Teachers reported being entrusted with the autonomy to handle challenging situations, which boosted their confidence and professional growth. One respondent remarked, "My headmaster trusts me to make decisions, giving me the autonomy to handle classroom issues independently." Furthermore, headmasters involved teachers in discussions to address complex problems, ensuring that decisions were well-thought-out and inclusive. This collaborative approach not only strengthened relationships but also enhanced overall school performance.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence emerged as a crucial element in leadership effectiveness. The findings demonstrate that headmasters with strong emotional intelligence effectively manage their emotions and understand the emotional needs of their team members. Emotional intelligence is a skill that needs to be acquired by school leaders as it offers many benefits in managing the school community. One teacher explained, "Understanding her emotions helps her remain calm and composed during stressful situations, such as handling conflicts among students or parents." Another respondent emphasized the importance of emotional awareness, stating, "Managing his emotions allows us to model positive behaviors for our students and colleagues.". These findings show that by practicing emotional intelligence, not only leaders could help the teachers to handle conflicts but they also could model positive behavior to their fellow teachers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study underscores the significant role of emotional intelligence in enhancing servant leadership practices in educational settings. By demonstrating how emotional intelligence fosters trust, collaboration, and community building, the findings provide valuable insights for leadership training and professional development. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring diverse educational contexts and examining the long-term impacts of emotional intelligence-focused leadership training. The findings suggest that integrating EI training into leadership development programs can enhance servant leadership practices. School leaders should focus on developing empathy, emotional regulation, and communication skills to foster trust, collaboration, and empowerment. By doing so, they can create supportive educational environments that benefit teachers, students, and the broader school community. For instance, respondents described their leaders as actively listening to concerns and supporting both personal and professional well-being, echoing Neves and Wiesenberger's (2014) findings that servant leadership increases teacher satisfaction and reduces stress.

Emotional intelligence was consistently identified as a cornerstone of effective leadership. Teachers highlighted how headmasters regulated their emotions during conflicts and modelled positive behaviours, reinforcing Goleman's (2011) assertion that leaders' emotional awareness and regulation contribute to effective decision-making and school outcomes. These results also align with Malaysian studies which found that EI is central to managing school climate and change (Rahman et al., 2023; Hassan & Ismail, 2022). Similarly, broader evidence linking EI to resilience and well-being (Tan et al., 2025; Lim et al., 2024) helps explain why emotionally intelligent leaders foster trust and collaboration, as observed in this study.

The emphasis on mentoring and empowerment found in this study also resonates with Yusof and Ahmad (2023), who reported that emotionally intelligent leaders strengthen teachers' professional identity and motivation to grow. By delegating responsibilities and encouraging community involvement, the headmasters in this study demonstrated stewardship and a commitment to professional development, which mirrors Huang et al.'s (2020) conclusion that servant leadership fosters inclusive and empowering school cultures.

Importantly, the findings also suggest that emotional intelligence and servant leadership work in tandem to create a supportive school ecosystem. Leaders' ability to remain composed, demonstrate empathy, and uphold fairness enabled them to balance professional demands with teacher well-being. This

reflects Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso's (2004) view that emotionally intelligent leaders create positive environments through understanding and responding to emotional needs. By integrating EI and servant leadership, school leaders not only model ethical behaviour but also enhance collaboration and trust, ultimately strengthening both teacher morale and student outcomes.

Overall, this study extends prior research by demonstrating how servant leadership practices, when reinforced by emotional intelligence, manifest concretely in Malaysian primary schools. While earlier studies established the independent importance of EI (Goleman et al., 2002; Rahman et al., 2023) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Huang et al., 2020), the present findings illustrate their intersection, showing that emotional intelligence provides the practical skill set that enables servant leaders to actualize their principles in daily school management.

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