

Teachers' Emotional Intelligence Competencies in Managing Learner Behaviour: Evidence from Primary Schools in Mbabane, Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

Learner indiscipline remains a persistent challenge in Eswatini's primary schools despite the adoption of positive discipline policies. This situation raises concerns about the effectiveness of current classroom management approaches and highlights the need to consider teachers' emotional competencies. This study examined teachers' perceptions of emotional intelligence (EI) and the specific EI skills they consider essential for managing learner behaviour in selected primary schools in Mbabane. Guided by Daniel Goleman's mixed model of emotional intelligence and underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative multiple case study design. Sixteen participants, comprising twelve teachers and four head teachers, were purposively selected from four schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that teachers' understanding of EI varied considerably, with some demonstrating limited or inaccurate knowledge of the concept. However, self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy emerged as the most valued competencies for managing learner discipline. The study concludes that inadequate understanding of EI constrains its effective application in classroom management. It recommends the integration of emotional intelligence training into teacher education and professional development programmes to enhance positive discipline practices and improve learner behaviour outcomes.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Learner Behaviour, Teacher Perceptions, Positive Discipline, Self-regulation, Empathy, Self-awareness.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a modern psychological concept encompassing cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal abilities vital for social and professional success (Mancini et al., 2022; Sfetcu, 2020). It involves self-awareness, emotional regulation, motivation, empathy, and social competence. EI reflects an individual's capacity to integrate thought and action while managing personal and others' emotions (Jaberi et al., 2024). It enables individuals to maintain emotional control, think positively, and respond appropriately in social contexts. Broadly, EI encompasses perceiving, understanding, regulating, and effectively utilising emotions (Todmal, Rao & Gagare, 2023). Individuals with higher EI are more adept at managing emotional experiences and using emotional insight to guide decisions and interactions, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships (Jaberi et al., 2024).

Despite numerous disciplinary strategies implemented in schools, learner indiscipline remains a growing concern globally (Ngwokabuenui, 2015; Schlebusch, Makola & Ndlovu, 2022; Ndlovu, Makola & Schlebusch, 2023). Persistent behavioural challenges suggest that traditional discipline approaches may overlook the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching. Learners increasingly display behaviours such as disrespect, defiance, absenteeism, substance abuse, and violence, which disrupt learning environments and undermine academic progress (Ngwokabuenui, 2015). This study therefore focuses on integrating emotional intelligence (EI) as a complementary

approach to enhance teachers' ability to manage learner behaviour effectively. Developing teachers' EI competencies, such as empathy, self-regulation, and social awareness, can foster positive teacher-learner relationships, promote respectful interactions, and support more sustainable discipline practices in schools

(Ndlovu, Makola & Schlebusch, 2023).

Effective learner discipline management remains a global challenge (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2014). While many education systems have shifted from punitive approaches to positive discipline policies (Ndlovu, Makola & Schlebusch, 2023), indiscipline in schools continues to escalate (Schlebusch, Makola & Ndlovu, 2022). Emerging research highlights emotional intelligence (EI) as a promising foundation for improving discipline management (Tok et al., 2013). By enhancing teachers' empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal awareness, EI fosters stronger teacher–learner relationships and encourages positive behaviour. This study examines international efforts to integrate EI into learner discipline management to identify lessons applicable to improving discipline approaches in Eswatini's schools.

In the United Kingdom, emotional intelligence (EI) has become central to managing learner discipline, with the Department for Education (DfE, 2014) advocating for emotional and social learning alongside academic growth. Initiatives such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) program focus on enhancing students' empathy, self-regulation, and social skills, which are crucial for effective discipline (Tok et al., 2013). Restorative justice practices further reinforce EI by encouraging reflection, empathy, and accountability, thereby improving relationships and reducing behavioural problems (Kirkwood et al., 2019; Sutton et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Turkey has adopted a dual approach, integrating EI training for both students and teachers. Programs emphasize emotional awareness, regulation, and social interaction to mitigate indiscipline (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017). Teachers with high EI foster supportive classrooms that model emotional competence, preventing conflicts and promoting holistic development (Collie et al., 2015). Collectively, these strategies illustrate how integrating EI into school systems strengthens discipline and well-being through empathy-driven, relationship-focused educational practices.

In South Africa, the management of learner discipline has evolved toward democratic and empathetic approaches since independence, guided by the South African Schools Act (1996), which promotes positive discipline and student participation. Restorative justice practices are central, encouraging reflection, accountability, and relationship repair over punishment (Boehm et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence (EI) is embedded in this framework, equipping teachers to address behavioural issues such as bullying and violence through empathy and insight (Lombard & Brijdan, 2021). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have also been integrated into curricula to nurture emotional regulation and interpersonal skills, improving school climate and reducing conflict. In Eswatini, the 2017 abolition of corporal punishment and adoption of positive discipline have not produced the desired outcomes (Ndlovu, Makola & Schlebusch, 2023; Tshabalala et al., 2024). Challenges persist largely due to limited teacher understanding and application of EI, as existing research focuses mainly on leadership rather than classroom practice (Mabuza, Makondo & Bhebhe, 2017). This gap highlights the need to integrate EI into teacher training and discipline strategies to foster empathy, emotional awareness, and supportive learning environments essential for effective classroom management and improved learner behaviour.

Learner indiscipline in Eswatini schools has intensified since the abolition of corporal punishment and the introduction of positive discipline in 2017, with persistent issues such as defiance, bullying, and absenteeism undermining the teaching and learning process (Tshabalala et al., 2024; Mabuza, Makondo & Bhebhe, 2017). These behaviours disrupt not only individual learning but also the broader classroom environment, negatively affecting academic outcomes and teacher morale (Ndlovu, Makola & Schlebusch, 2023). A key factor hindering the success of positive discipline is the limited understanding and application of Emotional Intelligence (EI) among teachers. Without emotional awareness and empathy, educators struggle to implement supportive discipline effectively (Jaberi et al., 2024). This study therefore explores the integration of EI into classroom management as a mechanism for improving learner behaviour and fostering positive teacher–learner relationships. By enhancing teachers' emotional competence, the research aims to promote a more supportive school climate and sustainable behavioural improvement in Eswatini's education system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' understanding of emotional intelligence and identify the emotional intelligence competencies they perceive as essential for effectively managing learner behaviour in

primary schools in Mbabane.

Problem Statement

Based on the purpose the study has been problematized as follows;

The shift to positive discipline policies in Eswatini, including the abolition of corporal punishment in 2017, has not yielded the expected improvement in learner behaviour, as indiscipline in primary schools continues to persist. Behaviours such as defiance, bullying, and classroom disruption remain prevalent, negatively affecting teaching and learning as well as school climate. This situation suggests a gap between policy intentions and classroom practice. Research increasingly highlights emotional intelligence (EI) as a critical factor in effective classroom management, with competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy enabling teachers to manage learner behaviour constructively. However, in the Eswatini context, existing studies have focused largely on policy and leadership, with limited attention to teachers' emotional competencies in classroom discipline. In addition, many teachers may lack adequate training in EI, which constrains their ability to apply emotionally informed strategies. This study therefore sought to examine teachers' understanding of emotional intelligence and identify the EI competencies they consider essential for managing learner behaviour in primary schools in Mbabane.

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Goleman's (1995) mixed model of Emotional Intelligence. Goleman (1995) proposed a mixed model of EI that includes five elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Jaberi et al, 2024). According to Goleman, these elements are interrelated and work together to determine an individual's overall EI (Sfetcu, 2020).

Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory emphasises the importance of five key elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Self-awareness involves recognizing and understanding one's own emotions, strengths, and weaknesses, which lays the foundation for effective emotional management (Hoffmann et al. 2020). Self-regulation refers to the ability to control or redirect disruptive emotions. According to Li et al. (2020), persons who have the ability to effectively regulate their emotions are more likely to use emotional information to inform their reasoning processes positively, leading to better decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Motivation, on the one hand, encompasses the intrinsic drive to achieve goals for personal gratification and growth, rather than for external rewards (Kensinger & Ford, 2020). Empathy is the capacity to recognise and understand the emotions of others, fostering stronger interpersonal connections (Congleton & Berntsen, 2020). Lastly, social skills involve the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships, communicate effectively, tolerate others, and work collaboratively with others (Van Kleef & Côté, 2022). Together, these elements contribute to enhanced personal and professional interactions, making Goleman's EI theory a powerful framework for understanding emotional dynamics in the management of learner discipline by the teacher.

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory serves as a relevant theoretical framework for this study by highlighting the critical role that emotional competencies play in educational settings, particularly in managing learner discipline. The study focuses on how teachers' self-awareness and self-regulation can enhance their ability to create a supportive classroom environment, fostering positive interactions and effective discipline strategies. Understanding and managing emotions assists teachers to respond thoughtfully to student behaviours, minimising conflict and promoting engagement. Additionally, the elements of motivation and empathy within Goleman's framework underscore the importance of building strong relationships with students, which can lead to improved behaviour and academic outcomes. Lastly, social skills enable teachers to communicate effectively and collaborate with students, enhancing classroom dynamics. The study explored how these emotional competencies contribute to better discipline management and overall learner success by applying Goleman's (1995) EI theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding of Emotional Intelligence (EI) among teachers.

According to Maamari (2019), emotional intelligence is typically concerned with how individuals understand, control, and communicate both their own and others' feelings. It encompasses a set of skills that enable individuals to navigate social complexities, build strong relationships, and make informed decisions, fostering both personal and professional success (Jaberi et al. 2024). EI often consists of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In demonstrating understanding of what emotional intelligence entails, an individual should clearly articulate these abilities or their synonyms. Teachers' conscious understanding of EI is important for effective classroom management, as one cannot apply what they are not aware of. In support, Matthews (2020) argues that effective transmission of knowledge requires an emotionally intelligent teacher who has the ability to understand and regulate his or her emotions and those of students.

Assali and Riskus (2023) posit that emotional intelligence is something that may be learned and developed accordingly. Therefore, teachers' level of understanding of EI can be said to be linked directly with the extent to which they were trained on EI during teacher training.

A study conducted in Iraq by Madallah and Sachit (2021) on the assessment of knowledge of Emotional Intelligence among teachers in the city of Mosul revealed that all teachers who participated in the study had not been trained in any course of emotional intelligence. According to this research's findings, 78.3% of teachers who participated in the survey had a poor degree of understanding regarding emotional intelligence. Consequently, they had no clue about its five competency-related domains (Madallah & Sachit, 2021). These findings confirm that the absence of emotional intelligence components in teacher training curricula leaves teachers bereft of the emotional intelligence skills required for effective classroom and learner discipline management.

Matthews (2020) conducted a study in Nigeria titled, "Developing Emotionally Intelligent Teachers: A Panacea for Quality Teacher Education." The study revealed that in most teachers' training institutions in Nigeria, there are no facilities and programmes put in place to teach emotional intelligence skills. Matthews (2020) concluded that, in spite of the vital role played by emotional intelligence, the concept of emotional intelligence has remained an enigma to most teachers. The study also established that some teachers do not have both an in-depth understanding of the concept of emotional intelligence and emotional intelligence competencies. This situation could be based on the premise that teacher training colleges are not producing emotionally intelligent teachers (Matthews, 2020). In the same vein, Assali and Riskus (2023) report that there is a lack of high-quality professional development for teachers and school leaders to simultaneously develop their own emotional skills and become proficient at helping students develop and manage emotions. What emerges from these studies is the fact that teachers cannot apply what they do not comprehend. It is imperative, therefore, for teachers to be trained in emotional intelligence so that they can apply it in various classroom demands (Matthews, 2020).

A study carried out in the United States of America by Smith and Kamm (2024) on emotional intelligence training revealed that Principals, teachers, and management teams in schools experience various challenges related to emotions and interpersonal relationships that influence learning while educating students. The problem identified teacher's lack of emotional intelligence skills (Smith & Kamm, 2024). The lack of emotional intelligence skills in teachers could also be indicative of their low understanding of EI and its competencies.

Studies conducted in Iraq, Nigeria, and the United States of America indicate that teachers' understanding of EI is, in the majority of cases, non-existent. The number of teachers who have an understanding of EI overwhelmingly outnumber those who do not. The application of various positive discipline strategies without exercising EI in classroom management has a high likelihood of yielding futile results. Eswatini, being of a lower socioeconomic status compared to these countries, is bound to have similar or even worse levels of EI understanding by teachers.

Emotional Intelligence competencies teachers perceive as most effective for managing learner discipline.

Emotional Intelligence encompasses a wide range of competencies that are effective for managing classroom and learner discipline. According to Goleman (2007), EI's skills are based on two broad competencies being personal and social competencies. Personal competency comprises three domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation, while social competency consists of two domains, namely empathy and social skills. This section briefly explores these competencies and demonstrates how they are instrumental in effective classroom and learner discipline.

Self-Awareness

Tok et al. (2013) posit that self-awareness is defined by an individual's ability to know one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions. It has three sub-domains: emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment, and self-confidence. Teachers with high self-awareness can identify their own emotional states and understand how these feelings influence their reactions to classroom behaviour (Todmal, Rao & Ggane 2023). This awareness helps them manage their responses, maintaining a calm and composed demeanour during disciplinary situations.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation refers to an individual's ability to manage internal states, impulses, and emotional responses in a controlled and constructive manner. As Tok et al. (2013) explain, this competency encompasses attributes such as self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, and innovation. Within the classroom context, self-regulation enables teachers to pause, reflect, and respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to learner misbehaviour. By maintaining emotional control, educators are better positioned to address disciplinary issues objectively and create a calm, supportive learning environment. Furthermore, the ability to manage stress, frustration, and emotional tension allows teachers to remain composed in challenging situations, a capacity that Mayer et al. (2016) associate with more effective decision-making and classroom stability. Such emotional balance is essential for de-escalating conflict and fostering constructive interactions between teachers and learners.

Motivation

Motivation represents the internal emotional drive that directs individuals towards the achievement of goals. According to Goleman (2007), it includes elements such as achievement drive, commitment, initiative, and optimism, which collectively influence professional effectiveness. Todmal, Rao, and Gagare (2023) further highlight that intrinsically motivated individuals tend to demonstrate persistence and resilience in the face of challenges. In educational settings, teachers who exhibit strong intrinsic motivation are more likely to cultivate positive classroom environments that encourage desirable learner behaviours. As noted by Kgosiemang and Khoza (2022), such teachers inspire learners to engage meaningfully in the learning process, thereby reducing the incidence of disciplinary problems. Consequently, motivation not only enhances teacher performance but also contributes to the development of self-driven, well-behaved learners.

Empathy

Empathy involves the capacity to recognise, understand, and respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Goleman (2007) conceptualises empathy as a core emotional competence that supports

effective interpersonal relationships. Tok et al. (2013) identify several dimensions of empathy, including understanding others, developing others, service orientation, leveraging diversity, and political awareness. In the context of classroom discipline, empathy enables teachers to adopt a compassionate and learner-centred approach to behaviour management. Rather than reacting to surface behaviours, empathetic teachers seek to understand the underlying causes of learner misconduct, thereby facilitating more meaningful and supportive interventions. Kgosiemang and Khoza (2022) argue that such an approach fosters a sense of belonging and respect among learners, which in turn reduces the likelihood of disruptive behaviour. Through empathy, teachers can

create emotionally safe environments where learners feel valued and understood.

Social Skills

Social skills refer to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with others within a social context. These skills, as outlined by Tok et al. (2013), include communication, conflict management, leadership, collaboration, and relationship-building. In classroom settings, strong social skills enable teachers to communicate expectations clearly, manage interactions constructively, and address misbehaviour in a manner that promotes understanding rather than punishment. Todmal, Rao, and Gagare (2023) emphasise that effective communication helps learners interpret behavioural expectations accurately, thereby reducing ambiguity and potential conflict. Additionally, conflict resolution skills equip teachers to mediate disputes among learners, fostering cooperation and mutual respect. Through the application of social skills, teachers can build positive classroom relationships and create environments conducive to both discipline and learning.

METHODOLOGY

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which, according to Creswell et al. (2016), posits that reality is socially constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions within their cultural and social contexts. Musingafi and Hlatjwayo (2013) concur that interpretivism emphasises understanding how people make meaning of their lived realities. This paradigm was deemed suitable for the study as it sought to explore teachers' personal interpretations and experiences regarding Emotional Intelligence (EI) and its role in managing learner discipline. The interpretivist perspective allowed the researcher to engage with teachers in their natural school settings, capturing the complexity and subjectivity of their emotional and behavioural interactions, thereby revealing how teachers construct meaning around EI competencies and their application in learner discipline.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes within their natural and contextual environments. As noted by Creswell (2014), qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena, while Choongwa (2018) emphasises its usefulness in capturing contextual realities. Rather than relying on numerical data, qualitative research prioritises meaning-making through rich, descriptive accounts, enabling a deeper understanding of phenomena from participants' perspectives, as highlighted by Creswell et al. (2016). In the context of this study, the approach facilitated an in-depth examination of how teachers understand and apply Emotional Intelligence (EI) in classroom management. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, participants articulated their subjective interpretations and reflected on the ways in which EI informs their disciplinary practices. This process created a platform through which teachers' voices illuminated the relationships between emotional awareness, empathy, and behaviour regulation, thereby revealing the underlying dynamics shaping learner discipline in Mbabane primary schools.

To support this approach, a multiple case study design was employed to enable a comprehensive exploration of teachers' understanding and application of Emotional Intelligence across different school settings. According to Creswell (2014), a multiple case study design allows for the examination of several cases, thereby facilitating cross-case comparisons and the identification of recurring patterns. In this study, the design made it possible to analyse how teachers in different schools interpret, value, and implement EI competencies in managing learner discipline. Through examining multiple cases, the researcher was able to identify both shared patterns and contextual variations in teachers' emotional regulation strategies, decision-making processes, and behaviour management practices. Furthermore, as Maree et al. (2016) observe, such a design enhances methodological rigour by promoting triangulation across participants and data sources, thereby strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

The target population consisted of primary school teachers and head teachers in the Mbabane Urban District of Eswatini. This group was selected because of its direct involvement in shaping classroom environments, managing discipline, and promoting positive learner behaviour. Within the district, approximately 20 primary schools were identified, comprising an estimated 300 teachers and 20 head teachers. Teachers formed the primary focus of the study due to their continuous interaction with learners and their central role in applying emotionally intelligent strategies in response to behavioural challenges. Head teachers were also included, given

their leadership responsibilities and their influence in establishing and supporting school-wide policies and practices related to discipline and emotional development.

A non-probability sampling approach was adopted in this study, combining convenience and purposive sampling techniques. As explained by Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), convenience sampling allows researchers to select participants based on accessibility and practicality. In this study, four easily accessible schools within the Mbabane Urban District were selected, ensuring feasibility in data collection while still capturing a degree of contextual diversity. Following this, purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience in learner discipline and Emotional Intelligence (EI) practices. Participants were deliberately selected based on their roles in disciplinary committees, guidance, and counselling, as these positions require direct engagement with behaviour management. The final sample consisted of 16 participants, including four head teachers and twelve classroom teachers, thereby incorporating a range of perspectives and experiences related to the application of EI in managing learner discipline. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, which are widely recognised for their effectiveness in qualitative inquiry. Creswell et al. (2016) highlight that semi-structured interviews provide flexibility while maintaining consistency across participants. In this study, interviews with head teachers enabled an in-depth exploration of leadership perspectives and school-level disciplinary practices linked to EI. Participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences, allowing for rich and detailed accounts.

Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers to facilitate interactive engagement and collective reflection. According to De Vos et al. (2015), focus groups are particularly useful for generating diverse viewpoints through group interaction. In this context, the discussions encouraged participants to share and reflect on their experiences regarding emotional awareness, empathy, and classroom behaviour management. To ensure accuracy and completeness, all sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with detailed field notes, thereby enhancing the reliability of the data for subsequent analysis. Ethical principles were rigorously observed throughout the study. Drawing on the guidelines proposed by Choongwa (2018), participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study prior to their participation. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded identifiers and secure data storage procedures, as emphasised by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The researcher ensured that the research process was conducted in a respectful and professional manner to prevent any emotional or psychological harm. Participants were treated fairly throughout the study, and appreciation for their participation was expressed through refreshments as well as a commitment to share a summary of the study findings with the participating schools.

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Credibility was ensured through triangulation of data sources, participant validation, and consistent comparisons across cases. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of participants, settings, and contextual factors to enable applicability in similar settings. Dependability was reinforced through clear documentation of research procedures and consistency in data collection methods. Confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in participants' actual responses, supported with direct quotations, and by seeking supervisor input to minimise researcher bias.

Data from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis. Following Creswell et al. (2016), the researcher familiarised themselves with the data through repeated reading, coding, and categorising emerging ideas into key themes. This process enabled the identification of patterns and relationships between teachers' understanding of EI and their disciplinary practices. Through iterative coding and comparison, themes such as emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation were developed and refined to reflect teachers' lived experiences. The results were presented narratively with supporting quotations from participants to illustrate meaning and context.

Triangulation was employed by integrating data from multiple sources interviews with head teachers, focus group discussions with teachers, and relevant school documents such as disciplinary records and codes of

conduct. This approach enhanced the study's validity by allowing cross-verification of findings from different perspectives, ensuring that conclusions drawn captured the most authentic understanding of EI and its role in learner discipline (Musingafi & Hlatjwayo, 2013). The integration of these data sources led to a deeper, more holistic comprehension of the phenomenon, strengthening both the consistency and interpretive richness of the study's results.

Findings and discussions

This section presents and discusses the findings generated from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted with teachers and head teachers from selected primary schools in Mbabane. The discussion integrates participants' views with existing literature and the theoretical framework underpinning the study, namely Daniel Goleman's mixed model of Emotional Intelligence (EI). The findings are organised according to the major themes that emerged from the data and are aligned with the research objectives of the study. The section therefore not only presents participants' perceptions and experiences but also critically analyses how these findings correspond with existing scholarly debates on emotional intelligence and learner discipline management.

Teachers' understanding of emotional intelligence

The findings of the study revealed that teachers possessed varying levels of understanding of Emotional Intelligence (EI), ranging from complete unfamiliarity with the concept to partial and relatively accurate understandings. While a few participants demonstrated an ability to explain EI as the capacity to understand and regulate emotions in oneself and others, many teachers either misunderstood the concept or admitted that they had never encountered it before. This suggests that emotional intelligence remains a relatively underdeveloped area within the professional knowledge base of many teachers in the studied schools.

For instance, Teacher 5 openly stated: "I am hearing this term for the first time."

Similarly, Teacher 4 associated emotional intelligence with teaching emotional content within subjects rather than emotional awareness and regulation, remarking:

"...teachers should teach the children emotional intelligence in the context of reading history and any other subjects."

In contrast, some participants demonstrated a more informed understanding of EI. Teacher 2 explained:

"Emotional intelligence is the ability to control the emotions and understand the other person so that you can come to a common reason."

Likewise, Teacher 1 stated: "It is understanding and managing your own emotions. We should also be able to understand the emotions of others."

These findings demonstrate that although some teachers have foundational awareness of emotional processes, there remains substantial inconsistency in teachers' conceptualisation of emotional intelligence. The findings further suggest that teachers' understanding of EI is largely fragmented and incomplete, which may negatively affect the practical implementation of emotionally informed discipline strategies in classrooms.

The findings are consistent with the arguments advanced by Maamari and Majdalani (2019), who conceptualise emotional intelligence as the ability to recognise, regulate, and appropriately express emotions while understanding the emotions of others. According to Jaber et al. (2024), emotional intelligence encompasses a combination of emotional awareness, empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal competence that collectively shape human interaction and decision-making. The inability of several participants in the current study to explain EI comprehensively therefore indicates significant deficiencies in emotional competence among teachers.

The findings further corroborate studies conducted in different international contexts which reveal that teachers often possess limited understanding of emotional intelligence due to inadequate exposure during teacher training.

For example, Madallah and Sachit (2021), in their study conducted in Iraq, found that the majority of teachers demonstrated poor understanding of emotional intelligence because they had not received formal EI training. Similarly, Matthews (2020), studying Nigerian teachers, concluded that emotional intelligence remains poorly understood within many teacher training institutions despite its growing importance in classroom management and learner development. The similarities between these international findings and the present study suggest that inadequate teacher preparation in emotional intelligence may be a widespread challenge across educational systems, particularly within developing contexts.

The findings also support Assali and Riskus' (2023) assertion that emotional intelligence is not necessarily an innate characteristic but rather a competency that can be developed through systematic training and professional support. The limited understanding demonstrated by participants in this study may therefore reflect the absence of structured emotional intelligence programmes within teacher education and in-service professional development in Eswatini.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings strongly align with Daniel Goleman's mixed model of emotional intelligence, particularly the concept of self-awareness. According to Goleman (1995), self-awareness constitutes the foundational competency upon which all other emotional competencies are built because individuals cannot regulate or manage emotions they fail to recognise. The fact that some teachers were unable to define EI suggests that they may also struggle to consciously monitor and manage emotional reactions during classroom interactions. This limitation may hinder their ability to respond constructively to learner misconduct and implement positive discipline effectively.

Furthermore, the findings reveal an important contradiction between educational policy expectations and teacher preparedness. While Eswatini's educational reforms increasingly promote positive discipline approaches, the findings indicate that many teachers lack the emotional competencies necessary to operationalise such approaches effectively. Since positive discipline relies heavily on empathy, emotional regulation, and constructive interpersonal relationships, teachers' limited understanding of EI may partly explain the persistence of learner indiscipline despite the abolition of corporal punishment.

Another important issue emerging from the findings is that some teachers appeared to understand emotional intelligence narrowly as emotional control alone, without appreciating its broader interpersonal dimensions such as social skills, motivation, and relationship management. This reflects what Goleman describes as partial emotional competence, whereby individuals may demonstrate isolated emotional skills without possessing the integrated emotional functioning necessary for effective social interaction and leadership. Such fragmented understanding may limit teachers' ability to apply EI holistically in learner discipline management.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers' understanding of emotional intelligence remains uneven and underdeveloped. Although some participants demonstrated awareness of emotional regulation and empathy, many lacked a comprehensive understanding of the broader EI framework. The findings therefore highlight the urgent need for teacher education institutions and educational policymakers in Eswatini to integrate emotional intelligence training into both pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes. Without adequate understanding of EI, teachers may struggle to effectively implement emotionally responsive and relationship-based discipline approaches necessary for fostering positive learner behaviour.

Emotional intelligence competencies perceived as effective for managing learner discipline

The study further sought to identify the specific emotional intelligence competencies that teachers perceived as essential for effectively managing learner discipline. The findings revealed that self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy were the most frequently identified competencies. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of understanding one's emotions, controlling emotional reactions, and appreciating learners' emotional experiences when dealing with behavioural challenges.

The findings suggest that teachers perceive emotionally intelligent classroom management primarily as the ability to maintain emotional control during disciplinary situations. Participants indicated that teachers who understand their emotions are less likely to react impulsively or escalate classroom conflict when confronted

with learner misconduct.

Teacher 3 explained:

“First, we have to be aware of ourselves, yes ... self-awareness. Then once you can do that, you should also have an awareness of how your students are, such that when a situation arises, you will be able to respond appropriately, without making things worse.”

Similarly, Teacher 7 remarked:

“I think self-awareness should be the first one, because once you are aware of what will trigger your own emotions, you are likely to respond better.”

These findings align closely with Daniel Goleman’s conceptualisation of self-awareness as the cornerstone of emotional intelligence. Goleman argues that self-awareness enables individuals to recognise emotional triggers, understand emotional patterns, and make deliberate rather than reactive decisions. Within classroom settings, emotionally self-aware teachers are more likely to remain calm, reflective, and objective during learner disciplinary encounters.

The findings are also supported by Tok, Tok, and Dolapçioğlu (2013), who argue that self-aware teachers are better positioned to manage classroom interactions because they understand how their emotional states influence behaviour and decision-making. Similarly, Todmal, Rao, and Gagare (2023) maintain that emotionally self-aware teachers are more capable of fostering positive classroom climates because they are less likely to respond aggressively or irrationally to learner misconduct.

Self-regulation also emerged strongly within participants’ responses. Teachers emphasised the importance of emotional control, restraint, and calmness when responding to learner misbehaviour.

Teacher 6 stated: “I think it is self-regulation because you need to make sure that you intervene appropriately without losing control of your emotions.”

The emphasis placed on self-regulation reflects teachers’ recognition that emotional impulsivity may worsen behavioural situations rather than resolve them. Participants suggested that emotionally regulated teachers are able to de-escalate tension, avoid confrontation, and model appropriate behaviour for learners.

These findings resonate strongly with Goleman’s mixed model, which conceptualises self-regulation as the ability to control disruptive emotions and maintain emotional stability in challenging situations. According to Goleman, emotionally regulated individuals demonstrate patience, adaptability, emotional restraint, and thoughtful decision-making. In classroom settings, such qualities become particularly important because learner discipline situations often involve provocation, frustration, and emotional tension.

The findings are also consistent with Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey’s (2016) argument that emotionally regulated teachers are better able to maintain classroom stability because they manage stress and frustration constructively. Tok et al. (2013) similarly contend that self-regulation allows teachers to avoid emotionally reactive disciplinary practices that may damage teacher–learner relationships and negatively affect classroom environments.

Empathy also emerged as an important competency, although participants appeared to associate it more strongly with interactions involving parents than learners. Teacher 8 explained:

“With empathy, you find that it's more with the parents than with the learners, because most people who give big problems are parents who would come to shout at you.”

However, Teacher 8 further acknowledged that teachers sometimes deliberately avoid empathy with learners because learners may “abuse” empathetic treatment. This finding reveals an important tension within classroom discipline management. While teachers recognise empathy as valuable, some perceive empathetic approaches as potentially weakening teacher authority or encouraging learner misconduct.

The findings nevertheless align with Goleman's view that empathy is essential for understanding others' emotional states and fostering positive interpersonal relationships. Empathy enables teachers to identify the underlying emotional, social, or psychological causes of learner misconduct rather than merely reacting to observable behaviour. According to Kgosiemang and Khoza (2022), empathetic teachers create emotionally supportive learning environments where learners feel respected, valued, and understood, thereby reducing behavioural problems.

Similarly, Lombard and Brijdan (2021) found that emotionally empathetic teachers are more successful in addressing learner indiscipline because they prioritise relationship-building and emotional understanding rather than punitive control. The findings of the current study therefore reinforce the growing scholarly consensus that empathy is central to positive discipline approaches.

However, an important finding emerging from the study is that teachers rarely identified social skills and motivation as important EI competencies despite these being central components within Goleman's theoretical framework. Social skills involve communication, conflict management, collaboration, and relationship-building, while motivation refers to the internal emotional drive that sustains commitment and resilience.

The absence of these competencies within participants' responses suggests that teachers possess a relatively narrow understanding of emotional intelligence, focusing mainly on emotional control rather than the broader relational and motivational dimensions of EI. This finding is theoretically significant because Goleman conceptualises emotional intelligence as an integrated system of emotional competencies rather than isolated skills. Teachers' limited recognition of social skills may therefore weaken their ability to establish collaborative classroom relationships, mediate conflicts effectively, and sustain positive classroom climates.

The omission of motivation is equally important because emotionally motivated teachers are more likely to remain patient, resilient, and committed when dealing with difficult learner behaviours. According to Goleman (2007), intrinsic motivation supports persistence and optimism in emotionally demanding environments such as schools.

The findings reveal that teachers perceive self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy as essential competencies for managing learner discipline. These findings strongly align with existing literature and with Goleman's mixed model of emotional intelligence. However, the findings also expose important gaps in teachers' understanding of the broader emotional intelligence framework, particularly regarding social skills and motivation. This partial understanding may limit the holistic application of emotional intelligence within learner discipline management. The findings therefore underscore the importance of comprehensive emotional intelligence training programmes that develop all dimensions of EI necessary for effective classroom management and positive learner discipline.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that teachers in Mbabane primary schools possess varying levels of understanding of Emotional Intelligence (EI), with many recognising its significance in shaping positive learner behaviour and promoting effective discipline. Key EI competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation, and social skills were identified as particularly valuable in managing classroom discipline, as they enable teachers to respond calmly to learners' misbehaviour, foster respectful relationships, and create emotionally supportive learning environments. The study established that emotionally intelligent teachers are better equipped to handle disciplinary challenges constructively, reducing the need for punitive measures and promoting a culture of mutual respect. These findings underscore the importance of integrating EI training into teacher professional development programmes to enhance educators' capacity for emotional management, thereby contributing to more harmonious, disciplined, and productive school environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini, together with school administrators, prioritise the integration of Emotional Intelligence (EI) training into both pre-service and in-service teacher development programmes. Such training should focus on enhancing teachers'

competencies in self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills to promote positive learner discipline and improve classroom relationships. Schools should also establish supportive structures, such as mentorship programmes and peer learning forums, to enable continuous reflection and sharing of best practices in managing learner behaviour through emotionally intelligent approaches. Furthermore, policy frameworks on discipline should be reviewed to emphasise restorative and emotionally guided strategies rather than punitive disciplinary methods, ensuring that EI becomes an essential component of effective teaching and holistic learner development.

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