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Emotional intelligence and power distance in African educational leadership: A conceptual framework

Stephen Nsengiyumva[1]

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Manna University, Lynchburg, VA, United States[1]

Corresponding Author Email: snsengiyumva@gse.harvard.edu

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Abstract

Educational leadership in African settings operates within diverse cultural and institutional environments, where authority, hierarchy, communal relationships, and resource constraints may shape how school leaders relate to teachers and other stakeholders. Emotional intelligence (EI) has been linked to school leadership effectiveness, teacher support, instructional leadership, and organizational climate; however, less conceptual attention has focused on how EI may interact with power distance and culturally endorsed leadership expectations in African educational contexts. Using an integrative conceptual review, this conceptual paper examines EI as a relational leadership resource for navigating formal authority while fostering trust, teacher voice, participation, and humane leadership. Drawing on ability-based and competency models of EI, Hofstede's power-distance construct, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study of culture and leadership, and research on educational leadership in Africa, the paper develops a four-element contextual framework linking cultural and institutional conditions, EI competencies, relational leadership behaviors, and proximal school outcomes, and advances four propositions for future empirical testing. The framework proposes that self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management can help school leaders exercise legitimate authority without creating unnecessary relational distance. The paper also argues that neither Africa nor African schools should be treated as culturally homogeneous and cautions against projecting national culture scores onto individual schools or leaders. EI is therefore presented as a context-sensitive complement to instructional competence, organizational capacity, resources, and

professional leadership preparation rather than as a substitute for them. The article offers implications for leadership development, principal preparation, school governance, and future empirical research.

Key terms: Emotional intelligence; educational leadership; power distance; Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE); Africa; school leadership

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

School leadership is simultaneously technical, organizational, and relational. Principals and other school leaders allocate resources, supervise instruction, interpret regulations, manage personnel, communicate expectations, resolve conflict, and cultivate the conditions in which teachers and learners work. These responsibilities require professional knowledge, but they also require the capacity to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and in others. This relational dimension matters because schools are social organizations in which leadership is enacted through recurring interactions among people with unequal formal authority.

The literature on emotional intelligence (EI) offers one way to explain leadership's relational dimension. Salovey and Mayer (1990) introduced EI as a set of emotion-related abilities involving the appraisal, regulation, and use of emotion. Later ability-based formulations emphasized perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotional information, and managing emotions (Mayer et al., 2004, 2008). A parallel competency tradition, strongly associated with Goleman (1998) and Goleman et al. (2002), translated EI into leadership-relevant domains such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Although these traditions differ conceptually and in measurement, both focus on the role of emotional information in judgment, relationships, and behavior.

Evidence linking EI and school leadership is growing. A recent systematic review found that school leaders' emotional competency can influence teachers directly and indirectly through school climate, instructional leadership, well-being, and collective efficacy, while also emphasizing that cultural and contextual conditions shape how EI is expressed (Sasere & Matashu, 2025). African empirical evidence also indicates that EI is relevant to school leadership, but the country-level studies and their methodological strengths and limitations are examined in Section 2.2.1 rather than repeated here.

The African educational leadership literature also emphasizes context. Research documents uneven leadership preparation across the continent, complex relationships between formal authority and participation, and the need to avoid importing leadership models without attention to history, culture, institutions, and local conditions (Bush & Glover, 2025; Hallinger, 2018; Nkomo, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2011). Comparative education and policy-borrowing scholarship similarly cautions against treating practices from other systems as ready-made solutions. Cross-national learning is most useful when external ideas are examined, adapted, and ultimately internalized or indigenized within local conditions rather than mechanically transplanted (Phillips & Ochs, 2003, 2004; Schleicher, 2018). In several national and school-level studies, hierarchical authority remains influential even when official reforms call for broader participation. For example, Kenyan research has described strong hierarchical school structures alongside teachers' desire for greater participation in decision-making (Mualuko et al., 2009), while studies in South Africa and Ethiopia have documented constraints on distributed or participative leadership (Mitchell, 2017; Williams, 2011).

This paper brings these literatures together. It argues that EI may be particularly valuable where school leaders hold substantial formal authority and where cultural or institutional norms create relational

distance between leaders and followers. This distinction matters because the formal position itself is a source of legitimate power: principals can obtain compliance because their role carries recognized authority (French & Raven, 1959). Yet positional authority does not automatically produce trust, commitment, candid feedback, or professional voice. EI may therefore help leaders supplement legitimate positional power with relational influence. The argument is not that hierarchy is inherently harmful or that African schools share a single leadership culture. Formal authority can provide coordination, accountability, and clarity. The concern arises when authority creates excessive distance: when teachers are reluctant to question leaders, feedback travels upward poorly, participation is symbolic, conflict is personalized, or the leader's emotions disproportionately shape the school climate. In such conditions, emotionally competent leadership may help preserve legitimate authority while fostering more humane and participative relationships.

Educational leadership research in Africa has expanded substantially, yet it remains uneven across countries, methods, and themes. Hallinger's (2018) systematic review identified 506 journal articles on educational leadership and management in Africa and described the knowledge base as rapidly emerging. More recently, Bush and Glover (2025) reviewed school leadership preparation and development across African countries and found that formal preparation remains inconsistent; in some contexts, leadership learning is structured, while in others it remains largely incidental. Earlier research similarly noted that many principals assumed leadership positions with limited formal preparation and were frequently selected primarily from successful teaching careers rather than on demonstrated leadership competence (Bush & Oduro, 2006).

These leadership-development challenges matter because the principalship requires more than administrative compliance. Contemporary school leaders must manage professional relationships, instructional improvement, reform pressures, policy changes, community expectations, staff morale, conflict, and organizational change. These responsibilities make relational competence especially relevant, while the empirical evidence connecting EI to school leadership outcomes is examined in Section 2.2.1.

At the same time, EI cannot be studied apart from culture and institutional power. Leadership always occurs within expectations about authority, status, deference, participation, and appropriate interpersonal behavior. Hofstede's concept of power distance describes the extent to which unequal distributions of power are accepted or expected (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 2010). The GLOBE project developed a related cross-cultural approach and distinguished between societal practices (how things are) and societal values (how things should be) (House et al., 2004). In the GLOBE Sub-Saharan Africa cluster, based on data from Namibia, Nigeria, the Black South African sample, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, existing practices were characterized by relatively high power distance and strong in-group collectivism, while respondents desired substantially less power distance and more humane-oriented leadership (Wanasika et al., 2011). Respondents also positively endorsed team-oriented, participative, and charismatic/value-based leadership.

This tension between hierarchical practice and relational leadership preferences is highly relevant to schools. A principal may occupy a culturally and institutionally powerful role while also being expected to demonstrate care, fairness, interpersonal skill, and responsiveness to the group. EI may help explain how a leader can navigate that tension. Rather than treating emotional intelligence as a universal leadership formula, this paper positions it as a context-sensitive capacity that leaders use to interpret and manage relationships shaped by authority and culture.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Research increasingly links emotional intelligence to effective school leadership, yet the relationship is

often discussed without sufficient attention to the cultural and institutional conditions in which leadership occurs. This is a significant limitation in African educational settings, where studies have documented both strong formal authority and ongoing efforts to expand teacher participation, distributed leadership, and collaborative decision-making (Jwan et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2017; Mualuko et al., 2009; Williams, 2011). The result can be a practical tension: school leaders are expected to exercise authority and accountability while also building trust, encouraging professional voice, managing conflict, and mobilizing collective responsibility.

Existing African EI studies provide important evidence, yet much of the literature focuses on direct associations between EI and leadership effectiveness, instructional leadership, or managerial outcomes (Ayiro, 2009; Dampson, 2021; Venter et al., 2024). A less-developed question is how EI might operate in hierarchical, high-power-distance environments. Cross-cultural leadership research offers concepts for examining that question, but national culture frameworks are also prone to overgeneralization. Brewer and Venaik (2014) warn against the ecological fallacy of projecting national-level cultural scores onto individuals or organizations, and Nkomo (2011) cautions against stereotypical representations of a singular “African” leadership culture.

The conceptual problem is twofold. First, educational leadership scholarship needs a clearer explanation of how EI may help leaders navigate formal authority, relational distance, and participation. Second, that explanation must be culturally sensitive without treating Africa as homogeneous or assuming that national culture scores apply to every school. This paper addresses this problem by proposing a contextual framework in which EI operates between cultural-institutional conditions and relational leadership behaviors.

1.3 Objectives of the study

This conceptual paper is anchored on the following objectives:

To examine the relevance of emotional intelligence to educational leadership in African contexts.

To identify relationships between emotional intelligence, relational leadership behaviors, and teacher voice, trust, collaboration, and school climate that future studies should test.

To examine how Hofstede’s power-distance construct and GLOBE leadership findings can be applied responsibly within a contextual framework for African educational leadership.

To identify implications for school-leader preparation, professional development, governance, and future empirical research.

1.4 Research questions

The paper is guided by the following four questions:

How can emotional intelligence strengthen educational leadership in African school contexts where formal hierarchy and power distance shape leader-teacher relationships?

What relationships between EI, relational leadership behaviors, and teacher voice, trust, collaboration, and school climate should future studies test?

How can power-distance and GLOBE perspectives be applied responsibly within a contextual framework for African educational leadership without stereotyping countries, schools, or leaders?

What implications does the proposed framework have for school-leader preparation, professional development, governance, and future empirical research?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Emotional Intelligence: Competing Models and Leadership Relevance

The EI literature contains several conceptual traditions. Salovey and Mayer (1990) originally defined EI in terms of abilities related to recognizing, regulating, and using emotions. The later four-branch ability model conceptualized EI as the capacity to perceive emotion, use emotion to facilitate thought, understand emotion, and regulate emotion in ways that promote adaptive functioning (Mayer et al., 2004, 2008). In this tradition, EI is treated as an ability that should be distinguished from personality traits and broad claims about character.

Goleman's (1998) work popularized a broader competency approach to EI in organizations. In leadership applications, Goleman et al. (2002) grouped competencies into four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-awareness concerns recognizing one's emotions, strengths, limitations, and effects on others. Self-management concerns regulating disruptive emotions and behaving intentionally rather than reactively. Social awareness includes empathy and sensitivity to interpersonal and organizational cues. Relationship management involves communication, influence, conflict management, collaboration, and the development of others.

For this paper, the ability model provides the conceptual foundation for treating emotional information as a legitimate domain of cognition, while the four-domain competency framework provides a practical vocabulary for educational leadership. The distinction is important because EI should not become an umbrella term for every positive leadership quality. Côté (2014) notes that EI research is strongest when it specifies mechanisms and contextual conditions rather than assuming that EI predicts all forms of performance. Critics have also questioned whether broad mixed models blur the boundary between intelligence, personality, motivation, and social competence (Locke, 2005; Mayer et al., 2008).

Leadership research similarly counsels moderation. Harms and Credé's (2010) meta-analysis found stronger relationships between EI and transformational leadership when both were rated by the same source, but substantially weaker relationships when different raters assessed the constructs. This suggests that common-method bias and measurement choice can inflate associations. A credible educational leadership argument should therefore avoid treating EI as a universal predictor and instead identify the conditions and behaviors through which it may matter.

2.1.2 Power Distance and Responsible Use of Hofstede

Hofstede (1980) introduced power distance as one of several dimensions for comparing national work-related values. In later formulations, power distance referred to the extent to which less-powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept unequal power distribution (Hofstede et al., 2010). In educational settings, the construct can illuminate questions such as whether teachers challenge a principal's decision, how comfortably subordinates provide upward feedback, whether leaders consult staff before decisions, and whether status differences affect communication.

Power distance should not be equated with bad leadership. Schools require authority, role clarity, and accountability. In some circumstances, especially emergencies, clear hierarchical decision making may be necessary. The concern is excessive or rigid power distance: authority that discourages professional dissent, concentrates information, weakens feedback, or converts respect into unquestioning compliance. From this perspective, the relevant question is not whether hierarchy exists, but how leaders use authority and how followers experience relational distance.

Hofstede's framework has also received substantial criticism. McSweeney (2002) challenged assumptions that national cultures are coherent, stable, and adequately captured by national averages. Taras et al. (2010), in a large meta-analysis of Hofstede's dimensions, found that cultural values do relate to organizationally relevant outcomes but also demonstrated considerable complexity across levels and contexts. Brewer and Venaik (2014) provide an especially important warning for this paper: national culture scores are ecological-level constructs and should not be projected directly onto individuals, organizations, or schools.

Accordingly, this paper does not classify "African schools" as high power distance. Instead, it treats power distance as a sensitizing concept for examining authority relationships and uses school-level studies from specific African settings as contextual evidence. This approach allows the concept to inform analysis without turning it into a cultural stereotype.

2.1.3 GLOBE, African Leadership, and the Tension Between "As Is" and "Should Be"

The GLOBE project advances cross-cultural leadership research by distinguishing societal practices from societal values and by examining culturally endorsed leadership prototypes (House et al., 2004). The distinction between what is practiced and what is preferred is especially useful for understanding leadership change. A society may exhibit hierarchical practices while also preferring more participative or humane leadership.

Wanasika et al. (2011) analyzed GLOBE data and related evidence for a Sub-Saharan African cluster comprising Namibia, Nigeria, the Black South African sample, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Their analysis emphasized strong group solidarity, paternalistic elements, and humane-oriented leadership. The GLOBE cluster results also indicate relatively high power-distance practices but a preference for much lower power distance, alongside positive endorsement of charismatic/value-based, team-oriented, participative, and humane-oriented leadership. These data cover only five country samples and therefore cannot represent the continent. Their importance lies in illustrating a possible tension between hierarchical social practice and preferred relational leadership.

That tension provides a useful bridge to EI. Humane-oriented leadership emphasizes support, consideration, generosity, and compassion; participative leadership emphasizes involving others in decisions; and team-oriented leadership emphasizes cohesion and a common purpose. EI does not automatically produce these leadership behaviors, but its core competencies are logically relevant to them. Social awareness can help leaders read the emotional and status dynamics of a staff meeting. Self-management can reduce defensive or punitive reactions to disagreement. Relationship management can support conflict resolution, inclusive communication, and delegation. Self-awareness can help leaders recognize how positional power affects others' responses to them.

Indigenous African leadership concepts also offer a useful counterweight to relying exclusively on imported cross-cultural models. Ubuntu, for example, emphasizes relational personhood, mutual care, dignity, interdependence, and communal responsibility. In school leadership, Setlhodi (2019) found that Ubuntu-oriented practices were associated with social cohesion, shared values, and collaborative efforts toward school performance. Ubuntu should not be treated as a single or universal African leadership model, but its relational emphasis resonates with GLOBE's humane-oriented leadership and with the present paper's concern for exercising authority in ways that preserve dignity and participation.

The GLOBE perspective also complicates the assumption that high observed hierarchy necessarily indicates a preference for authoritarian leadership. In educational settings, a principal may inherit a strongly hierarchical role while teachers simultaneously desire greater respect, consultation, and professional voice. EI may be one mechanism by which the leader narrows unnecessary relational

distance without abandoning legitimate authority.

2.1.4 Integrated Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework integrates three bodies of thought: emotional intelligence, power distance, and culturally endorsed leadership. EI explains a leader's capacity to process and regulate emotional information; power distance explains the relational significance of unequal authority; and GLOBE distinguishes between existing cultural practices and preferred leadership behaviors. Together, they support a contextual proposition: the value of EI may increase when leadership requires a person with substantial formal authority to maintain accountability while fostering voice, trust, and collaboration.

The framework draws primarily on Goleman et al.'s (2002) four competency domains for the leadership mechanism. Self-awareness helps leaders recognize emotions, triggers, biases, and the interpersonal effects of their status. Self-management supports restraint, adaptability, and deliberate rather than reactive behavior. Social awareness, including empathy, enables leaders to interpret teacher concerns, informal norms, and the emotional meaning of change. Relationship management translates these capacities into observable leadership practices, such as providing constructive feedback, managing conflict, influencing, collaborating, and developing others.

Power distance is treated as part of the context rather than as an individual diagnosis. In high-power-distance settings, subordinates may be less likely to challenge leaders openly, and leaders may receive filtered information. EI can help a leader notice silence, indirect disagreement, fear, resentment, or face-saving behavior that formal channels do not reveal. GLOBE's humane and participative leadership dimensions then provide culturally relevant behavioral outcomes: leaders can remain decisive while remaining supportive, consultative, and relationally accessible.

2.2 Empirical Studies

2.2.1 Emotional Intelligence and School Leadership

Schools are emotionally demanding workplaces. Principals routinely deliver difficult feedback, manage conflict among adults, respond to distressed students and families, address underperformance, communicate during change, and make decisions that affect professional identity and status. Their emotional responses are visible to staff and can influence the tone of meetings, the safety of professional dialogue, and the willingness of teachers to raise concerns. These features make schools an appropriate setting for examining EI as a leadership resource.

Sasere and Matashu's (2025) systematic review of 28 studies found recurring evidence that self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management are important to school leadership and may influence teachers through emotional reframing, instructional support, collective efficacy, school climate, and well-being. Importantly, the review concluded that cultural and contextual factors shape how EI is expressed and that some EI measures may not transfer seamlessly across cultural settings. This finding supports a move away from culture-free models of emotionally competent leadership.

African evidence is consistent with the broader literature but also reveals contextual particularities. In Kenya, Ayiro (2009), in a study of 100 high-school principals using the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test and leadership-effectiveness indicators, reported a significant relationship between principals' EI and school or leadership performance. In Ghana, Dampson (2021) used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design with 262 headteachers in the quantitative phase and eight headteachers in follow-up qualitative interviews; the study found low EI levels among the sampled headteachers and recommended explicit EI development in leadership preparation. In Nigeria, Okoro and

Chimezie (2023) surveyed 92 secondary-school principals in Rivers State and reported a positive association between EI dimensions and principals' effectiveness. In South Africa, Venter et al. (2024) used a correlational design with 75 principals and found positive relationships between EI and instructional-leadership functions, while Maduna and Mohangi (2026) used a qualitative multiple-case design with 10 school-management-team members from five rural primary schools and emphasized EI's potential contributions to trust, collaboration, teacher morale, conflict management, and resilience under conditions of material scarcity. The concentration of this EI evidence in Anglophone sub-Saharan settings limits geographic generalization and underscores the need for broader regional research.

Taken together, these studies support the relevance of EI to African school leadership, but they do not establish that EI operates identically across contexts. Nor do they show that EI by itself produces school improvement. Leadership effects are nested within resources, governance, professional capacity, community conditions, and institutional expectations. The more defensible claim is that EI can strengthen the relational processes through which leadership is enacted.

2.2.2 Educational Leadership in African Contexts

The phrase "African educational leadership" must be used carefully. Africa includes more than fifty countries, thousands of linguistic and cultural communities, diverse political histories, and very different education systems. Hallinger (2018) showed that educational leadership research on the continent is unevenly distributed, while Bush and Glover (2025) documented substantial variation in leadership preparation and development. Nkomo (2011) similarly cautions against reducing African leadership to a fixed set of cultural traits or replacing Western stereotypes with equally simplistic counter-stereotypes.

Nevertheless, contextual patterns identified in multiple settings can be analytically useful when treated as tendencies rather than universal properties. One such pattern concerns the concentration of authority in formal leadership roles. Mualuko et al. (2009) described the hierarchical structure of Kenyan secondary schools and found that teachers desired more participation in decision making than they were receiving. Jwan et al. (2010) found that Kenyan principals and teachers had made efforts toward democratic school leadership but continued to negotiate cultural and historical limits around participation. Mitchell's (2017) study in Tigray, Ethiopia, found that formal participatory structures existed but that management agendas continued to dominate important decision-making forums. In South Africa, Williams (2011) documented how hierarchical and authoritarian traditions constrained distributed leadership even after policy changes encouraged greater participation.

North African evidence broadens this contextual picture even where studies do not examine EI directly. Elmeski (2015), in a phenomenological study of three urban middle schools in Morocco, described principals shifting from agents of authority toward school-improvement leadership while remaining constrained by bureaucratic and place-based conditions. Amghar (2026), using 44 questionnaires and seven interviews with school leaders in Morocco, likewise reported limited principal decision-making authority and inadequate resources and argued for leadership models grounded more explicitly in local intellectual and cultural traditions. These studies reinforce the need to examine authority, participation, and relational leadership within specific African settings rather than infer them from continent-wide labels.

These findings do not prove that all African schools are "high power distance." They do, however, show that formal authority, deference, and participation are consequential leadership issues in multiple African educational settings. This makes power distance useful as a conceptual lens, provided it is used at the correct level of analysis and supplemented by direct school-level evidence.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This paper uses an integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic review or primary empirical design. Integrative reviews are appropriate when the purpose is to synthesize diverse theoretical and empirical literatures and generate new conceptual perspectives rather than estimate an effect size or exhaustively retrieve every study (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). The purpose here is theory building: to connect previously separate literatures in order to propose a framework that can be tested in future research.

Targeted searches were conducted through Google Scholar and ERIC, supplemented by publisher databases and backward reference chaining. Searches emphasized literature published from 1990 through 2026, while earlier seminal works were retained when necessary to establish foundational concepts such as legitimate power. Search combinations included “emotional intelligence,” “school leadership,” “principal leadership,” “power distance,” “GLOBE,” “teacher voice,” “participative leadership,” “educational leadership,” and “Africa,” together with country names represented in the review. Sources were included when they were peer-reviewed empirical or review studies, authoritative foundational works, or major reports directly relevant to EI, school leadership, power distance, cross-cultural leadership, or educational leadership in African settings. Sources lacking direct relevance to educational leadership or sufficient scholarly grounding were excluded. Approximately 40 sources were retained for the conceptual synthesis.

The synthesis was organized around the four research questions stated in Section 1.4. Evidence was compared across theoretical constructs, country settings, research designs, and levels of analysis to identify recurring mechanisms, contradictions, and boundary conditions. Foundational sources were used to define EI, power distance, and GLOBE constructs, while empirical studies were used to assess the plausibility of the proposed relationships in educational settings. The resulting framework is therefore a theoretically derived set of propositions, not a causal model established by the reviewed evidence.

The review has limitations. Because the search was targeted and integrative rather than systematic, selection bias and omission of relevant studies are possible. The accessible evidence is also concentrated in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa, and the review relies primarily on English-language scholarship, although North African evidence from Morocco is included. These constraints mean that the review does not claim comprehensive coverage of African educational leadership; rather, it develops a context-sensitive framework from representative and theoretically relevant literature for future empirical testing.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Leadership authority is necessary, but relational distance must be managed

The first conceptual finding is that the central problem is not hierarchy itself but its relational consequences. Principals require authority to fulfill legal, instructional, and organizational responsibilities. Yet authority can create information asymmetry: teachers may say what they believe the principal wants to hear, avoid raising problems, or express dissent only through informal channels. Leaders may interpret silence as agreement, even when it reflects deference, fear, resignation, or status concerns.

School-level studies in Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Africa illustrate this tension. Teachers may be formally invited into decision-making processes while leaders retain strong agenda-setting power (Mitchell, 2017). Participation may exist but remain partial or culturally bounded (Jwan et al., 2010). Hierarchical structures may preserve coordination while simultaneously weakening teacher ownership and morale when staff perceive their professional knowledge as undervalued (Mualuko et al., 2009). Distributed leadership may be endorsed in policy yet constrained by inherited organizational traditions (Williams, 2011).

These patterns help explain why relational competence is not merely a “soft” addition to school leadership. A leader’s capacity to read the emotional meaning of silence, disagreement, frustration, or compliance can affect the quality of information reaching the leadership office. EI therefore has potential organizational value because it influences how power is exercised and how feedback moves across status boundaries.

4.2 Emotional Intelligence as a mechanism for relationally responsible authority

The second conceptual finding is that the four EI domains can be mapped to specific leadership risks associated with unequal authority. Self-awareness addresses the risk of power blindness. Leaders may underestimate how their title, control over evaluations, access to resources, or influence over assignments affects what teachers are willing to say. A self-aware principal is more likely to ask how positional power shapes the conversation rather than assuming that an open-door policy automatically creates openness.

Self-management addresses the risk of reactive authority. When challenged, leaders may experience anger, embarrassment, anxiety, or threats to their status. In a context where the leader is expected to be respected, a defensive response can quickly teach staff that disagreement is unsafe. Self-management does not require passivity; it helps leaders separate emotional impulse from professional response and remain firm without resorting to humiliation, retaliation, or unnecessary escalation.

Social awareness helps mitigate the risk of misreading followers. Teachers may communicate disagreement indirectly, especially where respect for seniority or authority is strong. Empathy and situational awareness help leaders recognize emotional cues, understand the pressures staff face, and distinguish resistance rooted in self-interest from concerns rooted in workload, professional judgment, or fear of failure. Social awareness also matters across differences in age, gender, ethnicity, language, status, and community expectations.

Relationship management addresses the risk that authority becomes relational distance. Through communication, conflict management, influence, coaching, delegation, and collaboration, leaders can create structures in which teachers contribute without undermining accountability. The objective is not to erase hierarchy but to humanize it. This aligns with GLOBE’s humane-oriented and participative leadership dimensions and with evidence that teachers in several African settings seek meaningful involvement in decisions affecting their work.

4.3 Proposed contextual Emotional Intelligence framework

Figure 1 presents the proposed framework. The model begins with the cultural and institutional context because EI is not expressed in a vacuum. Power distance, authority norms, collectivist or relational expectations, resource constraints, policy demands, and local school history shape what leadership behavior means. The same act, for example, inviting teachers to challenge a decision, may be interpreted as empowering in one setting and as a sign of uncertainty or loss of authority in another. Effective leaders therefore require both emotional and cultural judgment.

The second element is EI, encompassing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. These capacities are expected to influence a third element: relational leadership behaviors. These behaviors include respectful use of authority, active listening, teacher participation, constructive feedback, trust-building, conflict management, and delegation. The fourth element comprises proximal organizational outcomes: psychological safety, teacher engagement, collaboration, change readiness, and a supportive school climate. These outcomes are closer to the relational mechanism than broad indicators such as examination scores and are therefore more

appropriate initial targets for empirical testing.

The arrows in the model should not be interpreted as deterministic. Relational leadership behaviors are proposed as a mediating pathway through which EI may influence proximal school outcomes, while cultural and institutional context moderates the strength and meaning of these relationships. A highly emotionally competent principal cannot create adequate classrooms, textbooks, teacher supply, electricity, internet access, or salaries through interpersonal skill alone. Maduna and Mohangi (2026) make this limitation explicit in rural South Africa. The 2026 Global Education Monitoring Report similarly emphasizes that equitable educational progress depends in part on how resources are intentionally allocated to disadvantaged regions, schools, and learners (UNESCO, 2026). Similarly, EI without instructional knowledge or ethical judgment could simply make a leader more socially skillful without making leadership more educationally sound. The model therefore treats EI as a complement to professional competence and structural capacity.

Context shapes how emotional intelligence is expressed; EI complements rather than substitutes for structural resources and professional competence.

Figure 1. Proposed contextual emotional intelligence framework for African educational leadership.

4.4 Conceptual propositions for future research

The framework generates four propositions that can guide future empirical research:

Proposition 1: In school contexts where teachers perceive higher relational power distance, leaders' self-awareness and social awareness will be positively associated with behaviors that enhance teacher voice and upward communication.

Proposition 2: Leaders' self-management will be negatively associated with punitive or defensive responses to professional disagreement and positively associated with constructive conflict management.

Proposition 3: Relationship management will be positively associated with humane-oriented and participative leadership behaviors, which, in turn, will be linked to teacher trust, engagement, collaboration, and psychological safety.

Proposition 4: The relationship between EI and school-level outcomes will be contingent on institutional conditions, including leadership preparation, organizational resources, governance structures, and the local meaning of authority.

These propositions intentionally focus on school-level perceptions and behaviors rather than assigning national culture scores to individual leaders. Future studies could measure teachers' perceived power distance within the school, principals' emotional competency using validated instruments, and observable or multi-rater leadership behaviors. This would reduce the ecological fallacy identified by Brewer and Venaik (2014) and permit direct testing of the mechanism proposed here.

4.5 Why the framework matters for African educational leadership

The proposed framework contributes to educational leadership scholarship in three ways. First, it shifts EI from a generic claim that "good leaders need empathy" to a mechanism tied to a specific leadership problem: managing the relational consequences of unequal authority. This makes the theory more testable and avoids portraying EI as a panacea.

Second, it brings culture into EI research without reducing it to a stereotype. Muchiri (2011) and

Walumbwa et al. (2011) argue that leadership in sub-Saharan Africa must be studied in context, while Nkomo (2011) warns against flattening African leadership into a single cultural narrative. The framework responds by treating power distance as a contextual variable and insisting that cultural claims be tested at the school level.

Third, the framework bridges two observations that might otherwise seem contradictory: hierarchical practices can remain influential even as humane and participative leadership are valued. GLOBE's distinction between "as is" practices and "should be" values helps explain how these conditions can coexist. EI may help leaders move between them, not by importing a foreign model of informality, but by exercising authority in ways that preserve dignity, relationships, and professional voice.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Educational leadership in African contexts cannot be understood solely through administrative competence or formal position. It is enacted through relationships shaped by authority, culture, professional norms, history, and institutional conditions. The literature reviewed in this paper provides growing evidence that EI is relevant to school leadership, including studies from Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa. At the same time, cross-cultural and school-leadership research shows that formal hierarchy can constrain participation and upward communication in some educational settings.

This paper has argued that EI can be conceptualized as a relational leadership resource for navigating that tension. Self-awareness helps leaders recognize how their positional power affects others; self-management reduces reactive uses of authority; social awareness improves the reading of emotional and cultural cues; and relationship management supports trust, participation, conflict resolution, and collaboration. EI therefore does not remove hierarchy but supports the responsible exercise of authority.

The argument must remain bounded. Africa is culturally and institutionally diverse. Hofstede and GLOBE offer useful lenses but should not be used to label every African school or leader. National culture scores cannot replace direct evidence at the school level. EI cannot overcome structural inequality, resource shortages, weak governance, or insufficient professional preparation. It is best understood as one component of capable, ethical, and contextually responsive educational leadership.

5.2 Recommendations

First, ministries of education, teacher service commissions or equivalent appointing bodies, national school-leadership institutes such as the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI), and universities responsible for principal preparation should explicitly develop emotional competencies alongside instructional leadership, school management, finance, governance, and policy knowledge. Training should use realistic school-based scenarios involving conflict, feedback, authority, change, teacher resistance, and community relationships rather than relying solely on abstract EI inventories.

Second, district or county education offices, school-leadership institutes, and professional-development providers should help school leaders examine power as a relational phenomenon. Principals can be encouraged to ask how teachers experience authority, whether staff can safely disagree, how decisions are communicated, and whether formal participation yields genuine influence. Multi-rater feedback may be especially useful because leaders' self-perceptions of EI and openness may differ from teachers' experiences.

Third, ministries of education, teacher service commissions, school governing bodies, and other principal-selection authorities should avoid using EI as a stand-alone selection test for principals. The

measurement literature remains contested, and culturally inappropriate instruments can misrepresent competence. EI should instead be considered within a broader leadership-development process that includes ethics, instructional expertise, professional judgment, and contextual knowledge.

Fourth, ministries of education, KEMI and similar leadership institutes, teacher service commissions, and universities should support culturally grounded research on EI and school leadership, including validation of EI measures and examination of local meanings of authority, respect, hierarchy, and relational leadership.

Finally, future interventions should distinguish between relational and structural problems. EI development can improve leaders' communication, collaboration, and stress management, but it should never become a low-cost substitute for adequate school financing, staffing, infrastructure, or systemic reform.

5.3 Areas for further research

Future studies should test the proposed framework across multiple African countries and school types using multilevel designs. School-level measures of perceived power distance should be preferred over national scores when the research question concerns teachers and principals. Studies should also use multiple data sources; for example, ability-based or validated EI measures, teacher ratings of leadership behavior, qualitative interviews, and organizational climate indicators, to reduce common-method bias.

Comparative research could examine whether EI is more strongly associated with teacher voice and psychological safety in schools with higher perceived power distance than in those with lower perceived power distance. Researchers could also test whether humane-oriented or participative leadership mediates the relationship between EI and teacher outcomes. Rural and under-resourced schools deserve particular attention because relational leadership may be highly consequential where material constraints are severe, yet it cannot substitute for resources.

Finally, research should explore indigenous and locally grounded leadership concepts alongside EI. Comparative research should also move beyond national averages and examine how leadership operates across multiple levels. Bray and Thomas (1995) argue that comparative educational analysis can be strengthened by considering geographic levels, demographic groups, and different aspects of education simultaneously. Applied here, such a multilevel approach could compare countries, regions, districts, schools, and leader-teacher relationships while examining how power distance and EI are experienced at each level. This would strengthen cross-national learning while reducing the risk of ecological fallacy. The objective should not be to force African leadership into Hofstede, GLOBE, or Western EI categories, but to use these frameworks as starting points for dialogue with African educational realities.

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