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The Emotional Intelligence of Elementary Principals and the Impact on Culture

Colleen Conway

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
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Colleen Conway
Educational Leadership

Approved:

Elizabeth Minor
_____
Chair, Dissertation Committee

A Edwards
_____
Member, Dissertation Committee

Gloria McDaniel Hall
_____
Dean's Representative

Hannter Gibbs
_____
Director, EDL Doctoral Program

Carolyn Theard-Griggs
_____
Dean, National College of Education

May 24, 2024
_____
Date Approved

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ON CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study involved examining the emotional intelligence (EI) of elementary principals and then comparing their EI to their ratings on the Illinois 5Essentials survey. The main questions were: Is there a relationship between principal EI and school culture? How do principals create a positive working environment? What is needed to build and maintain a positive school atmosphere? Throughout this qualitative research, more specific questions centered around principal relationships and trust, creating supportive environments, having strong communication and accountability, professional development, and overall school atmosphere. Though the surveyed population was small, the results showed principals who were high in the relationship management competency of EI tended to have high and positive ratings within the areas of effective leaders and supportive environment as measured on the Illinois 5Essentials. It is recommended that district leaders and building principals deepen their understanding of EI and its significant impact on creating a positive school culture. Additionally, leaders should familiarize themselves with the EI competencies through training, professional development, and coaching sessions so they can better support and lead their elementary schools. It is suggested that an ongoing focus on EI will foster trusting relationships among all stakeholders in the school community, enhance school culture, and create more effective schools.

PREFACE

Being an elementary school principal does not just require teaching experience teaching, it also requires high-quality skills related to working with people. As an elementary principal, I wanted to explore the topic of developing and understanding emotional intelligence (EI) because I have realized that before I meet with teachers, visit a classroom, send an email, present at staff meetings, attend a PTO event, or engage in any other activity, I always first pause to consider how I will be received by others. I try to be cognizant of others' feelings and experiences while also managing my own; and I do this hundreds of times every day, with every interaction I have. EI is the awareness of one's own emotions and also the ability to understand others' emotions. Every interaction matters, and I want to make sure I am always presenting my best self in front of others while also showing empathy and care for my staff, students, and families. In doing so, I am using my skills in EI.

I learned many leadership lessons during the processes of writing and researching. To start, this research taught me so much about the importance of EI, especially how much I lean into my own EI competencies on a daily basis. I know that when I am empathetic with my students, staff, or families, I am able to form close relationships and collaborate to our best abilities. Now that my research is complete, I understand that my empathy is related to my social-awareness and relationship-management EI, and that those competencies allow me to have trusting relationships with stakeholders. Moving forward, when I come across a situation where I may find myself frustrated, I will pause to seek out my empathy skills in order to move forward.

Another important leadership lesson I learned, and revisited along the way, was the importance of setting and adhering to a strategic plan. This included every minute detail, including planning out how much within a chapter I would write in a given time span, how I

would carefully recruit participants, or how to plan out the rest of my non-writing time so I could be efficient when it came time to write. I created a large number of checklists throughout the process to help me complete my tasks. I found myself constantly revisiting my overarching timeline of completion, and then setting mini-timelines, or plans, to help me achieve each step. This organization was critical for me to feel like I was inching closer to my goal of a finished dissertation. Another leadership lesson I learned was the importance of balance. In the busyness of being a new, first-time mom, leading an elementary building, completing doctoral work, writing a dissertation, and managing life overall, I found I needed to carefully balance each area with great intention. Furthermore, I needed to give myself grace and know that I could not do it all at once. I tried my best to use nap time to research and write my dissertation, but also gave myself permission to miss some wake-windows to complete my work. This was hard, but I knew I needed to have a better balance to be able to complete my work. All in all, this process has greatly affected me as a leader. Now more than ever before, I know the importance of creating a strategic plan of execution and how to keep refining the details within that plan so the outcome exceeds my expectations. Additionally, because I have had to be very intentional with my priorities, my time management skills have greatly improved. Finally, becoming more aware of EI has helped me grow as a leader. Completing the research on EI made me reflect on who I am as a leader and what ways I can continue to grow. I feel as though I am now paying closer attention to the emotions and feelings of others than I did before, but also looking for ways to support the development of EI in others who may be lacking some skills.

As mentioned, this dissertation and research has enabled me to better understand my own EI strengths and areas in need of continued growth. I hope it will do the same for the other principals I interviewed for this research and beyond. Based on my research, I know that when

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leaders have a good understanding of their EI, they are setting the model for others to also be aware of their emotional and even social intelligences. This awareness can have positive effects on students' social skills and emotional regulation, which are important life skills to master. Since beginning this research I have become aware of some leaders and teachers who may be lacking competencies of EI, and I believe my proposal of leadership EI professional development can support these deficit areas. I am excited by the work I have done and want this research to help other school principals grow their own capacity to lead others.

DEDICATION

This work would not have been possible without the love and patience of my husband. I am grateful for his unwavering support each step of this journey. I am also so appreciative of the ongoing support from my peers and colleagues. They reminded me that this work is important! I would also like to thank the research participants who took the time to speak to me about their leadership; I respect each of you and have learned so much from our conversations! I would also like to thank my chair for your guidance and support throughout this process. I dedicate this work to my son, and I promise to continue developing my EI competencies to foster a supportive and empathetic world for you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

"Effective principals know that positive change in their schools is up to them" (Whitaker, 2012, p. 22). The work of a school principal is all-encompassing and has the greatest impact on students, teachers, and the school community. For that impact to be positive, school principals need to have more than just experience and a high intelligence quotient (IQ) to be successful; they also need to have strong emotional intelligence (EI). EI is the awareness of one's own emotions and also the ability to understand others' emotions.

> Emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader. (Goleman & Taylor, 2009, p. 39)

Elementary school principals have a multifaceted role. Not only do they need to make daily decisions about academics, safety, behavior, engagement, schedules, teaming, budgets, curriculum, and more, they also need to constantly be empathetic yet assertive; have an open door but also set firm boundaries; and be relatable to students, staff, and families, yet also be innovative and visionary. Elementary principals must possess these qualities and more to be successful, while also managing their own emotions. "Our emotional intelligence sets the tone for the entire school, and our students will not develop their own emotional intelligence unless we lead by example and model what makes us culturally unique" (Lopez, 2024, p. 15). A principal has to set the tone for their students, staff, and community to lead a culturally successful school environment and EI plays a large role in shaping such a dynamic. Goleman wrote of an emotional and rational dichotomy, the distinction between "heart" and "head." "These two minds, the emotional and rational, operate in tight harmony for the most part,

intertwining their very different ways of knowing to guide us through the world" (Goleman, 2012, p. 8). Simply stated, if an elementary school principal wants to be successful, they need to be aware of their EI and how it affects their ability to lead.

Purpose

Elementary school principals work hard to foster a school culture of trust, belonging, and inclusivity. The tone of the school climate, especially the atmosphere of trust, is established by the principal (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Principals who can genuinely establish a trusting school environment for all school members—parents, teachers, students, and the community—can become "drivers of change" (Bryk et al., 2010). In today's climate of intense school reform, principals' ability to build relational trust with their teachers may be especially important for improving schools (Price, 2012, p. 48). Elementary principals who have strong EI will also be aware of the need for trust and how to maintain trust in their schools. Though trust and relationships are important in the principal role, the problem is that principals have a limited understanding of their own EI and how it influences the way they are leading. Goleman defined EI as "the abilities to recognize and regulate emotions in ourselves and in others" (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001, p. 14), attributing a large component of personal and professional success to four main EI competencies, two relating to personal competence (i.e., self-awareness and self-management) and two relating to social competence (i.e. social awareness and relations management). Self-awareness is one's ability to understand and manage their own emotions; self-management is one's ability to manage positivity, achievement, adaptability, and emotional balance; social awareness is one's ability to be empathetic and have organizational awareness; and relationship management is one's ability to influence others, coach, have conflict management, lead teamwork, and inspire others. "Within each of the four

domains nest the competencies that make someone highly effective" (Goleman, 2012, p. xii). By understanding EI, elementary school principals will create stronger trust and culture in their schools.

There were two purposes of this study. First, to create an awareness of school leaders' EI and second to explore how EI can be further developed to create stronger school cultures and more effective schools. I chose to closely examine this topic because, as a school principal, I am constantly trying to find ways to improve myself as a means to better others. Leadership plays a significant role in fostering and enhancing employees' behavior in organizations (Khalili, 2016). However, to strengthen a school as an organization, we also need to develop and strengthen school principals. EI is a subject that was not taught in my undergraduate or graduate work as an elementary school teacher and principal; further, the participants in this study indicated they had little to no teaching or professional development within the realm of EI. Allen (2018) shared that "Every comment counts . . . [teachers need to] recognize the importance of everything we say to our students, every interaction that we have with them, as well as the importance of how we act when we are not with students" (p. 104). The same applies to principals and their interactions with students, teachers, community members, and district-level leaders—every action matters. By developing awareness and engaging in ongoing refinement and enhancement of their EI skills, elementary school principals will be able to improve their interactions with others, become more self-aware and aware of others, become cognizant of others' emotions, and be better equipped to manage trusting relationships in a positive way.

As a researcher and an elementary principal, I want to know how I can continue to improve my leadership capacity. Based on evidence from my study, I now know that the awareness and development of EI are ever evolving. This research illustrates how principals can

continue to grow and develop their leadership capacity through better understanding their EI. When considering Patton's (2012) reasons for researching, my research purposes align closely with the developmental evaluation process. Patton shared that all researchers have different reasons or goals for completing their work and indicated there are six alternative evaluation purposes (p. 115):

- Summative, judgment-oriented evaluation

- Improvement-oriented formative evaluation

- Evaluation for accountability

- Monitoring

- Knowledge-generating evaluation

- Developmental evaluation

As mentioned, my research aligned with developmental evaluation. "Developmental evaluation involves changing the model by adapting it to changed circumstances and emergent conditions. Developmental evaluation is designed to be congruent with and nurture developmental, emergent, innovative, and transformative processes" (Patton, 2012, p. 127). As can be seen in this study, the understanding and development of one's own EI needs to be ongoing. In the recommendations portion of this research, I propose ongoing professional development and coaching for elementary principals so they can continue to develop their EI. Patton went on to say:

> Developmentally oriented leaders in organizations and programs don't expect (or even want) to reach the state of "stabilization" required for summative evaluation . . . Rather, they aspire to continuous development, ongoing adaptation, and rapid responsiveness . . .

They expect to be forever developing and changing—and they want an evaluation

approach that supports development and change. (pp. 127–128)

As a researcher, I want to know more about how I can continue to develop my leadership

capabilities through EI. As can be seen in the results, this work needs to be ongoing to continue

growing as a leader.

To gather data for this research, I used qualitative research methods. I wanted the

participants to be able to authentically explain and express their thoughts as related to their

highest identified EI trait. Using a qualitative method allowed the participants to share thoughts,

ideas, and experiences that I may not have been able to capture through a quantitative method. In

a qualitative study, sometimes the participants are referred to as "quals." Patton (2012) shared

insight as to who "quals" are:

The qual's world is complex, dynamic, interdependent, textured, nuanced, unpredictable,

and understood through stories, and more stories, and still more stories. Quals connect the

causal dots through the unfolding patterns that emerge within and across these many

stories and case studies. (p. 288)

By using qualitative research, I was able to listen intently to the participants' responses, hear

their stories, and then build themes around their thoughts.

Rationale

I chose to study the impact of elementary principals' EI on school culture because I want

to know what more can be done to develop myself as a school leader. Through principal and

teacher preparation programs and undergraduate and graduate programs, we are taught how to

teach and how to evaluate, laws within education, fiscal responsibility, and how to coach

teachers and work with families; however, we have not been taught how we can continue to

grow ourselves. This work is important because educators are in the business of developing others, and that work should not stop at the principal level. "To meet the many challenges they will face in the next decade, 21st-century principals will need to develop skills and strategies that aren't taught in graduate school" (Ferrandino, 2001, p. 441). Ferrandino (2001) went on to explain more about what principals need to be successful:

> Today's principals could certainly use the skills of a public relations professional to "market" their schools and generate community support. They also need to know how to work with groups of teachers, parents, and community members in pursuit of a common mission. (p. 442)

This work is important because it identifies and promotes the ongoing growth and development of elementary school principals' EI traits, which, in turn, will positively affect students, teachers, families, and community members. When a school culture is positive, the greater community feels it, as this positivity can affect test scores, home values, district goals, and more. "Research shows that positive school climates maximize student learning opportunities" (Price, 2012, p. 44).

I argue that elementary school principals who have strong EI will not only positively affect their school culture, they will also be well-equipped to handle difficult situations.

> Leaders who master the five dimensions of emotional intelligence and who help foster these domains in their schools will find success in their leadership and with their students. We don't have to let every situation lead to conflict or division. As leaders, we can control our reactions in the moment, preventing our own impatience or misinterpretations from creating unwarranted difficulties. (Lopez, 2024, p. 3)

A large part of a principal's role is ensuring the academic and emotional success and growth of students. Leaders who have strong EI will also cultivate an environment in which students can develop their EI as well.

> A robust culture is characterized by numerous interconnected and harmonious exchanges among all members of the school community. These exchanges foster a widespread and reinforced understanding of the school's distinctive culture and an understanding of the key elements for succeeding within that culture. (Lopez, 2024, p. 50)

Elementary principals have many stakeholders to consider, including students, teachers, staff, parents, district leadership, and the greater community. Principals who are strong in EI will understand that their actions and inactions play a critical role when interacting with each stakeholder subgroup. Every interaction a principal has matters, and, as a result, will positively or negatively affect the school culture.

Goals

As a lifelong learner, I am continually looking for ways I can better myself as well as improve the working and learning environment in my school. My goal in this study was to explore whether EI plays a role in how an elementary principal influences their school and, if so, what specific intelligences should be developed to foster a positive culture for staff and students. With these outcomes in mind, I also wanted to understand what can be done to support principals' development and awareness of their own EI. I imagine this work will be ongoing and used as a reflective and refining tool within principal professional development. When principals take the time to invest in themselves through understanding their EI, the school culture will be positively affected; beyond that, students will thrive as they will be able to learn in a supportive environment where their principal is modeling what is needed to be emotionally responsive and

empathetic toward all. This positive and supportive environment will significantly enhance the learning environment for students.

Research Questions

"The relationships of principals, as the school leader, strongly and directly affect teachers' attitudes, which define the schooling climate" (Price, 2012, p. 40). The primary question I explored was whether there is a relationship between principal EI and school culture. I wanted to know if there was a relationship between the two, and if so, how we can use that information to develop principals. Relatedly, I wanted to know how principals create a positive working environment and what is needed to build and maintain a positive school atmosphere. These questions were answered in various forms throughout my research. Within my qualitative research, I asked my participants many other questions, but they all centered around principal relationships and trust, creating supportive environments, having strong communication and accountability, professional development, and overall school atmosphere.

Conclusion

I designed my research to help elementary school principals gain a better understanding of their own EI traits as well as how they can continue to use these strengths to positively influence others. Through qualitative research methods, I interviewed nine elementary school principals from six different school districts in north and northwestern Illinois. These interviews enabled me to learn more about the ways in which the principals build relationships and trust, communicate, develop their staff, and more. Additionally through an analysis of Illinois 5Essentials data, I was able to compare principal EI and ratings of school culture. The goal of this work was to foster ongoing awareness and development of school leaders' EI so they can continue to positively influence their school communities. The following chapter provides an

overview of the literature aligned with this study. The text referenced supports the importance of

trusting relationships, positive school culture, and strong communication as well as why EI

awareness and development are critical for strong leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

"Consciously or unconsciously, we decided the tone of our school" (Whitaker, 2012, p. 39). To cultivate a positive school culture, a school leader must be aware of the many ways in which their EI influences the school. As a way of measuring this influence, principals should become more aware of their EI so they can understand their areas of strength and areas where development is still needed. The following literature review examines Goleman's work with EI (Goleman, 2012) and the four EI competencies that play a role in leadership: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. This review also confirms that a principal's EI is instrumental in building trusting relationships and shaping a school's culture. "The work of leading effective teams takes a great deal of emotional intelligence on the part of leaders" (Lopez, 2024, p. 40).

Emotional Intelligence

In a 2002 interview with Daniel Goleman, he explained what sets EI apart from IQ and why EI is so important:

> Emotional intelligence is a different way of being smart. It includes knowing what your feelings are and using your feelings to make good decisions in life. It's being able to manage distressing moods well and control impulses. It's being motivated and remaining hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks in working toward goals. It's empathy: knowing what the people around you are feeling. And it's social skill - getting along well with other people, managing emotions and relationships, being able to persuade or lead others. (O'Neil, 1996, p. 6)

Unlike IQ, which measures intelligence, EI is a measurement of one's feelings, empathy, and self-regulation, as well as an awareness of others' emotions. "Emotional intelligence can be described as an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures" (Bar-On, 1997, p. 14, as cited in Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 95). In the workplace, and especially in a school setting, the ability to cope with fluctuating and unexpected stressors and challenges is a tool leaders need to be successful. Goleman (1998) has conducted extensive research within the area of EI and how it plays a role in the work environment, noting "emotional intelligence refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 371). The ability to manage and understand emotions is important for all stakeholders, but is especially important for leaders.

"Studies have shown that emotional intelligence impacts a leader's ability to be effective and that managers who do not develop their emotional intelligence have difficulty in building good relationships with peers, subordinates, superiors, and clients" (Goleman, 1998, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 230; see also Miao et al., 2016). As mentioned earlier, EI is just as important as intellectual abilities for leaders in the workplace. Suppose a CEO, president, manager, or principal, for example, wants to make a positive impact within their organization. In that case, they need to possess strong EI to not only be aware of their own feelings and abilities but also to be aware of their subordinates' feelings, abilities, and relationships.

> Leaders' emotional intelligence, therefore, is the ability of leaders in an organization to be aware of their personal emotions, effectively manage them, and also have the ability to identify, understand, and effectively manage the emotions of their subordinates in an organization. (Goleman, 2014, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 227)

To summarize, a leader in an organization needs to be aware of the feelings and emotions of their subordinates in order to effectively manage and lead. "Leaders need emotional intelligence because it has the potential to make them effective leaders as they are able to identify, understand, and manage their personal emotions as well as the emotions of their subordinates in the workplace" (Fianko et al., 2020, p. 228). Based on this information, effective leaders need to have a strong balance of managing their own emotions as well as being cognizant of others' emotions and feelings, and then act accordingly to lead.

> An emotionally intelligent leader knows how their emotions influence their words and actions, affecting the connections they have with their employees, the decisions they make throughout the day, and the way they cope with work pressures. Your employees will go out of the way for you when they feel cared for and connected to you, appreciated for their efforts, and fulfilled in their role. (Stern, 2022, p. 48)

Organizational leaders need to understand how their emotions affect their employees, and consequently, how their employees' emotions affect leadership. Leaders with strong EI will be able to balance, learn, and grow from their awareness of their own emotions and the emotions of others.

Goleman identified four main areas of EI (Goleman, 2012, p. xiii): social awareness, relationship management, self-awareness, and self-management. Within these four competencies are further descriptors separating each one from another. Though the competencies are different from one another, they are all rooted in an individual's emotional abilities.

> In particular, there are two pathways; one begins with self-awareness as a necessary competency for effective self-management, which in turn results in greater social skills. The other pathway is formulated by self-awareness serving as a prerequisite for social

awareness, or more specifically empathy, which then leads to effective self-management.

(Cassady & Eilla, 2008, p. 102)

The different intelligences are parallel to one another, each having specific criteria that define them. Successful leaders may be strong in one area of EI or many. Stern (2022) stated the following:

Leading with emotional intelligence is the magnetic attraction that captures everyone's attention and moves teams forward. Professionals with high emotional intelligence have exceptional self-awareness, better control of their actions, and more empathy for others. An increased level of emotional intelligence can also help individuals manage stress better, build healthier relationships, and be more successful and work in life. (p. 49)

The next sections further in depth into each of the EI competencies.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the first EI competency. "Individuals who are self-aware are able to recognize and understand their own emotions, and they have the essential abilities that contribute to strong empathy skills" (Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 102). Leaders, especially principals, benefit greatly from using and modeling empathy while leading. "Self-awareness refers to a deep understanding of our own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. School leaders with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful; they are honest with themselves and others" (Lopez, 2024, p. 10). Goleman (2012) said,

Mindfulness is an obvious way to promote self-awareness and emotional management; it offers basic training and concentration. From a scientific perspective, this strengthens cognitive control, the capacity to focus on whatever is most salient at the moment and ignore everything else. (p. xiv)

Self-awareness is a critical attribute of being a focused and empathetic leader.

> Having high emotional self-awareness allows leaders to be in touch with their feelings, take the emotional charge out of situations when triggered, and label an emotion for what it is without getting too emotionally invested. Without emotional self-awareness, leaders may react impulsively, making themselves, and possibly others, victims of their feelings. (Stern, 2022, p. 137)

Stern (2022) and Lopez (2024) stated successful leaders are aware of their own emotions and manage them appropriately based on the different situations presented; furthermore, they can identify the emotions of others and respond in a supportive way. "School leaders who are self-aware know to recognize and credit the emotional intelligence of others. Too often leaders don't give self-awareness the attention it deserves" (Lopez, 2024, p. 10).

Self-Management

The next EI competency is self-management. "Self-management consists of emotional self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Control of impulses and flexibility are key aspects for those who are able to manage their own emotions" (Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 102). Slightly different from self-awareness, self-management has more subcategories over which an individual has control. Goleman (2012) listed emotional balance, adaptability, achievement, and positivity as core domains within self-management. These traits are especially important for leaders when needing to handle difficult situations. "Self-regulation (management) is the inner conversation we are always having with ourselves. School leaders who are in control of their feelings act reasonably and can create an environment of trust and fairness in which disagreements are sharply reduced" (Lopez, 2024, p. 11). When disagreements or challenges arise, successful leaders with strong self-management EI are able to

rise to the occasion. "Leaders are also measured by their ability to handle challenging situations and recover quickly from misfortunes. Great leaders show serenity and understanding, distancing themselves from their own emotional reactions" (Stern, 2022, p. 56). Individuals who have strong EI competencies also have high abilities of cognitive reasoning, analysis, and verbal communication skills.

> These three cognitive factors (i.e., cognitive reasoning, analysis, and verbal communication) are the same three factors that help us shape, develop, and strengthen our emotional intelligence, yet they are also the same three factors that are ego and hijack in the heat of a turbulent moment or time. (Lopez, 2024, p. 98)

Self-management is a competency leaders need to constantly refine in order to improve. "Self-regulation [management] strategies may be the means by which people can improve on emotional competencies such as stress tolerance, optimism, communication, and assertiveness. When people learn a new behavior, they use self-regulation to move from other-regulated behavior to automated behavior" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, as cited in Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 37).

Social Awareness

The third EI competency is social awareness. "Those with high social awareness display empathy, organizational awareness, and service (i.e., recognizing follower needs). Socially aware individuals are in tune with others' feelings and are able to react to them appropriately" (Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 102). Goleman (2001) explained why social awareness within leaders is important: "Social awareness enables leaders to be sensitive towards others so that they can create an atmosphere of openness, making these leaders more flexible and open to new ideas and perspectives that lead to effective leadership" (as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 240). A school

principal works with many stakeholders every day and needs to be in tune with each individual's emotions and needs if they want to lead and engage successfully. "Social awareness also plays an important role in developing trust in leader-employee relationships" (Martinovski et al., 2007, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 225).

> Emotionally intelligent school leaders recognize the impact that naysayers can have on a group or team. They may instinctively want to devalue the naysayers' voice, but socially aware leaders know when to include the opposition and when to dismiss it. (Lopez, 2024, p. 80)

Principals who are strong in social awareness also have strong empathy skills. In their study comparing emotional and cognitive competencies as a basis of how subordinates perceived effective leadership, Kellet et al. (2002) reported "social awareness (empathy), which is a substantial emotional intelligence component, bore the strongest correlation with perceived effective leadership" (as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 239). "Social awareness (empathy) has become increasingly important to the success of leadership because empathetic leaders are more likely to have an appropriate degree of openness about diversity and cultural differences" (Choi, 2013, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 225). The awareness of others' needs and the ability to be empathetic with employees are traits strong leaders require. This quality also allows leaders to have organizational awareness and stay well-informed.

> Empathy is a missing piece in many if not most, relationships - at work and at home. It's also missing in many if not most, teams and organizations. And that limits our effectiveness and impact. Modeling empathy with others dramatically increases not only well-being but also the performance of all involved. (Covey, 2022, p. 117)

Relationship Management

"The triad of self-awareness, self-management, and empathy (social awareness) all come together in the final EI ability: relationship management. Managing relationships skillfully boils down to handling other people's emotions" (Fianko, et al., 2020, p. 226). Relationship management is the fourth overarching competency within EI.

> Relationship management includes the competencies of inspirational leadership, influence, developing others, catalyst of change, conflict management, building bonds, teamwork, and collaboration. Strong relationship managers are able to problem solve, use persuasion effectively, and handle the social aspects of their relationships. (Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 102)

"Strong leaders will likely be strong in relationship management because it requires them to lead, coach, inspire, manage conflict, and support teamwork within an organization" (Goleman, 2012, p. xiii).

> Successful leaders are able to create strong connections by nurturing, building, and maintaining great, mutually satisfying relationships. They know that by using their interpersonal relationship skills, they can enhance communication in the workplace and build effective and collaborative relationships and associations with all levels across the organization. (Stern, 2022, p. 143)

The ability to use interpersonal relationship skills is critical for organizational leaders, especially when considering how to manage resistant individuals. Leaders who are strong in relationship management will be able to address those concerns: "Emotionally intelligent leaders look for paths to building relationships with resistors. Of course, not every relationship will be all rainbows and unicorns, but creating connections is vital to collaborative problem-solving"

(Lopez, 2024, p. 81). Furthermore, individuals who are strong in relationship management can bring people together. "Managing relationships also includes the ability to work cooperatively with others in teams as opposed to working separately or competitively" (Goleman, 1998, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 227). "The relationship management dimension of emotional intelligence comprises of developing others, which is defined by gaining an understanding of the developmental needs of others and helping them to acquire them" (Goleman, 2004, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 224). Leaders who want to grow and develop their organizations should lean into developing their relationship management skills; this is especially true for school principals.

> Leveraging social skills (relationship management) as a leader during difficult times is not just a matter of friendliness, it is about friendliness with a purpose. Socially skilled school leaders tend to have a wide circle of acquaintances and a knack for finding common ground and building rapport with people of all kinds. (Lopez, 2024, p. 14)

Principals need to constantly build upon their relationships with all stakeholders. "The art of handling relationships well begins with authenticity, acting from one's genuine feelings" (Goleman, 2004, as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 226). "If any group needs to maximize its effectiveness, it's the team at the top, which means establishing close and smooth relations so that everyone can share information easily and coordinate effectively" (Goleman, 2004 as cited in Fianko et al., 2020, p. 240).

Principals and Emotional Intelligence

Interwoven into the four EI competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management are suggestions as to why successful school principals need to have strong EI. This next section further examines why this is important for school

leaders. As previously described, Goleman (1998) defined EI as "the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships" (p. 317). Principals engage with students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members on a daily basis, and the ability to recognize the feelings and emotions of others is pivotal to their success.

> Effective leaders are also distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence in the form of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and refined social skills. These qualities may sound "soft," but leadership development research has found direct ties between emotional intelligence and measurable organizational results. (Lopez, 2024, p. 9)

Similarly, Turk and Wolfe (2019) concluded that "school leaders possess the skills of self-awareness, awareness of others, mindfulness, hope/optimism, and compassion/empathy to initiate, utilize, and sustain resonant leadership" (p. 147). These skill sets make an effective school leader.

> Principals are in a position where they are typically center-stage; they are the face of the building and the person all stakeholders rely on for direction and support. This means a principal needs to be cognizant of what they say and do because all their actions have an impact.

> School leaders who are in control of their emotions are better able to roll with changes and navigate students and staff through tough times. When new challenges arise they don't panic but rather stay calm, suspend judgment and seek out information before moving forward. (Lopez, 2024, p. 11)

Furthermore, Stern (2022) explained the way in which an emotionally intelligent leader can use their competencies to lead effectively:

An emotionally intelligent leader knows how their emotions influence their words and

actions, affecting the connections they have with their employees, the decisions they

make throughout the day, and the way they cope with work pressures. Your employees

will go out of the way for you when they feel cared for and connected to you, appreciated

for their efforts, and fulfilled in their role. (p. 48)

Principals who have strong EI should also soon be able to see EI strengths emerge from their

staff and students. It is known that principals play a large role in supporting student success, and

a large part of student success is the development of their emotional and social intelligence.

Many school districts that were part of this study have social emotional learning (SEL) standards

embedded in their math and English language arts scope and sequences. SEL standards are

included parts of the curriculum to ensure students are growing and developing in all areas.

Emotional intelligence may be related to improved educational outcomes. Early signs of

EI can predict positive outcomes later. Children with a higher ability to label emotions

were more likely to exhibit long-term positive behavioral outcomes such as academic

performance, peer status, and adaptive social behavior, even after controlling for verbal

and general intelligence. (Izard et al., 2001, as cited in Cassady & Eissa, 2008, p. 32)

As mentioned earlier, every action matters; this also pertains to the actions students observe on

the part of the principal. "Emotional intelligence, above all else, is the key to effective education

leadership" (Lopez, 2024, p. 100).

Principals Creating a Supportive Culture

To have an emotionally intelligent workplace, you, as the leader, are responsible for the

environment you create. Creating an emotionally intelligent culture is an inside job. It

comes from the internal relationship your employees have with you as their leader and with the work itself. (Stern, 2022, p. 48)

School leaders play a large role in developing the overall building culture. This positive school culture represents the well-being of staff and students, respect among all stakeholders, and a sense of pride and belonging within the school. Effective principals need to have ownership of their school so they can cultivate a positive and engaging culture. Beyond that, effective leaders need to take time to create trust with stakeholders. This includes giving principals enough agency over their schools so they can build effective, trusting, affective relationships with their staff. "School climates can benefit from good principal management" (Price, 2012, p. 70). Based on this information, it is clear the principal will set the tone for a positive and supportive culture, or one that is negative. Stern (2022) concluded the following:

It's essential to learn how to be in the driver's seat of your feelings and understand how to lead with a strong mind and a kind heart while using a set of clear, simple, and tested skills and strategies. Doing so will allow you to connect more authentically and communicate more effectively with your co-workers and teams. This kind of connection and communication will create an environment of trust and belonging that will spur engagement, by curiosity, and engender fraternity among team members. That is what leading with emotional intelligence looks like. (p. 10)

To establish an inclusive and supportive culture, principals need to consider the EI of others. "Research finds principals especially influential over the organizational climate of the school where they are able to foster trusting, cooperative, and open environments where input from staff is welcome" (Price, 2012, p. 40).

Additionally, being an effective leader requires the ability to take the perspective of

others. McCormick (1999) further noted that the ability to take the perspective of others

means that leaders should be able to see the world through others' eyes. (Fianko et al.,

2020, p. 225)

However, effective principals also need to cautiously weigh other's opinions and thoughts so

they are mutually beneficial for all stakeholders. "Emotionally intelligent school leaders know

not to place too high a value on harmony in every gathering, as making true progress on issues

requires us to be honest and forthright with one another" (Lopez, 2024, p. 79).

"The relationships of principals, as the school leader, strongly and directly affect

teachers' attitudes, which define the schooling climate. Principal–teacher relationships offer a

prime organizational case where relational trust likely develops from emotional bonds" (Price,

2012, p. 40). Research has shown principals need strong EI to effectively lead a school.

Principals also need to establish trusting relationships with staff, students, families, and the

community to make a positive impact. The next section covers why trust is important for

principals.

Principals Establishing Trust

"Principals who can genuinely establish a trusting school environment for all school

members—parents, teachers, students, and community—can become 'drivers of change'" (Bryk

et al., 2010, p. 45). When principals can create trust with these important stakeholders, more

productive progress can be made toward school initiatives and goals. "With this trust,

cooperation, and collaboration around unified school goals and program coherence can thrust

forward school improvement ideas and plans, even among disadvantaging barriers" (Bryk et al.,

2010, p. 25). Simply put, effective principals need to establish trust to excel. "When principals

establish trusting school spaces, serious school improvement and success can occur" (Price, 2012, p. 44).

Lopez (2024) shared, "Your teachers and staff must believe you before they will believe in you" (p. 82). He went on to say that principals can build trust with stakeholders by giving trust, changing their mindset, and recognizing the value of a skeptical perspective. "Emotionally intelligent leaders seek to give trust by being transparent, being consistent, extending empathy to others, and taking feedback from others to heart" (Lopez, 2024, p. 82). Beyond that, principals need to find ways to help staff build trust with one another. "Supportive administrators enhance collegial support and cohesion among staff, a process that feeds back to form even stronger trusting relationships and reduces the structural vulnerability of principals" (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, as cited in Price, 2012, p. 46; see also Bryk et al., 2010).

> The trust among individuals in a community provides reasons to talk about the future
> rather than being stuck in the "good old days" of the past. Social capital is like insurance,
> almost a pre-forgiveness contract that allows for risk-taking. When social capital exists
> inside schools, the issue of accountability becomes less of a mandate or threat to react to.
> (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2019, p. 64)

Research shows that when trust is established by all individuals within an educational setting, progress will be made and students will be positively affected. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies SEL dimensions that are critical for students to learn in order to develop social and emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness. These dimensions are very closely aligned to Goleman's EI competencies identified in this work, which is important to

note because when leaders can develop these competencies and model them in their work, students will be positively supported.

Conclusion

If an elementary school principal wants to ensure success in their leadership, building goals, and mission, then they need to take time to invest in those around them. This time should include making connections with all stakeholders through building rapport, developing relationships, and establishing trust. "A robust culture is characterized by the numerous interconnected and harmonious exchanges among all members of the school community" (Lopez, 2024, p. 50). School principals with strong EI will be able to lead a dynamic group of stakeholders by understanding their feelings and the feelings of others, showing empathy, having organizational awareness, and constantly working on building trusting relationships. Through his work in EI, Goleman identified ways in which individuals can display positive leadership. "Being able to understand others' lives and perspectives is a key factor in emotionally intelligent leadership. Failing to accurately read the emotional cues and needs of others can leave us disconnected and unable to serve all students equitably" (Hogan, 2024, p. 32). The EI competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of a school leader. In the next chapter, I provide details of how I conducted my study of elementary school principals' EI and whether there was a relationship to Illinois 5Esssentials ratings for the indicators of Effective Leaders and Supportive Environments.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

As a school leader, the principal can have the greatest impact on school culture, achievement, and performance. In order to better understand what influences a principal's impact on schools, I wanted to learn more about the individual leadership EI components principals identify as having. Specifically, I wanted to know whether there was a relationship between a principal's EI and school culture, explore how principals create a positive working environment, and uncover what is needed to build and maintain a positive school atmosphere. According to Patton (2012),

> Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller
> number of people and cases; finding patterns and themes in the diverse narratives can be
> painstaking, time-consuming, and uncertain. But qualitative data in program evaluation
> are aimed at letting people in programs express their reactions in their own terms rather
> than impose upon them a preconceived set of limited response categories. (p. 290)

My method of qualitative research included a two-step process for participants. First, principals completed a survey to identify their individual EI competency and then they participated in an interview with me during which they reflected on their identified EI trait and how it related to their work as an elementary school principal. The initial survey was optional; however, it was a beneficial component of the study because the results drove the interview conversations I had with participants. All participants took the survey.

The purpose of this study was to collect information about the different components of EI that different principals possess, and then compare their strengths to the positive impact made on

school culture and performance. By better understanding the differing levels of EI, school leaders should have a greater perspective of their EI strengths, and can then use these strengths to develop greater capacity within their buildings and connect with colleagues to learn from their own EI.

Participants

The participants in this study were principals from various school districts within the north and northwest suburbs of Chicago. They were current elementary school principals and had been serving in their buildings as principal for at least one full school year. Participants were within my professional network and represented a multitude of school districts: Long Meadow School District, Stockton School District, Palmer School District, Winston School District, Pontiac School District, and Little Rock School District. All districts listed are pseudonyms. I chose these districts because they represented different demographics and populations within Illinois schools. Additionally, by including principals from different school districts, I was able to compare different leadership cultures from a multitude of districts. The participants were male and female and had a range of experience in the principal position, with some having only led for 1 year and others leading for over 13 years. Table 1 provides a comparison of the demographics of each school district.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants' School Districts

District	Students served	Enrollment	Low income	IEPs	ELL	Demographics
Long Meadow	EC–12th Grade	5,585 students	16%	12%	12%	77% White 1.2% Black 8.5% Hispanic 9.9 % Asian
Stockton	EC–8th Grade	14,925 students	20%	12%	23%	38.7% White 5.9% Black 24.8% Hispanic 26.1% Asian
Palmer	EC–8th Grade	11,037 students	41%	13%	30%	38.7% White 4.4% Black 33.9% Hispanic 18.4% Asian
Winston	EC–8th Grade	5,971 students	49%	15%	53%	33.7% White 2.7% Black 49.1% Hispanic 10.7% Asian
Pontiac	EC–8th Grade	1,449 students	28%	10%	31%	63.3% White 1.4% Black 20.8% Hispanic 10.8% Asian
Little Rock	EC–8th Grade	1,194 students	39%	17%	15%	51.7% White 2.3% Black 28.5% Hispanic 2.8% Asian

Note. EC = Early childhood education. ELL = English language learners. IEP = Individualized Education Plan.

The information in Table 1 illustrates the diversity in student enrollment, percentages of low-income students, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and students who are English language learners (ELLs). Additionally, the table describes the differences in demographics within each school district. The differences in demographics are important to point

out to illustrate the diversity of the participants' school districts. Furthermore, these differences create different school environments. It is important to note that most of these school districts support students in early childhood (EC) through eighth grade, with the exception of one school district that also supports students through Grade 12. The demographics in the school districts greatly vary, indicating many districts are quite diverse in culture, whereas others, such as Long Meadow, are not as diverse. It is also important to point out the difference in enrollment numbers per district as well as the percentage of students who fall into subcategories such as low-income or ELL. These different factors help create diverse student populations across all six school districts.

I intentionally collected information from a variety of school principals, districts, and years of service so I could better understand how leaders can make an impact on their school culture. I believed that if I were to survey principals from only one school district or from a more restricted range of years as an educator, I may have gathered skewed results based on experience, values, professional development, and expectations. Having participants from a variety of school districts helped me understand how the different types of leader EI affect schools. Table 2 details the different principals interviewed, the districts they represented, and the EI trait with which they mostly identified. This information is helpful to show that different districts and leaders are cultivating different EI traits.

Table 2

Participant Name, School District, and Strongest Identified EI

Participant	District	EI
D. Gonzalez	Stockton	Social awareness
H. Nicholas	Stockton	Relationship management and self-management
E. Bennett	Little Rock	Relationship management
M. Wilson	Long Meadow	Social awareness
T. Smith	Pontiac	Social awareness
K. Feuer	Winston	Relationship management
E. Austen	Palmer	Relationship management
K. Johnson	Long Meadow	Social awareness
K. Wolffe	Stockton	Relationship management and social awareness

The schools represented in this research also had diverse ratings according to the Illinois 5Essentials Survey data. The Illinois 5Essentials surveys teachers, families, and students about the climate, culture, academics, and safety within their given school and district. I used the Climate section of the survey results to identify how principals and schools were measured within the areas of Effective Leaders and Supportive Environments. The survey also includes information on the indicators of Collaborative Teachers, Ambitious Instruction, and Involved Families. Schools are rated as most implementation, more implementation, average, less implementation, or least implementation within the given categories. Table 3 showcases how the

different schools in the survey were rated within the given categories. Schools are kept

anonymous to maintain confidentiality.

Table 3

School Climate Survey Ratings as Measured by Illinois 5Essentials Survey

	Effective leaders	**Supportive environment**	Collaborative teachers	Ambitious instruction	Involved families
Aldrin Elementary	**Average**	**More**	Less	Average	Average
Dwyer Elementary	**More**	**Most**	More	More	More
Long Grove Elementary	**Average**	**More**	Average	Average	Average
South Lane Elementary	**Average**	**More**	Average	More	More
Proper Hill Elementary	**Less**	**More**	Less	Less	Average
Powell Elementary	**Average**	**Most**	Less	Average	More
Lakewood Elementary	**Less**	**Most**	Average	More	Average
Frost Elementary	**Average**	**Most**	More	More	More
Harrison Elementary	**More**	**Most**	More	More	Most

The information provided in Table 3 should also help readers understand the culture

within each building. The bolded columns indicate the areas researched. As mentioned, I took a

closer look at how the principals were rated within the areas of Effective Leaders and Supportive

Environments, which are bolded in the table. However, the other categories should help readers

understand the other elements that contribute to the culture within an elementary school.

Data Gathering Techniques

My data collection process was a multi-tiered approach, requesting participants to first complete a free and public EI survey, which was then followed up with a leadership style interview. I requested participants to complete the free and public EI survey created by the Global Leadership Foundation (Global Leadership Foundation, 2022). This survey was optional for participants; however, everyone took the survey and received the results. The Global Leadership Foundation website has a "Free Emotional Intelligence Test," which is a useful source to quickly access and easy to complete. The survey took participants about 10–15 minutes to complete. See Appendix A for a list of questions that were part of the survey. Immediately after submitting their answers, participants received their results without having to submit an email or sign up for any memberships. At the end of the survey, participants were provided with their results and how they measured on the EI traits of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Participants then referred to their identified EI trait during the interview I conducted.

After participants completed the EI survey, I conducted a follow-up interview with each principal via video chat or over the phone. These interviews were longer, ranging from 15 to 40 minutes depending on the individual being interviewed and the length of their responses. The interviews were a combination of closed and open-ended questions, allowing participants to expand upon how their strongest identified area of EI affected their 5Essentials data. See Appendix B for the interview questions. In the interviews, the participants reflected on how their EI strengths may have affected the culture in their building. I asked specific questions related to school culture and climate, trust, leadership style, professional development, and communication. For the second part of the interview, I provided participants with their results

from the most recent year's Illinois 5Essentials report, allowing them to also reflect on their scores related to building culture within the report. This category was specifically highlighted because data should vary based on types of leadership style and reflect the way leadership can support culture in the building. The 5Essentials data are freely available to the public by accessing IllinoisReportCard.com and then searching for school-specific information (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.).

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting interviews with the participants, I provided a detailed description of how I would conduct the research as well as how I would ensure participants would remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Participants knew there were two steps to the interview process and they could forfeit at any time if they felt they needed to end the conversation. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and should they choose to discontinue, it would be without penalty or bias. Before beginning the interviews I also informed the participants that their identities would not be revealed within the final dissertation, as data would be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants. I also informed the participants of how their information would be kept safe, once provided. I informed them that to ensure confidentiality, recordings of the interviews would be securely kept on a password-protected laptop and 3 years after the conclusion of the research, these records would be destroyed.

Before conducting any interviews, I also informed the participants of the risks and benefits associated with the research. I shared the benefit of allowing each participant to identify their EI strengths and considerations on how to implement these strengths within their buildings. I also explained that this benefit can enable school leaders to enhance their current practices to

then positively influence their schools. Along with the benefits, I also shared the risks of participating. I told the participants a potential risk related to the participant sharing information about their own leadership style with me. This could have been a risk if the participant did not want to discuss their methods and thoughts of leadership with others. I explained to the participants that there were no anticipated risks or benefits greater than what they encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to district leaders who are succession planning and beginning or refining administrative mentoring programs.

Data Analysis Techniques

Once I collected the data from my qualitative research, I had the participant responses transcribed using Otter.ai. I also separated the participants into different groups based on how they identified on the EI survey. Using the highest score from the EI survey, I categorized the respondents into two groups: social awareness and relationship management. This organization was beneficial when reporting the results in Chapter 4. After identifying participants within the different EI groups, I then organized their interview responses according to the different questions asked so I could see all answers for one question

I used the in vivo coding process to analyze my data (Saldaña, 2011). In this coding process, the researcher uses the actual language the participants use in their responses to then create a list of themes. "What words and phrases you select as codes are those that seem to stand out as significant or summative of what's being said" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 99). Once extracted, "the in vivo codes are then clustered into similar categories. The categorization is based on the researcher's interpretation" (Saldaña, 2011, p. 101). In this case, the words that stood out most to me fell under different categories (i.e., relationships, trust, supportive environments, connection

to the administration) and were grouped within those categories (i.e., atmosphere, hiring, staff development, communication, and accountability).

Last, I looked up each participant's 5Essentials data within the areas of Supportive Environments and Effective Leaders. These data were necessary to compare to EI traits. After organizing the participants by EI trait, I completed the coding, identified themes, and reviewed the Illinois 5Essentials data per elementary building. After organizing the data, I was able to orchestrate a summary of my findings.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between elementary school principals' EI and how it influenced their school culture. I guided this work by asking whether there was a relationship between a principal's EI and school culture, how principals create a positive working environment, and what is needed to build and maintain a positive school atmosphere. Participants were thoroughly informed of the survey and interview process, as well as how their recorded responses would be kept confidential and safe. After identifying themes and common EI traits and analyzing Illinois 5Essentials data, I was then able to come to conclusions with my findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between elementary school principals' EI and the impact on school culture. The focus was on the four different types of EI: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Participants completed an online survey through the Global Leadership Foundation (2022) to determine which of the four EI descriptors best matched their leadership style.

- Self-awareness is described as the core of EI and comprises emotional self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-assessment. Someone who is high in self-awareness has the ability to be critically self-reflective, recognize their impact on work and relationships, and understand their strengths and limitations.

- Self-management includes self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement orientation, and initiative. Individuals who score high in self-management are aware of their emotions and management of responsibilities, they can adapt easily to obstacles, and they have high expectations to meet personal goals.

- Social awareness includes empathy, organizational awareness, and service orientation. Individuals who score high in social awareness have a strong ability to understand the concerns of others, can build a network of friends or work relationships, and can identify when others have needs and how to fill those needs.

- Relationship management is the largest identifier, consisting of visionary leadership, developing others, influence, change catalyst, conflict management, building bonds, and teamwork and collaboration. School leaders who identify as high in relationship management inspire and guide others, strengthen the ability of others, and know how

to use persuasive techniques. They also are strong leaders who focus on the value of

the relationships within teams and can send a clear message to set individuals on a

desired path.

Freeland et al. (2008) explained the following:

The concept of emotional intelligence was formally introduced in the research arena by

Salovey and Mayer in 1990. They defined emotional intelligence as a cognitive ability to

monitor and manage feelings, and to discriminate among them in oneself and others.

Daniel Goleman first introduced emotional intelligence to the general public in his 1995

book *Emotional Intelligence*, in which he defined emotional intelligence as the ability to

recognize, understand, and manage one's own and others' feelings and emotions. (p. 93)

For the purpose of this research, I used Goleman's model of EI and his four core competencies to

explore principal effectiveness (Goleman, 1995).

Findings

I began each interview by asking the participant to share their identified EI competency

as measured by the Global Leadership Foundation survey. Table 4 presents the different self-

identified EI competencies of each participant. None of the participants identified self-awareness

as their dominant EI competency, which was surprising considering it is the core intelligence. I

was expecting more participants to score high in this competency because those high in self-

awareness typically can understand their impact on others. "Individuals who are self-aware are

able to recognize and understand their own emotions, and they have the essential abilities that

contribute to strong empathy skills" (Freeland et al., 2008, p. 102). Only one participant

identified self-management as their dominant EI competency, and it was tied with relationship

management. Five participants identified relationship management as their strongest EI

competency; one participant tied this competency with another competency (social awareness) and another tied with self-management. Additionally, five participants identified social awareness as their strongest EI competency; one participant tied this competency with another competency (relationship-management). When asked whether their results surprised any of the participants, no one stated they were surprised. E. Austen commented, "It didn't really surprise me. I feel like that's just the kind of person I am." T. Smith similarly said, "It didn't surprise me. I'm kind of like an empath, so I'm very attuned to other people's feelings and their cues, their interactions with each other, and nonverbal stuff; it didn't really surprise me at all." However, three participants shared they were surprised that they did not score higher in any other area. M. Wilson commented,

> It doesn't surprise me that that social awareness is high on mine. It actually surprised me a little bit that relationship management was tied with self-management, just because we thrive on relationships. And so I expected that you know, maybe it would be a little bit different there.

H. Nicholas also shared, "I was pretty comfortable with that [scoring high in relationship management and self-management]. My lowest point actually surprised me, and that was self-awareness, which I only scored a 6 in. I thought I would be higher in that."

Figure 1

Participants' Self-Identified EI Competencies

Social awareness	Relationship management	Self management
D. Gonzalez	E. Bennett	H. Nicholas*
M. Wilson	K. Feuer	
T. Smith	E. Austen	
K. Johnson	K. Wolffe*	
K. Wolffe*	H. Nicholas*	

* Indicates identified more than one EI competency.

Reflecting on EI and Leadership Impact

To better understand the participants, I asked how they felt their identified EI competency affected their leadership. M. Wilson and D. Gonzalez, both scoring high in social awareness, shared that learning their competencies reaffirmed and reinforced what they knew about leadership and how they led within their buildings. D. Gonzalez shared she would try to capitalize on her social awareness strengths and M. Wilson said, "This is a social job and we have to maintain our relationships or we cannot do our jobs. We have to have relationships with each other and our students or everything else falls apart." She went on to say that knowing she was strong in social awareness would affect her leadership for the better as she was always paying attention to others and she acknowledged she could get a good feel for how others were feeling. H. Nicholas commented that being aware of her own reactions could help her respond to other people and that knowing her dominant competencies of relationship management and self-management would give her permission to take time while making decisions to process things to make the best choice. Other participants who scored high in relationship management were E.

Austen, K. Feuer, E. Bennett, and K. Wolffe. All four of these participants felt this EI competency was a good reflection of their leadership style. K. Wolffe reflected, "I think I do a lot to build that [relationships]. It's not so much of a top-down approach to leadership, it's more about the ability to build a team and have effective relationships with people." Similarly, E. Bennett explained that her strong competency in relationship management positively affected others by inviting more voices and collaboration to the school environment. E. Bennett said she liked to lead with a sense of shared leadership so she felt her relationships were strong. K. Feuer commented,

My leadership style is and has always been focused on developing positive relationships. And so this score [relationship management], I think, reflects that. That's something that I've always put a lot of stock into and prioritize that above, potentially some other things.

E. Austen had also put extra effort into creating strong relationships in her building, especially after coming back from the pandemic: "I try to make sure that teachers feel appreciated and cared for. That's important to me. I want teachers to know I'm going to do everything I can to support them and want them to feel that support."

To take the reflection a step further, I asked the participants if they felt their identified competency was important to be an effective leader. D. Gonzalez explained,

[Being a principal] you're working with people who are doing complex jobs and your job is very complex. And so having a high amount of EI, especially in social awareness, is really the only way that these complex situations can be handled in the best way possible.

Also high in social awareness, K. Johnson reflected that working in a school was a dynamic environment and principals have to balance and connect students, staff, community, and the district office: "I think social awareness is a huge piece of supporting and building a high school

culture; it's the building blocks for culture and you have to be aware of social connections before you can make a positive impact." Similarly, T. Smith explained,

> If you don't have that social awareness piece and aren't cued into it, like you're at some level going to have unhappy employees. Especially in our profession, I think feeling valued and respected and safe at work; that emotional safety is super important. So I do think that social awareness is key for leadership.

E. Austen reflected on the teacher shortage and credited it to teachers not feeling supported as well as the trauma students were bringing to the classroom:

> [Relationship management is important] because we can't control what students and teachers bring to the school environment, but we can control how we support one another. I try to do what's best in supporting teachers, but everyone is supporting each other too.

> Thinking from a slightly different lens, H. Nicholas, who scored high in relationship management and self-management explained,

> The self-management piece and getting things done and following up on principal responsibilities goes hand-in-hand with relationship management. If you can't get some of those logistical things done, or there are things that you commit to do for people, you need to get them done in a timely manner. Then, you can have great relationships. So I think they definitely play on each other.

In a similar mindset to E. Austen and H. Nicholas, K. Wolffe explained the high level of relationships and trust in his building:

> [High relationship management and social awareness] is a positive! I think it's an example you've set [as principal] for people and is what gets reflected back. It's very

much a family feel that people are there for each other, but it doesn't just impact their

social level. I think it also translates to everybody doing their job because they don't want

to let anybody else in the team down.

K. Wolffe went on to say that because he had been at his building for over 10 years, he had seen

the impact of his EI competencies of relationship management and social awareness be displayed

by his tenure staff as well.

After asking the participants to reflect on their identified EI, it was evident that they each

had a solid understanding of who they were as elementary principals and leaned into their

strengths while leading. The biggest takeaway from this introduction is that these principals

poured a lot of effort into building and maintaining trusting relationships with their staff,

students, and community. Every interviewee identified they were high in either social awareness

or relationship management, both involving connecting with others. Many reflected on the

importance of understanding stakeholders and working hard to maintain relationships and trust.

This theme continued to emerge as the participants reflected further on their results.

How do Elementary Principals Build Culture?

The next portion of the interviews focused on what the elementary principals did to build

a positive culture within their buildings. This question yielded lengthy responses from the

participants, as they explained the multitude of ways they brought staff together to provide

support. My goal in asking this question was to begin bridging the gap between each principal's

identified EI competency and their Supportive Environments rating as measured by the Illinois

5Essentials survey. The biggest theme that emerged from this section was the importance of

principals being cognizant of their staff and intentionally creating school environments that are

supportive of teachers and staff members' needs. Related to a supportive environment, the

interviewees heavily referenced the need to build the confidence and capacity of their staff, put the right people in the right positions, and create a fun and social atmosphere, significantly leading to creating a positive school culture.

H. Nicholas and K. Feuer, both strong in relationship management, identified that part of building culture within their schools was empowering their staff members. K. Feuer shared,

I've looked to build capacity in some of our teacher leaders to lead some professional development throughout the year and kind of step up to lead some other things to get more people involved in the leadership lens, to hopefully build that culture of we're all working together.

Likewise, H. Nicholas stated,

One of the really big things that I do here is try to tap into a variety of leaders. So that starts in the springtime, just identifying which building leaders are interested in different committees and how they'd like to play a role. We identify interests and make it very clear that if you lead a committee or a group in some way for 1 year, it doesn't necessarily mean that you're always going to be fulfilling that role. It might evolve and change. And I think that builds the culture because it just gives everyone a sense of feeling, "I have something that I'm proud of, and I'm good at." And so that might start with some meetings in the fall, just to reflect on leadership, personal goals . . . to build our culture.

Other elementary principals shared that they built culture by creating a supportive and communicative environment for teachers; a clear theme in this section of the interview. T. Smith shared that she started to lead her building before the pandemic and had worked hard to get to know her staff and their customs before she arrived:

I gave staff the option to meet with me as individuals or teams to try to understand where

we were as a school, what their goals were, what their concerns were. I made a lot of

missteps, with coming in and like not understanding some of the law, for lack of a better

word, the rituals or the traditions that were in place. There were a lot of things I wanted to

change and push forward in the building, but they needed to know me first.

Similar to T. Smith, K. Johnson explained that she wanted to create an outlet where staff could

share their concerns. She went on to say,

We can't keep concerns bottled up. So staff have to have appropriate ways to share them

because I also feel like teachers are here because they really want this to be the best

school possible. So I want them to share their concerns and their ideas for making it

better because if we have the same goal, we want this to be the best place that we can be.

However, I need staff to know I consider all options and ideas to get there; to be the best.

K. Wolffe's reflection on building culture focused on his teams and professional learning

communities (PLCs). Similar to others, his response aligned with a common theme of

understanding people and putting the right staff members in the right positions to be successful:

I look at how I create opportunities for staff to work together collaboratively. I always try

to be strategic about providing opportunities where staff on the general education side of

the building are also working with staff from self-contained special education classes.

The classrooms can be a very big disconnect between those teachers because they don't

do the same job but their relationship affects the overall culture in the building. Creative

action is where they're working cohesively. I try to create a more laid-back setting to

create these relationships.

K. Wolffe was unique in that he was high in the EI competencies of both relationship management and social awareness. His initial reflection highlighted the relationship management strength; however, K. Wolffe also provided a response that was reflective of his social awareness competency: "Building culture starts from hiring. You're hiring the right fit, you're building people. We're all team-focused, we're collaborative. So when you're looking for those qualities through interviews, that's who you're looking to bring on board."

Though the principals identified that creating cohesive teams, providing ongoing support, and empowering teachers were all ways to build culture, almost every principal interviewed also stated there was a need to have fun and stay social to enhance the culture. This theme came out in different elements of the interviews and was notably important. E. Bennett exclaimed,

> There's like a whole social side! We do after-school socials, focus on being positive while working together, and then there are random things throughout the school day as well, that staff do for one another to make the day better.

T. Smith also mentioned the need to take time to be together with her staff and for staff to be with one another. She stated social outings had even helped to build trust. E. Bennett, H. Nicholas, and K. Wolffe mentioned there were many opportunities built into their systems that allowed staff members to praise and recognize one another. This could include a teacher, paraprofessional, substitute teacher, or more. In H. Nicholas and K. Feuer's buildings, this act of recognition and praise even transferred to students. K. Feuer shared,

> I look to always create opportunities for interactions between staff and students, and students and students. I also look for opportunities to have fun within the building and draw on positives from there; this could be whole-school assemblies, playing games, having pep rallies, and more.

Illinois 5Essentials Reflection

Although the interview participants were principals in different school districts, there is one common way culture and impact are measured across Illinois. The 5Essentials survey is a tool sent out to staff members, students in fourth grade and up, and parents as a way to measure the indicators of Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environments, and Ambitious Instruction. For the purpose of this research, I asked participants to reflect on their 5Essentials data within the area of Supportive Environments. Every participant scored in the highest two ratings (i.e., More Implementation or Most Implementation) out of five possible areas (Least Implementation, Less Implementation, Average, More Implementation, and Most Implementation). Though no principal identified it directly, it was clear that the need for connection was what contributed to their high 5Essentials data. This theme was consistent with every principal's response, as seen below.

Principals who identified as having high EI within the area of relationship management shared their thoughts on their 5Essentials Survey data. H. Nicholas shared that her 5Essentials scores were pretty high overall:

> I feel like my emotional intelligence results of high in relationship management and self-management are reflected in my 5Essentials data. I think that if my leadership is strong, it's clearly coming out and what the staff, students, and family members are seeing.

E. Bennett shared she thought her 5Essentials score of more implementation was a result of having strong relationships with her school community and gaining staff buy-in: "My door is always open and I'll support what they [my staff] do." K. Feuer felt his high scores were due to the strong relationships he had with the parents in his school community:

I really focused on trying to connect with the parent community and involve them in

everything we were doing. I was lucky to have an involved PTO, having people that

wanted to be involved, and creating a system where they can be involved. I worked with

them [parents] to be able to figure out how they can support and help so they feel like

they're also a part of the system.

K. Wolffe had a different perspective on the 5Essentials data, initially saying he did not

think the results on the 5Essentials really gave a good perspective on building culture. This is

likely due to the fact that there are many ways culture is built but the 5Essentials does not

reference, such as how well a principal may know a staff member's personal and professional

life:

A supportive environment comes from relationships and building a staff; meaning

knowing what things are happening, status-wise, and knowing how they need to be

supported, not just professionally but social-emotionally. I pride myself on knowing just

about everything that's going on in people's lives that they're comfortable sharing with

me; people are comfortable coming to me because they know it is a supportive

environment.

Connecting with his EI competencies of social awareness and relationship management, K.

Wolffe also shared he thought this high level of comfort was credited to his 10 years serving as

principal in the same building, and the fact that he had hired about 90% of the staff currently

employed in the building. He knew his staff well, understood their strengths and areas for

improvement, and was cognizant of how they worked with others, allowing him to use his skills

of social awareness and relationship management to create a supportive environment for all staff

members.

Building principals who identified as having strong social awareness and EI also focused their reflection on their connections with others. M. Wilson commented on her emphasis on people—that being the staff and students. "That's where I consider my job to be, and so that is reflected in the 5Essentials scores. If students need something, I am there for them first and foremost, but if staff needs something, they come second." T. Smith shared she thought her strong score on the 5Essentials was not just related to her leadership, but also the support she provided her teachers such as having other professionals push into classrooms:

> In the long run, it's made the teachers feel more supported because they feel heard and they feel okay; they hear these kids are struggling and that they need some new ideas. They know they need some co-teaching in the classroom so I really think just me stepping back and watching how people interact has really helped me with the 5Essentials.

K. Wolffe identified relationship management and social awareness as his highest EI competency. As mentioned, he felt like the 5Essentials may not be the best tool to measure supportive environments. He also went on to share that his higher score could also be part of the way he ensured staff were connected to one another, which related to his social awareness EI score:

> Nobody wants to let anybody else down on the team. So they're all making sure that they're doing what they say they're going to do. They're providing the following structure for the kids but also that they're caring. They're part of the team.

K. Wolffe took a lot of pride in putting teams together based on what he knew about the members and felt these relationships and the "trickle down" of caring for one another were what contributed to a strong 5Essentials score.

The Illinois 5Essentials is a valuable tool to measure the indicators of Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environments, and Ambitious Instruction within the school setting. When reflecting on 5Essentials scores, the principals I interviewed all stated having strong connections with stakeholders influenced their ratings. Based on the research I conducted, elementary school principals' EI does influence their 5Essentials ratings. The information presented below supports these findings even further.

Comparing EI Competencies to 5Essentials

Table 5 shows the average 5Essentials Supportive Environments rating for all participants. To get this information, I assigned each 5Essentials score a number: 5 points for those who scored most implementation and 4 points for those who scored more implementation under the Supportive Environments category.

- Five participants identified social awareness as their highest EI. When averaging their total score (22 points divided by five participants), their average score was 4.4 for Supportive Environments.

- Five participants identified relationship management as their highest EI. When averaging their total score (24 points divided by five participants), their average score was 4.8 for Supportive Environments.

- One participant identified that self-management and relationship management were their highest intelligence. I removed the score for self-management, as only one person was identifying within this category and there was no way to take an average on this score. However, this participant's EI rating in relationship management was still included in the results.

- One participant identified both relationship management and social awareness as the highest intelligence, which is why there are 10 participants.

Table 4

Participants' Rating in Supportive Environment on Illinois 5Essentials Compared to Their EI Competency

Participant	Supportive environment rating		EI
D. Gonzalez	More implementation	4	Social awareness
H. Nicholas	Most implementation	5	Relationship management
E. Bennett	More implementation	4	Relationship management
M. Wilson	More implementation	4	Social awareness
T. Smith	More implementation	4	Social awareness
K. Feuer	Most implementation	5	Relationship management
E. Austen	Most implementation	5	Relationship management
K. Johnson	Most implementation	5	Social awareness
K. Wolffe	Most implementation	5	Relationship management
H. Nicholas	Most implementation	4	Self-management*
K. Wolffe	Most implementation	5	Social awareness

*Removed to not affect results.

My findings show those principals who identified their highest EI competency as relationship management overall scored higher in the Supportive Environments category of the 5Essentials (see Figure 2). Though both intelligences scored high in this category, relationship

management still proved to score higher based on this field of study, even if it was a close comparison.

Figure 2

Average Supportive Environments Rating by EI Competency
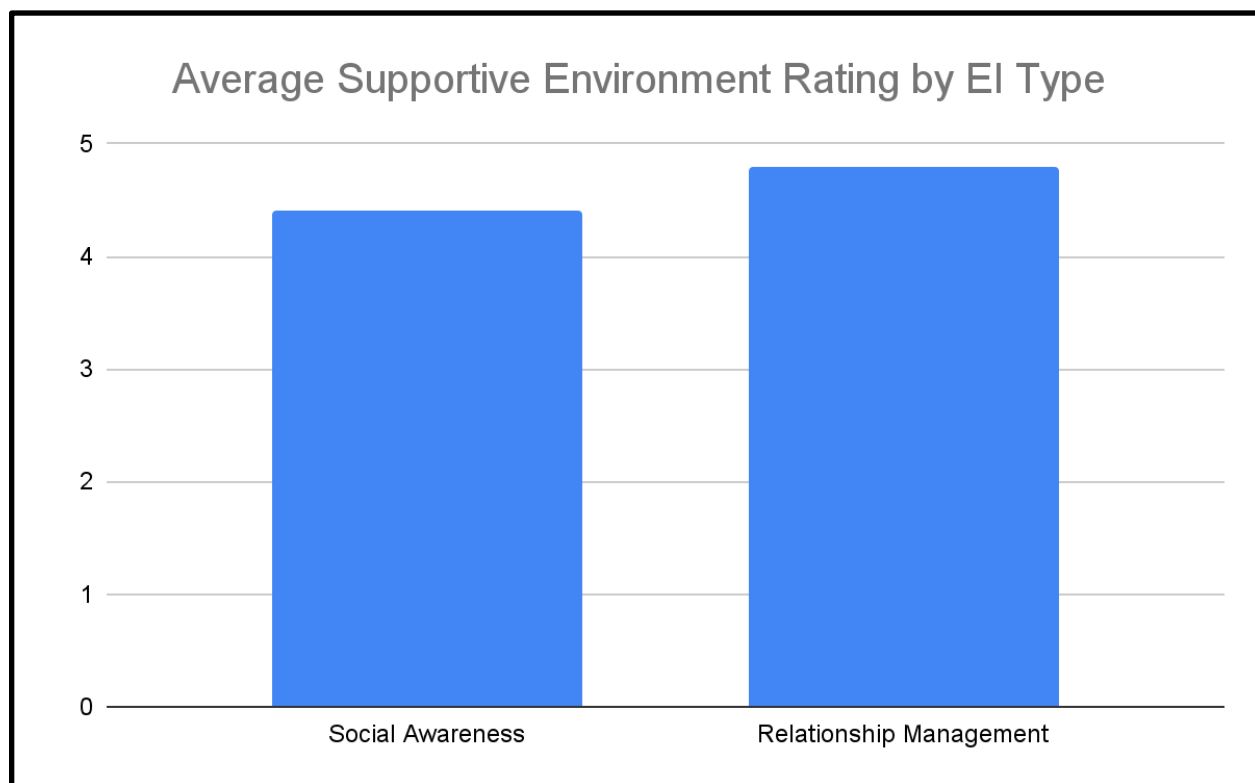
I wanted to find out if other areas of the 5Essentials survey would yield different results based on the participants' EI score. To do so, I reviewed the participants' 5Essentials rating of Effective Leaders using a similar format as above (see Table 6). This time there was more variety in scores: more implementation scored 4 points, average implementation scored 3 points, and less implementation scored 2 points.

- Five participants identified social awareness as their highest EI. When averaging their total score (15 points divided by five participants), their average score was 3 for Effective Leaders.

- Five participants identified relationship management as their highest EI. When averaging their total score (16 points divided by five participants), their average score was 3.2 for Effective Leaders.

- One participant identified that self-management and relationship management were their highest intelligence. I removed the score for self-management, as only one person was identifying within this category and there was no way to take an average on this score. However, this participant's EI rating in relationship management was still included in the results.

- One participant identified both relationship management and social awareness as the highest intelligence, which is why there are 10 participants.

Table 5

Participants' Rating in Effective Leaders on Illinois 5Essentials Compared to Their EI

Competency

Participant	Effective leaders rating		EI
D. Gonzalez	Average	3	Social awareness
H. Nicholas	More	4	Relationship management
E. Bennett	Average	3	Relationship management
M. Wilson	Average	3	Social awareness
T. Smith	Less	2	Social awareness
K. Feuer	Average	3	Relationship management
E. Austen	Less	2	Relationship management
K. Johnson	Average	3	Social awareness
K. Wolffe	More	4	Relationship management
H. Nicholas	More	4	Self-management*
K. Wolffe	More	4	Social awareness

*Removed to not affect results.

Similar to the findings within the Supportive Environments category, participants who identified relationship management as their highest EI also scored higher in the area of Effective Leaders on the 5Essentials survey (see Figure 3). It is important to note that the two intelligences scored very closely to one another and the difference was marginal. Effective leaders need to balance many competencies to be successful. If the participant pool was larger, my results may

have shown that additional EI competencies, such as being socially aware, lead to higher results on the 5Essentials.

Figure 3

Average Effective Leaders Rating by EI Competency
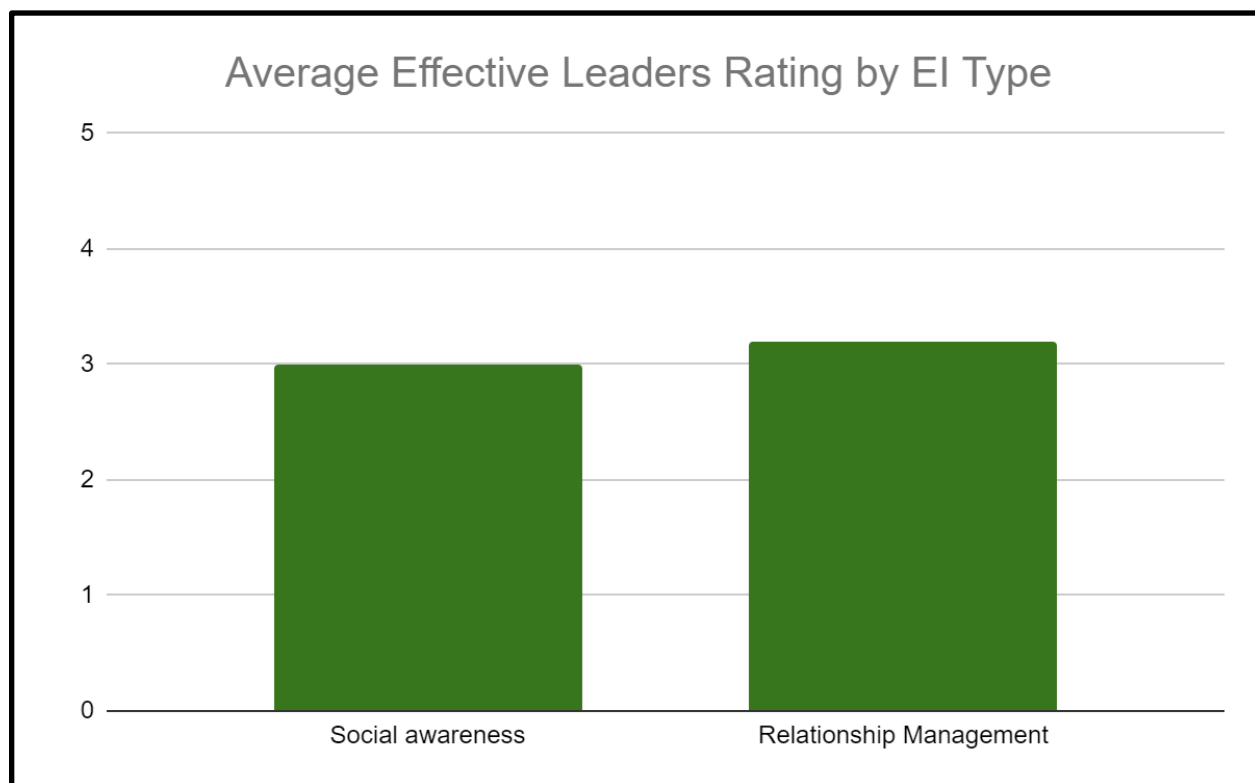
Principals and Trust

"To be trusted is the most inspiring form of human motivation. People who trust those they lead bring out the very best in them-and in all of us. Trusting others is among the most important of our life's work" (Covey, 2022, p. 9). I concluded each interview by asking the elementary principals to reflect on the level of trust within their buildings. I prefaced that trust could be between staff, students, or the community. Another clear theme emerged from these conversations—trust comes from staff knowing they can count on the principal and one another, and effective communication is necessary. Each principal, regardless of their highest EI

competency, provided insight that reflected the need for communication and accountability of the adults for the school to have a trusting environment.

K. Feuer spoke about the trust in his building and how it affected the classroom environment and teacher confidence:

Well, the hope is that by developing those trusting relationships or developing strong relationships, that hopefully would lead to staff taking some risks and knowing that you'll support them—without fear of being put down to punishment or anything like that. I always try to encourage our staff to try something new. And so hopefully, as I build those relationships, they'll feel more able to or more free to take some of those academic risks, and try some new things with kids which could lead to positive outcomes.

E. Austen, high in relationship management, shared that most people had a strong level of trust within her building. She went on to say that the only time trust became disrupted was when student behaviors were rising: "It's not a bad thing because we know our students are struggling. Mostly our teachers trust each other and trust is high in the building." H. Nicholas, who was high in relationship management and self-management, said she thought the high level of trust in her building helped to keep things running smoothly:

I think that having a high score in relationships shows that people trust me, and would come to me if they had questions or concerns. I also think that you can see just from our interactions with the union, that there's a high level of trust with the staff members, and that'll continue if they have a concern, or a problem or worried about something, which really helps; it's not that there's never any issues, but it kind of helps keep everything like at ease here.

These statements reflect examples of teams working together and holding one another accountable as well as demonstrate ongoing communication. Without high levels of either accountability or communication, trust within a building can be low. Principals who are high in relationship management understand how to develop and foster ongoing trust in their schools by being accountable and having great communication with all.

Other principals, who scored high in social awareness, reflected the trust in their buildings. M. Wilson explained she thought the EI competency of social awareness and trust were interconnected:

> People notice that I pay attention and I'm going to do what I say, and I care. Sometimes, I can't always do what they want. But I would hope that they know that I'm listening and that I understand and I've listened.

Both K. Wolffe and K. Johnson continued to reflect on the strong teams in their buildings as high leverage areas that affected trust. K. Johnson said, "I think that we're trying to create a really high level of trust because people want to take all the aspects of our organization and want it to be a collaborative process." Similarly, K. Wolffe shared it was the relationships of his staff and the collaboration he had with them that made trust strong:

> Sometimes they're more worried about missing days because they know the hardship that is created for the rest of the team; so just letting them know, like, "Hey, we'll figure it out that's got to take your priority." I think that helps show the staff that I care about them more as a person than just solely as a teacher. That builds and teachers want to do their best for everybody because they know they're cared for and are more than just a person on a job.

Interpretation

When I started my research, I wanted to know what set apart great principals who lead buildings with a positive culture from others. To dig a little deeper, I asked principals to identify their strongest EI to then see if there was a relationship between school culture and type of EI. Though the differences were marginal, the results show principals who were high in relationship management tended to score higher in creating a supportive environment as measured by the Illinois 5Essentials. Taking it a step further, those who were high in relationship management also scored higher in the area of Effective Leaders on the 5Essentials. Therefore, elementary principals who have high relationship management EI may have a more positive impact on their school culture than those high in other EI competencies.

Common themes emerged from my research that were interwoven with one another. Figure 4 illustrates the hierarchy of themes emerging from the participant data. The strongest theme, regardless of EI competency, was the need for principals to constantly be building and maintaining trusting relationships with their staff members. This theme was overarching and all other identified themes could easily fit under this one. Another important theme was principals identifying the need for a supportive environment; underneath would be themes of developing staff capacity, principals hiring and assigning the right people for the job, and creating a fun and social atmosphere. The third strongest theme identified was the need for ongoing connections of administrators to staff and staff to one another. Under this category, principal interviewees also identified ongoing communication and inter-staff accountability as needed for a positive school culture.

Figure 4

Hierarchy of Themes From Participant Data

Building and Maintaining Trusting Relationships ↓				
Supportive environment ↓			Connection to administration and colleagues ↓	
Developing staff capacity	Hiring and assigning the right people	Fun and social atmosphere	Communication	Accountability
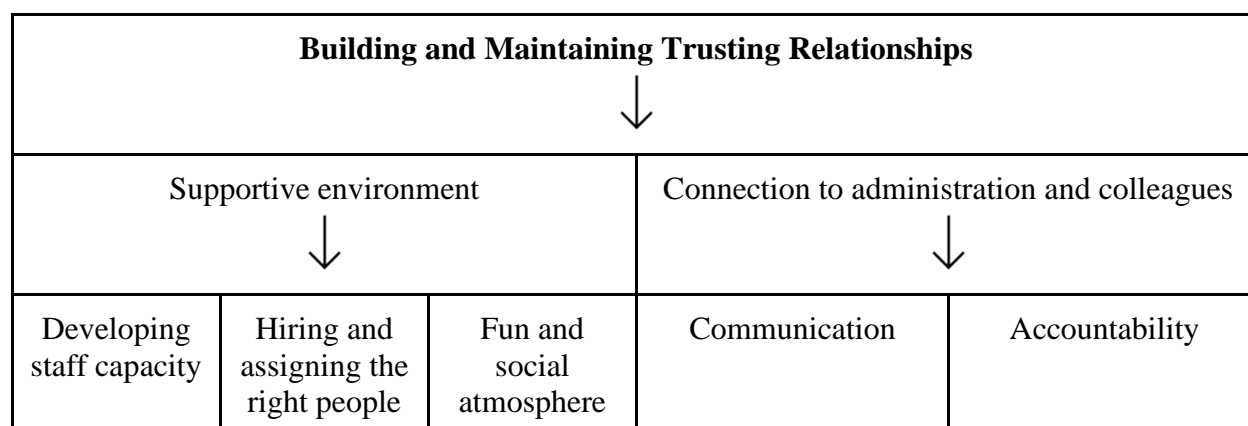
Does EI Have an Impact on School Culture?

Yes! EI does have an impact on school culture! However, having high EI alone is not enough to support a positive school culture. Principals need to constantly be working to build and strengthen the relationships they have with their staff.

School leaders with robust social skills may sometimes appear not to be working when they really are. These leaders don't think it makes sense to arbitrarily limit the number or type of relationships they have. They are continuously building bonds across the board because they know they may need help from those connections someday. (Lopez, 2024, p. 14)

This theme emerged loud and clear regardless of whether the principals identified relationship management or social awareness as their strongest EI competency. H. Nicholas, high in relationship management, shared how she constantly worked on relationship building:

Thinking to my first year as building principal a priority for me was just being able to build relationships, not just with key players, but with all people at all levels, whether it's custodial, office staff, paraprofessionals . . . trying to just connect with everyone and I

think over the years trying to give opportunities to allow people to lead and share has

helped with relationships.

M. Wilson, high in social awareness, similarly said, "If you can't make relationships work and

build those relationships, and if you are not aware of what is going on with your staff and

students you will fail big. You will fail." Simply stated, successful elementary school principals

need to constantly be working at developing, strengthening, and maintaining relationships with

staff, and all stakeholders, to be successful.

What Else is Needed for a Positive School Culture?

A Supportive Environment

People want to work in a space where they feel they belong, are included, and where they

can thrive. Beyond building and maintaining relationships with staff members on an individual

basis, principals have to create an environment in which staff members feel a sense of security

and inclusivity. Almost every principal I spoke with was able to give examples of different ways

they fostered an inclusive environment for their staff. It was clear through my research that the

principal interviewees dedicated a lot of time toward setting up supportive environments; this

occurred be through one-on-one meetings, having caring conversations about personal concerns,

checking in with staff who needed extra help, and modeling ways to authentically care so staff

would follow suit. When thinking about social awareness and her leadership, T. Smith shared,

"It's like, you know, kind of like Maslow; like you have to be fed, you have to feel safe, you

have to feel comfortable" when creating a supportive environment.

Three themes reinforced having a supportive environment: developing staff capacity,

hiring and assigning the right people, and cultivating a fun and social atmosphere.

Developing Staff Capacity. As educators, we are in the business of developing people, and that does not stop with our students. Great principals know how to develop the talent in their building and help them grow. K. Johnson, K. Wolffe, H. Nicholas, and K. Feuer all made mention of ways they tried to develop the talent and goals of their staff through having them lead staff development or district-level committees; they wanted to help them climb the ladder by providing more leadership opportunities.

Hiring and Assigning the Right People. K. Wolffe explained it perfectly: "Building culture starts from hiring. You're hiring the right fit, you're building people. We're all team-focused, we're collaborative. So when you're looking for those qualities through interviews, that's who you're looking to bring on board." When principals are hiring new teachers, their decision has a great impact on students, teams, and the community. It is important that principals choose the best candidate for their positions because hiring poorly can have a negative impact that ripples through the school culture. Beyond hiring the right people for the job, principals have to understand the dynamics of their teams and ensure the right people are working together; this cannot be done unless a principal has a good understanding of who their staff members are, their strengths and deficits, and how teaming teachers the right way can help everyone achieve more.

Fun and Social Atmosphere. Dale Carnegie said, "People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing." (Long, 2003, p. 69). This simple quote holds so much weight in the realization that people want and need to enjoy themselves at work to be productive and successful. The same certainly holds true for teachers—if principals want teachers to have a positive impact and want their students to grow, we need to cultivate a positive, fun, and social atmosphere in which people are enjoying what they are doing. K. Feuer commented, "I look for opportunities to have fun within the building and draw on the positives from there. We have

gotten back into doing whole school assemblies and are doing positive school culture."

Similarly, other principals shared examples of ways they cultivated a social environment for

staff; K. Johnson and H. Nicholas explained that they incorporated staff celebrations throughout

the school year, T. Smith and E. Austen planned social outings, and K. Wolffe even talked about

getting beers with staff. Though I do not recommend the latter, it is still an example of a

principal creating a supportive environment by ensuring the atmosphere is fun and social.

Connection to Administration and Colleagues

Teachers want to feel connected in order to be supported. This theme came through loud

and clear throughout my interviews and was even referenced in a variety of questions I asked.

Interviewees commented on the importance of staying connected to staff or staff staying

connected to one another while answering questions about trust, professional development, their

5Essentials data, school culture, and being an effective leader. K. Wolffe reflected,

> We're all here for each other; in the 10 years I've been here, I hired maybe 90% of the
>
> staff. They've gone from getting their first jobs to being at each other's weddings to
>
> having their first kids and now their second kids together, so it's like they're just very
>
> well connected. They're people that care for each other.

The connections created among staff are critical for a successful environment. Teachers can

identify friendships, confide in each other, and feel safe. When principals are able to foster an

environment in which teachers feel a sense of belonging, the staff will stay longer and feel good

about being there. Beyond staying connected to one another, teachers need to feel that sense of

security with their principals. K. Feuer and E. Bennett spoke about how their door was always

open so staff could connect whenever needed. E. Bennett went on to say,

It's about building trust and collaborative relationships to help us move forward. Now

people trust that I have a shared vision and am open-minded about all possible decisions

and changes. I feel like there's definitely a positive vibe and everyone's willing and

wants to work towards the same goal.

Connection matters. And when connections are strong, it fosters a positive and trusting school

environment.

Under the theme of connection were the themes of communication and accountability.

Through my interviews, I concluded that these two actions are necessary to support positive,

trusting relationships.

Communication. If you want to stay connected, you need to be communicating, and

communicating frequently. I once heard you can never over-communicate enough if you want

your message heard. Furthermore, principals must communicate effectively to make a positive

impact. D. Gonzalez explained,

I think communication is the most important but communication can undermine you as a

leader unintentionally. Like not being a clear communicator. Not only can it cause

confusion, but it can also cause staff frustration, it breaks down your relationships and

trust with staff. So I feel like if you don't have communication you will not be successful,

no matter how amazing of an instructional leader you are.

Throughout the interviews, the principals identified the need to be clear communicators and

ensure the right message is being delivered. Clear communication not only affects teachers and

staff, it affects students, parents, and community members as well. Principals who want to create

and maintain a supportive school environment need to be cognizant of the message they are

sharing with all stakeholders. "Over-communicating is the glue that holds a high-performing

team together and keeps them focused in the same direction. And, it circles back to clarity. Without good, consistent communication, you don't have clarity" (Ellis, 2012, p. 164).

Accountability. The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of accountability. K. Wolffe shared,

It really translates to nobody wants to let anybody else down on the team. So they're all making sure that they're doing what they say they're going to do. They're providing the following structure for the kids but also that they're caring [for each other]. They're part of the team.

Accountability does not just look like staff members counting on one another, it is imperative that teachers know their principals will also be held accountable. Building leaders can show their teachers they can be held accountable by following through on commitments, staying visible and available, providing the right resources to support building goals, and staying in close collaboration with staff and teams. Principals who are known to be held accountable for their actions and decisions will ultimately stay in close connection with teachers, students, and community members, which will allow them to build and maintain trusting relationships with all stakeholders.

Limitations

It is clear from my research that an elementary school principal's EI does play a role in supporting a positive school culture. My study consisted of nine individuals, all of whom held very similar intelligences. If a greater population of principals were surveyed, I would have had more data to compare the relationship between 5Essentials Supportive Environments ratings and EI competencies. With a greater database, I would look to see whether relationship management and social awareness were the highest identified EI competencies, or whether self-awareness and

self-management became more prevalent indicators. Having a smaller study of only nine participants makes it challenging to definitively state that principals high in relationship management will have a positive school culture; however, I can confidently say that relationship management is a critical intelligence to have in order to foster a positive culture.

It was mentioned above that no participants identified as high in self-awareness; however, through my interviews, it seemed all the participants were very aware of how their leadership affected their school communities. If I were to go further in this research, I would consider asking participants to share their overall ratings for all intelligences to see the hierarchy of scores for all four intelligences (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management). Having this additional information would provide a bigger picture of how the different EI competencies could overlap and play a role in supporting a positive school culture.

One further limitation was the lack of participant identified gender, race, and more specific experience differences, such as number of schools in which they had served as principal or the socioeconomic backgrounds of the various school districts. If these areas would have been further compared, the results may have provided more information on how the participants were rated. Furthermore, this additional information could be helpful indicators of how participants identified their strongest EI competency as well as how it influenced their school culture.

Conclusion

The EI of an elementary school principal does have an impact on school culture. My research showed principals who have strong EI in the area of relationship management score higher in two categories on the Illinois 5Essentials: Supportive Environments and Effective Leaders. Along with being high in relationship management, principals need to be cognizant of

how they are building and maintaining trusting relationships with all stakeholders, staff, students, and community members. In addition, principals need to make sure they are creating supportive environments where they are developing the capacity of staff members, hiring and assigning staff with the big picture in mind, and creating a fun and social atmosphere. Finally, successful principals also need to stay connected to their staff and ensure staff are staying connected to one another by having strong communication and holding each other accountable.

CHAPTER FIVE

Change Plan

The results of my research show elementary principals who are high in the EI competency of relationship management tend to also have higher scores for the Supportive Environments and Effective Leaders indicators on the Illinois 5Essentials. Principals who emphasize building trusting relationships through staying connected and creating a supportive atmosphere ultimately have a positive impact on the overall school culture.

Of the nine principals interviewed, four indicated their strongest EI competency was relationship management, three indicated their strongest EI competency was social awareness, one had a tie for relationship management and social awareness as their strongest, and one had a tie for social awareness and self-awareness as their strongest EI competency. Regardless of EI strength, there were common themes among all participants' responses and reflections. In order to be an effective leader and to create a supportive environment, the principals stated they needed to create trusting environments. High levels of trust can happen when staff members feel connected to their administrators as well as connected to one another through ongoing and productive communication as well as knowing colleagues can count on one another. In addition to developing trust, principals need to create a supportive environment. Developing staff capacity, hiring and assigning the right people to the job, and cultivating a fun and social atmosphere all contribute significantly to creating and maintaining a supportive environment.
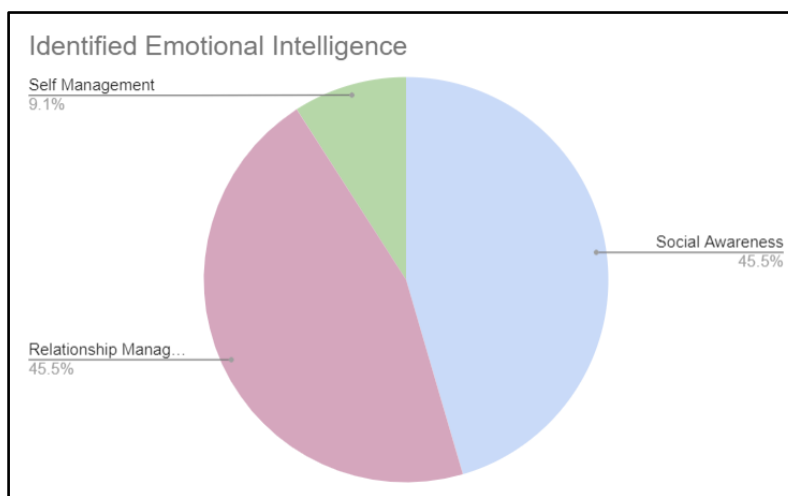
As-Is

In this chapter, I use Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 C's framework to systematically think about the challenges and opportunities related to a principal's EI and its impact on school culture. Using the framework (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 98), I examine the context, culture,

conditions, and competencies from my results to understand possible areas of change. By reviewing the 4 C's, school leaders will need to think about what they need to do to achieve this goal (of understanding principal EI) and what needs to happen to bring this work to their schools or districts (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 98). Appendix C presents the As-Is chart.

As-Is Context

"We need to understand all contextual information to help inform and shape the work we do, to transform the culture, conditions, and the competencies of our schools and districts" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). The context of my research was elementary school principals in the north and northwest suburbs of Chicago. All nine principals interviewed had at least 13 years of experience in the field of education and at least 1 full completed year of serving as an elementary school principal prior to the interview. Participants came from six different school districts, including elementary only or unit districts, and district student counts ranged from 3,000 students to over 15,000 students. All nine participants spoke to the importance of building relationships with their staff. Everyone completed the same Emotional Intelligence Test through the Global Leadership Foundation, yet no one identified self-awareness as their strongest EI competency; relationship management and social awareness were the most populated competencies identified (see Figure 5; Global Leadership Foundation, 2022). Participants reported they had little to no training in EI through administrative professional development.

Figure 5

Most Identified Types of EI

Identified Emotional Intelligence

Self Management 9.1%

Social Awareness 45.5%

Relationship Manag… 45.5%

As-Is Culture

As mentioned, the participants were from various districts in north and northwestern Illinois. It is important to note that the identified culture represents six different school districts and buildings, rather than the culture of one school district. Wagner et al. (2006) stated "culture is the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school" (p. 102). In this case, I focus on the latter part of the statement— instructional leadership and the quality of relationships.

The nine participants claimed they put a great deal of effort into building and maintaining relationships with their staff members. That can easily be seen based on their collective EI results as everyone either identified as having relationship management or social awareness as a strength. Stern (2022) stated:

> Building strong, genuine, and trusting relationships needs time and care but goes a long
>
> way. Invest the time and energy in getting to know people personally and finding out
>
> precisely what makes them tick and what makes them who they are. (p. 143)

In addition to a cultural expectation of focusing on relationships, the principals also spoke about

the importance of establishing trust within schools. This trust was interwoven between all

stakeholders: principals with staff, principals with parents, principals with students, staff with

parents, and staff with students. Trust is critical in ensuring staff, students, and parents feel

valued, heard, and part of the school community.

Because all the participants were principals in Illinois, the 5Essentials tool is a common

way to measure effectiveness. The principals were aware of their individual results, particularly

in the areas of Supportive Environments and Effective Leaders. Typically, administrators will set

goals around deficit areas on the 5Essentials to build a stronger culture within their buildings. I

did not ask if there were any goals set around these two categories.

Based on the information collected, the principals interviewed agreed that awareness and

education on EI are important and would help inform their work as leaders. However, they

reported there had been little to no professional development or higher education focused on EI.

Participants were interested in learning more about their individual EI competency but claimed

they would not know where to begin to find such information. Additionally, some principals

shared they would want to bring the EI survey to their staff, but would need more information

and support to then guide teachers on what to do with the information.

As-Is Conditions

Conditions refer to the surroundings, time, and resources available (Wagner et al., 2006). Because the participants in this study were from six different school districts, I took a broader perspective of the overall conditions for the collective group.

Every principal has Illinois 5Essentials data to stay informed about their school culture and conditions. They are given a window in late winter/early spring for staff, parents, and students in fourth grade and higher to complete the survey. However, they cannot control how many individuals complete the survey, especially the parent population. As a way to stay informed about staff satisfaction, some principals collect feedback from staff throughout the year, but this is on their own account and inconsistent.

Principals also reported that they enjoyed learning about their respective EI competencies and would like to learn more. They had not had formal education about EI within their undergraduate or graduate work, nor had it been part of professional development from district-level administrators. The closest comparison was education on restorative practices and social-emotional learning, but this was not specific to EI. Participants from one school district said they had one administrative meeting where they discussed EI and were provided a book, yet nothing more was done with the information. Principals also shared that learning about their individual EI competency would be beneficial and they would like to bring the work to their staff. However, they were not sure what that work would look like or how to roll it out in an effective way. T. Smith commented, "The more that we reflect upon how our personality and our emotional intelligence impact our staff, I think it just makes us better leaders."

As-Is Competencies

As mentioned, there has been very little work within higher education and at the district administrative level on educating principals and teachers about EI. Wagner et al. (2006) stated "competencies are most effectively built when professional development is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed and collaborative. But, implementing this type of professional development necessarily implicates many parts of the system" (p. 99).

So, what does this mean? To begin, EI education needs to start sooner in undergraduate work so educators are aware of the different EI competencies and how their strengths could positively influence their students and work environment. Furthermore, school district leaders should provide EI training or professional development for school principals so school leaders have a better understanding of how they can use their strengths to lead their schools. To continue the work, district administrators should provide mentoring opportunities to principals that are focused on EI strengths and deficits. The mentoring conversations could help develop leadership capacity within elementary school buildings. Finally, principals can bring their training and knowledge of EI to staff to also build upon their intelligence strengths.

Envisioning the Success TO-BE

The current context, culture, conditions, and competencies of school districts and practices in north and northwest Illinois were just examined. In this next section, I explore the possible positive changes that could happen if school district leaders and school leaders had a better understanding and deeper education of EI. In this section, I continue to use Wagner et al.'s (2006) 4 C's framework. The proposed To-Be context, culture, conditions, and competencies can be viewed in Appendix D.

To-Be Context

In this To-Be scenario, we are looking for improved change for school districts and school leaders in the northern and northwest suburbs of Illinois. We will still focus on school districts with elementary school students and they can vary in population size. Principals will still have a large focus on building strong relationships with staff; however, in this future setting, principals will have a deeper understanding of how to develop and sustain relationships with staff members based on their EI strengths. This would require EI training and ongoing professional development for elementary school principals. The training and support for principals would come from district-level leaders.

To-Be Culture

Looking ahead to the future of developing the EI of principals, relationships and trust are still rooted requirements to build culture. "Where there is growing trust, the quality of discourse increases, again helping stimulate greater engagement and real collaboration" (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 150). The proposed changes would not alter the need to continue fostering and strengthening the relationships and trust that principals are constantly refining with all stakeholders; rather, the change would help principals understand how they can use their EI strengths to continue to improve. The culture shift would have to come from the district level and examine the way cabinet, or district leaders, are supporting principals.

This culture shift would require elementary principals and district leadership to take time to collaborate and review individual EI competencies. District leaders would need to create a plan and provide time for education on EI as well as time for coaching and mentoring for each principal. The coaching sessions would allow individual principals to understand their EI strengths and areas for growth while being mentored by a member of the cabinet. The coaching

conversations should be continuous through the school year and should be reflective of the current needs in the building, including results from the Illinois 5Essentials survey.

> Coaching conversations foster the deep reflection necessary to establish new thinking patterns. When a school leader engages in coaching conversations with members of his school community, he provides the ongoing support for staff and others to practice new thinking skills and behaviors. (Gross Cheliotes & Reilly, 2018, p. 5)

The same transformation of ongoing coaching support can be said for district-level cabinet members and their mentorship for building principals.

The purpose of this change in culture from the district-level leadership is to enhance the capabilities of each elementary principal within the district. Data from the Illinois 5Essentials affect the overall district score, so it would be advantageous for cabinet members to build the capacity of principals. The coaching partnership should examine data related to the areas of Supportive Environments and Effective Leaders on the 5Essentials and discuss ways in which principals could use their EI strengths to enhance these scores. Those principals who identify as low in relationship management would benefit from specific conversations on how to enhance this competency, especially as my research shows principals with high relationship management EI tend to score higher on the 5Essentials. A specific plan would be needed to create an effective coaching relationship.

To-Be Conditions

For effective change to happen, systems need to change. This starts with school district leaders creating a plan to develop their principals' EI through professional development and coaching sessions. A sample plan is provided in Figure 6. This plan details how a district leadership team could carefully outline steps to educate principals and teachers on EI. The

coaching sessions would be monthly and would reflect individual principal needs. To make this plan happen, school district leaders would require formal training in coaching skills and EI awareness. This may require using external experts in the subject area or coaching training business to educate cabinet members.

Conditions within the schools will also need to change, and this comes from the principals. Staff members will need to have a better understanding of the questions being asked on the Illinois 5Essentials, as well as engage in a review of the results from the previous year. "Facilitating data interpretation among primary users increases their understanding of the findings, their sense of ownership of the evaluation, and their commitment to use the findings" (Patton, 2012, p. 420). When reviewing this information, staff members should also have an opportunity to ask questions about what the questions mean; principals should also be prepared to speak to examples of what the questions are asking. This added level of clarification should help scores. Another conditional shift principals will need to make is to allocate time for all staff and eligible students to complete the survey. This will ensure there is more control over who completes the survey. It is more challenging for principals to ensure parents in the community complete the 5Essentials; however, they can support families by sending out reminders in newsletters and text messages, and by setting up a 5Essentials survey station for parents to complete when they visit the building. Although these strategies will not ensure parents will complete the 5Essentials, they will provide more reminders and opportunities for them to do so.

Figure 6

District Leadership Professional Development Plan Over the Course of a Year

Timeframe	Professional Development Focus
June/July	- Cabinet members are trained in coaching - Cabinet members are trained in EI
August, before staff return to work	- EI overview of competencies - Principal EI identification
September	- Principals are paired with cabinet coach - Coaching sessions/meetings are established - Review of Illinois 5Essentials from the previous school year
October–April	Principals and cabinet meet in monthly coaching sessions with topics focused on EI results and how they relate to school culture data from Illinois 5Essentials
May	- District provided professional development for principals on EI and growth - Overview of how to bring EI awareness to teacher leaders
June/July	Principals and district leaders developing teacher awareness of EI through district-level professional development
August, before staff return to work	- EI overview of competencies - Principal EI identification and awareness of any changes

To-Be Competencies

Wagner et al. (2006) defined competencies as the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning. This statement also holds true for adult learners. Shifts in competencies are necessary to build the awareness and understanding of EI, as well as how it is a powerful tool in supporting culture. In the other 4 C's, I mentioned many of the changes that needed to be made at the district level. However, this work also needs to be done at the graduate

or undergraduate level as well. Educators, regardless of whether they are teachers or administrators, would benefit from understanding their EI competencies. "Understanding how our own emotions, thoughts, and awareness can influence our decisions and leadership style is essential to navigating situations successfully" (Lopez, 2024, p. 3).

As mentioned, ongoing coaching by district leaders will also be beneficial to developing the capacity of principals. Cabinet members should pair up with building leaders to help them identify EI competencies that are strengths and areas to still be developed. From there, coaching conversations or mentoring sessions should take place so the principals can continue learning and growing based on their need. Over time, this coaching could be extended to principals coaching teacher leaders in their buildings. However, to support the larger staff, school district leaders should provide foundational training or professional development in understanding EI. Teachers who participate in these training opportunities should walk away with a better understanding of what EI is, how to identify their own EI strengths, and suggestions on how to apply that competency with their students. Just like the administrator training, this would likely require an external expert or EI business to lead the professional development course.

Conclusion

When considering how to support the ongoing growth and development of school leaders' EI, it is important to allow them time to reflect on their leadership style while also being provided the right tools and support from other resources. After reflecting on the data provided by the principal interviewees, it became clear more work is needed to educate leaders on how to foster and develop their EI to then have a ripple effect to influence school culture. This could start by having district-level administrators provide coaching or mentoring to building principals or by bringing in outside resources to support development. Based on the research conducted,

building leaders enjoy the reflection process and are interested in learning more about their own

individual EI and consequently want to know how they can continue to develop a positive

culture within their buildings.

CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions, Implications, Policy Recommendations

The workplace demands a new kind of leader- a leader who can see, develop, and unleash the greatness in every person. A leader who can model authentic behavior with humility and courage. A leader who can inspire others to willingly give their hearts and minds because they want to contribute meaningfully to something that matters. (Covey, 2022, pp. 13–14)

Having high EI will help a principal be successful, though high EI is not enough for continued effectiveness—principals need to constantly be aware of their EI and how to further develop their skills for ongoing impactful leadership. The work and learning of a principal is never done. In this last chapter, I review strategies and actions principals and district leadership can implement to develop an effective principal. Additionally, I explore implications related to developing principals' EI and policy recommendations to support ongoing growth and leadership professional development.

Strategies and Actions

Appendix E presents a list of strategies and actions that need to be put into place to strengthen elementary school culture, starting with district leadership's awareness of EI. These steps begin from the top of a district's organizational chart to ensure all leadership can capitalize on strengthening their own EI results. As a way to ensure leadership is properly supported, district leadership needs to research and work with a company that specializes in the awareness and development of EI; this company should then provide professional development to both district leaders and building principals in a cyclical pattern. Ongoing reflection and enhancement will positively influence the school culture, as measured by 5Essentials data.

As indicated in Appendix E, the first strategy is to have district leadership, including the superintendent and assistant superintendents, be trained in EI development. This includes having cabinet members understand their own EI strengths and then collaborate to identify strong EI competencies as a group as well as EI competencies that need to be developed as individuals and as a group. It would be ideal if this training came from an outside source that specializes in human resources and EI training. Cabinet members will need to research companies that align with their mission and vision and ensure this work is aligned with their strategic plan.

The next strategy requires district leadership to carefully outline how training in EI will be brought to principals and ensure it is a professional development topic that is revisited. Cabinet leaders must create time for the ongoing training and coaching of building principals; this work should be intentional and valued by all stakeholders. Cabinet leaders will need to create a year-long timeline and set aside time for an outside company to also train principals. In addition, cabinet leaders will need to be partnered up with each building principal as a mentor or coach. This partnership will allow for ongoing conversations on how to strengthen the EI of the building leader as well as the district as a whole.

Strategies 1 and 2 focus more on understanding EI and bringing professional development and coaching to building and district leadership. Strategy 3 requires all leadership in the district to closely examine the results from the Illinois 5Essentials survey to identify strengths and deficiencies within the categories of Effective Leaders and Supportive Environments. These two areas are important to analyze because they relate to leadership, culture, relationships, and trust, all of which can be developed by strengthening EI competencies. Leaders should share the ways in which they create a positive culture within their buildings and then bring the data back to school leaders in their respective buildings. Principals and teacher

leaders should then review the 5Essentials data and consider the strengths, what leads to positive and negative results, if clarity is needed for any stakeholders completing the survey, and importantly, what can be done to strengthen deficiencies. From there, teacher leaders and building principals should create an improvement plan; this plan should ideally be integrated into their School Improvement Plan.

Finally, district and building leaders should continue to make this work of training leaders in EI, collegial coaching between district and building leadership, and the reflection and analysis of 5Essentials data repeated agenda items. Cabinet members should require building leaders to use information from the 5Essentials to curate School Improvement Plans focused on strengthening culture. Elementary principals should continue to meet with their district mentor to refine and enhance their EI competencies and district leaders should continue working with experts to bring the latest research to their teams. Furthermore, cabinet members and principals should collaborate to see how EI may change over time based on the coaching sessions. Growth of EI competencies should be tracked and compared to 5Essentials data. Principals can measure the growth of their EI competencies by taking another survey such as the one provided by the Global Leadership Foundation or one provided by an outside business. For example, HumanEx provides a developmental assessment as well as culture and climate assessments and consulting, and could be a useful source in measuring and analyzing EI competency growth for individuals. Ideally, principals and cabinet members should survey themselves on EI growth yearly so they know what areas to continue refining. Furthermore, the measurement tool should be consistent so individuals are able to be constant with their comparisons each year. The hope is that EI in all areas would further develop, thus influencing the culture of the building as measured by the

5Essentials. Tracking these comparative data would further support the suggestion of ongoing cabinet and principal mentorship for years to come.

By following the strategies and action steps outlined, district and building leaders should begin to understand their EI strengths and how to use these strengths to enhance the culture within their buildings. By bringing teacher leaders together to analyze 5Essentials data, principals will be able to receive direct feedback from staff on areas in need of ongoing improvements. The collaboration between district leaders and principals as well as principals and teachers will positively influence the buildings.

Policy Statement

For elementary principals to positively support the culture and trust in their building, there needs to be a requirement that principals are provided professional development and education on their own awareness and understanding of their EI strengths. "Taking care of ourselves emotionally as leaders benefits everyone who looks to us for guidance and support" (Hogan, 2024, p. 33).

This is a policy school district leaders need to adopt and then implement to foster the success of principals. District leaders, such as the superintendent and assistant superintendents, need to support building principals by providing ongoing education and professional development about EI; furthermore, district leaders should provide reflective opportunities for building principals to be cognizant of their EI strengths and areas in need of growth so they can continue refining their leadership.

I strongly recommend this policy because elementary school principals are "the face" of their buildings. They are responsible for the atmosphere of the building, which directly affects staff, students, and families. The principal needs to build lasting, trusting relationships with all

stakeholders to create change and support student growth. A principal's EI influences teacher morale and performance as well as student well-being. "When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. This is neither good nor bad, it is just the truth. Our impact is significant; our focus becomes the school's focus" (Whitaker, 2012, p. 36). This metaphor conveys the idea that the actions and decisions of the principal have a significant impact on the entire school community. The principal's influence is so strong that any decision, behavior, or interaction can affect the entire community. The principal sets the tone for the building and their interactions and EI matter.

If a principal has low EI or low awareness of their impact on others, they can negatively affect the building culture. What they say and what they do matters. Elementary principals need to be effectively communicating with all stakeholders. A principal with low EI might communicate ineffectively, leading to misunderstandings, confusion, frustrations, and a breakdown of trust between staff and the community. Furthermore, low awareness of one's own EI may negatively affect relationships by not handling conflict appropriately or with empathy or by not engaging in collaborative problem-solving conversations, which will directly affect the building culture. "Great principals know that putting others in an upbeat frame of mind comes back to brighten their own day as well. Keeping your school in a positive cycle enhances everything you do" (Whitaker, 2012, p. 37).

When school district leaders (superintendents and assistant superintendents) begin educating and supporting elementary principals on their EI, I envision the entire school community benefiting. When elementary principals become aware of their EI and then participate in ongoing education, reflection, and refinement of their EI strengths and areas for growth, the school community will thrive. In Illinois, 5Essentials data play a large role in the

overall performance of a building. If district leaders want to see a positive increase in 5Essentials results, they need to build and strengthen the capacity of their elementary building principals.

Considerations for Decision Makers

There are important considerations when district leaders begin to bring EI awareness and tools to their elementary principals. This section describes the economic, political, legal, and moral and ethical factors that need to be taken into consideration, as well as how staff, students, families, and the community will be affected.

Economic Analysis

The first consideration for district leadership is contemplating whether it is worth the money to purchase resources and educational tools for principal professional development. The superintendent will need to collaborate with the business office to ensure there is adequate funding set aside for this new resource. The resources could vary in pricing, depending on the resource brought in. The resources could be simple and a single action such as bringing in an expert to lead professional development, or they could be more costly and long term such as working with a company for an extended time and creating a contract. Some companies to consider are HumanEx, Tesseon, ABA Technologies, and others. The purchase of this additional resource will have an impact on the greater community. School board members will need to know the importance of developing elementary principals' EI and will have to approve the additional spending. The district budget should already have a dedicated line item for principal and leadership development, it is just a matter of understanding whether there is enough funding for this additional resource.

When considering the bigger picture and long-term investment of the school district, it would be beneficial to train building principals in the area of EI as a way of cultivating highly

cultured leaders. This training should help build a positive culture within buildings and keep teacher and principal turnover low, if satisfaction and culture are high. This low turnover would be cost-effective for the district and taxpayers.

Staff, students, and families will have little impact on the economic consideration of using the budget for the ongoing growth of school leaders. However, students and staff can be affected if the budget needs to be adjusted and money needs to be reallocated from other areas to support this initiative. If money is reallocated, the superintendent and district leadership should avoid pulling resources that support students; money could be used from district professional development funds to support the principal professional development. If this decision is made, then there will be a slight impact on staff.

Political Analysis

The Board of Education represents the greater community and the superintendent must explain the positive impact this ongoing education for elementary principals will have on school culture, staff, students, and families. The superintendent and district leadership will not only need to educate the School Board on the importance of EI, but also the community to gain more buy-in. To create a convincing argument that it is worth it to spend the money, the explanation needs to be thorough and explicit as to why it is worth allocating resources for the growth of school leaders. It should be argued that by developing school leaders' awareness and ongoing growth of strong EI, everyone will benefit. Staff members will be led by principals who are strong communicators, empathetic, and relationship-oriented. This is important because staff will be better supported by leaders, feel a better connection with them, and will experience overall increased morale, which will contribute to higher job satisfaction and tenure of staff. Principals with strong EI can support students by being aware of how to support a diversity of needs,

fostering a positive school climate that focuses on the growth of student behavior and academic achievement. Most importantly, a principal with strong EI can connect with students' social and emotional needs, which will ultimately create a more inclusive culture. Additionally, principals with strong EI will have a great impact on families, especially regarding communication and addressing conflict. Leaders who have strong EI will know how to navigate difficult conversations with families in a caring and empathetic manner and will ensure all voices are heard to come to beneficial resolutions for all stakeholders. Finally, the community will want to support the development of principal EI because Illinois 5Essentials data should improve, which will indicate stronger schools. The rise in ratings will make homes more valuable and desirable for prospective buyers who are looking to move into a community with high-achieving schools.

School superintendents and cabinet members may consider educating the Board of Education on EI by having them analyze their own competencies. Additionally, cabinet members could invite members of the Board to join EI training sessions for district leaders so they can also become familiar with why awareness of EI is important, as well as why the ongoing development of EI is beneficial to all stakeholders within a school community. By inviting Board of Education members to be part of the process, they will be able to have their questions or doubts addressed by EI experts. Additionally, members who join the training sessions should be able to understand their own EI strengths and areas for growth, which may be a helpful reflective practice.

Legal Analysis

There are legal considerations, though they are minimal. District leadership will need to review principal contracts if they are to include this professional development and ongoing reflection as a requirement for employment. Though this would be a requirement, it should attract potential new hires as a way to foster ongoing growth and development, which not all

school districts offer. The principal contract should explicitly explain that professional development will be provided for principals and there is an expectation that principals will use what they learned in these sessions to support staff, students, and families. Additionally, as mentioned in the Actions and Strategies Chart (see Appendix E), principals should be expected to use data from the 5Essentials to create building goals for their School Improvement Plans. Though this may not be a legal consideration, this is something that should be consistently expected and practiced by every building leader within a district. District leaders need to ensure there is continuity of expectations for every school within their district so community members know they can expect the same level of data-driven decisions to be made at every building. There should be no legal impact on staff, students, families, or the community other than benefiting from the ongoing growth of principals' leadership abilities.

An additional legal consideration district leaders need to consider is the validity and confidentiality of the training company they choose to lead professional development for principals. Cabinet members will need to verify that the outside company follows ADA compliance expectations, supporting anyone with disabilities. They will also need to review the company's confidentiality and privacy laws to protect the confidentiality of their educational team. Additionally, the cabinet will want to make sure they are complying with any educational regulations and policies the Board has already established. Violating any of these items could cause professional development to end.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

School district leaders everywhere want to do what is best for their students and foster academic achievement and a positive, supportive culture in their schools. It should be an easy decision to further develop the EI of elementary principals because the ripple effect will benefit

students, staff, families, and the community. Principals who have strong EI are better equipped to make informed, conscientious, and empathetic decisions that affect all stakeholders. Furthermore, they can navigate complex situations while considering how their actions will support a positive school culture. The principal is the positive role model in the building, and ultimately the entire school community. An emotionally intelligent principal will set positive examples for all stakeholders and will also foster the further development of social and emotional skills for students and staff. This positive modeling will also influence student learning as students now have social and emotional learning standards woven into their curriculum. By seeing the principal leading with empathy and an awareness of others' feelings, this will positively affect student learning as well.

When working with principals, district leaders will need to be cognizant of privacy and respect for individual responses from principals. Everyone will have strengths and deficiencies; however, an ethical consideration is to ensure everyone's results are kept private while coaching conversations are being conducted as well as throughout the process. There may be times when leaders can share with one another, but out of respect for the individual, the cabinet needs to keep results confidential. Along with this, cabinet members need to avoid exploiting principals' vulnerabilities during the coaching process. These conversations are meant to develop and empower principals so they can provide greater support for their buildings; if a member of district leadership taunts or challenges a principal's response or EI rating, they risk losing trust with that individual and causing a greater divide instead of ensuring ongoing professional development and growth.

Conclusion

The work of leading effective teams takes a great deal of EI on the part of leaders. "Successful team leaders are consultative and supportive as expert persuaders, they manifest the dimensions of self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy" (Lopez, 2024, p. 40). The purpose of this research was to create awareness of school leaders' EI and to explore how EI can be further developed to create stronger school cultures and more effective schools. I interviewed nine elementary school principals to learn about their leadership style and the way they create and support a positive culture and had them complete an EI survey to identify their strongest competency. I also looked at each principal's Illinois 5Essentials survey results to see how their EI and leadership qualities related to their scores in the areas of Effective Leaders and Supportive Environments. The overall results show elementary principals who had relationship management as their strongest EI competency also had the highest culture as measured by the Illinois 5Essentials.

This research shows the EI of a principal will influence the building culture; more importantly, high EI will positively influence culture. "Principals are central figures in schools whose actions directly shape their schools' climate" (Price, 2012, p. 40). School leaders who are strong in relationship management tend to have stronger culture scores for their schools. However, this research has shown principals who are strong in any of the EI competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management; Goleman, 1995) will foster a more positive climate for all stakeholders. An elementary school principal wears many hats when supporting and leading staff, teachers, students, parents, community members, and even district leaders. Because principals touch so many lives, they need to constantly be aware of their emotions as well as the emotions of others. "The power of empathy

is unsurpassed. It's a gift, not only because of what it does to people but because of how it enables us to elevate performance" (Covey, 2022, p. 116). "Thus, leaders must acquire empathy to promote behaviors that are necessary for effective global leadership" (Fianko et al., 2020, p. 239). The power of empathy and having strong relationships with others will ultimately lead to successful leadership. "Emotionally intelligent leadership is necessary in creating healthy school environments. Leaders who lack empathy miss opportunities to connect with their staff and students in meaningful ways, truly repair harm, and teach valuable lifelong lessons along the way" (Hogan, 2024, p. 30). "Emotional intelligence, above all else, is the key to effective education leadership" (Lopez, 2024, p. 100). When principals and district leaders take the time to be aware of EI and further develop their EI competencies, all stakeholders will benefit. Having strong EI is integral to being a successful and positive principal.

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Appendix A

List of Emotional Intelligence Survey Questions From Global Leadership Foundation

1. My emotions generally have

    a strong impact on the way I behave.

    little or no impact on the way I behave.

2. I am generally guided by

    my goals and values.

    others goals and values.

3. When I am under pressure, I generally have

    changed behaviours from normal.

    behaviours that remain unchanged.

4. I generally learn most

    by actively doing activities.

    from reflecting on past experiences.

5. I generally

    have a good sense of humour about myself.

    take myself seriously.

6. I present myself

    with self-assurance and having "presence."

    with some confidence and cautiousness.

7. Where there are uncertainties and pressures, I am always

decisive and make sound decisions.

cautious about making the right decision.

8. I always voice views that

are unpopular and go out on a limb for what is right.

most others agree with and support.

9. I always like to

take on new challenges.

maintain the status quo.

10. I generally

inspire confidence in others.

rely on others confidence.

11. I generally

allow my emotions and moods to impact on my behaviours.

keep my disruptive emotions and impulses under control.

12. When I am under pressure

I get easily distracted in other things.

I think clearly and stay focused

13. I always

do as I say I will do.

do only what I have to do.

14. Trust by others

    is automatically given to me.

    is built through reliability and authenticity.

15. I am always

    flexible in how I see events.

    able to see events for what they are.

16. During changing situations, I always

    work hard to try and keep up with the demands.

    smoothly handle multiple demands and shifting priorities.

17. I always

    set myself challenging goals.

    complete the goals that are set for me.

18. When obstacles and setbacks occur in pursuing my goals, I always

    readjust the goals and/or expectations.

    persist in seeking the goals despite what has happened.

19. Generally, I

    pursue goals beyond what is required or expected of me.

    pursue goals only as far as is required of me.

20. When I Identify opportunities, I am always

    uncertain about whether to pursue the opportunity.

    proactive in pursuing the opportunity.

21. Group differences are always

    causing difficulties and unrest.

    understood and valued.

22. When I see bias and intolerance I always

    challenge the initiating people.

    turn a blind eye and ignore it.

23. I always help out based on

    the tasks others need help with.

    understanding others needs and feelings.

24. I always

    listen to the important words being said.

    listen well and am attentive to emotional cues.

25. Others perspectives are always

    understood and sensitivity shown.

    clouding the issues and getting us off track.

26. I always find social networks in the organisation

    get in the way of delivering performance.

    help create better decision networks.

27. I always use

    informal key power relationships to get what I need.

    formal decision networks to get what I need.

28. I always

    give customers what they ask for.

    understand customers needs and match products/services.

29. I always

    act as a trusted advisor to the customer.

    tell the customer what they want to hear.

30. Increasing customers satisfaction and loyalty

    is always part of the way I work

    is not important in achieving the sale.

31. The vision and mission are always

    given to staff so they know where we are going.

    used to inspire groups and individuals.

32. I always

    let people know of the behaviours expected.

    model the behaviours expected of others.

33. I always give assignments to people who

    can get the job done and do it well.

    will grow and develop as a result of the challenge.

34. Winning people over is something

    that I find difficult to do.

    I am very good at.

35. I always communicate in a way

    that everyone understands what I am saying.

    that seeks mutual understanding and full information sharing.

36. I always

    go along with the changes being driven by others.

    recognise the need for changes and remove barriers.

37. I always handle difficult people

    in a straight forward and direct manner.

    with diplomacy and tact.

38. I always seek out relationships that

    are mutually beneficial.

    will help me achieve my end goal.

39. I generally have a

    stronger focus on tasks rather than relationships

    balanced focus on tasks and relationships.

40. When I work with teams, I always

    make it clear what I expect members to do.

    draw all members into enthusiastic participation.

Appendix B

List of Interview Questions

Part 1: Background Information

- How long have you been an educator?

  ○ Less than 10 years

  ○ 10–15 years

  ○ 15–20 years

  ○ 20–25 years

  ○ More than 25 years

- How long have you been a principal?

  ○ 1–3 years

  ○ 4–6 years

  ○ 7–10 years

  ○ 10–14 years

  ○ More than 15 years

- How long have you been a principal at your current building?

  ○ 1 year

  ○ 2 years

  ○ 3 years

  ○ 4 years

  ○ 5 years

  ○ More than 5 years

- How many years have you resided in your current district?

○   1–3 years

○   4–6 years

○   7–10 years

○   10–14 years

○   More than 15 years

Part 2: Emotional Intelligence Reflection Interview

●   Are you comfortable sharing your emotional intelligence results with me?

If so, what trait did you score highest in? If not, what trait do you feel you would

score highest in?

○   Did this surprise you? Why or why not?

○   How does this information impact your leadership?

○   How might this trait affect your school culture?

○   Does this information make you want to change any way you lead?

○   How important do you feel this trait is to be an effective leader?

■   Why do you feel as you do?

○   Additional thoughts on this trait?

●   What trait resonates most with you?

○   Why?

○   How might this impact your current school culture?

○   How will this acknowledgement positively impact your current

work as a principal?

○   Any other thoughts regarding this trait?

- After reviewing your overall emotional intelligence results, what surprised you most?

  - Why?

  - How might this result play a role in your role as principal?

  - Will you adapt any of your leadership style based on this new finding? Explain.

  - Any other thoughts regarding this trait?

- How might you use the emotional intelligence data to lead at your building?

  - What would you do differently?

  - What are you going to expand upon?

- What do you do to build culture at your building? Can you provide specifics of what you've done?

  - What culture building professional development have you held?

  - When thinking about your results of your Emotional Intelligence survey, how do they align to the results of your school's 5Essentials data? Can you tell me more?

  - Does comparing your dominant trait to the 5Essentials make you want to change anything about your leadership style? Why or why not?

  - How does your emotional intelligence impact your level of trust within your building?

- How do you think your emotional intelligence trait impacts your principal–teacher trust as measured by the 5Essentials?

- ○   Can you provide specific examples of how this trait relates to your building culture and the teacher trust?

- ●   What types of training or professional development have you had in emotional intelligence?

- ●   Would you be interested in learning more about emotional intelligence or specific emotional intelligence traits to enhance or inform you leadership?

- ●   Is there anything else that I haven't asked that you think would be beneficial for me to know?

Appendix C

As-Is Chart

Context	Culture
● Elementary school principals who have held at least 1 full year in their role as principal in the building ● Principals are from six school districts in northern and northwest Illinois; districts represented are Unit or EC–Grade 8 ● School district sizes vary from 3,000 students to 15,000+ students ● Principals have been in their district for at least 1 year, but in the field of education for at least 13 years ● Leaders have a focus on building relationships with staff ● No principal identified self awareness as a high EI competency ● Little to no training in EI through professional development	● Elementary principals value relationships with staff to build culture in their schools ● Elementary principals work on building trust with all stakeholders (staff, parents, students) ● Elementary principals identified relationship management EI over self-awareness or self-management ● Based on Illinois 5Essentials, staff value relationships with one another and their school leader ● Elementary principals believe EI is important to acknowledge, but are not sure where to begin
Conditions	**Competencies**
● Elementary principals use information from the Illinois 5Essentials to stay informed on school culture and conditions ● Principals cannot control who completes the Illinois 5Essentials ● Elementary principals collect informal and consistent feedback from their staff to stay informed on overall culture levels ● Elementary principals have not had exposure or training in the area of EI ● School districts have not provided school leaders EI training and development ● Principals have not provided education to staff on EI	● EI education is not happening in undergraduate and graduate work ● Districts do not provide professional development and education on EI to school leaders and staff ● District administrators are not mentoring or providing reflective time for principal EI awareness ● Elementary principals are unfamiliar with the way their unique EI strengths impact school culture ● Elementary school principals have not explored EI competencies to develop their staff

Appendix D

To-Be Chart

Context		Culture	
● Elementary school principals who have held at least 1 full year in their role as principal in the building ● Principals are from six school districts in northern and northwest Illinois; districts represented are Unit or EC–Grade 8 ● School district sizes vary from 3,000 students to 15,000+ students ● Principals have been in their district for at least 1 year, but in the field of education for at least 13 years ● Leaders have a focus on building relationships with staff and developing relationships based on EI strengths ● Training in EI through professional development		● Elementary principals continue to value relationships with staff to build culture in their schools ● Elementary principals continue to work on building trust with all stakeholders (staff, parents, students) ● Elementary principals are provided time to understand their EI strengths and areas that are low to then refine how they build culture ● Elementary principals are coached and supported by district leaders to develop their EI ● The Illinois 5Essentials supportive environments and effective leaders data are reflected upon to improve culture	
Conditions		**Competencies**	
● Principals have better control over who completes the Illinois 5Essentials ● Principals educate staff and students on the 5Essentials ● An EI training plan is created for principals ● A series of coaching sessions is created by district leaders for each individual elementary principal ● District-level leaders will have training in coaching and awareness of EI ● External experts are brought into district leadership meetings to educate leaders on EI values		● EI education is included in undergraduate and graduate work ● Ongoing coaching opportunities for principals ● Districts to provide professional development and education on EI to school leaders and staff ● Elementary school principals use their EI competencies to develop their teachers	

Appendix E

Strategies and Actions

Strategies	Actions
1. District leadership (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents) educates themselves on their own EI strengths and areas for growth.	1a. District leadership completes a reflective EI survey to understand their strengths 1b. District leadership collaborates to reflect on their results and identify the following: ● Individual strengths ● Individual areas for growth ● Group strengths ● Group areas for growth ● Action steps to develop strengths ● Action steps to address deficits 1c. Research companies that specialize in EI training. 1d. Partner with a company to deliver certified professional development to elementary principals
2. District leadership (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents) collaborates to create a structured timeline to bring EI education and professional development to elementary building principals.	2a. Create a year-long plan, including support for certified trainers. 2b. Create an ongoing timeline to bring professional development and reflection to principals at least twice a year. 2c. Deliver a clear message to principals that this work is intentional and should be valued. 2d. Create cabinet and principal mentorship teams for ongoing coaching conversations to strengthen EI
3. District leadership (Superintendent, Assistant Superintendents) provides time for elementary principals to reflect on 5Essentials data.	3a. District leadership creates a collaboration session for elementary principals to identify 5Essentials strengths and deficits. 3b. District leadership facilitates conversations with elementary principals on ways to use one another to share ideas and resources on increasing positive climate results on 5Essentials. 3c. Elementary principals share 5Essentials data with building team leaders. Reflective conversations and questions should include: ● What do we see as building strengths and are proud of our work? ● What part of the results surprise us? What do you think impacts the results of negative or lower ratings?

	● What points of clarity are needed for staff? What points of clarity are needed for principals? ● How can we strengthen our deficits in communication and trust? 3d. Elementary principals elicit feedback from reflection with team leaders to create a culture improvement plan. 3e. Elementary principals integrate results from their EI survey into culture improvement plans.
4. District leadership and elementary principals continue to refine and reflect on EI results.	4a. District leadership ensures 5Essentials results in an ongoing focus on building School Improvement Plans. 4b. Elementary principals use their EI strengths to continue building trust and communication in buildings. 4c. District leadership includes elementary assistant principals in the growth and awareness of their EI to further support a positive building culture.