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## **Adaptive Educational Leadership Transformation: Addressing the Challenges of Modern Education Through Empathy**

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### **Abstract**

The paradigm shift in 21st-century education demands a leadership transformation that is not merely administrative but also adaptive. This study aims to explore the role of principals as adaptive leaders in enhancing school community collaboration through empathy-based problem-solving strategies and a humanistic approach. Utilizing a qualitative method with a multi-site case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies at two Catholic Elementary Schools in Malang. The findings indicate that principals successfully integrate their roles as leaders, motivators, and facilitators by leveraging effective interpersonal communication, both formally and informally. This approach is proven to create a harmonious work atmosphere, increase inclusivity, and strengthen the loyalty of the school community in facing educational disruptions. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of "compassion" (Christian humanism) into the adaptive leadership framework, which transforms management strategies into personal moral actions. This research provides a practical contribution to the development of educational leadership models that are responsive to global dynamics without losing the institutional value identity.

**Keywords:** Adaptive Leadership; Empathy; School Community; School Management; Humanism.

### **1. Introduction**

The paradigm shift in 21st-century education is expected to serve as a foundational basis for developing high-quality human resources. These human resources will become the primary benchmark in realizing the grand vision of Indonesia Emas 2045 (Puspa et al., 2023). The transformation of 21st-century education constitutes a crucial element in fostering superior human capital. Education in the 21st century, which emphasizes the development of 21st Century Skills,

aims to produce a generation that is intelligent, competitive, well-characterized, and capable of competing both in everyday life and on a global scale.

The education sector faces increasingly complex competition, particularly due to various emerging challenges. Several identified issues include limitations in educational infrastructure, challenges related to the quality and relevance of curricula, concerns regarding teaching personnel, and difficulties in implementing distance learning (Isma et al., 2023). Educational reform is further hindered by an orientation that remains rooted in the past, less modern organizational management, inadequate infrastructure, and learning methods that do not yet fully support the development of 21st-century skills. Therefore, significant efforts are required to respond to the demands of contemporary change (Hairullah, 2023).

Efforts toward 21st-century educational reform represent a collective endeavor involving all components of the school ecosystem. Teachers, as key elements within this ecosystem, play a crucial role in cultivating high-quality and competitive human resources capable of addressing 21st-century educational challenges. Consequently, teachers are required to think creatively and innovatively, understand students' psychological characteristics, optimize their potential, communicate effectively, and possess broad perspectives. The development of teachers' capacity necessitates awareness of the importance of pedagogical aspects. As professionals, teachers function not only as sources of knowledge but also as dynamizers, facilitators, and catalysts who inspire students to become creative individuals (Rahayu & Muhtar, 2022). In responding to 21st-century challenges, teachers must continuously enhance their pedagogical competencies and embrace technological advancements to produce a generation capable of thriving in global dynamics.

In addition to improving teacher competence, 21st-century educational reform also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, as highlighted (Halim, 2022). Critical thinking is one of the most essential skills in 21st-century education, as it is closely related to the ability to understand others' perspectives empathetically, analyze information deeply, and make appropriate decisions based on comprehensive understanding.

Furthermore, as noted by Zaenab Hanim (2023), leadership must be dynamic and future-oriented. An organization will become increasingly ineffective if its leadership is neither adaptive nor visionary. Adaptive leadership is a 21st-century educational approach that prioritizes the ability to lead and manage schools or institutions flexibly, with a focus on ongoing challenges and the dynamic changes characteristic of the modern era (Assefa & Mujtaba, 2025).

The concept of adaptive leadership involves the ability to distinguish between essential elements and those that can be disregarded (McKimm et al., 2023b; Al-Harthy, & Al-Kindi, 2024.). It also emphasizes the role of leaders as facilitators of change (Wong & Chan, 2018). This indicates that adaptive leadership focuses on long-term adjustment to change, while responsive leadership

emphasizes immediate reactions to urgent situations. This approach requires leaders to encourage organizational members to embrace change, learn from experience, and continuously adapt to evolving environments.

Although adaptive leadership theory has been widely discussed as a solution for organizational flexibility, a significant gap remains in understanding how this model operates within value-based educational institutions, such as Catholic schools in Malang. Conventional leadership models often fail to bridge the tension between rigid professional demands and the Christian humanistic values that form the foundation of these institutions. In this context, an empathy-based approach becomes essential, as it transforms from merely a management strategy into a tangible manifestation of compassion, which underlies the institution's spirituality (Khatir & Madani, 2024).

Empathy-driven adaptive leadership enables school principals not only to make administrative adjustments but also to engage with the emotional and spiritual dimensions of school members in responding to contemporary disruptions (Busa & Yakubu, 2024). This approach is particularly relevant given that educational challenges in Malang require more personalized strategies to maintain cohesion within multicultural school communities. Without integrating emotional intelligence and adaptive flexibility, educational transformation risks becoming mechanistic and losing its humanistic essence. Therefore, in this study, adaptive leadership is positioned as a bridge that aligns practical needs with the moral identity of the school. This synergy represents both a distinctive feature and a strategic advantage compared to instructional or authoritarian leadership models, which tend to overlook relational and humanistic aspects (Puspa et al., 2023; Gultom, 2024).

Schools serve as fertile ground for developing high-quality and competitively capable human resources for the future. Therefore, educational leadership remains a critical and relevant area of study, as the education sector continuously encounters change, new challenges, and unpredictable situations. These conditions influence leadership styles, roles, and strategies, which must be adapted to respond effectively to such dynamics (Ford et al., 2021; McKimm et al., 2023a).

Given the complexity and dynamics within schools, future educational leadership requires principals who embody adaptive leadership patterns grounded in compassion. Empathy-based problem-solving practices, as demonstrated in this study, support the concept proposed by Spillane and Healey (2010), which emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in resolving conflicts and strengthening collaboration within school communities. School principals must not only consider administrative solutions but also address emotional aspects to create constructive outcomes and build trust among school members.

In the face of globalization and digitalization, adaptive educational leadership becomes essential to ensure that schools can effectively respond to environmental changes. Principals are not only responsible for administrative tasks but also play a vital role in fostering strong

interpersonal relationships, promoting collaboration, and supporting innovation. Adaptive leadership is characterized by the ability to interpret context, flexibility in decision-making, and empathy in problem-solving (Heifetz et al., 2009; Fullan, 2007).

This study was conducted to address the challenges of modern education, particularly within the context of two private Catholic schools in Malang. The principals of these schools function as adaptive educational leaders who are capable of integrating humanistic values with practical needs in the field. The focus of the study includes the leadership strategies employed and their impact on collaboration within the school community.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative method with a multisite case study approach (Stake, 2006). The research was conducted at two Catholic elementary schools in Malang City. The selection of sites was based on institutional characteristics, particularly their strong historical reputation and commitment to Christian humanistic values amid the dynamics of modern education.

### 2.1 Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) school principals with a minimum tenure of three years to ensure an in-depth understanding of the school's adaptive dynamics; (b) full-time teachers holding strategic roles in curriculum development or student affairs; and (c) educational staff involved in daily school operations. A total of 10 informants participated in this study, consisting of 2 principals, 6 teachers, and 2 administrative staff members across the two research sites. These qualifications were established to capture both managerial and practical perspectives on adaptive leadership and empathy in the field.

### 2.2 Data Collection

#### 2.2.1 Instrument of Collecting Data

Data were collected through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, passive participant observation, and document analysis. The primary instrument in this study was the researcher as a human instrument, supported by semi-structured interview guidelines, school environment observation sheets, and digital recording devices (Creswell, & Poth, 2018).

#### 2.2.2 Techniques for Collecting Data

Interviews focused on the manifestation of empathy in decision-making processes, while observations were directed at social interactions and organizational culture within the school environment. Document analysis was conducted on school strategic plans, meeting records, and institutional codes of ethics to validate the verbal data obtained.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted iteratively following the interactive model, which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis process began with within-site analysis to examine the unique characteristics of each Catholic elementary school. Once patterns within each site were identified, a cross-site analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method to identify overarching themes, similarities, and significant differences in adaptive leadership practices. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the researcher employed technique triangulation and source triangulation, as well as member checking to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' experiences.

### 3. Results

The role of the school principal as an adaptive educational leader ideally encompasses the ability to establish effective communication. Principals are capable of fostering strong interpersonal communication by integrating both formal and informal approaches. This combination has proven effective in creating a harmonious working environment and promoting inclusivity within the school community. Through open and personal communication, principals are able to build close relationships with all members of the school.

A school principal (SP) expressed this as follows:

*"As a leader in this school, I recognize that rapid societal changes demand flexibility in communicating with all staff members. I strive to build effective interpersonal communication not only through formal meetings but also through personal interactions during breaks. Informal approaches, such as casual conversations in the teachers' lounge, are often more effective in capturing their aspirations and concerns honestly. For me, the combination of formal structure and personal warmth is key to ensuring that the school's vision continues to progress amid dynamic circumstances."*

The principal's statement reflects the implementation of adaptive leadership grounded in emotional intelligence. The principal does not merely position themselves as an administrative manager but also as a communication facilitator capable of breaking down hierarchical barriers to ensure the smooth flow of information. The use of a "dual-channel" communication strategy (formal and informal) demonstrates a deep understanding that, within Catholic institutions, strong interpersonal relationships serve as the primary foundation for collectively addressing external challenges.

A teacher, identified as G, highlighted the importance of communication with the principal: *"We experience a highly harmonious work environment because the principal consistently adopts a humanistic and inclusive approach toward all teachers without discrimination. Open and personal communication with the principal makes us feel fully supported, especially when facing challenges in classroom instruction. This approach also becomes a model for us in interacting with students, where empathy serves as the main bridge to*

*understanding each child's unique needs. This supportive environment makes us more adaptive and comfortable in implementing educational innovations."*

From the teacher's perspective, the adaptive leadership demonstrated by the principal has a direct impact on the creation of a healthy school climate. The inclusivity experienced by teachers fosters a sense of psychological safety, which they subsequently translate into their pedagogical interactions with students. This illustrates a "domino effect" of institutional humanistic values, whereby empathy demonstrated by leadership becomes a behavioral standard for teachers in creating adaptive and inclusive classrooms.

This perspective is further reinforced by a member of the administrative staff, identified as AD:

*"Although our roles are primarily operational and administrative, we feel valued as an integral part of the school community. The principal often takes time to listen to our input regarding facilities in a very approachable manner. The close relationships between leadership and all school members strengthen teamwork. We feel personally appreciated, which motivates us to fully support any policy changes implemented by the school with a strong sense of responsibility."*

This statement underscores that adaptive leadership within the school effectively reaches all levels of the school ecosystem across functional roles. The relationships established extend beyond professional interactions to a sense of collegiality and shared belonging, reflecting the humanistic values characteristic of Catholic institutions. The principal's ability to emotionally engage administrative staff enhances both retention and organizational commitment, which are critical for maintaining stability during periods of change or disruption.

The role of the principal as an adaptive educational leader is reflected in their ability to manage interpersonal relationships, organizational structures, and change processes with flexibility, empathy, and inclusivity, as demonstrated through: (1) effective two-way communication as a key element in fostering a harmonious and collaborative school environment; (2) the management of a well-organized and cohesive team to ensure operational efficiency and the smooth implementation of programs; (3) an empathetic approach to problem-solving that builds trust and minimizes conflict; and (4) flexibility in responding to change, enabling all members of the school community to adapt to evolving regulations and the demands of modern education.

Communication grounded in humanistic values enables principals to better understand the needs and challenges faced by teachers, students, and staff. This, in turn, allows for more relevant decision-making and problem-solving aligned with the conditions and aspirations of the school community. Such strategies enhance trust and collaboration among school members. Through inclusive communication, principals not only fulfill their administrative roles but also

act as emotional supporters for the school community, thereby fostering a conducive environment for learning and professional development (Heifetz et al., 2009; Fullan, 2007).

Principals demonstrate the integration of roles as leaders, motivators, and facilitators in an adaptive manner, which is central to the effective management of their schools. As leaders, they utilize efficient team structures as the foundation for school management. By ensuring that each team member has clearly defined responsibilities—whether in curriculum, student affairs, or spirituality—they foster strong collaboration within the school community. This cohesive teamwork supports the smooth implementation of school programs and enhances operational efficiency. Such organized management reflects their ability to integrate various aspects of the school into a harmonious system (SP, G, AD, 2025).

As leaders, principals are responsible for managing teams effectively, ensuring that each member understands their roles and performs optimally. They establish solid organizational structures to support school operations and achieve shared goals. In their role as motivators, principals encourage teachers to continuously develop their professional competencies (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). This is achieved through training programs, workshops, and the promotion of innovative teaching methods aligned with contemporary educational needs. Such motivation enhances teachers' confidence in applying new knowledge and skills.

As facilitators, principals provide not only technical support but also emotional support. They play a crucial role in creating a supportive work environment in which individuals feel valued and have access to adequate resources to perform their duties. This includes providing facilities, access to technology, and opportunities for collaboration. Through this combination of roles, principals cultivate a productive and conducive working environment. This approach ensures that the entire school community can collaborate harmoniously, resulting in positive outcomes for both teacher professional development and student achievement.

#### **4. Discussion**

The adaptive educational leadership strategies demonstrated by both principals are grounded in a combination of communication, empathy, and flexibility, all centered on interpersonal relationships. Both leaders employ effective personal communication as a foundation for building strong relationships with teachers, students, and other members of the school community. By adopting informal approaches, such as casual discussions, principals and school members create a comfortable working environment in which individuals feel valued and heard. This strategy strengthens mutual trust and fosters a harmonious workplace climate (SP, G, AD, 2025).

An empathy-based approach constitutes a central element of the principals' leadership strategies. In addressing challenges faced by teachers or students, principals do not rely solely on administrative measures but also consider the emotional dimensions of those involved. This approach not only generates constructive solutions but also minimizes the potential for conflict. Furthermore, empathy strengthens relationships among school members and enhances trust in leadership.

Empathy is a crucial component in problem-solving processes within the school context. Principals who prioritize empathy demonstrate concern for the emotional needs of teachers, students, and staff. This approach facilitates the development of comprehensive and relevant solutions, helping to reduce tensions while fostering trust within the school community (Goleman, 2000). By understanding the emotional needs of individuals, principals create a more harmonious working environment. They integrate empathy into communication strategies and decision-making processes, ensuring that all members of the school community feel valued. This emphasis on empathy not only enhances interpersonal relationships but also cultivates a sense of belonging within the workplace (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Moreover, empathy enables principals to take constructive steps in conflict resolution. This approach ensures that solutions are not only practical but also consider the psychological impact on all parties involved. In doing so, principals foster a more inclusive school environment that supports innovation (Fullan, 2007). An inclusive and adaptive culture of collaboration is also strengthened through the integration of empathy in leadership practices. Principals who adopt this approach effectively encourage collaboration among school members, thereby improving work efficiency and the effectiveness of educational programs.

Strong collaboration further promotes the development of innovative ideas that are responsive to contemporary educational challenges (Northouse, 2018). The situational approach applied by principals contributes to the creation of a work environment that is responsive to change. By involving teachers, students, and staff in policy discussions, principals ensure that all voices are heard. This not only strengthens collaboration but also fosters a sense of ownership over decisions (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The application of empathy in leadership not only reinforces interpersonal relationships but also serves as a foundation for building a more resilient and adaptive school community. In the context of modern education, empathy becomes a critical asset for principals in developing a progressive and responsive organizational culture. Thus, empathy emerges as a key pillar of successful educational leadership strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

By integrating empathy and collaboration within a situational approach, principals successfully cultivate an inclusive and adaptive work culture. The school environment becomes more responsive to contemporary educational challenges, enabling all members of the school

community to work collaboratively toward shared goals. This approach represents a relevant leadership model for addressing the demands of 21st-century education (Dunn, 2026).

A collaborative and responsive environment is essential in principal leadership. Principals foster a culture of collaboration by involving all stakeholders in decision-making processes. A situational approach is employed to align policies with specific needs, thereby creating a school environment that is responsive to change and modern educational challenges (SP, G, AD, 2025). By encouraging active participation from teachers, students, staff, and parents, principals establish inclusive decision-making processes. This approach accommodates diverse perspectives and needs, enhancing a sense of ownership over resulting policies.

The situational approach enables principals to tailor policies to the unique context of the school community. By understanding the specific circumstances of each situation, principals are able to make relevant and impactful decisions. Consequently, implemented policies are more effective and widely accepted. Responsiveness to change is a key outcome of this approach, as flexible leadership ensures that the school community can proactively address modern educational challenges. This approach also facilitates the adoption of innovations necessary for improving educational quality (Fullan, 2007).

Through the establishment of a collaborative culture, principals also strengthen interpersonal relationships within the school community. These harmonious relationships support not only policy implementation but also the creation of a comfortable and productive work environment. When individuals feel heard and valued, collaboration becomes more effective and sustainable. By involving stakeholders in decision-making, principals build mutual trust and strengthen commitment to a shared vision. This approach encourages collective problem-solving and enables the school community to respond effectively to diverse challenges.

Ultimately, this collaborative approach not only creates an adaptive environment but also ensures that every member of the school community feels integral to collective success. In doing so, principals lead schools as learning communities that are well-prepared to navigate the complexities and challenges of 21st-century education.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that adaptive educational leadership grounded in empathy and humanistic values serves as a key determinant in addressing the disruptive challenges of 21st-century education. The success of principals in Catholic schools in Malang in integrating both formal and informal interpersonal approaches has proven effective in fostering strong school community collaboration and creating an inclusive work climate.

As a recommendation, educational institutions should continuously strengthen the emotional intelligence of their leaders to ensure that decision-making processes extend beyond administrative

considerations and also encompass the spiritual and emotional dimensions of school members. Teachers and administrative staff are likewise encouraged to emulate this humanistic model of interaction in order to cultivate a supportive learning environment for students.

From a theoretical perspective, this article makes a significant contribution by proposing a model of adaptive leadership that aligns practical field-based needs with the moral identity of the institution. In the future, the synergy between managerial flexibility and empathetic values may serve as a strategic reference for leadership development across educational institutions, particularly those grounded in religious and multicultural values.

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