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Preferred style of leader among UK primary school teachers: comparing social identity, transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire approaches

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ABSTRACT

The UK is experiencing a teacher retention crisis, marked by increasing attrition rates and vacancies, highlighting the need for effective school leadership. No past work has investigated leadership preferences within UK primary school settings, nor compared more contemporary models of leadership, such as social identity leadership, to established models including transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. This quantitative mixed-design study (within- and between-subjects factors) investigated the preferred leadership styles of UK primary school teachers, focusing on preferences for social identity leadership relative to alternative models. A secondary aim was to examine leadership preferences as a function of gender identity, age, and experience. One hundred and one current and former primary school teachers participated in an online survey adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire and the Social Identity Leadership Inventory, enabling an evaluation of job satisfaction and retention in relation to three widely studied leadership styles and one emerging style. Results indicated a clear preference for social identity leadership across all demographic groups. These findings challenge established leadership assumptions and have important implications for leadership practices. Future research should examine these patterns across broader educational contexts and explore situational influences on leadership preferences.

KEYWORDS

Teaching; leadership; transformational; transactional; laissez faire; social identity

Introduction

'There are no great schools without great teachers' (Department for Education, 2019, p. 3), yet the UK is in the midst of a teacher retention crisis (Education Committee, 2024). Falling retention and recruitment rates find schools struggling to fill teaching vacancies; in 2023 vacancies reached 2800 – up 20% from the previous year (GOV.UK, 2024). Although 2024 saw a slight rise in teacher numbers, growth has not kept pace with pupil numbers (Education Committee, 2024).

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Teacher attrition rates reveal a concerning pattern, with retention among teachers with over 10 years' experience now at its lowest point since records began (GOV, 2024). Early-career attrition has also risen, although at a slower rate, possibly reflecting targeted Government support. High teacher turnover is strongly associated with reduced pupil attainment (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Atteberry et al. 2016 in Sims, 2016), prompting questions about why teachers are leaving and how effective current retention strategies are (Zuccollo, 2023).

Job dissatisfaction, indicated by increased attrition rates, is closely linked to well-being, stress, and burnout among teachers (Klassen et al., 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Viac & Fraser, 2020). In 2019, a qualitative study of primary school teachers (Glazzard & Rose, 2019) found that 77% believed their wellbeing directly affected their classroom performance. Additionally, following conversations with 64 pupils across 10 different educational settings, children reported that they learn more effectively when their teacher is happy and performing well (Glazzard & Rose, 2019). Similarly, Harrison et al. (2023) established a link between job satisfaction and positive student-teacher relationships, improving instructional quality. This finding is echoed globally (see Harrison et al., 2023) and with job satisfaction having a direct impact on teacher wellbeing and retention, and therefore pupil progress, identifying and addressing sources of dissatisfaction is essential for school leaders.

School leadership is consistently highlighted as a predictor of teachers' job satisfaction and wellbeing (e.g. Boyd et al., 2011; Kraft et al., 2016; Sims, 2019). A 2023 study involving 383 teachers from across six countries (Ghamrawi et al., 2023) found that stronger leadership correlates with higher teacher wellbeing. Wolor et al. (2022) similarly attribute low job satisfaction to ineffective leadership and poor working conditions. The Department for Education's TALIS 2013 report (Sims, 2017), shows that improved school leadership is associated with markedly higher retention; a one standard deviation (SD) increase in the quality of leadership produced a (0.49 SD) increase in job satisfaction and a 64% reduction in the odds that teachers wished to change employers (Sims, 2017). Furthermore, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017), and Collie et al. (2012) also demonstrate that a supportive school climate, typically shaped by leadership, can enhance teachers' job satisfaction. Accordingly, Glazzard and Rose (2019) advise school leaders to develop a positive school climate which enables staff and pupils to thrive.

Against this backdrop, the present research examines UK primary teachers' preferences across three established leadership styles; transactional, transformational and laissez-faire, alongside the more contemporary model of social identity leadership.

Transactional leadership

Transactional leadership, although not named such at the time, was first described by Weber (1947) as a rigid, authoritative style based on employees acting in order to receive something in return, whether this be a monetary reward, promotion or a values-based exchange, such as respect or trust. This assumes employees are not self-motivated and therefore require instruction, monitoring and extrinsic motivation in order to perform effectively (Weber, 1947). Burns (1978) later formalized the term *transactional leadership* and Bass and Riggio (2006) characterized it as a style in which leaders reward or discipline followers according to performance.

Research exploring the impact of this style in educational settings is mixed. A study surveying 700 teachers from across 70 primary schools in Tanzania found no significant positive effect of transactional leadership on teachers' job satisfaction nor teachers' intent to remain (Nguni et al., 2006). Bogler's (2001) quantitative study of 750 teachers across elementary, middle and high schools in Israel, similarly found higher job satisfaction when leaders demonstrated fewer transactional behaviors. However, when breaking the style into Bass's (1985) components, Nguni et al. (2006) did identify positive effects for specific behaviors, particularly 'contingent reward' which produced a moderate increase in job satisfaction. This finding is supported by Lowe et al. and Degroot et al. (in Eagly et al., 2003) and by Bass and Avolio (1990), who argue that contingent reward forms the basis of effective leader – follower relationships.

This may relate to transactional leadership's focus on self-interest (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Northouse, 2018). When rewards feel fair, job satisfaction may rise and if they feel inadequate or inconsistent, dissatisfaction and turnover can increase. Although, this will differ between individuals so leaders need to identify the reward that will elicit the desired effect. Burns (1978), therefore emphasizes the importance of leaders acting with moral purpose and displaying honesty and fairness, while Kellerman (1984) highlights the need to meet follower expectations. Likewise, Graen et al. (1982) found that employees involved in higher-quality exchange relationships, who receive support and emotional resources, not only contractual obligations, were less likely to leave an organization, indicating higher job satisfaction, than those whose exchange relationships solely involved their contractually agreed upon elements, such as rate of pay for an amount of work.

Transactional Leadership may also present itself as 'management by exception' (Bass, 1985). Active management by exception involves proactively monitoring performance and intervention before issues occur, encouraging maintenance of the status quo (Barbuto, 1997), which may be deemed as effective leadership if the status quo is adequate and employees are satisfied in their current roles. Conversely, passive management by exception finds leaders remaining 'hands-off' until corrective action is needed due to errors, complaints or failures (Avolio & Bass, 2011). This might appeal to followers who favor autonomy but risks creating negative relationships if feedback is only corrective (Barbuto, 1997). Additionally, because this approach does not encourage problem solving or personal growth, followers may struggle in non-routine situations (Bass, 1985).

While transactional leadership can support efficiency and compliance, useful where protocols are fixed, it may be less effective in a school environment where teachers are often driven by intrinsic values, such as educating children and contributing to society, rather than extrinsic rewards (Gorard et al., 2021; Shkurina, 2018). Indeed, a 2011 qualitative study of four UK secondary school headteachers found transactional leadership was mainly used in response to external accountability demands, particularly where performance tracking data was required. However, headteachers did report using this style of leadership reluctantly as it does not foster participation, collaboration and a supportive school climate (Smith & Bell, 2011). Thus, although transactional leadership may be suit some individuals or contexts, it is generally less desirable in a school setting where intrinsic motivation is strong and tangible rewards (e.g. monetary bonuses) are limited.

Transformational leadership

Transformational Leadership aims to motivate and inspire, described by Burns (1978) as a style which focuses on the essential needs of the followers. This concept is further built upon by Bass and Riggio (2006) who posit that transformational leaders help their followers to develop and grow by understanding their needs and aligning the objectives of individual followers with the organization as a whole.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating that transformational leadership improves teachers' job satisfaction and therefore their organizational commitment (Dumay & Galand, 2012). For instance, Maeroff (1990) discovered a positive correlation between job satisfaction and participative decision-making and found that teachers report greater job satisfaction when they perceive their school leader to be someone who shares information, delegates authority, and communicates freely. All of which are behaviors associated with transformational leadership. Similarly, in a study of survey responses from 337 Canadian teachers, Leithwood et al. (1996) suggested that individualized consideration, a characteristic of Transformational Leadership, was positively linked to teacher job satisfaction. This is supported by Hauserman and Stick (2013) who found that teachers felt more positive about their school environments when leaders demonstrated transformational leadership in the form of individualized consideration, as it helped to build cooperative and trusting relationships.

However, not all transformational leadership behaviors have been found to improve teachers' job satisfaction. Nguni et al. (2006) found intellectual stimulation to have a weak influence on job satisfaction and no significant influence on teachers' commitment to the school. In fact, Podsakoff et al. (1990) found intellectual stimulation to have a negative impact on both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The study postulates that these findings may be due to the effect of intellectual stimulation on role ambiguity, conflict, and stress. This may be linked to teachers' career stage and self-confidence, with earlier career teachers preferring the less ambiguous approach of transactional leadership.

Although Smith and Bell's aforementioned study (2011) found that leaders often adopt a transactional approach when needing to meet external pressures and targets, the findings of a 2017 literature review of transformational leadership in education (Anderson, 2017) suggest that transformational leadership may in fact be a viable approach to meet stakeholder demands due to its established positive correlations to employee performance, motivation and job satisfaction. In addition, Eagly et al. (2003) and Bass and Riggio (2006) cite transformational leadership as the most successful method to lead schools that are in challenging circumstances or going through a process of change. However, Burns (1978) suggests that, although transformational and transactional styles differ, they are not mutually exclusive and the most effective leaders will display behaviors associated with both.

Laissez-faire leadership

Laissez-faire refers to a hands-off approach, allowing individuals significant autonomy. It is often criticized as a form of 'absent leadership,' characterized by an abdication of responsibility, avoidance of decision-making, and a failure to provide feedback or

guidance (Robbins & Judge, 2019; Luthans, 2008; Bass & Avolio, 1990, as cited in Yang, 2015). Such limited direction can leave employees feeling unsupported and undervalued, leading to confusion, reduced job satisfaction, and poorer performance (Agotnes et al., 2020; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Kelloway & Cooper, 2021). Bass (1985) therefore views laissez-faire leadership as largely ineffective, particularly where motivation and consistent performance are required.

However, contrasting evidence suggests that laissez-faire leadership can offer certain benefits under the right conditions. Yang (2015) identified that the autonomy inherent in this style can enhance feelings of empowerment, confidence and independence – factors which can strengthen motivation and performance (Humphrey et al., 2007, as cited in Yang, 2015). Moreover, in environments where creativity and innovation are valued, such autonomy has been linked to the emergence of novel ideas and flexible problem-solving (Zhang & Zhou, 2014, as cited in Yang, 2015).

The impact of laissez-faire leadership is therefore context dependent. Teams lacking the necessary skills or intrinsic motivation may become disengaged and underperform when guidance is minimal (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Conversely, high-performing and experienced teams, particularly mid to late career professionals, may benefit from the self-direction and space this style offers, enhancing creativity and professional autonomy (Pearce & Sims, 2002, Zhang & Zhou, 2014, as cited in Yang, 2015). This underscores the importance of aligning leadership style with team needs and capabilities.

Social identity leadership

Research over the past decade has increasingly examined the relationship between social identity and leadership (e.g. Haslam & Platow, 2001; Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Social Identity Theory suggests that people incorporate groups into their sense of selves, shaping their psychology and behavior (Austin & Worchel, 1979 Tajfel, 1978). Social identity leadership builds on this, suggesting that effective leaders articulate and embody the shared identity of their group, fostering belonging and collective purpose. This aligns with Northouse's (2018) view of leadership being a reciprocal relationship.

Hogg et al. (2012) argue that followers look to their leaders to define their social identity, yet this is often overlooked by traditional leadership models. This style of leadership depends on the leader bring seen as prototypical, sharing the values and behaviors of the group. In a school setting, this could involve the leader teaching classes, undertaking playground duties and displaying the shared values and beliefs. Prototypical leaders hold greater influence (Haslam et al., 1995; Hogg et al., 2012) and are more trusted, due to acting in the group's interests (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001; van Knippenberg et al., 2005).

While no studies have investigated social identity leadership in UK primary schools, research from other spheres demonstrates its appeal and effectiveness. Fransen et al. (2022) found that social identity leadership among athlete leaders improved performance and wellbeing of follower athletes by strengthening group identification. Social identity leadership effects have also been shown to be reliable cross-culturally. Cross-cultural evidence from van Dick et al. (2021), using data from 7294 participants across 28 countries, demonstrates that social identify leadership promotes greater identification among followers and this in turn reduces follower burnout. Additionally, Cicero et al.

(2007) conducted two cross-sectional surveys of employees in four Italian organizations and found that, during times of stress, particularly during periods of change, leader prototypicality significantly boosted job satisfaction. This is pertinent to educational settings, which can be dynamic environments. However, the emerging nature of this research suggests that further tests of its efficacy are required in a range of settings.

Preferences by gender

While no studies directly examine leadership preferences of primary school teachers by gender, existing research in other sectors highlights clear gender-based differences in both leadership behaviors and preferred leadership styles.

A meta-analysis by Eagly and Johnson (1990), comprising 45 studies, indicates that women leaders typically adopt more democratic or participative approaches, characteristic of transformational and social identity leadership. Conversely, men are more likely to employ autocratic, directive approaches, demonstrative of transactional and laissez-faire leadership. This distinction underscores a broader trend where women leaders are often perceived as more transformational than men (e.g. Bass & Riggio, 2006; Miranda, 2019).

Employee preferences also reflect gender dynamics. In a survey of 2757 Dutch public service employees, Offringa and Groeneveld (2023) found that transactional leadership is more preferred in male-dominated contexts, while transformational leadership is favored in female-majority environments. This suggests that, in the traditionally female dominated UK primary school sector, transformational or identity based leadership may be the preferred style. Supporting this, in a study of 577 working adults in Texas Green et al. (2011) found that women placed greater value than men on integrity, team orientation, participative approaches, and humane, diplomatic leadership styles, which characterize both the transformational and social identity styles of leadership. In addition, a survey of 1009 US workers found that female workers preferred relational, worker-centered leadership, consistent with transformational leadership, while male employees favored job-centered leadership, consistent with transactional and laissez-faire styles (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000). However, Boatwright and Forrest (2000) notes that gender bias may influence willingness to report relational needs.

Overall, although research specific to primary teaching is limited, existing research in other contexts shows gender plays a significant role in shaping preferred and enacted leadership styles, reinforcing the importance of considering workforce demographics when selecting leadership styles.

Preferences by age

Limited literature exists on leadership preferences of teachers as a function of age, although there are studies that look at this relationship in other industries. Boatwright and Forrest (2000) found that younger employees tended to prefer worker-centered and relational leadership. Additionally, Valenti's (2019) quantitative survey of 372 Texan employees, 82% of which were Millennial (those born between 1982 and 2004), found that Millennial employees value communication, caring and coaching,

characteristics of transformational leadership. Coaching was also valued by older participants, although they were represented by a comparatively smaller sample size (18%).

Studies that look into linking age and the determinants of teacher job satisfaction also suggest likely leadership preferences. Lowther et al. (1985), utilizing secondary data from three qualitative studies of 182 US teachers, suggested that older teachers placed greater value on extrinsic factors, such as salary, benefits and stability (characteristics of transactional leadership). Whereas, younger teachers, under the age of 35, were more motivated by intrinsic factors of teaching itself. Although the sample sizes in this study were small, the same findings were present in all three data sets. Supporting this, a quantitative study by Masath (2015) involving 340 secondary school teachers in Tanzania found that teachers aged between 25 and 40 valued opportunities for creativity and skill development, implying a preference for transformational leadership. However, creative autonomy may also be met through the more 'hands-off' and flexible laissez-faire approach.

In sum, research suggests that younger teachers may favor relational and transformational leadership styles, valuing communication and development opportunities. Conversely, older educators appear to prioritize extrinsic factors associated with transactional leadership. These findings highlight the need for school leadership to adapt to the needs of a multi-generational workforce. Further research within educational settings could provide deeper insights and help refine strategies that enhance job satisfaction across age groups.

Preferences by career stage

Time spent in the profession is often assumed to correlate with age, with younger teachers being early career and older teachers more experienced. However, although younger teachers are likely in the early stages of their career, individuals may enter the profession later in life. Therefore, one cannot assume that the aforementioned findings based on teachers' age also apply to their career stage.

Huberman's (1989) review of empirical studies identified recurring patterns relating to teachers' career phases, which may be a better indicator of teachers' leadership needs and preferences based on their time spent in the profession. Klassen and Chiu (2010) later assigned approximations of time to Huberman's phases. The identified trends and phases, alongside hypotheses informed by the present literature review, are summarized below.

Early career (0–6 years)

Teachers experience *survival and discovery* in the early years of their careers marked by enthusiasm, self-doubt and adjustment to classroom realities. At this stage, collegiality, belonging and support that is facilitated by social identity leaders may be particularly valuable. Clear directions and monitoring, associated with transactional leadership, may also provide reassurance. At around years four to six, teachers enter a *stabilization* phase, deciding whether to commit to the profession. Those who stay may begin seeking professional development opportunities, aligning with transformational leadership.

Mid-career years (7–18 years)

Teachers at this stage personalize their teaching strategies, resulting in experimentation and attempts to increase their impact. This may take the form of middle leadership roles and new responsibilities. Such professional development aspirations are fostered by transformational leadership, which supports creativity, autonomy and professional growth, rather than the emphasis on compliance which characterizes a transactional leadership approach.

Late-career years (19+)

Here, Huberman posits that teachers enter a phase of *serenity*, where a gradual decline in energy and enthusiasm is offset by increased confidence. In years 31 to 40, teachers may experience *disengagement and conservatism*, resisting change. Huberman (1989) notes that this is the phase that has been demonstrated the least within literature and may be a result of school context and climate and less psychological in nature. However, this phase is supported in a later study by Huberman (1989). Teachers at this stage of their career may prefer transactional and/or laissez-faire leadership due to predictability and autonomy, however leaders may need to adopt a more transformational approach to combat disengagement and complacency.

In support of Huberman's findings, studies have shown that Early Career Teachers (ECTs) place high value on collegiality and the opportunity to plan collaboratively with experienced colleagues, engaging in conversations about practice (Allensworth et al., 2009; Boyd et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2015), reinforcing the relevance of social identity leadership, whereby leaders facilitate group membership and collegiality. With teachers joining the profession at different life stages, this may also translate to an older teacher, who is new to the profession.

Furthermore, Klassen and Chui (2010) studied a sample of 1430 teachers and found that teachers' self-efficacy peaks at around 20–25 years' experience, consistent with Huberman's (1989) description of increased self-confidence and a desire for experimentation, which may indicate a preference for autonomy and a more laissez-faire approach to school leadership.

The present study

With school leadership being cited as a leading cause of teacher job dissatisfaction, understanding teachers' leadership preferences is essential for creating a positive school climate, good working conditions and retention.

While past research links particular leadership styles with motivation and job satisfaction in other spheres, no work has investigated this among primary school teachers in the UK. Moreover, much existing work focuses on the *Full Range Model of Leadership* (FRML; Bass & Avolio, 2000), which comprises transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, yet no work has compared these styles to the more contemporary approach of social identity leadership (Hogg, 2001). This study contributes to the existing body of research by examining how established and emerging leadership styles may support teacher job satisfaction and retention, particularly when considering variables such as age, gender, and experience. These insights could help inform school leaders in adopting leadership behaviors that might better support their staff.

The research questions and hypotheses are as follows:

1) What is UK primary school teachers' preferred style of school leadership, as displayed by their headteacher?

H1a: Transformational Leadership will be preferred over Transactional and Laissez-Faire leadership (Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Leithwood et al., 1996).

H1b: Social identity leadership has similar principles to Transformational Leadership, so will be preferred over Transactional and Laissez-Faire (Allen et al., 2016, as cited in Anderson, 2017).

2) How does the preferred leadership style vary between genders?

H2a: Women will prefer transformational leadership (Offringa & Groeneveld, 2023), while (H2b) men will prefer transactional and/or laissez-faire (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

3) Is the preferred leadership style associated with age?

H3a: Younger teachers will prefer transformational and social identity leadership (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Valenti, 2019), while (H3b) Older teachers will prefer transactional leadership behaviors (Lowther et al., 1985).

4) How does the preferred leadership style vary depending on time spent in the profession?

H4a: Early-career teachers (1–4 years) will prefer social identity leadership and transformational leadership (Allensworth et al., 2009; Boyd et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2015).

H4b: Mid-career teachers (5–18 years) will prefer social identity and transformational leadership (Huberman, 1989; Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

H4c: Teachers in the later stages of their careers (19–40 years) will favor laissez-faire leadership.

Materials and methods

Design

UK primary school teachers' preferences for school leadership behaviors were explored using a quantitative mixed design study (within and between-subjects components). A quantitative study allowed for a larger sample size, population level inferences, and enhanced generalizability of findings across a wide range of schools and settings. Standardized measures and analyses also allow findings to be tested for reliability and reproducibility. The dependent variables were transformational,

transactional, laissez-faire and social identity leadership. The independent variables were gender (man vs woman vs other), age and time spent in the profession (early vs mid vs late).

Participants and recruitment

Initial recruitment occurred via social media posts in public, teaching-related groups and direct messages, but only yielded 34 responses. Recruitment was then expanded to the online participant recruitment tool, Prolific. In total, 102 teachers completed the survey. One participant failed the attention check and was removed, resulting in a final sample of 101. Eligible participants were men and women, aged 18 or older, who were either current or former UK primary school teachers. The mean age of the sample was 41.11 years (SD = 10.56). Of the sample, 86 identified as women, 14 as men and 1 as 'other'; ages ranged from 21 to 64. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 40 years, with 27% of teachers in the early-stages of their career (1–4 years), 46% were mid-career teachers (5–18 years) and 27% were late-career teachers (19–40 years).

Materials and measures

The study utilized a quantitative questionnaire using Likert-type scales to measure participants' preferences for leadership behaviors. Respondents were instructed to rate how important each behavior was to their job satisfaction, when considering their current or most recent school leader. The 5-point scale ranged from 1= *not important at all* to 5 = *extremely important*.

The 17-item questionnaire measured transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors and was adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), developed and validated by Avolio and Bass (2004), Avolio et al. (1999). The MLQ-5X was selected due to its wide spread use (Kirkbride, 2006, as cited in Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008; Rowold, 2005), strong reliability (Bass, 1985, pp. 225–229) and structural validity (Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008).

Adaptations involved removing the outcome sub-scale (effort, job satisfaction and perceived leadership effectiveness) as this was not being explored in the current study, and altering phrasing so that items measured the importance participants placed on behaviors, rather than observed leader actions. This modification, while necessary, does introduce interpretive limitations, since the adapted questionnaire captures valued leadership behaviors, rather than observed practice. This shift may also raise potential construct validity concerns, as the measure diverges from the original focus of the MLQ. Therefore, findings should be interpreted with an awareness that the conclusions reflect participants' ideals of leadership behaviors, rather than direct accounts of what leaders do in practice.

A pilot with five individuals led to one item (My leader does not challenge status quo) being revised to 'My leader challenges status quo' in order to avoid a double negative; this Laissez-faire item was reverse scored.

As the MLQ-5X does not explore social identity leadership, the Social Identity Leadership Inventory – Short Form (ILI-SF) (Steffens et al., 2014) was adapted to add an additional sub scale. The ILI-SF is a theory-based inventory and has been found to

have good content, construct and criterion validity (Steffens et al., 2014). As with the MLQ adaptations, the Likert scale was altered in order to measure the importance that participants place on each behavior, as opposed to observed leadership actions.

Additionally, an attention check question was added to ensure validity of responses.

Procedure

The online survey was administered through Jisc Online Surveys. After accessing the link through social media or Prolific, participants viewed the rationale and design of the study, anonymity, confidentiality and right to withdraw details, and then provided consent before completing the questionnaire.

Ethical considerations

This study complies with the BERA Revised guidelines for Educational Research 5th Edition (BERA, 2024) and Liverpool Hope University's ethics guidance for internet-mediated research. Ethics approval was granted by the School of Education Ethics Lead.

There were minimal physical risks to taking part in this research. The five-minute survey time mitigated against participant fatigue and the online format allowed completion anywhere, with no time limit, therefore avoiding time-related stress. Some questions required reflection on past leadership experiences, which could impact participants wellbeing if they had an upsetting experience involving school leadership. Participants were advised to access their trusted support systems if needed and it was clearly stated that participation was voluntary.

To ensure confidentiality, all questionnaires were anonymous and no identifying information was collected. Participants created an anonymized ID code so that data could be retrieved and destroyed if a participant exercised their right to withdraw. Additionally, data collected from Jisc was securely stored on university, password-protected drives to mitigate the risk of any data breaches. Prolific users' personal data is held under Prolific's own data management and privacy policies. Data collected from the survey was not accessible to Prolific.com.

When approaching current and/or former colleagues to request participation, efforts were taken to mitigate perceived obligation, reiterating that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw their data.

Monetary remuneration was offered via Prolific to boost responses at the recommended rate (£6/hour; £0.50 for a 5-minute survey), as outlined in Prolific's fair pay policy. The research information sheet ensured that participants were fully aware of what they were being paid to do and the payment was proportionate, not coercive, ensuring that participants were not unduly influenced to participate.

Data analysis strategy

Data analyses were conducted in SPSS. The Descriptive Statistics function was used to generate descriptive statistics. Tests of normality were performed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests. Correlations were assessed using Spearman's Rho tests to investigate whether there were significant associations between variables. Tests of difference

(within-subjects ANOVA and Friedman's Tests) and related follow-up tests were used to examine overall leadership preferences (i.e. Transactional vs Transformational vs Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity) and preferences determined by gender, age and time spent in the profession (early career teachers, 1–4 years, mid-career teachers, 5–18 years and late-career teachers, 19–40 years).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1. Because the data was nonparametric, medians and ranges are reported in lieu of means and standard deviations. Descriptive statistics indicated that, overall, social identity leadership was considered most important for job satisfaction, followed by transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership, respectively. This pattern of preferences was the same for men and women, and for each career stage.

Correlations between all variables are reported in Table 2. Nonparametric Spearman's Rho correlations were conducted as data was non-normal for all variables, as noted below in the Kolmogorov Smirnof test results, and thus did not meet the assumptions for conducting parametric correlations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for all variables: overall and by gender and career stage.

Leadership style	Median	Range
Overall		
Transformational	4.40	2.50
Transactional	4.00	3.20
Laissez-faire	3.00	2.50
Social identity	4.75	3.50
Women		
Transformational	4.40	2.00
Transactional	4.00	3.20
Laissez-faire	3.00	2.00
Social identity	4.75	2.25
Men		
Transformational	4.20	1.50
Transactional	3.80	2.20
Laissez-faire	3.50	1.50
Social identity	4.50	1.25
Early-career		
Transformational	4.20	1.90
Transactional	3.80	2.00
Laissez-faire	3.00	1.50
Social identity	4.33	2.25
Mid-career		
Transformational	4.40	2.50
Transactional	3.90	3.20
Laissez-faire	3.50	2.50
Social identity	4.75	3.50
Late-career		
Transformational	4.40	1.10
Transactional	4.20	1.80
Laissez-faire	3.00	1.50
Social identity	4.75	1.50

Table 2. Spearman's rho correlations between all variables (total sample, $n = 101$).

	Transformational	Transactional	Laissez-faire	Social identity
Transformational		.36***	−.22*	.64***
Transactional			−.27**	.29**
Laissez-faire				−.07
Social identity				

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

The strongest correlation was a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership and social identity leadership ($r_s = .64$, $p < .001$). Transactional, transformational, and social identity leadership were all significantly positively correlated, and transformational leadership and transactional leadership were significantly negatively correlated with laissez-faire leadership. Social identity leadership was not significantly correlated with laissez-faire leadership.

What is UK primary school teachers' preferred style of school leadership, as displayed by their headteacher?

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests of normality indicated that all four leadership style variables were not normally distributed. K-S statistics ranged from .122 to .243 and all p-values were < .001. As such, a non-parametric Friedman test was conducted. The Friedman test indicated that there was a significant difference in preferred leadership styles, χ^2 (3) = 194.73, $p < .001$, $N = 101$

Follow-up pairwise comparisons, utilizing Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Tests (as per Table 3), indicated significant differences in preferences between all pairs of leadership styles. Social identity leadership was the most preferred style (mean rank = 3.63, $Z_{Transformational} = -5.90$, $Z_{Transactional} = -7.92$, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -6.09$), followed by Transformational Leadership (mean rank = 3.00, $Z_{Transactional} = -6.58$, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -9.09$), Transactional Leadership (mean rank = 2.06, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -6.09$), and the least preferred style was Laissez-Faire Leadership (mean rank = 1.31).

Does preferred leadership style vary between genders?

One participant, who indicated their gender was non-binary, was excluded from the gender analysis.

Women's preferences

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests of normality indicated variables were not normally distributed. K-S statistics ranged from .122 to .268 and p-values ranged from < .001 to

Table 3. Pairwise comparisons results for overall sample.

	Z	p value
Transactional vs Transformational	−6.584	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	−8.096	<.001
Transformational vs Social Identity	−5.902	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	−6.088	<.001
Transactional vs Social Identity	−7.921	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity	−8.245	<.001

.003. As such, a non-parametric Friedman test was conducted. The Friedman test indicated that there was a significant difference in women's preferences for leadership styles, χ^2 (3) = 171.01, $p < .001$, $N = 85$.

Follow-up pairwise comparisons, utilizing Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Tests (as per Table 4), indicated significant differences in women's preferences between all pairs of leadership styles. Social identity leadership was the most preferred style (mean rank = 3.64, $Z_{Transformational} = -5.36$, $Z_{Transactional} = -7.14$, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -7.87$), followed by Transformational Leadership (mean rank = 3.01, $Z_{Transactional} = -6.00$, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -7.85$), Transactional Leadership (mean rank = 2.09, $Z_{Laissez\text{-}Faire} = -6.28$) and the least preferred style was Laissez-Faire Leadership (mean rank = 1.26).

Men's preferences

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests of normality indicated variables were all normally distributed. K-S statistics ranged from .122 to .218 and p-values ranged from .054 to .200. Therefore, a parametric test was conducted in the form of a Within-Subjects ANOVA. The ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference in men's preferences for leadership styles, F (3.42) = 19.32, $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 5, follow-up pairwise comparisons indicated that social identity leadership ($M = 4.48$, SD = .37) was preferred significantly more than all other leadership styles, Transformation Leadership ($M = 4.13$, SD = .37) was preferred over Transactional ($M = 3.67$, SD = .59) and Laissez-Faire Leadership ($M = 3.33$, SD = .56), and there was no significant difference in preference between Transactional and Laissez-Faire styles of leadership.

Is preferred leadership style associated with age?

In addition to the distribution of all four leadership styles being non-normal, as noted above, age was also not normally distributed, according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov

Table 4. Pairwise comparisons results for women.

	Z	p value
Transactional vs Transformational	−6.000	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	−7.849	<.001
Transformational vs Social Identity	−5.362	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	−6.283	<.001
Transactional vs Social Identity	−7.136	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity	−7.872	<.001

Table 5. Pairwise comparisons results for men.

	Mean Difference (SE)	p value
Transactional vs Transformational	.47 (.14)	.004
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	.80 (.19)	<.001
Social Identity vs Transformational	.35 (.07)	<.001
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	.33 (.23)	.162
Social Identity vs Transactional	.82 (.14)	<.001
Social Identity vs Laissez-Faire	1.15 (.17)	<.001

(K-S) test of normality, D (101) = .11, p = .006. Therefore, a series of non-parametric Spearman's Rho tests were conducted.

Results showed that older age was significantly positively associated with a preference for Transactional, Transformational and social identity leadership. There was no significant association between age and Laissez-Faire Leadership (r_s (99) = .084, p = .402). The strongest association was between age and Transactional Leadership (r_s (99) = .31, p = .002), followed by age and social identity leadership (r_s (99) = .30, p = .002) and finally age and Transformational Leadership (r_s (99) = .23, p = .018).

How does the preferred leadership style vary depending on time spent in the profession?

Early career teachers (1–4 years)

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests indicated that Transformational (D (27) = .16, p = .070), Transactional (D (27) = .13, p = .200) and Social Identity (D (27) = .14, p = .159) leadership were normally distributed. However, Laissez-Faire leadership was not normally distributed, D (27) = .27, p < .001. As such, a Friedman's test was conducted. Results revealed a significant difference in preferences for leadership styles, χ^2 (3) = 44.43, p < .001, N = 27. Follow-up Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests indicated that all pairwise comparisons were significant (Table 6). Social identity leadership (mean rank = 3.50) was the most preferred style among early career teachers, followed by Transformational Leadership (mean rank = 2.98), Transactional Leadership (mean rank = 2.19) and finally Laissez-Faire Leadership (mean rank = 1.33)

Mid-career teachers (5–18 years)

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests indicated that Transformational (D (46) = .15, p = .008), Transactional (D (46) = .17, p = .003), Laissez-Faire (D (46) = .21, p < .001) and Social Identity (D (46) = .22, p < .001) leadership were all non-normally distributed. As such, a Friedman's test was conducted. Results revealed a significant difference in preferences for leadership styles, χ^2 (3) = 88.65, p < .001, N = 46. Follow-up Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests indicated that all pairwise comparisons were significant (Table 7). Social identity leadership (mean rank = 3.63) was the most preferred style among mid-career teachers, followed by Transformational Leadership (mean rank = 3.02), Transactional Leadership (mean rank = 2.01) and finally Laissez-Faire Leadership (mean rank = 1.34).

Table 6. Pairwise comparisons results for early career teachers.

	Z	p value	Mean rank difference
Transactional vs Transformational	−2.93	.003	−0.79
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	−4.12	<.001	−1.65
Social Identity vs Transformational	−2.90	.004	0.52
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	−3.36	<.001	−0.86
Transactional vs Social Identity	−3.88	<.001	−1.31
Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity	−4.39	<.001	−2.17

Table 7. Pairwise comparisons results for mid-career teachers.

	Z	p value	Mean rank difference
Transactional vs Transformational	−4.69	<.001	−1.01
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	−5.34	<.001	−1.68
Social Identity vs Transformational	−3.72	<.001	0.61
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	−3.44	<.001	−0.67
Transactional vs Social Identity	−5.24	<.001	−1.62
Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity	−5.35	<.001	−2.29

Late career teachers (19–40 years)

Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests indicated that Transformational (D (27) = .11, p = .200) and Transactional (D (27) = .15, p = .110) leadership were normally distributed. However, Laissez-Faire (D (27) = .25, p < .001) and Social Identity (D (27) = .24, p < .001) leadership were not normally distributed. Therefore, a Friedman's test was conducted. Results revealed a significant difference in preferences for leadership styles, χ^2 (3) = 60.02, p < .001, N = 27. Follow-up Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests indicated that all pairwise comparisons were significant (Table 8). Social identity leadership (mean rank = 3.74) was the most preferred style among late career teachers, followed by Transformational Leadership (mean rank = 3.00), Transactional Leadership (mean rank = 2.04) and finally Laissez-Faire Leadership (mean rank = 1.22).

Discussion

Overall preferred style

Teachers showed a significant preference for transformational leadership over transactional and laissez-faire styles, aligning with extensive evidence that transformational leadership supports teacher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Allen et al., 2016 in Anderson, 2017; Hauserman & Stick, 2013, Leithwood et al., 1996; Mearoff, 1990).

However, there was a significant overall preference for social identity leadership, exceeding even Transformational Leadership. This suggests that teachers value leaders who embody the shared values of their group and foster a sense of belonging and collective purpose. This is an important finding, as no existing literature has compared transformational and social identity leadership. Existing work often relies on the MLQ-5X (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Avolio et al. 1999), which focusses on transformational, transactional and laissez-faire approaches. As a result, literature has traditionally positioned transformational leadership as the key predictor of job satisfaction (Dumay &

Table 8. Pairwise comparisons results for late career teachers.

	Z	p value	Mean rank difference
Transactional vs Transformational	−3.44	<.001	−0.96
Laissez-Faire vs Transformational	−4.46	<.001	−1.78
Social Identity vs Transformational	−3.33	<.001	0.74
Laissez-Faire vs Transactional	−3.94	<.001	−0.82
Transactional vs Social Identity	−4.52	<.001	−1.7
Laissez-Faire vs Social Identity	−4.47	<.001	−2.52

Galand, 2012), with social identity leadership being overlooked in the field of primary education.

Social identity leadership has been found to be highly effective in other spheres; notably, in times of stress and change (Cicero et al., 2007), conditions common in primary schools due to frequent internal and external policy shifts. Additionally, as primary school teaching requires high emotional labor, the findings may reflect the association of social identity leadership with reduced burnout (van Dick et al., 2021) and improved performance (Fransen et al.., 2022), both of which are linked with increased job satisfaction. Moreover, the cross-cultural nature of van Dick's study suggests that social identity may be effective for diverse teaching teams, although future research would be required to confirm this proposition.

The preference for social identity leadership may also reflect its alignment with transformational leadership's most impactful component, Individualized Consideration (Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Leithwood et al., 1996) which is suggested to help to build cooperative and trusting relationships and is a key aspect of social identity leadership.

Followers form a sense of self by adopting a personal identity, but social identity leadership encourages followers to then align this with a group identity, modeled prototypically by the leader who embodies shared values and behaviors (Hogg et al., 2012). This cooperative and participatory focus has been linked to increased job satisfaction (Bogler, 2001). Transformational leaders, as described by Bass and Riggio (2006), seek to elevate followers' motivation through vision and charisma. However, in the context of primary education, where teamwork and collaboration are essential, the ability to foster a shared identity may be more impactful.

Transactional leadership was found to be less favored among teachers, consistent with Nguni et al. (2006) who found transactional leadership to have no positive impact on teachers' job satisfaction, and Bogler (2001) who found that teachers' job satisfaction increased as fewer transactional behaviors were displayed. The style's reliance on extrinsic motivation to drive performance (Burns, 1978; Weber, 1947) may conflict with the intrinsic motivations of educators, who often seek fulfillment beyond tangible rewards (Gorard et al., 2021; Shkurina, 2018).

Laissez-faire leadership, often criticized for its lack of direction and involvement (e.g. Luthans, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2019), was the least preferred style among teachers. This aligns with literature highlighting its association with ambiguity and decreased performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006) alongside confusion and employees feeling undervalued (e.g. Agotnes et al., 2020; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Kelloway & Cooper, 2021). Although autonomy can benefit highly skilled and self-motivated teams (Pearce & Sims, 2002, Zhang & Zhou, 2014, as cited in Yang, 2015), the absence of guidance and support inherent in laissez-faire leadership can be counterproductive in school settings.

Overall, the preference for social identity leadership highlights the importance of leaders who can cultivate a sense of belonging, shared purpose and relational support. This is vital to mitigating the risk of burnout in a profession that requires a high level of emotional labor and interdependence. By creating conditions where followers can thrive individually and collectively, shared identity and collective purpose are especially powerful in sustaining motivation and wellbeing.

Gender differences in leadership preferences

Women exhibited a strong preference for social identity leadership, followed by transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. This finding is consistent with research indicating that women prioritize participative, relational, and worker-focused leadership behaviors (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Green et al., 2011). Although traditionally viewed as transformational traits, recent research suggests they are more indicative of social identity leadership (Steffens et al., 2020).

Men also significantly preferred social identity leadership, with transformational leadership then significantly favored over Transactional and Laissez-Faire. This contrasts with literature, suggesting men typically adopt a more autocratic and directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990) and that preferences for transactional leadership and job-centered behaviors are more pronounced in men-dominated environments (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Offringa & Groeneveld, 2023). Boatwright and Forrest's (2000) caution regarding potential gender bias may explain this discrepancy, as relational needs may be more socially acceptable for women to express. The anonymous format of this study may have enabled men to provide more candid responses regarding their need for relationally oriented and participative leadership approaches.

Age differences in leadership preferences

The most significant correlation was observed between older teachers and transactional leadership, consistent with literature indicating increasing value upon extrinsic factors such as salary and stability (Lowther et al., 1985) whereas younger teachers were found to value communication, coaching and relational behaviors, typical of transformational leadership (Boatwright & Forrest, 2000; Valenti, 2019).

However, age also correlated significantly, although slightly less so, with both social identity leadership and transformational leadership. This suggests that while extrinsic factors may gain importance with age, intrinsic factors remain relevant as teachers mature, possibly due to increased experience and confidence, along with desire for professional growth. Coaching, for example, is highly valued by both younger and older teachers (Valenti, 2019).

Experience differences in leadership preferences

Career stage groupings (early-career 1–4 years; mid-career 5–18 years; late-career 19–40 years) were based on the work of Huberman (1989) and Klassen and Chiu (2010). All groups significantly preferred social identity leadership, followed by transformational, transactional, and finally laissez-faire styles.

Early-career teachers, who often experience self-doubt as expectations and classroom realities become more apparent (Huberman, 1989; Klassen & Chiu, 2010), may favor social identity leadership as they seek to observe prototypical behavior and receive collegial support through collaboration and opportunities to engage in discussions about practice with more experienced colleagues (Allensworth et al., 2009; Boyd et al., 2011; Burke et al., 2015).

Mid-career teachers also preferred social identity leadership, likely reflecting increased interest in professional development and middle leadership opportunities (Huberman, 1989) consistent with distributed leadership, which is becoming a common model in educational settings (Bush, 2019, as cited in Doherty, 2021). In this model, leadership is seen as a shared form of agency (Muijs & Harris, 2003, as cited in Doherty, 2021) through such roles as year group, phase, or subject leaders. Collaboration is a key component of primary teaching and the inclusive practices of social identity leadership may facilitate this effectively.

Late-career teachers similarly preferred social identity leadership. Those in this group who remain committed to their organization, motivated to improve their practice, and seek middle or senior leadership roles may share the same reasoning for this preference as mid-career teachers. However, Huberman's (1989) study suggests that teachers in this group may disengage and prefer the autonomy characteristic of laissez-faire and transactional styles. Self-efficacy rates, which peak at around 20 to 25 years in the profession (Klassen & Chiu, 2010) may make teachers resistant to change and advice, however it may also promote confidence and willingness to share expertise and mentor others, an identity-based, group-oriented behavior. Therefore, school leaders should consider a colleague mentoring model in schools.

Overall, the preferences for social identity leadership behaviors suggest that leadership training programs should be adapted to explicitly foster identity alignment and participatory values, enabling school leaders to more effectively cultivate shared purpose and trust among staff.

Limitations and future directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The sample size, particularly regarding male and non-binary participants, was limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. However, the sample used was reflective of the 2023 UK primary school and nursery workforce, which was only 14% male (GOV, 2024), and was able to detect significant effects despite the small sample of men. Future research should aim to include a more balanced demographic representation to confirm the present results. It may also be interesting to consider the interactive effects of gender, career stage and age on leadership preferences, which would require larger samples. Moreover, while the study focused on UK primary schools, differences in educational contexts and cultural settings may influence leadership preferences. Comparative studies including social identity leadership across primary schools in different countries could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics and improved generalizability.

The quantitative nature of the study strengthens the argument that these effects extend to the population of UK primary teachers; however, the fixed response options in the survey may oversimplify the leadership styles examined and reduce nuance in the findings. Thus, complementing quantitative studies with observational studies in primary school settings and qualitative studies that delve deeper into the benefits and

drawbacks of the different leadership styles would help to build on the present findings.

Situational leadership theory advocates that followers may appreciate different styles of leadership depending on the situation and context, and that effective leaders have the ability to transition between directive and supportive leadership when needed (Northouse, 2018). Therefore, future studies should explore teachers' preferences for leadership when facing certain situations, for example when starting at a new setting or when dealing with problematic classroom behavior.

The self-reporting nature of this study does risk potential social desirability bias, although the anonymized design helped to mitigate this. Finally, it may be difficult to determine whether preferences are age related or generational. Therefore, future research should incorporate longitudinal studies to ascertain whether individual preferences change over time.

Implications for practice

The study reveals a strong teacher preference for social identity leadership, even above transformational leadership. This suggests that school leaders should focus on fostering belonging and shared purpose. By modeling highly visible prototypical behaviors – such as covering classes or partaking in playground duties – leaders can strengthen group identity, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Building a collaborative culture where teachers feel valued and part of a cohesive team is essential; this involves engaging with teachers, understanding their needs, seeking their views in decision making, and aligning school goals with teachers' professional identities. Given its preference and impact on teachers' performance and job satisfaction, identity aligned leadership practice should be integrated into Headteachers' appraisal and training, with oversight at School Governor level. Providers of the National Professional Qualification of Headship may also consider embedding social identity leadership theory within its curriculum.

While social identity leadership is preferred, transformational behaviors, such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, remain important. By recognizing individual contributions and supporting professional growth, leaders can create an environment that encourages innovation and personal development, aligning with the collaborative nature of education.

The study indicates a lesser preference for transactional leadership. Thus, school leaders should avoid overly transactional approaches, which may not reflect educators' intrinsic motivations. Focusing instead on development opportunities, recognition of achievements, and fostering a supportive work environment is likely to increase job satisfaction and reduce burnout.

The study also highlights differences in leadership preferences based on gender and career stage. Women show a significant preference for social identity leadership – a key finding given that, in 2023, they made up 86% of the primary workforce (GOV, 2024). Career stage differences also matter: early-career teachers may need mentorship and support, while mid-career teachers might seek leadership opportunities and professional development. A structured mentorship model, pairing new teachers with experienced

teachers could build the support, collegiality and retention for those new to the profession, and offer experienced teachers meaningful leadership roles at a point of high professional efficacy.

The preference for social identity leadership also suggests benefits in distributed leadership models, which emphasize shared leadership responsibilities. Empowering teachers to lead and encouraging collaborative decision-making, can heighten engagement and satisfaction, while drawing on the diverse skills and strengths of the workforce. This creates a more responsive, dynamic school culture and distributes leadership more sustainably.

In conclusion, the study's findings support the critical role of leadership in addressing the teacher retention crisis. By understanding and responding to teachers' leadership preferences, school leaders can create a positive school climate that enhances job satisfaction and retention. This, in turn, can lead to improved pupil attainment and overall school performance. The preference for social identity leadership, a style that existing literature in the field of education has overlooked, is important and suggests that fostering a sense of community and shared purpose within schools, with leaders who demonstrate prototypical behavior, can be a powerful strategy for retaining teachers.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or personal interests.

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Data availability statement

The anonymized data set associated with this study is available from the first author, upon written request.

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