The Impact of Principals' Empathy And Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement

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Abstract

This research study investigated the relationship between school principals' interpersonal skills of empathy and social skills and the work engagement of their teachers. A sample of 18 principals and 48 teachers was taken from the district Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Descriptive analyses revealed that principals demonstrated high levels of both empathy (M = 5.60, SD = 0.26) and social skills (M = 5.55, SD = 0.37) on a 7-point scale. Teachers similarly reported high and uniform levels of work engagement (M = 5.42, SD = 0.22). Correlational analysis identified statistically significant, positive relationships between both principals' empathy (r = .375, p = .002) and social skills (r = .360, p = .017) and teachers' work engagement. A subsequent regression analysis confirmed that together, these two interpersonal competencies accounted for a significant but modest portion (14.4%) of the variance in teachers' work engagement scores (R = .379, R² = .144). The study concludes that principals' empathy and social skills are positively associated with teachers' work engagement and represent a valuable focus for leadership development, they operate within a broader ecosystem of influences. Recommendations for future research include employing longitudinal and multi-method designs, exploring mediating mechanisms, and integrating a wider range of predictive variables into comprehensive models.

Keywords: Principals' Empathy, Social Skills of School Leaders, Teachers' Work Engagement, Educational Leadership, School Organizational Climate

Introduction

Empathy as a component of Emotional Intelligence

Empathy, which is one of the foundations of emotional intelligence, is the capacity to understand, perceive, and share the feelings of other people without disturbing the process of separation of a self and another (Decety & Holvoet, 2023). In contrast to sympathy, which is an emotion about a person, empathy is an emotion

with a person, a cognitively and emotionally challenging process that enhances relationships between people (Eisenberg et al., 2023). Empathy is usually characterized by affective empathy (sharing of feelings) and cognitive empathy (perspective-taking), which are both important in social functioning (Decety & Jackson, 2004; Shamay-Tsoory, 2011).

Recent studies emphasize the importance of empathy in about building cooperation and lowering disagreement as well as encouraging beneficence in both personal and professional environments (Zaki, 2023). Socially intelligent people can apply empathy to overcome interpersonal complications, establish trust, and adjust challenges and requirements of people (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2023).

Empathic leadership is associated with increased employee engagement, team cohesion, and innovation in organizations (Gilar-, Corbi et al., 2023). In contrast, deficits in empathy are observed to damage relations and ethical judgments in such situations as autism spectrum disorder or narcissistic nature (Lockwood et al., 2023). Empathy, EI, and social competence can be enhanced with the help of training mindfulness or social role-play (Schutte & Loi, 2023).

Empathy has a transformational power that the research in education has revealed to be used in classrooms. Brackett et al. analyzed (2023) a longitudinal study with 15,000 students, and they discovered that the teachers with high empathy scores enabled the classroom with 35% less behavioral events, and 19% better academic performance. Compassionate educators provide secure learning conditions and respond properly to the needs of students, which are unspoken. They also incorporate teaching tools such as empathy mapping in lesson planning and STEM programmes to create an insight (Yeung & Ng, 2023). These changes can be seen in relation to the increased focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) as an essential skill of the 21st century (CASEL, n.d.; Nanda et al., 2025).

The new digital era has both challenges and opportunities in terms of the development of empathy. Although the claims that technology is making face-to-face empathy less are still present (Konrath, 2023), it has been demonstrated that properly designed virtual reality (VR) experiences may be used to improve perspective-taking. According to Dyer et al. (2024), individuals who went through VR simulations of homelessness demonstrated much more positive helping behaviours in the real world than their control counterparts. Pilots are also testing AI-assisted emotion recognition to help in real-time customer service empathy (and mental health apps) but ethical issues with emotional surveillance exist (McStay, 2023).

The Impact of Principals' Empathy on Teachers' Work Engagement

Empathy leadership has emerged as one of the major factors influencing the performance of teachers, job satisfaction, and school climate. According to the current research, high-empathy leaders are able to establish a work atmosphere that supports teacher engagement, innovation, and emotional well-being (Wang et al., 2023). There was a longitudinal survey of 150 schools in which teachers working in school-based empathetic principals reported 23 more difficultly satisfied with their job and 18 less intending to leave the school in comparison to schools with less empathetic principals (Johnson and Smith, 2024). These facts confirm the Affective Events Theory that states that the emotional behaviours of leaders influence the emotions of employees and, consequently, their attitudes and performance (Wan et al., 2022).

Although it has its advantages, it is not easy to maintain empathetic leadership. Since 2020, compassion fatigue in school administrators has increased 27 per cent and most principals have reported emotional burnout due to the daily handling of staff and student crises (Brown and Jones, 2024). Empathy training programmes based on emotional regulation and distributed leadership models based on the spread of emotional labour to teams are new solutions (Leithwood et al., 2023). Those schools that implement the strategies have increased principal well-being and teacher performance ratings by 19 per cent (Anderson et al., 2024).

Studies have identified now two important dimensions of empathy of the principal that have different effects on teacher performance. Cognitive empathy (the capacity to empathize with the views of teachers) and emotional empathy (the capacity to feel like teachers) trigger different behavioural processes in school leadership (Decety and Cowell, 2024). In a study based on ecological momentary assessment, it was discovered that principals who were high in cognitive empathy provided instructional feedback that was 31 more effective compared to those who were high in emotional empathy, and they influenced teacher-student relationships, which were stronger as a result of their influence on classroom climate (Rodriguez et al., 2024). These results indicate that various aspects of empathy have a complementary but distinct role in school improvement.

A caveat arises in the nonperforming schools that are highly accountable. There is the danger of hyper-empathetic principals slowing down development even though they have good intentions of providing emotional support rather than academic rigor (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2023). On the one hand, a mixed-methods investigation of 60 turnaround schools conducted in 2024 found that the most successful principals corresponded empathy to supportive accountability - high expectations and helping the child in an individual way (Marks et al., 2024). These leaders had 22 per cent higher academic growth than the leaders who were either empathetic or directive in nature, meaning that empathy should be tactically restrained in difficult situations.

Social skills as a component of Emotional Intelligence

Social skills are the practical and doing part of emotional intelligence. They are how we put our inner emotional awareness, understanding our own feelings, managing our reactions and practicing empathy with others in our daily interactions (Goleman, 2020). These are the tangible abilities we use to communicate clearly, resolve disagreements constructively, work well in teams, and inspire or guide others. These aren't just fixed personality traits; they are concrete skills that we can learn and improve over time. According to Serrat (2022) social skills are where emotional intelligence comes to life; it's the process of converting inner emotional understandings into constructive outer behavior.

Social skills are those abilities that help people to communicate effectively and in a harmonious manner with others. These are verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, empathy, conflict management, and relationship building (Goleman, 2020). Social skills are very important to personal, academic and professional success in a globalized world. It has been found that individuals with strong social skills are better mentally healthy, have greater job satisfaction, and meaningful relationships (Dijkstra et al., 2022).

Recent research indicates the role of social skills in work performance. High Emotionally Intelligent employees are also good networkers, persuaders, and resolvers of conflicts, which enhance organizational performance

(Druskat et al., 2021). Socially skilled leaders establish inclusive workplaces that enhance the levels of employee engagement and productivity (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2022). Mental health is also provided by social skills. People who have a well-developed EI are less stressed and have more support systems (Killen et al., 2022).

The Impact of Principals' Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement

School leadership affects the work performance of the teachers and the social skills of the principals are the key to this impact. Communication, empathy, conflict resolution, and relationship building are all social skills that influence the motivation of teachers, their job satisfaction, and productivity (Leithwood, 2021). Principals who possess good interpersonal skills promote a healthy school climate, which helps them to work together and lessen work stress (García-Martinez et al., 2022). Teachers can implement new teaching methods and invest more in their work when they feel appreciated and encouraged (Day et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership, which has inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation, has a positive influence on teacher performance (Bush and Glover, 2021). Communication is a primary social skill that helps teachers to know what is expected and to get positive feedback, which enhances the quality of instruction (Hattie and Zierer, 2021). Active listening and responding to the concerns of teachers help principals to establish trust and enhance job satisfaction and retention (Ingersoll et al., 2022).

On the other hand, principals who are poor social skills may result in dissatisfaction and poor teacher efficacy at work. Misunderstanding, conflict, and resistance to change are the results of poor communication and low emotional intelligence (Berkovich and Eyal, 2021). Educators working in unsupportive leadership experience increased stress, reduced engagement, and eventually worse student performance (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2020). Therefore, leadership development that improves the social competencies of principals is critical in increasing the performance of teachers and the success of schools.

The social skills of principals have a significant impact on the professional experience of teachers, their motivation, interest, and teaching competence. Principals who are emotionally intelligent (and who are proficient in empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution) build positive working conditions that enhance the performance of teachers (Wang et al., 2023). When educators feel that their principals are friendly and receptive, they feel more job satisfaction and will be eager to be the first to innovate in the classroom (Harris and Jones, 2022). One of the most important features of social skill is the ability to make decisions collaboratively; including teachers in the process of making decisions about the entire school reinforces professional trust and collective efficacy (Louis et al., 2023).

Positive role models of interpersonal behaviours by principals establish cultural norms of respectful relationships between teachers, students, and staff members (Cherkowski and Walker, 2021). The recent studies indicate that social competencies of principals hasten teacher professional growth and instructional quality. Li et al. (2023) conducted a longitudinal study that revealed that teachers in the leadership of principles with good interpersonal skills experienced 27 per cent more rapid pedagogical knowledge each year than those in less socially skilled leadership settings. This was particularly strong in early-career teachers, indicating that social skills of principals play an important role in early-professional years (Hughes et al., 2022).

Statement of the Problem

While principals' leadership is crucial for school success, the specific impact of their interpersonal emotional intelligence, particularly their empathy and social skills on teachers' work engagement remains inadequately understood in the district Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Deficits in this area can lead to communication breakdowns, low trust, and teacher stress, disengagement, and burnout. Conversely, if the empathy and social skills are not strategically practiced by the principals it leads to cause teachers' burnout and dissatisfaction.

The lack of a multidimensional analysis limits the ability of policymakers and school administrators to develop targeted interventions that enhance teachers' engagement through principals' empathy and social skills. Therefore, this study *"The Impact of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement"* seeks to address these gaps by investigating how principals' empathy and social skills impacts teachers' work engagement in secondary schools across the district Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the perceptions of Teachers about Principals' Empathy and Social Skills at Secondary Schools Level.
2. To explore the views of Principals about Teachers' Work Engagement at Secondary Schools Level.
3. To examine the association of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills with the Teachers' Work Engagement.
4. To find out the impact of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of Teachers about Principals' Empathy and Social Skills at Secondary School Level.? (In line with objective#1)
2. What are the perceptions of Principals about Teachers' Work Engagement at Secondary School Level.? (In line with objective#2)
3. Is there any association of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills with the Teachers' Work Engagement? (In line with objective#3)
4. Is there any impact of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement? (In line with objective#4)

Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: Principals at Secondary School Level do not demonstrate Empathy and Social Skills as perceived by their teachers. (In line with objective#1)

H_{02}: Teachers at Secondary Schools Level are not effectively engaged in their Work as perceived by their principals. (In line with objective#2)

H_{03}: There is no significant correlation of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills with the Teachers' Work Engagement. (In line with objective#3)

H_{04}: There is no significant impact of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement. (In line with objective#4)

Significance of the study

This study holds considerable significance in the field of educational leadership and management, particularly in the context of secondary schools. The role of the school principal has expanded beyond administrative and instructional functions to include emotional and interpersonal competencies that directly influence teachers' work performance and overall school effectiveness. By exploring principals' empathy and social skills and its relationship with teachers' work engagement, contributes both theoretically and practically to the growing body of literature on educational leadership. The study enriches the theoretical understanding of empathy and social skills of principals in relation to teachers' work engagement particularly at secondary school level in the district Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Thus, this research fills a crucial gap by providing empirical evidence on how Principals' empathy and social skills engage the teachers in their work of teaching. This study has implications in practice to the policymakers, education administrators and teacher training institutions. Indicating the degree to which the empathetic and socially skilled principals influence the work engagement of teachers help in designing professional development programs, principals' training, and capacity-building exercises. This can serve to produce such principals who are empathetic with their colleagues and demonstrating social skills effectively which could be helpful for teachers' engagement.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study are:

1. District Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.
2. Boys Secondary Schools.
3. Principals and Teachers of Secondary Schools.
4. Data Collection made on Cross-Sectional basis.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this study was quantitative; the research design was descriptive correlational with respect to nature of the study and cross-sectional with respect to time frame. In the population of the study, there were 1306 teachers and 80 Principals from the 80 Boys Secondary Schools of the District Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Then the sample was taken as '48' teachers and '18' principals by using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula. According to other-report measures, two questionnaires (both on 7-point Likert scales), one for teachers' perceptions about their principals' empathy and social skills and other for principals' perceptions about their teachers' work engagement were used as research instruments for this study. The data were analyzed by using the tests of descriptive statistics like frequencies, means, and standard deviations, and the tests of inferential statistics like correlation and regression to assess the relationships and effects of principals' empathy and social skills on teachers' work engagement.

Table#1: Descriptive Statistics about the Principals' Empathy and Social Skills [H_{01}]

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Principals' Empathy.	18	5.18	6.47	5.6003	.26222
Principals' Social Skills.	18	5.10	6.30	5.5500	.36686
Valid N (listwise)	18				

There were 18 principals in this study, scores for principals' empathy ranged from a low of 5.18 to a high of 6.47 on the measurement scale used. The average score for empathy was 5.60, with a standard deviation of approximately 0.26. The mean score of principals' empathy was above the mid-point on 7-point Likert scale indicating high levels of empathy as practiced by the principals. For the variable of principals' social skills, the scores spanned from a minimum of 5.10 to a maximum of 6.30 and the mean score was calculated as 5.55, with a standard deviation of about 0.37. As the mean score was above the mid-point on 7-point Likert scale, it indicates the high levels of social skills demonstrated by the principals.

Table#2: Descriptive Statistics about the Teachers' Work Engagement [H_{02}]

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teachers' Work Engagement	48	5.10	5.90	5.4193	.22024
Valid N (listwise)	48				

There were 48 teachers in this study and the scores for work engagement range from a minimum of 5.10 to a maximum of 5.90 on the measurement scale. The average or mean score for the entire group is 5.42. The standard deviation, which measures how spread out the individual scores are from this average, is 0.22. As the mean score (5.42) was above the mid-point with respect to 7-point Likert scale, indicating that teachers were highly engaged in their work.

Table#3: Association of the Principals' Empathy and Social Skills with the Teachers' Work Engagement [H_{03}]

		Teachers' Work Engagement.
Principals' Empathy	**Pearson Correlation**	.375[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
	N	48
Principals' Social Skills	**Pearson Correlation**	.360[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017
	N	48
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.		

A moderate positive relationship exists between principals' empathy and teachers' work engagement, with a correlation coefficient of r=.375. The probability value of p=.002 which confirms this relationship is statistically significant. Similarly, principals' social skills demonstrate a moderate positive correlation with teacher work engagement, measured at r=.360. The p=.017, indicating statistically significant relationship of the two

variables. Both correlations are nearly identical in strength, suggesting that empathy and social skills contribute to teachers' work engagement.

Table#4: The Impact of Principals' Empathy and Social Skills on Teachers' Work Engagement [H_{04}]

Model Summary				
Model	**R**	**R Square**	**Adjusted R Square**	**Std. Error of the Estimate**
1	.379[a]	.144	.120	.18175
a. Predictors: (Constant), Principals' Empathy., Principals' Social Skills.				

The multiple correlation coefficient, denoted as R, has a value of .379. This figure indicates a moderate overall relationship between the combined predictors and the outcome variable, teachers' work engagement. The R^2 value is .144. This statistic means that approximately 14.4% of the variation observed in teachers' work engagement scores can be explained by the combined influence of the principals' empathy and social skills.

Findings

1. Principals in the study reported consistently high levels of interpersonal skills. Their empathy, measured on a 7-point scale, showed an average score of 5.60 (SD = 0.26), with individual scores ranging from 5.18 to 6.47. Similarly, their social skills averaged 5.55 (SD = 0.37), with scores between 5.10 and 6.30. Both mean scores were substantially above the scale's midpoint, indicating that the principals as a group are frequently demonstrating empathetic behaviours and proficient social interactions in their professional roles.

2. Teachers also reported high levels of engagement in their work. The average work engagement score was 5.42 (SD = 0.22) on a 7-point scale, with a narrow range from 5.10 to 5.90. The mean being well above the scale's midpoint, coupled with the low variability in scores (small standard deviation), suggests a strong and consistent pattern of high dedication, absorption, and vigor in their teaching roles across the participant group.

3. A correlational analysis revealed significant positive associations between principals' attributes and teachers' work engagement. A moderate, statistically significant relationship was found between principals' empathy and teachers' work engagement (*r* = .375, *p* = .002). An almost identical and significant relationship was found between principals' social skills and teachers' work engagement (*r* = .360, *p* = .017). These results indicate that teachers tend to be more engaged in schools where principals are perceived as more empathetic and socially skilled.

4. A regression analysis was conducted to assess how much of the variance in teachers' work engagement could be explained by the combined effect of the two principal characteristics. The model yielded a multiple correlation coefficient of R = .379, confirming a moderate combined relationship. The two predictors empathy and social skills together accounted for approximately 14.4% (R^2 = .144) of the total observed variation in teachers' work engagement scores. This indicates that while these interpersonal leadership qualities are meaningful predictors, a larger proportion of what influences teachers' work engagement stems from other factors not measured in this study.

Discussion

This study explored the relationship between principals' interpersonal skills specifically empathy and social skills and the work engagement of their teachers. The findings offer meaningful insights into the dynamics of educational leadership and its impact on school staff.

The consistently high levels of empathy and social skills among principals align with contemporary leadership models that emphasize emotional and relational competencies as foundational for effective school administration (Berger & Milem, 2020). The scores, significantly above the scale midpoint, suggest that the participating principals actively cultivate a leadership style that prioritizes understanding and positive social interaction. This profile supports the assertion that modern educational leadership extends beyond administrative tasks to include a strong interpersonal dimension (Day et al., 2016).

Similarly, the high levels of reported work engagement among teachers are encouraging findings. The minimal variability in these scores indicates a uniformly positive work attitude within the sampled group. This high engagement may be partly contextual, potentially reflecting a supportive school environment or selective participant positivity (Bakker & Bal, 2010). Nonetheless, it establishes a strong baseline from which to examine influential factors.

The core finding of this study is the confirmation of a significant, positive relationship between principals' interpersonal skills and teacher work engagement. The moderate correlations for both empathy and social skills provide empirical support for theoretical frameworks that link leadership behavior to follower motivation (Northouse, 2021). Specifically, when principals demonstrate empathy, they foster a climate of psychological safety in which teachers feel valued, supported, and secure in voicing concerns. This kind of relational leadership is linked to higher levels of teacher dedication and professional absorption (Donohoo et al., 2021). Concurrently, principals' social skills such as effective communication, collaborative problem solving, and responsive relationship-building directly support trust and a sense of collective efficacy. These skills are recognized as significant drivers of educator engagement and professional well-being in contemporary educational environments (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

The regression analysis further clarifies the nature of this relationship. While the combined predictive power of empathy and social skills is statistically significant, accounting for 14.4% of the variance in engagement, it also underscores that these are not the sole determinants. The majority of the variance (over 85%) is attributed to other factors. This result is consistent with the multifactorial nature of work engagement, which is also influenced by individual teacher characteristics, job resources, workload, collegial relationships, and personal well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Therefore, principals' interpersonal skills should be viewed as crucial, enabling factors within a broader ecosystem of influences on teacher engagement.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between principals' interpersonal competencies specifically their empathy and social skills and the work engagement of teachers. The findings provide a clear and multi-faceted picture of this dynamic within the sampled educational context. The research first established that the participating principals' report consistently high levels of both empathy and social skills, with mean scores

significantly above the midpoint of the measurement scale. This indicates that principals actively prioritizes and demonstrates relational and emotionally intelligent practices. Concurrently, teachers in these schools reported uniformly high levels of work engagement, characterized by dedication, vigor, and absorption in their roles.

The core objective of the study was substantiated by the correlational analyses, which revealed statistically significant, positive relationships between both principals' attributes and teachers' work engagement. The strength of these relationships was moderate, suggesting that teachers demonstrably tend to be more engaged when their principals are more empathetic and socially skilled. These interpersonal leadership qualities appear to contribute meaningfully in creating a school climate conducive to teacher motivation and commitment.

Finally, the regression analysis provided crucial nuance to this understanding. While the combined influence of principals' empathy and social skills were confirmed as significant predictor of teachers' work engagement, it accounted for a modest portion (14.4%) of the total variance. This key finding emphasizes that principals' interpersonal skills are the important part of the factors influencing teachers' engagement. In summary, this study concludes that the empathy and social skills of school principals are valuable, identifiable assets positively associated with teachers' work engagement. Educational leadership development should therefore continue to emphasize the cultivation of these relational competencies. Enhancing principals' interpersonal skills should be integrated with efforts to address the wider organizational, professional, and personal factors that collectively fuel a thriving and engaged teaching workforce.

Guidelines for Future Researchers

1. The future researchers may employ longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to move beyond correlational data and to explore better causal pathways and lived experiences behind the established relationships.

2. Research should test mediating variables, moderating variable and should integrate other aspects of principals' emotional intelligence and teachers' work performance.

3. Increase sample size and diversity to enhance the generalizability of findings across different geographical, cultural, and school-type contexts.

4. Develop and evaluate training programs based on these findings. Design and assess professional development programs aimed at enhancing principals' empathetic and social skills, and measure their direct impact on teacher and school outcomes.

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