



The Potential of Emotional Intelligence Skills Amongst School Principals to Manage Conflict

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Abstract

This study investigates the potential of emotional intelligence skills amongst school principals to manage conflict. Principals also deal with conflict daily, and conflict that is not dealt with effectively may damage staff relationships. These may include a negative spiral of distrust, tension, and low morale amongst the staff. This study investigated how principals should use emotional intelligence skills to manage conflict. This qualitative study was conducted at three schools in the Motheo district, Mangaung Municipality, Free State, South Africa. It embraced a case study research design with the data collected being analysed thematically. The findings revealed that emotional intelligence skills offer an important toolkit for principals to manage conflict effectively. The results also showed that emotional intelligence could be valuable for principals, other leaders and staff. It can lead to improved relationships amongst staff, which can lead to higher job satisfaction. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that principals and staff be subjected to continuous professional development sessions on this topic.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Conflict, Leaders/Leadership, Functional, Resolution

Introduction

Conflict is an ever-present phenomenon in any organisation (Ertürk, 2022; Göksoy & Argon, 2016; Skordoulis et al., 2020). Therefore, complex and vibrant institutions like schools are not spared because conflict situations are most likely to emerge due to the unique nature and dynamics where teamwork and close interaction amongst staff are a daily given. Shank and Thuo (2017, p. 63) argue that “conflicts are inevitable in schools due to the collection of people with diverse personalities.” School leaders, hence, are often challenged to manage conflict situations, sometimes extremely daunting and delicate.

Studies show that managing conflict seems time-consuming, labour-intensive, and overwhelming. For example, Sharma and Sehrawat (2014) estimate that leaders spend up to 21% of their day dealing with conflict. In a recent study, Pretorius (2021) found that South African school principals have to deal with a wide variety of issues, including teacher stress, poor motivation of teachers, poverty, learner achievement, and low job satisfaction. The consequences seem to be far-reaching, including disturbances, reduced

productivity, high failure rates, absenteeism of staff, a high staff turnover rate, and early resignations. Additionally, conflict may lead to emotional stress.

To reach the larger organisational goals in schools through a positive and productive approach, scholars such as Ertürk (2022) and Utleg (2013) caution that a hostile atmosphere occurs when the conflict in the working environment is not managed functionally. In schools specifically, “[t]his will negatively affect the job performances of the personnel and will decrease the quality of education and training at school” (Göksoy & Argon, 2016, p. 198). Furthermore, poor conflict management may lead to low school performance, absenteeism, underachievement of school plans, an unfavourable work environment, and mistrust among workers (Shanka & Thou, 2017). If ignored and misdiagnosed, conflict can lead to a spiral of antagonistic interaction and aggravated, destructive behaviour. Many schools are broken down by the conflict that alienates teachers from their professional work. Conflict creates cliques, suspicion, communication breakdown, and low teacher morale (Msila, 2012). When conflict is not managed well, it can be disruptive and dysfunctional, including limited creativity, smothering communication, and reducing overall productivity (Cain & du Plessis, 2013; Ertürk, 2022; Mersino, 2013; Shanka & Thou, 2017).

On the contrary, though, when conflicts are swiftly and adequately handled, benefits may accrue; contributing to solidarity within conflicting groups and reconciliation of legitimate interests where, in turn, relationships are strengthened, there is enhanced identification of problems and solutions, increased knowledge or skill, and peace is safeguarded (Bano et al., 2013). Göksoy and Argon (2016) and Omisore and Abiodun (2014) opine that conflict situations should be regarded as an opportunity to address a problem. To this end, being emotionally intelligent may provide a much more appropriate approach to leaders in resolving the issue. It has also been found that emotionally intelligent leaders are more effective in interacting with colleagues (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018); thus, conflict resolutions may be resolved more effectively and successfully; being suggested by Gunkel et al. (2016, p. 573) that individuals with “high emotional intelligence can manage conflict more constructively [and productively].” Little research on this topic has been conducted in South African schools, mainly on how principals should deal with the challenges of applying Emotional Intelligence skills to manage conflict. Despite the main focus of the ‘how’ on conflict resolution, the other gap in the literature is the type of leaders being studied and different leaders in different contexts. Literature on emotional intelligence and leadership mainly focuses on leaders in the business world, owing to big companies and/or businesses and their teams (Mersino, 2013). This study, therefore, aims to close this gap in existing research by *investigating the potential of emotional intelligence skills for principals to manage conflict*.

Research Aim and Objectives

The following research aim guides this study: To explore the potential of emotional intelligence to manage conflict in South African schools.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To identify the challenges associated with conflict in schools, specifically in the Motheo Education district, Free State, South Africa.
2. To investigate how principals should use emotional intelligence skills to manage conflict in South African schools.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The study adopts a conceptual lens, focusing on the most pertinent concepts and literature related to the research topic. These include conflict-related concepts, such as dysfunctional and functional conflict and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, it focused also on addressing conflict through emotional intelligence, emotional intelligence in leaders and self-and relationship management. This discussion was concluded concerning the issue of leadership opportunities. Therefore, our focus was in line with what Regoniel (2001) pointed out: a conceptual framework should represent a researcher’s synthesis of the literature on how to explain a phenomenon. In addition, the conceptual framework study was also guided by the inclusion of

relevant theoretical literature and the empirical findings of prior research, as well as the researchers' own experiential knowledge, beliefs, commitments, and values (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). The concepts will be discussed in conjunction with related literature in the next section.

Conflict

The term is described by Omisore and Abiodun (2014) as a disagreement between two people or groups based on differences, while Cain and du Plessis (2013, p. 26) view conflict and the causes thereof as "the perceived and/or the actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties over substantive and/or relational issues." For Ertürk (2022, p. 252), conflict is "an interactive process involving disagreement, discrepancy or incompatibility between two or more individuals or groups in any subject." In schools specifically, conflict may occur differently amongst staff members: teacher-teacher, principal-teacher, principal-deputy principal, and/or teacher-parent (Göksoy & Argon, 2016). Pretorius (2021) claims that causes for conflict may stem from the distribution of work for the academic year among staff members, duties and responsibilities, teamwork performances, dress code, and much more.

Dysfunctional and Functional Conflict

Conflict may be dysfunctional with destructive consequences or functional with positive outcomes. Dysfunctional conflict may hamper and even destroy staff performances (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014). Cain and du Plessis (2013, p. 29) warn further that "it could lead to the non-realising of an organisation's goals and the breakdown of relationships among colleagues." As opposed to dysfunctional conflict, functional conflict is seen as a productive force that supports the organisation's goals and enhances staff performances (Omisore & Abiodun, 2014; Utleg, 2013). The literature on conflict management identifies various ways of dealing with conflict. Göksoy and Argon (2016) propose conflict-solving strategies such as accommodating, compromising, collaborating and avoiding confrontation. Dana (2001 in Msila, 2012) avers that leaders need to comprehend structure to analyse conflicts well, including interdependency, the number of interested parties involved, constituent representation, negotiator authority, critical urgency, and communication channels.

Emotional Intelligence

Mayer and Salovey (1997, p. 10) posit that emotional intelligence is "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth." Jordan and Troth (2004, p.196) states that "the ability to be aware of and manage emotions is also thought to facilitate functional rather than dysfunctional conflict resolution, and consequently contribute to better team performance." Being emotionally intelligent may generate empathy, encouraging individuals to consider their interests when solving conflict, and leaders will respect others' needs and interests (Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014).

Addressing conflict through Emotional Intelligence

Conflict can still be managed well and effectively without emotional intelligence in leaders, but being emotionally intelligent significantly increases functional conflict resolution's success (Barent, 2005; Horne, 2017; Mersino, 2013; Skordoulis et al., 2020). According to Leung (2010), emotional competencies in leaders, such as empathy, self-control, emotional awareness, and being able to develop good relationships with others, contribute significantly to leader effectiveness. Chen and Guo (2020) and Mayer et al. (2000 in Abas et al., 2012) found that people with high emotional intelligence competencies could be more socially effective than their counterparts and thus, could be more skilful in motivating people to achieve goals, aims, and missions in organisations. Realising the value of emotional intelligence in addressing conflict, Omisore and Abiodun (2014, p. 124) point out that "the potential of emotional intelligence will end up with not only institutional benefits but personal satisfaction as well." A lack of emotional

intelligence can cause and/or worsen conflict in the workplace (Ertürk, 2022; Mersino, 2013; Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014; Utleg, 2013). Additionally, studies such as the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), a self-report that measures emotionally- and socially intelligent behaviour and provides an estimate of the underlying construct of emotional-social intelligence, demonstrate that there is an important relationship between emotional intelligence and performance in various aspects in the workplace (Bar-on et al., 2007). Therefore, test results and research indicate that an individual can learn and develop emotional intelligence (Gutierrez, 2017).

Emotional Intelligence in Leaders

Studies by Kaur (2010) suggest that space should be created for emotional intelligence in leadership and that the leader's emotional intelligence in an organisation can determine performance and success. Further, Horne (2017) states that emotional intelligence is vital for effective leadership and that studies have shown that a person's emotional intelligence can significantly benefit leadership. Equally, Maamari and Majdalani (2017) and Muslihah (2015) explain that a leader's ability to manage emotions, and emotional intelligence, directly affect the organisation and its performance. According to Chen and Guo (2020) and Hebert (2011), being a leader is not just about basic leadership skills. Still, the ability to identify, control and understand one's own emotions and others can be beneficial in terms of success in the workplace. To elaborate, where conflict is managed well and properly (with the potential of emotionally intelligent leaders), it can motivate teams, improve creativity and cause healthy competition (Ertürk, 2020; Mersino, 2013; Skordoulis et al., 2020; Utleg, 2013). Different studies have demonstrated that emotionally intelligent leaders tend to have better and higher success rates in functionally resolving conflict (Sharma & Sherawat, 2014; Skordoulis et al., 2020; Utleg, 2013). To conclude, emotionally intelligent leaders will be able to identify and manage emotions which are also thought to facilitate functional rather than dysfunctional conflict resolution and, consequently, lead to better team performance (Jordan & Troth, 2004; Maamari & Majdalani, 2017).

Emotional intelligence encompasses various components. For this study, we focus on the four main Emotional Intelligence competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management. Introduced by Mayer and Salovey in 1990 and adjusted to a more simplistic framework by Daniel Goleman, these key ingredients can be applied to a school leader's skillset to manage conflict. Coleman's work seems more prevalent in research today mainly because it is more organised and easier to understand and apply (Chen & Guo, 2020; Mersino, 2013). In continuation thus of the discussion under point (iii), the discussions next will elaborate on these concepts.

Self-Awareness

The first domain, self-awareness, means understanding yourself and your emotions. According to Goleman (1995) and Skordoulis et al. (2020), self-awareness refers to a leader's ability to identify and understand their own emotions, which will most likely have a better approach to dealing with conflict. Gutierrez (2017) argued that leaders with high levels of self-awareness could be aware of their biases and what makes them angry or emotionally reactive. These leaders cannot only identify how their feelings affect themselves but how they may affect others (Bower et al., 2018). According to Goleman (1995), the first domain of emotional intelligence – self-awareness – is the foundation of being emotionally intelligent. “You sense how others see you, and your self-image reflects that larger reality. You have an accurate sense of your strengths and limitations which gives you realistic self-confidence. It also gives you clarity on your value and a sense of purpose, so you can be more decisive when you set a course of action” (Matlock, 2017. p. 1). The value of self-awareness in dealing with conflict is highlighted by Jordan and Troth (2004, p.196) who claim that: “the ability to be aware of and manage emotions is also thought to facilitate functional rather than dysfunctional conflict resolution, and consequently contribute to better team performance.” Being emotionally intelligent may generate empathy, encouraging individuals to consider their interests when solving conflict, and leaders will respect others' needs and interests (Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014).

Self-Management

The second domain, self-management, means managing one's own state of emotions (Goleman, 2001; Punia et al., 2015). After identifying one's own emotions (self-awareness), an individual will be able to control them. In leadership, it is crucial to control one's emotions to avoid losing them, leading to anger and being drained (Goleman, 1995; Mersino, 2013). Additionally, Mayer and Salovey (in Kanesan & Fauzan, 2019, p. 3) define the regulation of emotions as the ability "to avoid, diminish or adapt one's own emotions and those of others." The result, according to Kanesan and Fauzan (2019), is an individual will be more likely to succeed at managing both positive and negative emotions.

Moreover, Bower et al. (2018) stated that these leaders could manage and channel their emotions in useful ways. When it comes to conflict management, in particular, a principal possessing the skill of self-management will be able to establish and promote good relationships by being mindful of how they are displaying their emotions. Being conscious of the impact of negative emotions and the associated impressions they may convey may also prevent damage to long-term relationships between principals and staff. Keeping this factor in mind is especially important in schools, characterised by intertwined and delicate relationships. Edelman and van Knippenberg (2018, p. 595) confirm that "leaders with high [emotional intelligence] respond more appropriately to follower expression of emotion, and display emotions that are more appropriate to the situation."

Social Awareness

The third domain, social awareness, occurs when one expands their awareness to identify, understand and include the emotions of others. Goleman (1998) refers to social awareness as the ability to recognise and understand the emotions of others. In short, Goleman (2001, p. 32) stated that social cognition is "reading people and groups accurately." Noteworthy, Goleman said (in Bower et al., 2018) that social awareness does not include being just friendly with others. Instead, it is being familiar with purpose – to motivate and move colleagues in the direction the leader desires. Leaders who score high in this ability will be much more sensitive to the emotions and feelings of others (Skordoulis et al., 2020). However, mastering the ability to identify and understand the emotions of others may not be so easy; it was found by Finnigan and Maulding-Green (2018) that only principals with many years of experience scored high in this ability.

Nevertheless, school leaders who can master this ability may resolve conflict more effectively since principals may identify and understand emotions in certain situations and thus act and interact more appropriately. A positive relationship has been found by Gunkel et al. (2016) between emotional intelligence and conflict handling since identifying and understanding the emotions of other solutions were reached. Lastly, it has been found by Bayraktar et al. (2021) that individuals with high emotional intelligence scored high in problem-solving as well as interpersonal relations skills – both indispensable elements of conflict resolution.

Relationship Management

Managing relationships is a challenging, crucial responsibility of the modern-day school principal. Goleman (1998, 1995) refers to relationship management as the ability to use the emotions of others to motivate, direct and develop them towards a specific goal. This is where strong and good relationships become crucial in the working area, where team effort is mainly required. Goleman (in Bower et al., 2018) stated that principals who could "find common ground and build rapport with others" were perceived as more successful than those who could not. With good and well-built relationships, leaders appear to resolve conflict more effectively (Goleman, 1995; Leung, 2010; Mersino, 2013; Sharma & Sehrawat, 2014).

Opportunities for Leadership

An individual can learn and develop emotional intelligence (Gutierrez, 2017). According to Matlock (2017), there is no single important domain of emotional intelligence. All four are connected, and leaders must be confident in applying and understanding all the domains to be considered emotionally intelligent. Conflict can be healthy and provides opportunities for leaders to demonstrate their leadership skills with

emotional intelligence, such as empathy, self-control, and relationship management (Mersino, 2013). Leung (2010, p. 23) explains that managers “with higher performance ratings have higher emotional competencies.” Therefore, It is thus evident that emotional intelligence in leaders is a crucial factor in better performance, which includes improved conflict resolution.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm; an approach used to understand knowledge related to humans and social sciences (Nieuwenhuis, 2019; Pham, 2018). It emphasises the individual’s ability to construct meaning; therefore, it is also sometimes known as constructivism (Cresswell et al., 2017; Pham, 2018). According to Cresswell et al. (2017) and Pham (2018), an interpretive perspective gives researchers a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and its complexity. For this reason, this paradigm was regarded as suitable for our study because it seeks to find the knowledge and perceptions of teachers, School Management Teams, and principals about the importance of being emotionally intelligent to manage conflict.

Research Approach

This study utilised a qualitative approach, allowing for a deeper understanding of participants’ opinions and experiences and contextual responses where the researcher cannot control or manipulate the collected data (Mohajan, 2018). Therefore, this approach allows the collected data to be regarded as dependable and reliable (Silverman, 2006). This approach proves reliable as it reflects the current situation of the school participants regarding their opinions and experiences with leaders and emotional intelligence in conflict resolution. A qualitative approach allows participants to articulate their perspectives, opinions, inner feelings, and experiences, in other words, to gather their stories (Cain & du Plessis, 2013). Cain and du Plessis (2013, p. 30) add that “a qualitative approach explores how individuals, or participants, derive meaning from a social- or human phenomenon.”

Research Design

The case study research design was adopted for the study. Cresswell et al. (2017, p. 81) define this design as “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon, set within its real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident.” Cain and du Plessis (2013) also point out that the case study approach provides the opportunity to investigate the phenomenon’s real-life context. A case study typically focuses on an individual or small group that records that individual’s or small group’s experience in a specific setting (Lodico et al., 2010). For this reason, a case study was deemed suitable for this study as we sought deep understanding from a small group of participants in a real-life situation, the school, regarding experiences with conflict in the workplace.

Selection of the study group

The participants for this qualitative study were purposefully selected. Cresswell et al. (2017) state that qualitative researchers generally tend to make use of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is precisely what the word suggests – participants are chosen with a purpose. It is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are selected based on specific characteristics that align with the objective and aim of the study (Cresswell et al., 2017; Crossman, 2018). Therefore, the selection of participants focused on a particular group within a secondary school. The focus grades were grades 8-12; ten participants were selected – three principals, one deputy-principal, three HoDs, and three teachers (where the teacher is selected, it was preferable to one with more than five years of teaching experience). The main characteristic and factor that affects this study are teachers in leadership positions, such as the principal and HoD, and a teacher with experience to have seen and experienced conflict resolution, which serves the purpose of the study in terms of data that is collected not just from a leader’s perspective, but from those working under leaders as well.

Data Collection Method

Data collection consisted of a structured, open-ended questionnaire. A questionnaire is a tool that consists of a series of questions, and for this study, open-ended questions were used to collect each individual's views (Abawi, 2013; Zarinpoush & Gumulka, 2006). An open-ended questionnaire allows participants to respond from their own perspectives. According to Cohen et al. (2018), it is a method that hooks the truthfulness, fullness, profundity, and honesty of responses, which are trademarks of the qualitative approach. Therefore, it is vital to design and formulate the questionnaire to meet the study's goals and objectives and eliminate unanswered questions as far as possible (Abawi, 2013).

The following questions formed part of the questionnaire:

1. How would you describe an emotionally intelligent leader/person?
2. Explain, in general, whether school leaders (Principals, deputy-principal, HoD) must be emotionally intelligent.
3. Describe any conflict resolution founded upon emotional intelligence (witnessed or experienced by you).
4. Explain whether the conflict should be managed by a leader in the school, even if it might have nothing to do with them.
5. Do you believe that conflict in the workplace is healthy? Why?
6. Explain how/why being emotionally intelligent can help resolve conflict.
7. Conflict often occurs between a leader and a teacher. What is your opinion of teachers, not just leaders, being emotionally intelligent in the conflict resolution process?
8. Do you believe leaders should manage and attempt to resolve conflict immediately or wait a few moments or the next day? Why?
9. Do you think all staff at a school should attend courses/programs to enhance their emotional Intelligence skills? Why?
10. Is there a direct link between emotionally intelligent leaders and staff members' overall job satisfaction? Why?
11. Emotional intelligence consists of four competencies, namely **self-awareness** (ability to understand one's own and other's emotions), **social-awareness** (ability to expand one's awareness to identify, understand and include the emotions of others), **self-management** (ability to manage own emotions), and **relationship management** (ability to use your own emotions and those around them to build good and strong relationships).

Question:

If you had to choose one, which of the four emotional intelligence competencies would you believe is the most important for a school leader to excel in? Is it self-awareness / social-awareness / self-management or relationship management? Why?

Ethical Considerations

The academic rigour of the research was ensured by implementing the measures of credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability. Credibility refers to the research focus and confidence in how well the collected data addresses the intended objective (Elo et al., 2014), which was obtained through member-checking of the data and prolonged engagement with the participants. Furthermore, the findings were shared with the participants to verify if they were a true reflection of the collected data. Through this approach, the dependability of the research was safeguarded. The findings represented the situation being researched instead of the researcher's beliefs and biases, ensuring the study's confirmability (Gasson, 2004). We adhered to the quest for transferability by providing sufficient information about the researchers, the research context, and processes to allow the reader to select how the outcomes can be transferred (Morrow, 2005).

The University of the Free State granted ethical clearance, ethics number: **UFS-HSD2017/1063/2908**, whilst permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Free State Department of Education. The

study details were communicated to them to ensure the participants' protection. Further, participants were given the option to participate in the study or not. The purpose of ethics in research is to protect participants from any harm or consequences from any activities done during the research (Resnik, 2015). Considering that the study was voluntary, and no individual was forced to participate, participants were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any time during the research.

Regarding the confidentiality of the participants, their names were not indicated in the study. Therefore, when the data was transcribed and reported, a letter and number were assigned to each participant; for example, P1 is participant one, P 2 is participant two, and so forth. The table below indicates the positions and years of experience of the participants:

Table 1.

Position in years of participant experience

Code of the participants	Position	Years of experience
P 1 (Participant 1)	Deputy-principal	30
P 2 (Participant 2)	Head of Department (HOD)	*
P 3 (Participant 3)	Teacher	5
P 4 (Participant 4)	Principal	4
P 5 (Participant 5)	Principal	3
P 6 (Participant 6)	HOD	20
P 7 (Participant 7)	Teacher	5
P 8 (Participant 8)	Principal	30
P 9 (Participant 9)	HOD	*
P10 (Participant 10)	Teacher	5

Lastly, the participants also signed a consent form to permit and specify that the data collected from the study may be used for the intended purpose of the research.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis method was selected for the data analysis process, a foundational qualitative analysis method. The transcriptions were coded, and high-frequency codes were given way to themes that will bid the basis of further reporting. Qualitative researchers create themes from collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). According to Nowell et al. (2017), trustworthiness and insightful findings can be produced with a thorough thematic analysis. The main intention of trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to support the argument that the researcher's findings are worth paying attention to (Elo et al., 2014).

Results

After the data were collected and transcribed, five themes were created. These were as follows:

- i.) Participants' understanding of Emotional Intelligence,
- ii.) The Importance of Being emotionally intelligent,
- iii.) Emotional intelligence and conflict resolution,
- iv.) Being emotionally intelligent and job satisfaction,

The findings are presented under each of the themes below:

Theme 1: Participants' understanding of Emotional Intelligence

The findings indicated that participants narrowly understand emotional intelligence and related competencies. Six of the ten participants' descriptions of an emotionally intelligent leader involved mentioning and describing only some basic skills considered standard in a leader. They include consistency, calmness, fairness, courage, support, reflection, and confidence. However- and significant though- participants 1 and 8, who are in leadership positions (deputy-principal and principal), showed a slightly

better understanding of what it means to be emotionally intelligent, stating: “It is a person who understands how emotion, words, and feelings can affect those around him.” (P1), and in another response stating that a leader being emotionally intelligent “would be able to exercise self-control.” Participant 8 said that someone is in touch with their own and others’ emotional well-being. Participant 7, a teacher with five years of experience, referring to the issue of conflict, described what it means to be emotionally intelligent best: “Someone who understands their emotions as well as manages it despite the uprising of conflict” (P7).

Interestingly, only the two participants in teaching positions agreed that if they had to choose one competency of emotional intelligence that a leader should have, it would be self-awareness. However, the participant in a leadership position, P1, indicated that all four competencies are equally crucial for a leader, and they would not be able to choose one as “...the four are all related and cannot stand alone. They are intertwined.”

Theme 2: Importance of being emotionally intelligent

It is evident from the data collected that all ten participants agree that being emotionally intelligent is important, not just for leaders but for teachers as well. Furthermore, all ten participants described and explained various situations where being emotionally intelligent is of utmost importance. Participant 1 stated: “... to show empathy for those who work with you.” Participant 2 agreed by adding the following: “...to be able to work with our colleagues and our pupils’ parents.” Lastly, participant 3 clearly stated that all parties must be emotionally intelligent (P3). Significantly, four participants (P4, P6, P8 & P9) all agreed that emotional intelligence is necessary since principals work with people and different personalities:

“Definitely. People work with people” (P4)

“It is definitely necessary; you work with different personality types...” (P6)

“... the management of others” (P8)

“... otherwise the staff will not have trust in their leaders.” (P9)

Theme 3: Emotional Intelligence and conflict resolution

Data collated from the question asking the respondent to describe any conflict resolution founded upon emotional intelligence indicates that emotional intelligence plays a vital role in the conflict resolution process. It also showed that it is crucial to manage conflict practically. One participant, P3, described a situation where a teacher reacted calmly after being criticised by a parent. It is not clear whether the learner was with, but as a teacher, it is important always to stay calm and think before saying or doing anything, not just with the students in class but their parents too. Furthermore, participant (P1) also stated in another question that being emotionally intelligent helps one stay calm in conflict situations. The participant in a leadership position, P1, also described a situation where emotional intelligence was clearly visible and essential during the conflict process:

“Two teachers in one department had strong feelings (negative feelings) towards each other. To diffuse the situation, it was necessary not to tell the two teachers certain things they had said about each other. It would have inflamed the situation, and by the reconciliatory words, common ground could be found.”

Additionally, a principal (P5) who was insulted for his leadership style during a meeting managed to control his strong emotions and stay calm, thus managing the situation more effectively and appropriately. This participant also stated, “Take emotions out; thinking more realistically” (P5) when asked how emotional intelligence can help resolve conflict. Participant Seven also described a situation where calmness solves conflict more effectively. On the other hand, participant 7 stated that being emotionally intelligent will be easier to manage conflict and find the best solution. Furthermore, participant 8, who has 30 years of teaching experience, described a general strategy he uses in conflict situations where intelligent, emotional skills were evident such as social awareness and self-management:

“Manage conflict differently if you are aware of the other person’s emotional well-being, e.g. more empathy” (P8). Moreover, this leader also stated that emotionally intelligent leaders could recognise and be sensitive toward others’ situations: “More able to put yourself in the other person’s situation” (P8).

Participant ten agreed with this by stating, “Others’ emotions, feelings, dignity and motivation to make a difference should be considered when resolving conflict” (P10).

Theme 4: Being emotionally intelligent and job satisfaction

Responding to the question of whether there is a direct link between leaders being emotionally intelligent and staff members’ overall job satisfaction, all participants, leaders, and teachers, strongly felt that emotional intelligence, not just in the leader, can lead to an increase in job satisfaction. Participants 1 and 3 thought it would make work more manageable, and good relationships could be built, leading to better conflict management and productivity. According to participant 3, “the more emotionally intelligent staff, the more understanding, the more effective communication becomes.” Therefore, emotional intelligence combined with effective communication can resolve conflict more functionally, leading to higher job satisfaction. A principal with 30 years of teaching experience agreed with this by stating that “... problems find solutions which makes the working environment more productive” (P8). Whereas participant 5 noted that it creates a safe environment for staff.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that emotional intelligence could be a valuable asset in a principal’s leadership toolkit. Kaur (2010) supports this idea, declaring that a leader’s emotional intelligence directly impacts the organisation. A lack of solid emotional intelligence skills may lead to misunderstandings and eventually tense conflict situations. This is supported by Sharma and Sehrawat (2014), who proclaims that leaders who lack emotional intelligence skills are considered to be one of the key origins of the conflict. Concerning then, is that the data presented in theme 1 indicates that the participants do not possess a solid understanding of the four primary emotional intelligence skills. The principal’s understanding of the central tenets of emotional intelligence is crucial, as with the potential of emotional intelligence, success in resolving conflict in schools may be more prominent (Ertürk, 2022; Skordoulis et al., 2020; Tidwell, 1998).

The data (under theme 2) conveyed that the different subskills associated with being emotionally intelligent enhance staff morale and performance and are incredibly beneficial in leadership (Bower et al., 2018; Horne, 2017). Thus, having an in-depth understanding of the subsets of the emotional intelligence concept will support principals to enable conflict resolution, creating synergy and eventually improved team (staff) performance (Jordan & Troth, 2004). The study also revealed that being emotionally intelligent is equally important for teachers and other leadership team members. Excellent emotional intelligence skills build and uphold healthy relationships and support individuals in understanding and managing themselves and others better. These approaches will lead to less conflict and disagreements (Vashisht et al., 2018). The advantage that solid emotional intelligence skills hold is displayed excellently in a study done by Umanshankar (2014), in which it was reported that after only a two-day emotional intelligence training program, individuals showed significant improvement in key conflict resolution skills such as collaboration, empathy and compromising instead of negative organisational behaviours such as competing and avoiding. Regarding the value of emotional intelligence skills in staff members, Kanesan and Fauzan (2019) opine that staff members who possess this trait appear to be better decision-makers, open-minded, understand different perspectives and are more likely to be positive and optimistic.

Regarding the value of emotional intelligence in conflict resolution, the study revealed some remarkable insights, as discussed under theme three; first of all, by displaying emotionally intelligent skills, conflict resolution may have a higher success rate in terms of being functionally resolved in a way that will benefit not only the school but also the staff members. Skordoulis et al. (2020) confirm that emotional intelligence offers opportunities for conflict resolution. Omisore and Abiodun (2014) state that leaders who manage conflict with emotional intelligence competencies tend to end up with institutional benefits and personal satisfaction. On the contrary, as pointed out by Ertürk (2022) and Skordoulis et al. (2020), when emotional intelligence levels are low, conflict arises more frequently in the workplace, is destructive, and can cause serious harm. The findings of our study also indicate that by being emotionally intelligent, actions such as staying calm during an argument or showing empathy (the EI-component of social awareness) towards a

fellow colleague for understanding their emotions could lead to better relationships which would, in turn, lead to better conflict resolution.

From the findings under theme 4, it can be deduced that being emotionally intelligent as a leader may eventually lead to higher job satisfaction. This can counter the issue of a negative work environment (Shanka & Thou, 2017). This point is supported by Göksoy and Argon (2016, p. 197), who states that “conflicts are not desired and generate failure simply because they are not managed well and therefore generate negative results.” Consequently, conflicts will only worsen and be more complicated, resulting in a negative environment, low job satisfaction and productivity amongst the staff members, and an unpleasant work environment (Göksoy & Argin, 2016; Shanka & Thou, 2017; Utleg, 2013). Similarly, Ertürk (2022, p. 252) most recently stressed that conflict that is not well managed could be “destructive and cause serious harm”, which results in negative feelings, a decrease in motivation, satisfaction, organisational commitment and communication. Furthermore, Wijayati et al. (2020, p. 185) found a significant and positive relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction; “emotional intelligence is effective in increasing job satisfaction.” In addition, Leung (2010) states that emotional competencies in leaders contribute to leader effectiveness, which leads to more success in conflict resolution, and ultimately to higher job satisfaction and productivity.

Conclusions, implications and recommendations

In conclusion, the study confirmed that if principals possess sufficient knowledge and understanding of emotional intelligence skills, they will be able to resolve conflict much more effectively. The findings indicated that all the participants in the study have a narrow and shallow understanding of the concepts related to emotional intelligence, let alone applying it as part of their leadership role. This finding implies that principals may struggle to utilise the immense advantages associated with having solid emotional intelligence skills. Therefore, principals should be made aware of this critical facet of their leadership role, which could be done through workshops and professional development sessions.

The study also revealed the importance of emotional intelligence skills for teachers and other leaders, which is especially important as these leaders should also be on the same page as to what the concept entails, how it should be applied, and their role in ensuring that principals are not being singled out as solely responsible for creating and maintaining a conducive work environment. To this end, therefore, it is vital to provide intervention in the form of internal and external professional development sessions to inform and train other leaders and teachers on how to apply emotional intelligence skills in their interaction with others. Leaders will then have a better understanding of the what and the why of emotional intelligence skills.

As the findings indicated that sound emotional intelligence skills might lead to improved conflict resolution and eventually lead to a conducive working climate in the school, all the roleplayers should be engaged in continuous professional development and workshops. These workshops should focus on establishing a clear, mutual understanding of the importance of emotional intelligence skills in addressing challenging situations that may escalate into a negative conflict state of affairs.

The finding also demonstrated that there is indeed a relationship between being emotionally intelligent and job satisfaction. Therefore, principals should be made aware of this, enabling them to work tirelessly to improve their skills and staff. This again could be done through periodic refresher training internally and externally.

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