Self-Awareness as a Key Emotional Intelligent Skill for Secondary School Principals' Leadership Toolkit

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the importance of self-awareness as a fundamental emotional intelligence skill for the school principals' leadership toolkit. Globally, school principals face complex challenges and responsibilities in the education system. Failure to manage these educational challenges effectively may result in failure as a principal. However, self-awareness as an emotional intelligence skill for school leadership demonstrates promising results in dealing with these difficulties. This qualitative study was conducted at six Motheo districts, Free State, South Africa secondary schools. Participants totaled 19, comprising six school principals, two deputy principals, three Heads of Departments (HODs), and eight teachers. The findings revealed that self-awareness as an emotional intelligence skill might have positive and significant results for school principals in managing and dealing with educational challenges and overall school leadership. The results indicated that self-awareness should be necessary for school principals. Improving the sub-skills of self-awareness, such as emotional awareness, self-regard, self-confidence, assertiveness, and independence, may give school principals the edge for school and principalship success. It is strongly recommended that principals and staff consider self-development and workshops or seminars on emotional intelligence, specifically self-awareness.

KEYWORDS

Educational challenges; emotional intelligence; leadership; school principal; self-awareness.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that school principals globally today face enormous challenges and responsibilities in the education system, which may eventually result in high levels of pressure, stress, and burnout amongst school principals (Gómez-Leal et al., 2021). Consequently, for many, resigning from leadership may become the better option (Bayar, 2016). It was stated by Jones and Ali (2021) that the education sector was rated as one of the worst professions when it came down to physical health and psychological well-being. What is even more thought-provoking is that it has been found by Turk and Wolfe (2019) that 25% of school principals leave their school after only one year in the profession, while almost 50% leave their schools after just three years. This can be problematic for such schools since educational leadership, and management research demonstrates principals' undisputed importance and essential part in school success (Blose et al., 2022).

A school principal is regarded as the leader and expected to be an effective leader of his school – one who can set a vision and goals for the school and influence work colleagues to strive towards those goals enthusiastically and sacrificially (Preetika & Priti, 2013). Further scrutiny of the concept of leadership reveals numerous definitions and that it is impossible to form a comprehensive, succinct definition that includes all the features and characteristics of leadership. However, leadership is defined as "influenced interactions with groups of followers to implement changes and achieve the determined goals" (Ghasabeh et al., 2015, p. 460). Similarly, according to Bush (2013, p. 6), educational leadership is "people who bend the motivations and actions of others to achieve certain goals; it implies that taking initiatives and risks." Due to the dynamic nature of these close interactions with other fellow humans in contested workspaces such as schools, researchers such as Pretorius and Plaatjies (2022), Pretorius (2021), and Goleman et al. (2013) have discovered that sound emotional intelligent skills seem to be vital in ensuring that educational goals are obtained.

In literature, emotional intelligence was derived and credited to Professor Edward Lee Thorndike in 1920, which started as Social Intelligence. Thorndike referred to social intelligence as "[the] ability to get along with others" (Punia et al., 2015, p. 967). Thus, social intelligence was explained by Thorndike in Punia et al. (2015) as being able to understand and manage people, young or old, male or female, to act sagaciously in human relationships. Towards the end of the chronological timeline, Peter Salovey and John Mayer, majoring in psychology, explored and defined emotional intelligence in their published article: "Emotional Intelligence" in 1990 (Dhani & Sharma, 2016). Thus, the earliest definition of emotional intelligence was that of Mayer and Salovey (1990, p. 198), who wrote that it is "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." However, the concept of emotional intelligence only became known to the public after the publication of Daniel Goleman's book: "Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More Than IQ" (Dhani &

Sharma, 2016; Punia et al., 2015). For school principals, being emotionally intelligent may greatly help handle the relationship challenges associated with their position.

The continuing changes in the education system caused school principals' job descriptions to change drastically; thus, the principal's leadership repertoire has become crucial for school success (Taole, 2013). As mentioned earlier, being a principal can be so demanding that studies have shown that some would rather resign and go back to being full-time teachers. A study by Bayar (2016) found that approximately 60% of participants (out of 200) considered leaving their leadership and managerial positions. In finding solutions to this problem, though, numerous research studies continue to investigate why some principals with similar educational qualifications, training and experiences continue to produce different levels of success at their schools (Bardach, 2008). Studies have revealed that one reason for a principal's success might depend on being emotionally intelligent (Hebert, 2011; Skordoulis et al., 2020). It has been articulated that the relationship between solid emotional intelligence and principals' job performances exemplified significant results (Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2022; Skordoulis et al., 2020).

A study conducted in Canada with five principals from large, urban school districts discovered crucial results pertaining to emotional intelligence and school leadership (Horne, 2017). Furthermore, Horne (2017) proved that higher-achieving schools were led and managed by principals with higher emotional intelligence skills. Basic emotional intelligence levels were present, such as perceiving, understanding, using, and managing emotions. Similar findings were achieved in a study conducted in the United States (California) by Fulcher-Gutierrez (2017). It was found that higher levels of emotional intelligence in school leaders reacted and responded more appropriately to various situations. Situations have more success in building and maintaining healthy relationships. Lastly, in South Africa, Bipath (2008) found that certain schools in the same geographical area displayed different results because of the principals' emotional intelligence – dysfunctional schools transformed into functional schools. These studies have shown that sound emotional intelligence skills could fill the gap in the principals' toolkit in coping with many of the inevitable challenges in the educational landscape.

Research Problem

Due to the continuous growing pressure on principals, they experience exhaustion on different levels: physically, emotionally, and mentally (Bayar, 2016). Although principals face several problems in addition to experiencing various demands and difficulties, pressure exists on them to manage and lead a school effectively. It has been stated by Allen (2022, p. 10) that school leaders have "a tremendous responsibility to get it right" – the expectations for success have been raised drastically, making the job more difficult regardless of the constant change in education. Therefore, emotional intelligence's attractiveness, or rather the necessity, is emphasized as a required skill for school leadership. Numerous research reports (Bower et al., 2018; Gómez-Leal et al., 2021) confirmed a significant correlation between successful school leaders and sufficient levels of emotional intelligence.

Nevertheless, it seems that many principals lack or have poor emotional intelligence skills, which might allow one to manage the growing demand of responsibilities, educational challenges, and duties as a principal. Furthermore, this may lead to ineffective leadership and failure as a leader. Pretorius and Plaatjies (2022) point out that emotional intelligence encompasses various components, including self-awareness which refers to the ability to understand oneself; self-management means managing one's own emotions; social awareness is the ability to recognize and understand others' emotions and lastly, relationship management the ability to use others' emotions to motivate them and achieve a specific goal. Each one of these competencies is comprehensive in scope. Providing the limitations associated with a research manuscript, we have decided to devote this paper to focusing on how one component of emotional intelligence may assist school principals in their leadership role: the competency of self-awareness. Applying the skill of self-awareness calls for school principals; to possess the competencies to identify one's strengths and weaknesses, assertiveness, self-confidence, emotional awareness, and independence. It was strongly argued by Gómez-Leal et al. (2021, p. 2) that "an awareness and understanding of emotions, the ability to manage one's emotions and the ability to express emotions in appropriate ways, given the context, are regarded as critical to effective school leadership." Therefore, principals in secondary schools require the development and improvement of self-awareness to be more effective leaders in their respective schools and, ultimately, to have the edge to achieve success as a principal.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Study

According to Adom et al. (2018), the research study adopted a theoretical framework that gives structure to a study leading to focus and vision. For this study, sections of the work of premium scholars in the discipline of emotional intelligence, namely Daniel Goleman and Reuven Bar-On in emotional intelligence, were used. Their research on emotional intelligence, in which they developed models of the topic, is two of the most recognized models of emotional intelligence in the literature. The models are as follows: Goleman and Boyatzis's Model of emotional intelligence (Goleman et al., 2013; Livesey, 2017), which is derived from one of Goleman's (2001) first emotional intelligence models, and Bar-On's (2005) Emotional Social Intelligence Model. The theories of both models of emotional intelligence are interrelated and intertwined, with intersecting findings and results that relate to cognitive intelligence and personality traits (Bar-On in Punia et al., 2015). Both the emotional intelligence models of Goleman-Boyatzis and Bar-On are considered mixed-method models of emotional intelligence, following a socio-emotional approach and focusing on the abilities and personality characteristics – known as the emotional and social competence model (McCleskey, 2015; Punia et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Kanesan and Fauzan (2019, p. 4) confirmed that this model consists of both "competency (ability) and general disposition (trait)." Goleman's dimension of self-awareness, listed under his emotional intelligence model, has been applied. In contrast, Bar-On's component of intrapersonal skills listed under his emotional intelligence model has also been

applied. As stated in the previous paragraphs, the skill of self-awareness forms the focus of this study.

Self-awareness was developed by Duval and Wicklund in 1972, who distinguished between subjective self-awareness and objective self-awareness (Carden et al., 2022). Subjective self-awareness is described by Carden et al. (2022, p. 143) as "a state of consciousness where attention is focused on events external to the person." On the other hand, objective self-awareness is a process of inwardly reflecting on oneself for social evaluation and comparison (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012), leading to judgment against personal self-developed standards, as Carden et al. (2022) mentioned. It is commonly assumed that a negative state of mind may occur since an inconsistency occurs between one's self-perception and self-developed standards. Past scholars believe that the impression of self-awareness as an aversive state may be connected to negative cogitation of self-consciousness – "rumination tends to be focused on negative thoughts" (Carden et al., 2022: p. 144). In contrast, a different perspective differentiates rumination and reflection – "where reflection is perceived as position and providing a road to self-consciousness and a route to learning" (Carden et al., 2022: p.144).

Self-awareness, one of the emotional intelligence competencies, refers to being "aware of both our mood and our thoughts about that mood" (Goleman, 1995, p. 47). Self-awareness is identifying and clearly understanding one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, drives and needs - and how it may affect others and their ultimate job performance (Bower et al., 2018; Livesey, 2017). It has been argued that self-awareness is the first step in becoming emotionally intelligent (Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). Goleman (Bower et al., 2018; Goleman, 1998; Goleman, 1995) further argue that persons who demonstrate higher self-awareness are honest, not overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful – not just with themselves but with others. Principals who display these traits are usually extremely concerned about their values' impact, such as honesty on staff and the broader school community. They also realize that being overly critical may create tensions, which hampers sound relationships – meaning that leaders (such as school principals) with significant levels of self-awareness would be aware and understand how and why emotions affect them, other people, and job performance (Goleman, 1998; Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). Delport et al. (2021) point out that self-awareness refers to being sensitive to one's innermost self, which leads to significant trust in oneself and, ultimately, in one's decisions.

Interestingly, a positive and significant role between self-awareness and team performance has been shown by Dierdorff et al. (2019) as well as a previous study indicated that emotional intelligence affects self-efficacy (Kostić-Bobanović, 2020) and job satisfaction (Bower et al., 2020). Therefore, as a school principal, understanding how this domain comes to life in the school setup is essential. Since self-awareness showed positive results in leadership effectiveness (Carden et al., 2022; Strum et al., 2014), self-awareness as part of the educational management and leadership duties of leaders is deemed of high importance and value by various researchers (Bower et al., 2018; Carden et al., 2022; Da Fonseca, 2020). Moreover,

Goleman et al. (2013) regard this skill as indispensable since it is the foundation for the rest of the emotional intelligence domains. Additionally, Dierdorff et al. (2019) highlighted that challenges and difficulty in managing relationships might seem inevitable where self-awareness is lacking, as well as contributing as a team member and adapting to situations and individuals. Supporting this notion, Ashley and Reiter-Palmon (2012) claimed that sufficient levels of self-awareness demonstrate better adjustments for individuals to their environments.

Delving deeper into the components of self-awareness and drawing from the emotional intelligence model of Goleman (2001), the following emotional intelligent sub-skills are listed under self-awareness: emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. A short explanation of these subskills will be given below.

According to Goleman and Boyatzis (in Livesey, 2017), emotional self-awareness is considered to identify and understand the emotions oneself and their impact on personal performance and recognize the feeling to discard situations that may cause discomfort. Principals' knowledge and understanding of this sub-skill is vital. They must stay in control of their emotions, especially in conflict situations or when dealing with sensitive matters. The accurate emotional intelligence skill self-assessment refers to the awareness and understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses (Goleman et al., 2013; Livesey, 2017;), which is of particular importance when a leader wishes to improve the overall self-awareness ability (see Victoroff & Boyatzis, 2012; Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). Therefore, principals should regularly retrospect the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in this area (SWOT). Through this approach, principals may become aware of their behavior, leading to a more significant overall development (Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). Self-confidence is defined by Goleman et al. (2013, p. 31; Livesey, 2017, p. 27) as "a sound sense of one's self-worth and capabilities." However, it has been argued by Tamunomiebi and Owhorji (2018) that only once one's confidence is developed one's feelings can be acknowledged and recognized, as well as how they impact others and themselves instead of being forced to avoid or hide those feelings.

On the other hand, under Bar-On's model of emotional intelligence (Matthews et al., 2004), intrapersonal skills, which strongly relate to self-awareness, are defined by Bar-On (in Punia et al., 2015, p. 981; Bar-On, 2005, p. 4) as "the ability to be aware and understand oneself." According to Bar-On's (2005) intrapersonal component, some interesting emotional intelligent skills are listed. These include self-regard, emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, self-actualization and independence (Bar-On, 2005). Self-regarding, understanding, accepting, and respecting oneself is particularly important for principals as this is the foundation for developing authenticity and an accurate understanding of themselves and being at peace with who they are. Bar-On (2005, p. 27) states that emotional self-awareness is "to be aware of and understand one's emotions." The ability to constructively communicate and express one's emotions is called assertiveness. For school principals - who are often requested to stand up for a progressive point of view, this skill is vital to voice their thoughts effectively while respecting the rights and beliefs of the staff. Concerning self-actualization, it is the striving to achieve

personal objectives and reach one's full potential. Principals who recognize the value of self-actualization have clear personal objectives regarding what they need to actively improve on a personal level to reach their full potential as educational leaders.

Regarding independence, this refers to self-control, self-reliance, and "free of emotional dependency on others" (Bar-On, 2005, p. 27). Thus, for school principals, mastering the skill of independence will enable them to operate confidently without fear of being isolated or, worse, getting allies among staff or the school community. According to Pinatik (2021), independence is the ability not to be influenced by others, to be honest when considering facts, and to be objective when dealing with educational challenges or matters.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This study explored the importance of self-awareness as a fundamental emotional intelligence skill for the secondary school principals' leadership toolkit. The following research questions were used as a guide:

- What are the tenets of self-awareness as an emotional intelligence skill?
- How can secondary school principals apply self-awareness skills to improve their leadership practices?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm as the research paradigm. In short, an interpretivist paradigm studies the understanding of the world and human experiences (Creswell et al., 2017; Dean, 2018). One of the aims of an interpretivist paradigm, as stated by Cohen et al. (2007, p. 22), is "to understand how this glossing of reality goes on at one time in one place and compare it with what goes on in different times and places." Thus, an interpretive paradigm was employed since a better understanding of the studied phenomenon (self-awareness) will be gained in-depth, as well as its complexity, through the experiences and perspectives of participants.

Using a qualitative approach is well-established in exploring the meaning of the studied phenomenon (Chombo, 2019). Furthermore, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative approach is advisable when a problem needs to be explored. Thus, the aim is to explore and describe a particular phenomenon. This study explored the importance of self-awareness as a fundamental emotional intelligence skill and a critical leadership skill for secondary school principals. The research approach implemented for this study was qualitative since one of the main advantages is an in-depth and rich account of the information being produced (Queirós et al., 2017). In addition, one of the main aims of the researcher using a qualitative approach is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem from the participants' perspectives and opinions without trying to control anything (Farghaly, 2018).

Since qualitative studies are characterized by their flexibility, which allows studies to collect data using multiple methods, two data-collecting methods were used to investigate the importance of self-awareness as a leadership skill for school principals: interviews and questionnaires. By

using multiple methods, triangulation is attained, which strengthens the study's credibility (Anney, 2014). Interviews were conducted with school principals, whereas questionnaires were handed out to deputy principals, HODs and teachers. For interviews, semi-structured individual interviews were used. Using semi-structured interviews provides detailed information from participants' views. One advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that it avoids ambiguity since the researcher can ask follow-up questions regarding specific issues that may arise, as well as clarity or elaboration on specific responses (Creswell et al., 2017). As mentioned, open-ended questionnaires were handed out for the participants' completion. Open-ended questionnaires eliminate the limitations of pre-set categories of responses; thus, participants can write freely according to their own terms, explaining, describing, and clarifying (Cohen et al., 2007; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the individual semi-structured interviews conducted with the principals and the questionnaires completed by the deputy principals, HODs and teachers. This method is considered appropriate for investigating participants' viewpoints, comparing similarities and differences, and capturing unexpected understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6) as "a method for identifying, analyzing, describing and reporting themes found within the data." The data analysis process followed the suggested procedure by Brain and Clarke (2013) for thematic analysis; after transcriptions, codes were generated. Afterwards, high-frequency codes were clustered together to create initial themes – qualitative researchers create themes from collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). The themes were separated manually, and the researchers reviewed the data thoroughly to ensure rigor.

Participants

Generally, according to Creswell et al. (2017), qualitative studies use purposive sampling. Furthermore, the main aim of purposive sampling is to select individuals most likely to offer sufficient and adequate information relevant to the research questions (Creswell et al., 2017). It was decided that the best sampling method to adopt for this investigation was to use purposive sampling. For this study, the following participants from six secondary schools were purposefully selected: (a) six secondary school principals, (b) two deputy principals, (c) three HODs, and (c) eight teachers. This group enabled the researcher to obtain a comprehensive account from a leadership perspective regarding the importance of self-awareness as a critical emotional intelligence skill as a leadership skill for principals. The selection of participants focused on a particular group within a secondary school, thus grades 8 to 12. A total of 19 participants were selected – six principals, two deputy principals, three HODs and eight teachers (where a teacher is selected – it was preferable to one with teaching experience of five years or more). Words were carefully used when making comparisons, and gender assumptions were avoided to avoid bias.

Regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been created. Therefore, after data transcription, it was reported that a letter and number were allocated to each participant; for example, P1S1 is participant one from school one, and so forth. The table below indicates the positions, gender, age, and years of experience of the participants:

Table 1

Demographic characteristics and position in years of experience

Code of the participants	Position	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience	Years principal	Qualification
School 1 (S1)						
Participant 1 (P1)	Principal	M	51-55	28	12	B.Ed. Hons.
Participant 2 (P2)	Deputy Principal	M	61+	31+	n/a	n/a
Participant 3 (P3)	HOD	F	46-50	21-25	n/a	n/a
Participant 4 (P4)	Teacher	M	36-40	6-10	n/a	n/a
Participant 5 (P5)	Teacher	F	36-40	11-15	n/a	n/a
School 2 (S2)						
Participant 6 (P6)	Principal	M	56-60	31+	<1	B.Ed
Participant 7 (P7)	HOD	M	56-60	26-30	n/a	n/a
Participant 8 (P8)	Teacher	F	31-35	11-15	n/a	n/a
Participant 9 (P9)	Teacher	F	36-40	11-15	n/a	n/a
Participant 10 (P10)	Teacher	F	26-30	1-5	n/a	n/a
School 3 (S3)						
Participant 11 (P11)	Principal	M	51-55	30	9	MBA & M.Ed
Participant 12 (P12)	Teacher	M	36-40	11-15	n/a	n/a
School 4 (S4)						
Participant 13 (P13)	Principal	F	50	26-30	6	B.A. Ed.
Participant 14 (P14)	Deputy Principal	F	46-50	21-25	n/a	n/a
Participant 15 (P15)	HOD	F	51-55	31+	n/a	n/a
Participant 16 (P16)	Teacher	M	36-40	11-15	n/a	n/a
School 5 (S5)						
Participant 17 (P17)	Principal	M	61+	31+ (43)	11	B.Sc. & HOD
Participant 18 (P18)	Teacher	F		31+	n/a	n/a
School 6 (S6)						
Participant 19 (P19)	Principal	F	51-55	26-30	1-5	HOD & School Leadership Certificate

Most principals who participated in the study were males, indicating that the positions were still male dominated. According to Martínez et al. (2021), less than 50% of the total female teachers in education in South Africa are in principal positions. The data also demonstrates that most principals possess little leadership experiences, which may indicate that a sound understanding of self-awareness and its importance as a key leadership skill may be wanting. In terms of years of teaching experience, the data shows that all the principals have immense experience. This experience may help them understand self-awareness's value as they

interacted intensely with learners, parents, and colleagues over the years. It may also help them understand the concept in their role as principals. Regarding qualifications, these participants are well qualified, whereas one had a leadership qualification in education and two advanced degrees (Honours in Education and Master of Education in Management and Leadership).

Ethical Considerations

Permission and authorization for ethical clearance were requested from and granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State (ethics number: UFS-HSD2020/2093/163). Additionally, permission to conduct the study at selected schools was granted by the Free State Department of Education – study details were communicated to them to ensure participants' protection. Participants obtained consent after being fully informed about the study and answering questions about any uncertainty. Participation was voluntary, and the option to withdraw from the study at any point during the research was given.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The following themes derived from the data were identified: accurate self-assessment, self-confidence, emotional awareness, assertiveness, self-regard, and independence.

Accurate Self-assessment

Positive and promising results were achieved regarding principals' understanding of self-assessment. All school principals (P1S1; P6S2: P11S3; P13S4; P17S5; P19S6) did accurate self-assessments (formally or informally) and were aware of their strengths, and all the other participants (working under their principals) were able to confirm that their principals are knowledgeable and know their strengths and weaknesses. However, only one principal could not share possible weaknesses (P6S2) or identify any weakness relating to his role as a school leader, a principal, and thus any leadership quality. However, three staff members, a HOD (P7S2) and two teachers (P8S2; P10S2), working under the leadership of this principal, stated that he pleases everyone to avoid conflict and that staff members take advantage of that approach. They regard this as one of his weaknesses. Being unaware of and not applying self-assessment in identifying one's weaknesses may lead to being unable to develop as a person and improve specific behaviors. For example, one principal (P1S1) was aware of one weakness, conflict management, and how this caused complicated situations, but worked on it for years and eventually got better at it. Through self-assessment, there is more improvement in this area and more benefit than harm for him personally and the school when conflict is managed.

Self-assessment also involves and requires one to do self-reflection to learn from experiences and improve behaviors. The findings show that most school principals perform constant self-checks and identify areas where to improve on. One participant (P1S1) reported that he learnt from experience how to stay quiet and calm when criticized or difficult situations occur. His approach was to go and think about it. Now, this participant sees it as strength; in fact, one HOD (P3S1) indicated that this principal could accept criticism without being negatively influenced. Another principal (P13S4) also does "harsh introspection" to "identify areas of development

that you need." This participant went on to find a life coach to teach her specific skills after identifying the weakness and the impact it may have. Thus, principals' weaknesses may become strengths over the years after accurate self-assessment, identification of weaknesses, and willingness to work on them.

Self-confidence

One participant (P2S1), a deputy principal, highlighted the self-confidence of his principal by indicating that he can make sound decisions, despite uncertainty and under pressure and believes it is the correct decision – showing confidence in his capabilities. Furthermore, the deputy principal (P2S1) confirmed that his principal "[l]ikes challenges." This principal (P1S1) also confirmed that he always seeks positivity in any setback or failure and for the staff members to stay motivated, thus demonstrating confidence in his capabilities – being positive and resilient also being listed as one of his strengths. Another principal (P6S2) explained a situation where he overturned the decision of the school management team since he believed it was the better and right decision for the school at that moment. This approach predominantly demonstrated high levels of self-confidence and assertiveness in doing what is right and not always what the majority believes.

Additionally, another principal (P13S4) indicated she is not afraid of change; however, if the "personal reasoning overshadows the professional motivation, then I would not." Furthermore, a HOD (P15S4) working with this principal confirmed she would not change "at the cost of the school and its principles." In addition, the HOD further stated that the principal… "takes full responsibility and manages difficult situations," which, getting to the main point, illustrates the principal's self-confidence in her capabilities as a principal through taking and making tough decisions and trusting her abilities as a principal in doing what is believed as beneficial for the school.

This female principal realized and believed that it is critical to becoming more self-confident (and assertive, or that matter) to do what is right and voice her opinions:
"If I do not have the ability to stand up straight and voice my opinion at a principals' meeting where 90% are male, I just as while could go sit in the corner."

Another principal (P13S5) also indicated a good sense of self-confidence by explaining that in conflict situations, he focuses on what is right; "I serve the case, what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong." This indicates a combination of self-awareness skills originating from his emotional awareness, impact on the school's value system, strengths and weaknesses, and confidence in doing what is right as a school principal.

Emotional awareness

Participant 1 (P1S1), with 12 years of experience being a school principal, demonstrated sound emotional awareness by stating that he must "… stay calm." Furthermore, the principal said, "Some of those people [principals] threaten and scream at the staff. Staff members must know this is a place where they can talk calmly and speak their heart out." In responding to another question, the principal claimed that sometimes it is difficult and that he feels infuriated but will

not show it on the outside. It is evident that P1 has a sound level of emotional awareness by identifying and knowing his emotions and, secondly, by understanding the impact of these negative emotions on the spirit of staff members, their performance, and their performance. Both Participant 6 and Participant 19 supported that principals need to be more mindful of the impact of their emotions on their subordinates. The participants stated that "[w]hen you lose yourself with the staff… [and] humiliate him or her… you basically lost the person forever" (P6S2) - meaning the principal lost the respect of the staff member. Most assuredly, the relationship is damaged, and contrarywise: "… as soon as a person manages a situation peacefully, it leads to calmness" (P19S6).

Interestingly enough, a participant (P6S2), who was currently acting principal with more than 31 years of teaching experience and part of the board to select a new principal, stated that teachers today do not want principals who are emotionally unstable and let negative emotions most likely have outbursts on staff members. In the same vein, participant 13 (S4) also indicated the value of a principal realizing what the impact of their identified emotions may have on staff: "… expressing your emotions to staff, I am able to do that, but I rarely do. If I do, when I do that, it has a very positive effect because people appreciate vulnerability." Similarly, another principal (P17S5) explained that being mindful of one's emotions and understanding their impact on the staff members may develop tranquility among staff.

Assertiveness

One participant (P8S2), a teacher with more than ten years of experience, agrees that her principal can express his feelings and thoughts accurately. However, emotions sometimes get the better of him, and he will say exactly what he thinks or feels. Similarly, one participant (P9S2) supports that principals are also human and that emotions sometimes get the better of someone. However, she believes it is essential for principals to stay strong and move to another "level" when accurately expressing feelings and thoughts. Thus, emotional awareness and assertiveness are of utmost importance since, as earlier findings indicate, a lack of controlling negative emotions and/or thoughts may do more damage than harm.

One principal (P13S4) acknowledged that she must be assertive and able to express thoughts and feelings accurately since "… you will be asked the difficult questions and that you have to ask the difficult questions." Thus, she pays more attention to the situations and "approaches every conversation strategically" to express any thoughts or feelings, especially difficult or negative ones, accurately, constructively, and appropriately. However, this principal needed a life coach "… because I am so impatient, and my impatience would have gotten in the way of my management." Thus, very early in her career, she realized what damage not expressing thoughts and feelings accurately and constructively may cause her staff and that traits such as arrogance and disrespect may lead to further destruction in relationships with staff. Lastly, the principal stated a positive effect of expressing one's emotions – "… it has a very positive effect because people appreciate vulnerability." Similarly, a principal with more than ten years of experience (P17S5) points out that he speaks openly to his staff when something is

not right or bothering him. He believes in being honest and sincere with the staff because it will lead to more support and loyalty: "… they will stand with you."

Self-regard

One principal (P17S5) openly admitted that he is an honest person by stating that "[w]alk with my heart on the shoulder. They [staff] quickly notice if something is wrong." Some principals, or teachers for that matter, may see it as a weakness to show vulnerability. However, this principal demonstrates a level of self-regard by accepting who he is—in addition, accepting his weakness if he sees it as a weakness since the result indicates more positive consequences of this approach – getting more support. Interestingly, one principal (P13S4) stated that "acknowledgement of weaknesses" as a needed skill for a principal may lead to accepting one's weakness which opens the opportunity to work on it or use it, which can only benefit the school.

On the other hand, a demonstration of this principal's self-regard skills was by arguing that principals cannot "be a people pleaser", – indicating that she accepts and respects herself and her strengths and weaknesses. In addition, she also confirmed that she is "quite fine with someone disagreeing with me, but blatant rudeness and unprofessional behavior is something I do not tolerate." This quote from asking how a principal responds when a staff member questions your authority or instruction demonstrates efficient levels of self-regard, respect for oneself, and strong assertiveness. Thus, the findings may suggest that principals who have a better sense of self-regard and accept themselves for who they are may lead to more benefits than one may assume.

Independence

Findings for the emotional intelligence skill independence under self-awareness/intrapersonal have not been promising and may lack in certain areas. However, half of the principals realized and indicated that being a school principal is a lonely seat and/or lonely road to take, as demonstrated by the comments of the principals of three of the participating schools (P1S1; P13S4; P17S5):

"Most of the times, a lonely chair, most of the times must learn these things for yourself."
"Principals stand alone."
"School principal is just a lonely road you walk."

Thus, some findings may indicate that school principals must have a sense of independence since a school principal is the one that needs or instead expected to stay strong emotionally and mentally. Additionally, principals are pressured to keep professional relationships and treat everyone fairly. "Staff members aren't your friends; they cannot be your friends" (P13S4); "It becomes dangerous terrain. You must treat your staff members fairly and treat everyone within the working environment fairly and equally" (P11S4). This finding may not imply that principals can be, in general, independent. However, this finding indicates that regardless of being unable to be independent, principals need to practice or develop some level of independence for the school and their members.

Furthermore, independence is the ability to be objective when dealing with any situation, thus not being easily influenced by others. One principal (P6S2) demonstrated this by overturning an important decision which affects the school by looking at what is best for the school, facts, and not what the people may feel or think. Thus, principals may struggle to be independent when staff members become friends rather than colleagues, where decisions are more likely to be made subjectively instead of objectively.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the findings that the emotional skills under the self-awareness component may have positive and significant results for school principals in dealing with everyday educational challenges. It has been stated by Da Fonseca (2020) that one of the first signs of derailment for a leader is a lack of self-awareness. Supported by Dierdorff et al. (2019, p. 2892), who stated that "if one lacks [self-awareness], then it is difficult to see how one can adapt one's behavior to the circumstances and individuals." However, on the contrary, Dierdorff et al. (2019) claimed that sufficient self-awareness led to effectiveness and productivity among staff. Generally, school principals demonstrated adequate knowledge, understanding and ability regarding the emotional intelligence component – self-awareness; this is promising since a lack of self-awareness in leaders may lead to negative consequences for schools. It has also been found by Da Fonseca (2020) that leaders with inadequate self-awareness revealed more likely to engage in negative behaviors such as narcissism, self-interest, emotional inconsistency, negative or ignored feedback, unpredictable behavior and blaming others. These are also chrematistics of destructive leadership (Shaw et al., 2011). Furthermore, leaders in serious need of self-awareness were portrayed as being blind by Goleman (1998).

Participants, especially school principals, demonstrated abilities regarding self-assessment – meaning being able to do self-assessment because participants could confidently state their strengths and weaknesses. Doing and being conscious of their strengths and weaknesses may assist principals in dealing with and managing educational challenges. It has been articulated by Dierdorff et al. (2019) that if inaccurate or lacks accurate self-assessment (own contributions), the individual may experience difficulties in contributing to the team regardless of the number of contributions which was evident, especially in teamwork. Dierdorff et al. (2019, p. 2893) claimed that "self-awareness of individual contributions is important above and beyond actual contributions in team contexts." Additionally, Goleman (1998) contended that successful leaders know their limits and weaknesses, thus knowing what and where to improve. Some educational challenges, which on most occasions require teamwork for the school principal, for example, with the deputy principal and Departmental Head or School Management Team, might cause more severe harm or difficulties for school principals since it may fall in their weaker areas as a leader, thus not being aware of having the ability to manage those challenges.

However, to be aware of one's weakness when it comes to challenges, principals may ask for assistance from staff members such as the deputy principals and start improving and developing those weaker areas. Supporting this finding is the work of Tamunomiebi and Owhorji (2018), who claimed that once school leaders show greater consciousness of their assets and weakness, they can start working on identified harmful behaviors. For example, one participant indicated that his weakness is conflict management; only after being aware of the weakness was he able to start working on it by asking for assistance and trying different, more functional approaches when conflict situations arise. Thus, the principal improved this weakness over time, which became one of his strengths. Some educational challenges may be difficult and time-consuming to resolve because the school principals lack the necessary skills. However, being aware of those weaker areas as a leader, the first step in resolving these educational challenges will be to develop strategies to counter these weaknesses.

Regarding self-confidence, it is critical to note that school principals who demonstrate trust and confidence in their capabilities may manage and deal with educational challenges more effectively and productively. It has been stated by Banga (2019) that self-confidence is the "oil that smoothly turns the wheels of the relationships between an individual and their capability" – their abilities, talents, and potential. Due to the immense pressure often experienced in educational environments, these educational challenges tend to be avoided by school principals since the fear of making mistakes and the need for confidence may be surpassed. It has been found by Norman and Hyland (2003) that a lack of self-confidence is caused by self-doubt and fear of making mistakes. Thus, a principal doubting his abilities to manage and deal with educational challenges may not resolve or come up with solutions which could lead to even more problems.

Additionally, Tamunomiebi and Owhorji (2018) highlighted that principals are more likely to feel incompetent, incapable, and self-doubting when lacking self-confidence. On the contrary, Goleman (1998) found that self-confident leaders have the strength to make difficult decisions and stand by their decisions despite disagreement or disapproval – demonstrated by a few principals who overturned decisions and/or made unpopular decisions. This level of self-confidence may create hope, resilience, and optimism in colleagues, as Tanui et al. (2018) argue.

An interesting finding that stood out for emotional awareness was the impact school principals' lack of awareness of emotions on staff may have. The negative emotional impact on staff members from school principals may escalate to a highly hostile working climate of distrust, destructive relationships, unmotivated staff, and lack of communication. It has been found by Burns (2017) that leaders who are not aware of the impact of their emotions on their followers lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and motivation. A leader will be more likely to express their emotions adequately once they have the competence to be conscious of their emotions (Goleman, 1998; Tamunomiebi & Owhorji, 2018). An emotionally stable and tranquil leader will contribute immeasurably to a smooth and pleasant

working climate where staff and learners can flourish and accomplish the larger organizational goals.

Another finding was principals tried to stay calm, demonstrating a wholesome understanding of being emotionally aware. These principals could identify or predict negative emotions and know how to manage them, leading school principals to stay focused on the task and not act emotionally. In support of this are the findings by Tamunomiebi and Owhorji (2018), who articulated that leaders with adequate awareness of their emotions, such as anger, will suppress them and deal with the task in front.

A few principals demonstrate the crucial advantages of being assertive. Lazenby (2015) found that assertive leaders were more effective and appropriate than less assertive leaders in conflict situations. On the other hand, however, assertive leaders tend to be seen as unsympathetic and dominant (Lazenby, 2015). An interesting finding is that of one principal who claimed that being honest, open, and assertive leads to more support from staff members. This finding aligns with what Lazenby (2015) found that assertive leaders tend to be more likeable and seen as competent.

Additionally, Rofiki et al. (2022) also found that assertiveness led to qualities of authenticity and mutual respect. Furthermore, assertiveness is strongly related to motivation, persuasion, self-confidence, and risk-taking (Rofiki et al., 2022; Lazenby, 2015), which strongly connects to the findings in the study of principals who demonstrated self-confidence and now assertiveness when it comes to decision-making and taking risks despite possible resistance from staff. The approach of another principal who is aware of the importance and the need to be assertive aligns strongly with what Rofiki et al. (2022) found that encourages school principals to express themselves to serve the school's needs. A few principals exhibited this need to be assertive because challenges may not be dealt with effectively, as well as being able to stand up for themselves and the school and obtain respect at principal meetings. A similar finding has been found by Naidoo (2019), also in South African public schools, that school principals are more likely to yield to the pressures of governing bodies and unions who are not assertive. These unions and governing bodies may have the best interest of the schools. Still, they may not always be aware of what is best for the schools as opposed to the school principals being there physically and knowing exactly what is happening in their school.

It has been argued by Delport et al. (2021) that school principals, being the leader and managers of the school, have a tremendous responsibility. To add, this all starts with one's self-concept, which is an overarching for self-regard and defined as "self-image and self-esteem, which includes all feelings and thoughts of all talents, capabilities, benefits, strengths and weakness through interaction with others" (Delport et al., 2021 p. 204). Thus, leaders have an immense effect on the performance of their staff and their own (Delport et al., 2021). The study revealed that principals who respect themselves and who they are gained more support and respect from teachers. Delport et al. (2021) also alluded that self-leadership, which significantly relates to self-regard, indicated increased effectiveness in leadership in areas such as team

cooperation, cohesion, and work-related goals. Furthermore, it can be argued that job satisfaction increases with principals with high self-regard since mutual respect and trust may increase when principals know, accept, and respect themselves and who they are. Lastly, more support may lead to better work outcomes and meeting deadlines, which strongly relates to a finding by Delport et al. (2021) – "... can get work done punctually by their followers."

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research study found promising and positive findings relating to the emotional intelligence component of self-awareness and improved leadership and management for school principals in secondary schools. With the changing educational environment, school principals who are more likely to enhance their self-awareness skills may provide better leadership, and this, in turn, may lead to effective leadership and management of the school as a whole consisting of the staff, parents, stakeholders, department of education and more. The educational environment and system are in constant change, and principals need to embrace that and look for ways to improve as a principal. With its many abilities, being self-aware may assist school principals in being successful and effective school principals today and in the future – an inevitable skill that every principal should have in their toolkit. As the findings indicated, self-awareness may improve various areas of a principal's emotional intelligence, leading to improved relationships, reduced stress and burnout, increased job satisfaction, and better management of educational challenges.

The findings showed that self-assessment might give principals a better understanding and awareness of their weaknesses and strengths. This, in return, may lead to better utilization of these strengths and improvement of weaknesses. Additionally, the findings implied that principals' self-confidence might deal with educational challenges more effectively and will not shy away from any challenges that may arise since the trust in their capabilities in dealing with this seems higher than principals who are not self-confident enough. Being emotionally aware may lead to better relationships and awareness of the impact of emotions, especially negative emotions, on the school environment. The findings also demonstrated that more assertive principals tend to deal with educational challenges more effectively.

Additionally, principals have more support from staff, and mutual trust and respect seem to improve when principals are open and honest, thus assertive. The findings for self-regard cannot draw significant conclusions due to the lack of data gained regarding self-regard. However, the study revealed that principals who respect and know who they are and accept that demonstrated more teacher support. Thus, one may argue this could lead to better job performance, job satisfaction, and increased overall productivity. Displaying high levels of independence, principals may demonstrate much better judgement, make far better choices aligned with the school's needs, and not be influenced by other people's feelings and opinions. Research on independence in school principals is lacking, but one study of independence on auditors found that higher independence led to better work quality (Pinatik, 2021).

It is recommended that school principals allocate time for self-development in this area, self-awareness as well as emotional intelligence. This should be done by attending workshops and/or seminars presented by experts in this field. In addition, Short Learning Programs on emotional intelligence may be implemented focusing on self-awareness and/or emotional intelligence. Furthermore, personality tests may be strongly considered for principals to determine the levels of their strengths and weaknesses. Knowledge of shortcomings may force principals to reflect profoundly and address them, whilst understanding strengths may improve self-concept and confidence. Lastly, school principals should familiarize themselves with the entire concept of emotional intelligence, especially self-awareness, to obtain better insight, understanding and knowledge that could eventually lead to improved management, leadership, and practices in schools.

As is the case with any study, this study also has limitations. The study included five selected secondary schools in one city. Therefore, the participants in the study cannot be representative of the entire population of primary school and secondary school principals in South Africa. This study showed that various topics warrants further research. For example, further investigations need to be conducted about the need for and importance of EI-skills in the rest of the management team and educators. Furthermore, it is vital to establish how EI-training programmes, courses and seminars can assist newly appointed principals with educational challenges.

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