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Factors that influence public school principals' professional discretion: Perspectives of South African public-school principals

Abstract

Through the lens of the contextual intelligence theory, this article utilises previous empirical research studies as a base to support the application of professional discretion practices of public-school principals. The study focused in particular on the factors that influence or limit their use of professional discretion in their daily tasks. A mixed-methods study was conducted in which quantitative survey data were used to inform the questions that were asked to participants during semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that public-school principals are susceptible to both internal and external factors that could limit or influence the application of their professional discretion. Even though public-school principals within a particular school district operate under the same set of policies, it is evident that some principals are more inclined to apply professional discretion than others.

Keywords: *accountability, contextual intelligence, professional discretion, public-school principals, school leadership, school management*

1. Introduction and background

To provide a broader understanding of principals' obligations and the discretionary components of their decision-making it is important to recognise that virtually every day principals are faced with situations in which they are required to apply professional judgement (Thorn, 2015: 46). The application of discretion in decision-making requires professional wisdom and acumen and is regarded as an essential aspect of a school principal's professional responsibilities. The responsibilities of the principals often relate to their duty of care in relation to the well-being of the schools' staff, community and all their learners (Heilmann, 2006: 3). It is argued by Du Plessis (2019: 112) that it would be virtually impossible for school principals to fulfil their obligations without discretionary powers. However, principals need to be prudent in the way they apply their discretionary power,



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because every decision taken makes them accountable. Moreover, the authority to make decisions resulting from the power bestowed upon them can be restricting or limiting to principals' discretionary powers (Marishane & Mampane, 2018: 45).

2. Literature review

When exercising professional discretion, principals must often balance the conflicting demands of internal and external forces. A principal's knowledge, experience, leadership practice and personal belief can be categorised as internal forces. External forces include legislation and policy requirements (May, 2010: 11, 16). Professional discretion is exercised when principals use their learned expertise to determine what should be done in a specific situation and to take the necessary steps in the best interests of learners. It is therefore necessary to mitigate the demands of external factors in the process of making decisions (Jeffries, 2013: 76).

According to Heilmann (2006: 3, 7) and May (2010: 11, 16), principals' decisions are influenced by several factors, such as case facts, their personal values, the context of the school and individuals concerned (learners, parents, educators, etc.), and school and departmental policies. Although these factors often limit the extent to which a principal can apply professional discretion, there is always space for a principal to manoeuvre his or her decision-making if they choose to do so (Heilmann, 2006: 120). However, it is difficult to foresee the products and consequences of discretionary reasoning, because the internal and external forces will not have the same effect on every decision (Molander, Grimen & Eriksen, 2012: 218). In this regard, Molander *et al.* (2012: 218) argue that the same case can be judged differently at different times, in different situations and by different persons, even if it is an unchanged case and the case has been handled in a thorough, conscientious, and reasonable manner.

Boote (2006: 464) explains that principals' values often guide them in their decision-making to come to what they would believe is the best possible decision. However, their judgements can also be influenced negatively by their values and such decisions may, for example, not be in the learners' best interests. Additionally, a lack of competencies, a lack of self-control and a lack of independence could make it difficult for principals to apply professional discretion appropriately (Boote, 2006: 465-466). Although competencies alone do not necessarily result in the application of professional discretion, relevant competencies are important contributors to the appropriate application of professional discretion (Boote, 2006: 466). Moreover, school principals require particular knowledge, competencies, and context-specific practical applications in the key areas of managing a school in order to apply adequate professional discretion (Du Plessis, 2019: 98).

In South Africa, the autonomous decision-making freedom of principals is restricted by external factors such as laws and policies. However, laws and policies are often ignorant of local school contexts and principals often have to contravene legislation and policies to act in learners' best interests. In such cases, they should use Section 36 of the Constitution (limitation of rights) (RSA, 1996a) to guide their decision-making. This section stipulates the factors that should be considered when limiting a right. Consideration should be given to

the nature of the right, the importance of the purpose of the limitation, the nature and extent of the limitation, the relation between the limitation and the purpose, and the availability of less restrictive means to achieve the purpose (RSA, 1996a).

In this regard it is important to note that constitutional rights and freedoms are not absolute; they have limitations placed on them by others and by important social concerns, for example, democratic values and public order and safety and security (Currie & De Waal, 2005: 163). To be lawful, a limitation of a right must be justifiable in accordance with the criteria in Section 36 of the Constitution (Prinsloo, 2015: 47). Principals need to consider these factors when deciding what is in the best interests of learners and other members of their school community. These factors impact on the decision-making process and should become everyday working habits.

Marishane (2016: 164) argues that the context within which schools and school leadership interact is ever-changing. A school's context is shaped by many internal and external factors which influence the principal's behaviour and discretionary power and to which the principal must adapt. Marishane (2016: 164) explains that among the contextual factors which influence learners' learning and achievement are the school's climatic conditions, school safety considerations, and the school's teaching and organisational structure. External factors may also include technological advancement, socio-economic conditions, and accountability systems. Due to the variety of contexts within which principals operate, they must develop contextual intelligence in order to be able to apply appropriate professional discretion. Moreover, when exercising professional discretion, good judgement is required, which is to be exercised within a framework of accountability consisting of laws and policies (Du Plessis, 2019: 102).

Ottesen and Møller (2016: 428) argue that there is tension between internal and external accountability when applying professional discretion. International studies of professional discretion have indicated that there is increased pressure from national and local governments, and this directly influences principals' professional discretion (Grace, 2014: 22; Ottesen & Møller, 2016: 429). Within the South African context, there is, however, not much evidence to show how legal forms of authority are key aspects in the regulation of education or how principals handle legal standards and professional discretion.

3. Theoretical framework – the contextual intelligence theory

The contextual intelligence theory framed this study. This theory is rooted in psychology and popularised from the original work of Sternberg (1985), *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence*. The theory presents contextual intelligence as a principal's "ability to influence anybody, in any place at any time" (Kutz, 2015: 11). Sternberg (2005: 5) states that a successful intelligent person demonstrates the ability to set goals, capitalise on strengths to adapt and to shape and select environments through analytical, creative, and practical abilities. In terms of principalship, Kutz (2008: 23) defines contextual intelligence as:

[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.

According to Marishane (2016: 164) contextual intelligence combines acquired knowledge and technical skills and practical know-how. Contextually intelligent individuals know for certain which decisions to make and which actions to take under different conditions (Marishane, 2020: 8). In other words, principals with contextual intelligence will seize the first opportunity available to them to decide on how best to protect their respective schools' best interests. Hence, being contextually intelligent could enable principals to make appropriate decisions.

Kutz (2008: 18) reiterates that there are three competencies that overlap in the conceptual foundation of contextual intelligence. Firstly, contextual intelligence requires an intuitive grasp of relevant past events. Secondly, it requires acute awareness of present contextual factors. Thirdly, it requires awareness of the preferred future. It is of paramount importance to have knowledge of the interactions between the three competencies as they enable school principals to apply adequate professional discretion (Kutz, 2008: 18). In addition, Sternberg's *Beyond IQ: A triarchic theory of human intelligence* (1985) underscores that all human activity is contextualised within a specific historical and social context.

Contextually intelligent principals must always view their current context through the dual lenses of past experience and the preferred future, as it could influence the success of their professional discretion (Kutz, 2008: 24; Molander *et al.*, 2012: 221). Marishane (2020: 9) reiterates that "the influence derives from the leader's freedom of choosing how to relate to the environment – to change the environment or to be changed by the environment". Furthermore, a contextually intelligent principal will know when, how, and whether to adapt to the environment and when to manipulate and shape it for a given purpose. This is because they are equipped with experience gained from previous situations, knowledge and understanding of appropriate behaviour needed to deal with the current situation, and a sense of imagination about future situations (Marishane, 2020: 9). Hence, contextual intelligence is composed of being aware of the past, having an accurate sense of the present and understanding the future.

Intuition as used to describe contextual intelligence involves being proficient at instantly assimilating past events into the current context, irrespective of the context in which the original event occurred (Dane & Pratt, 2007: 33). Kutz (2008: 23) emphasises that intuition is an asset for principals to make appropriate decisions in the best interests of their learners. Dane and Pratt (2007: 33) found that the accuracy of principals' decisions decreases when principals spend too much time on decision-making due to influential internal, external, and contextual factors.

Boote (2006: 462) argues that professional discretion should be appropriate to a specific context. It is therefore important that school principals develop an acute awareness of contextual factors that may have an impact on their school. This suggests that any school improvement effort requires context-sensitive approaches and adequate professional discretion from school principals (Marishane & Mampane, 2018: 48).

4. Problem statement

It is argued by Du Plessis and Heystek (2020: 847-850) that education authorities have managerialist mindsets and are applying bureaucratic control over public schools. Also, Kruger, Beckmann and Du Plessis (2022: 317) found that many principals have negative experiences with their school governing bodies who drive their own hidden agendas. These experiences, together with the managerialist approach of the education authorities, leave little room for public school principals to manoeuvre in terms of applying their professional discretion. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that influence public school principals' professional discretion. Hence the question: What factors influence a public-school principal's professional discretion?

5. Methodology and research design

The study utilised a mixed methods research approach with an explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design. Firstly, survey forms were distributed to secondary and primary public school principals of both fee-paying and non-fee-paying public schools. Thirty-four (34) responses were received. The purpose of the survey was to gather quantitative data to inform the questions asked during online semi-structured interviews with fourteen (14) purposively sampled principals.

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018: 224), it is commonplace for mixed-methods research to use more than one kind of sample (probability, non-probability) and to use samples of different sizes, scopes, and types. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009: 185-191), in sequential mixed-methods sampling, one kind of sample (both probability and non-probability) precedes another and influences the proceeding sample. In other words, what one gathers from an early sample influences what one does in the next stage with a different sample. In this study, the numerical data from the quantitative phase set the scene for more in-depth interviewing in the qualitative phase.

Google Forms were used to analyse the quantitative data obtained in the surveys. This provided valuable information to inform the interview questions in the interview protocol that was used in the qualitative phase of the study. Thematic analysis, utilising open or substantive coding, was carried out after the interviews were completed in the second phase of the data collection process. Atlas. Ti (version 22.0.0) was used to analyse the qualitative data to ensure that all records of identified codes and themes were well documented and structured.

6. Ethical considerations

After ethical clearance had been obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, permission was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the study and informed consent was obtained from each respondent and participant. The informed consent included aspects such as the purpose of the research; what participants would be required to do if they consented to participate; the potential benefits or consequences of participating in the study; the issue of privacy; participants' right to withdraw; anonymity and confidentiality; and how the data would be used once the research is completed.

7. Findings and discussion

The responses of the participants revealed both internal and external factors that may influence when and how they apply their professional discretion.

7.1 External factors

The evidence suggests that a variety of external factors influence a principal's ability to exercise appropriate professional discretion. The external factors are as follows:

7.1.1 Laws and policies

The participating principals generally acknowledged that they are guided by relevant legislation and policies in their decision-making. For example, Principal 1 explained that the application of his professional discretion "*is determined by what the laws are and what the rules are ...*"

This was echoed by other participants:

I must think about what is the school law saying. I must look at SASA (South African Schools Act) and from there I must, of course, know what's in SASA so that I could make that specific decision (Principal 2).

The most important ... is to always have what the law says at the back of your mind ... (Principal 5).

Principal 4 provided a different perspective, the “unchangeable” factor, which is beyond his control, but which can also undermine his professional discretion:

... that unchangeable factor ... there are certain things that you as a principal or as a manager cannot change (Principal 4).

According to Principal 4, one of the most difficult aspects of professional discretion relates to accommodating different religions in the school. He explained as follows:

Will you still open a day or start the day with Christian prayer for example, or finish the day with a Christian prayer? Will you do it, but allow learners of another religion to also practice the religion at school? Will you allow them to, for example, miss your assemblies because of the fact that you are using a different religion than theirs? The religion factor is a very big thing in professional discretion (Principal 4).

The participants expressed their thoughts on the influence that the rigid laws and policies have on their professional discretion as follows:

... there can never be a 100% rigid template for everything that you have to do ... If there were a strict book of rules and those are the only things that you are allowed to do, then it's straightforward and easy. But you have to act in every child's best interest and things change, and they differ (Principal 1).

They just want to force you. This is policy, this is the law, this is the guidelines and you have to keep to it (Principal 7).

The Bill of Rights (Chapter 2 of the Constitution) (RSA, 1996a) should be the starting point from which principals apply their discretionary decision-making. The participants encountered ambiguity in that on the one hand they are required to apply professional discretion, while on the other hand they are being constrained by the rigidity and inflexibility of policies. In other words, principals are expected to adhere to these policies, thereby losing their ability to use their discretion. This confirms Du Plessis and Heystek's (2020) argument of managerialist mindsets and bureaucratic control as indicated in the problem statement.

The data confirmed that principals regularly find themselves in a position where, on the one hand, their judgements or decisions may require of them to contravene the provisions and prescriptions of departmental policies, and on the other hand, are obligated to act in accordance with policies, although it may not be in the best interests of a learner. In such cases, their discretionary decision-making should, for example, be guided by Section 36 of the Constitution (RSA 1996a).

Generally, the participants use laws and policies as guidelines to apply appropriate professional discretion. However, the participants indicated that laws and policies often compel them to make decisions that they may not necessarily be comfortable with and that may not be

in the best interests of the learners. In addition, one can argue that making decisions based on legal and policy requirements rather than what is best for the learners can be damaging for principals, since they should constantly keep Section 28(2) of the Constitution (RSA, 1996a) and Section 9 of the Children's Act (RSA, 2005) in mind. Sub-section 28(2) of the Constitution (Bill of Rights) states that "[a] child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child". This is reaffirmed in Section 9 of the Children's Act (RSA, 2005), which specifies that "[i]n all matters concerning the care, protection and well-being of a child the standard that the child's best interest is of paramount importance, must be applied".

7.1.2 Political factors

The participants indicated that political parties frequently intrude on or disrupt their schools to express their views or to impose a particular political agenda and therefore the political factor is worthy of mention. Principal 2 expressed his concern in terms of the potential influence political parties could have on his professional discretion as follows:

In my school there is the whole issue of political parties who want to play a role in the school. And I am working with multi-racial groups, there are different groups, different cultural groups ... We had a few incidents last year where political parties entered the school and there were a lot of issues on racism that have actually never been shown to be true. But when these people are standing outside your door, you don't know how to handle them. You don't know what to do with them. And they are aggressive, and they are noisy, but they put you under a lot of pressure. And usually what I do then is I just step away for five minutes and I phone somebody that I know, that will give me a legal opinion at that specific moment. What must I do now? Because as I've said, we are not trained to work with political parties, storming into your office, demanding all kinds of things.

Section 33A of the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) prohibits political activities during school hours. However, political parties do not always abide by this law, and some principals have come across instances where they had to intervene and use their professional discretion to protect the physical safety of their learners and staff. Hence, principals are expected to rely on their professional discretion and intuition when dealing with political influence because they are generally not prepared or equipped for such situations. They have no other choice but to apply professional discretion.

7.1.3 Frequent policy and curriculum changes

Some of the participants indicated that constant policy and curriculum changes have an impact on their professional discretion. They must continuously adjust their discretionary considerations to keep up with the changes in policy. Principal 7 stated that if a principal does not stay updated with all the latest developments, it will be difficult for him or her to make informed decisions:

If you do not stay on top of recent changes and amendments and court [cases], that are going on, you will never be able to make an informed decision.

In addition, Principal 12 expressed his opinion regarding constant curriculum changes and the challenges they pose:

I think we are aware that we had many curriculums and policies that have changed. I think this is the third or the fourth one. And every system was unique and it had its own challenges. So, you had to get the system and structures right to get good results.

Furthermore, Principal 13 confirmed that these changes occur frequently:

And also, the changes that came this year, we're doing it this way, but next year we are changing it and the process will be different.

The implication of the frequent policy and curriculum changes is that the legislative and policy contexts in which schools operate are constantly in a state of flux. Principals therefore need to update themselves continuously regarding the latest legislative, policy and curriculum changes. Only with this knowledge will principals be contextually intelligent and will they be able to exercise professional discretion appropriately. Sternberg (2005: 5, 189) and Marishane (2016: 164) argue that contextually intelligent principals have a better chance of fitting into an environment and being able to appropriate professional discretion than less contextually intelligent principals because they can relate to their environment through selection, adaptation, and rephrasing.

7.1.4 Contextual factors

All school contexts differ, and the past histories of school principals will undoubtedly influence how they use their discretion. Accordingly, Principal 1 stated that:

My professional discretion is influenced by contextual factors.

In addition, Principal 7 explained that she must take “all contextual factors into consideration” when making decisions:

You need to be able to understand that sometimes contextual factors will definitely influence your decisions and that you have to keep that in mind.

Principal 2 also indicated that it is important to understand the specific situation at hand since it will influence the decision that must be made. Similarly, Principal 5 explained that:

The biggest mistake you can make is making a decision without considering all the different contextual factors.

Principal 6 explained that a principal's failure to understand the context or circumstances could result in poor decisions:

I think my professional discretion ... shouldn't be a discretion that is in vain, that doesn't have the context, that does not have the background to it. It does not need to stem from my personal opinion or experience as this might be detrimental to the process of my decision-making, which might lead to a situation whereby I'm careless and negligent in my decision-making and lose the respect of law and policy, probably because I feel that I'm the law myself.

Principal 4 explained that his decision-making is influenced by the different cultural and racial groups in his school.

And I am working with multi-racial groups, there are different groups, different cultural groups. So, all those things will influence my decision-making.

In addition, Principal 2 added that his school is a bilingual school in which Afrikaans and English are the languages of teaching and learning, which makes decision-making even more difficult.

... multi-cultural school, we've got double parallel medium, all those kinds of things. So, we are really getting in different situations each day, we need to apply different thinking patterns.

Foreign learners could also impact Principal 14's professional discretion. She explained that although being a double-medium school at the time of the interview, the language of teaching and learning at her school would soon be English only. She too has a school with diverse cultures being represented.

... our language of learning and teaching is only English from next year. So, there will be no English and Afrikaans learners. And then I had to do a summary and then obviously there are let's say around about a hundred different cultures in this school ... The other difference in my school to other schools is the fact that we have a lot of immigrants in this school. We have a lot of refugees in the school that stay here ...

When applying professional discretion, Principal 7 emphasised that principals “*need to take all aspects into consideration*” including the “*background, the culture of the learners*”.

The above responses by the participants relate to Section 9 of the Constitution, which determines that everyone is “equal before the law” and may not be unfairly discriminated against based on “race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, language and birth” (RSA, 1996a). In addition, the Policy on the South African Standard for Principals (RSA, 2016: 3) acknowledges that due to the diversity of school contexts in South Africa, issues that principals must resolve are more complex. This implies that school principals require particular knowledge, competencies, and context-specific practical applications in the key areas of managing a school to apply adequate professional discretion (Du Plessis, 2019: 98). Similarly, Boote (2006: 462) argues that professional discretion should be appropriate to a specific context.

7.2 Internal factors

Participating principals' professional discretion has been influenced by a variety of internal factors. These are discussed in the following sub-sections.

7.2.1 Principals' experience and knowledge

It is essential for principals to possess the necessary knowledge and experience to support their work and guide their decision-making. Experiential knowledge will assist principals in applying professional discretion in the best interests of the school community. Principal 12 explained:

There are a number of factors that affect and influence the professional discretion, such as the experience of the principal. Like they say: “Experience is a good teacher”. The more experienced you are, the more strategies you have learned to use professional discretion.

Principal 12 expanded on this point:

Experience is good, the good teacher; meaning that if you have a challenge that has taken place for the second or the third time, the principal will automatically use the same strategy used to solve the same problem previously.

Principal 13 stated that she took notes on how the principals of her neighbouring schools addressed certain situations. She also acquired knowledge from their experiences:

We've studied all of that, but when it comes to experience, it comes with dealing with certain situations and then making a call or talking during principals' meetings to your neighbouring schools' principals and say: "They had a situation like this [and] this is what they did.

Principal 14 explained that a principal's ability to successfully apply professional discretion will only improve with experience.

You can never learn that from any book. You can never learn professional discretion from any law. You have principles and guidelines, but I think to act in a professional way with a lot of discretion only comes with experience ... you will only be successful in applying your professional discretion, once you have enough experience.

Principal 8 believed that although he has knowledge and experience, it will never be enough. He argued that lifelong learning might reduce the risk of being negligent in the school environment.

I do have knowledge and experience, but I don't think it is enough. I'm still learning a lot. I'm still referring to the textbooks that I have. I'm still reading online or whatever, just to keep myself up to date in terms of what is happening around education and the law to reduce the risk of being negligent at school.

Therefore the participants regard experiential knowledge as essential to apply appropriate professional discretion. Moreover, principals need autonomy in making decisions that are consistent with their knowledge and experience. However, several participants maintained that their experience and knowledge alone will never be sufficient. Additionally, several the participants claimed that while exercising discretion, they usually depend more on their experiences rather than their knowledge. Principal 14 suggested that she would be able to use professional discretion effectively as she gains more experience. Hence, it is imperative for principals to have leadership and management experience prior to being appointed as a principal.

7.2.2 Personal beliefs or values

A principal's decision-making is influenced by their values. Principal 1 suggested that:

Discretion comes from within you. And I think it's based on your values system. So, if your value system is awkward and "vrot" (rotten) ... your discretion will fail you. Discretion is seated in my value system.

Principal 1 explained that his decisions will be based on his religious beliefs and values. According to Principal 11, it is easier to teach because of his religious background and values as they allow him to exercise appropriate professional discretion in his school:

I come from a religious background. All religions have it, but values are quite important. And once the values are in place within the teaching environment ... that is what I try to preach as much as possible.

Principal 4 provided a different dimension as he indicated that the personal feelings of people need to be considered. He explained that when he makes decisions, he considers the feelings of the school governing body, educators, and the management team:

You as a principal need to factor in the feelings of your management, the feelings of all your educators, the feelings of the school governing body.

The beliefs and values of a principal can add value to the contextual understanding of when and how to make decisions. It is important that principals are clear-headed and rational in their thinking when making decisions within the school environment. From a subjective standpoint, a school principal must behave responsibly and with the belief that doing so is in the interests of the learners and the staff. Principal 11 argued that because he himself comes from a religious background where values are respected, it was easier for him to appreciate the religious background of his learners and staff and to apply his discretion accordingly.

To be contextually intelligent, principals must have a full awareness of and respect for the values and beliefs of others. There is, however, a danger that the personal values of principals could also influence their judgment negatively and decisions might not be in the best interests of learners.

7.2.3 Time constraints

Participating principals frequently asked themselves if there is a sense of urgency or whether there are time constraints when making decisions. This is evident in the participants' responses:

Do you have a time limit to make this decision? Is that something that must happen the same day? Is it something that gives you time to consult? So, the first thing is, is the time factor is very important? (Principal 5).

In a similar vein, Principal 10 stated:

The factors that influence my professional discretion are time and the urgency of the matter. In what time and in what space and area? The urgency or how urgent it is.

It is imperative to note that time constraints and the urgency of the situation within which a decision must be taken influence the principal's capacity to exercise professional discretion. Numerous principals stated that the seriousness or importance of the situation affected how they make decisions. Some situations warrant immediate action while others can be postponed until a later suitable time. Nonetheless, time constraints can also raise the principals' stress levels, which could influence how they make discretionary decisions.

7.2.4 Stress

The data suggested that stress experienced by principals is an important determinant when and how principals exercise professional discretion. This was articulated as follows by Principal 13:

Personal stress. If I had a bad day at home coming into school and then something comes up, I might not act as discreetly as I must ... especially this time of year, and during COVID... I think that stress is a very big influencer for my behaviour and my discretion.

She (Principal 13) believed that most principals' decision-making will be influenced by the stress factor:

I think the stress factor is the biggest demand at this stage.

Similarly, Principal 2 stated that:

Because these days we have a lot of stress, and it is difficult out there.

Furthermore, Principal 6 stated that training can potentially reduce uncertainty and stress when it comes to making decisions:

So, I do understand that such training is very, very critical and essential, and it does help us so that we don't get confused about what to do. When there are situations, we don't get confused and stressed about how to behave or act.

The above responses highlighted the demanding nature of being a principal. Principals will inevitably be confronted with difficult situations where they are expected to apply discretion. As a result, it can make principals feel more anxious. An example of a stressful situation, according to Principal 13, was the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, stressful situations can influence the discretion of principals, particularly when they are afraid of the consequences of their decision-making. Principal 6 suggested that more training, in general, can potentially reduce uncertainty and stress when it comes to decision-making.

7.2.5 Fear of making decisions

Some participants disclosed that, because they are controlled by legislation and policies, principals are often afraid to make decisions. The fear to make decisions could therefore create a sense of uncertainty in the discretionary abilities of principals. The fear of litigation has compelled school principals to adjust their decision-making. Principal 1 was, however, very confident in his abilities to apply professional discretion without the fear of being reprimanded. He motivated his confidence as follows:

I don't care what anyone else tells me how to do that. I have to use my discretion how to do that. So, I will not base decisions on fear of being reprimanded either by a school governing body or by the education department.

Moreover, Principal 1 disclosed that he was aware of principals who are afraid of making wrong decisions. He admitted that he too, was once afraid of making the wrong decisions:

I think that some principals, and I was like that too when I started, are so scared because you are being threatened the whole time. So, yes, I think most principals are very scared of what can go wrong, and they don't want to upset their employer ... I've been in this thing long enough to understand that I don't really have to answer to them. I've lost my fear of them. My sense of duty to the children in my care is larger than my sense of being scared of them.

Principals 3 and 8 indicated that some educators might be hesitant to make decisions, and this could in the end jeopardise their duty of care towards their learners:

I've seen that a number of teachers are very, maybe I won't use the word "scared", but they are very hesitant and very aware of the reactions of parents. And then sometimes I think they are so intent on not crossing any lines whatsoever that I think the best interest of the child is often not met (Principal 3).

I do find teachers who at times don't want to be that much involved. They're scared, and then they will tell you that these kids have rights ... I used to say to them it's not that kids have rights, but it is you who are afraid to exercise the rights that you have in a way that you don't trample on their rights. That means it is your knowledge of the law that makes you to fear to exercise your own rights, without trampling on their rights as learners (Principal 8).

Principal 6 also suggested that work experience could reduce the fear of making decisions:

Most of the educators tend to work based on experience ... Therefore, they are not afraid to do certain things, because they've never been punished or found to have offended legislation.

Evidently, there are participants who are hesitant to apply their professional discretion since they are constrained by laws and policies, and they fear the potential repercussions of making the wrong decisions. Therefore, the fear of making decisions may indicate that principals do not believe that they have sufficient legal knowledge to be able to understand when to apply discretion. Principal 1 acknowledged that, although he had confidence in his ability to exercise professional discretion, at an earlier stage he was nervous about making the wrong decision. With 16–20 years of experience as a principal, he now has more self-confidence when applying his professional discretion. Training, such as legal training, could enable principals to be more confident in applying professional discretion and this will automatically reduce the fear of making the wrong decisions.

8. Discussion

Principals do not have control over the external factors (laws and policies, political factors, frequent curriculum changes and contextual factors) which impact how they apply professional discretion. They do, however, have control over how they react to these factors. This means that to be effective in their discretionary decision-making, principals must have intimate knowledge of these external factors and must understand how these factors may or may not impact their school. Although the level of discretion could be limited by these factors, there is still space for a principal to apply appropriate discretion if they choose to do so. However, as explained by Molander *et al.* (2012: 218), it is difficult to predict discretion, because outcomes of discretionary reasoning can differ due to these external forces.

In contrast to the external factors impacting principals' professional discretion, principals have much more control over internal factors such as experience and knowledge, personal beliefs and values, time constraints, stress, and fear of making decisions. One could argue that by arming themselves with knowledge of the regulatory environment and the contextual nuances (external factors) of their schools, principals can empower themselves to develop their experiential knowledge. They will then be more likely to develop leadership and management competencies regarding time and stress management, which in turn could mitigate the fear of making decisions.

The data suggest that principals' values often inspire them to make what they perceive as the best decisions. However, values may also have a negative influence on their decision-making because a principal's personal values may not necessarily be compatible with the best interests of the learners and the values of the broader school community. For this reason, principals must have full awareness of and respect for the values and beliefs of others.

9. Recommendations

It is evident that to apply professional discretion appropriately, public school principals not only have to have good knowledge and a sound understanding of the regulatory framework in which they operate, but they also have to develop a range of competencies to aid them in discretionary decision-making. Leadership and management experience and training prior to being appointed as a principal is thus important. However, the minimum requirements to

be appointed as public-school principal in South Africa does not include prior leadership and management training or experience (RSA, 2016a: B-46). Therefore, it is recommended that principals acquire leadership and management experience and training before being appointed as a school principal. In addition, in-service training focusing on the development of soft skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability and flexibility, and the development of self-confidence should strengthen principals' discretionary decision-making abilities. Hence, there is a need for further research on how these soft skills influence a principal's leadership and management practice.

10. Conclusion

Principals are exposed to both internal and external factors that influence or limit their discretion. This can ultimately result in an inability to maintain a high standard of care at their schools. There is space for a principal to manoeuvre beyond these external and internal factors when applying professional discretion if they choose to do so. However, it is difficult to predict discretion, because outcomes of discretionary reasoning can differ due to these internal and external forces. Even though the participating principals operate under the same set of policies in the same school district and are subject to the same restrictions, it was clear from reviewing these limitations that some principals exercised more discretion than others. Having a thorough understanding of discretion and the factors that influence or limit discretion, as well as relevant leadership and management competencies will enable principals to make appropriate and correct decisions. Hence, it is imperative that principals continuously educate and develop themselves to enhance their leadership and management practice.

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