

## SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19: EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic presented rapid, unpredictable shifts in education, which had rippling effects on school leaders' responsibilities. In the early stages of the pandemic, school leaders throughout the United States, and the rest of the world made the strategic decision to transition to remote learning in adherence to CDC guidelines. This decision presented critical and immediate challenges for school leaders to manage their institutions. Emotional intelligence (EI) is well documented in the literature as a contributor to leadership effectiveness. We considered the novelty of the pandemic and the myriad of changes that accompanied it. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study to learn how emotionally intelligent school administrators leveraged EI in their daily leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic. A sample of eight emotionally intelligent K-12 principals from a larger study on school leadership across North Carolina was selected for analysis. We utilized Goleman's emotional intelligence model to frame our analysis of principals' emotionally intelligent leadership. Four coders analyzed semi-structured interviews through a series of open coding followed by axial coding techniques. The findings revealed that emotionally intelligent school principals across North Carolina generally displayed key emotional competencies that supported self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. In their crisis leadership during the pandemic, the principals attended most to relationship management. Given that EI is known to positively impact school leadership, these findings can help us understand how it works in practice to lead schools during difficult times. This work adds a US perspective to current education conversations that aim to unpack the COVID-19 experience, by providing practical knowledge from principals rated high in EI. Our work has implications for professional development and principal preparation programs as they forge forward to prepare principals for these unpredictable experiences.

**Keywords:** *Emotional intelligence, crisis management, Covid-19, school leadership, pandemic.*

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### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic presented rapid, unpredictable shifts in education, which had rippling effects on school leaders' responsibilities. In the early stages of the pandemic, school leaders throughout the United States, and the rest of the world made the strategic decision to transition to remote learning in adherence to World Health Organization (WHO) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines. This decision presented significant challenges for school leaders to manage the procedural, operational, physical, and socio-emotional structures of their institutions. The decision required major, spontaneous transformations in instruction and learning which have been demanding on all stakeholders of the learning community (Lavonen & Salmela-Aro, 2022; Robinson et al., 2021).

One of the core influencing factors in principals' leadership during the pandemic was the mandates prescribed by state and district-level administration. Although principals in the state of North Carolina are typically tasked with school-related decisions such as staffing, scheduling, budgeting, instruction, and events, the pandemic impacted their autonomy in some areas, especially in the domain of school operations. Decisions such as school closures, rules and regulations, among others were hinged on determinations made at a higher level (Reich et al., 2020). Principals and school leaders essentially became the conduit between state and district-level management and school-level operations and they had to be creative, strategic, and empathic in their leadership.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is well documented in the literature as a contributor to leadership effectiveness. In fact, research indicates that it is a critical component of school leadership success, showing significant effects on school turnaround, school climate, student achievement, teacher commitment, and change management, among other variables (Rivers et al., 2012; Saleem et al., 2017; Qijie, 2011). We considered the novelty of the pandemic and the myriad of changes that accompanied it. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study to explore how emotionally intelligent K-12 school administrators leveraged EI in their daily leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we examined how these principals managed their own experiences and supported their students, teachers, and the wider school community during this critical period in history.

## 2. Literature review

Research in educational leadership has been shifting its focus on the influence of school leaders on those under their charge (Tai & Kareem, 2019). School leaders influence students' academic performance indirectly since their leadership affects teacher morale, job satisfaction, and commitment, which consequently has a direct influence on student success (Zins et al., 2007; Moore, 2009). Similarly, school leaders can impact student performance indirectly through their influence on school climate (Rivers et al., 2012). Principals' leadership styles also have a positive impact on teachers. Decades ago, we learned that collaborative leadership and school climate have increased teacher commitment in urban schools and have positively impacted teachers' feelings of efficacy and job satisfaction (Kushman, 1992).

As a longstanding research topic, leadership styles in school leaders have been extensively studied. More recently, however, EI is being studied alongside leadership styles to better understand how the construct (EI) impacts the way school administrators lead. EI has been found to be impactful in instructional leadership preferences (Chen & Guo, 2020; Goldring et al., 2015) as well as task-oriented leadership and relationship-oriented leadership preferences (Wirawan et al., 2018). Chen and Guo (2020) investigated the effect of EI on instructional leadership in principals of 54 schools in China and found that appraisal, use, and regulation of emotions were all predictive supports to instructional leadership. A validity study on a leadership measure and an EI measure indicated convergent validity between instructional leadership and EI, suggesting that EI may be linked to effective school leaders.

A noteworthy finding in the literature is that EI has been linked to change management. Positive relationships were found between EI and the way principals managed change in their schools (Grobler et al., 2017). Another key finding is that principals' EI has been found to be positively associated with teachers' attitudes toward change (Kin & Kareem, 2020; Tai & Kareem, 2019). These findings are useful to the current study because the pandemic presented a series of uncertainties that introduced themes of spontaneity and change within the educational setting. EI can therefore be a critical attribute and skill to support principals and their stakeholders through crisis situations, such as the pandemic

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model was utilized to frame principals' statements about how they define and apply emotional intelligence to their work. The model focuses on EI from a performance perspective. This makes it a good fit for the current study because it supports our inquiry into how principals think about their roles and specifically, how they *perform* in it. Goleman (2001) describes how leaders' potential for demonstrating emotionally intelligent management behaviors are rooted in the domains of *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, and *relationship management*. Each domain has several emotional competencies, which are observable skills. Within the domain of self-awareness, there are emotional competencies of emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. Within the domain of self-management, there are emotional competencies of self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, achievement drive, and initiative. In the domain of social awareness, there are emotional competencies of empathy, service orientation, and organizational awareness. Finally, there are competencies in developing others, influence, communication, conflict management, leadership, change catalyst, building bonds, teamwork, and collaboration within the domain of relationship management.

## 3. Method

The current study used an exploratory qualitative design (Maxwell, 2005) to examine the crisis leadership practices of emotionally intelligent K-12 school administrators during the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design was best suited to answer our research question — How do emotionally intelligent school administrators describe their use of emotional intelligence in their leadership during a crisis? Moreover, Bryman (2004) portrays the benefits of

qualitative research in leadership studies as “giving the reader a profound sense of the realities of leadership” (p. 763). To this end, this design allowed us to explore how principals’ emotional intelligence influenced their leadership practices during the pandemic.

### 3.1. Participants

A purposive sample of eight K-12 principals across North Carolina was selected from a pool of 49 principals who participated in a larger mixed-methods study on emotional intelligence in school leadership. The present sample represented the principals with the highest scores on the Genos Emotional Intelligence Inventory administered in the mixed-methods study. The Inventory is a behavior-based EI measure specifically designed for use in the workplace. Pseudonyms were used to maintain the anonymity of the participants and their demographic information can be seen in Table 2.

This study relied on semi-structured interview data. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analyzed by four coders through a series of coding steps. First, the coders used open coding to identify relevant text within the transcripts, and memo emergent ideas. Simultaneously, *in vivo* coding was used to assign meaning to pieces of text (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The second round of coding included a continuous and iterative process of axial coding to identify relationships among the codes and to work towards agreement across coders. Next, using the theoretical framework as a guide, we used selective coding to identify codes that relate to existing concepts in the literature. Codes that did not directly answer the research questions, or provide additional understanding to the overall study were not used in the results.

## 4. Findings

The findings revealed that during the pandemic, emotionally intelligent school principals across North Carolina generally displayed key emotional competencies that supported self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Their responses are organized thematically within those domains.

**Self-awareness.** This theme includes principals’ ability to notice and clarify their emotions, being mindful of the impact they can have on their staff and students. The principals in this study showed emotional self-awareness and accurate self-assessment. For example, Shania recognized the impact that the stress of the pandemic had on her engagement with her staff and she became intentional about addressing it in order to effectively show up in her role as a school leader. She revealed,

It was a stressful two weeks for me because we're reopening. And so I allowed what was happening around me to affect me and I had a bad attitude. And so I was ...disappointed in myself as a leader because I should be supportive and not allow that to affect me because then it affects everything in my building. I had reached my peak. So what I did was take a mental health morning, Monday morning and spend a lot of time in meditation, reflection, energy clearing...and it's been a much better week so far.

**Emotional self-management.** This theme represents principals’ ability to manage emotionally arousing states such as anxiety and anger in order to control emotionally impulsive responses. The pandemic presented so many uncertainties that emotional impacts were expected throughout the world. Principals in this study mostly demonstrated emotional self-control, trustworthiness, and adaptability when leading a school through the present turbulent times. Ken described his process as “staying grounded in the truth, even when chaos is happening around him”. Ann spoke about how she manages her staff in the midst of her own struggles,

I'm very consistent with them, I treat them the same every time, whether I'm feeling good on the inside, or not. If I'm in a staff meeting with 22 of my staff, and I'm dealing with something internally, there's only one person in the room who knows about it. And that's me. And I do that on purpose because they don't need my stuff, you know because they're working with kids.

**Social awareness.** The theme, social awareness, refers to principals’ effectiveness in interpreting emotions in others, reading social cues, being aware of others’ needs, and responding appropriately to them. Principals shared evidence of empathy, service orientation, and organizational awareness. Empathy was useful to understand the experiences of others. Principals discussed situations where this was helpful.

I'm able to have empathy and compassion and see the perspective. So we've had some upset parents, we've had, again, difficult conversations, but frequently, I'm able to calm the rest of the staff down, whoever's in there, trying to deal with these parents, and remind them that these are their babies. This is always important to them. They're just trying to deal with what's going on. (Macy)

To ensure that teachers felt supported, some principals disrupted lines of power. Being present in teachers' experiences was important to Brad. He voiced,

And I think they would say that I tried to lead by example. You know, I don't have teachers, anybody do stuff that I'm not willing to do. So that means I may have to drive a van, I may have to mop something up in the hallway, I may have to cover a class, I may have to help a kid with their computer, all those things.

**Relationship management.** This theme includes principals' effectiveness in being attuned to their own emotions, the emotions of their staff, students, and other stakeholders, and forging productive and progressive relationships based on this awareness. This domain of EI was most represented in the principals' leadership during the pandemic. Their interviews suggested that they emphasized practice in the emotional competence areas of visionary leadership, collaboration and teamwork, communication, and influence in order to ensure that their schools function optimally under uncertain circumstances. Decisions regarding mode of instruction were one challenge that required principals to exhibit skills in relationship management. Ken spoke about his experiences convincing fearful parents about the decision to serve students in person during the pandemic. He shared,

So, when we began the second semester, where we're going face to face, we had to make some decisions about some students who weren't doing well, virtually...and we had to painstakingly look at each individual student to ensure that we were making the right decision for them. And we had to convince their parents one way or the other...that this is a safe environment for your kid....

Principals also prioritized their teachers and students in their decision-making. Given that many decisions were tied to requests at a higher level, the principals in this study protected their relationships at school. In making big decisions, Macy explained that she would go to her team and say "Here's the problem, and then get their feedback after they ask clarifying questions..." Ken shared that he tries not to rush into decisions but involves all decision-makers in the building. Further, one principal, Leah, discussed how she included students in her decision-making. She revealed,

I give a lot of student voice here. My students have a say in just about every aspect of the school, and I value that they're the customer, they're the people I'm serving. So it behooves me to know what they prefer, what they like. And so when I'm interviewing for a candidate for an English position, I have a student panel, just like I would have a staff or my adult panel and in the case of recently, when I had to hire during this season of COVID, my students sat on a panel with the adults because I didn't want to do two different sessions. And they asked their questions, they got their input, they voted and told me who they prefer, just like the staff did...

## 5. Conclusions

This exploratory qualitative study examined the perspectives and leadership decisions of eight emotionally intelligent K-12 school principals across North Carolina during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that principals demonstrated key emotional competencies in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management with greatest emphasis on relationship management during the pandemic. Given that EI is known to positively impact school leadership, these findings can help us understand how it works in practice to lead schools during difficult times. This work adds a US perspective to current education conversations that aim to unpack the COVID-19 experience, by providing practical knowledge from principals rated high in EI. Our work has implications for professional development and principal preparation programs as they forge forward to prepare principals for these unpredictable experiences.

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