

## The Essential Meaning of Self-Actualization via Principalship: A Phenomenological Study\*

Okul Müdürlüğü ile Kendini Gerçekleştirmenin Özsel Anlamı: Fenomenolojik Bir Araştırma

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**Abstract.** According to Abraham Harold Maslow, self-actualization can be defined as using one's own potential in full. He described it as a higher sort of human need, which must be satisfied to reach healthiness and achieve the full range of desirable personality traits. The aim of this phenomenological study is to reveal the shared meaning of self-actualization in the context of school principalship as derived from the articulated beliefs of a number of public and private school principals. Twelve principals from both public and private schools were interviewed about the meaning of self-actualization as described by literature on the topic. The findings from semi-structured interviews of the participants revealed a consensus that there are five prominent skills which constitute a principal's fully-realized potential: communication, organization, motivation, empathy, and self-improvement. As a consequence of realizing their individual potential, the participants expressed feelings of happiness, peace, and enjoyment in their work, as well as an increase in their self-confidence and self-motivation. However, the participants expressed feelings of a short-term loss of morale and increased unhappiness whenever they failed to realize their individual potential due to impediments encountered in the field. Possible implications for research and practice are also offered.

**Keywords:** Self-actualization, Maslow, principals, school administration, phenomenology

**Öz.** Abraham Harold Maslow'a göre kendini gerçekleştirme, kişinin potansiyelini sonuna kadar kullanması olarak tanımlanabilir. Maslow bu kavramı sağlıklı olma haline ve arzu edilir kişilik özelliklerinin her çeşidine ulaşabilmek için karşılanması gereken üst düzey bir gereksinim olarak betimlemiştir. Bu fenomenolojik araştırmanın amacı, kamuya ve özel sektöre ait okullarda çalışmakta olan bir grup okul müdürünün ifadelerine dayalı olarak okul müdürlüğü bağlamında kendini gerçekleştirme kavramının paylaşılan anlamını ortaya koyabilmektir. Bu kapsamda on iki okul müdürü ile kendini gerçekleştirme kavramının anlamına ilişkin yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Görüşmelerden elde edilen bulgular, katılımcılar arasında bir okul müdürünün potansiyelini tamamen gerçekleştirebilmesi için beş temel becerisini kullanması gerektiği yönünde ortak bir algı olduğunu göstermiştir. Söz konusu beceriler, iletişim, organizasyon, motivasyon, empati ve kendini geliştirmedir. Katılımcılar potansiyellerini gerçekleştirebilmeleri halinde mutluluk ve huzur duyduklarını ve işlerinden haz aldıklarını; bunlara ek olarak öz güvenlerinde ve bireysel motivasyonlarında artış hissettiklerini dile getirmişlerdir. Potansiyellerini gerçekleştirmeleri önünde engellerle karşılaştıkları durumlarda ise kısa süreli bir moral kaybı ve mutsuzluk hissettiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Araştırma metni içerisinde bulguların uygulama ve gelecek araştırmalar açısından doğrularına da yer verilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kendini gerçekleştirme, Maslow, müdürler, okul yönetimi, fenomenoloji

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## Introduction

In many educational systems around the world, principals possess a teaching background, which is widely considered to be a prerequisite for effective principalship. However, beneficial skills acquired in the classroom environment do not usually translate to the position of principal, a fact that is the *raison d'être* of the educational administration discipline. Principals often find themselves in a position that calls for a wide variety of skills, some of which they may not possess or even anticipate needing before taking the job. Although this might seem like a problem at first, it also represents an opportunity for principals to work towards satisfying their individual self-actualization needs as part of the process for becoming an effective administrator.

This study aims to develop a perspective on the shared meaning of self-actualization for principals, and it adopts Maslow's understanding of self-actualization as its theoretical framework. Maslow's thoughts about self-actualization developed as part of his theory on the hierarchy of human needs, and his ideas continued to evolve throughout his career until his death in 1970. Consequently, it is necessary to briefly review Maslow's theory about human needs before proceeding to this study's focus on the self-actualization of school principals.

## Conceptual Framework

Maslow (1943) posited that beginning from physiological needs, which are the most prepotent ones, human needs are arranged hierarchically in ascending order. Needs that come after the physical ones are the needs of safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and the one at the top of the hierarchy, self-actualization. In Maslow's (1970) succinct description, self-actualization is "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc." (p. 150). Rather than an endpoint, self-actualization is an ongoing process of realizing one's own potential by doing what the individual is capable of (Maslow 1969).

According to the theory, a lower, prepotent need must usually be satisfied so that a higher need might appear and motivate the individual to take action. In the case of an extremely hungry man, as Maslow (1943) put it, "the urge to write poetry, the desire to acquire an automobile, the interest in American history, the desire for a new pair of shoes are, in the extreme case, forgotten or become of secondary importance" (p. 3); and as soon as this hunger is satisfied, it loses its motivational potential and is replaced by the safety needs. Maslow (1943) felt the need to clarify and emphasize that it is not a precondition for a certain need to be satisfied 100 percent for the emergence of the subsequent one. A normal person is partially satisfied in all his or her needs. In the same paper, Maslow (1943) described the normal person's situation using rough estimates of satisfaction, such as 85 percent for the physical needs and only 10 percent for the self-actualization needs. He also added that a certain need does not appear suddenly, rather, it might emerge five percent, as its more prepotent predecessor is satisfied 25 percent.

Maslow (1970) differentiated between the deficiency needs, which include first four levels of the hierarchy, and the growth needs, which is exclusively felt by healthy, self-actualizing people. Even in the earlier period of his theory, he described the person who feels the deficiency needs as "simply an unhealthy man" (Maslow 1943, p. 13). The other term, Maslow (1974) used for the growth needs was "metaneeds." In line with this, he named the motivation of lucky, healthy people as "metamotivation," which is the source of their dedication and makes them distinct from unhealthy people. Maslow (1974) vividly described this dedication. For self-actualizers, work is only the external appearance of their

mission, to which they devote themselves. Deep down, they work for truth, beauty, perfection, justice and so on. The relationship between self-actualizers and their jobs is similar to a romantic relationship, in which both sides are meant for each other. This good fit enables self-actualizers to overcome the dichotomy between work and play. Consequently, work is intrinsically rewarding, and pay is only a by-product of this uplifting experience. Nevertheless, having a job is not a sine qua non for self-actualization. What self-actualizers need is to find a pursuit, to which they can devote their lives, and by which they can exercise their creativeness. Maslow (1974) believed that when self-actualizers are asked who they are, their answer might well be “I am a mother” as well as “I am a lawyer” (p. 49). Elsewhere, Maslow (1968) claimed that “a first-rate soup is more creative than a second-rate painting, and that, generally cooking and parenthood or making a home could be creative while poetry need not be; it could be uncreative” (p. 22). This example of a full-time housewife implies that, from the standpoint of self-actualization, what matters is a worthwhile pursuit, not necessarily a high-status occupation.

Maslow (1974) acknowledged that all people are metamotivated to a certain extent; so he did not draw a sharp line between self-actualizers and non-self-actualizers from the standpoint of being metamotivated. Maslow (1970) also shared his observations about self-actualizing people, who were either his personal acquaintances or public and historical figures. After his first attempt, he decided not to study on young people, thinking that they were not self-actualizers as yet. His observations, which he presented as a basis for further clinical and experimental studies, are valuable in terms of understanding what he meant by the self-actualizer individual. For Maslow (1970), self-actualizers were those who are able to:

- understand people correctly,
- perceive the world as it is,
- accept their own natures,
- be relatively spontaneous in their behaviors and in their thoughts,
- form a clear understanding of what is right or wrong,
- have a strong but relatively autonomous ethical stance instead of a conventional one,
- demonstrate democratic attitudes,
- have ambitions for self-development instead of being content with merely satisfying their basic needs,
- be mission-oriented and strongly focused on others’ problems,
- feel a deep love for other people and help them,
- enjoy solitariness,
- maintain their calmness and dignity even when it is difficult to do so,
- control their own lives,
- be dependent on their own development rather than external sources such as other people,
- take pleasure in what they routinely do,
- see the difference between means and ends, though they might enjoy means as well, and
- engage in intense concentration.

Maslow (1970) also identified other characteristics of self-actualizers such as:

- creativity,
- willingness to learn from anyone,
- being less culturally constricted,
- being comfortably disorderly and uncertain when it is necessary,
- preference for gradual evolution over radical revolution,

- lack of fear of the unknown, and
- refusal to be controlled by the culture in which they live.

Maslow (1970) also shared his observations about actions or habits that self-actualizers avoid. To him, they do not:

- fight against conventionality, even though they are not conventional people,
- feel shamed by their physiological appetites and impulses,
- show disrespect for social ceremonies in order not to hurt people's feelings,
- enjoy hostile humor,
- worry about trivial matters, and
- care much about what other people think of them.

Maslow (1970) reported that, because self-actualizers are strong people, when they deem it necessary, they are able to:

- speak harshly to people,
- display behaviors that might even be regarded as ruthless by others, and
- be clear about their anger and be strong-willed when it comes to counterattack evil people.

Maslow (1970) did not claim that self-actualizers are perfect human beings; on the contrary, he noted that they might:

- have human failings such as being boring or stubborn,
- have few friends, as it often takes time to be very close to someone in a self-actualizing way,
- be absent-minded or inclined to forget requirements of social politeness when they concentrate on something, and
- be capable of feeling sad or guilty (However, these feelings stem from non-neurotic sources as they are healthy people).

Perhaps, Maslow's (1970) most interesting observation about self-actualizers was that they do not need to resolve dichotomies such as being selfish or altruistic; therefore, they can exhibit both in their behaviors. They can be the most moral and the lustiest person at the same time. As they are healthy individuals, self-actualizers are able to trust their impulses.

Over the years, Maslow modified his views, particularly in certain dimensions. For example, in his last years, he mentioned the existence of a new level over self-actualization. While Maslow (1969, p. 3) vaguely used the word "transhumanistic," Greene and Burke (2007) called this new level "selfless-actualization", and Koltko-Rivera (2006) preferred the term "self-transcendence". At this level of the hierarchy, the self-actualized individual goes beyond his or her own needs (self-actualization is also a personal need) and finds the meaning in the service to others. Koltko-Rivera (2006) discussed five possible reasons why Maslow did not clearly articulate this sixth level of human needs. Among them, what seems to be the most plausible is that he could not find enough time to elaborate on this concept. Maslow mentioned his views on the sixth level in late 1960's. During that time he was very busy as the president of APA and died of a coronary attack in 1970.

It should also be noted that there are thorough criticisms towards Maslow's inconsistencies and vagueness in both the original and the later versions of his theory (Daniels 1982; Neher 1991). Nonetheless, today it still finds favor in various disciplines of social sciences. Because of its importance to a proper understanding of the highest needs of human beings, several scales for measuring self-actualization have been developed (Çetinkanat 2005; Jones and Crandall 1986;

Shostrom 1964; Shostrom 1975). One positive facet of the concept of self-actualization is that it implies that every successful self-actualizer has the potential to greatly contribute to society. Pfaffenberger (2005) summarized her readings of studies on self-actualization by saying that “adults at higher stages of development are in a unique position to make valuable contributions to the field of education, organizational management, and social leadership because of their mature insight and intellectual flexibility” (p. 280). Both Maslow’s insights and Pfaffenberger’s (2005) above-cited conclusion suggest that self-actualized principals could make significant contributions to their schools. Indeed, there are convincing studies showing the importance that self-actualization holds for principals. For example, Stone, Parker, and Wood (2005) identified key emotional and social competencies for successful school administration, and self-actualization was one of them. Kennedy (2017) compared commonly valued professional attributes to the attributes of self-actualizers as described by Maslow and went so far as to claim that these two sets of attributes are essentially the same. The above-cited studies imply that investigation of self-actualization among principals could be valuable for the discipline of educational administration. Unfortunately, studies in this research field are predominantly quantitative, and the author is unaware of any field studies that shed light on the shared meaning of self-actualization as it applies to principals. Accepting this as a starting point for investigation, the aim of this phenomenological study is to reveal the shared meaning of self-actualization as experienced by twelve principals from both public and private schools and to discuss this meaning as it applies to the self-actualization literature.

## Method

This study was designed to reveal the shared meaning of self-actualization in the context of school principalship as derived from the articulated beliefs of a number of public and private school principals. Phenomenology was defined by Sanders (1982) as a research method that “seeks to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experiences. It is the search for ‘essences’ that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation” (p. 354). Because the aim was to reveal the essence of self-actualization phenomenon, phenomenology was adopted as the research method for the present study.

Phenomenology as a research tradition was founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and expanded by other writers in the later years. Marton (1988) summarized Husserl’s sensitivity about finding the immediate experiences as unaffected by conceptual thoughts. Therefore, phenomenologists bracket their conceptual thoughts in their pursuit of the immediate experiences. This practice is called “abstention (epoche) or bracketing (Einklammerung)” in this particular research tradition (Richardson, 1999, p. 59). In addition, phenomenology is strongly focused on the “essence” which refers to the common meaning of the phenomenon under study (Marton, 1981). Strandmark and Hedelin’s (2002, p. 79, as cited by Larsson and Holmström, 2007) definition of phenomenology puts this in a very concise way as follows: “The goal of phenomenology is to uncover the essence of the phenomenon, its inner core, what the ‘thing’ is, and without which it could not be what it is.” Blomqvist and Ziegert (2011, p. 187) used a catchy term “main common denominator” for the essence. In conclusion, the focus in phenomenology is on participants’ common lived experience (Creswell, 2007) instead of the variation of their experiences of the phenomenon, which falls into the domain of another research tradition: phenomenography.

The present study focuses not on the participants’ individual understandings of the phenomenon of self-actualization, but rather on the shared meaning of their lived experiences of it. The present study



seeks to give a clear answer to the question: “What does self-actualization mean to a school principal?” These characteristics together render this research endeavor phenomenology.

### Study Group

Creswell (2007) reminded the recommendations of Dukes (1984) as between 3 to 10 and of Polkinghorne (1989) as between 5 to 25 for the number of participants in phenomenological studies. Accordingly, the number of participants was determined as 12. The maximum variation sampling method was employed to address the diversity of principals’ self-actualization experiences. Consequently, the study group was varied in terms of: (a) sector (four participants from public schools and eight from private schools); (b) school level (two preschool, three primary, four secondary, and three high school principals); (c) gender (two participants were female); and (d) years of service in principalship position (ranged from 1.5 to 39 years). All the participants were in principalship position in an Anatolian City of Turkey during the data collection period.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The study’s data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The researcher received the gatekeeper permission from the related Provincial Directorate of National Education and the institutional review board permission from his university. After that, he made contact with the school principals who were suitable for requirements of the study’s sampling method. At the beginning of each interview, the participants’ informed consent was obtained using the form recommended by Creswell (2007, p. 124). The interview questions were as follows:

1. What are the skills that you can use as a school principal but you were not able to use when you were a teacher?
2. Could you please describe the situations in which you can use your skills thanks to your position as a school principal? How do you feel in those situations?
3. Could you please describe the situations in which you are not able to use your skills as a school principal? How do you feel in those situations?

All the interviews took place in participants’ offices during March-April, 2016. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted approximately 40 minutes on average. The researcher himself conducted the interviews in Turkish and translated the study’s final report into English.

To begin the data analysis, the researcher transcribed the content of interviews using Google Documents Voice Typing tool. In the analysis step, the researcher largely adopted the methodology developed by Colaizzi (1978) and exemplified by Riemen (1998, as quoted in Creswell 2003). In order to reveal the essence of the phenomenon, the researcher: (a) read the transcriptions in detail to get a sense for them; (b) determined the significant statements as categories and collected the statements that have the same meaning under these categories; (c) formulated the meanings based on the significant statements; (d) created the exhaustive description of the phenomenon; and (e) in order to increase the rigor of the study, he sent the exhaustive description to the participants’ e-mail addresses and made alterations based on the feedback he received. As distinct from Riemen’s (1998) methodology, the significant statements and the formulated meanings were not presented in the study. Instead, drawing on the methodology developed by Anderson and Spencer (2002, as quoted in Creswell 2007), the

exhaustive description was supported by direct quotations from the participants. As is evident in the description above, the formulated meanings are common to all the participants. The only exception to this is the last interview excerpt, which illustrates one participant's motivation to establish his own school since this idea seemed to be an interesting and important deviation from the rest. The practice of formulating the meanings based on the significant statements can be exemplified as follows:

- Significant statement→ "... I take great pleasure in doing different things. I say 'Look, we have done a superb job, and this is the result.' It's a great pleasure for me."
- Formulated meaning→ The principal feels enjoyment when she uses her various skills in her daily work life.

Before proceeding to the findings, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "a principal's potential." In Motivation and Personality, Maslow (1970, p. 150) mentioned "talents" along with "capacities, potentialities, etc." to be realized for self-actualization. Elsewhere in the same book, he emphasized that when he referred to creativeness, he did not mean an innate sort of "special-talent creativeness of the Mozart type" (p. 170); instead, he pointed to the creativeness hidden in daily, routine activities such as housekeeping, teaching and so on. In the present study, both talent, which is innate, and skill, which is related to, but different from talent as being "the multiplicative product of talent and effort" (Duckworth, Eichstaedt, and Ungar 2015, p. 359), are considered within the scope of the participants' potential. For example, because it is similar to Maslow's (1968) example of a first-rate soup created by an uneducated housewife, organizing a school activity using creativity was taken as the realization of a participant's potential. Both accomplishments require talent, creativity, and practice.

This study reveals the shared meaning of the phenomenon as understood by a number of participants who, although diverse based on certain variables, lived in the same Anatolian city and belonged to the same culture. In other cities, or in other types of schools (for example, science high schools, which offer high-quality education to the most successful students in the country), principals might share different understandings of the phenomenon in question. The revelation of these understandings would be a useful contribution to the literature on the topic. This possibility should be noted by colleagues who are interested in this research subject.

## Findings

In this section the findings revealing the participants' shared meaning of self-actualization will be presented under the following headings: (a) the content of the participants' potential; (b) the participants' emotions when they realize their potential; and (c) the participants' emotions when they fail to realize their potential.

### The Content of the Participants' Potential

The participants mentioned five skills as the content of their potential for principalship position. These five skills are as follows:

#### *Communication*

The addressees with whom a principal communicates consist of teachers, parents, superiors, and other institutions.

*Communication with teachers.* Within the context of communication skill, the participants tended to dwell on communication with teachers most. In the following excerpt, one participant expressed his belief in the effectiveness of establishing warm relations with teachers instead of using his positional power.

I don't stay in my office. I am here just because you are here today. I don't sit in that armchair even one hour a day. I spend time with my teachers. I don't enter their classrooms either [the participant means teacher inspection]. Cordiality is important for me. (Principal of a private secondary school)

*Communication with parents.* Another important dimension of the participants' communication skill was to establish good communication with students' parents, who had various expectations from the school. One public school principal discussed his views on this dimension as follows:

Principals of large schools have to be good communicators. 80-90 percent of our effort is devoted to communication, if not more. If we manage to make ourselves understood in parents' meetings or parent-teacher association board meetings, then we can receive their support. (Principal of a public primary school)

Especially in private schools, influencing parents' attitudes appeared to be of prime importance in the eyes of participants. As one participant clarified:

Now, what am I currently reading? "The Science of Influence: How to Get Anyone to Say 'Yes' in 8 Minutes or Less." This book is about persuasion. No one told me to read it. When I came here [the participant means private school], I immediately understood that leadership and persuasion are the most important skills. If the number of student enrollments is not sufficient, your other achievements mean nothing here. (Principal of a private secondary school)

*Communication with superiors.* The participants expressed their need to convince their superiors for administrative implementations that they find necessary. One participant shared her thoughts:

You have to get along well with your superiors too because they have expectations from you. On the one hand, you have to deal with your teachers; on the other hand, you have to send positive messages to your superiors. Because, as you know, in our system there are always higher, higher, and higher positions; and everybody wants to hear only good news. That's why you should please both your teachers and your superiors. You are a buffer [between superiors and teachers], so to speak. (Principal of a public preschool)

*Communication with other institutions.* The participants found it necessary to maintain good relations with other institutions in the immediate vicinity of the school to receive their help when needed. The following two excerpts show that this skill of communication with other institutions is necessary for both public and private schools:

Our priority is inter-organizational relations. No one can deny this. Institutions, governmental and nongovernmental organizations; I have to keep in touch with them. (Principal of a private primary school)

Our shareholders are not only students or parents. When the occasion arises, we set about projects with the province or district governors, nongovernmental organizations, and universities. In such cases, my formal position was not that important. Throughout my sixteen years of experience in the principalship, I have achieved lots of things by my bilateral relations. (Principal of a public secondary school)

### *Organization*

Organization skill emerged in two dimensions: organizing school activities and being competent and fair in the distribution of tasks to teachers.



*Organizing school activities.* In their work routine, the participants reported demonstrating creativity, finding monetary resources, and providing the conditions to run school activities such as excursions, sports events or knowledge contests. One private school principal discussed her time at a public school:

When I was the principal, I found both time and money [for school activities]. I took great pleasure in every school activity. We held such beautiful exhibitions. . . . Those who sat in the principal's armchair after me [her successors in the office] were not able to organize such things [activities]. They had no creativity, no vision. I heard with sorrow that our showboards got rusty in the basement [of the school]. Back in my time, you could see creativity in that school. We took so much pleasure in those activities. . . . You need to be creative and energetic to take pleasure in this work. (Principal of a private preschool)

*Being competent and fair in the distribution of tasks to teachers.* It was quite important for the participants to give the impression of being fair in task distribution. One participant commented:

I have to organize everything in such a way that no one should be obliged to undertake someone else's workload. Everybody should know their responsibilities and pull their weights. (Principal of a public preschool)

### *Motivation*

This skill emerged in two dimensions: motivating teachers to exert effort for the good of students and supporting teachers to provide continuance of their performance.

*Motivating teachers to exert effort for the good of students.* The participants were of the opinion that their schools' success was contingent on their teachers' motivation. In the following excerpt, the participant explained her recipe for motivating teachers:

This is my forty-fifth year in education. There is a singing competition on TV called "That Voice; Children." I wait for this program and get excited while watching it. My children are also teachers, but they laugh at me. They tell me that "Mom, there are so many programs on TV, and what you watch!" Still, whenever a child achieves success, I feel excited. I guess that the most important thing I do as a principal is to transfer this excitement to my teachers. I have never lost that excitement. Look, it has been forty-five years. This brings success. Excitement brings success. (Principal of a private preschool)

*Supporting teachers to provide continuance of their performance.* As exemplified in the following excerpt, the participants stated that they would eagerly push their current circumstances and find creative solutions for problems to maintain the performance of teachers who took the initiative and made attempts for the good of their students.

Suppose that she wanted to participate in a painting contest. You must certainly clear the way for that visual arts teacher. I would say to her "Go ahead! Keep going! I'll back you up" or to a physical education teacher "I'll back you up. I am behind you all the way!" . . . When they said "We need vehicles" or "We'll need food service there," I took care of everything. (Principal of a private high school)

### *Empathy*

All the participants had teaching experience. Using this experience, the participants claimed to be able to understand their teachers' conditions and to make teachers believe in that ability of their principal. One participant stated:

I had the same problems too. They know that very well. I make them feel that they are understood. All principals used to be teachers, but only a few can benefit from that experience. (Principal of a public high school)

### *Self-improvement*

The participants perceived that to sound convincing in front of teachers, it was essential to be knowledgeable about educational and regulatory issues. Therefore, self-improvement, which stands for being competent and eager to reach information in the present study, was an important skill in the eyes of participants. There are two reasons as to why self-improvement was taken as one of the components of the participants' potential: The first is that, in the participants' statements, this skill emerged as a useful personal quality, and the participants felt lucky to have it. The second reason is that, as being more than a means to an end, this skill appeared to be a source of pride and enjoyment in the same statements. The following two excerpts illustrate the participants' competence and eagerness for self-improvement respectively:

Sometimes, it is natural not to know something. There are some thirty principals in this neighborhood, and I have close relations with some fifteen of them. When I am unable to make sense of something, I can call them to ask about it. I don't consider it embarrassing to ask questions. Also, I know a departmental manager in the district directorate; I can call him to ask. Somehow, I find a way to update my knowledge. (Principal of a private high school)

For example, I took business administration courses for one and a half years. Also, I am a certified total quality management expert. I realized my inadequacies in the field of business administration and decided on taking courses. When our school needed advertisement, we cooperated with some very successful advertising agencies in Ankara; by this means I learned the logic of advertising. (Principal of a private secondary school)

### **The Participants' Emotions When They Realize Their Potential**

The participants reported that they felt to have realized their potential after using their talents and skills in the exercise of their duties. The emotions they experienced in such situations were as follows:

#### *Happiness*

The participants' first answer to the question of "What did you feel when you experience that?" was mostly "happiness." As a result of their happiness, they reported getting into a positive and tolerant mood and looking cheerful. The participants shared their happiness as follows:

Happy. I mean, you feel happy. You look cheerful in the mornings. You don't sulk. You behave positively to people around you. You become more tolerant. Your tolerance coefficient [sic] increases. (Principal of a private secondary school)

When I get the result, I think there is a smile on my face even as I sleep at night. Why? Because of happiness, enjoyment. I am a smoker. I say "I did a good job today!" to myself, as I take a puff from my cigarette in the evening. (Principal of a private primary school)

#### *Enjoyment*

Enjoyment appeared to be the very reason why some participants kept on working despite their advanced ages and being free from the obligation to earn money or, in the case of certain younger participants, despite the fact that they are too busy even to have a lunch break. One participant summed up the source of his energy this way:

Teaching and administration require love. You can't be successful in these professions without loving them ... If I tell you my age, your jaw will drop open; but I still get the same enjoyment from my profession. I don't feel tired at all. Still, we think hard about what else we can do here. ... The only

monetary gain that we get here is our salaries; but what we feel is priceless when we come across one of our former students. It is impossible to measure those feelings by money. The most appropriate word is enjoyment. (Principal of a private primary school)

### *Peace*

The participants expressed a sort of inner peace stemming from knowing that they deserved their salaries and did not fail in their duties or hurt the feelings of others. One participant articulated his sense of inner peace in the following excerpt:

To say the least, I can sleep more comfortably at nights. If I hadn't felt peaceful or if I hadn't loved this place, I wouldn't have worked here after my retirement ... I feel peace, which is beyond measure when people around me achieve success. (Principal of a private secondary school)

### *Increase in self-confidence and motivation*

The participants related that when they showed success by exercising their skills, they felt an increase in their self-confidence, and as a result of this, they set new goals for themselves. One participant stated:

An increase in self-confidence. Making moves for new accomplishments. Thinking about next steps. I mean, you feel like "We have done this, so we can do that too." Setting new goals. When unachievable things are achieved, the respect felt for you increases too. The staff's motivation increases too. (Principal of a public secondary school)

## **The Participants' Emotions When They Fail to Realize Their Potential**

It was evident in the participants' statements that when they failed to realize their potential due to impediments they encountered, they suffered a short-term loss of morale and increased unhappiness. This mood emerged in various forms such as reluctance, inertia, and becoming withdrawn. The following excerpt illustrates the intensity of the feelings in such cases:

"My Friends," I said. Although I resented it bitterly; although it leaked inside me like a lead melt, I said that "Okay, we shouldn't comment on it anymore. We have done our part." I mean, just like the fact that water leaks into the soil, I repressed my emotions. I felt reluctance for a couple of days, and then I managed to forget it. (Principal of a private secondary school)

Nevertheless, as an exception to the emotions exemplified above, one participant stated that he was not adversely affected by restrictive conditions; instead, he felt an increase in his motivation to establish his own private school. He described his reaction as follows:

They may ignore your suggestions. Your suggestions may be delayed, or even they may not be fulfilled at all by the board of management. You may feel sorry for delays but, in situations such as this, I say to myself that "My son, then do it after you have established your own school." I overcome that feeling by self-talk ... I can get through it saying that "I'll realize my ideas when I become the boss." Maybe, I deceive myself by doing so. (Principal of a private secondary school)

Except for the excerpt above, the findings presented so far were common to all the participants and constituted the shared meaning of self-actualization in their minds. In the following section, these findings are discussed in the light of relevant literature.

## Discussion

The present study focuses on its participants' process and understanding of self-actualization. At this point, one question arises: Are they really self-actualizers? Without any observational or documental data and only based on their statements, can we conclude that the participants are self-actualizers? To find answers to this question, firstly Maslow's some premises should be remembered. In his pathbreaking paper "Theory of Human Motivation," Maslow (1943) clearly articulated that "Motivation theory is not synonymous with behavior theory. The motivations are only one class of determinants of behavior" (p. 2). Therefore, the likelihood should not be ignored that there might be various other reasons behind the behaviors and emotions expressed by the participants. Moreover, Maslow (1974) was against to draw a sharp line between self-actualizers and non-self-actualizers; and he mentioned the possibility that all people could be metamotivated to some degree. With this in mind, and based on the participant's statements, which were replete with self-actualizers' creative behaviors and emotions without any sign of frustration of their prepotent needs, it can easily be concluded that the participants were indeed self-actualizers, or at least, they were making headway in their process of self-actualization.

Among the participant characteristics that were congruent with the self-actualizers' characteristics identified by Maslow (1970), most noticeable one was their urge to use creativity in the exercise of their duties. Administrative tasks that require skills such as persuasion or organization were the areas for the participants in which they found opportunities to push their creativeness, although these tasks might seem to be no more than bothersome to many other people who have no desire for them. Maslow (1968) emphasized that creativity is not limited to poets or composers; a housewife, a pure clinician psychiatrist or a young athlete can also be creative. In his aforementioned study on the characteristics of self-actualizers, Maslow (1970) claimed that self-actualizers, without exception, show creativeness, originality or inventiveness. It is this quality that appeared to be the source of success achieved by the participants in this study.

Another noticeable congruity between the characteristics of the participants and Maslow's subjects was the enjoyment and satisfaction that they took from realizing their potential. In the public schools of Turkey, there is no appreciable pay gap between teachers and principals, so the enjoyment mentioned by the public school principals is particularly important since they have no extra source of satisfaction other than their excitement. Comparatively, the other participants who received retirement pensions from the state while serving as principals in private schools emphasized the fact that their leading motive for working in private sector was not their monetary needs, but certain intrinsic rewards they found in their jobs. These statements bring Maslow's (1974) observation to mind that if self-actualizers can do the work of their choice, and if they have no external obligations to other people, then they devote themselves happily to their works. After that, self-actualizers are oriented to intrinsic rewards of their works; and pay is only the by-product of their pursuit of realizing their potential. These intrinsic rewards noticeably manifest themselves in the participants' statements. The participants presented themselves as self-confident, highly-motivated, democratic, tolerant, peaceful, avid for self-improvement, and able to enjoy their work; and these are the characteristics of the self-actualized person described by Maslow (1970). A case study including observations on the participants of the present study and interviews with their assistant principals and teachers may shed more light on the participants' actualization of their potential and on whether their self-actualization is beneficial to their schools.

The participants' claims to have democratic, tolerant, and compassionate attitudes towards school staff brings Adler's term of "gemeinschaftsgefühl" to mind. Kaplan and Schoeneberg (1984) translated this term as "... feeling a part of the community of man, experiencing empathy, understanding, and respect for our fellow human beings" (p. 93). Maslow (1970) referred to this term several times in his discussion of self-actualizers. The participants' democratic and tolerant attitudes might stem from that emotion. Also, this term seems to hold great potential as an interesting research subject in the field of educational administration.

Although principalship post, which brings relatively sufficient autonomy and authority to its holder, is a convenient position for educationalists who wish to realize their administrative potential, data of the present study suggested another possible factor that paves the way for self-actualization: the age of the principal. In the present study, all but one participant were aged above 35, and more than half of the study group was above 50 years. As stated, Maslow (1970) did not include young subjects in his study group, on the grounds that young people lack identity, autonomy, and enough experience, which are the prerequisites for self-actualization. In addition to their findings which showed that their participants over the age of 36 achieved higher levels of self-actualization than the other participants under that age, Ivztan, Gardner, Bernard, Sekhon, and Hart (2013) also gave an extensive and convincing literature review about advantages that advanced age can offer in terms of self-actualization. Future research may include younger principals to understand the effect of age on self-actualization. Another research implication is that, in quantitative studies on principals' self-actualization, age should be taken into account as a moderator variable.

In addition to their anecdotes of success and enjoyment, the participants also recounted situations in which they were unable to realize their potential. Interestingly, the participants felt the need to emphasize that the emotions that they experienced in such situations such as low morale and unhappiness, and symptoms of reluctance, inertia, and becoming withdrawn were not long-lasting. A possible explanation of this finding is that Maslow (1970) described self-actualizers as strong people, so much so that sometimes they are regarded as ruthless by people around them. Consequently, the participants, who reported displaying certain self-actualizer behaviors and emotions, might have found ways to overcome their negative emotions. Another interesting finding is that one participant depicted his frustration as a source of motivation that supported his intentions to establish his own private school. This contradictory finding suggests that the self-actualization theory should be elaborated to cover its blind spots based on study data from various disciplines. This exception aside, the findings, in general, indicate that when they are prevented from realizing their potential, principals might lose their motivation, which is of great importance for their schools.

Although the participants claimed to have some characteristics that were also the same as those of Maslowian self-actualizers, they did not mention some other characteristics as well. For example, they did not show any indication of speaking harshly to people or forgetting requirements of social politeness when under deep concentration. This situation is understandable, given the fact that the findings are based on the participants' self-portrayals. Future research featuring other designs such as case study or grounded theory can contribute to the educational administration discipline by drawing on other data sources.

A fairly recent study by Krems, Kenrick, and Neel (2017) showed that what is regarded as self-actualizing varies from person to person. The present study does not contradict Krems et al.'s (2017) study but adds new information to the relevant literature by showing that people who vary in terms of gender and age can still find common ground regarding the meaning of self-actualization. Future



phenomenographic studies might reveal qualitatively different ways in which principals experience self-actualization.

Finally, the findings of the present study suggest a practical implication: In public schools where principalship conveys no monetary advantage over teaching, self-actualization becomes even more important as it is often the only apparent source of satisfaction. The Ministry of National Education in Turkey, then, should take necessary steps to eliminate any barriers to self-actualization that principals face. In this context, there are two possible solutions: First, access to sufficient budgetary resources must be made available to public school principals, since this access seems to be much easier to achieve for their private school counterparts, who can draw upon their relatively abundant resources to realize their potential as principals. Budgetary resources are severely limited in public schools, and the author, a former public school teacher, frequently observed how this problem tied the hands of principals who had very creative ideas for their schools. Second, to realize their potential, public school principals must first discover their potential. Here their private school counterparts again appear to have the advantage. During the interviews, three private school principals proudly showed the author folders full of certificates from highly specialized and expensive in-service trainings. Public school principals lack the opportunities to attend such trainings, which are essential to broaden their horizons and allow them to fulfill their potential. Public schools, which are of strategic importance for Turkey's future, should not be deprived of the creativity, energy, and devotion of self-actualized principals.

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