

The empathy-infrastructure gap: Leadership and staff wellbeing in UK secondary special schools

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Abstract

UK secondary special schools face a structural wellbeing crisis that existing leadership frameworks have not adequately addressed. This empirical study investigates how leadership practices contribute to that crisis, introducing the Empathy-Infrastructure Gap: the organisational condition in which leaders express care but institutional systems fail to protect staff against chronic work demands. A sequential mixed-methods design was used, combining a survey of 54 staff with semi-structured interviews involving 12 participants. Findings indicate that over 61 percent of respondents reported daily exhaustion, and cross-tabulation suggested that learning support assistants, agency workers, and neurodivergent staff experienced the highest strain with the least institutional recourse. The study proposes the Emotionally Sustainable Leadership (ESL) framework, integrating emotional labour theory, Conservation of Resources theory, intersectionality, and care ethics. ESL argues that staff wellbeing requires governance commitments rather than cultural gestures alone: protected recovery time, equity-differentiated support, and enforceable accountability structures.

Introduction

At 8:30 am in a London secondary special school, the day begins not with calm but with unspoken tension. Teaching assistants and teachers share glances of solidarity before entering classrooms where unpredictability is not the exception but the operational norm. A 2024 UNISON survey of nearly 8,000 school support staff found that almost half had experienced violent behaviour from a pupil within the past year, with around a quarter facing punching, kicking, or thrown objects on a weekly basis (UNISON, 2024). Most describe their stress as chronic rather than occasional (NEU, 2024). Staff arrive knowing that the child they support may have had no sleep, that communication will be reduced, that a corridor noise on the way in has already unsettled the morning. None of what they absorb in those moments appears in their job titles or their pay.

Policy attention to staff wellbeing in special schools has grown considerably since 2014. Yet the pattern across key milestones is consistent: increasing demands on staff without commensurate structural protection (Hastings et al., 2020; McLean et al., 2017). The 2014 SEND Code of Practice expanded the scope of support without expanding staffing resource (DfE, 2014). The 2021 Ofsted Education Inspection Framework shifted weight toward measurable outcomes while reducing attention to staff experience (Ofsted, 2022). The 2023 DfE Mental Health Initiatives raised institutional expectations around wellbeing without equivalent structural resource (DfE, 2023b). Each milestone generated new responsibilities for staff; none generated enforceable entitlements for the people who carry them.

This study is guided by four research questions, two empirical and two analytical. It addresses two empirical questions: how widespread and intense is emotional strain among special school staff, and how staff experience leadership's influence on their working conditions. It also addresses two analytical questions: which leadership behaviours correlate with better or worse wellbeing outcomes, and what governance framework would more adequately address the gap between expressed care and practical support.

The paper's central conceptual contribution is a structural concept of the gap between leadership empathy and institutional protection. It is specific enough to be operationalised, interrogated, and addressed through governance rather than goodwill alone.

The sustainability of any workforce depends on the sustainability of those who sustain others (Hobfoll, 2001; Maslach and Leiter, 2016). In special schools, that structural dependency has been systematically underaddressed.

Systemic Pressures	Leadership Response	Staff Outcomes
Insufficient funding; increasing pupil complexity and need	Generic wellbeing gestures: emails, CPD sessions, Friday refreshments	Burnout and compassion fatigue (Iszatt-White, 2012)
High emotional burden; safeguarding demands; physical risk	Crisis-focused management; limited post-incident supervision	Secondary trauma; absence and attrition (Figley, 1995)
Workforce inequalities by contract type, race, neurodivergence	Unrecognised differential burden; uniform provision applied equally to all	Compounded depletion (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991)

Table 1: Logic Model. Pathways from Systemic Pressures to Staff Outcomes. Source: Author, informed by Iszatt-White (2012).

Literature Review: Theoretical and Policy Context

Mainstream Leadership Models: Elegant Promises, Structural Limits

Education policy documents present leadership through a vocabulary of vision, empowerment, and empathy. In theory, these approaches should suit special education's complexity. In practice, their limitations are amplified when applied in UK secondary special schools, where emotional volatility is an ever-present operational condition rather than an occasional challenge. Three models dominate the literature. Each has genuine value; each carries a structural gap that this study's framework addresses directly. Transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1994) builds collective purpose and can help staff sustain effort under regulatory pressure. The limitation is structural rather than relational: without explicit recovery provisions, the model can inadvertently conflate endurance with commitment, so that visible competence obscures progressive depletion beneath.

Distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) reduces hierarchical load by sharing decision-making across teams. The structural limitation is that sharing responsibility without sharing the resources to act on those decisions distributes strain rather than reducing it. Shared accountability, in the absence of shared resources, can become shared exhaustion.

Emotionally intelligent leadership (Goleman et al., 2013) develops relational sensitivity in individual leaders. Its structural limitation is equally clear: protection that depends on who holds a post offers no institutional guarantee. When a caring headteacher leaves, the protection associated with their approach leaves with them. The argument here is not that emotional intelligence lacks value. It is that emotional intelligence must be embedded in governance structures rather than vested in individual personalities; otherwise, it is a feature of a person, not a property of a system.

Emotional Labour: The Mask with Bite Marks Underneath

Hochschild (1983) defines emotional labour as the management of one's own feelings to meet occupational expectations. In secondary special schools, this demand is not occasional; it is the operational constant beneath every other task. A student's elevated voice, clenched fist, or abrupt silence can each signal an imminent violent incident. Staff read those signals continuously, regulate their own responses, and continue to work immediately after crises as well as during them.

The lived reality is most honestly understood through the voices of those who carry it.

One teaching assistant recalled smiling and using Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) cards to encourage communication moments after being bitten hard enough to break the skin and bleed. Another described crying in a stockroom after a violent incident, then returning to playground duty within two minutes and keeping the pain and exhaustion hidden beneath a neutral expression (Interviewee 5). These accounts are not exceptional. They are the occupational normality.

"Some days, teaching assistants go home covered in bites and bruises, completely exhausted after several de-escalations. But the hardest part is not the pain; it is feeling like leadership does not see your effort. On a normal day, you do not have time to cry or recover. You wash your hands, put on a smile, and walk back in class." (Interviewee 2)

Hobfoll's (2001) Conservation of Resources theory explains the cumulative trajectory: when resource expenditure consistently exceeds recovery opportunity, depletion is progressive and does not self-correct without structural intervention. Sharrocks (2020) describes the institutional consequence as the 'silent extraction of caring': organisations benefit from the invisible emotional work of their staff while offering limited reciprocal care or formalised recovery.

The Job Demands-Resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) offers useful diagnostic vocabulary but has a documented limitation here: it does not differentiate between types of demand. Classifying crisis management, intimate personal care, and administrative tasks within the same generic category does not capture the qualitative weight of emotional labour in special schools. It also does not account for differential resource access across staff groups which intersectionality addresses directly.

Intersectionality: Whose Burdens Count and Whose Voices Are Recognised

Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2015) identify how overlapping structural factors compound one another in ways that aggregated data does not capture. In secondary special schools, emotional burden is not uniformly distributed. It is shaped by contract type, role, race, and neurodivergence, producing qualitatively different workloads, specifically workloads that standard wellbeing instruments neither measure nor address (Howard and Navarro, 2016).

Staff Group	Nature of Emotional Demand	Institutional Visibility	Risk Where Unsupported
White, neurotypical senior staff	Moderate; episodic	High	Compassion fatigue over extended tenure
Black and minoritised staff	High; includes racialised identity management alongside direct care demands	Low	Compound suppression; increased attrition risk
Neurodivergent staff	High; includes sensory processing demands in environments not designed for staff needs	Low	Masking-related depletion; non-disclosure risk
Casual or agency staff	High; compounded by employment insecurity and absence of equivalent entitlements	Very low	Rapid turnover; moral injury; no recovery provision (Figley, 1995)

Table 2: Differential Distribution of Emotional Labour by Staff Group. Source: Author, synthesis based on Howard and Navarro (2016) and Crenshaw (1991).

These differentials are structural rather than incidental. Equity audits, disaggregated by role, contract type, and demographic characteristics are the mechanism through which they become visible and addressable. Without such disaggregation, wellbeing initiatives reach those who need them least and systematically miss those who need them most.

Wellbeing Initiatives: From Symbolic Gesture to Structural Care

In numerous UK secondary special schools, staff wellbeing provision takes forms that Sharrocks (2020) characterises as 'wellbeing theatre': displays of care through performance that conceal the absence of meaningful institutional support. The data in this study confirmed that staff distinguished clearly between symbolic gestures and structural change and that only the latter produced durable wellbeing outcomes.

Approach	Cost to School	Short-term Effect	Sustained Impact
Informal gestures: biscuits, positive emails, cards	Low	Temporary morale lift	Negligible; may reinforce cynicism when workloads unchanged
Team-Teach refresher training	Medium	Practical skill	Moderate; does not address

		reinforcement	emotional aftermath of incidents
Timetabled peer-support sessions with facilitation	Medium	Reduced isolation; shared processing	High where sustained and properly resourced
Trauma-informed supervision by qualified practitioners	Medium-High	Professional processing of incidents	High; addresses source of emotional depletion
Funded psychological support without career penalty	Higher	Access to specialist mental health care	High; reaches staff who cannot access support within school culture

Table 3: Symbolic Versus Structural Approaches to Staff Wellbeing. Source: Author.

The distinction matters beyond effectiveness. Symbolic provision can reinforce cynicism when staff observe that expressions of care do not alter workloads, produce debriefs, or protect contracts. As one participant noted, wellbeing policies were 'announced in September and abandoned by October.' This finding is consistent with Sharrocks (2020) and with the broader literature on performative institutional care.

Methodology

Design and Philosophical Positioning

A sequential mixed-methods design was adopted, consistent with an interpretivist-pragmatist philosophical position (Saunders et al., 2012). Interpretivism recognises that staff experiences of emotional labour and leadership cannot be adequately captured by numerical data alone; they are shaped by context, power, and relationship. Pragmatism ensures that those insights are directed toward actionable findings rather than remaining purely descriptive (Biesta, 2010). The two phases were designed to work in sequence: survey patterns guided interview questions, and interview data challenged and deepened the interpretation of what the survey numbers showed.

Quantitative Phase

The survey was completed by 54 staff across UK secondary special schools, rated on a five-point Likert scale across six leadership dimensions and four wellbeing indicators. Items drew on established measures aligned to the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983), and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Recruitment was peer-to-peer through professional networks, deliberately avoiding institutional gatekeepers. In settings where raising concerns can carry employment consequences, any sampling route through management channels introduces self-selection bias toward those who feel relatively safe to participate.

The resulting sample was weighted toward learning support assistants, reflecting both their greater representation in special school frontline roles and their greater willingness to participate through peer networks rather than official channels. This weighting is analytically significant: the data are richest precisely where the burden is heaviest, which serves the intersectional aims of the study even as it limits representational breadth.

Qualitative Phase

Twelve participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across role type, contract status, ethnicity, and experience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely, recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An intersectionality lens was maintained throughout coding. Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines, with particular attention to anonymity, the right to withdraw, and participant wellbeing during the interview process.

"You promise no one will ever know I said this?", voice trembling before the interview began. (Interviewee 2)

Trust was not assumed; it was built through peer networks, plain language, and unambiguous assurances that management would have no access to participant data. The researcher's background as a practitioner in special schools in both London and Moldova shaped both the design and the quality of

access achieved. At one point during analysis, a pattern in the interview transcripts mirrored the researcher's own experience closely enough to require explicit interrogation; this was documented in the reflective journal and reviewed with the supervisor to ensure that interpretation remained grounded in the data rather than shaped by personal memory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Researcher positionality was acknowledged and managed throughout via reflective journaling and peer debriefing (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

Methodological Credibility and Reflexivity

Every decision in coding, theme development, and interpretation was documented to allow the logic of the analysis to be followed and evaluated independently (Cohen et al., 2018). Where disclosure was refused, that refusal is itself analytically significant: it reflects the power relations this study examines, and the silence it produces is a finding in its own right.

Findings

The Scale and Distribution of Emotional Strain

Analysis of the survey data as a whole reveals a consistent pattern: staff were operating under considerable emotional pressure and relying primarily on peer support as a buffer. Over 61 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt exhausted at the end of each working day. Four wellbeing indicators were measured: emotional exhaustion, peer support, work-life balance, and emotional safety. Peer support scored highest across all groups, suggesting that collegial relationships function as the primary available buffer. Work-life balance and emotional safety scored lowest, with emotional safety particularly low among agency and supply staff.

Cross-tabulation of years of experience and role type against wellbeing scores revealed a consistent pattern: outcomes did not improve with longer tenure or more senior role for frontline support staff. An LSA with ten years of experience reported as low a sense of safety as one starting their second year. This is consistent with JD-R predictions for groups where demands persistently exceed available resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), and with what Conservation of Resources theory would predict for cumulative depletion without recovery provision.

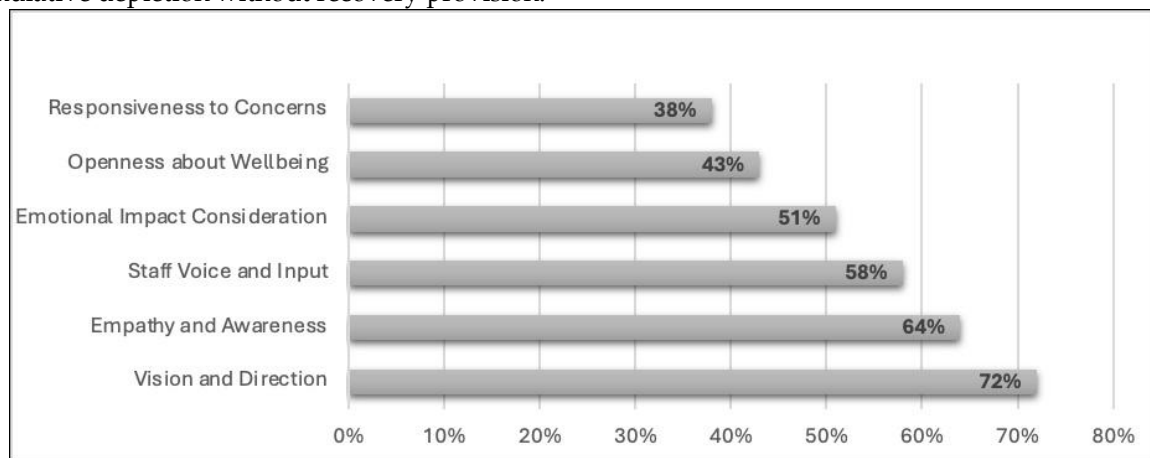


Figure 1: Quantitative Profile of Leadership Perceptions. Source: Author, survey data 2025. Five-point Likert scale; figures represent percentage of respondents selecting 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

The profile in Figure 1 reveals a structural pattern: relational dimensions of leadership, empathy and vision are rated substantially higher than structural ones like openness and responsiveness. That 34-percentage-point gap between Vision (72%) and Responsiveness to Concerns (38%) is the quantitative signature of the disconnect between leadership disposition and organisational design that this paper examines.

The Empathy-Safety Paradox

The survey data produced a structural contradiction within the same workforce. Vision and direction scored highest at 72 percent positive. Empathy and awareness scored 64 percent. Yet Responsiveness to Concerns, the lowest-scoring dimension in Figure 1, stood at just 38 percent. These findings coexist in the same schools, among the same staff, within the same leadership relationships.

"Leadership talks about wellbeing, but our workload never changes." (Interviewee 9)

"If you talk about how challenging it is, you worry about losing shifts. Most staff stay quiet and just accept." (Interviewee 6)

A school can have leaders who are genuinely experienced as caring and directionally clear, while simultaneously producing conditions in which staff self-censor (Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Kutsyruba et al., 2019). This is what the gap looks like from the inside. Empathy expressed in morning check-ins does not, in itself, protect a teaching assistant during a violent incident with no cover available and no debrief to follow.

The Intersectional Cost of Care

Cross-tabulation of contract type, role demands, and identity factors indicated that strain exceeded what any single variable would predict. Learning support assistants and agency workers reported the lowest scores on leadership empathy and emotional safety regardless of experience level. The following accounts were shared with explicit consent for anonymised publication.

"I was not thinking about my ribs. I was thinking: if I cry, will they think I cannot cope? Or worse, will they see me as the 'angry Black woman'?" (Interviewee 1)

This account captures two simultaneous and qualitatively distinct demands: the immediate physical and emotional response to being struck by a pupil, and the secondary management of how that response will be perceived through racialised interpretive frames. Howard and Navarro (2016) describe this as the compound labour of racialised professional identity. Standard wellbeing instruments do not measure the second demand. Standard provisions do not address it.

"I have not told anyone I am autistic. Because I have seen what happens, the assumptions people make. So I mask all day. And then I come home and I am completely empty." (Interviewee 3)

"If we speak up, we are replaceable." (Interviewee 10)

Each account reflects a different structural pathway to the same outcome: disproportionate depletion among those with the fewest organisational protections. Provision that is applied uniformly, and therefore equally available to all, does not reach these groups proportionally. The data indicate that targeted, intersectionally-informed provision is not an optional enhancement but a basic equity requirement.

The Fragility of Peer Support

Peer support emerged as the highest-scoring wellbeing resource in the survey. The interviews clarified why this reflected structural absence as much as collegial strength.

"We lean on each other, but it is like passing the same stress around." (Interviewee 4)

Where peer support is the primary available resource, it eventually functions as a demand rather than a buffer (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Sims (2020) describes this as distributed depletion. The data indicate this is not simply a limitation of peer solidarity but a predictable outcome when institutional alternatives are absent. Formalising peer support with professional facilitation and clear escalation routes would preserve its protective function without requiring colleagues to absorb each other's unprocessed trauma.

Protective Function	Limitation Under Structural Absence
Reduces isolation; maintains daily motivation	Stress transfers between colleagues when no institutional outlet exists
Informal post-incident processing	Becomes the only available debrief; not equipped for complex trauma

Sustains collective professional identity	Can produce distributed depletion (Sims, 2020) when solidarity substitutes for support
Trust-based disclosure networks	Fragile under employment pressure; breaks unevenly across contract types

Table 4: Peer Support as Protective Resource and Structural Limitation. Source: Author, interview data 2025.

Discussion

The Gap Between Care and Protection

Across both data phases, the primary pattern in poor wellbeing outcomes is structural rather than relational. This matters analytically because it redirects the policy response. If poor wellbeing were primarily a relational problem in which leaders lack empathy or commitment, the solution would be leadership development. The data do not support that framing. Leaders in this sample were experienced as empathic and directionally clear. What staff reported as absent was institutional capacity to translate that disposition into changed working conditions: different timetables, mandatory debriefs, secure contracts.

The concept introduced in this paper to name that condition is the Empathy-Infrastructure Gap: it locates the problem in governance design rather than in individual leadership character. A leader may be genuinely caring and still preside over a system that offers no post-incident recovery time, no mandatory debrief, and no equivalent entitlements for agency staff performing identical work to permanent colleagues. The gap is not primarily a failure of leadership intention. It is a failure of governance architecture.

Constrained Leadership and Multilevel Failure

It is important to resist an oversimplified reading of this pattern. The data do not suggest that institutions cynically perform care while knowingly withholding protection. The picture is considerably more complex than such an account would suggest. Leaders are themselves often constrained: funding gaps, Ofsted compliance cycles, local authority reporting requirements, and statutory SEND obligations limit what can be unilaterally redesigned at school level. Many of the leaders whose staff reported unmet needs were themselves operating without the structural backing they needed to act on what they could see.

The data point toward a multilevel structural failure rather than a school-level failure of intent (Harris, 2008; Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016). Closing the gap requires action simultaneously within schools, through governance commitments and leadership practice; at local authority level, through monitoring and accountability; and at national policy level, through enforceable standards rather than guidance alone. The 34-percentage-point difference between Vision and Responsiveness visible in Figure 1 is not a school-level problem with a school-level solution. It reflects a governance architecture that has placed relational competence in the foreground while leaving structural protection in the discretionary background.

ESL is designed to change that architecture, not to reproach the individuals working within it.

The ESL Framework

The Emotionally Sustainable Leadership framework provides a governance-level response built directly from the data. It does not replace existing leadership models but extends them by making governance-level accountability for staff wellbeing non-discretionary.

The first pillar: Emotional Labour as Primary Demand reclassifies trauma exposure, crisis management, and intimate personal care as core, measurable job demands rather than incidental features of the role. In practice, mandatory post-incident debriefs become timetabled operational requirements, not optional gestures. Recovery time following violent or emotionally distressing incidents is scheduled into the working day. Cumulative exposure is monitored through distress logs, enabling early intervention before depletion becomes entrenched. The evidential foundation is the finding that 61 percent of staff

reported daily exhaustion with no improvement across years of experience, confirming a structural rather than individual pattern (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Hobfoll, 2001).

The second pillar: Intersectional Equity addresses the differential burden that aggregated wellbeing data consistently fails to capture. Annual equity audits, disaggregated by role, contract type, disability, and ethnicity, become the governance mechanism through which invisible workloads are made visible and addressable. Resource allocation is proportional to burden rather than uniform: agency staff, neurodivergent practitioners, and racially minoritised staff receive targeted provisions rather than a standard offer applied equally to all. The cross-tabulation findings, showing that strain exceeded what any single variable predicted, and that standard instruments neither measure nor address compound labour, provide the evidential foundation (Crenshaw, 1991; Howard and Navarro, 2016).

The third pillar: Ethical Infrastructure moves accountability from individual discretion to institutional design. Contractual entitlements to recovery time and psychological support apply equally to all staff regardless of contract type, closing the gap between permanent and agency workers performing identical roles. Funded psychological support is provided without career penalty, addressing the finding that staff self-censor about distress for fear of professional consequences. Governance frameworks embed enforceable standards rather than aspirational guidance, ensuring that when a caring leader leaves, the protections associated with their approach do not leave with them. This pillar responds directly to the 38 percent responsiveness score, the lowest of all measured dimensions (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Sharrocks, 2020).

Gap in Existing Frameworks	ESL Response
Emotional labour treated as incidental rather than a primary demand category	Classifies emotional labour as a core measurable demand; triggers mandatory timetabled support provisions including debriefs and workload adjustments
Differential burdens across staff groups remain unmonitored and unaddressed	Annual equity audits disaggregated by role, contract type, disability, and ethnicity; targeted redistribution proportional to burden rather than uniform
Recovery from high-demand incidents depends on individual coping	Post-incident recovery built into schedules; debriefs mandatory; distress logs inform cumulative exposure monitoring
Ethical accountability rests on individual leadership discretion	Accountability frameworks embedded in governance with enforceable standards and contractual entitlements for all staff including agency workers

Table 5: Structural Gaps in Existing Models and the ESL Response. Source: Author, synthesis based on Crenshaw (1991), Hobfoll (2001), and Demerouti et al. (2001).

Originality and Contribution

Conceptually, the Empathy-Infrastructure Gap names a structural condition rather than a leadership personality deficit. That analytical precision matters: it locates the problem in governance design, making institutional rather than individual interventions the appropriate response. The concept is sufficiently specific to be operationalised and tested in future research, including in other high-demand care environments beyond special education.

Theoretically, the ESL framework integrates emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983), Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2015), and care ethics (Noddings, 2013) into a single governance model. Each has prior application in educational research. Their synthesis into an operational framework with defined audit and accountability mechanisms represents a conceptual extension of the existing literature rather than a wholly unprecedented departure from it.

Empirically, the study centres staff groups that wellbeing research has largely overlooked: learning support assistants, agency workers, neurodivergent practitioners, and racially minoritised staff. Trust-based peer recruitment reached participants that institutional sampling methods would not have accessed (Roffey, 2012). The findings document not only what staff experience but the structural conditions that suppress disclosure, including the refusals and silences that are themselves empirically significant.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

For Policy

Current DfE guidance and Ofsted inspection frameworks treat staff wellbeing primarily as a school-level cultural responsibility. The findings suggest that without enforceable structural requirements, provision is likely to remain uneven and insufficiently targeted. Three policy directions are indicated by the data: equivalent wellbeing entitlements for agency and supply staff performing equivalent roles; mandatory post-incident debrief as a timetabled provision; and funded psychological support as a statutory rather than discretionary resource.

Year	Policy or Report	Effect on Staff Emotional Demands
2014	SEND Code of Practice	Increased documentation and administrative workload without corresponding staffing increases
2019	Timpson Review on Exclusions	Drew attention to SEN-related exclusions and staff strain; no binding structural response for frontline wellbeing
2021	Ofsted EIF Revisions	Shifted inspection weight toward measurable outcomes; reduced attention to staff experience
2023	DfE Mental Health Initiatives	Raised institutional expectations around wellbeing without commensurate structural resource

Table 6: Key Policy Milestones and Their Effect on Staff Emotional Labour. Source: Author.

The pattern in Table 6 is the policy-level manifestation of the gap this paper examines: good intentions, consistently expressed, without the governance architecture to convert them into structural protection. Each milestone increased what is expected of staff; none enforceably increased what is provided for them.

For School Leadership Development

Leadership training in the special education sector should develop structural analysis alongside relational competency. Current programmes equip leaders with empathy and vision. The data suggest that empathy and vision, deployed without governance-level accountability, can produce rather than close the gap between expressed care and experienced protection. Programmes should address the distinction between empathic leadership and structural protection, equip leaders to conduct intersectional workload analysis, and provide tools for monitoring wellbeing outcomes by staff group rather than in aggregate.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that inform the direction of future research. The non-probability sampling method, through peer networks, constrains statistical generalisation; the findings are exploratory and theoretically generative rather than conclusive. Staff who felt too exposed to participate are likely absent from the data, meaning the emotional burden documented here may underrepresent the most severe cases. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction, and the sample's geographic concentration in London limits transferability to other UK regions.

Future research should replicate this study with larger, more geographically diverse, and probabilistically sampled populations to strengthen the evidence base. Longitudinal designs are needed to

assess whether governance changes produce durable wellbeing improvements over time. The Empathy-Infrastructure Gap concept and the ESL framework are also potentially transferable to other high-demand care environments, including early years settings, adult social care, and emergency services, where comparable patterns of invisible depletion may operate. Future studies in comparably power-laden settings might also consider trust-based peer recruitment as a principled methodological choice rather than a compromise.

Recommendations for Action

The findings indicate that staff wellbeing cannot be adequately protected by goodwill or symbolic gesture alone. Five governance-level actions are indicated by the data.

Recommendation	Required Action	Evidential Basis
1. Formalise Peer Support	Timetable supervised sessions with qualified facilitators; establish escalation routes beyond peer-level support	Over 61 percent daily exhaustion; peer support as primary buffer produces distributed depletion without formal structure (Sims, 2020; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007)
2. Trauma-Informed Line Management	Embed Bath's (2015) three pillars: safety, connections, managing emotions, into line management training and practice standards	Empathy scored 64% but responsiveness to concerns scored 38%, the lowest of all measured dimensions; expressed care without structural response becomes performative (Sharrocks, 2020)
3. Intersectional Equity Audits	Annual audits of wellbeing, workload, and support access, disaggregated by role, contract type, ethnicity, and disability	Cross-tabulation confirmed differential burden by contract type and role; uniform provision systematically misses highest-need groups (Crenshaw, 1991)
4. Responsive Accountability Mechanisms	Define timeframes for responding to staff concerns; communicate transparently where structural constraints prevent immediate action	Responsiveness scored 38%, the lowest of all measured dimensions (Kutsyruba et al., 2019)
5. Contractual Recovery Entitlements for All Staff	Post-incident recovery time and psychological support as contractual rights, applicable equally to agency and supply staff	Agency staff reported lowest emotional safety; COR theory indicates cumulative depletion without structural replenishment (Hobfoll, 2001); current exclusion of agency staff is both inequitable and operationally unsustainable

Table 7: Recommendations for Policy and Practice. Source: Author.

Conclusion

This study began with the image of a teaching assistant returning to class with a smile minutes after being bitten. That image is not exceptional in UK secondary special schools. It is the occupational normality; for too long, it has been treated as the wellbeing strategy.

The findings indicate that over 61 percent of staff experience daily exhaustion, that leaders are experienced as empathic and caring, and that the systems those leaders operate within fail to convert that care into structural protection. The concept introduced here names this condition with analytical precision: it is not a diagnosis of leadership failure, but a diagnosis of governance failure: the absence of the institutional architecture that would allow leadership empathy to produce structural protection rather than performative care.

The ESL framework offers a governance-level response built from the data: classifying emotional labour as a core demand, monitoring differential burden through equity audits, and embedding accountability into policy rather than leaving it to individual discretion. These three pillars are not presented as the final word on how to protect special school staff. They are a theoretically grounded, empirically illustrated starting point: a framework that merits testing, refinement, and scaling.

What the data suggest, consistently and across both phases, is this: staff resilience is not a leadership strategy: it is what staff exercise in the absence of one (Maslach and Leiter, 2016; Worth and Van den Brande, 2022). The evidence indicates that governance frameworks at school, local authority, and national level have not yet provided the structural conditions that the people who care daily for the most vulnerable children both need and deserve.

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