

What's Emotions Got To Do With It? School Principals Being Emotionally Intelligent

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the strategies that school principals use to manage their emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice. Methodologically, this is a qualitative study located within the interpretive paradigm. Two methods of data production were employed, namely, semi-structured interviews with school principals and focus group interviews with teachers. Eleven school principals were selected based on convenience for the semi-structured interviews. Fifty-five teachers, clustered into eleven groups were purposively selected for the focus group interviews. All the interviews were digitally audio recorded. The transcribed interviews were then subjected to a process of inductive content analysis. The findings indicate that school principals use strategies such as time outs from emotionally charged situations to strategies such as logical reasoning when confronted with situations that could be potentially unpleasant. This paper recommends that sessions on emotional intelligence be factored into pre-service and in-service leadership development programs for school principals.

INTRODUCTION

Academics, practitioners and reviewers from almost every field of study conclude that leadership is a central variable in the equation that defines organizational success. Looking specifically at education, there is evidence that a school principal's leadership is a central ingredient in school success (Leithwood and Wahlstrom 2008). While this is known about school leadership, little is known about the emotions of school leadership (Yamamoto et al. 2013) given that schools are emotional workplaces (Hargreaves 1998) and teaching is an emotional activity (Beatty 2000). There is growing recognition among researchers that educating is a deeply emotional experience and increasingly there is the acknowledgment of the centrality of emotion to educational leadership (Knight-Diop and Oesterreich 2009). The day-to-day work of a school principal is about people and relation-

ships, and the social interactions this invokes (Crawford 2007). Beatty (2000:333) borrowing from Loader (1997) incisively points out the emotions of school leadership by declaring, "Principals cry, laugh, dream and become suspicious..." In Grobler's (2014) view, successful school leadership is about achieving results through and with other people. These social encounters have the potential to evoke an emotional response, which at times may be covert or sometimes be immediately visible. Being able to recognize and handle such emotions is an important aspect of a school principal's attributes. Grobler (2014) accentuates that "while cognitive ability is an important aspect of leadership, it is not sufficient on its own in predicting personal effectiveness". Rather, it is about being emotionally intelligent as well. To paraphrase Goleman (1998), effective leaders are alike in one crucial way, as they all have a high degree of emotional intelligence. Given that "emotions are powerful forces in school leaders' lives" (Zembylas 2015:2), the purpose of this paper is to explore the strategies that school principals use to manage emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice.

Emotional intelligence has become a vital part of the way present day leaders face the significant challenges they have to face (Iuscu et al. 2012). Competent leaders are able to read and understand their own emotions and the emotions of the people they are leading. Taking into

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account emotions of the self and of others, a good leader will know how to influence followers in a manner that is acceptable to all involved (Bipath 2008; Cliffe 2011). Moreover, when one is aware of one's emotions and that of others conflict and resistance in the workplace can be minimized (Cliffe 2011). While this is known about emotions and leadership, evidence of emotions, self-awareness, or self-reflection on the part of school principals is undeveloped in the literature (Yamamoto et al. 2013). The words of Yamamoto et al. (2013:166) are apposite here where they proclaim, "literature that ignores or neglects emotion in leadership reveals only a partial image of leadership practice and theorizing". More to the point is Beatty (2000) when she proclaims that little seems to have been written about the person of the leader and the emotions that person experiences while leading. Therefore, this paper is significant in that it aims to fill a gap in the literature by addressing how school principals as school leaders manage their emotions in the course of executing their leadership functions. Further, it may dispel the myth that "emotion...[is] seen as feminine" (Crawford 2007) and therefore, should be ignored and/or downplayed (Yamamoto et al. 213).

In this paper the focus is on the emotions of the school principal. While the researchers acknowledge that there are multiple leaders (both formal and informal) in a school (Spillane 2006), the focus in this paper is on the "leader of leaders" namely, the school principal because she/he is considered the pivot around which the school turns (Supovitz et al. 2010). The term leadership as used in this paper refers to a relationship of influence over people directed towards the achievement of goals or outcomes (Christie 2010). Leadership, however, cannot be understood without reference to management. The two processes complement each other and both are needed for an organization such as a school to prosper (Grant 2009). Management is viewed as an aspect of leadership concerned with the maintenance of performance through planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling (Jwan and Ong'ondo 2011). Since leadership is a practical activity, leadership practice in this paper refers to the particular instances of leadership as they unfold in the moment-by-moment interactions in a particular place and time in the school (Harris et al. 2007). It has to do with what school principals do and the moves they make as they

execute tasks in their day-to-day work (Spillane et al. 2001).

The paper commences by elucidating the objectives of the study and explanations of the construct emotional intelligence. Thereafter, an account on the research methodology underpinning this study is presented. The findings of the study follow and are presented using themes that emerged from the data. A discussion drawing on relevant literature is woven into the findings. The implications of this paper in respect of strategies that school principals use to manage emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice and recommendations for capacitating school principals on emotional intelligence brings this paper to conclusion.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper explores the strategies that school principals use to manage their own emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice.

Emotional Intelligence

In order to understand emotional intelligence there needs to be an understanding of emotions (Anand and Udaya Surian 2010). Put simply, emotions are internal feelings (Shiota and Kalat 2007). Prinz (2005) defines emotions as judgments and feelings of pleasure and pain. Emotions are usually triggered by internal or external events (George 2000; Alston et al. 2010). Emotions play an essential role in human lives since they impact the beliefs, inform decision-making and guide how one adapts to the world around (Gratch and Marsella 2004). On the other hand, emotional intelligence, a term coined by Salovey and Meyer (1990), refers to one's ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions. For school principals this would mean a demonstration of "self-awareness, social awareness, and the ability to manage self and others' behaviors" (Sanchez-Nunez et al. 2015: 67). It would entail the capacity to effectively perceive, express, understand, and manage one's emotions and the emotions of others in a positive and productive manner (Anand and Udaya Surian 2010).

A theory of emotional intelligence was mooted by Salovey and Mayer (1990), which com-

prised three processes—appraisal and expression of emotion, regulation of emotion, and utilization of emotion as intelligence. Anand and Udaya Surian (2010) drawing on Salovey and Mayer (1990) explain that appraisal and expression of emotion includes the ability to convey personal emotions both verbally and nonverbally as well as perceive and understand the expressed emotions of others. Regulation of emotion incorporates the ability to be adept at using emotion to influence moods in the self as well as others. The process of utilizing emotion as intelligence encompasses the emotionally intelligent person using emotions to effectively decide on a solution to a problem.

Building on Salovey and Mayer's work, Goleman popularized the term emotional intelligence (Anand and Udaya Surian 2010; Cliffe 2011). According to Goleman (1998), there are five critical pillars or competencies of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, social awareness (empathy), and social skills. Each of the five components of emotional intelligence can greatly impact the way a leader such as a school principal perceives and reacts to all types of organizational events (Anand and Udaya Surian 2010). Self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation are important competencies for intrapersonal emotion management while social awareness and social skills are about interpersonal emotion management. Given the focus of this paper on the strategies school principals use to manage their own emotions, the emphasis will therefore be on the intrapersonal component of emotion management. In terms of the intrapersonal component, self-awareness is about recognizing a feeling as it happens, self-regulation is about handling feelings in a manner that is situation appropriate, and self-motivation is about marshaling emotions in service of a goal (Cliffe 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Since the intention of this study was to explore the participant's thoughts, understandings and perceptions about strategies that school principals use to manage their emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice, the qualitative approach to research aligned with this aim (Cohen et al. 2011). Further, an interpretive stance was taken in order to make meaning of how the participants in this study experienced and felt

about the strategies that school principals used to manage their emotions (Merriam 1988). Since knowledge in the interpretive paradigm is constructed through mutual engagement between the researcher and the participants (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999; Cohen et al. 2011), the researchers opted for two methods of data generation that involved the participants and the researchers in active dialogue. The first method of data generation comprised individual semi-structured interviews with school principals. This type of face-to-face interview helped the researchers get a deeper insight into the school principal's lives and how they made sense of their lives (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003). Further, semi-structured interviews permitted the researchers to use probes and cues in order to encourage the school principals to share more information and to get clarity on some issues (Gilbert 2008). The second method of data generation involved focus group interviews with teachers. The researchers opted for focus group interviews because this type of interview produces data through group interaction (Morgan and Krueger 1998) and they provide multiple viewpoints related to the research question (Krueger and Casey 2000).

In terms of selection of participants, eleven school principals (five males and six females) were selected based on convenience (Cohen et al. 2011) from the Pinetown District of the Kwa-Zulu-Natal province in South Africa for the semi-structured interviews. Six of the school principals were based at primary schools and five were based at secondary schools. In noting Grobler's (2014) assertion that successful school leadership is about achieving results through other people, the researchers deemed it important to explore the views of teachers on the emotional strategies that their school principals use. To this end, eleven focus group interviews were held with teachers from each of the schools from which the principals were selected. Cognizant of literature that focus groups generally comprise four to eight research participants (Struwig and Stead 2004), the researchers opted for five purposively selected participants per focus group (Cohen et al. 2011). In each focus group the researchers ensured that there was sufficient diversity in the group (gender, years of teaching experience and cultural backgrounds) so as to get a rich perspective on the strategies school principals used to manage emotions in their day-to-day leadership practice.

All eleven semi-structured interviews and eleven focus group interviews were digitally audio recorded and then transcribed *verbatim*. Informed by Henning's (2004) assertion that data analysis involves converting raw data into patterns of meaning, the transcripts were thereafter subjected to a rigorous process of inductive content analysis (Cohen et al. 2011). Throughout the research process, all ethical protocols pertaining to anonymity, beneficence and non-maleficence were observed (Rule and John 2011). In reporting on the data, *nom de plumes* are used in order to protect the identity of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented under themes derived from a grounded analysis of the data. Three themes emerged from the data, that is, taking time outs, rationalizing and reasoning through issues, and self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Injected into each theme is a discussion of the data using relevant literature. Interestingly, in almost all the interviews, the participants tended to focus on the strategies used to manage negative emotions with very little input on the managing of positive emotions. This is not unusual given Beaty's (2000) experience in conducting research on this phenomenon. Further, school principals paid little attention to the role their feelings played in the execution of their day-to-day leadership. It was only through this study that participant school principals began to reflect on their emotions and their management thereof.

Taking Time Out

Taking time out as a strategy to manage one's own emotions took two forms namely, delaying response to the unpleasant or hostile event, and removing oneself from the event for a period of time. The majority of school principals indicated that they sometimes avoid responding immediately to people when they are faced with a situation that may evoke negative emotions. When handling issues that may provoke feelings of anger and frustration on their part they excuse themselves and set another time or day to deal with the issue when they have calmed down. Ms. Kati, the principal of Manzi Primary School, indicated:

When I am angry, I do not respond to that situation immediately. I take time to calm down. It is very dangerous to respond when you are angry...for example when a teacher comes to me and there is a confrontation I don't respond immediately. I indicate that I am busy and make an appointment for another day. When I am in control of my emotions I confront that situation.

Similarly, Mrs. Nguse the principal of Tholinhlanhla Secondary School and Mrs. Ntaka the principal of Sibanisezwe Secondary School respectively said:

I try not to act immediately...I delay before I respond to difficult situations. Sometimes I move away from the people who make me angry until I cool down because if I am angry I won't be able to think logically and it may make things worse...

...I avoid talking about that particular subject until I cool down... For example, I was fuming when a teacher failed to follow my instructions on the setting of a question paper... Because I was angry and was aware that I might lose my temper, I took the question paper from her and I asked her to leave the office. I attended to the matter on the following day. Although my first instinct was to become angry I realized that it is not the correct response. Hence, I try to be professional no matter what. I have taught myself to be respectful and to treat my staff ethically.

In all eleven focus group interviews the participants confirmed that their school principals sometimes engage in delaying responding to people when a situation has the potential of becoming volatile. Some of their comments in this regard were:

I think he controls his emotions by not reacting instantly to a situation...I think that gives him time to calm down and think before he reacts... (Ms. Mdakane, Umhlanga Primary School)

She does not address things when she is upset but she says to you let us talk some other time about this. (Ms. Mphephethwa, Pumula Primary School)

Temporarily extricating themselves from potentially unpleasant situations for fear they may react unprofessionally was a form of time out used by some school principals. The school principals indicated that they take time out from their duties by either staying in their offices and redirecting their energies on something positive or going out of school to calm down so as to avoid

dealing with issues when they are not in a balanced frame of mind. Some of the school principals commented:

Sometimes one needs to rescue oneself by taking a walk, taking a deep breath or drinking a glass of water in order to calm down... If one cannot go out, then one must try to replace negative emotions with positive thoughts... (Mrs. Nguse, principal of Tholinhlanhla Secondary School)

I sometimes go out of school to calm myself down and come back when I feel better. By the time I come back I usually feel a lot better. I then deal with the issue at hand. (Ms. Kati, principal of Manzi Primary School)

I move out of the school just to take a deep breath. Sometimes I take a drive to another school where I can speak positive things with the principal and when I come back I know I am okay. I am able to work. (Mrs. Msomi, principal of Vezunyawo Secondary School)

Some educators in the focus group interviews confirmed this. They stated that their school principal's sometimes leave school or stay in their offices as a way of controlling their emotions. The following were some of their comments.

Miss Mthembu of Vezunyawo Secondary School shared:

What she sometimes does is she gets into her office and closes the door and sits there for a while. Then she will call the person and then they will talk the matter through.

Similarly, Mrs. Sgananda from Umgababa Primary School indicated:

She sometimes just disappears and goes out of school. If she is very upset you just see her going out with her car. She comes back having cooled off and ready to talk. I think she takes that time to calm herself down.

School principals are "confronted on a daily basis with a variety of emotions (both positive and negative) that are inextricably linked to personal, professional, relational, political and cultural issues" related to their jobs (Zembylas 2015:2). How they manage these emotions is central to their success as school leaders. Taking time out is seen as one effective mechanism to manage negative emotions (Connelly 2007). Lewis et al. (2008) support physical withdrawal from a situation in order to control negative emotions. School principals felt if they responded impulsively to the situation it could possibly lead to them handling the situation very unpro-

fessionally. Some school principals are aware of their emotions and the effects of these emotions on the self and others (Boyatzis et al. 2000). When these emotions are perceived by them to become problematic they regulate their emotions by withdrawing from the situation. Putting off till later, by setting another time or day to address issues when they are in control of themselves is seen as a more productive strategy by school principals. By so doing they are more likely to act positively and constructively to the problem (Castro et al. 2012). In support, Shiota and Kalat (2007) emphasize that a powerful way of dealing with negative emotions is to avoid a situation for a while in order to gather the necessary information to handle it more effectively. Connelly (2007) suggests that when taking a time out, one should get some exercise, drink water or breathe deeply in order to bring one's emotions under to control. This is a strategy which some participant principals are engaging in. Further, making time to be alone so as to think, reflect and meditate on things that happen can change the way one reacts and is a good way of managing one's emotions (Connelly 2007). Self-regulation on the part of leaders is a form of self-preservation. It allows a leader to control one's feelings or redirect disruptive impulses and moods (Goleman 1998).

Logically Working Through Issues

Impulsively acting on issues was considered by some participant school principals to be a recipe for disaster. They strongly believed that one needs to maintain one's decorum at all times irrespective of how hostile a situation might become. They mentioned that this can only happen if a school principal looks at the problem he is confronted with in an objective manner and engages with the problem logically through reasoning and reflection. Mr. Mpala, a school principal of Dududu Primary School mentioned that he applies logical reasoning to the problem by asking questions so as to get a better understanding of why a particular person is behaving the way he or she does. By getting to know the problem better it minimizes negative reactions. He said:

... For me the only way that helps manage my emotions is to try and rise to a level where I do not take things that happen around me to heart. I try to apply my intelligence, my intel-

lect as opposed to my emotions. As much as emotions may come in, I reason first before I get angry or even before I get excited...

Mr. Thusi, the principal from Siyamukela Primary, also made a reference to applying reasoning to the handling of difficult problems. He mentioned:

... If you reason why things happen, why an educator has done this or that through listening, through analyzing things that educators do, you handle things so much better... I try by all means to rely on reasoning, questioning and interacting with the educators, asking questions especially if an educator has misbehaved or a learner for that matter by probing and getting the reasons why something has happened.

Similarly, Mr. Mvelase, the principal from Siyabonga Secondary School, indicated that keeping calm and looking at the problem logically would prevent negative emotions from setting in. He volunteered:

It's simple. You need to focus on the problem. By focusing on the problem you prevent yourself from getting emotional. You need to logically unpack the problem.

Input from teachers in the focus group interviews did allude to some school principals being very clinical and practical about the way they deal with thorny issues so as to prevent overt negative emotions on their part. Mr. Thembu from the focus group of Vezunyawo Secondary School and Miss Hlongwane from the focus group at Sibanisezwe Secondary School respectively shared:

My principal is very proactive when he handles contentious matters. He is very levelheaded. He prevents a situation from getting to a point where he cannot handle his emotions. He reasons with people... He gets them to acknowledge what they have done is either right or wrong.

She is very logical. She is clear when it comes to issues. She relies on policies in order to make a breakthrough in difficult circumstances... Because she is confident of her knowledge on school matters she prevents a situation from breaking down and where she needs to become emotional.

Emotionally intelligent leaders are levelheaded. They are aware that their "emotional struggles have significant implications for their decision-making, wellbeing and overall leadership"

(Zembylas 2015:2). They are therefore leaders who are capable of using reason and logic to their advantage (Mayer et al. 2008). Emotionally intelligent leaders are able to use their cognitive abilities in challenging situations rather than relying on emotions (George 2000). They have the ability to slow down and examine a situation carefully before reacting to it (Batool 2013). Evidence from this study seems to be in concert with literature. Some school principals seem to have this attribute of rationalizing a situation logically rather than reacting prematurely with negative consequences to the self. They are able to ascertain why particular things are happening by asking questions, which lead to positive responses (Cure 2014). They are able to read the emotional climate in order to enhance thought and decision-making (Mayer et al. 2008). In contrast, leaders who allow emotions to overwhelm them rather than engage in logical reasoning are likely to experience challenges because of their inability to keep unhelpful feelings under control (Mayer et al. 2008).

Self-awareness of Strengths and Weaknesses

All eleven school principals were of the view that knowledge of the self was important in terms of the way in which they manage their emotions. They indicated that knowing their weaknesses in terms of their emotions assists them in reacting appropriately and in coming up with strategies to manage them. Mr. Mpala, the principal of Dududu Primary School indicated that when one is confronted by a situation that could stir up negative emotions in oneself, one could delegate the handling of the situation to another member of the school management team who is more adept at managing his or her emotions in that particular type of situation. He mentioned:

It is important that a school principal has self-awareness of his strengths and weaknesses in terms of expression of emotions... strengths keep us going and we learn from our weaknesses... once I have identified what angers me, I come up with ways to deal with that better. For example, if I have to deal with an educator who is always late... if I have seen that this angers me, I will engage another member of the SMT [school management team] to handle that situation.

Similarly, Mrs. Nkukhu, the school principal of Umgababa Primary School, explained that one

needs to be aware of one's "breaking point" in terms of emotions so that one can develop strategies to deal with it. She mentioned:

Everyone has to be aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses of ones emotions... you have to know things that push you to the breaking point so that you can come up with the control measures...the control measures will help you to handle your emotions better. From my weaknesses, I have developed strategies of controlling my emotions.

Mr. Ntaka, a school principal of Sibanisezwe Secondary stated:

...Principals must be able to identify signs of anger and take ownership of their emotions, they need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses so as to act on them...negative emotions can affect your health...therefore if you know your weaknesses in terms of emotions you can attend courses on how to manage these negative emotions.

The views of the school principals were confirmed by teachers in the focus group interviews. They indicated that school principals should know their strengths and weaknesses with regard to their emotions. Some teachers believed that knowledge of one's strengths and weaknesses could serve as an early warning system in the management of one's emotions. Some of their comments were:

I think my principal does not know his emotional strengths and weaknesses... Therefore, he sometimes has some nasty emotional outbursts with staff and learners... If he know his weaknesses he can use this as a warning to remove himself from situations when he feels negative emotions are coming on. (Mr. Khaya from Wozamoya Primary School)

I think it's also important for school principals to know their strengths and weaknesses, so that when they face situations that make them angry or frustrated, they will know in advance that this feeling is now coming on and then try to overcome it without hurting the other person. (Mr. Hlongwane from Sibanisezwe Secondary)

Being emotionally intelligent involves having a clear picture of one's own strengths and weaknesses (Boyatzis et al. 2000; Batool 2013) and being able to keep disruptive emotions and impulses in check (Goleman 1998). Therefore, it is important for leaders to be self-aware. Self-awareness leads to better self-management (Ya-

dav 2014). Authentic leaders engage in personal introspection in order to identify the true self, including one's strengths and weaknesses (Maric et al. 2013). This knowledge of the self is important in order to enact self-control. School principals should therefore engage in self-analysis regularly where they take stock of their emotions. They need to know what emotion drives or motivates them and what emotions bring out the worse in them. Knowing this can assist them in managing their emotions better because it will assist school principals to anticipate situations that stir up unhealthy emotions so that they can plan appropriate strategies (Grobler and Conley 2014).

When leaders are self-aware of their emotions and understand their strengths and weaknesses, they become capable of engaging in what Grobler (2014) drawing on Gross (2002) refers to as antecedent and response focused regulation of emotions. In antecedent regulation for example, a school principal may want to deal with matters, which may in his or her estimation lead to flared emotions, in a friendlier context, which may evoke positive emotions of the self. In response, focused emotion regulation, the school principal may adopt a strategy of reappraisal and suppression. For example, an initial emotional response to an irate parent may be reappraised by the school principal by attempting to view the problem from the parent's point of view. By so doing the school principal may suppress the initial emotional response by hiding it behind a pleasant countenance.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this paper point towards school principals engaging in three basic strategies to manage their own emotions. When they perceive a situation where they may act in an emotionally irrational manner, they use time out as a strategy by either delaying response to the situation they are confronted with or by removing themselves from the unpleasant situation for a short while and diverting attention to more pleasant activities. School principals also engage in working through emotionally charged situations by engaging in rational and logical reasoning. Knowing one's strengths and weaknesses in unpleasant situations is key to being emotionally intelligent. Emotionally intelligent leaders are capable of sensing the emotional cli-

mate during interactions and are able to deploy their strengths in managing such situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Leading is an emotional activity. School principals as school leaders therefore need to be capacitated on issues related to emotions and school leadership. This paper therefore recommends that leadership development programs for pre-service and in-service school principals include sessions on emotional intelligence.

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