

The Role of Empathy as an Instructional Leadership Competency among School Administrators

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Abstract – Instructional leadership plays an important role in improving teaching quality, supporting teachers' professional development, and creating school conditions that enhance student learning. As key middle-level school leaders, academic affairs directors are responsible not only for curriculum arrangement, instructional supervision, teacher coordination, and teaching quality improvement, but also for understanding and responding to teachers' and students' needs in daily school management. Therefore, effective instructional leadership requires not only technical and managerial competencies, but also emotional and relational competencies. Among these competencies, empathy is particularly important because it enables academic affairs directors to understand teachers' professional pressures, practical challenges, and emotional needs, and to provide more appropriate and supportive leadership. This study explored the role of empathy as an instructional leadership competency among academic affairs directors. Specifically, it examined how academic affairs directors understand empathy, how they demonstrate empathy in instructional management and leadership practices, and how empathy influences their instructional leadership. A qualitative research design was employed, using focus group discussion as the main method of data collection. Ten academic affairs directors with experience in instructional management participated in the study. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from participants' shared experiences. The findings revealed that academic affairs directors perceived empathy as an important instructional leadership competency that contributes to effective communication, trust-building, teacher support, conflict resolution, and context-sensitive decision-making. Empathetic academic affairs directors were better able to understand the challenges teachers face in curriculum implementation, classroom teaching, student management, and workload demands, thereby adopting more understanding and supportive management approaches. The study concludes that empathy should not be viewed merely as a personal quality, but as a leadership competency that enhances the effectiveness of instructional leadership among academic affairs directors. These findings suggest that leadership preparation, in-service training, and professional development programmes for school middle-level leaders should place greater emphasis on the cultivation of empathy.

Keywords – Empathy, Instructional leadership, leadership competency, School administrators

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has undergone significant changes over the past two decades (Hallinger, 2011; Walker, 2021). In many schools, leadership is no longer understood solely as administrative control, instructional supervision, or organizational management. Instead, educational leadership

increasingly emphasizes communication, collaboration, relationship-building, and emotional support within school communities (Hallinger, 2011). As teachers face growing instructional demands, curriculum reforms, student behavioural challenges, and increasing accountability pressures, school leaders are expected not only to manage instructional processes but also to understand and respond to teachers' professional and emotional needs (Mahfouz et al., 2019).

Within schools, academic affairs directors occupy a particularly important middle-level leadership position. Their responsibilities typically include curriculum coordination, teaching supervision, instructional planning, lesson observation, examination management, and teacher coordination. Compared to principals, academic affairs directors interact more frequently with teachers in daily instructional work. They often become the first administrators' teachers approach when facing classroom difficulties, workload concerns, curriculum implementation problems, or instructional stress. Consequently, their leadership effectiveness depends not only on technical and managerial competencies but also on their interpersonal and relational abilities.

Among these relational competencies, empathy has received growing attention in educational leadership research. Empathy is commonly understood as the capacity to recognize and understand another person's perspectives and experiences, and to respond in ways that acknowledge those experiences within social interaction (Cooper, 2011; Goleman, 1995). In school settings, empathy may influence how leaders communicate with teachers, respond to professional concerns, and navigate the interpersonal dimensions of instructional management. For academic affairs directors in particular, whose work involves continuous interaction with teachers, empathy may shape not only professional relationships but also everyday instructional leadership practices.

Recent studies in educational leadership have increasingly emphasized emotional intelligence and relational leadership (Mahfouz et al., 2019; Walker, 2021). Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in social interactions (Mayer et al., 2016). Empathy is widely recognized as one of the core dimensions of emotional intelligence because it enables leaders to recognize the emotional experiences of others and respond constructively. Research has shown that emotionally intelligent leadership can positively influence school climate, communication, collaboration, and teacher well-being (Mahfouz et al., 2019).

Despite increasing attention to emotional leadership, many instructional leadership studies continue to focus primarily on technical aspects such as instructional supervision, curriculum management, and academic accountability. Comparatively less attention has been given

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to the emotional and relational dimensions of instructional leadership, especially among middle-level school administrators. Existing studies also tend to focus more heavily on principals, while the experiences of academic affairs directors remain underexplored.

This study therefore explored empathy as an instructional leadership competency among academic affairs directors. Rather than examining empathy as a personal trait alone, this study focused on how empathy operates within daily instructional leadership practices. The study aimed to understand how academic affairs directors perceive empathy, how they apply empathy when working with teachers, and how empathy influences instructional management and leadership effectiveness.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. How do academic affairs directors understand empathy within instructional leadership?
- ii. How do academic affairs directors demonstrate empathy in their daily leadership practices?
- iii. How does empathy influence communication, decision-making, and teacher support in instructional leadership?
- iv. What challenges do academic affairs directors face when practicing empathetic leadership?

This study contributes to educational leadership research by highlighting empathy as a practical instructional leadership competency within middle-level school leadership. The findings may also provide useful implications for leadership preparation programmes and professional development initiatives for school administrators.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Instructional Leadership and Middle-Level School Leadership

Instructional leadership has long been recognized as an important leadership approach in schools because of its emphasis on teaching quality, curriculum improvement, and student learning (Hallinger, 2011). Hallinger (2011) explains that instructional leadership focuses on leadership practices directly associated with teaching and learning processes. Instructional leaders are expected to guide curriculum implementation, supervise classroom instruction, support teacher development, and establish effective learning environments.

Although instructional leadership research initially concentrated on principals, instructional leadership in schools is increasingly distributed among middle-level administrators such as department heads and academic affairs directors. These middle-level leaders often coordinate daily instructional activities and maintain close communication with teachers. Their leadership practices therefore influence teachers' instructional experiences and professional working conditions.

In contemporary schools, instructional leadership has gradually expanded beyond technical supervision and academic monitoring (Walker, 2021). Educational leaders are increasingly expected to support teachers emotionally, manage interpersonal relationships, and create collaborative

school cultures (Walker, 2021). Consequently, emotional and relational competencies have become increasingly relevant within instructional leadership research.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence in Leadership

Empathy is commonly defined as the ability to understand another person's emotions, experiences, and perspectives (Goleman, 1995). Empathy does not simply involve being kind or emotionally expressive. Instead, empathy allows individuals to recognize how others experience situations and respond appropriately within interpersonal interactions.

Within emotional intelligence theory, empathy is considered a key competency for effective leadership (Mayer et al., 2016). Mayer et al. (2016) explain that emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to perceive emotional cues, understand interpersonal dynamics, and manage social relationships effectively. Leaders who demonstrate empathy are often better positioned to communicate constructively, resolve conflicts, and establish trust.

In educational settings, empathy has particular significance because schools are relational organizations that depend heavily on communication and collaboration. Teachers frequently encounter professional stress related to classroom management, curriculum changes, administrative expectations, student behaviour, and workload demands. Leaders who demonstrate empathy may therefore better understand teachers' challenges and respond more supportively.

Mahfouz et al. (2019) argue that school leaders' social and emotional competencies contribute significantly to caring school environments. Similarly, Cooper (2011) suggests that empathy supports meaningful educational relationships by encouraging understanding, trust, and emotional responsiveness.

Empathy as an Instructional Leadership Competency

Leadership competency generally refers to the skills, behaviours, and abilities required for effective leadership performance. Traditionally, instructional leadership competencies emphasized curriculum expertise, organizational management, and instructional supervision. However, recent educational leadership studies increasingly acknowledge the importance of relational competencies such as communication, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and empathy.

Empathy may function as an instructional leadership competency in several ways. First, empathy can strengthen communication between leaders and teachers by encouraging active listening and respectful interaction. Second, empathy may improve leadership decision-making because leaders become more aware of teachers' instructional realities and workload pressures. Third, empathy can contribute to conflict management by helping leaders understand the perspectives underlying disagreements and tensions.

Kock et al. (2019) found that empathetic leadership positively influences employees' trust, engagement, and organizational relationships. In educational settings, empathetic leadership may similarly contribute to teacher

morale, collegiality, and supportive professional environments.

However, empathy within school leadership should not be misunderstood as emotional leniency or the absence of accountability. Educational leaders must still maintain instructional expectations, organizational standards, and professional responsibilities. Therefore, empathetic leadership involves balancing emotional understanding with professional decision-making.

Although empathy has increasingly appeared in leadership literature, relatively few studies specifically examine empathy among academic affairs directors. Existing research continues to focus mainly on principals or general leadership practices. Consequently, more research is needed to understand how empathy operates within the daily instructional leadership practices of middle-level school administrators.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore empathy as an instructional leadership competency among academic affairs directors. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' experiences, interpretations, leadership practices, and perspectives regarding empathy in instructional leadership (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Qualitative research is particularly useful for exploring complex social interactions and human experiences within natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since empathy involves interpersonal understanding, communication, emotions, and leadership experiences, qualitative inquiry allowed for a deeper exploration of how empathy operates within daily instructional management.

Participants

The participants consisted of twenty academic affairs directors from secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience in instructional leadership and teacher management.

The participants came from different school contexts, including urban and suburban schools. Most participants had several years of experience in curriculum coordination, instructional supervision, teacher evaluation, and school instructional management.

The selection of academic affairs directors was appropriate because these administrators work closely with teachers on a daily basis and are directly involved in instructional leadership practices.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups allow participants to discuss experiences collectively, respond to each other's perspectives, and generate richer descriptions through interaction (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Two focus group sessions were conducted, with ten participants in each group. Each interview session lasted approximately ninety minutes. Semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the discussion while allowing participants sufficient flexibility to share experiences and examples.

Examples of interview questions included:

- i. How do you understand empathy in your leadership role?
- ii. How do you demonstrate empathy when working with teachers?
- iii. Can you describe situations where empathy influenced your leadership decisions?
- iv. How does empathy affect communication and teacher relationships?
- v. What difficulties do you experience when practicing empathy in leadership?

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) approach. The analysis process involved several stages.

First, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. Second, meaningful statements related to empathy, communication, leadership practices, teacher support, and decision-making were identified and assigned initial codes. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories and themes. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency.

The coding process focused on identifying recurring patterns regarding how empathy influenced instructional leadership practices among academic affairs directors.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate after being informed about the purpose of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing participants' names and school identities from the transcripts and findings.

Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The interview recordings and transcripts were used solely for academic purposes.

IV. FINDINGS

The analysis generated five major themes:

- i. Empathy as relational understanding in instructional leadership
- ii. Empathy and teacher-centred communication
- iii. Empathy in instructional decision-making
- iv. Empathy as trust-building and emotional support
- v. Tensions and limitations in empathetic leadership

Theme 1: Empathy as Relational Understanding in Instructional Leadership

Most participants described empathy less as emotional sympathy and more as a form of professional understanding. In their discussions, empathy was often associated with the ability to recognise teachers' instructional realities, workload pressures, and personal circumstances before making administrative decisions or evaluations.

Rather than viewing empathy simply as kindness or emotional concern, participants often connected empathy with professional understanding. Several participants explained that instructional leadership requires leaders to understand the realities teachers face in classrooms and curriculum implementation.

One participant explained:

"If we do not understand teachers' actual classroom difficulties, our decisions may become unrealistic."

Another participant stated:

"Teachers face pressure from students, parents, examinations, and administrative tasks at the same time. Leaders need to understand these realities."

The participants therefore framed empathy as part of practical instructional leadership rather than simply a personal disposition. Their responses suggested that empathy functioned as a way of interpreting teachers' situations within the broader context of curriculum demands, classroom management, and institutional expectations.

This finding reflects relational leadership perspectives emphasizing that effective educational leadership depends on understanding people within organizational contexts.

Theme 2: Empathy and Teacher-Centred Communication

Communication emerged consistently across the interviews as one of the main areas in which empathy shaped leadership practice.

Participants explained that empathetic communication involves listening carefully to teachers, adjusting communication approaches according to individual situations, and avoiding overly authoritative interactions.

One participant stated:

"Sometimes teachers only want leaders to listen first before giving instructions."

Another participant explained:

"If teachers feel that leaders only criticize them, communication becomes difficult."

Several participants described situations where teachers became emotionally defensive during discussions about teaching performance or classroom management problems. In these situations, empathy helped leaders communicate more constructively.

One participant shared:

"When teachers make mistakes, we usually try to understand what caused the problem before discussing solutions."

The findings suggest that empathy shaped the tone and approach of leadership communication. Rather than relying solely on authority or formal supervision, participants described communication as more effective when teachers felt heard and understood. In this sense, empathy appeared

to reduce defensiveness during instructional discussions and helped sustain more cooperative professional relationships.

The findings support previous studies suggesting that emotionally intelligent leadership improves interpersonal communication and professional relationships within schools (Mahfouz et al., 2019).

Theme 3: Empathy in Instructional Decision-Making

A recurring pattern across the interviews was that participants rarely discussed empathy in abstract emotional terms. Instead, they often connected empathy with the practical realities of instructional management. In many cases, empathy appeared to influence how leadership decisions were approached, communicated, and adjusted within everyday school operations.

Participants also emphasized the role of empathy in instructional management decisions.

Several participants explained that empathy helped them consider teachers' workload, experience, emotional condition, and classroom realities when making decisions regarding teaching assignments, curriculum implementation, and instructional expectations.

One participant commented:

"Different teachers have different capacities and pressures. Leadership decisions cannot always be made in the same way for everyone."

Another participant stated:

"If we only focus on completing tasks, teachers may feel exhausted and unsupported."

Participants did not describe empathy as lowering instructional expectations. Instead, empathy appeared to influence how decisions were implemented and communicated. Several participants suggested that teachers were more accepting of leadership decisions when administrators demonstrated awareness of classroom realities and workload constraints.

Several participants explained that empathy did not necessarily change institutional expectations themselves, but it influenced how those expectations were implemented in practice. For example, participants described situations in which curriculum deadlines, teaching assignments, or administrative tasks still needed to be completed, yet leaders attempted to negotiate these demands in ways that acknowledged teachers' workload conditions.

One participant explained:

"Sometimes teachers are already overloaded, so even when tasks cannot be reduced, we may need to adjust the timing or communication approach."

Another participant stated:

"Empathy does not mean lowering standards. It means understanding what teachers are dealing with before making decisions."

These responses suggest that participants viewed empathy less as emotional accommodation and more as contextual awareness within instructional leadership.

Theme 4: Empathy as Trust-Building and Emotional Support

Many participants believed that empathy helped establish trust between academic affairs directors and teachers.

Participants explained that teachers were generally more willing to communicate openly with leaders who demonstrated understanding and respect.

One participant explained:

“Teachers are more comfortable discussing problems when they feel they will not be blamed immediately.”

Another participant stated:

“Trust develops when teachers feel leaders understand their difficulties instead of only checking performance.”

Several participants also described situations where teachers experienced emotional stress related to workload, student behaviour, or personal pressures. In these situations, empathetic leadership involved emotional support and flexibility.

One participant shared:

“Sometimes teachers are emotionally tired. Small supportive actions from leaders can make a difference.”

The findings indicate that empathy contributed to relational trust within the school setting. Participants repeatedly associated empathetic leadership with openness, approachability, and a greater willingness among teachers to discuss instructional or personal difficulties. This suggests that empathy may strengthen the relational dimension of instructional leadership in ways that extend beyond formal supervision.

Theme 5: Tensions and Limitations in Empathetic Leadership

Although participants consistently valued empathy, the interviews also revealed uncertainty regarding how empathy should be balanced with institutional responsibility. This tension appeared repeatedly throughout discussions about supervision, accountability, and leadership expectations.

Although participants strongly valued empathy, they also acknowledged several tensions and challenges.

One common concern involved balancing empathy with organizational accountability. Participants explained that academic affairs directors still needed to maintain instructional standards, complete administrative requirements, and enforce school policies.

One participant stated:

“Sometimes we understand teachers’ situations, but deadlines and school expectations still exist.”

Another participant explained:

“Leaders cannot always make decisions based only on emotions.”

Several participants also mentioned the emotional demands associated with middle-level leadership. Because academic affairs directors often function as intermediaries between senior management and teachers, participants described situations in which they needed to absorb pressure from both sides.

One participant noted:

“Teachers expect understanding from us, while school management expects results and efficiency.”

Another participant explained:

“Sometimes leaders also feel stressed, but we still need to remain calm when communicating with teachers.”

These comments suggest that empathetic leadership may involve emotional labour, particularly within accountability-oriented school environments where leaders are expected to

maintain both interpersonal support and organizational performance.

One participant noted:

“Leaders also experience pressure, but teachers usually expect us to remain emotionally stable.”

The findings also revealed that empathetic leadership involves ongoing negotiation between relational responsiveness and institutional responsibility. Participants frequently described situations in which they understood teachers’ concerns but still needed to uphold school policies, instructional targets, or administrative timelines. Empathy therefore operated within, rather than outside of, accountability-oriented school structures.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that empathy functions less as an individual personality trait and more as a relational leadership practice embedded within daily instructional management. Participants did not describe empathy primarily in emotional or moral terms. Instead, empathy was frequently associated with communication, contextual understanding, workload awareness, and teacher interaction.

This is important because instructional leadership research has traditionally emphasized supervision, curriculum management, and academic accountability. The findings of this study indicate that instructional leadership among academic affairs directors also involves ongoing relational work. In many cases, participants described empathy as influencing how leadership authority was exercised rather than whether authority existed.

The findings also suggest that empathy operates within institutional constraints rather than outside them. Participants repeatedly acknowledged that school leaders still needed to enforce policies, maintain instructional expectations, and meet administrative deadlines. Consequently, empathetic leadership was not described as unrestricted emotional accommodation. Instead, empathy appeared to function as a way of negotiating instructional demands while maintaining professional relationships.

This tension is particularly relevant within middle-level instructional leadership. Academic affairs directors occupy positions that require them to manage instructional accountability while simultaneously maintaining close working relationships with teachers. Unlike senior administrators who may operate at broader organizational levels, academic affairs directors interact directly with teachers in the daily implementation of curriculum and instructional policies. As a result, relational competencies such as empathy may become especially significant within their leadership practice.

The findings therefore extend existing instructional leadership research by highlighting the relational and interpersonal dimensions of middle-level instructional management. Rather than framing empathy simply as emotional sensitivity, this study suggests that empathy may function as a practical leadership competency through which instructional supervision, communication, and decision-making are enacted in everyday school contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the role of empathy as an instructional leadership competency among academic affairs directors. The findings revealed that participants viewed empathy as an important professional competency that influences communication, teacher support, trust-building, conflict management, and instructional decision-making.

The participants generally understood empathy as the ability to recognize and understand teachers' professional realities, emotional experiences, and instructional challenges. Empathy was not viewed merely as kindness or emotional concern, but as a practical leadership competency that contributes to more effective instructional leadership.

The study also found that empathy influenced leadership practices in multiple ways. Empathetic communication encouraged teachers to express concerns more openly, while empathetic decision-making helped leaders consider contextual and human factors within instructional management. In addition, empathy contributed to stronger professional relationships and greater trust between academic affairs directors and teachers.

At the same time, the participants acknowledged the challenges involved in practicing empathetic leadership. Academic affairs directors must balance emotional understanding with instructional accountability, organizational expectations, and administrative responsibilities.

Overall, the findings suggest that empathy should be recognized as an important instructional leadership competency within middle-level school leadership. Leadership preparation programmes and professional development initiatives should therefore place greater emphasis on emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, and relational leadership skills.

Future research may further examine empathy across different educational leadership positions and school contexts. Comparative studies involving principals, department heads, and other school leaders may provide deeper understanding of how empathy influences leadership effectiveness in schools.

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