INTERROGATING THE ROLE OF CONTEXTUAL INTELLIGENCE WHEN APPLYING PROFESSIONAL DISCRETION BY SOUTH AFRICAN PUBLIC-SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

This research, rooted in the contextual intelligence theory, aimed to investigate how contextual intelligence influences the capacity of public-school principals to exercise professional discretion. The research delved into the decision-making processes of principals when confronted with challenging decisions related to legislation, policy, leadership, and management within the distinctive operational context of their schools. Utilising pragmatism as a paradigm, this was a mixed-methods study during which survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the data collection techniques. The findings revealed that principals frequently encounter context-specific scenarios that require contextual intelligence to appropriately apply professional discretion in their decision-making. In prioritising the well-being of learners and staff, principals often find themselves compelled to deviate from official policies that fail to consider the contextual nuances of their schools. The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Findings from the quantitative phase during which a survey was used, informed the semi-structured interviews in the qualitative data collection phase. Probability and non-probability sampling techniques were respectively applied in the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. Quantitative data was analysed using Google Forms and descriptive statistics. In the qualitative phase, thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.Ti software, allowing for detailed exploration and elaboration of the quantitative results.

Keywords: Contextual Intelligence; Professional Discretion; School Context; School Principals; School Leadership and Management; Decision-Making

Introduction and Background

Individual leaders (principals or educators) execute professional discretion and leadership obligations differently depending on the context and the desired outcomes (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, the transformation of a school principal from an individual entangled in multiple contexts to one who embodies contextual intelligence is crucial. Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 47) contend that this evolution is achieved through accumulated experience and knowledge combined with professional behaviour and practices. Professional discretion is a skill that principals develop over the course of their careers. A thorough grasp of professional discretion enables competent principals to integrate this skill with their knowledge, effectively addressing the needs of their learners (Boote, 2006, p. 462; Harrell, 2019, p. 104).

Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen (2012, p. 214), along with Marishane (2016, p. 164), suggest that professional discretion involves individual judgement and decision-making; however, it should be applied carefully and in a contextually relevant manner.

Contextual intelligence (CI) is defined by Kutz (2008a, p. 5) as the capacity of a principal to recognise contextual factors in every circumstance and adapt their thought processes to impact or behave in a way that best serve the learners of their school. This happens through combining technical skills and practical knowledge (Marishane, 2016, p. 164). As noted by Marishane (2016, p. 164), principals with CI are better equipped to apply professional discretion more effectively. A principal and an educator have an obligation to act in the child's best interests, according to Section 9 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2005). These obligations include providing for the child's needs and serving as the child's guardian (Mohammed, Gbenu, & Lawal, 2014, p. 138). These responsibilities give principals the authority to take parental roles, allowing educators to eventually regulate learners' behaviour (Nakpodia, 2012, p. 25). Furthermore, according to the common law doctrine of *in loco parentis*, educators (and principals) have a legal obligation to protect and discipline learners under their supervision.

Principals are therefore obligated to act *in loco parentis* within the bounds of their legal duty while using professional discretion and CI. For instance, principals have discretion when handling learner wrongdoing, according to Clark (2008, p. 4). With these discretionary powers the principal can choose whether to charge a learner with significant misconduct and bring them before a disciplinary hearing.

Hence, it is essential to explore how principals navigate the balance between these obligations and the practical realities unique to their schools. This research aimed to address this gap by examining how CI impacts principals' ability to exercise professional discretion effectively.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Professional Discretion

Boote (2006) underlines the importance of principals understanding professional discretion. This enables them to make optimal judgements that serve the interests of both their school and its learners. Professional discretion pertains to the capacity and duty of a principal to ascertain suitable actions and thereafter take them (Beyers & Du Plessis, 2022, p. 198).

According to Jeffries (2013, p. 76) it enables principals to "flexibly adapt their practices to the diverse circumstances they face each day". In addition, Pinkele (1985, p. x) clarified that:

"When an individual or a set of individuals has the capability of making decisions based on personal choices or preferences without being behaviourally constrained in their actions by rules or by others in positions of greater authority, the resulting behaviour is discretionary in nature."

When laws and regulations do not provide explicit instructions on what to do in situations of urgency, discretion must be applied (Heilmann, 2006, p. 9). Du Plessis (2019, p. 112) argues that it becomes difficult to be an effective principal in the absence of professional discretion. But trying to manage discretion, which is by nature resistant to limitation, is a difficult task (Heilmann, 2006, p. 35). Therefore, having adequate understanding of discretion is essential for a principal to make decisions, particularly when there is a lack of expertise, and policies might not be appropriate or suited in a certain situation.

Contextual Intelligence (CI) of Principals in Public-Schools

According to Kutz (2008a, p. 5), contextual intelligence (CI) is characterised by the capacity to identify and analyse the numerous contextual factors present in any given situation, and to adapt one's decisions both intuitively and purposefully with the aim of influencing the situation. According to Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 53), a principal must possess the knowledge to enhance the environment and make it more favourable than its current state to align their decisions with it. A principal with CI, as described by Kutz (2015, p. vi), possesses the capability to exert influence over individuals, regardless of location or time. The application of professional discretion and leadership responsibilities can vary significantly based on the leader's (whether an educator or principal) personal approach, the specific context, and the desired results (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2).

The Policy on the South African Standard for Principals (RSA, 2016, p. 3) recognises that the variety of South African school contexts makes the challenges that principals face increasingly complex. It may be inferred that to apply appropriate professional discretion, school principals need to possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and context-specific practical applications in the major areas of school management (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 98). As stated by Boote (2006, p. 462), professional discretion ought to be appropriate for a given situation. Hence, it is imperative for school principals to recognise the impact of context on the psychological and physical well-being of learners, as well as their ability to perform effectively across diverse environments. Hallinger (2016, p. 11) explains that schools are unique because of elements such as history, policies, cultures, and context. Moreover, Hallinger (2016, p. 11) contends that these contextual factors have a major effect on a school principal's professional judgement. As such, context must be the primary consideration in any effort to enhance the application of professional discretion (Harris & Jones, 2022, p. 1-3).

This suggests that context-sensitive strategies and adequate professional discretion from school principals are necessary for school reform endeavours (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 48). Success for principals in South Africa, with its varied cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, historical disparities, and geographical factors (rural and urban), according to Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 49), is determined by their capacity to work and adapt well within these complex contexts. It is imperative for principals to acknowledge that their capacity for CI is contingent upon primary leadership doctrines: human agency, purpose, and context (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 50-52; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2-3). Establishing a sense of shared purpose constitutes a component of the broader concept of purpose. The initial step in understanding the context involves recognising the situation's context and reshaping that context to align with a purpose necessitates the application of human intellect and experience (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, pp. 50–52). In order to apply appropriate professional discretion in areas pertaining to laws and policies, leadership, effective administration, and professional oversight in school management, principals must acquire these fundamentals to cultivate CI (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 102). Compared to principals with lower CI, those with higher CI are more likely to assimilate into the environment and exhibit successful professional discretion through their engagement in adaption, selection, and rephrasing (Marishane, 2016, p. 164).

Theoretical Framework: Theory of Contextual Intelligence (CI)

The theory of contextual intelligence has psychological roots and gained popularity through Sternberg's initial research (1985). Drawing from Sternberg's original work, "Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence", the theory characterises CI as a principal's capacity to exert influence over anyone, anywhere, and at any time (Kutz, 2015, p. 11). Kutz (2008b, p. 23) provides the following definition for CI:

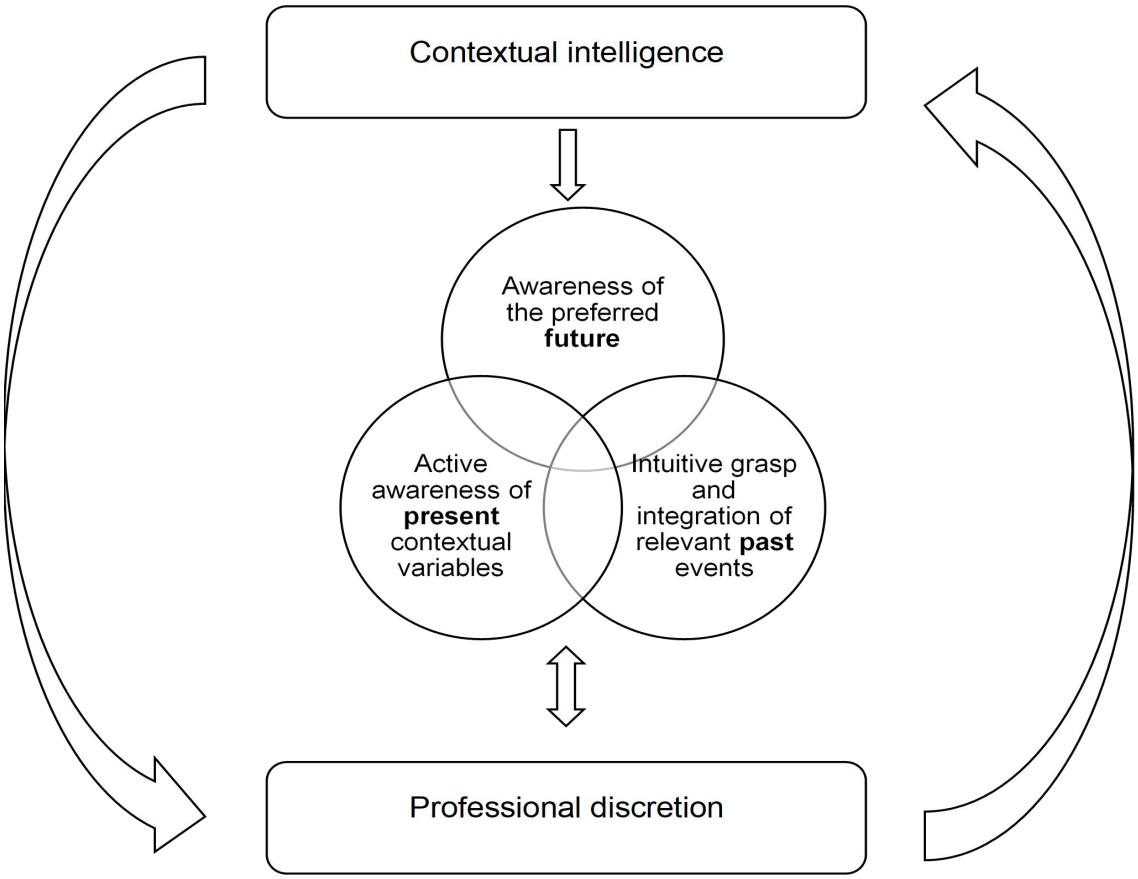
[the] ability to quickly and intuitively recognise and diagnose the dynamic contextual variables inherent in an event or circumstance and results in intentional adjustment of behaviour in order to exert appropriate influence in that context.

A Triangular-Shaped Perspective on Contextual Intelligence (CI)

Figure 1 demonstrates how a principal's comprehension of historical, current, and future dynamics can underpin the sustainable application of professional discretion within the school context (Marishane, 2020, p. 2). Put simply, to make decisions suitable for their specific school context, principals must consider the past, present, and future from a triangular perspective. Marishane (2020, p. 2) argues that a principal's (leader's) "behaviour, abilities, knowledge, personality, theoretical perspectives, and decisions [discretion]" should all be adapted to the situation as it unfolds, and new information based on data must be incorporated into the existing body of knowledge.

Additionally, Figure 1 demonstrates that CI is a prerequisite for school principals exercising proper professional discretion and vice versa. School principals should be cognisant of the interplay between the past, present, and future. This awareness enables them to exercise sound professional discretion (Marishane, 2020, p. 2; Kutz, 2008b, p. 18).

Figure 1: The Professional Discretion of School Principals and Contextual Intelligence (adapted from Marishane, 2020, p. 2)



The Crucial Significance of Contextual Intelligence (CI) within the Proficiency of School Principals

Marishane (2016, p. 164) argues that principals with CI are more likely to integrate into an environment and apply appropriate professional discretion compared to those with lower CI. This is attributed to their ability to better connect with their surroundings. In terms of understanding how to navigate different situations and respond appropriately, principals with CI exhibit confidence (Marishane, 2020, p. 8). To put it differently, these principals seize every opportunity to determine the most effective ways to protect the interests of their learners, educators, and schools.

Principals need to utilise autonomy and common sense to shape a context, determining the timing and manner of their behaviour (proactively, actively, or reactively), thought processes (retrospectively, introspectively, or prospectively), and appropriate actions (Marishane, 2011, p. 56). Utilising CI implies the skill of adapting to various contexts. Hence, it is imperative for principals to thoughtfully evaluate each decision to fulfil their responsibilities effectively (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 112).

For school principals (leaders), CI is essential, as stated by Marishane (2020, p. 42), and this is demonstrated by five important elements. Firstly, context and leadership are closely related. Secondly, for a response to be effective, one must comprehend how dynamic and intricate the context is. Thirdly, it can be difficult to directly affect learning outcomes since the context acts as an intermediary between a principal (leader) and the learning experiences of learners. Fourthly, leadership serves as an interface for the external and internal school environments, encouraging or discouraging change depending on the context. Finally, there is a mutually beneficial impact between context and leadership (Marishane, 2020, pp. 42–43).

Hence, it is believed that using discretion when making decisions is a vital element of a school principal's duties (Heilmann, 2006, p. 2). Principals are supposed to possess the highest level of skill in applying discretionary or intuitive powers and making expert-level decisions. Principals must always grow and broaden their understanding and knowledge to make decisions with efficiency (Boote, 2006: 463). For instance, school principals have a duty to be knowledgeable about laws and policies, to apply them efficiently, and to make decisions by using appropriate professional discretion (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 112; Harrell, 2019, p. 42).

Problem Statement

Principals face a myriad of complex decisions pertaining to administration, management, leadership, legal matters, and policies within their schools. Their duties are directly related to making sure that all learners, staff members, and the community are safe (Heilmann, 2006, p. 3). In addition, an increased demand for accountability has led to increased scrutiny of their judgement calls (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 112).

To navigate these challenges effectively, principals must apply their professional discretion with CI (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 159). Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 45) highlight the empowerment of principals in decision-making, but this authority is constrained by the school's context, legislation, and policies. CI therefore becomes an important competency for principals to navigate the diverse contexts they encounter and to make informed decisions (Du Plessis, 2019, p. 102). Hence, this study sought to investigate the influence of CI on the discretionary decision-making exercised by principals in South African public schools leading to the research question:

"What role does contextual intelligence (CI) play in the discretionary decision-making of South African public school principals?"

Methodology and Research Design

Carried out within a pragmatist paradigm, the study utilised an explanatory, sequential mixed-method design. Surveys were distributed to both Gauteng secondary and primary public school principals, covering fee-paying and non-fee-paying institutions, yielding thirty-eight (38) responses. The survey aimed to gather quantitative data, guiding subsequent online semi-structured interviews with fourteen (14) purposively selected principals.

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018, p. 224) state that mixed-methods research frequently uses a range of sample sizes and types. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009, pp. 185-191) note that sequential mixed-methods sampling entails one type of sample influencing the subsequent sample. In this study, quantitative data from the initial phase informed in-depth semi-structured interviews during the qualitative phase. Quantitative survey data were collected using Google Forms, offering insights to create interview questions in the qualitative phase. Thematic analysis occurred after the semi-structured interviews were transcribed and member checked. Atlas.Ti facilitated the qualitative data analysis, ensuring a systematic documentation of identified codes and themes.

Findings

How Participating Principals View Professional Discretion

Heilmann (2006, p. 49) emphasises the importance of understanding how discretion is applied in decision-making, stating, "a greater understanding of discretion is essential for sound decision-making and interpreting decisions made by others". Thus, principals need to be aware of their discretionary powers to guarantee that 'justice prevails' in their decision-making (Heilmann, 2006, p. 124). Recognising their discretionary power prompts principals to acknowledge the influence of emotions and thoughts, highlighting the need for CI (Marishane 2020, p. 2; Heilmann, 2006, p. 124).

All participants are professionals with formal education who displayed a reasonable understanding of professional discretion. Here are some of their exact (v*erbatim*) responses:

"On the one hand, professionality entails certain guidelines with which one has to work with. Everything you do will be within both the parameters of professionality, which certainly entails a specific style, a specific protocol. And then, on the other hand, the word discretion, implies that you are given a certain leeway to interpret certain guidelines.

*So, the two words: professional on the one hand, is a specific way you would like to react, given certain professional codes. And on the other hand, discretion would obviously entail the leeway that would be to your disposal when making decisions." (*Principal 3*)*

Principal 12 emphasised that professional discretion should be used in situations when rules and regulations do not indicate how to proceed.

*"Professional discretion is a personal judgement and decision that the school principal has to make and take in an absence of legislation, policy, acts, and regulations to help and guide the principal decisions." (*Principal 12*)*

Principals 9 and 12 perceived professional discretion as a decision made in response to a specific situation:

*"That is the ability for any person in the professional field to apply their mind in order to make a decision, as long as the decision is appropriate, or if it best suits the situation." (*Principal 9*)*

*"Decisions and judgments are influenced by circumstances and the experiences of the principal. The environment in which the principal is located also influences professional discretion." (*Principal 12*)*

Several participants suggested that laws and policies often restrict the extent of autonomy granted to a school principal. Principal 3 made the following statement regarding the necessity of providing school leaders with greater autonomy and decision-making power:

*"… give more autonomy to the schools that are functional and give them more rope in a space where they can actually be more creative and more innovative to raise their schools and manage schools [to] the next levels of excellence." (*Principal 3*)*

Participants perceived professional discretion as a crucial element of decision-making. For example, Principal 3 described it as having flexibility in interpreting laws and policies, while Principal 12 believed it is necessary in situations lacking clear policy guidance. Some participants acknowledged their discretionary power, often using it for the benefit of learners and staff. Nevertheless, other participants issued a cautionary note, pointing out that the accountability framework within which they carry out their duties limits their discretionary power.

The Role of Contextual Intelligence (CI) on the Ability of Principals to Apply Professional Discretion

CI is defined by Marishane (2016, p. 164) as combining technical skills, practical knowledge, and combined knowledge. Consequently, having CI may help principals make informed decisions.

The participants underlined how often they have to modify their decision-making to suit the context or the educational environment. Furthermore, the data showed that a principal's capacity to use adequate professional discretion is heavily influenced by CI. Principal 1 emphasised that failure to recognise contextual factors prevents a principal from making well-informed decisions.

*"I don't think that you can make informed decisions when you don't know what the contextual factors are. If you don't understand the situation… Contextual intelligence is key!" (*Principal 1*).*

Principals 8 and 11 shared this opinion:

"I think … in that regard contextual intelligence does assist me as a leader, particularly to be able to make a decision after considering some other factors that are within my environment … " (Principal 8)

"… you've got to look at it very carefully and consider all factors and how it's going to affect what you're really busy or dealing with at the moment." (Principal 11)

According to Principal 3:

"… you have to weigh up the different contexts in which [a] certain decision needs to be made in order for you to make the correct decision… I believe that you need to take everything into account … " (Principal 3)

Hence, it appears that principals must thoroughly understand the circumstances before making decisions. Principals with CI are confident in determining the decisions and actions required in various situations (Marishane, 2020, p. 8). These findings underscore the crucial role of CI in a principal's ability to apply professional discretion when needed.

Principals are Advised to Assess a Situation Before Applying Discretion

Before deciding, most participants mentioned that they assess a situation by considering relevant contextual factors.

"You've got to look at every situation and assess the situation and get all the information you can… There has to be an awareness and consciousness…" (Principal 11)

"You can't just make decisions on face value. You need to make decisions on having the right information to make the decision…" (Principal 2)

It is not always straightforward to assess a situation before making a decision, according to Principal 7:

"You will look at the whole situation. It's not just black and white. This is wrong, this is right. You have to consider everything. You will take all the factors into consideration, and you will then make your decision. It is just so difficult." (Principal 7)

Principal 5 emphasised that the most significant mistake a principal can make is deciding without considering all contextual factors. He clarified that he never makes a decision without first studying pertinent laws or policies, highlighting that applying professional discretion is facilitated when all relevant data are available.

"It is very important that you get all the relevant facts, all the relevant opinions and ask all the relevant questions and then also remind yourself and your team of what the law says and what the policy says. What is allowed and what is not allowed?" (Principal 5)

Before taking any action, Principal 13 assessed the situation to determine if it is not an emergency. She also mentioned that, before making a decision, she consulted the relevant laws and policies.

"If it's not an emergency situation, I will first make sure that what we're doing is correct before acting… sometimes I have to wait, and I'll say: I'm not going to make a decision at this stage. Let me go look at legislation before I act." (Principal 13)

Principals 5 and 13 recognised that making an incorrect decision could result in adverse outcomes. Moreover, intricate situations may test the capacity of principals to employ adequate professional discretion.

Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 53) contend that in order for principals to align their decisions with the environment, they must possess the necessary knowledge to shape and adjust to their surroundings, thereby enhancing the current environment. This assertion finds support in the statement made by Principal 12:

"The situation also warrants the principal to use, or to apply professional discretion, to suit that particular environment… you need to improve your professional discretion to change that environment." (Principal 12)

Hence, it appears that in order to effectively exercise professional discretion, a principal needs a comprehensive grasp of the situational context and a familiarity with pertinent legal and policy guidelines.

Audi Alteram Partem

Audi alteram partem (or *audiatur et altera pars*) is a Latin phrase meaning "listen to the other side", or "let the other side be heard as well" (Bray, 2005, p. 136).

When exercising professional discretion, school principals are expected to follow the *audi alteram partem* rule. It is vital for principals to have a comprehensive understanding of a problem before making decisions by considering the interests of all involved. Principals 3 and 5 explained as follows:

"I believe that you need to take everything into account, and listen to different sides of the story, in order for you to try and make an objective decision based on all facts at your disposal…" (Principal 3)

"You've got to get all the information and listen a lot and get all the information before formulating your own opinion and then test your opinion." (Principal 5)

The *audi alteram partem* common law principle is likely to be regarded as a contextual factor when applying professional discretion. In addition, Oosthuizen (2021, p. 85) argues that *audi alteram partem* is in concurrence with the right to just administrative action (Section 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa). The *audi alteram partem* rule must be applied by principals so that they can develop a comprehensive understanding of the situation. This, in turn, could empower a principal with the insight to make appropriate decisions.

Varied Contexts will Yield Diverse Outcomes

Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011, p. 588) introduce four aspects of context, namely "situated contexts, professional contexts, material contexts, and external contexts". These aspects are influenced by various requirements. Prolonged decision-making by principals results in reduced accuracy, influenced by contextual, internal, and external factors (Dane & Pratt 2007, p. 33). As a result, school principals should recognise that their application of CI is influenced by three leadership principles: context, purpose, and human agency (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 50-52).

It is undeniable that context-specific demands have an impact on principals' professional judgement. According to Marishane and Mampane (2018, p. 49), there are numerous cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, historical disparities, geographical (rural and urban) factors, and historical contexts in South Africa, all of which have an inevitable effect on principals' ability to make intelligent decisions.

Beyers (2023, p. 242-245) identified a wide range of contextual factors which influence how principals apply professional discretion. These include: culture and ethnic groups; language of instruction; religious orientation; socio-economic background; pressure of academic success; geographical location (rural and urban); different schools; fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools; financial pressures; human factor; accountability; laws and policies; media; emotions; school culture; COVID-19; and sexual orientation of learners and staff members.

Due to variations in school principals' contexts and diverse historical backgrounds, the manner in which they apply professional discretion is influenced. Principal 12 underscored that:

"Decision-making is situational. Different situations warrant different professional discretion. When you are confronted with certain contextual factors, you need to apply suitable and reliable professional discretion to solve that challenge." (Principal 12)

Principal 2 mentioned that he works in a dual-language, multicultural school where he is bound to come across new circumstances every day, requiring a different approach to problem-solving and decision-making in each situation.

"I really believe that different contexts will have different outcomes. So, each of these situations that I find myself in, the decision-making will not always be exactly the same… because of the fact that we are a multi-cultural school, we have got double parallel medium [languages of teaching and learning], all those kinds of things. So, we are really getting in different situations each day, we need to apply different thinking patterns." (Principal 2)

Similarly, Principal 4 mentioned the diverse language contexts within schools:

"… the context in which you work will have a major influence on your decision to have a different outcome. Let's take it in the context of the different language schools that we have. If you are a principal of a full Afrikaans-medium school, you are working with a totally different situation." (Principal 4)

Principal 4 argued that the location of a school may also be taken into consideration when making decisions and that this could have an impact on how those decisions turn out. A less wealthy school in an underprivileged township will have a distinct background compared to a wealthy suburban school.

"Your area, the context of area plays an even bigger role…a big school in the middle of Johannesburg, in a wealthy area… Now you take that same situation. You apply it to a school in a township, in a poor township…" (Principal 4)

Furthermore, Principal 1 mentioned that:

"Different contexts, same situation. The same situation can present itself here in this school and in another school in Soweto and they have different contexts, but it is the same situation, but the context will determine how you act and what decisions you make. Of course, it plays a big role. So, the context will definitely influence what I decide and how I decide, because the context normally determines what the outcomes should be." (Principal 1)

Principals 7, 8, and 13 affirmed this by highlighting that, even though their neighbouring schools are situated in the same geographic area, their contexts are markedly different:

"Another English primary school in the area, we are quite a couple of schools close together. We will have to decide on exactly the same things, but it is definitely not true, because our combination of learners, our combination of parents, structures, their incomes, and their situations are completely different." (Principal 7)

'My school is bigger than the other neighbouring schools that we are working with. Surely there are factors that are in play when going on with the day. The business day of my school will differ from the other schools." (Principal 8)

"Even if I am just looking at the schools in our vicinity, we are totally different. We have schools that are from a bit of a higher income and then we have the lower income schools and we have them all around us." (Principal 13)

Principal 5 noted that the interaction of school principals with the community leads to varying contexts due to the distinct differences of communities:

"No decision you are making every day is the same. There are always different factors because you're working with humans, you are working with educators and children. So, nothing is the same every day because people are different each day. So, you have got to take into consideration all the different facts and situations when you make decisions like that." (Principal 5)

Principal 7 argued that, despite similarities between situations, minor details or contexts can vary, producing different outcomes:

"Some of the situations might be the same, but not all the detail parts are the same. So, there might be some areas that overlap and they're all similar. But some of the finer details are definitely different from one another." (Principal 7)

Most participants concurred that a principal's decision-making process might be influenced by various situations, leading to varying outcomes. Making decisions is heavily context-dependent and impacted by a multitude of factors. Since the results of discretionary reasoning might vary depending on the circumstances, it is therefore challenging to predict.

One-Size-Fits-No-One

Policies are thought to be developed with all schools in mind. However, participants claim that this is not the case. The participants asserted that there isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' answer that works in every situation. Principal 10 provided the following explanation:

"There is no policy that can fit all the schools. They will differ from contextual factors and will differ from area to area…One size does not fit all. It does not fit us as a school." (Principal 10)

Principal 12 emphasised that each situation is unique. He consequently thought that there is never a 'one-size-fits-all' solution when it comes to decision-making. Professional judgement ought to be used in accordance with the situations:

"You can never apply [or] fit all sizes when dealing with different situations. Every situation has its own tailor-made strategy in decision-making. The professional discretion to be applied must fit a particular environment." (Principal 12)

It is evident from the narrative of Principal 3 that the decision-making process will adapt to changing situations. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach, he warned, might result in decisions that are made with restricted thinking, which might prevent a principal from utilising adequate professional discretion.

"So, obviously if the context differs your decision-making would definitely also differ. Otherwise, if you have a one-size-fits-all approach to all of this, the decision-making processes… I think you'll be very narrow-minded. And in the end, I don't think you would be able to make a wise and intelligent decision." (Principal 3)

Principal 13 firmly clarified her belief that laws and policies often force her to make decisions on a 'one-size-fits-all' basis, an expectation she frequently encounters:

"I am just looking at the schools in our vicinity, we are totally different. I mean, we have our schools that are from a bit of a higher income and then we have the lower income schools, and we have got them all around us. And there is no one size fits all. But unfortunately, we as principals have to fit into that one-size-fits-all which makes it very difficult… legislation sometimes pushes us in a direction of making a decision that is not fit for our school." (Principal 3)

According to the data, laws and policies may not always support principals' ability to apply appropriate discretion in making decisions. Principals of public schools in South Africa should especially be aware of this, as they are required to function in a variety of contextual environments. The participants generally agreed that there isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' answer for each circumstance. Since every situation is different, professional discretion should be used according to the situation.

Principals who effectively utilise their knowledge and experience in diverse situations are likely to excel in applying professional discretion. Marishane (2020, p. 42) argues that a principal has the ability to navigate change to align with the specific context, choosing whether to embrace or resist it.

Hence, implementing an 'one-size-fits-all' approach to policies would undoubtedly pose challenges, given the distinct circumstances and contexts of each school.

Policy Flexibility

Participants argued for tailored school policies, urging policymakers to embrace flexibility for accommodating unique school contextual nuances. Principal 10 remarked that policies lack coherence universally due to the presence of diverse social, political, and academic contexts in schools:

"It depends on the context. For example, the social context, the political context, and the academic context cannot be the same. Because we do not have the same circumstances. One size does not fit all. It does not fit us as a school. There is no policy that can fit all the schools. They will differ in respect of contextual factors, and they will differ from area to area." (Principal 10)

Principal 12 contended the necessity for a tailor-made plan in every situation. This underscores the importance for both principals and SGBs to adapt their policies based on the specific circumstances at hand.

"Every situation has its own tailor-made strategy in decision-making. The professional discretion to be applied must fit a particular environment." (Principal 12)

According to Principal 1, if all policies were the same, everything would be simple. However, he emphasised the challenge of expecting uniformity in all school policies due to considerations for the learners' well-being and evolving circumstances.

"If there was a strict book of rules and those are the only things that you are allowed, then it is straightforward and easy. But you have to act in each child's best interests, and things change, and they differ." (Principal 1)

Principal 4 emphasised the importance of granting each school the flexibility to modify or adapt policies set by the Department of Basic Education:

"Make sure [you have] your own policies… You cannot just say, the department says that… You must have your own policies in place." (Principal 4)

The data supports Harrell's (2019, p. 25) contention that schools should have the responsibility and some freedom to formulate local school policies to address the interests of their school without undermining the interests of the Department of Basic Education. Furthermore, according to Heilmann (2006, p. 120), it is argued that "policies that have no room within them may lead to situations where decisions are made based on what is written and not necessarily on what is best for the school or learners".

Emotional Intelligence Considered Within the Realm of Contextual Intelligence (CI)

When making decisions, the following participants recommended that CI and emotional intelligence work hand in hand. The two ideas seem to be fundamentally interrelated.

"If you look at the term contextual intelligence, I think you could actually draw a parallel to emotional intelligence." (Principal 3)

"I think it's very important. I will almost link that with emotional intelligence. Those two things run side-by-side. It is so important, but you've got that contextual intelligence." (Principal 2)

In a school environment, effective interaction with individuals necessitates principals to have emotional intelligence, as a lack thereof could hinder their decision-making capabilities.

"The next thing would be your emotional intelligence and your ability to be able to understand other people and your working relations with other people will affect your professional discretion." (Principal 8)

"So, I think the other thing is emotional intelligence. When you deal with people, you really need to apply a lot of that. It's really, really difficult out there. So, you need emotional intelligence." (Principal 9)

According to the aforementioned principals, a principal's capacity to make wise decisions may be hampered by a deficiency in emotional or CI. Understanding the context in which an individual works is essential for meaningful decision-making by principals. This knowledge, which is integral to CI, should encompass self- and other-knowledge, often referred to as emotional intelligence (Marishane, 2020: 75). Certain participants contended that emotional intelligence ought to be regarded as an integral aspect of CI. As indicated by the results, principals firmly believe that the lack of emotional intelligence hinders their CI and compromises their ability to make sound decisions. Hence, there should be an intrinsic connection between emotional intelligence and CI, as the presence of one is dependent on the other. Within a school setting, the significance of emotional intelligence becomes apparent in interpersonal interactions, given that a lack of emotional intelligence may hinder the decision-making process for principals.

School Culture and Climate

Every school possesses its distinct culture, climate, and decision-making processes, creating a unique context where principals must apply their professional discretion.

"Every school has its own culture when making those decisions. There's a certain culture in each school that you will take into consideration. The culture, the ethos of the school, what is your aims, long-term, short-term? (Principal 5) *Every school has its own sort of culture and the way it works, no school is the same… the culture of the school, the way the people perceive it depends a lot on the head of the institution."* (Principal 11)

"The culture and the climate and everything in that school is the principal's responsibility. If the principal does not care, no one will care. If I didn't have a good value system, I cannot expect others to have a good value system…" (Principal 1)

"The principal must create the situation and understanding that says you are the leader and therefore you have that added obligation. Because everybody kind of looks at you to create a positive climate." (Principal 6)

"One of the primary duties of the principals is to create an environment conducive to learning and teaching. Hypothetically speaking there is a positive relationship between the climate conducive to learning and teaching and the quality of teaching and learning and ultimately the quality results." (Principal 12)

It is the responsibility of principals to cultivate an environment in schools that is conducive to learning and teaching. A supportive atmosphere enhances the ability of principals to apply their professional discretion. This is often achieved through the establishment of professional standards for educators, empowering them to make more informed decisions.

Discussion

Data suggests that without CI principals cannot make wise decisions, but having contextual knowledge enables them to exercise appropriate professional discretion. The data further suggests that it is important that all contextual factors indicated that problems and situations are often complex and that principals' decisions must meet legal and policy requirements.

Principals may find it challenging to apply their professional discretion in complex situations (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 49). According to the data, flexible policies would be advantageous for schools since there isn't an 'one-size-fits-all' solution for every situation. School principals, influenced by a variety of backgrounds, apply professional discretion, and implement policy differently (Marishane, 2020, p. 2; Kutz, 2008b, p. 18). Participants generally agreed that different environments could affect a principal's decision-making process and result in different outcomes. The process of making decisions appears to be heavily influenced by the context and a number of influencing factors. Predicting discretion is challenging as outcomes can differ based on different contexts and situations.

Molander et al. (2012, p. 218) argue that the same case can be judged differently under different circumstances, underscoring the dynamic and multifaceted nature of decision-making processes in various educational contexts.

Effective interaction within a school setting necessitates emotional intelligence, as the absence of such intelligence may impede the decision-making abilities of principals. Therefore, principals should comprehend the impact of contextual factors on the physical and psychological well-being of learners, as well as their capacity to thrive in various contexts. This suggests that any initiative aimed at improving schools demands an approach tailored to the specific context, along with the application of suitable professional discretion by school principals (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 48).

Principals cannot make informed judgements without a comprehensive understanding of all contextual factors related to the situation and their school. In essence, they must possess a thorough awareness of the context before exercising professional discretion. Therefore, through their professional conduct, practices, knowledge, and experience, principals should transition from individuals entangled in numerous contexts to those who demonstrate CI (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 47). Effective professional discretion and leadership should be context-based, as emphasised by Hallinger (2016, p. 6) and Yusoff et al (2023, p. 79).

The participants emphasised that all contextual factors must be considered before a decision is made. A number of participants asserted that, in addition to other contextual factors, they carefully consider laws and policies. According to Hallinger (2016, p. 11) and Yusoff et al. (2023, p. 79), schools are unique because of factors like context, history, policies, and cultures. They argue that these external factors significantly impact the professional judgement of a school principal. Consequently, the foremost factor to be considered in any endeavour to enhance the application of professional discretion is context (Harris & Jones, 2022, p. 1-3).

In the diverse contexts of South Africa, encompassing various cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, historical inequalities, and rural-urban differences, the success of principals is defined by their abilities (Marishane & Mampane, 2018, p. 49). Participants generally concur that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to every problem. Furthermore, given the unique nature of each situation, professional discretion should be applied in alignment with the specific situation. Certain participants indicated that employing a ‘one-size-fits-all’ practise might result in narrow-minded decisions, potentially hindering a principal from exercising adequate professional discretion. Laws and policies may not always support adequate discretionary decision-making by principals, as they often lack consideration for contextual nuances. This is especially applicable to the diverse and intricate contextual environments found in South African public schools.

Decisions within the school are influenced by policies, which seem to limit professional discretion. To enhance the adaptability, flexibility, and suitability of policies for varied school contexts, it is imperative to re-evaluate the process of policy creation. Heilmann (2006, p. 120) argues that "policies that have no room within them may lead to situations where decisions are made based on what is written and not necessarily on what is best for the school or learners". The resilience exhibited by the participating principals in navigating the challenges of exercising discretionary power despite restrictive pressures from laws and policies, echoes the findings of Crocco and Costigan (2007, p. 513). Their study identified how principals manage to appropriately apply discretionary authority within the constraints of an accountability-driven environment. Therefore, while determining what should be covered in their policies, principals and SGBs should work together and use appropriate professional discretion. It is essential to recognise that adjusted policies aid principals in exercising professional discretion more adeptly rather than eliminating the need for such discretion.

Moreover, implementing the *audi alteram partem* principle will enable principals to gain a comprehensive understanding of the entire situation (Oosthuizen, 2021, p. 85). This has the potential to empower a principal with the insight for sound decision-making. Even in seemingly similar situations, subtle contextual nuances may arise, resulting in diverse outcomes. Decision-making is thus context-dependent and influenced by factors like culture, language, and geography.

Conclusion

As professionals operating in intricate and diverse environments, principals are expected to wield discretionary powers responsibly and be accountable for their decisions. Contextually intelligent principals, who comprehend the nuances of their school context, are better equipped to justify their discretionary decision-making. The capacity to apply appropriate professional discretion is compromised when principals fail to grasp the contextual uniqueness of their school. Participants in this study emphasised the context-dependent nature of discretionary use, underscoring the need for a comprehensive awareness before making informed decisions. These findings highlight the pivotal role of CI in enabling principals to navigate and apply appropriate professional discretion in the dynamic landscape of educational leadership.

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