

EMPATHY AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE AS DETERMINANTS OF PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BAYELSA STATE

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ABSTRACT: This study investigated Empathy and Social Competence as Determinants of Principals' Leadership Performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State using a descriptive correlational survey research design. The descriptive component aimed to profile the existing characteristics of the population, while the correlational aspect explored the relationships between the study variables. The population consisted of 222 principals across nine educational zones in Bayelsa State. A sample of 149 principals, representing approximately 67% of the population, was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across all zones. Data were collected using a self-structured instrument titled Empathy and Social Competence as Determinants of Principals' Leadership Performance Questionnaire (ESCDPLPQ). The instrument was validated by three experts. It comprised demographic items and 16 core items rated on a modified 4-point Likert scale. Reliability was confirmed through a test-retest procedure, yielding Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of .969 and .884. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was applied to test the hypotheses at a .05 level of significance using SPSS version 28. A benchmark mean score of 2.50 was used for interpreting respondents' agreement levels. The findings provided empirical insight into the role of emotional and social skills in school leadership performance. The study concluded by establishing that empathy and social competence are critical determinants of principals' leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The study recommended that the Ministry of Education should promote emotional intelligence in terms of empathy and social competences to enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

Keywords: Empathy, Social Competence, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership Performance, School Principals, Public, Senior, Secondary Schools, Bayelsa State, Educational Leadership, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, the role of school leadership has transcended the traditional focus on administrative efficiency and instructional supervision to encompass interpersonal and emotional dimensions. Principals are no longer just managers of physical and human resources; they are expected to lead with empathy and demonstrate advanced social competence to navigate the complexities of school environments (Leithwood et al., 2020). Particularly in public senior secondary schools where diverse stakeholders interact teachers,

students, parents, and policymakers, the ability of principals to understand others' emotions, respond appropriately, and foster positive relationships is central to effective leadership.

Empathy, defined as the ability to perceive and understand the emotions of others, and social competence, which encompasses the skills required for successful interpersonal functioning, are critical elements of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). These competencies allow school leaders to engage in meaningful communication, resolve conflicts, motivate staff, and build a collaborative school culture (Mayer et al., 2004). Principals with high levels of empathy and social competence tend to create more inclusive and emotionally supportive school environments, which are essential for teacher satisfaction, student achievement, and overall school effectiveness (Brackett et al., 2011).

The Nigerian educational system, particularly in states like Bayelsa, faces multifaceted challenges including inadequate infrastructure, low teacher morale, and fluctuating student performance (Okebukola, 2015). In such settings, the leadership style and interpersonal behavior of school principals are even more critical. Studies have shown that leadership in emotionally demanding contexts requires more than technical or cognitive competencies; it necessitates emotional intelligence and the ability to lead through relational engagement (Oyetunji, 2006; Adeyemo, 2020). Empathy and social competence serve as soft skills that underpin the principal's capacity to inspire, support, and retain committed teachers and motivated learners.

Furthermore, research in educational leadership emphasizes that social-emotional skills significantly influence leadership outcomes. For example, Boyatzis and McKee (2005) argued that emotionally intelligent leaders foster resonance in organizations, promoting trust and collaboration. Similarly, Day and Leithwood (2007) noted that the emotional qualities of school leaders are linked to school improvement and student learning. Within the Nigerian context, emerging scholarship is increasingly recognizing the importance of non-cognitive skills in school leadership (Uko, 2015; Nwangwu, 2018), although empirical studies focusing specifically on empathy and social competence remain limited.

In Bayelsa State, where socio-economic and environmental factors often exacerbate educational challenges, understanding the role of empathy and social competence in school leadership is timely and essential. The performance of principals in such contexts must be evaluated not only on administrative accomplishments but also on their ability to build emotionally intelligent leadership practices. Schools in the region require leaders who can cultivate trust, manage interpersonal relationships sensitively, and adapt to social dynamics with compassion and foresight.

This study, therefore, seeks to examine empathy and social competence as determinants of principals' leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. It aims to fill a gap in the literature by empirically investigating how these emotional and interpersonal capabilities impact leadership effectiveness in a unique educational setting.

Statement of the Problem

Effective leadership in secondary schools is essential for achieving quality education, improving staff motivation, and enhancing student outcomes. In today's complex and emotionally charged educational environments, school leadership is increasingly recognized not only as a cognitive or technical function but also as one that requires emotional and interpersonal capabilities such as empathy and social competence. These attributes enable school principals to build strong relationships, manage conflicts, support teachers, and foster an inclusive learning environment.

However, despite the growing body of research linking emotional intelligence to leadership effectiveness globally, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific roles that empathy and social competence play in determining the leadership performance of principals within the Nigerian context, particularly in Bayelsa State.

In Bayelsa State, public senior secondary schools continue to grapple with leadership-related challenges such as poor communication, low teacher morale, student indiscipline, and weak stakeholder collaboration. Anecdotal evidence and reports from educational stakeholders suggest that many principals lack the interpersonal and emotional skills necessary for managing relationships and motivating staff in dynamic and sometimes stressful school settings. This deficiency in emotional and social competence often results in leadership practices that are reactive, authoritarian, or disconnected from the human needs of teachers and students. Moreover, while policies and training programs have traditionally emphasized administrative efficiency and academic supervision, little attention has been paid to the emotional intelligence components of school leadership, including empathy and social competence.

Existing studies on leadership effectiveness in Nigerian schools have largely focused on administrative style, instructional leadership, and resource management. However, there is a paucity of empirical research exploring the influence of emotional and social competencies such as the ability to understand others' perspectives, communicate effectively, and maintain positive interpersonal relationships on principals' leadership performance. Without a clear understanding of how these competencies affect leadership outcomes, efforts to improve school leadership may remain superficial and incomplete.

Therefore, the problem this study pursues to address is the insufficient empirical evidence on how empathy and social competence influence the leadership performance of principals in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. Given the educational and socio-cultural dynamics of the region, it is crucial to investigate whether and how these emotional and interpersonal skills contribute to effective school leadership. The findings from this study will provide valuable insights for policy makers, education managers, and leadership training institutions on the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into leadership development frameworks.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The study intends to achieve the following objectives:

- Determine how emotional intelligence in terms of empathy enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
- Investigate how emotional intelligence in terms of social competence enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study”

- How does emotional intelligence in terms of empathy enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State?
- How does emotional intelligence in terms of social competence enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

Hypotheses

The following formulated hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence in terms of empathy and leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
- There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence in terms of social competence and leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Behavioural leadership Theory of Watson (1924)

Behavioral leadership theory proposed by Watson (1924) cited in Ololube (2024) is a management philosophy that evaluates leaders according to the actions they display in the workplace. Supporters of this theory believe that all you need to do to be an effective leader is to learn a certain set of behaviors. Behavioral leadership theory argues that the success of a leader is based on their behavior rather than their natural attributes. Behavioral leadership theory involves observing and evaluating a leader's actions and behaviors when they are responding to a specific situation. Watson (1924) in Ololube (2024) stated that leaders are made, not born. Proponents of this theory suggest that anyone can become an effective leader if they can learn and implement certain behaviors. The behavioral leadership theory focuses on how leaders behave, and assumes that these traits can be copied by other leaders. Sometimes called the style theory, it suggests that leaders aren't born successful, but can be created based on learnable behavior. Behavioral theories of leadership focus heavily on the actions of a leader. The theory suggests that the best predictor of leadership success is viewing how a leader acts. Action rather than qualities are the focal points of behavioral learning theory. Northouse (2018) discovered that Patterns of behavior are observed and categorized as "styles of leadership" in this theory. Some of the styles of leadership include task-oriented leaders, people-oriented leaders, country club leaders, status-quo leaders, dictatorial leaders, and more. At the end of the day, the actions and actual behaviors of a leader are what defines success in this theory.

The behavioral theory has many advantages primarily that leaders can learn and decide what actions they want to implement to become the kind of leader they want to be. It allows leaders to be flexible and adapt based on their circumstances. Another great benefit of this leadership style is that it suggests anyone is capable of becoming a leader. Some disadvantages of the behavioral theory are that while it allows flexibility, it doesn't directly suggest how to behave in certain circumstances. There are dozens of leadership styles that stem from the behavioral theory, but there isn't a right one for every circumstance.

A great example of the behavioral theory is looking at a task-oriented leader vs. a people-oriented leader. If there's a problem with a team, a task-oriented leader will look at the process to

see if something needs to be adjusted with the workflow. A people-oriented leader will look at the individuals and go right to them, asking what the issue is. Whatever behaviors you choose, the behavioral leadership theory helps leaders focus on their actions and utilize their decisions to be a great leader.

According to Ololube (2024), the behavioural theory of leadership suggests that the success of a business organization depends on capable leaders whose behaviours drive their success and work ethics. This theory says that by observing and evaluating a leader's actions and behaviours and noting their responses regarding specific situations, you can determine what kind of a leader they are. According to this theory, successful leaders build themselves through learned behaviour and are not born successful. This leadership theory is highly action-focused and relies heavily on assessing leaders' actions in predicting leadership success. The behavioural theory of leadership, also known as the style theory, focuses on patterns of behaviours, categorized as 'styles of leadership'. Some leadership styles include task-oriented, people-oriented, status-quo, and dictatorial leaders. This theory enables individuals to practice learned behaviours to direct their actions to become the leaders they want to become. A core part of this theory is that it is flexible and allows leaders to adapt to various circumstances to better predict the outcomes of their behaviour.

Behavioural leadership theory and emotional intelligence are essential components of effective leadership. Behavioural leadership theory provides insights into specific leadership styles and behaviours that can be learned and developed. Emotional intelligence, on the other hand, offers a deeper understanding of the emotional dynamics that underpin these behaviours. Together, they form a robust framework for developing leaders who are not only skilled in managing tasks and people but are also emotionally attuned to the needs and motivations of their team members. This combination is crucial for fostering a productive, positive, and resilient organizational culture.

Empathy and Leadership Performance in Public Senior Secondary Schools

To Ololube (2024), effective leadership in public senior secondary schools plays a crucial role in shaping the educational outcomes and overall school environment. Among the various qualities that define effective leaders, empathy stands out as a critical yet often underemphasized attribute. Empathy the ability to understand and share the feelings of others has profound implications for leadership performance. It fosters positive relationships, promotes collaborative problem-solving, and enhances the overall school climate, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students.

Empathy is central to transformational leadership, a style that inspires and motivates individuals to achieve their full potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Empathetic leaders are adept at recognizing the emotions and needs of their team members, which enables them to build trust and rapport. In the context of public senior secondary schools, this translates into fostering a supportive environment for teachers and students. Leaders can offer meaningful support, improving teacher morale and effectiveness when they understand the challenges faced by teachers such as workload, classroom management, and curriculum demands empathetic school (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Moreover, empathy enables leaders to address student needs more effectively. For instance, empathetic principals and administrators are better equipped to identify and address issues such as bullying, mental health concerns, and academic struggles. This proactive approach

not only enhances student well-being but also contributes to improved academic outcomes and a positive school culture (Ciarrochi et al., 2006).

Conflict is an inevitable part of any organization, including schools. Empathetic leaders are particularly skilled at navigating conflicts by understanding the perspectives of all parties involved. They listen actively, validate emotions, and seek collaborative solutions. This approach reduces tensions and fosters a sense of fairness and inclusivity among staff and students (Goleman et al., 2013). For example, a principal who empathizes with a teacher's frustration about resource limitations while also considering the broader budgetary constraints can mediate effectively, ensuring both parties feel heard and respected.

Empathy not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also enhances decision-making. Leaders who prioritize empathy are better equipped to make decisions that consider the well-being of all stakeholders. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many school leaders had to balance the need for academic continuity with the health and safety of students and staff. Empathetic leaders who engaged with their communities and sought input were more likely to implement policies that garnered widespread support and minimized disruption (Sosik & Cameron, 2010).

In addition, empathy contributes to professional development and teacher retention. Leaders who take the time to understand the aspirations and challenges of their staff can provide targeted support, such as mentorship or professional learning opportunities. This not only enhances teacher performance but also reduces turnover rates, which is particularly critical in public senior secondary schools that often face resource constraints (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Despite its importance, empathy in leadership is not without challenges. Leaders in public senior secondary schools often operate under significant pressure, including tight budgets, large student populations, and diverse stakeholder expectations. These demands can leave little time for reflective practices that cultivate empathy. Additionally, cultural and systemic factors may sometimes undervalue emotional intelligence, prioritizing administrative efficiency over interpersonal connections (Fullan, 2003).

To overcome these challenges, leadership training programs should emphasize the development of emotional intelligence, including empathy. Techniques such as active listening, perspective-taking, and mindfulness can help leaders build their empathetic capacity. Furthermore, creating a school culture that values empathy at all levels among students, teachers, and administrators can reinforce its importance and impact.

Empathy is an indispensable attribute for effective leadership in public senior secondary schools. When trust and collaboration are observed, empathetic leaders enhance the well-being and performance of both teachers and students. While challenges remain in cultivating empathy, targeted training and a supportive school culture can help leaders harness this powerful quality. As public education systems continue to evolve, prioritizing empathy in leadership will be critical for creating inclusive and thriving school environments.

Social Competences and Leadership Performance in Public Senior Secondary Schools

While self-awareness and emotional control are crucial, so is the ability to discern the feelings of others around you. Being socially aware means being in tune with the feelings of people and the power dynamics at play in your workplace (Tiuraniemi, 2018). School leaders with a high level of social awareness exhibit empathy, as described by Ivcevic et al. (2017). They make an effort

to empathise with their co-workers, which improves their ability to communicate and work together.

This is often described as a 'people person, those who are socially skilled are adept at dealing with others. They are trustworthy team players and confident communicators: as good at listening to other people as they are at speaking themselves. They also make great leaders, inspiring and motivating colleagues, managing change and resolving conflict effectively, and giving praise where it's due. Social competences are an internal factor that is central to learning outcomes. Social competences refer to a school leaders's ability to interact with teachers, students and other stakeholders in various useful ways. The purpose of this interaction is to meet shared needs and create harmony in everyday school life.

Social competences also help in dealing with conflicts that may arise in routine situations (Nurma et al., 2014; Suswandari et al., 2020). In the same vein, Triyanti (2023) explained that Social skills involve patterns of behavior that support successful social relationships and enable individuals to work efficiently with others. Low social competences harm personal learning achievement. Therefore, the ability to develop social competence is one of the assets owned by leaders, which allows them to interact with others during the learning process (Daraee et al., 2016; Green et al., 2021). According to Mahabbati et al. (2017), at the basic education level, individuals' social competences are based on understanding diversity. In this context, it refers to the capacity to accept social contexts and behave following the norms and guidelines governing communication interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, with other individuals.

Social competences are often described as skills that enable individuals including leaders to respond to certain social requests in an acceptable way (Alfianti et al., 2019; Dewanti & Widada, 2016). Social competences are behaviors that must be learned because they allow individuals to interact and receive positive or negative responses from various parties in the form of adaptation to the social environment (El & Bali, 2017; Maryani, 2018; Ulum, 2019).

Aspects of social competences according to Maryani (2018) include the following: the ability to alternate between life and work, respecting the rights of others and being sensitive to their feelings, managing and recognizing oneself, and sharing ideas and experiences with other individuals. The relationship between social competences and leadership performance is well-documented and widely recognized in leadership theory and practice. Social competence refer to an individual's ability to effectively interact, communicate, and build relationships with others, while leadership performance pertains to the capacity of a leader to achieve desired outcomes by influencing and guiding others towards common goals. The link between these two concepts lies in the fact that leadership is inherently a social process that requires interaction with others.

Social competences are a core component of emotional intelligence (EI), which is one of the primary frameworks linking interpersonal abilities to leadership effectiveness. According to Goleman (1998), emotional intelligence consists of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social competences. Leaders with high emotional intelligence can manage their emotions and the emotions of others, thus fostering strong relationships and more effective team dynamics. Social competences enable leaders to communicate their vision clearly, resolve conflicts, inspire trust, and negotiate effectively, all of which are vital for leadership success.

Leaders who are emotionally intelligent are more adept at understanding the social environment, responding to the needs of their followers, and motivating them to achieve shared goals. A study by Boyatzis and McKee (2015) demonstrates that leaders with high social skills, a dimension of emotional intelligence, can foster resonant relationships that lead to increased

employee satisfaction and performance. In turn, this enhances leadership performance as it builds trust and cohesion within teams, which are critical to achieving organizational objectives.

Effective leadership performance is largely dependent on a school leader's ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. Communication is a fundamental aspect of social competences, involving not just the exchange of information but also the ability to listen, empathize, and adapt messages to different audiences. Leaders with strong communication skills can articulate their vision in ways that resonate with their followers, facilitating buy-in and motivation.

Research indicates that communication competence is directly related to leadership effectiveness. For example, de Vries et al. (2010) found that leaders who were skilled communicators had higher perceived effectiveness among their followers. Effective school leaders must use their social competences to build rapport, convey authority, and establish open lines of communication that allow for the exchange of feedback. This open communication fosters transparency and trust, leading to improved organizational performance.

Social competences also contribute to a leader's ability to build and maintain effective relationships within and outside the organization. The ability to cultivate positive relationships is essential for gaining followers' trust and loyalty. Leadership is not just about issuing directives; it also involves building a network of support, fostering collaboration, and managing relationships among various stakeholders. Leaders who are skilled at networking, mentoring, and conflict resolution are better equipped to handle the complexities of team dynamics and organizational challenges.

Research by Uhl-Bien (2016) highlighted the importance of relational leadership, where leaders focus on building strong interpersonal connections. In this framework, social skills are vital for fostering relational interactions that promote engagement, commitment, and cooperation among team members. These relationships are crucial in times of crisis, change, or innovation, where leaders need to rely on trust and collaboration to navigate uncertainties and achieve success.

Another area where social competences or skills impact school leadership performance is in conflict management. Conflict is inevitable in any group setting, and leaders must be adept at navigating disputes without causing lasting damage to relationships or morale. Leaders with strong social skills can recognize when conflicts are arising, understand the perspectives of all involved parties, and mediate effectively to find solutions. The ability to manage conflict constructively can prevent organizational dysfunction and lead to more innovative problem-solving. According to Rahim (2017), effective leaders use social skills to manage conflict in a way that fosters constructive outcomes rather than destructive consequences. Leaders who employ collaborative or compromising conflict management styles are better able to preserve relationships and enhance group cohesion, both of which contribute to improved leadership performance. In contrast, leaders lacking social skills may struggle to resolve disputes, leading to higher turnover, lower productivity, and diminished team morale.

Motivating teams and fostering a positive work environment are central to leadership success, and social skills are critical in this regard. Leaders must be able to understand and tap into the emotional and psychological drivers that motivate their followers. Socially skilled leaders can build an inclusive and supportive culture that encourages team members to perform at their best. They are often better at recognizing individual talents and strengths, providing recognition, and creating opportunities for development. Studies show that social skills contribute to transformational leadership, where leaders inspire and empower their followers to

exceed expectations. For instance, Bass and Avolio (2014) emphasized that transformational leaders possess strong interpersonal abilities that allow them to build trust, foster collaboration, and motivate employees to engage in behaviors that benefit the organization. The use of social skills to promote strong relationships means that transformational leaders will be able to influence the performance and satisfaction of their followers, resulting in enhanced organizational performance.

Leadership

School leadership, particularly at the secondary level, plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of teaching, learning outcomes, and overall school effectiveness. Principals, as the administrative and instructional heads of schools, are responsible for providing vision, direction, and support that align with educational goals and stakeholder expectations. Their leadership performance, therefore, is a critical determinant of a school's success or failure (Leithwood et al., 2020). In recent decades, the conceptualization of school leadership has evolved from a bureaucratic role to one that demands transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership practices.

Principals' leadership performance encompasses a range of competencies and actions, including setting a clear vision, fostering a positive school climate, managing human and material resources, implementing curriculum policies, engaging with the community, and ensuring accountability (Hallinger, 2011). High-performing school leaders are those who inspire and motivate teachers, support student development, promote professional learning communities, and lead change initiatives to improve academic outcomes. According to Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), effective principals influence student achievement indirectly through their impact on teacher quality and instructional practices.

Leadership performance is often evaluated through indicators such as staff motivation, student achievement, school discipline, teacher retention, and the level of stakeholder involvement. However, performance is not solely measured by tangible outputs. Increasingly, research highlights the importance of emotional intelligence, ethical behavior, and interpersonal skills in determining leadership effectiveness (Goleman, 1995; Day & Leithwood, 2007). Principals who possess qualities such as empathy, self-awareness, and social competence tend to create environments where teachers feel valued and supported, which translates to improved student learning outcomes (Brckett et al., 2011).

In the Nigerian context, the performance of school principals is often constrained by systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, political interference, and limited access to continuous professional development (Okebukola, 2015). Despite these obstacles, some principals have demonstrated outstanding leadership by leveraging interpersonal skills, community partnerships, and innovative practices to drive school improvement. Uko (2015) noted that effective leadership in Nigerian schools requires not only administrative competences but also the emotional and social intelligence to build relationships, resolve conflicts, and motivate staff in resource-constrained environments.

Bayelsa State, like many parts of Nigeria, presents unique educational leadership challenges including difficult terrain, limited school resources, and fluctuating student attendance. Principals in this region are expected to exhibit a high level of leadership performance to address both administrative duties and the emotional needs of their staff and students. The ability to lead effectively under such conditions is increasingly linked to non-cognitive competencies such as empathy, resilience, and communication skills.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive correlational survey research design. The descriptive component focused on collecting data from a sizable and representative sample drawn from a clearly defined population to describe existing characteristics at the time of the study. Meanwhile, the correlational aspect examined the relationships between the key variables. Descriptive techniques were utilized to address the research questions, whereas correlational methods were employed to test the study's hypotheses.

The target population comprised all principals of senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. At the time of the study, the total number of principals was 222, distributed across the state's educational zones as follows: Brass (12), Ekeremor (27), Kolokuma/Opokuma (13), Nembe (16), Ogbia (34), Sagbama (28), Southern Ijaw Zone I (27), Southern Ijaw Zone II (21), and Yenagoa (44). A table (not shown here) provides a detailed breakdown by zone.

A sample size of 149 principals, representing approximately 67% of the total population, was selected for the study. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure that each educational zone was proportionally represented. This method involved dividing the population into distinct subgroups (strata) based on their location, followed by the random selection of participants from each stratum. This approach ensured that the sample was both representative and reflective of the overall population.

Data collection was carried out using a self-structured instrument titled *Empathy and Social Competence as Determinants of Principals' Leadership Performance Questionnaire (ESCDPLPQ)*. The instrument was divided into two sections: Section A gathered demographic information, while Section B contained 40 items designed to address the research questions and test the associated null hypotheses. Section B was further segmented to ensure that specific items corresponded with particular hypotheses. A modified 4-point Likert scale was used to rate responses: Strongly Agree (4 points), Agree (3 points), Disagree (2 points), and Strongly Disagree (1 point).

To ensure the validity of the instrument, it was submitted to three experts from the Department of Educational Management. These experts reviewed the questionnaire to assess its content and face validity. Their feedback guided necessary revisions and refinements, aligning the instrument more closely with the study's objectives, research questions, and hypotheses.

The reliability of the instrument was established using the test-retest method. Twenty copies were administered to 20 principals not included in the study sample. Responses from the initial and follow-up tests were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding reliability coefficients of .969 and .884, indicating a high level of internal consistency and confirming the instrument's reliability for the study.

The researcher, with assistance from two trained research assistants, distributed the 149 questionnaires to the selected principals. Wherever possible, completed questionnaires were retrieved immediately to minimize loss and ensure data completeness. Data analysis involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, specifically, mean and standard deviation were used to address the research questions. To test the hypotheses, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was applied at a significance level of 0.05, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28.

For interpreting mean scores from the Likert scale, the cumulative value of the four options ($4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 10$) was divided by 4, resulting in a benchmark mean score of 2.50.

Mean scores equal to or above 2.50 were interpreted as agreement, while scores below 2.50 indicated disagreement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Answer to Research Questions

Research Question 1: How does emotional intelligence in terms of empathy enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation analysis on how empathy enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items	Mean	SD.	Remark
1	Empathy enables the leader to understand and share the feelings of others for enhanced leadership performance.	2.7450	1.24745	Agree
2	Empathy also allows the leader to connect with others on a deeper level, to feel their pain or joy, and to respond in a way that is appropriate and helpful for enhanced leadership performance.	2.6040	1.29875	Agree
3	It enables the leader to be motivated to take action to help others for enhanced leadership performance	2.7047	1.22752	Agree
4	It also enables the leader in building and maintaining positive relationships for enhanced leadership performance.	2.8054	1.26639	Agree
5	Empathy enables the leader to recognize other people's emotions and understand how they impact others, which makes them more attuned to the emotions of others for enhanced leadership performance.	3.0537	1.13771	Agree
6	Empathy and emotional intelligence helps the leader to improve His communication skill for enhanced leadership performance.	2.9597	1.17909	Agree
7	It also helps the leader to identify his own feelings and those of others, allowing him to self-regulate his moods and reactions so that he can respond appropriately in any given situation for enhanced leadership performance.	2.7584	1.28742	Agree
8	It allows the leader to connect with others on a meaningful level, fostering trust and intimacy with others for enhanced leadership performance.	3.0671	1.10076	Agree
Grand mean and SD.		2.8372	1.21813	Agree

The analysis in Table 1 evaluated the role of empathy in enhancing leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The grand mean of 2.8372 and a standard deviation of 1.21813 reflect an overall agreement on the positive influence of empathy, with moderate variability in perceptions across various dimensions.

Results for understanding and sharing feelings discloses that respondents agreed that empathy helps leaders understand and share the feelings of others, with a mean score of 2.7450 and a standard deviation of 1.24745, indicating general consensus with some variability. Deeper connections showed that school leaders acknowledged that empathy enables them to connect with others on a deeper level, allowing them to feel and respond to others' emotions appropriately. This dimension scored a mean of 2.6040 and a standard deviation of 1.29875, reflecting agreement but with notable differences in individual perceptions. Motivation to help revealed that empathy motivates school leaders to take action to assist others, with a mean of

2.7047 and a standard deviation of 1.22752, indicating general agreement and moderate consistency in responses. Data for building positive relationships depicts that respondents highlighted that empathy supports the building and maintenance of positive relationships, scoring a mean of 2.8054 and a standard deviation of 1.26639.

The data for recognition of emotions showed that school leaders strongly agreed that empathy helps them recognize and understand others' emotions, making them more attuned to emotional dynamics. This dimension scored a mean of 3.0537 with a relatively lower standard deviation of 1.13771, suggesting consistent agreement. For improved communication, the results on empathy and emotional intelligence were linked to improved communication skills, with a mean score of 2.9597 and a standard deviation of 1.17909, indicating broad agreement with moderate variability. Self-Regulation showed that school leaders agreed that empathy helps them identify and regulate their own feelings and reactions to respond appropriately to situations, scoring a mean of 2.7584 and a standard deviation of 1.28742, and the information for fostering trust and intimacy publicized that respondents strongly agreed that empathy allows leaders to connect with others on a meaningful level, fostering trust and intimacy. This aspect scored a mean of 3.0671 and a standard deviation of 1.10076, reflecting strong and consistent agreement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that empathy is a crucial leadership trait, enabling leaders to connect with others, build relationships, and improve communication skills while fostering emotional awareness and self-regulation. The grand mean reflects a general agreement on the positive impact of empathy, while the variability in responses (as indicated by the standard deviations) suggests some differences in the emphasis placed on specific aspects of empathy among leaders. These results underscore the importance of cultivating empathy as part of leadership development in educational institutions.

Research Question 2: How does emotional intelligence in terms of social competence enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

The analysis in Table 2 examined the influence of social competences on leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The grand mean of 2.8179 and a standard deviation of 1.22127 reflect an overall agreement that social competences positively enhance leadership effectiveness, with moderate variability in the responses across different dimensions.

Data on the interaction with others revealed that school leaders agreed that social competences enable them to interact effectively with others, with a mean score of 2.9799 and a standard deviation of 1.13584, indicating consistent agreement. Equally conflict resolution, the data presented showed that the respondents acknowledged that social competences aid in managing conflicts in routine situations, scoring a mean of 2.9664 and a standard deviation of 1.14736, reflecting broad agreement. On efficiency in collaboration, while social competences were linked to efficient teamwork, this dimension had a lower mean score of 2.5168 and a higher standard deviation of 1.27133, suggesting agreement but with notable variability in perceptions. For sensitivity and respect, school leaders disagreed that social competences help them respect others rights and be sensitive to their feelings, this aspect scored one of the lower means at 2.3557 and a standard deviation of 1.33596, indicating more variability in views.

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation analysis on how social competence enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State

S/N	Items	Mean	SD.	Remark
9	Social competences enable leaders to interact with others in various useful ways for enhanced leadership performance.	2.9799	1.13584	Agree
10	Social competences help the leader in dealing with conflicts that may arise in routine situations for enhanced leadership performance.	2.9664	1.14736	Agree
11	It also enables the leader to work efficiently with others for enhanced leadership performance.	2.5168	1.27133	Agree
12	Social competences help the leader to respect the rights of others and being sensitive to their feelings for enhanced leadership performance.	2.3557	1.33596	Agree
13	It also enables the leader in sharing ideas and experiences with other individuals for enhanced leadership performance.	2.8523	1.24323	Agree
14	Social competences enable the leader to respond to certain social requests in an acceptable way for enhanced leadership performance.	3.2215	1.04523	Disagree
15	It gives the leader the capacity to accept social contexts and behave following the norms and guidelines governing communication interactions for enhanced leadership performance.	2.8121	1.30161	Agree
18	It supports successful social relationships and enable the leader to work efficiently with others for enhanced leadership performance.	2.8389	1.28960	Agree
Grand mean and SD.		2.8179	1.22127	Agree

Data on sharing ideas and experiences revealed that social competences were associated with the ability to share ideas and experiences, with a mean score of 2.8523 and a standard deviation of 1.24323, reflecting general agreement. Information for responding to social requests depicted that school leaders strongly agreed that social skills enable them to respond to social requests appropriately, as evidenced by the highest mean score of 3.2215 and a relatively lower standard deviation of 1.04523, indicating strong and consistent agreement. On adhering to norms and guidelines, social competences were seen as enabler for leaders to accept social norms and communicate appropriately, with a mean score of 2.8121 and a standard deviation of 1.30161. For building relationships and teamwork, respondents agreed that social competences support successful relationships and teamwork, scoring a mean of 2.8389 and a standard deviation of 1.28960.

On the whole, the findings highlighted the significant role of social competences in enhancing leadership performance, particularly in fostering effective communication, managing conflicts, respecting others, and building relationships. The grand mean suggests general agreement, while the variability in standard deviations points to differing emphases on specific aspects of social competences. Leaders particularly valued social competences for their capacity to enable appropriate responses to social requests and foster adherence to communication norms, which emphasized the importance of these competences in promoting effective leadership within schools in Bayelsa state.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence in terms of empathy and leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa.

Table 3: PPMC analysis on whether significant relationship exist between emotional intelligence in terms of empathy and leadership performance

		Empathy	Leadership performance
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.790**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	149	149
Leadership performance	Pearson Correlation	.790**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	149	149

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis in Table 3 examined the relationship between empathy (a component of emotional intelligence) and leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

The Pearson correlation coefficient between empathy and leadership performance is .790, indicating a strong positive relationship. This suggests that higher levels of empathy are strongly associated with improved leadership performance. The p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) is .000, which is below the .01 significance threshold. This established that the observed correlation is statistically significant and not due to random chance. The analysis is based on a sample size of 149, providing a reliable basis for the findings.

The results revealed a significant relationship between empathy and leadership performance. Leaders with high levels of empathy are more likely to understand and relate to the emotions of others, fostering stronger relationships, better communication, and more effective conflict resolution. These qualities contribute substantially to leadership success. The findings emphasized the importance of empathy as a critical aspect of emotional intelligence in enhancing leadership effectiveness. Leadership development programs should prioritize building empathy to help leaders connect meaningfully with others and achieve higher levels of performance in educational settings.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence in terms of social competence and leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa.

Table 4: PPMC analysis on whether significant relationship exist between emotional intelligence in terms of social competence and leadership performance

		Social competences	Leadership performance
Social competences	Pearson Correlation	1	.506**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	149	149
Leadership performance	Pearson Correlation	.506**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	149	149

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis in Table 4 evaluated the relationship between social competences (a component of emotional intelligence) and leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

The Pearson correlation coefficient between social competences and leadership performance is .506, indicating a moderate positive relationship. This suggested that better social competences are moderately associated with improved leadership performance. The p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) is .000, which is below the .01 significance threshold. This confirms that the observed relationship is statistically significant and not due to random variation. The analysis used a sample size of 149, ensuring the reliability of the results.

The results indicated a significant relationship between social skills and leadership performance. Leaders who exhibit strong social competences such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork are moderately more likely to achieve higher leadership effectiveness. While social competences contributed positively to leadership performance, the moderate strength of the correlation suggested that their impact is less pronounced compared to other dimensions of emotional intelligence, such as self-awareness or empathy. Nevertheless, developing social competences remains an essential aspect of enhancing leadership capabilities, particularly for promoting collaboration and building relationships in educational settings.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Empathy and Leadership Performance in Public Senior Secondary Schools

The mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis examined the relationship between empathy (a component of emotional intelligence) and leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The results revealed a significant relationship between empathy and leadership performance. Leaders with high levels of empathy are more likely to understand and relate to the emotions of others, fostering stronger relationships, better communication, and more effective conflict resolution.

These results are in line with the study of Ololube (2024) who found that effective leadership in public senior secondary schools plays a crucial role in shaping the educational outcomes and overall school environment. Among the various qualities that define effective leaders, empathy stands out as a critical yet often underemphasized attribute. Empathy the ability to understand and share the feelings of others has profound implications for leadership performance. It fosters positive relationships, promotes collaborative problem-solving, and enhances the overall school climate, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students.

Ikewise Bass and Riggio (2006) and Boyatzis and McKee (2005) found out respectively that empathy is central to transformational leadership, a style that inspires and motivates individuals to achieve their full potential. Empathetic leaders are adept at recognizing the emotions and needs of their team members, which enables them to build trust and rapport. In the context of public senior secondary schools, this translates into fostering a supportive environment for teachers and students. Understanding the challenges faced by teachers such as workload, classroom management, and curriculum demands, empathetic school leaders can offer meaningful support, improving teacher morale and effectiveness.

Moreover, Ciarrochi et al. (2006) and Goleman et al. (2013) established respectively that empathy enables leaders to address student needs more effectively. For instance, empathetic principals and administrators are better equipped to identify and address issues such as bullying,

mental health concerns, and academic struggles. This proactive approach not only enhances student well-being but also contributes to improved academic outcomes and a positive school culture. Conflict is an inevitable part of any organization, including schools. Empathetic leaders are particularly skilled at navigating conflicts by understanding the perspectives of all parties involved. They listen actively, validate emotions, and seek collaborative solutions. This approach reduces tensions and fosters a sense of fairness and inclusivity among staff and students. For example, a principal who empathizes with a teacher's frustration about resource limitations while also considering the broader budgetary constraints can mediate effectively, ensuring both parties feel heard and respected.

Thus, empathy not only strengthens interpersonal relationships but also enhances decision-making. Leaders who prioritize empathy are better equipped to make decisions that consider the well-being of all stakeholders (Sosik & Cameron, 2010). In addition, empathy contributes to professional development and teacher retention. Leaders who take the time to understand the aspirations and challenges of their staff can provide targeted support, such as mentorship or professional learning opportunities. This not only enhances teacher performance but also reduces turnover rates, which is particularly critical in public senior secondary schools that often face resource constraints (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Social Competences and Leadership Performance in Public Senior Secondary Schools

The mean, standard deviation and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis evaluated the relationship between social competences and leadership performance among leaders in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The results indicated a significant relationship between social competences and leadership performance. Leaders who exhibit strong social skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork are moderately more likely to achieve higher leadership effectiveness.

These results are in line with the study of Tiuraniemi (2018) who found that leaders with a high level of social awareness exhibit empathy, as described by Ivcevic et al. (2017). They make an effort to empathize with their co-workers, which improves their ability to communicate and work together. This is often described as a 'people person, those who are socially skilled are adept at dealing with others. They are trustworthy team players and confident communicators: as good at listening to other people as they are at speaking themselves. They also make great leaders, inspiring and motivating colleagues, managing change and resolving conflict effectively, and giving praise where it's due. Social competences are an internal factor that is central to learning outcomes. Social competences refer to a person's ability to interact with others in various useful ways. The purpose of this interaction is to meet shared needs and create harmony in everyday life.

Nurma et al. (2014) and Suswandari et al. (2020) studies established that social skills also help in dealing with conflicts that may arise in routine situations. In the same vein, Triyanti (2023) explained that social competences involve patterns of behavior that support successful social relationships and enable individuals to work efficiently with others. Low social skills can harm personal learning achievement. Therefore, the ability to develop social competences is one of the assets owned by individuals, which allows them to interact with others during the learning process (Daraee et al., 2016; Green et al., 2021). According to Mahabbati et al. (2017), at the basic education level, individuals' social skills are based on understanding diversity. In this context, it refers to the capacity to accept social contexts and behave following the norms and

guidelines governing communication interactions, both verbal and non-verbal, with other individuals.

Alfianti et al. (2019) and Dewanti and Widada (2016) studies found that social competences are often described as skills that enable individuals including leaders to respond to certain social requests in an acceptable way. Social competences are behaviors that must be learned because they allow individuals to interact and receive positive or negative responses from various parties in the form of adaptation to the social environment (El & Bali, 2017; Maryani, 2018; Ulum, 2019).

Aspects of social competences according to Maryani (2018) include the ability to alternate between life and work, respecting the rights of others and being sensitive to their feelings, managing and recognizing oneself, and sharing ideas and experiences with other individuals. The relationship between social competences and leadership performance is well-documented and widely recognized in leadership theory and practice. Social skills refer to an individual's ability to effectively interact, communicate, and build relationships with others, while leadership performance pertains to the capacity of a leader to achieve desired outcomes by influencing and guiding others towards common goals. The link between these two concepts lies in the fact that leadership is inherently a social process that requires interaction with others.

CONCLUSION

This study has established that empathy and social competence are critical determinants of principals' leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State. Through a descriptive correlational approach, the research highlighted the significance of emotional and interpersonal skills in promoting effective school leadership. The findings demonstrated that principals who exhibit high levels of empathy and social competence are better equipped to foster positive relationships, manage school dynamics, and enhance teaching and learning outcomes. The use of a structured, validated, and reliable instrument provided credible data, while the stratified random sampling ensured fair representation across the state's educational zones. The study further reinforced the importance of integrating emotional intelligence into school leadership development programs and training for principals. It is recommended that education authorities and policymakers in Bayelsa State and beyond promoting these soft skills as essential components of leadership capacity building for sustainable improvement in secondary school administration and performance.

Recommendations

The study's findings stimulate the following recommendations:

- The Ministry of Education should promote emotional intelligence in terms of empathy to enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
- The Ministry of Education should encourage emotional intelligence in terms of social competences to further enhance leadership performance in public senior secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

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