

AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS' EMPATHIC LEADERSHIP ON STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

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Abstract: *This study explores the factors influencing empathic leadership among teachers and the challenges in its implementation. Findings indicate that teacher experiences, institutional culture, and pedagogical philosophy are key factors affecting teachers' ability to apply empathy. Teachers working in schools with a culture that supports emotional well-being are more likely to demonstrate empathy in their interactions with students. However, there is a significant gap in the application of empathetic principles, primarily due to an excessive focus on academic achievement and administrative demands. To address these challenges, intensive training focused on developing empathetic skills and cultural shifts within schools towards collaboration and reduced administrative burdens are necessary. The impact of empathetic leadership on student well-being is also identified. Research results show that students interacting with empathetic teachers experience increased self-confidence, higher engagement in learning, and better social relationships. This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving in-depth interviews and observations at three elementary schools in Bandung. Participants consisted of 15 purposefully selected teachers representing diverse backgrounds. The findings indicate that the application of empathetic leadership not only benefits teachers but also contributes to the emotional well-being of students, highlighting the need for systemic support to facilitate these changes within the school environment.*

Keywords: *Empathetic Leadership; Psychological Well-Being; Emotional wellbeing; Teacher-Student Relationships.*

Introduction

In recent years, attention to the mental health and emotional well-being of students in schools has increased, in line with the importance of emotional intelligence in education. According to Asyari (2016), emotional intelligence is crucial for enhancing teachers' creativity and improving interactions between students and teachers. With high academic pressure, many students experience stress, anxiety, and other emotional challenges that hinder the learning process. In this context, effective educational leadership requires emotional competence and self-awareness, as expressed by Abi (2019). A lack of effective training for educators often results in low emotional intelligence among students, making emotional development in the classroom less optimal (Prasetyo, 2024). Without a deep understanding of the importance of emotional intelligence, teachers may struggle to recognize or respond appropriately to students' emotional needs. This can lead to an unresponsive learning environment, where students feel neglected or unsupported. Conversely, teachers with strong emotional skills can create an inclusive classroom atmosphere, where every student feels safe to express themselves and participate actively.

An approach focused on understanding and responding to students' emotional needs is expected to enhance their sense of security and engagement in the learning process. When students feel that their teachers care and understand their feelings and challenges, they are more likely to be motivated to learn. This supportive environment can also encourage active participation from students, which in turn improves the overall learning experience. By feeling more connected and valued, students will be more willing to take risks in learning and be more open to collaborating with their classmates.

Positive psychology in education is closely related to the development of students' strengths and psychological well-being, enabling them to thrive optimally. Keyes (2002) describes the concept of flourishing as the presence of positive feelings about oneself and life (emotional well-being), feeling connected to others (social well-being), and functioning well (psychological well-being). These three aspects are interconnected and create a foundation for students not only to achieve academic success but also to build healthy social relationships and contribute to a harmonious learning environment (Widiasmara, 2023).

However, despite the recognition of the importance of empathetic leadership, many teachers still struggle to implement these principles in their daily practices. Nasution (2016) indicates that many leadership models in schools focus more on managerial and administrative aspects, neglecting the essential emotional dimensions in the interactions between teachers and students that can be fostered through a supportive educational environment. Research also indicates that while many teachers have good intentions to demonstrate empathy, adequate skills and training to implement this effectively are often lacking (Wisda, 2020). This gap hinders the full potential of empathetic leadership, which could contribute to improved student academic performance, as highlighted by Zarim & Surat (2022). Therefore, training and development of empathetic skills for teachers are essential to strengthen their role in creating a better educational climate.

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the phenomenon of empathetic leadership among teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations in three elementary schools in Bandung, chosen to reflect variations in social, cultural, and economic contexts. Participants consisted of 15 teachers selected purposively, with criteria of a minimum of five years of teaching experience and involvement in professional development programs, to gain diverse perspectives.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, lasting 60-90 minutes, and were recorded for thematic analysis. The research adhered to ethical principles, including explaining the research purpose and ensuring confidentiality for participants. Reliability and validity were ensured through data triangulation, member checking, and peer involvement in the analysis. With this methodology, the researcher aims to understand the factors influencing empathetic leadership among teachers and the challenges in its implementation.

Discussion

The Urgency of Empathetic Skills in Teachers

The leadership style of teachers significantly affects how students manage their behavior and adhere to classroom rules (Kale & Özdelen, 2014). Teachers who adopt empathetic leadership tend to create a more supportive learning environment, where students feel valued and understood. This contributes to increased student motivation to follow classroom rules, as they develop better relationships with their teachers.

Although teacher leadership does not directly impact student achievement (Sari & Hendro, 2017), its influence on student attitudes and behavior is crucial. Empathetic leadership enables teachers to understand students' needs and emotions, helping them feel more connected and motivated to behave well. Teachers who show empathy can create a positive atmosphere, encouraging mutual respect among students and adherence to established norms.

Furthermore, empathetic leadership influences student attitudes and behavior not only at school but also outside of it. When students feel emotional support from their teachers, they learn to appreciate and understand others, impacting their social interactions (Eliawati, 2021).

For teachers, developing empathy is a vital component of pedagogical competence. By being attuned to students' emotions, teachers can create a learning climate that meets their needs (Akbar, 2021). This positions teachers as role models in providing the necessary emotional and social guidance (Santosa & Andrean, 2021).

Training focused on developing empathetic skills positively impacts teaching practices and teacher-student relationships. Programs designed to foster empathy in various educational settings have shown promising results. Such interventions include educational cinema techniques aimed at preventing bullying and enhancing social-emotional competencies through teacher training (Jayanti & Umar, 2024). Research indicates that these interventions positively affect students' prosocial behavior, ultimately improving the overall institutional culture (Suparmi & Sumijati, 2021). Thus, developing empathetic skills among teachers and students benefits individuals and contributes to creating a better, more supportive educational environment.

Empathy training and development for both students and teachers foster a better educational climate. The empathetic skills teachers possess can facilitate prosocial attitudes, enhancing positive social interactions within the school environment (Kusmanto, 2011). Research shows that when students become familiar with and understand their own emotions and those of others, they are more open in communicating and interacting with peers, strengthening social relationships and creating a more positive learning atmosphere. This prosocial attitude contributes to the formation of a solid, respectful community. An inclusive learning community

provides students with a sense of comfort and safety to express themselves and actively participate in the learning process.

Various Teacher Perspectives on Empathetic Leadership

The discussion on empathetic leadership among teachers reveals diverse perspectives influenced by various factors, including individual experiences, institutional culture, and pedagogical philosophy. Teachers believe that integrating empathy into their leadership style is crucial for building positive relationships with students. Emotional intelligence plays a vital role in this, as teachers not only understand students' academic needs but also their emotional needs. Those who practice empathetic leadership emphasize the importance of open and transparent communication, attentive listening, and providing the emotional support necessary for students to feel valued and heard.

Teacher Experience as a Key Factor

Interview results indicate that teachers' personal and professional experiences greatly influence how they practice empathetic leadership. Teachers with backgrounds of facing emotional or social challenges in the past are more likely to emphasize the importance of empathy in their relationships with students. One respondent, a rural elementary school teacher, explained: "As someone who struggled in school, I want to ensure my students don't feel the same way. That's why I always try to listen to them carefully and provide the support they need."

This teacher feels that their personal experiences drive them to be more sensitive to students' emotional needs, especially those facing social or family issues. Such experiences not only shape how they interact with students but also positively impact students' confidence. When students feel heard and supported emotionally by their teachers, they tend to feel more valued and secure in the learning environment. For example, in this teacher's class, many students who were initially hesitant to speak up now confidently express their opinions and ask questions.

Research shows that an empathetic relationship between teachers and students contributes to increased student confidence. Emotionally supported students are more actively engaged in discussions and class activities, reinforcing their self-assurance in both academic and social abilities. Students who receive strong social support from parents, peers, and teachers demonstrate various positive outcomes in socializing at school, reflected in improved behavior. Mufidah, Iswinarti & Fasikhah (2021) state that social support acts as a crucial element in social ties, indicating the level and quality of relationships that can protect individuals from stress. When students receive consistent support, they experience calmness, attention, and ultimately, higher self-confidence.

Strong social support enables students to feel loved, valued, and part of a group. In this context, the role of teachers is vital. Teachers who create an empathetic and supportive environment can provide the social support that students need. When students feel they have a safe space at school and that their teachers and peers care, they are more likely to interact positively and actively engage in social activities.

The personal experiences of teachers who have faced emotional and social challenges, like the rural elementary school teacher mentioned, underscore the importance of social support. When teachers strive to listen to and understand students' emotional needs, they not only help students navigate difficulties but also encourage them to participate more, further enhancing their confidence.

With appropriate social support, students not only feel more comfortable in the learning environment but also develop better social skills. They learn how to interact positively with peers and adults, which is essential for their future. Therefore, creating a strong network of social support within the school environment is crucial, as it can strengthen students' sense of belonging, enhance their emotional well-being, and encourage greater engagement in the learning process.

Conversely, teachers without direct experiences related to emotional or social challenges in their personal or professional lives tend to view empathetic leadership more pragmatically. They focus their roles more on academic tasks rather than on students' emotional aspects. However, the social-emotional competencies that teachers possess positively impact students' academic achievement as well as the well-being of teachers and school leaders (Zarim & Surat, 2022). Many teachers struggle to effectively apply the principles of empathetic leadership, highlighting the need for adequate training and skill development in this area (Komarudin & Suherman, 2023; Wisda, 2020; Nasution, 2016).

Diverse Institutional Culture

Institutional culture also plays a significant role in how teachers implement empathetic leadership. Schools that emphasize students' emotional development and have emotional support programs, such as emotional intelligence training, are more likely to create environments that encourage teachers to prioritize empathy in their interactions. A teacher from a private school with a student wellness program shared: "At our school, empathy is part of the culture. Every month, we participate in training to enhance our communication skills with students, and there is strong support from the principal to build positive relationships with them."

On the other hand, teachers from schools with a culture focused more on academic achievement and performance measurement, such as standardized testing or grade targets, report difficulties in applying empathetic leadership. They feel that pressure from the education system limits the time and energy they can dedicate to understanding students' emotional needs. One teacher from a public school stated: "There is so much pressure to meet grade targets and complete the curriculum. Sometimes, I feel I don't have enough time to truly listen to my students."

As highlighted in research on workload, teachers face complex challenges, where increased workload can have both positive and negative impacts. For instance, Nasution (2020) noted that certain pressures can enhance engagement in the classroom. However, excessive workload often leads to stress and fatigue, as pointed out by Rudyanto et al. (2021).

Research indicates that administrative burdens often reduce the time and energy teachers need to build empathetic relationships with students, resulting in a decline in the quality of emotional interactions in the classroom. In this context, administrative challenges can exacerbate the negative impacts of excessive workload, as also found by Dawam & Setiawan (2022), who emphasize that workload, including administrative aspects, has a dominant influence on teachers' stress levels.

Pedagogical Philosophy Influencing Leadership Style

The pedagogical philosophy held by teachers also plays a role in the implementation of empathetic leadership. Teachers who adopt a constructivist or student-centered approach are more likely to integrate empathy into their leadership practices. They view the learning process

as a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students, where students' emotional needs must be considered to achieve academic success (Sujarwo and Rachman, 2020).

One elementary school teacher who focuses on a constructivist approach stated: "For me, students are at the center of everything. If they feel heard and valued, they will be more motivated to learn. I always try to build a good relationship with them because I know it affects how they learn."

Research findings show that when teachers prioritize an empathetic approach, students experience higher engagement in learning. For example, at an elementary school in Bandung, a teacher implements active listening techniques in every class session. She routinely asks students to share their personal experiences before starting the lesson. This way, students feel heard and valued, making them more open to actively participating in class discussions.

In this context, the development of students' emotional intelligence is closely related to the quality of their interactions with teachers. For instance, when a student struggles with the subject matter, an empathetic teacher not only provides academic help but also seeks to understand the student's emotional state. The teacher stated, "I understand that you might be feeling stressed. Let's talk it over together so you can feel more comfortable."

When teachers can understand and respond to students' emotional needs, students feel safer and more valued. As a result, in that class, the level of student participation increased significantly. Students who were initially passive now actively ask questions, share ideas, and collaborate in groups. This improved learning experience is reflected in their academic performance, where the average class grades show consistent progress.

This example illustrates how an empathetic approach by teachers not only enhances student engagement in learning but also creates an environment that supports their emotional development.

Conversely, teachers who are more oriented toward traditional teaching approaches, where the teacher is seen as the primary authority in the teaching-learning process, tend to prioritize empathetic aspects less. They focus more on delivering content and achieving academic goals.

Conclusion

This study reveals that empathetic leadership among teachers is influenced by three main factors: individual experience, institutional culture, and pedagogical philosophy. Teachers with relevant personal experiences and who work in school environments that support emotional well-being are more likely to practice empathetic leadership.

However, systemic challenges, such as excessive focus on academic achievement and administrative pressures, often hinder the consistent application of empathetic principles in daily practice. The lack of specialized training in developing empathetic skills also poses a challenge. To address this, intensive training is needed to enhance teachers' abilities to respond to students' emotional needs, foster a more inclusive institutional culture, and reduce administrative burdens so that teachers can focus on emotional relationships with students and effectively implement empathetic leadership.

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