Empathic Connection in School Counseling: A Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Study among Junior High School Counselors in Semarang Regency, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of empathic connection in school counseling practices among junior high school counselors in Semarang Regency, Indonesia. Empathic connection plays a crucial role in fostering supportive relationships between counselors and students. However, little is known about how this dynamic unfolds in real educational settings. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, this study integrates quantitative data from 30 counselors selected through proportionate stratified random sampling and qualitative data from in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. The findings reveal that empathic connection is established through active listening, mutual respect, and the counselor's ability to understand students' cognitive and emotional states. Disconnection may occur due to factors such as limited time, inadequate facilities, and overlapping responsibilities. In such cases, counselors employ reconnection strategies including asking open-ended questions, rescheduling sessions, and understanding students' psychosocial backgrounds. Both internal factors (e.g., emotional strain, fear of failure) and external factors (e.g., workload, environment) affect empathy continuity. These findings suggest that empathy in school counseling is not static but requires continuous adaptation and regulation. Institutional support and empathy-focused training are therefore essential to help school counselors maintain effective engagement and promote student well-being.

Keywords: Empathic Connection, Empathic Reconnection, Empathic Disconnection, School Counselor, Junior High School.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy is widely recognized as one of the most critical and influential skills in psychological counseling (Hojat, 2007; Irarrázaval & Kalawski, 2022; Kapoor & Professor, 2022; Manisha, 2023; Mercer et al., 2004; Pearson, 1999). In the context of school guidance and counseling, empathy contributes significantly to fostering a positive school climate—free from stigma, judgment, and fear. However, in practice, many school counselors tend to emphasize behavioral control over emotional connection, prioritizing compliance through rules and sanctions. This approach can result in counseling sessions being perceived as intimidating and judgmental (Khairunisa et al., 2022). In contrast, counseling should provide a safe and supportive space that enables students to develop optimally. School counselors face both internal and external challenges in delivering empathetic services. Internal barriers include the counselor's competence, personality, and commitment, while external barriers relate to limited facilities and a lack of institutional support (Khairunisa et al., 2022).

In person-centered counseling, empathy promotes congruence, unconditional positive regard, and accurate empathic understanding, which are key to facilitating self-awareness and personal growth(Wilkins, 2016). This approach has proven effective in helping students develop a positive self-concept—replacing feelings of inferiority and lack of confidence with self-assurance, independence, and acceptance (Hamlet, 2010; Lusiana & Basuki, 2020). This approach promotes autonomy and self-regulation, aligning with the broader educational goal of nurturing student independence and well-being. Through empathy, as part of person centered helps individuals to grow, learn self-regulation and take responsibility in life rather than imposing dependency (Lux, 2010; Manickam & Kapur, 1985; Meyers et al., 2019; Zucconi, 2015, 2016a).

Empathy also enhances autonomy and self-regulation, supporting the broader goal of education to nurture independence and well-being. Neuroscience has shown that the human brain, as a social organ, thrives in safe interpersonal relationships, which foster emotional growth and learning (Zucconi, 2016b).Neuroscientific evidence supports the role of empathy in fostering neuroplasticity and emotional safety—critical factors for learning and development (Silani et al., 2013). Empathic connection

occurs when both counselor and counselee are emotionally attuned, enhancing trust and the therapeutic alliance (Meneses & Larkin, 2017; Young, 2012). This shared emotional space strengthens rapport and promotes mutual understanding.

On the other hand, empathic disconnection may arise from emotional fatigue, competing demands, or diminished motivation(Hardee & Platt, 2010; Hare, 2017). This disconnection may be minor or profound—ranging from emotional fatigue to a loss of motivation (Jordan, 1995). Re-establishing connection requires deliberate relational efforts and emotional regulation. This study aims to explore how junior high school counselors in Semarang Regency experience, sustain, and rebuild empathic connections in their school counseling practices, recognizing that empathy is a dynamic and context-sensitive process.

Research Questions

This study aimed to investigate the empathic connection between junior high school counselors and students in Semarang Regency, Indonesia. The research was guided by the following questions:

1.   What is the current state of empathic connection among junior high school counselors?

How do counselors experience, maintain, or rebuild empathic connections in their counseling practices?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2022; Creswell & Clark, 2018) combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of empathic connection among school counselors. The quantitative phase assessed general empathy levels, while the qualitative phase explored counselors' lived experiences in greater depth.

1.   Quantitative Phase

A survey was conducted using the Basic Empathy Scale – Adolescent (BES-A), which consists of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). This instrument measures cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy, including perspective-taking and emotional resonance. A total of 30 junior high school counselors were selected through proportionate stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across schools. The Indonesian version of BES-A had been previously adapted and validated (Shaula, 2022). Data analysis was performed using SPSS to examine reliability and descriptive statistics.
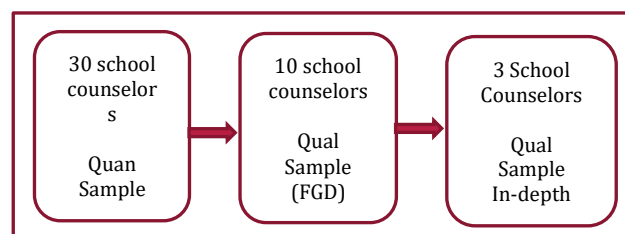
2.   Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase was designed to provide a deeper understanding of the survey results. Two sampling strategies were used: snowball sampling for the focus group discussion (FGD), involving 10 counselors identified by peer recommendation, and purposive sampling for in-depth interviews with three senior counselors who had more than 10 years of experience. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and FGDs, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis with Quirkos qualitative software.

Participants

This research uses probability sampling for the quantitative stage, snowball sampling for FGD and purposive sampling for in-depth interview in the qualitative stage. Probability sampling, the process by which a sample of participants or cases is selected from a larger group in such a way that each item has a known (or calculable) probability of being included (VandenBos, 2015). For the qualitative phase, participants were selected through two strategies: snowball sampling was used to recruit 10 counselors for a focus group discussion (FGD), and purposive sampling was employed to select three senior counselors (with more than 10 years of experience) for in-depth interviews.

Diagram 1

Research Sample

Procedure

The quantitative phase involved the administration of the BES-A questionnaire to selected counselors. Based on the findings, empathy scores were categorized into three groups: disconnection (score < 35), reconnection efforts (36–46), and connection

(score > 47). Reliability improved from 0.714 to 0.809 after item refinement. The qualitative phase included one FGD with 10 participants and in-depth interviews with three experienced counselors. These sessions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed using Quirkos qualitative software.

Diagram 2

Mixed Methods: Explanatory sequential design
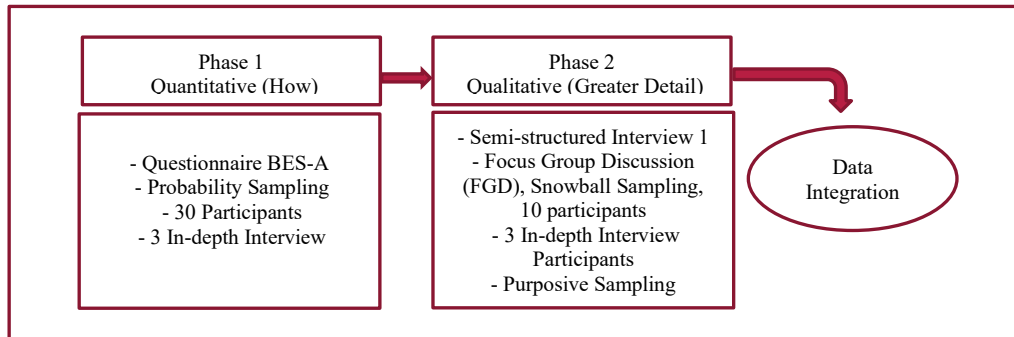
Data analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages, corresponding to the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, including mean and standard deviation calculations. The BES-A's internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha. Qualitative data were analyzed inductively through thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with data, (2) coding, (3) theme development, (4) refinement, and (5) synthesis into narratives. Integration of both phases was done through a joint display matrix to derive meta-inferences.

3. RESULTS
Quantitative Findings

A total of 30 junior high school counselors participated in the quantitative phase. Using the adapted Basic Empathy Scale–Adolescent (BES-A), participants' scores were categorized into three empathy levels: Empathic Disconnection (n = 4), Reconnection Efforts (n = 21), and Empathic Connection (n = 5). The mean score across participants was M = 41.37 (SD = 5.55). Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha improved from 0.714 to 0.809 after excluding non-contributing items.

Table 1 Counseling teacher empathy category

Category	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Empathy Disconnect	4	32.75	1.893
Efforts to Reconnect	21	41.00	2.950
Empathy Connected	5	49.80	3.633
Total	30	41.37	5.549

Qualitative Findings

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus group and in-depth interviews: Empathic Connection, Reconnection Strategies, and Disconnection Barriers. Each theme was supported by subthemes that illuminated counselors' practices and experiences.

Focus Group Findings

Focus group discussions revealed three primary themes in counselors' empathic interactions: empathic connection, empathy reconnection, and empathic disconnection. Empathic connection was demonstrated through understanding the counselee's condition, engaging in two-way communication, and showing respect. Reconnection efforts included encouraging openness through probing questions, rescheduling disrupted sessions, ensuring privacy despite limited facilities, understanding generational differences, and proactively reaching out to students. Meanwhile, empathic disconnection occurred due to challenges such as listening fatigue, premature advice-giving, distractions from other duties, and students' reluctance to attend sessions. These findings highlight both the strengths and barriers in school counselors' ability to maintain empathy within real-world constraints.

TABLE 2: Integrated quantitative and qualitative data.

Category		Subcategory	Quotes from the focus group interviews that give a deeper understanding of the respective quantitative result
Empathic Connection (Connected)	16.67	understand the counselee's condition	*"….We try to find out what the student is experiencing, without judging them"* *"..We try to be in their shoes first.."* *"..We must understand that today's children are different, and so are their issues.."*
		Two-way communication	*"..When I meet a talkative and open student, I let them speak, then ask: 'Is there anything else you'd like to share?'.."*
		Respect for the counselee	*"When we listen and paraphrase their words, they feel that their story is valued."*
Category		**Subcategory**	**Quotes from the focus group interviews that give a deeper understanding of the respective quantitative result**
Empathy reconnection (Reconnection Efforts)	70	Provoking the counselee's openness	*".We ask more open-ended questions to encourage students to talk more."*
		Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted Scheduling follow-up sessions when interrupted	*"Just for a minute ma'am" I listen without making any comments.... and he wants an agreement, then after that we will do the next session.* *"..When I don't have time, I ask for a minute and we agree to continue later by WhatsApp or after school.."* *"Actually, there are many things we can do if for example we have to cut it. Sometimes we also, for example, for example, I am often called by the principal. When I have focused on the child, the child we called has already said "mom, I want to talk" but I don't have time during the lesson if I think oh maybe this child has something we need to help."*
		Ensuring privacy in sessions Ensuring privacy in sessions	*"Our counseling room lacks privacy, so we make agreements to talk later or find a better time"*
		Understanding the counselee's	*"We try to understand Generation Z characteristics and provide tailored support. "*

		generation and background	*"When the child has told the story then we try to convey what it is "oh like this is what you are experiencing" it is usually later that the child feels oh yes ee my teacher understands what I am experiencing. Now this is part of our efforts to increase empathy for the counselee."*
		Summoning students with issues Summoning students with issues	*"If we call the student, it's harder—they avoid us. But if they come on their own, the session flows better."*
Category		**Subcategory**	**Quotes from the focus group interviews that give a deeper understanding of the respective quantitative result**
Empathic disconnection	13.33	Difficulties with active listening	"...Sometimes we get impatient and cut off students, even though they just need to be heard."
		Tendency to give advice too soon	"Sometimes advice is our final weapon, even if we know it's not what they need."
		Being distracted by other work	"Ee for example, the second break there is a child to me. Then they want to tell a story, then by chance at that time maybe I have hours or maybe I'm needed at another school, usually if I have a minute, I listen first, if not, I serve later"
			"We're often multitasking, which makes it hard to focus solely on the student."
			"Calls from principals interrupt the session; this prevents us from being fully present."
		Counselee refusal to attend	"..Sometimes students cancel or avoid sessions due to mood changes or fear of being scolded."

In-depth interview Findings

Mrs. S, School Counselor, 14 years of service

Participant 1, Mrs. S, a female school counselor who has served since 2010, described her experience of forming an **empathic connection** through active listening and cognitive engagement in understanding the counselee's concerns. She emphasized the importance of attentively receiving the student's narrative before offering any advice:

"I listen first, then I understand what the problem is, then I provide input, miss".

Mrs. S highlighted that her empathetic engagement occurs primarily at the cognitive level, driven by the goal of delivering appropriate guidance and acting as an equal partner in problem-solving. This is reflected in her structured approach to time allocation during sessions:

"For those who come directly, the proportion until listening is 30 minutes miss usually. Then ee yes 30 minutes then ee to convey ee opinions or information from me personally is only 15 minutes. Then the next 15 minutes, ee the child will try to… I take the decision like this how yes ma'am, so..".

She noted that sessions with students who proactively seek counseling tend to be more efficient and fluid:

"If, for example, the child asks for counseling, it is automatically fast because the child can tell the story directly". "If the child comes directly, then yes, the miss can be fast and not more than an hour. Then, in fact, we can also tell other things because it is finished quickly, finished."

Mrs. S also described her strategies for rebuilding *(empathy reconnect)* with students who are hesitant or not intrinsically motivated to attend counseling. She recognized that counselees who were summoned rather than coming voluntarily were often reluctant to engage openly. In these cases, she employed probing techniques to re-establish communication and emotional openness:

"….let's make an appointment with Mrs. S to tell the story, then most of the time it is ee difficult to dig or make the child tell

the story. So I personally have to have probing questions to be able to stimulate the child to tell about his situation.".

Her approach reflects the need for intentional relational repair when empathic disconnection is anticipated, particularly by promoting a sense of psychological safety and responsiveness to the counselee's communication readiness.

Empathy disconnection, Despite her efforts, Mrs. S reported several challenges that resulted in a breakdown of empathic connection. The physical environment emerged as a significant barrier. She explained that the school counseling room was not conducive to privacy, hindering the establishment of a safe space for meaningful dialogue:

"..the counseling room in our place is not representative…. it is not private, ...it was difficult for me to get a comfortable space...".

Time constraints also played a role in triggering disconnection. Scheduling sessions outside regular hours often conflicted with students' routines, causing reduced engagement:

"Well, then the time is also, for example I make an appointment, after school yes nok. It's either that or go home from school. That means it takes up their time to go home immediately.".

Mrs. S also faced frequent interruptions from school duties, which diminished her ability to be fully present and emotionally available during sessions:

"If ee, because I use school hours, I am the student affairs department, well that is often sought after. You know there is a call, Mrs. S has a guest, like that. So for me, the obstacle is if, for example, ee what else does not make an appointment first, miss yes, well it is often frequent calls like that. When it's time to listen, when there are no calls, I can listen until the child finishes telling the story.".

An important internal factor contributing to disconnection was Mrs. S's fear of failure and excessive sense of responsibility for the counselee's choices. Her tendency to prioritize solution delivery over process-oriented empathy may stem from anxiety related to possible negative outcomes:

"..if he ends up making the wrong.. decision, well that makes me feel guilty miss, feel like a failure…".

This emotional burden reflects elements of personal distress, where the counselor's own discomfort interferes with empathic presence, potentially leading to premature advice-giving and reduced emotional attunement.

This comprehensive portrait of Mrs. S's practice illustrates the dynamic interplay between empathic connection, the effortful process of reconnection, and the systemic and personal constraints that contribute to disconnection. Her narrative reveals how counselor reflexivity, institutional limitations, and emotional regulation all influence the quality of empathic engagement with students.

Mrs. L, School Counselor, 22 years in service

Participant 2, Mrs. L, a school counselor with 22 years of experience, expressed that **empathic connection** in her counseling practice involves providing comfort, fostering openness, and understanding students' backgrounds both emotionally and contextually. She often conducts sessions outside of the official counseling room, choosing more comfortable and private environments such as a gazebo near the canteen to make students feel more at ease. This strategy allows for more natural and sincere communication between counselor and counselee:

"...Sometimes I take it to the back gazebo or gazebo near the canteen… if it's individual, I invite them there… ".

Mrs. L demonstrates a strong cognitive and affective empathic approach by acknowledging the family-related difficulties faced by students. She explains that many of her students experience prolonged separation from their parents due to work-related absence, and this lack of parental presence contributes to emotional loneliness.

"...many of them actually don't meet their parents for days. Sometimes the father goes to Semarang until he comes home once a week. Or the mother goes to sell mattresses until two or three days and then comes home. ".

She utilizes probing and reflective questioning to reconnect with students who initially appear disengaged or unaware of their internal distress. She shared that sometimes students claim not to have any problems, but when asked more deeply, their emotional pain becomes apparent:

"...sometimes like this to you, the child has a problem but he feels he doesn't have a problem. Later, if asked, he doesn't have a problem. After I ask first, where are your parents, then you miss them. Not missing, but crying..., ..".

Empathic reconnection, for Mrs. L, also involves creating an environment where students feel safe to share without judgment or fear of punishment. She reflects on how students who are scolded by parents for speaking up tend to suppress their emotions, leading them to seek comfort through school counseling.

"...Because the children want to be listened to mbak... I'm sorry to say this, sometimes the children said the parent don't take care of them,... Sometimes the child has a story like this, if I talk, I will definitely get scolded mom. So the child just wants

to talk already scolded ... So the child finally continues to be lazy. That's it. Lha children like that sometimes at school there must also be an impact.... Sometimes there are also children who just cry. Come on, you don't want to tell me. No. He just cries, so he can cry but not in class, he cries here..".

Mrs. L respects the autonomy of the counselee by offering various possible solutions and letting them choose the most suitable one. This encourages independence and critical thinking in the decision-making process:

"I think what you should do, try if it's like this what do you think, you can't do it, if you can do it, if for example this doesn't work, maybe try something like this but try everything first, if for example one time it works, thank God, but if for example one time it doesn't work, try another way. Then I give some solutions to ee but from the solutions that I convey, let the children choose for themselves which ones they want to do and which ones they are able to do.".

Efforts to reconnect, with quiet or passive students, she gently challenges them using behavioral cues and rational dialogue to bring their hidden concerns to the surface.

"Yes, usually if the type is quiet, we will use what I asked earlier, ee, sometimes you don't have a problem. That's right, quiet. No, I don't have a problem. But how come your behavior is like this, this means that you want to show that you have a problem, right? No, where's your father. He's watching TV with mom. You are in the room, counselee tends to be willing to talk.".

Mrs. L also shared experiences of **empathic disconnection**, particularly when dealing with students who violate school rules or behave dishonestly. She uses confrontation strategies that remain empathetic but assertive in reinforcing boundaries:

".... Sometimes using confrontation. Because sometimes the children also need to be told. You are like this,.... Sometimes like that, but not all cases.". "Once too, but sometimes there are children who swear, ma'am. Well if it's like that then I say yes, if you are like that, I can't do anything but your oath is not with me, your oath is with your creator and your God so if you lie, the risk is your own responsibility, the important thing here is that I want to help you but if you don't want to be helped, I can't do anything ....I don't need you to apologize, I don't need you to admit, but what I want is for you to change, if it's not allowed according to school rules, then don't do it. That's it.".

Mrs. T, School Counselor, 34 years of service

Participant 3, Mrs. T, has served as a school counselor for 34 years. She emphasized the significance of understanding adolescent psychological development as the foundation for **empathic connection**. According to her, junior high school students tend to prefer confiding in peers over adults, and their ability to reason through problems is still maturing:

".... many junior high school children sometimes do not like to open up to older people, they prefer to be more open to their peers.. they have not considered the cause and effect like that.".

Mrs. T facilitates empathic connection by first understanding the student's condition before introducing any form of guidance. She intentionally positions herself not as a director, but as a facilitator of self-discovery and growth:

"..understanding the child's condition and, understanding the child's condition and ee what yes, guiding the child to take solutions, solutions, so. Guiding the child to reach the solution.".

Her **reconnection efforts** are evident in her flexible methods of communication. She allows students who are uncomfortable with verbal sharing to express themselves through writing. This method is especially useful when dealing with embarrassment, fear, or mistrust at the beginning of the session:

"..Then I continue like this, it's okay if you don't want to talk maybe you're embarrassed or yes now in writing, I sometimes do that..", "...write it down in the paper, I give the opportunity. Then yes, I still lure them, finally hehe. I lure with what is it, questions that lead to it...".

When students are reluctant to share or cover up facts, Mrs. T patiently uses cross-checking strategies and factual verification to encourage them to open up:

"...but when we conveyed the data yesterday it was like this. Lha in, what is it in the crosscheck so finally it's new, just want to come out because he's covering it up. Until then, we want to try to let the children open up themselves. ....".

Despite these efforts, Mrs. T acknowledged the experience of **empathic disconnection**, particularly when she is unable to fully comprehend what the student is going through, or when problems remain unresolved. This results in emotional disappointment and concern for the student's well-being:

"...if the problem is not resolved, it automatically disrupts other aspects of life, hehe, learning, learning concentration and others, maybe even communication with teachers is also disrupted, it could even be so..... The problem is not solved, the solution is not implemented, so the problem is not resolved....... If the problem is not solved right...". "If it happens, well,.. It's sad too, because I don't understand what he wants, what he wants to say. Automatically, being a school counselor, how does it feel, it's not good either heh".

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that **empathic connection** in school counseling is formed through active listening, mutual respect, and the counselor's ability to understand students' emotional and cognitive states. These three elements reflect the affective, cognitive, and compassionate dimensions of empathy, affirming its multidimensional nature (Wilkins, 2016; Zucconi, 2016b). The cognitive axis allows individuals to understand others' emotions without shared experience by drawing upon perspective-taking and contextual understanding—detection is based on imagining oneself in the counselee's position, while the response is guided by predicting how the counselee perceives their reaction (Di Girolamo et al., 2019; Dvash & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014; Ferrari & Coudé, 2018). The compassion axis reflects an understanding of another's situation without emotionally resonating with it—this includes a broader sense of care for self and others (Daher et al., 2022; Siegel, 2012; Watt, 2007; Zhou'an_Zhu et al., 2023). Empathic relationships built on mutual trust allow vulnerability, grief, and suffering to be shared, which contributes significantly to emotional healing (Jordan, 1995; Ladd & Churchill, 2012). Empathy in counseling is not limited to emotional sensitivity but requires active interpretation of the counselee's experience and the ability to respond with understanding and attunement.

Counselors in this study described structuring their sessions around active listening and participative reflection, enabling counselees to feel heard and empowered Their attentiveness allowed counselees to express their feelings openly, establishing a trusting environment. Active listening involves nonjudgmental attention to the counselee's emotions, thoughts, and needs, even when personal distress arises. It requires focus and openness to provoke counselee expression (Tountopoulou et al., 2019). This aligns with person-centered counseling approaches, where the counselor's role is to facilitate rather than direct the client's self-discovery and problem solving (Zucconi, 2016b). The relational space built through empathic communication becomes a foundation for psychological safety, allowing counselees to share freely and work collaboratively toward meaningful outcomes.

The theme of **empathy reconnection** emerged through five subcategories: (1) efforts to provoke openness, (2) efforts to reschedule interrupted sessions, (3) efforts to ensure privacy in the absence of adequate facilities, (4) efforts to understand the counselee's condition, and (5) efforts to summon students with problems. These strategies confirm the adaptive nature of empathy, where the counselor must continuously tune in to fluctuating affective and behavioral cues (Bayne et al., 2021; Kartalova-O'doherty, 2010). Counselors are encouraged to accept disagreement or clarification from the counselee to gain further insight, as such interactions can reveal areas for deeper exploration (Bayne et al., 2021). The concept of "reconnecting with life", underpins the process of empathic reconnection. This involves: (1) reconnecting with oneself through acceptance and belief in one's capacity for change; (2) reconnecting with others through validating and empathic relationships; and (3) reconnecting with others across time by integrating past experiences and shaping the future through understanding and empathy. Giving back, being accepted, and developing empathy toward oneself and others enhance confidence and self-esteem(Kartalova-O'doherty, 2010). Reconnecting with others involves focusing on the positive, feeling accepted and validated as a person capable of positive change, engaging in interaction and dialogue, developing empathy towards and understanding of others and oneself, giving back to others, and developing self-esteem and confidence by doing things and getting positive and constructive feedback (Kartalova-O'doherty & Doherty, 2010).

Conversely, **empathic disconnection** occurs due to various challenges: (1) difficulty with active listening, (2) premature advice-giving, (3) distractions due to competing job responsibilities, and (4) counselee refusal to attend sessions. These findings are supported by Bayne and Hays (2017), who identified client-related factors (e.g., willingness to connect, emotional distress), counselor-related factors (e.g., personality traits), and external barriers (e.g., time constraints, fatigue) as limitations to empathy. When the counselor lacks the ability to connect beyond personal identity and experience, empathy becomes difficult to consistently practice (Bayne et al., 2021). In such cases, clients may feel ignored, judged, or even emotionally harmed (Donelli et al., 2018a). Additionally, people may avoid empathic engagement altogether due to the cognitive effort it requires, a phenomenon known as empathy avoidance (Cameron et al., 2019). A major sign of disconnection is a counselee's refusal to attend counseling. This reluctance may stem from prior negative experiences—feeling misunderstood, judged, or disrespected during sessions (Islahuddin, 2021; Nyandoro & Kinga, 2023; Vybíral et al., 2024). The empathy available encourages counselees to utilize counseling services (Nyandoro & Kinga, 2023). Therefore, accurate empathy is crucial—both excessive and insufficient empathy can foster distrust and disconnection (Command Sgt Maj Daniel, 2023; Zhou, 2022).

Moral judgment within school counseling settings also leads to empathic breakdowns. When counselors confront students for breaking rules (e.g., smoking), and the interaction lacks a foundation of trust, students may feel unsafe and refuse to disclose information (Donelli & Rizzato, 2017; Matson, 2011). However, when enforcement is coupled with empathy, students are more willing to be honest and perceive interventions as caring rather than punitive. This reflects a perception of the counselor as morally good, harmless, and empathetic (Uhlmann et al., 2015; van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016; Zaki & Cikara, 2015). Personal distress was also identified as a barrier to empathy. This includes anxiety and discomfort counselors experience when witnessing the counselee's suffering (Kariagina & Ivanova, 2017). Counselors who become impatient or rush counselees toward insight may be struggling with their own emotional discomfort. In cases of silence or closed-off behavior, sessions demand deeper emotional sensitivity and regulation. If the counselor becomes overwhelmed, they may

shut down empathic engagement or dominate the session with solutions. This distress represents the adverse aspect of emotional empathy and can hinder empathic interaction (Kim & Han, 2018). On the other hand, the ability to understand others' emotions facilitates deeper and more meaningful relationships ((Bekiroğlu & Güllühan, 2024). Empathizing with counselees also requires respecting their autonomy, including their life choices—even when counselors disagree with those choices. True empathy promotes independence, empowering counselees to take ownership of their decisions. Sympathy, by contrast, may shift the focus to the counselor's emotions, potentially leading to pity or self-serving motivations (Eisenberg & Eggum, 2013). This self-oriented stance can lead to emotional exhaustion or depression, particularly in professionals who lack appropriate emotional boundaries (Flasbeck et al., 2018; Jeffrey, 2016). The dynamic interplay between empathic connection, reconnection, and disconnection suggests that empathy in school counseling is not a static skill but a fluid, responsive, and context-sensitive process. Empathy is shaped by both the counselor's intrapersonal capacity and the institutional environment in which they work. Therefore, sustaining empathy requires reflective awareness, emotional regulation, and systemic support (Donelli et al., 2018b; Tountopoulou et al., 2019). Professional development must address these layers by combining empathic skills training with infrastructure advocacy and workload management strategies.

This study presents a novel contribution to the field of school counseling by integrating a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach to examine empathic connection among junior high school counselors in an Indonesian context—a population and cultural setting that remain underrepresented in existing literature. Unlike previous research that primarily addresses empathy in Western or clinical settings, this study explores the real-life empathic interactions between counselors and students in a school-based environment, using both quantitative assessment and qualitative reflection. The integration of the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES-A) with in-depth interviews provides a comprehensive view of how empathy is experienced, expressed, and influenced by systemic challenges such as workload, institutional policy, and cultural expectations.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that empathic connection in school counseling is a dynamic and relational process shaped by both cognitive and affective components. Counselors establish empathic connection through active listening, mutual respect, and a deep understanding of students' emotional and contextual realities. However, empathic connection is not always linear or sustainable. Disconnection may arise due to internal factors, such as emotional overload, fear of failure, and personal distress, or external factors, such as inadequate facilities, time constraints, and conflicting administrative responsibilities.

To address these barriers, counselors engage in deliberate strategies of empathic reconnection—such as adjusting interactional timing, using probing questions, and enhancing contextual understanding—to restore trust and engagement. This highlights the fluidity of empathic practice, where connection, disconnection, and reconnection exist along a continuum and must be managed reflexively.

The findings reinforce the need for schools to support counseling practices structurally and psychologically. Enhancing infrastructure, clarifying counselor roles, and reducing multitasking can significantly improve the conditions for sustained empathic engagement. Future research is encouraged to explore training models that foster empathic capacity across varying levels of counselor experience.

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