

Key Leadership Attributes and Professional Growth among School Leaders: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of key leadership attributes—Emotional Intelligence, Rapport Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and Emotionally Safe Environments—on the professional growth of school leaders in China. Using data from 500 respondents, we applied Ridge Regression to manage multicollinearity and found that these attributes significantly predict professional growth, explaining 62.1 percent of its variance ($R^2 = 0.621$). Emotional Intelligence (coefficient = 0.2689, $p < 0.001$) emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by Rapport Trust Building (coefficient = 0.2518, $p < 0.001$), Reflective Capacity (coefficient = 0.1710, $p < 0.001$), Generativity in Leadership (coefficient = 0.1745, $p < 0.001$), and Emotionally Safe Environments (coefficient = 0.1758, $p < 0.001$). The results underscore the importance of these competencies in leadership development within the Chinese educational context, providing valuable insights for policymakers and administrators.

Keywords

Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Development, Professional Growth

1. Introduction

The domain of educational leadership has placed growing emphasis on the ongoing professional growth of school administrators. In this context, coaching has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing leadership effectiveness, supporting leaders in navigating complex challenges, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within schools. Coaching is not only beneficial for the coaches but also significantly impacts the coaches, particularly when school leaders themselves take on

coaching roles (Grant, Green, & Rynsaardt, 2010).

Professional growth in school leaders is a multifaceted construct that encompasses the development of leadership skills, adaptability, and personal growth. As school leaders engage in coaching, they are likely to experience improvements in emotional intelligence, the ability to build rapport and trust, reflective capacity, generativity in leadership, and the capacity to create emotionally safe environments. These aspects are crucial for effective leadership, especially in educational settings where leaders must manage both the academic and emotional needs of their staff and students (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015).

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a critical aspect of educational leadership, enabling leaders to effectively regulate their emotions while empathizing with the feelings of others. This skill enhances both communication and decision-making processes, which are crucial in the complex environments of educational institutions. Studies indicate that coaching is an effective tool for improving emotional intelligence, enabling leaders to perform their roles with greater effectiveness (Brinia, Zimianiti, & Panagiotopoulos, 2014). Similarly, building trust and rapport within the school community is essential for leadership success, as trust serves as the cornerstone of teamwork and collaboration (Breyer, 2022).

Reflective capacity is another significant aspect of leadership development. Leaders who consistently engage in reflective practices are better equipped to critically assess their experiences, derive meaningful lessons, and apply these insights to address future challenges. Coaching plays a crucial role in fostering this reflective process by offering structured opportunities for leaders to evaluate their actions and enhance their leadership strategies (Nadeem & Garvey, 2020).

Generativity in leadership, which emphasizes nurturing the growth and development of team members, is another pivotal aspect. Generative leaders actively support the professional advancement of their teams, fostering an environment of collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement (Hirsch, Odom, & Moore, 2021). Creating emotionally secure environments is crucial for fostering creativity and open dialogue in educational settings. When staff and students feel comfortable voicing their ideas and concerns, it helps nurture a culture of trust and innovation.

Although the benefits of coaching for school leaders are well known, there is still much to learn about how different coaching methods affect various leadership dimensions. This study seeks to bridge that knowledge gap by investigating the influence of coaching on emotional intelligence, relationship-building and trust, reflective thinking, generative leadership, and the capacity to establish emotionally safe environments. These interconnected factors play a vital role in the professional development of school leaders. By exploring these connections, the research offers significant insights into how coaching can strengthen leadership effectiveness in education.

2. Literature Review

This section centers on how coaching influences the professional advancement of

school leaders, focusing on aspects like emotional intelligence, the development of trust and rapport, reflective practices, generative leadership qualities, and the cultivation of supportive, emotionally safe environments. The discussion emphasizes the vital role of coaching in strengthening these leadership characteristics, highlighting its impact on the overall effectiveness and growth of school leaders.

Coaching and Professional Growth in School Leadership. Extensive literature in educational leadership points to a strong connection between coaching and professional development. Coaching is widely regarded as an essential factor in the continuous improvement of school leaders, enabling them to handle the multifaceted demands of their roles more adeptly while refining their leadership abilities and competencies (Reiss, 2015).

Emotional Intelligence and Leadership. Emotional intelligence (EI) is critical for effective leadership, particularly in educational settings. Leaders with high EI are better equipped to manage their own emotions and those of others, leading to more effective communication and stronger team dynamics (Chang, Sy, & Choi, 2012). Research shows that coaching can enhance a leader's emotional intelligence by providing tools and strategies for self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Rapport and Trust-Building in Leadership. Building rapport and trust is essential for school leaders, as these skills foster a collaborative and supportive work environment (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). Coaching helps leaders develop these skills by encouraging open communication and mutual respect between leaders and their teams. Trust is a foundational element in leadership that influences team performance and school outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

Reflective Capacity and Leadership Development. Reflective practice is a cornerstone of professional growth, allowing leaders to critically evaluate their experiences and actions (Slade, Burnham, Catalana, & Waters, 2019).

Coaching enhances reflective capacity by guiding leaders through structured reflection processes that promote deeper insights into their leadership practices. Leaders who engage in regular reflection are more likely to make informed decisions and exhibit adaptive leadership behaviors (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Generativity in Leadership. Generativity in leadership involves contributing to the growth and development of others, which is a key aspect of transformational leadership (Ghislieri & Gatti, 2012). Coaching supports generativity by encouraging leaders to mentor and develop their colleagues, thereby creating a ripple effect of professional development within the organization. Generative leaders often cultivate a culture of continuous improvement and innovation (Macaux, 2012).

Creating Emotionally Safe Environments. An emotionally safe environment is one where team members feel valued, respected, and free to express their ideas without fear of judgment or retribution (Robbins, 2022). Coaching helps leaders develop the skills needed to create such environments by emphasizing empathy, active listening, and supportive communication (Grant & Hartley, 2013). Emotionally safe environments are critical for fostering creativity, collaboration, and high

performance within schools (Rajoo, 2020).

Synthesis and Research Gaps. While the literature provides substantial evidence of the positive impacts of coaching on various aspects of leadership, gaps remain in understanding the specific mechanisms through which coaching influences these variables. Further research is needed to explore the direct and indirect effects of coaching on emotional intelligence, rapport and trust-building, reflective capacity, generativity, and the creation of emotionally safe environments in school leadership contexts.

The literature review underscores the importance of coaching in enhancing various aspects of school leadership. By focusing on emotional intelligence, trust-building, reflective capacity, generativity, and emotional safety, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on how these factors collectively influence the professional growth of school leaders.

3. Research Hypotheses

Drawing from the literature review, this study proposes the following research hypotheses to investigate how coaching influences the professional development of school leaders.

3.1. Emotional Intelligence and Professional Growth

H1: There is a positive relationship between the emotional intelligence of school leaders and their professional growth as a result of coaching activities.

Supporting Literature: Emotional intelligence is vital for effective leadership, particularly in educational settings where leaders need to manage both their emotions and those of others. Research shows that coaching enhances a leader's emotional intelligence by fostering self-awareness and emotional regulation (Chang, Sy, & Choi, 2012; Reiss, 2015).

3.2. Rapport and Trust-Building Skills and Professional Growth

H2: The development of rapport and trust-building skills through coaching positively influences the professional growth of school leaders.

Supporting Literature: Building rapport and trust is essential for fostering a collaborative work environment. Coaching helps leaders develop these skills, which in turn improve team performance and organizational outcomes (Brewster & Railsback, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

3.3. Reflective Capacity and Professional Growth

H3: Increased reflective capacity in school leaders, fostered through coaching, is positively associated with their professional growth.

Supporting Literature: Reflective practice is critical for leadership development, enabling leaders to assess their behaviors and decisions. Coaching promotes reflective capacity, which leads to adaptive and informed leadership (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Slade, Burnham, Catalana, & Waters, 2019).

3.4. Generativity in Leadership and Professional Growth

H4: Generativity in leadership, enhanced by coaching, positively affects the professional growth of school leaders.

Supporting Literature: Generativity in leadership refers to the desire to nurture and develop others, a key trait of transformational leaders. Coaching encourages generative leadership by helping leaders support the growth of their colleagues and promote a culture of continuous improvement (Ghislieri & Gatti, 2012; Maccaux, 2012).

3.5. Capacity for Creating Emotionally Safe Environments and Professional Growth

H5: The capacity to create emotionally safe environments, developed through coaching, has a positive impact on the professional growth of school leaders.

Supporting Literature: Creating emotionally safe environments is crucial for fostering creativity, collaboration, and high performance within teams. Coaching emphasizes the development of empathy and active listening, which are essential for building these emotionally safe spaces (Grant & Hartley, 2013; Rajoo, 2020; Robbins, 2022).

The proposed hypotheses test the relationships between coaching-influenced leadership skills (emotional intelligence, rapport and trust-building, reflective capacity, generativity, and creating emotionally safe environments) and the professional growth of school leaders. Each hypothesis is grounded in the literature, highlighting the theoretical and empirical foundation for these relationships.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between key leadership attributes and the professional growth of school leaders in China. The main objective was to explore how Emotional Intelligence, Rapport and Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and Emotionally Safe Environments are associated with Professional Growth, which served as the dependent variable. A cross-sectional survey approach was used to collect data, and statistical techniques, including regression analysis and variance inflation factor (VIF) diagnostics, were applied to analyze the relationships among the variables.

All constructs were operationally defined at their first occurrence in the study, drawing on established literature to ensure conceptual clarity. Emotional Intelligence was defined as the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others; Rapport and Trust Building referred to the capacity to establish positive and trusting interpersonal relationships; Reflective Capacity was understood as the ability to critically evaluate one's experiences and leadership practices; Generativity in Leadership described the tendency to support and develop others; and Emotionally Safe Environments referred to conditions in which

individuals feel secure to express ideas without fear of negative consequences. Professional Growth was conceptualized as the continuous development of leadership skills, competencies, and effectiveness.

The measurement instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire adapted from previously validated scales, with modifications to suit the Chinese educational context. Each construct was measured using multiple items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

4.2. Sample and Sampling Technique

The study targeted school leaders across various educational institutions in China. A sample of 500 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity and representation. The stratification criteria included geographical location, school type (primary, secondary, or tertiary), and institution size. This method enabled the capture of diverse leadership experiences from different regions and educational contexts.

4.3. Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was employed to collect data on the independent variables (Emotional Intelligence, Rapport Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and Emotionally Safe Environments) and the dependent variable (Professional Growth). The questionnaire was adapted from validated scales in existing literature, with cultural and contextual adjustments for the Chinese educational setting. A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree), was used, allowing for detailed insights into participants' perceptions.

4.4. Pilot Study

A preliminary study involving 50 school leaders was carried out to assess the questionnaire's reliability and validity. Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each construct to ensure internal consistency. Based on the pilot results, minor modifications were made to improve item clarity and cultural appropriateness, ensuring the robustness of the final instrument.

4.5. Data Collection Procedure

The finalized questionnaire was distributed to a stratified random sample of 500 school leaders across China using an online survey platform. The sampling frame included schools from different regions and levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary), ensuring diverse representation. Invitations were sent to all selected participants, of which 500 completed and usable responses were retained for analysis. Participants were briefed on the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and provided with clear instructions for survey completion. Data collection was conducted over four weeks, allowing sufficient time to maximize response rates and ensure a representative sample across school types and regions.

4.6. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using a range of statistical methods to address the research questions and test the hypotheses.

4.6.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were calculated to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and the main study variables. A thorough picture of the sample and response distribution was given by these statistics.

4.6.2. Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the questionnaire's reliability, yielding an overall value of 0.810. This indicates that there was good internal consistency among the questionnaire's items. This outcome demonstrates that the questionnaire was effective in measuring the ideas it was intended to cover.

4.6.3. Multicollinearity Diagnostics

The independent variables were examined for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF) methodology. Ridge regression was used to address any multicollinearity-related problems. As a result, the VIF values were well within the permitted ranges, ranging from 1.558 to 1.660. The accuracy and reliability of the regression findings were improved by this technique.

5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

5.1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis

All variables were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, and the dataset included responses from 500 people. Cronbach's Alpha, which was computed to evaluate the scale's dependability, came out to be 0.8104. This suggests a high degree of internal consistency, demonstrating the scale's validity as a tool for assessing the concepts under investigation.

5.2. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Analysis

Values of the variance inflation factor (VIF) were calculated in order to evaluate the existence of multicollinearity among the independent variables. **Table 1** shows that all VIF values stayed considerably below the typical cutoff of 10. This guarantees the robustness of the regression analysis by confirming that multicollinearity is not a problem in the dataset.

5.3. Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

The regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the independent variables—Emotional Intelligence, Rapport Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and Emotionally Safe Environment—and the dependent variable, Professional Growth. The results of the regression analysis are summarized in **Table 2**.

Table 1. VIF values after ridge regression.

Feature	VIF
Emotional Intelligence	1.5802
Rapport Trust Building	1.5586
Reflective Capacity	1.6601
Generativity in Leadership	1.5946
Emotionally Safe Environment	1.6166

Table 2. Regression analysis after ridge regression.

Feature	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
Emotional Intelligence	0.2689	0.035	7.724	<0.001
Rapport Trust Building	0.2518	0.035	7.281	<0.001
Reflective Capacity	0.1710	0.036	4.790	<0.001
Generativity in Leadership	0.1745	0.035	4.989	<0.001
Emotionally Safe Environment	0.1758	0.035	4.993	<0.001
Constant	-2.368e-16	0.028	-8.55e-15	1.000

To ensure robustness in coefficient estimation, ridge regression was employed. The regression coefficients reported in **Table 2** were obtained from this ridge regression model, which helps stabilize estimates in the presence of potential multicollinearity. For hypothesis testing, the corresponding t-values and *p*-values were derived from an ordinary least squares (OLS) model using the same dataset. This approach allowed us to maintain stable coefficient estimates while providing conventional inferential statistics to assess the significance of the relationships.

The regression analysis revealed that the independent variables collectively explain 62.1% of the variance in Professional Growth, as indicated by an R^2 value of 0.621. The model was statistically significant ($F(5, 494) = 161.9, p < 0.001$), confirming that the independent variables significantly influence the dependent variable.

5.3.1. Hypothesis Testing and Interpretation

Hypothesis 1: Emotional Intelligence

The hypothesis that Emotional Intelligence has a positive impact on Professional Growth was supported by the analysis. The regression coefficient for Emotional Intelligence was $\beta = 0.2689$, with a t-value of 7.724 and a *p*-value less than 0.001. This result highlights the significant positive effect of Emotional Intelligence on

Professional Growth.

Hypothesis 2: Building Trust and Rapport

The results demonstrated that cultivating trust and rapport significantly contributes to Professional Growth. The regression analysis yielded a coefficient of $\beta = 0.2518$, with a *t*-value of 7.281 and a *p*-value below 0.001. These values highlight the critical role of relationship-building in advancing professional development.

Hypothesis 3: Reflective Capacity

A positive link between Reflective Capacity and Professional Growth was established through the analysis. The regression coefficient for Reflective Capacity was $\beta = 0.1710$, accompanied by a *t*-value of 4.790 and a *p*-value under 0.001. This underscores the pivotal importance of reflective practices in bolstering professional progress.

Hypothesis 4: Leadership Generativity

The findings supported the notion that Generativity in Leadership has a positive influence on Professional Growth. The regression coefficient for this factor was $\beta = 0.1745$, with a *t*-value of 4.989 and a *p*-value beneath 0.001. This underscores the importance of fostering others' development and growth as a key leadership responsibility.

Hypothesis 5: Emotionally Safe Environments

Evidence from the study showed that creating Emotionally Safe Environments positively affects Professional Growth. The regression coefficient was $\beta = 0.1758$, paired with a *t*-value of 4.993 and a *p*-value below 0.001. This finding highlights the necessity of nurturing secure, supportive settings to promote effective professional advancement.

5.3.2. Combined Effects and Model Diagnostics

The regression analysis reveals that all five independent variables—Emotional Intelligence, Rapport and Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and an Emotionally Safe Environment—meaningfully influence Professional Growth. The positive coefficients for each variable suggest that when these areas improve, Professional Growth increases accordingly. Furthermore, the strong statistical significance (*p*-values < 0.001) provides compelling evidence to confirm the hypotheses that these variables positively affect Professional Growth.

In addition, the low VIF values confirm the absence of multicollinearity among the independent variables, ensuring that the observed relationships are not skewed by overlapping variances. This finding bolsters the reliability of the regression results and the conclusions derived from them.

5.4. Correlation Analysis

A correlation matrix was constructed to explore the relationships among the independent variables and the dependent variable, Professional Growth. As shown in **Table 3**, all independent variables were positively correlated with Professional Growth, with Emotional Intelligence ($r = 0.625$) and Rapport Trust Building ($r = 0.612$) showing the strongest correlations.

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

Variable	EI	RTB	RC	GL	ESE	PG
Emotional Intelligence (EI)	1.000	0.513	0.459	0.395	0.458	0.626
Rapport Trust Building (RTB)	0.513	1.000	0.484	0.407	0.387	0.612
Reflective Capacity (RC)	0.459	0.484	1.000	0.499	0.482	0.588
Generativity in Leadership (GL)	0.395	0.407	0.499	1.000	0.524	0.561
Emotionally Safe Environment (ESE)	0.458	0.387	0.482	0.524	1.000	0.570
Professional Growth (PG)	0.626	0.612	0.588	0.561	0.570	1.000

5.5. Interpretation

The findings from the VIF analysis confirm that multicollinearity is not a concern, as all VIF values are well below the threshold of 10. The high Cronbach's Alpha indicates that the scale used to measure the constructs is reliable. The regression analysis reveals that all five independent variables significantly contribute to the prediction of Professional Growth, with Emotional Intelligence and Rapport Trust Building showing the strongest influence. The correlation analysis supports these findings, showing strong positive correlations between the independent variables and Professional Growth. These results emphasize the importance of Emotional Intelligence, building trust and rapport, engaging in reflective thinking, adopting a generative leadership style, and fostering emotionally supportive environments in promoting individual professional growth.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the key factors influencing the professional development of school leaders in China, specifically examining Emotional Intelligence, Rapport and Trust Building, Reflective Capacity, Generativity in Leadership, and the ability to establish Emotionally Safe Environments. Conducted within the unique context of Chinese educational institutions, where leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering innovation and achieving institutional objectives, the research highlights these attributes as critical to leadership success.

6.1. Key Observations and Their Significance

The study revealed that the identified factors together accounted for 62.1% of the variation in Professional Growth ($R^2 = 0.621$), highlighting the strong influence these elements exert on leadership development.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence emerged as a critical driver of professional growth, illustrating how leaders who manage their emotions effectively and show empathy can foster better team relationships. Given the importance of interpersonal harmony in Chinese culture, integrating Emotional Intelligence into leadership training pro-

grams can greatly enhance communication and decision-making.

Rapport and Trust Building

The analysis showed that establishing Rapport and Trust Building plays a significant role in professional growth. This underscores the value of cultivating trust within leadership teams—particularly in hierarchical Chinese school systems—where trust can bolster collaboration and improve overall team functioning.

Reflective Capacity

Reflective Capacity demonstrated a strong link to professional growth, emphasizing the importance of regularly examining and assessing leadership approaches. This finding aligns with Chinese cultural values that stress self-improvement, suggesting that leaders should be encouraged to engage in reflective exercises to refine their skills.

Generativity in Leadership

Generativity in Leadership, centered on nurturing the development of others, exhibited a marked positive impact. Leaders who invest in their team members' advancement create a collaborative atmosphere that aligns with China's cultural emphasis on collective achievement.

Emotionally Safe Environments

Finally, ensuring Emotionally Safe Environments was also pivotal for fostering professional growth. Leaders who provide psychological safety encourage creativity, frank discussions, and innovation—elements that are increasingly prioritized in Chinese educational settings.

6.2. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on these findings, the study offers practical suggestions for enhancing leadership development in China:

Emotional Intelligence: Design training modules aimed at strengthening leaders' emotional intelligence to improve interpersonal communication and team dynamics.

Trust-Building Skills: Incorporate activities that foster trust within leadership teams, thereby promoting effective collaboration and shared decision-making.

Reflective Practices: Encourage leaders to engage in structured reflection, consistent with the cultural ethos of ongoing personal and professional growth.

Generative Leadership: Cultivate a supportive culture in which leaders actively mentor and develop their teams, reinforcing collective success.

Emotionally Supportive Environments: Equip leaders with strategies to create settings where psychological safety thrives, spurring creativity, cooperation, and innovation.

By addressing these critical areas, policymakers and educators can equip school leaders with the skills needed to navigate the evolving challenges of modern education in China. This ensures sustained professional development and enhanced institutional effectiveness, contributing to the broader goal of advancing the educational landscape in China.

Additionally, it is important to design leadership development programs that respect and align with cultural values in China. These include harmony in relationships, community involvement, and collective well-being. Tailored programs will ensure that school leaders can succeed within the unique cultural context of Chinese education.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected using same-source self-report measures, which may introduce common method bias and potentially inflate the observed relationships between leadership attributes and professional growth. Future research could benefit from incorporating multiple data sources, such as peer evaluations or performance metrics, to enhance measurement validity. Second, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing relationships at a single point in time. As a result, causal inferences cannot be drawn from the findings; the results indicate associations between leadership attributes and professional growth rather than definitive causal effects. Longitudinal or experimental designs would be necessary to establish causal relationships and examine changes in professional growth over time. Lastly, while the sample was stratified to ensure representation across school types and regions in China, the findings may not generalize to contexts outside of this setting.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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