
Original Paper

Examining Teachers' Perceptions of School Leaders' Emotional Intelligence: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

Although the benefits of school leader emotional intelligence are well-known, leadership preparation programs lack training in emotional intelligence, thus calling for reform (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Guerra & Pazet, 2016; Mills, 2009; Wallace, 2010). Emotional intelligence competencies, such as empathy, self-awareness, and motivation, are closely aligned with components of transformational leadership theory, including idealized influence, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation (Kumar, 2014). Highlighting these connections can guide in identifying significant components of emotional intelligence. This study examined teachers' perceptions of school leaders' emotional intelligence to identify critical components of emotional intelligence. This research utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to address the research problem and questions. A purposeful sampling technique was used to recruit teachers employed in public school districts in Louisiana. Consistent with phenomenological designs, semi-structured individual interviews were the primary method of data collection, along with document analysis. Transformational leadership theory and emotional intelligence provided a framework to guide the construction of methodological approaches, including participants, data collection, data analysis, and limitations. Four major themes emerged as a result of this study: 1) school leader social skills, 2) leadership styles, 3) authentic leader-teacher relationships, and 4) perceived benefits of school leader emotional skills.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, educational leadership, phenomenological study, elementary teachers, qualitative design, transformational leadership

Introduction

In the new era of accountability, the role of the school leader has become more complex due to significant pressure on educational leaders (Litchka, 2007; Moore, 2009). This pressure is due in part to the demands for higher levels of student achievement, and improvement of the quality of education (Litchka, 2007). Leaders are also expected to transform schools into adaptable organizations, encompassing "professional learning communities that can embrace change and create high-performing learning environments for students as well as teachers" (Moore, 2009, p. 20). This transformation involves restructuring and reorganizing schools, requiring leaders "skilled in emotional intelligence" to handle the intense emotions that occur during change (Moore, 2009, p.21). 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" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10). Emotionally intelligent leaders build trusting relationships with teachers and staff, display empathy and social awareness, understand the problems that occur during change, and are better skilled in addressing related issues (Moore, 2009).

According to Gray (2009), school leadership is one of the most researched topics in the organizational sciences, mainly emphasizing the cognitive abilities of leaders, such as logical decision-making, rational thought, and behavior, giving minimal attention to the emotions of school leaders. However, research suggests that leaders' feelings and emotions play a critical role in decision-making, affecting the well-being of everyone in their learning communities (George, 2000; Goleman, 2004; Gray, 2009). Therefore, principals' emotional intelligence could be crucial to overcoming challenges, while

positively influencing and developing committed and motivated staff (Gray, 2009; Litchka, 2007; Moore, 2009; Singh & Manser, 2009).

Although the benefits associated with school leaders' emotional intelligence are well-established, research suggests that school leaders are being properly prepared cognitively, but not emotionally for the demands of the job (Bulach et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2010; Schultz, 2007; Trinidad Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2015; Wallace, 2010). A growing body of literature suggests a shift in the educational community's efforts to develop leaders with emotional intelligence, to meet the challenges educational leaders face (Guerra & Pazey, 2016; Litchka, 2007). In recent years, controversy has surrounded leadership preparation programs regarding course content, methodology, and rigor in targeted areas (Schultz, 2007). Programs often prioritize leadership effectiveness, yet fail to link these aspects to social and emotional components (Cobb, 2004; Schmidt, 2010). Emotional intelligence is the most important curricular goal for "meaningful change to take place in schools" (Schultz, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, there has been a call for reform in leadership preparation programs to include emotional intelligence in the curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Guerra & Pazey, 2016; Mills, 2009; Wallace, 2010).

Incorporating a more unified approach to practicing and teaching social and emotional intelligence competencies in leadership preparation programs might further develop and better prepare school leaders for the emotional aspects of the job (Trinidad Sanchez-Nunez et al., 2015). Refocusing or structuring training will assist leaders in developing emotional competence to prepare them for critical incidents that occur in schools (Johnson et al., 2005). Furthermore, Taliadorou & Pashiardis (2015) found that school leaders' emotions and emotional skills can also influence teachers' emotions, and motivation, thus leading to their overall well-being and performance at work. Goleman (2004) found that although there is a genetic component to emotional intelligence; it can be learned as well. Therefore, identifying what specific elements of emotional intelligence contribute to leadership effectiveness and job satisfaction is critical to identify.

Research Question

This study was designed to address one overarching research question and presented in an effort to better understand elementary teachers' perceptions of their school leaders' emotional intelligence through identifying integral components of emotional intelligence and the associated impacts: *What are teachers' perceptions of school leaders' emotional intelligence?*

Conceptual Framework

While examining teachers' perceptions of school leaders' emotional intelligence, transformational leadership theory provided a framework to better understand the specific components of emotional intelligence that are the most effective in school leaders. Existing research has identified critical linkages between dimensions of transformational leadership and constructs of emotional intelligence. Transformational leadership theory is useful because it links emotional bonds to effective performance. Further examination of these related concepts can shed light on the potential benefits of school leaders' emotional intelligence (Kumar, 2014; Modassir & Singh, 2008). Therefore, this study utilized a conceptual framework integrating both transformational leadership theory and emotional intelligence to understand teachers' perceptions regarding the most important components of emotional intelligence of their respective school leaders, and the related impacts.

Purpose

George (2000) asserts that emotional intelligence is deserving of consideration in the leadership domain, and may lead to effective leadership, however indicates the need to further explore the interactions between leaders and followers to increase this understanding. Furthermore, according to Trinidad Sanchez-Nunez et al. (2015), "We need to learn how to best identify the constructs of emotional intelligence within school leadership, measure them, and place an intentional focus on them in the development of school leaders" (p.69).

Additionally, while existing research has focused on leader emotional intelligence within the K-12 context (Allred et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2005; Moore, 2009; Mousavi et al., 2012; Taliadorou &

Pashiardis, 2015), there have been limited studies emphasizing the impact on elementary teachers' experiences. Furthermore, there is a need for research involving the impact emotional intelligence has on school leaders' effectiveness (Sasare & Matashu, 2024; Omotayo, 2024). Teachers' perceptions provide insight into what specific emotionally intelligent behaviors, traits, and practices are the most impactful, thus providing guidance for professional development and training at school district levels and within leadership preparation programs. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore elementary teachers' perceptions of school leaders' emotional intelligence to focus training on these components. This study helped clarify emotional intelligence constructs and their related impacts.

Methodology

To study the specific phenomenon of school leaders' emotional intelligence from teachers' perceptions, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate to deeply understand the teachers' experiences and how their experiences have been reconstructed into knowledge and awareness (Merriam, 2009). According to Kumar (2014), transformational leadership components, such as idealized influence, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation, have direct positive correlations with constructs of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, empathy, and motivation. This study utilized a conceptual framework integrating both transformational leadership theory and emotional intelligence to understand teachers' perceptions regarding the most significant components of the emotional intelligence of their respective school leaders. As a result of this study, these connections were identified, and the lack of leadership training on emotional intelligence through highlighting the related impacts.

The setting of this study involved ten schools within two different school districts in Louisiana. The number of schools depended upon participants who voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Therefore, this was a limitation that affected the variation in the study. While each participant was from a different school, this is a small sample size considering the number of schools in Louisiana. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select ten participants who volunteered for this study. Participants were public elementary teachers (1st-5th) with at least seven years of experience. The participants were 90% female, from 7 to 34 years of experience, and were 90% white and 10 % Hispanic. Pseudonyms were utilized to mask the names of the participants, places, and research sites. Data were collected over five months and consisted of semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis. Guided by Glaser & Strauss (1967), data from interviews and journals were analyzed using a constant comparative method. Once relationships between categories were specified, the analysis moved toward a theoretical direction (Saldana, 2016). The final step in data analysis involves the researcher's interpretation of the findings and acquiring meaning by comparing literature or theories to the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Results

The findings from this study on the lived experiences of ten public elementary teachers resulted in four interrelated themes.

School leader social skills

School leader social skills were a notable theme among the participants. Leader support was identified as a critical aspect, especially during arduous times. Leaders with "open door policies" were more apt to encourage open communication with teachers while providing emotional support and demonstrating genuine care and concern. Teacher and leader communication also contributed to reducing and solving challenges, making them feel "more valued" as professionals. The participants indicated coping strategies that led to professional growth as educators, including self-reflection and self-motivation.

Leadership styles

The participants shared diverse perspectives when discussing their school leaders' styles of leadership. Some participants highlighted characteristics in their leaders that were viewed as detrimental; leaning toward a coercive leadership style. The participants with positive experiences had leaders who were more transformational in their leadership approach and exhibited emotional aspects: empathy, motivation, and self-control. Intuition was an additional emotional skill that emerged from the data.

Self-confidence was a common trait discussed among all participants but viewed in varying ways. Although a leader may exude confidence, this does not mean it is a positive attribute, unless it is “authentic”. On the other hand, true self-confidence in leadership can have many positive outcomes, such as mutual respect, and alacrity.

Authentic leader-teacher relationships

Some participants experienced authentic relationships with their school leaders, while others indicated that leader-teacher relationships were sparse. Authentic leader-teacher relationships can contribute to instilling a sense of belonging, comradery, and emotional bonding. The participants who had positive interactions and close bonds with their principals were more satisfied with their teaching positions. Trust also played a critical role in the relationships that existed.

Perceived benefits of school leader emotional skills

School leaders’ emotional skills; such as empathy, motivation, and self-control were common among teachers who showed high levels of morale and job satisfaction. Another benefit of school leaders’ emotional skills was an increased awareness of teachers’ emotions. Whereas the teachers who did not identify their leaders as highly skilled emotionally reported low levels of job satisfaction and overall morale within the school. Additionally, leaders who provided teacher praise and recognition were found to be more emotionally skilled.

Discussion

The findings from this study indicated that the experiences of ten public-school elementary teachers involved school leader social skills, both transformational and coercive leadership styles, and authentic leader-teacher relationships.

Participants who identified school leaders’ emotional intelligence skills also noted perceived benefits. Participants identified lack of leader and parental support, and student behavior as common challenges for elementary teachers.

The role of leader support, coping mechanisms, and teacher and leader communication were also emphasized. Participants’ views varied regarding the level of support their leaders provided. Feelings of stress, loneliness, and anxiety resulted from a lack of leader support for some participants. When teachers experience challenges, emotionally intelligent leaders tend to be more genuine and instill trust and support during challenging times (Taliadorou & Pashiardis, 2015). For some participants, this was reflected in how leader support was implemented.

Through emotional and social support, these participants were less stressed and felt a sense of security and safety.

While all participants experienced some form of conflict or other negative occurrences, genuinely supportive leaders were viewed as more emotionally intelligent than others.

Another finding is that participants viewed leadership styles as both effective and non-effective. Some participants viewed their leaders as taking a more coercive approach. The coercive style of leadership tends to be less effective, contributing to low morale and pride in employees (Goleman, 2000). Participants noted leadership traits affiliated with coercive leadership; such as, being rigid, strict, and unsupportive. However, participants who experienced effective leadership noted emotional attributes prevalent in their leaders; such as, empathy, motivation, and self-control. These emotional components are often associated with transformational leadership. Transformational leaders often motivate their followers to reach their maximum potential (Burns, 1978). Through leader motivation and support, participants indicated they were inspired to work at their highest capacity.

Furthermore, all participants discussed relationships with their leaders. Participants who noted having positive relationships with their leaders described them as authentic. Authentic relationships in the educational context have underlying values involving the importance of relationships, listening, and ensuring teachers have a voice (Quick, 2013). According to Avolio & Gardner (2005), authentic leader-follower relationships involve trust, respect, and positive influence. The participants who reported close relationships with their principals noted their principals gained their trust and respect;

while continuing to foster their relationships through ongoing support, encouragement, and showing a genuine interest.

The benefits associated with teacher-leader relationships identified in this study were the establishment of comradery, a sense of belonging, and emotional healing. One commonality tying all benefits together was trust. Trust is a major component of emotional intelligence (Batool, 2013; Boyatis et al., 1999; Goleman, 1998). Participants who noted high levels of trust in their leaders, also said they were more committed to their job and more willing to adapt to change. While research indicates emotionally intelligent leaders are more flexible during times of change (George, 2000; Moore, 2009; Schultz, 2007), this study found that the teachers of perceived emotionally intelligent leaders embrace change more readily as well.

Conclusion

This study broadens literature involving emotional intelligence and school leadership, as it incorporates elementary teachers' experiences from their varying viewpoints. While emotional intelligence competencies were more prominent in some leaders than others, there was a consistency among participants' views of beneficial leadership abilities. Specific emotional intelligence competencies identified were: empathy, self-awareness, self-control, organizational awareness, motivation, communication, trustworthiness, and adaptability. These findings are beneficial when considering the implementation of leader emotional intelligence training at the school district level and potentially in higher education institutions. This information will guide leaders and districts to implement policies and practices that promote emotional intelligence. Future research involving school leader emotional intelligence should be studied further, considering their perceptions.

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