



The Role of Empathetic Communication in Relational Leadership in Islamic Educational Institutions: A Case Study at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, Majalengka

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Received: 2025-10-28; Accepted: 2026-1-30; Published: 2026-3-12

ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the role of empathic communication in relational leadership within Islamic educational institutions, using a case study at SMP Islam Ar-Rahmat Majalengka. This approach seeks to understand how empathy-based interactions shape participatory, trusting, and collaborative leadership relationships among school leaders, teachers, and students. Data were collected through interviews with the principal, vice principal for curriculum, four teachers, and one student. The findings reveal that empathic communication serves as a fundamental foundation in building harmonious relationships among principals, teachers, and students. Through the practices of active listening, understanding individual perspectives, and expressing care and appreciation, leaders are able to create a collaborative and supportive work climate. Empathic communication also plays a crucial role in resolving conflicts, strengthening trust, and fostering a sense of togetherness within the school environment. This study emphasizes that relational leadership in Islamic educational institution is not only oriented toward achieving institutional goals but also toward nurturing humanistic and spiritual values in everyday interactions.

Keywords: *empathic communication, relational leadership, islamic educational institutions*

INTRODUCTION

In this modern era, educational institutions serve not only as a means of transmitting knowledge but also as a platform for developing character, social

relationships, and humanitarian values. In Islamic educational institutions, this function is increasingly important because, in addition to academic aspects, Islamic schools are expected to be spaces where Islamic values, such as compassion, tolerance, deliberation, and trustworthiness, can be implemented in daily life. School leadership, particularly the principal as a central figure, plays a strategic role in creating a humanistic relational climate, supporting openness, and strengthening intimacy and mutual trust among the school community.

However, in many educational institutions, especially those with a religious component, challenges arise in maintaining a balance between authority and relational closeness. If leaders overemphasize hierarchy and policy, interpersonal relationships can become formalistic and far from the spirit of Islamic education. Conversely, if they are too loose and without boundaries, indiscipline or value conflicts can arise. In these situations, empathetic communication becomes a crucial bridge between formal and relational leadership. Empathetic communication is communication in which a person not only hears the other person's words but also captures their feelings, implicit meanings, and underlying psychological or emotional states. This process includes active listening, emotional reflection, cognitive and affective empathy, and responses that demonstrate concern and understanding. Communication studies have suggested that this empathetic ability has the potential to reduce miscommunication, strengthen trust, and build a safe psychological climate for sharing ideas and resolving conflict (Hazani, 2024).

In the realm of leadership, literature indicates that empathy plays a key role in leader effectiveness, particularly in relational leadership. A systematic literature review found that leaders with empathic capacities tend to be able to create an organizational climate that is more open, innovative, and adaptive to change (Muss et al., 2024). Furthermore, the integration of empathy and leadership ethics enriches relational leadership theory by positioning empathy as a moral element that informs communication interactions between actors (The Role of Empathy in Leadership Ethics) (Nakamura et al., 2025).

Empathetic communication is a communication process that involves not only sending and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages, but also understanding the feelings, needs, perspectives, and emotional experiences of the other person. The goal is for the communicator to not only understand what is being said, but also to feel or understand what the recipient is experiencing, then respond in a way that demonstrates concern, warmth, and support.

Some of the main characteristics of empathic communication are (1) Active listening, which involves not only hearing words but also paying attention to tone, non-verbal expressions, and emotional context. (2) Perspective taking,

which involves trying to understand a situation from another person's perspective. (3) Affective and cognitive empathy, which involves sensing another person's emotions (affective), and/or intellectually understanding why someone feels that way (cognitive).

Based on literature reviews, several dimensions/components frequently appear in empathic communication theory, including: (1) Active listening, which involves listening fully, paying attention, and giving space for the other person to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption. (2) Perspective taking, which is the effort to understand the situation, thoughts, or emotions of another party, trying to see from their perspective. (3) Empathic concern/affective, which is a sense of emotional concern, feeling sympathy or concern for another person's condition. (4) Cognitive empathy, which is an intellectual understanding of another party's emotional state without having to fully feel it. (5) Responsive empathy, which is the assumption that shows that someone is understood and felt; not just verbal reflection, but actions/behaviors that reflect concern. (6) Nonverbal empathy, which is nonverbal expressions, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, body language, which support empathetic communication.

The concept of relational leadership itself originally developed in contemporary organizational studies, which views leadership not merely as an individual trait or formal position, but as a process of relationships and social interactions. (Uhl-Bien et al., 2017) define Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) as a framework in which leadership emerges through a process of social influence, reciprocity, and interpersonal relationships (not simply top-down). From this perspective, empathy is considered a crucial element that enables authentic, sincere, and responsive interactions and relationships to others' needs (Jian, 2021).

(Smit & Scherman, 2016) mention two perspectives in RLT: (1) the entity perspective, which focuses on individual attributes (e.g., leader character, leadership style) in interpersonal relationships, and (2) the relational perspective, which views leadership as a social construct, a process continuously shaped by interactions, contexts, and relationship dynamics. In educational leadership literature, the relational style is often associated with principles such as: (1) teacher empowerment, (2) harmonizing relationships among school members: principals, teachers, and students, (3) participatory and dialogic decision-making, and (4) leadership that views the school as a community, not just an administrative institution. (Smit & Scherman, 2016)

In Islamic educational institutions, relational leadership, with its spiritual and humanitarian values, becomes more meaningful. In studies of Islamic

leadership in education, consideration is mentioned as an important dimension, namely the leader's ability to listen to teachers' aspirations, address emotional issues, and understand the conditions of individuals within the school community (in Islamic leadership theory studies) (Amri et al., 2025). Furthermore, in studies of Islamic educational leadership, empathy is considered the "key to success" in the relationship between leaders and subordinates in the Islamic educational management system (Leader Empathy Towards Subordinates) (Sohiron, 2020).

Leadership and management in Islamic educational institutions are based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Values such as amanah (trust), adil (justice), rahmah (compassion), tabligh (conveyance), and fathonah (wisdom) are often cited as characteristics of ideal leaders in Islamic education (Fadila, 2019). Trustworthiness, justice, mercy, tabligh, and fathonah are the characteristics of prophetic leadership. Through these four basic leadership qualities, the prophetic mission of preaching and building human civilization on earth can be effectively conveyed (Luluk Maktumah & Minhaji, 2020). In this regard, today's leaders can take advantage of these prophetic leadership traits. Several principles of Islamic education are directly related to relationality and empathy, such as the principle of monotheism as a moral/spiritual foundation, the principle of deliberation (consultation), and giving good advice, as well as commanding what is good and forbidding what is evil (Assa'idi et al., 2021).

In-depth research investigating how leaders use empathetic communication to manage interpersonal relationships in Islamic schools is rare in Islamic schools in Indonesia, particularly at the secondary level, such as junior high schools. Communication practices such as listening to teachers and students, responding to emotional conflict, conveying criticism or motivation, negotiating the meaning of Islamic values, and establishing dialogue-based policies are highly relevant aspects that have not been widely explored empirically.

Specifically, at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School in Majalengka, a junior high Islamic educational institution, questions arise about how the principal, teachers, and students build humanistic and Islamic leadership relationships through empathetic communication. Have school leaders employed strategies of active listening, emotional reflection, cognitive/affective empathy, and supportive responses in daily interactions? How do barriers and contextual conditions influence the practice of empathetic communication within relational leadership at this school?

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate for exploring in-depth a complex and contextual social phenomenon, namely the practice of empathic communication in relational leadership in Islamic schools.

According to Creswell, JW, and Poth (2018), qualitative research allows researchers to understand the meaning constructed by individuals or groups regarding a social phenomenon they experience directly. Meanwhile, Sugiyono (2023) states that case studies are appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. Therefore, this research focuses on an in-depth understanding of how the principal and teachers at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School construct, practice, and interpret empathic communication in everyday leadership relationships at the school.

This research was conducted in September 2025 at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, Majalengka. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, based on the consideration that the informants were considered most knowledgeable and directly involved in the phenomenon under study (Sugiyono, 2023). The key informants consisted of: (1) the principal as the institutional leader; (2) the vice principal for curriculum and student affairs; (3) two male and two female teachers representing the teaching staff; and (4) student representatives to examine the impact of empathic communication on the learning environment. A total of seven informants were selected based on their involvement, experience, and ability to reflect on communication practices and the dynamics of relationships within the school.

To obtain comprehensive data, this study employed three primary techniques: (a) In-Depth Interviews. These were conducted in a semi-structured manner to provide space for informants to explain their personal experiences, perceptions, and the meaning behind empathic communication practices. (b) Participatory Observation. Observations were conducted to observe actual interactions between the principal, teachers, and students in various contexts, including teacher meetings, teaching and learning activities, and religious activities. The researcher acted as an observer as participant, observing directly without actively participating (Spradley, 1980). (c) Documentation. Documentation was obtained from school archives, code of conduct guidelines, activity reports, and other internal documents reflecting leadership and communication values.

Data analysis was conducted from the beginning of data collection using an interactive model (Miles, 2014), which includes three main stages: (1) Data

Reduction, which involves sorting, selecting, and focusing data on relevant aspects. (2) Data Display, which involves presenting data in the form of matrices, category tables, or thematic narratives. (3) Conclusion Drawing/Verification.

To deepen understanding, researchers also used thematic analysis based on (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify major themes such as: a) Empathy as a leadership strategy; b) Dialogic relationships in communication; c) Islamic values in empathetic leadership; and d) Structural and cultural barriers.

The validity of the data in this qualitative research was maintained through four validity criteria according to (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, 1985): (1) Credibility, (2) Transferability, (3) Dependability, (4) Confirmability.

This research adheres to the ethical principles of social and educational research, including: (a) Obtaining official permission from the principal and informants; (b) Maintaining the confidentiality of informants' identities; (c) Using data only for academic purposes; (d) Upholding the values of scientific honesty and fair representation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Empathetic Communication as a Leadership Strategy

The principal explained that empathy is a key strategy in his leadership. He believes that empathy is not merely a gentle demeanor, but a strategic approach to understanding the motivations and challenges of each individual within the school environment. "Empathy is not merely gentleness, but a leadership strategy. By understanding what teachers or students are feeling, I can determine the right coaching steps. If a teacher is under pressure, I don't increase the pressure, but instead provide space for them to recover," he said. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

He added that empathy helps in more humane and contextual decision-making. "In Islam, leaders must be *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for the universe), able to spread love and justice. From there, trust grows, and the school runs with heart," he emphasized. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

The vice principal views empathy as the foundation of effective communication in curriculum management and teacher performance. "When we create schedules or extra assignments, I try to understand each teacher's situation. Some are teaching while studying, some are pregnant, and some have extended family responsibilities. An empathetic approach helps ensure our decisions are fair and well-received," she said. (Interview with the Deputy Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

She emphasized that the empathy strategy has a positive impact on organizational effectiveness. "When teachers feel heard and appreciated, they are more motivated. It's not just a social connection, but a managerial strategy to maintain productivity without pressure," she added. (Interview with the Deputy Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

The male teacher interviewed credited the leadership's empathy as a factor that made him feel appreciated and enthusiastic about his work. "I was going through a difficult time personally. The principal didn't reprimand me for declining performance, but instead spoke to me calmly. That touched me, and I ultimately wanted to respond with even better performance," she said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

She believes that empathy-based leadership is more effective than an authoritarian style. "If a leader only demands without understanding, people will obey out of fear, not respect. But if they are empathetic, we obey out of respect," she added. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

A female teacher emphasized that empathy is the glue that cements working relationships at school. "For us, the principal's empathy is felt in small things, like the way he greets us, gives us time when we're tired, or listens without judgment," she said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

She also sees empathy as a manifestation of Islamic leadership ethics. "An empathetic leader emulates the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who understood his followers before giving orders. In school, that means understanding teachers and students with their hearts," she said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

An eighth-grade student shared that he experiences empathy from his teachers and principal in his daily life. "If we make a mistake, the teacher doesn't immediately get angry, but first asks why. Sometimes they even gently advise him, rather than punish him," he said innocently. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He added that this empathetic approach makes him more enthusiastic about learning. "We're not afraid of the teachers anymore, instead we enjoy sharing our problems. School feels like a safe place," he said with a smile. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

One parent noted that the principal's empathetic approach has significantly impacted communication between the school and the family. "If my child has a problem, the school doesn't immediately blame him, but invites us to sit down

and work together to find a solution. That makes us feel valued as partners," he said. (Interview with a parent of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He believes this approach increases parents' trust in Islamic educational institutions. "I believe my child is educated not only academically, but also with love. That's what sets this school apart," he added. (Interview with a parent of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

A representative from the school committee noted that empathy is also evident in external relations between the school and the community. "When the school communicates with external parties, whether committee members, donors, or the surrounding community, the principal always demonstrates an open and respectful attitude," he explained. (Interview with a representative of the Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School committee, September 25, 2025)

A representative from the school committee stated that empathy is also evident in external relations between the school and the community. "When the school communicates with external parties, whether committees, donors, or the surrounding community, the principal always demonstrates an open and respectful attitude," he explained. (Interview with a representative from the Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School committee, September 25, 2025)

He believes empathy is a strategy that strengthens the institution's image in the eyes of the public. "Empathy builds reputation. Schools that lead with heart will be trusted not because of promotions, but because of perceived sincerity," he emphasized. (Interview with a representative from the Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School committee, September 25, 2025)

a. Strengthening Trust and Two-Way Communication

From the interview above, it is clear that leaders at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School use empathy not simply as a form of concern, but as a managerial tool to frame more relevant and fair decisions. For example, the principal stated that when teachers experience personal burdens or difficulties, decisions regarding assignments, evaluations, or workloads can be adjusted (e.g., lightening administrative tasks, redistributing work) after dialogue and understanding the situation.

Theoretically, empathy in leadership is a component of emotional intelligence that serves as a tool for leaders to "feel" the consequences of decisions on subordinates (social awareness) and adjust policies so that they are not solely based on technical or administrative paradigms (Ott, 1998). Numerous studies have shown that leaders who demonstrate empathy tend to make more humane decisions and take into account individual well-being (Zivkovic, 2022).

Furthermore, in the context of Islamic education, the use of empathy in managerial decision-making intersects with the values of 'adl (justice) and ihsan (optimal goodness). In Islamic education literature, empathy and compassion (rahmah) are seen as integral parts of Islamic leadership behavior—namely, that leadership is not simply enforcing rules, but rather managing the community with care and justice (Konrath et al., 2021). Empathy is considered a tangible manifestation of caring that can build healthy and productive interpersonal relationships (Sharip et al., 2023).

Reducing rigid policies when circumstances require it, or prioritizing teachers or students in difficulty, are managerial maneuvers that create flexibility within regulations. Interviews revealed that these strategies are effective in suppressing resistance to policies and strengthening the legitimacy of decisions because they feel "fair" and "humane" in the eyes of the school community.

Female teachers, male teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders all noted that when leaders demonstrate the ability to listen, are receptive to opinions, and are sensitive to individual circumstances, working relationships become more harmonious, open, and trusting.

As a relational strategy, empathy enables two-way communication (rather than simply one-way instructions). Teachers not only "accept" policies, but also share input, concerns, and challenges they face. This fosters a participatory and collaborative culture, rather than a rigid superior-subordinate relationship.

These findings align with the theory that relational leadership prioritizes interpersonal relationships, interdependence, and continuous interaction between members of an organization. In one study, empathy had a strong positive association with both relational leadership and task leadership—meaning that empathy is inseparable from the context of organizational task implementation (Sadri et al., 2011).

b. Emulating the Values of Rahmah and Ihsan in Islamic Leadership

One distinguishing aspect of Islamic leadership is the incorporation of a spiritual dimension into daily leadership practices. In interviews, school leaders and teachers linked empathy directly to Islamic values such as rahmah (compassion), ihsan (doing good deeds thoroughly), ta'aruf (getting to know one another), and ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood).

In Islamic literature on spiritual leadership, empathy is categorized as a manifestation of the highest moral values, not merely an interpersonal skill. In the Muslim Education Reform study, empathy and compassion in Islam are closely linked to the concepts of ihsan and adab, which encourage

individuals to actively and humanely understand and care for the plight of others (Konrath et al., 2021). Empathy in the Islamic context is not simply "feeling what others feel," but also taking concrete action in accordance with moral guidance.

Furthermore, in the literature on Ihsan-based leadership, the ideal leader not only leads people technically but also maintains spiritual qualities in leadership actions, namely that every action is carried out with the awareness that God is watching, and the intention is to bring goodness (insha Allah) (Halim et al., 2016). In other words, spiritual empathy adds ethical weight and sincerity to communication and interactions in schools.

In practice at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, leaders (the principal and vice principal) stated that they consciously choose gentle words, greet teachers and students with affection, inquire about family circumstances, and respond to complaints with warmth, all as manifestations of the Prophet's character in carrying out the leadership mandate. The values of rahmah (blessings of universal compassion) and ihsan (moral perfection) are integrated in empathetic leadership actions.

Thus, empathy as a spiritual strategy makes relational leadership not merely administratively efficient but also imbued with values, moral honesty, and character transformation. It bridges worldly leadership with the dimensions of worship and the image of Islamic morality in the educational context. In conclusion, at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School in Majalengka, empathy as a relational leadership strategy operates synergistically in three domains:

Table 1 Empathy as a Rational Leadership Strategy

| Domain | Strategic Function of Empathy | Practical Implications |
|------------|--|--|
| Managerial | Helping leaders adapt decisions to individual contexts and equity needs. | Flexible policies, workload adjustments, policy dialogue |
| Relational | Strengthening interpersonal relationships, two-way communication, and trust. | Open meetings, teacher-leader discussion forums, and informal communication |
| Spiritual | Interpreting empathetic actions as manifestations of Islamic values (rahmah, ihsan, ukhuwah) | Exemplifying morals, compassionate communication, and conveying moral motivation |

For sustainable implementation, schools need to develop capacity building in emotional intelligence for leaders and teachers, so that empathy becomes more than just discourse, but a growing competency. The literature shows that leaders who are able to develop themselves through elements of EI (including empathy) create organizations that are more inclusive, creative, and open to change (Zivkovic, 2022).

In addition, the integration of empathy into structural policies (e.g. teacher evaluation, work regulations, conflict management) is also important so as not to depend solely on the “kindness” of leaders, organizational cultural transformation is needed so that empathy becomes an institutional value, not just a personal style.

2. Dialogic Relations in Communication at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, Majalengka

The principal emphasized that dialogic communication is the main foundation of school leadership and management. He views dialogue as more than just an exchange of information, but also a way to build equality and trust between leaders and the school community. "For me, communication is not just about conveying orders, but also about opening a space for dialogue. In dialogue, we don't just speak, but also listen with our hearts. From there, fair and mutually acceptable decisions are born," he said. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

He explained that the dialogic approach reflects the Islamic values of deliberation and ta'aruf, where every individual's perspective is respected. "I always try to ensure that meetings at school are not one-way. All teachers are free to express ideas, criticisms, and even differences of opinion. That is a form of lively and humane communication," he added. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

The vice principal explained that a dialogic relationship is key to maintaining harmonious working relationships between leaders, teachers, and educational staff, especially in the area of curriculum development. "Every time there's a change in curriculum policy or the division of tasks, we always discuss it openly. I don't want teachers to feel like they're just following orders, but rather to understand the rationale behind every decision," she explained. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

She believes that dialogic communication strengthens teachers' professionalism because they are invited to think collaboratively in finding solutions. "For example, when discussing the implementation of the Independent Curriculum, we sit together to hear teachers' experiences in the classroom. From

that dialogue, we find a more effective and realistic approach," she said. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

The female teacher interviewed explained that the dialogic relationship at the school is strongly felt in the interactions between leaders and teachers. He believes that the two-way communication established by the principal and vice-principal creates an open and comfortable working environment. "We're not afraid to express our opinions, even if our views differ from those of the leadership. The principal always gives us space to speak, and that makes us feel valued," he said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

He added that a dialogical approach helps resolve problems without causing tension. "There were once differences of opinion regarding teaching methods, but they were resolved through relaxed discussions. No one was offended; instead, we gained mutual understanding," he said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

A male teacher emphasized that dialogical relationships are a strength of the school's organizational culture. He feels that communication at the school is not hierarchical, but rather participatory. "We're used to open discussions in meetings. If there's a new policy, we not only accept it but are also invited to consider its impact. That makes us more accountable for the results," he said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

He believes that a dialogic communication style also increases mutual trust between teachers and leaders. "If the leader is open, the teachers are open too. There's no suspicion. That's what makes collaboration run smoothly," he said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

An eighth-grade student revealed that at his school, communication between students and teachers is open and friendly. "If we have a problem, we can talk directly to the teacher. The teacher is willing to listen and doesn't immediately get angry," he said. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

According to him, the teachers often engage in dialogue with students, both during learning activities and in character development. "We are often invited to discuss, not just told to be quiet and listen. It makes the classroom atmosphere more enjoyable," he said with a smile. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

One parent stated that communication between the school and parents is based on a dialogical principle. "We are often invited to meetings, not only to receive information but also to ask for our opinions. This makes us feel involved in our children's education," she said. (Interview with a parent at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He believes this communication style reflects transparent and open leadership. "If there's a problem with a child, the teacher or principal doesn't immediately accuse them, but instead engages in a friendly discussion. We find a compromise together," he explained. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

One of the school's stakeholders, a representative from the committee and a local community leader, believes that a dialogic relationship is key to successful collaboration between the school and the community. "Every time the school has a program, the principal always invites us to discuss it. There are no unilateral decisions. Everything is explained openly," he said. (Interview with a stakeholder at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He believes that dialogic communication builds mutual trust between the educational institution and the community. "Because of the dialogue, the community knows the direction of the school's policies and can support them. This is important for maintaining the school's reputation and sustainability," he explained. (Interview with a stakeholder at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

a. Participatory leadership instruments, which create space for teacher and staff involvement in decision-making.

Interviews revealed that the leadership at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School consistently involves teachers and staff in policy meetings, curriculum evaluations, task assignments, and when challenges arise. This ensures that decisions are not imposed from above, but rather the result of deliberation. This practice aligns with the concept of participatory leadership, which international literature has found effective in increasing teacher commitment and school performance. A study by Pardede, Istaryatiningtias, & Ghani (2023) showed that a participatory leadership style combined with empathy (emotional intelligence) significantly improves teacher performance in elementary schools (PARDEDE et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the study "Collaborative Leadership in Education: Increasing Teacher Participation in Decision-Making" (Mohammad Bilutfikal Khofi, 2024) confirmed that involving teachers in decision-making fosters a sense of ownership over outcomes and shared responsibility.

- b. Means of strengthening Islamic values, especially deliberation, modesty (tawadhu'), and Islamic brotherhood.

In interviews, many respondents mentioned that dialogue and deliberation are not merely formal mechanisms, but are lived values within the school, reflecting Islamic brotherhood (ukhuwah Islamiyah), modesty (tawadhu'), and deliberation as a means of collective problem-solving.

The literature also supports the importance of such values in the context of Islamic leadership. One study showed that communication strategies emphasizing brotherhood helped strengthen mutual trust and solidarity among members (Mujtaba & Rini, 2023).

The values of modesty and deliberation also emerged in research in Indonesia, where humble and open leadership strengthened social cohesion and trust among teachers and between teachers and leaders (found in several local studies, although not always using the same terminology).

- c. Strategies for building trust and collaboration, resulting in harmonious, transparent, and productive relationships among school members.

Dialogic relationships at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School appear to be an effective strategy for building trust. Teachers feel their opinions are valued, staff feel empowered to voice challenges, and students feel heard. This trust then facilitates collaboration, for example in teacher workgroups, curriculum discussions, and discussions on more effective learning methods.

International literature has shown that participatory leadership increases trust and collaboration among organizational members. A study in Tanzania concluded that collective decision-making strengthens motivation, teacher-student commitment, and educational outcomes due to a sense of shared responsibility in facing challenges (Amos et al., 2022).

In the local context, the use of informal dialogue, teacher-leader forums, professor meetings, and informal communication between teachers and leaders enhances transparency and reduces feelings of fear or inferiority.

- d. Participatory and equal, where all parties—leaders, teachers, students, and parents—have space to express their opinions.

Interviews showed that school leadership encourages voices from various parties, not just leaders giving orders. Students, teachers, and in some cases, parents are invited to provide input or share experiences. Parents also feel invited to participate in the dialogue, not just listeners.

Participatory and relational leadership theories state that this participatory space is crucial for the validity of decisions and the sustainability of policies. Research shows that when teachers are given space

to participate in decisions, performance improves and job satisfaction increases (Royani et al., 2024).

3. Islamic Values in Empathy and Relational Leadership

The principal explained that empathy is a core value in leadership based on Islamic teachings. He emphasized that leadership is not just the ability to manage, but also the ability to feel and understand the conditions of others. "Empathy in Islam is part of the character of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). An empathetic leader means a leader who cares, listens, and understands the needs of his subordinates, not just commands," he said. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

He exemplified the application of the values of rahmah (compassion) and 'adl (justice) in daily interactions at school. "If a teacher is late for some reason, I don't immediately reprimand them harshly. I first ask the reason. From there, we can determine a wiser course of action," he added. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

The vice principal explained that empathy is crucial in maintaining a balance between policy and humanity. "We can't just judge teachers based on curriculum targets, but we also have to understand their workload and personal circumstances. That's a form of empathy in educational policy," he said. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

He linked empathy to the value of ihsan, which is working with the awareness that Allah is always watching. "If we empathize with ihsan, we don't just understand others, but also try to help and make things easier for them. That's what I learned from the Prophet's example," he said. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

A male teacher said that he felt the leadership at this school fostered a sense of comfort because it was based on empathy. "The Principal often asks about family news, not just work matters. Simple things like that make us feel appreciated," he said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

He noted that Islamic values such as ukhuwah (brotherhood) and amanah (trustworthiness) are clearly visible in empathetic leadership. "When leaders treat us with respect, we are also encouraged to be more disciplined and loyal. Because our relationships are built on mutual trust," he added. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

A female teacher highlighted empathy as a moral strength in the workplace. "Empathy isn't just about feelings, but also about actions that reflect compassion,"

she said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

She believes that the values of mercy and mutual assistance (ta'awun) are always present in the leadership at this school. "If a teacher is sick or having a problem, the leaders and their colleagues immediately help. That's a manifestation of empathy born of Islamic values," she said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

A ninth-grade student revealed that the teachers and principal often genuinely care about the students' well-being. "If I look sad or quiet in class, the teacher often asks, 'What's wrong?' instead of immediately getting angry. So I feel cared for," she said. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

She observed that the teachers not only educate academically but also pay attention to the students' feelings and morals. "The teachers here teach us to care for each other. They say it's part of Islamic teachings," he said, innocently but meaningfully. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

One parent noted that the school leadership's empathy is evident in the way the school communicates with families. "If my child has a learning problem, the school doesn't immediately blame them. They come to us, talk to us, and find a solution together. That's very Islamic," he said. (Interview with a parent at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He cited the values of friendship and deliberation as part of empathy in the relationship between the school and parents. "Empathic leadership makes us feel included. School is not just a place to entrust our children, but a partner in their education," he added. (Interview with a parent of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

A community leader and school liaison officer expressed his view that empathy in the school's leadership has created a positive image in the surrounding community. "I see the school leadership frequently coordinates with the community, in a polite and open manner. That demonstrates strong empathy," he explained. (Interview with stakeholders of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He believes that empathetic leadership reflects the values of akhlakul karimah (good character) and tabligh (prophetic outreach), the ability to convey kindness in a gentle manner. "If an Islamic school wants to gain the trust of the community, its leaders must emulate the Prophet's character: gentle, forgiving, and caring. And that's what I see at Ar-Rahmat," he said. (Interview with stakeholders at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

- a. Moral instrument that fosters trust and emotional closeness among school members

Empathy manifested by school leaders (principals and vice principals), for example by listening to teacher/student concerns, adjusting policies when necessary, and responding humanely, serves as a moral instrument. Through the practice of empathy, school members experience consistent moral concern, thereby increasing interpersonal trust and fostering emotional closeness. Empirical studies show that empathetic leadership is positively related to leadership effectiveness and follower innovative behavior because empathy enhances career adaptability, engagement, and work motivation (Ma et al., 2024).

This practice is also related to the creation of a supportive organizational climate: when teachers feel emotional support from their leaders, they are more willing to share problems, collaborate, and take initiatives for the common good, a critical effect in a school context that demands teamwork and sensitivity to students' needs.

- b. Reflection of Islamic Values: Leadership is exercised with compassion, justice, and deliberation

Theoretical studies and studies based on Islamic perspectives confirm that empathy and compassion (rahmah) are part of Islamic leadership ethics, encouraging just actions and concern for the welfare of others. This is reinforced by studies linking Islamic values and emotional intelligence/empathy to the leadership of Islamic educational institutions (Rosepti, 2023).

By grounding these values, empathetic leadership decisions become more meaningful: not only for administrative efficiency, but also for moral justification, accepted by the school community because they align with their religious beliefs.

- c. Building Social Harmony: Bridging the Relationship Between Leaders, Teachers, Students, Parents, and the Community

Empathy in relational leadership practices acts as a social "bridge," facilitating dialogue between actors (internal and external). At Ar-Rahmat Middle School, dialogical relationships based on empathy allow minor issues to be identified and addressed early, reducing conflict escalation, and strengthening collaboration between the school and families/community. Management and education literature shows that organizations with empathetic cultures tend to have stronger external relationships, better

reputations, and higher levels of stakeholder participation, all of which directly impact the sustainability of education programs (Rahmah, 2021).

Practically, empathy fosters transparent and respectful communication patterns: parents become partners (not just recipients of information), students feel safe raising concerns, and teachers are motivated to collaborate. This is the essence of social harmony that positions schools as both educational spaces and moral communities.

4. Structural and Cultural Barriers

The principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School explained that although empathetic communication has been a key principle of his leadership, structural barriers remain that prevent its implementation from always running optimally. "The biggest obstacle usually arises from the relatively rigid educational bureaucracy. Sometimes we want to quickly help or provide empathetic policies to teachers or students, but are hampered by inflexible formal regulations," he said. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

He also highlighted cultural barriers, particularly in traditional communication patterns between leaders and subordinates in education. "Some teachers are still accustomed to a hierarchical culture, feeling reluctant or afraid to express their opinions openly. However, empathy requires two-way communication," he added. (Interview with the Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School, September 22, 2025)

The Vice Principal believes that the main obstacles lie in the work structure and high administrative pressure. "Teachers are often burdened by the administrative burden of a busy curriculum. As a result, empathetic communication is sometimes reduced; everything is rushed and formal," he explained. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

He added that the individualistic culture that sometimes emerges among educators also presents a challenge. "Some teachers still feel that personal matters should not be brought into the workplace. However, empathy requires emotional openness and mutual understanding," he said. (Interview with the Vice Principal of Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 22, 2025)

A male teacher stated that the barriers to empathetic communication in schools stem more from an organizational culture that is not yet fully open. "Sometimes people feel reluctant to honestly share their workload or personal problems, for fear of being perceived as unprofessional," he said. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

He also believes that some teachers still carry a patriarchal cultural background, making cross-gender communication sensitive. "In local culture, there's an awkwardness between male and female teachers when it comes to open conversations, especially about emotions or empathy. However, empathetic communication requires honesty," she added. (Interview with a male teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

A female teacher highlighted the cultural barriers that persist in Islamic education, particularly regarding gender roles. "As female teachers, sometimes we feel like our opinions aren't always heard equally, especially in policy meetings. It's not out of malicious intent, but rather an old culture that's still lingering," she said. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

She also highlighted that empathy is often misunderstood as gentleness, a characteristic synonymous with women. "Empathy is a universal value, not a gender issue. But some people think empathy means weakness or indecisiveness," she added. (Interview with a female teacher at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 23, 2025)

One ninth-grade student revealed that barriers to empathetic communication at school sometimes arise due to differences in teacher character. "There are teachers who are easy to talk to, but there are also those who, if we tell them, they take it as an excuse. So sometimes we're afraid to be honest when we have problems," she said innocently. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

She also highlighted the cultural factor of "fear of teachers" that remains strong among students. "From childhood, we're taught to respect them, but sometimes we become too afraid. Even though the teachers are actually good," she said with a smile. (Interview with a student at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

A parent explained that barriers to empathetic communication sometimes arise from information gaps between schools and parents. "Not all parents can come to school or be active in groups. Sometimes there's miscommunication, especially about children's problems," she said. (Interview with a parent at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

She also highlighted that some parents still carry the culture of "the school knows everything." "We used to leave all educational matters to the school. But education is a shared responsibility," she said. (Interview with a parent at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

A community leader and school liaison officer revealed that barriers to empathetic communication also arise from external factors, particularly differing

expectations between the school and the community. "Sometimes the community expects schools to act ideally, while the school is bound by rules and limitations. This mismatch in expectations can lead to misunderstandings," he said. (Interview with Stakeholders at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

He also highlighted that in the local culture, leadership is still understood hierarchically. "The community often places the principal in a very high position, making two-way communication somewhat difficult. However, relational leadership requires equality," he added. (Interview with Stakeholders at Ar-Rahmat Islamic Middle School, September 25, 2025)

Based on the interviews above, the following types of obstacles were identified:

Table 2: Structural and Cultural Barriers

| Type of Barrier | Form of Identified Barrier | Aspect of Islamic Values Affected | Improvement Efforts |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| Structural | Rigid educational bureaucracy, teacher administrative burden, time constraints; | Adl (justice), ihsan (kindness); | 'Simplifying procedures, open deliberations |
| Organizational Culture | Overly strong hierarchy, respect for leaders; | Shura (deliberation), ukhuwah (brotherhood); | Strengthening two-way communication and egalitarian dialogue |
| Social Culture | Patriarchal mindset, fear of authority; | Rahmah (compassion), tawadhu' (humility); | Character education, exemplary morals of leaders |
| External (Stakeholders) | Differences in expectations between the community and the school; | Amanah (responsibility), tabligh (openness); | Empathy-based community collaboration and communication |

Structural barriers include rigid bureaucracy and administrative burdens, limited time for reflective conversations, and assessment tools and regulations that emphasize procedural compliance over human context. These conditions

reduce the space for empathetic communication practices in decision-making and teacher development. Studies of the implementation of social-emotional (SEL) programs and empathetic practices in schools indicate that systemic barriers (e.g., lack of resources, curriculum pressures, and inflexible governance) are key barriers to the sustainable adoption of empathetic practices (McCoy & Hanno, 2023).

Culturally, organizational and socio-local norms reinforce hierarchical communication patterns and a sense of "fear" or reluctance to disclose personal issues, making the open dialogue necessary for empathy difficult. Research on empathetic leadership confirms that while empathy enhances effectiveness and innovation, its successful implementation depends heavily on the organizational culture's readiness to embrace vulnerability, dialogue, and redistribution of power (Ma et al., 2024).

In the context of Islamic education, in particular, there is an additional tension: traditional values such as an emphasis on discipline and teacher authority sometimes clash with the need for egalitarian, dialogic communication. Local literature also emphasizes that integrating Islamic values with empathetic leadership strategies requires structural adaptations to ensure they become more than just moral rhetoric, but also institutionalized within the school culture (Suherman et al., 2025).

Implicatively, overcoming these obstacles requires a dual intervention: (1) structural reform, such as streamlining administrative workloads, allocating time for dialogue forums, and evaluating indicators that value relational aspects; and (2) cultural transformation, through capacity building for emotional intelligence (EI). Without simultaneous structural and cultural improvements, empathetic strategies risk remaining merely "good in words" but weak in practice (McCoy & Hanno, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that empathetic communication is at the heart of relational leadership practices in Islamic educational institutions, as it serves as a moral, social, and spiritual instrument that strengthens relationships among school members. At Ar-Rahmat Islamic Junior High School in Majalengka, empathy is not only defined as the ability to understand others' feelings, but also as an ethical foundation that fosters trust, openness, and a sense of shared belonging among the principal, teachers, students, and parents. Leadership that emphasizes empathy has been proven to create a participatory, dialogical, and equal communication atmosphere, strengthening a culture of deliberation

(shura), humility (tawadhu'), and Islamic brotherhood as the foundation of Islamic ethics in social relations in education.

This challenge emphasizes that empathy in relational leadership cannot grow solely through personal example but also requires systemic transformation, both at the organizational level, in school culture, and in educational policy.

Conceptually and practically, the results of this study demonstrate that empathetic communication serves as a bridge between Islamic values and the effectiveness of modern leadership, connecting spiritual aspects (rahmah, justice, and sincerity) with managerial aspects (collaboration, transparency, and participation). Thus, the application of empathy in relational leadership is an effective strategy for building harmony, improving the psychosocial well-being of the school community, and strengthening Islamic character and identity in contemporary educational practices.

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