Chapter 4
Emotionally Healthy School Leadership

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ABSTRACT

One of the great impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the need for schools to institute student social-emotional growth initiatives. Of particular concern is the well-being and emotional health of students. Efforts in this area often focus on student emotions and the feelings of others. While such efforts have made great gains in supporting student social-emotional growth, less focus has been given to the emotional wellness of staff and faculty. There has been some movement to address teacher wellness, but such efforts are in the foundational stages. Yet, little consideration has been given to what makes an emotionally healthy school leader and what is the impact on teacher wellness and other aspects of school climate. This chapter addresses, "What is an emotionally healthy school leader?" To accomplish this, the chapter incorporates a number of vignettes and scenarios. The purpose is to afford the reader an opportunity to reflect on the topics discussed as played out in real life settings.

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the need for schools to institute student social-emotional growth initiatives. Funding for such initiatives has grown exponentially in many states. Of particular concern is the mental well-being and emotional health of students. Efforts in this area often focus on student self-awareness of emotions and the feelings of others.

While such efforts have made great gains in supporting student social-emotional growth, there has been less focus given to the emotional wellness of staff, faculty and school leadership. There has been some movement by districts to address teacher wellness in this area, but such efforts are in the foundational stages. Early research on teacher wellness suggests that a key component is the actions of the school leader (Cann, Riedel-Prabhakar & Powell, 2021). Research on emotional intelligence and leadership development is not a new construct (e.g. Dearborn, 2002; Sadri, 2012). Yet, little consideration has been

given to what makes an emotionally healthy school leader and what is the impact on teacher wellness and other aspects of school climate.

The key question then to address is, "what is an emotionally healthy school leader?" This chapter seeks to address that question. To accomplish this task, this chapter incorporates lessons learned through research, reading, professional development and experiences during the author's 16-year journey as a school leader. A small number of vignettes are also incorporated. Most are true events observed by the author. Some are hypothetical and a few come from outside the field of education but have been adapted to a school setting. The purpose is to afford the reader an opportunity to reflect on the topics discussed as played out in real life settings.

Emotionally healthy school leaders acknowledge that growing emotionally healthy schools is not an easy venture. One reason for this is the role of teachers in the process. To find success, school leaders recognize that teacher wellbeing is a critical element for effectively implementing initiatives that have a positive effect on student achievement and socioemotional growth (Cann, Riedel-Prabhakar & Powell, 2021). In addressing both teacher and student wellbeing, school leaders are challenged in a myriad of ways, all of which have an impact on time and energy that can be put into such efforts. Such challenges include minimizing teacher burnout due to conflict that may arise from change efforts, overwhelming expectations, role ambiguity and negative pupil relations (Sava, 2002; Papastylianou, Kaila, & Poly-chronopoulos, 2009; Jomuad et al., 2021).

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT

Emotional Health: What Is It?

Before proceeding with any discussion on emotionally healthy school leadership, it is important to first define the construct. In this chapter, emotional health refers to the underlying set of skills, beliefs and habits of mind that equip an individual to manage the vicissitudes of everyday life, build positive relationships, and fulfil their role in a positive manner. According to Family Links: The Centre for Emotional Health, "Emotional health is a set of malleable skills and beliefs which impact on our thoughts, feelings and behavior in relation to our social and emotional functioning" (https://www.familylinks.org.uk/post/what-is-emotional-health, n.d.). The Centre describe seven "assets" associated with emotional health.

Noticeable overlaps exist between the assets of emotional health and the research of Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990) on emotional intelligence. Salovey and Mayer divided emotional intelligence into five domains: knowing one's emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing the emotions in others; and handling emotions. The seven assets include self-awareness, social awareness, self-regulation, relationship skills, self-beliefs, self-agency, and beliefs about others. Unlike emotional intelligence, emotional health includes an individual's *beliefs* both about themselves and about others.

In its simplest form, emotional health is a matter of what we believe, think and feel. It is our ability to cope with the daily stresses of life. It is how well we manage negative, as well positive, emotions. To that extent, emotionally healthy people command their thoughts, feelings and behaviors in a positive manner (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). It is how well we accept our emotions and cope with them. Hence, we understand how a strong emotional intelligence, specifically a strong self-awareness our emotions, serves as a foundational piece. We delve deeper into this concept later in this chapter.

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