



***Tepa Selira* and Empathy in School Counselors' Attitudes: An Indigenous Counseling Study in Surabaya**

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Abstract

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This study analyzes how *Tepa Selira*, a Javanese cultural value, is understood, internalized, and manifested in the attitudes of school counselors in Surabaya, and examines its congruence with empathy in guidance and counseling. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, involving three school counselors selected through purposive sampling until data saturation was reached; therefore, the findings are exploratory in nature. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis of the five indicators of *Tepa Selira* yielded twelve themes. Under *Rukun* (Social Harmony), Proactive Relational Harmony and Emotional Self-Regulation emerged; under *Ngajeni Liyan* (Respect and Appreciation), Appreciation through Closeness and Non-Judgmental Acceptance; under *Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin* (Self-Reflection and Introspection), Consistent Self-Evaluation, Post-Session Reflection, and Maintaining Emotional Boundaries; under *Unggah-ungguh lan Solah Bawa* (Communicative Etiquette), Firm yet Gentle, Attentiveness through Nonverbal Cues, and Situationally Reactive Tone; and under *Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* (Understanding Others' Position and Context), Proactive Contextual Understanding and Individual Context Verification. These themes align with the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of empathy in both basic and advanced forms. Thus, *Tepa Selira* functions as a cultural manifestation of empathy among Javanese school counselors, providing a local-wisdom foundation for strengthening counselor competence and culturally and spiritually sensitive counselor education.

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INTRODUCTION

Centuries before the concept of empathy entered Western psychology, Javanese society had long upheld a value demanding a similar capacity: putting oneself in another's position before acting, speaking, or deciding — a wisdom known as *Tepa Selira*. Ironically, this inherited wisdom is rarely addressed in counselor education in Indonesia, which remains almost entirely dependent on empathy frameworks rooted in Western psychological traditions. Zamroni et al. (2022) found that of 962 guidance and counseling studies conducted in Indonesia between 2010 and 2020, the services provided remained dominated by observable behavioral interventions, while affective dimensions such as empathy were largely marginalized in both research and practice. This is rather surprising given that empathy is mandated as a core mindset and behavior for school counselors (American School Counselor Association, 2021), and that students' access to social-emotional learning is significantly associated with reduced emotional distress and problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2022). Guthridge and Giummarra (2021) asserted that empathy is a multidimensional construct far more complex than a mere technical skill that can be directly taught, while Corey (2021) argued that the quality of the therapeutic relationship — which is entirely dependent on the counselor's empathic capacity — has a greater influence on counseling outcomes than technique alone. Given the gap between the recognized importance of empathy and the limited attention it receives, a fundamental question arises: where does a school counselor's empathic capacity truly originate — solely from formal education, or from something long embedded within them as an individual raised within a particular culture?

This question is not merely philosophical; it is the starting point of an increasingly prominent movement, both globally and nationally: the indigenization of counseling. This movement emerged as a critique of the persistent dominance of Eurocentric counseling models within non-Western educational settings, accompanied by calls to ground guidance and counseling practices in local cultural values (Almasi et al., 2025). Roziqi (2024) noted a sharp increase in academic interest in multicultural counseling competence in Indonesia over the past decade; this trend is also reflected in the growing body of research on the psychological well-being of indigenous communities — such as a recent phenomenological study on the collective spiritual practices of the Javanese *Kejawen* community, which likewise challenges individualistic Western frameworks by grounding well-being in communal and spiritual harmony (Wahyudi et al., 2026). Naqiyah et al. (2022) finding that culturally sensitive counseling requires teachers to demonstrate empathy, tolerance, and patience. Sakti et al. (2024) demonstrated how the revitalization of local wisdom through an ethnopedagogical approach can meaningfully strengthen character education in practice, while Uyun et al. (2024) asserted that local wisdom and cultural values play a key role in fostering social awareness and individual integrity. Specifically within the field of counseling in Indonesia, the study on *kejatmikaan* counseling by Mubarok et al. (2025) and the literature review by Hamidah et al. (2026)

on empathy within the philosophy of *Tepa Selira* provide concrete evidence that this movement directly links local cultural values with empathy as a core counselor competency.

Among Javanese values, *Tepa Selira* — the capacity to put oneself in another's position before acting, speaking, or deciding (Magnis-Suseno, 1984) — is one of the values most rich in content and most relevant to this empathic capacity, a concept whose relevance has been reaffirmed by Sakti et al. (2024) and Uyun et al. (2024) as a character foundation increasingly needed amid the modernization of education. This value is by no means foreign to school counselors raised within Javanese culture; it has most likely shaped their worldview since childhood, passed down through upbringing and everyday social interaction. Hardjowirogo (1989) explained that *Tepa Selira* encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions that substantively align with the components of empathy found in contemporary counseling literature, as more recently mapped by Reniers et al. (2022) and Thompson et al. (2022), who identified these three components as the most widely referenced empathy framework over the past five years. Nafilasari et al. (2023) further reinforced this conceptual alignment through a study integrating *Tepa Selira* into group guidance services, finding that the internalization of this cultural value measurably fostered students' empathic behavior.

Although this conceptual alignment appears compelling, its actual internalization among school counselors themselves has rarely been examined directly. A preliminary study by Raja Ahmad et al. (2024) in Indonesia found that secondary school counselors were prone to experiencing compassion fatigue, a condition that raises doubts as to whether their empathic capacity truly rests on a solid and sustainable foundation. Mukaromah et al. (2023) found that Javanese cultural values influence how school counselors conduct individual counseling; this pattern was similarly observed by Sri Harsantik and Khusumadewi (2025) in their study on integrating Javanese cultural values into multicultural counseling strategies, though neither study specifically explored how one particular value — *Tepa Selira* — is actually internalized and enacted. Lestari (2016) cautioned that cultural values, including *Tepa Selira*, are dynamic and continue to undergo shifts in meaning across generations, a dynamic that Uyun et al. (2024) confirmed is indeed occurring amid the challenges of individualism in contemporary education. In other words, however rich the conceptual literature may be, it cannot fully capture how *Tepa Selira* is actually lived out by present-day school counselors, making it necessary to directly investigate — through interviews and observation — how they understand, internalize, and enact this value in their interactions with students within the current context.

The urgency of this empirical inquiry is further reinforced by the chosen research site: the city of Surabaya. Soedarso et al. (2013) noted that the Javanese ethnic group constitutes the majority in Surabaya, comprising 83.68 percent of the population, yet exhibits the distinctive *arek Suroboyo* culture — a temperament that is considerably more

open, assertive, and egalitarian than that of Javanese society in general. Nissa et al. (2022) reinforced this picture by noting that Surabaya's multicultural character means that Javanese values in the city continually interact with other cultural influences, rather than developing within a homogeneous space. Roziqi (2024) further asserted that the effectiveness of multicultural counseling competence in Indonesia is highly dependent on local context, rather than on uniform cultural generalizations across regions. This raises an empirically testable question: does *Tepa Selira*, classically associated with the refined disposition of inland Javanese society, remain fully intact among school counselors practicing within the more outspoken *arek Suroboyo* cultural climate, or does the value undergo a shift in form? It is precisely this conceptual tension that makes Surabaya a unique and strategic research site.

Based on the foregoing, this study aims to analyze how *Tepa Selira* is manifested in the attitudes of school counselors in schools in Surabaya, and to examine its congruence with empathy from a guidance and counseling perspective. The novelty of this study lies in combining a conceptual analysis of *Tepa Selira* as a form of Javanese local wisdom with direct empirical data from school counselors obtained through interviews and observation — an approach that differs from previous studies that addressed *Tepa Selira* in purely conceptual terms (Hamidah et al., 2026) or examined students' empathy following an intervention without tracing its cultural roots within the counselors themselves (Nafilasari et al., 2023). Creswell and Poth (2018) argued that qualitative research combining field data with conceptual analysis yields a more contextual and vivid understanding than conceptual analysis alone. Accordingly, this study is expected to address the gap identified at the outset through the bibliometric findings of Zamroni et al. (2022), particularly the limited attention given to affective and cognitive dimensions in guidance and counseling research in Indonesia, while also offering a concrete portrait that can serve as material for reflection for school counselors regarding the cultural richness already inherent in their professional attitudes.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach because the research questions required an in-depth and contextual understanding of how *Tepa Selira* is understood, internalized, and enacted in counselors' everyday attitudes. Such an emic understanding can be obtained through direct interaction with participants rather than through a literature review alone (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Participants and Setting

The participants of this study consisted of three school counselors from various schools in Surabaya (two women and one man), selected through purposive sampling based on four criteria: active practice as a school counselor in Surabaya, a Javanese cultural background along with an understanding of the value of *Tepa Selira*, a minimum of five years of counseling experience, and voluntary willingness to participate. The

selection process was conducted in stages — comprising initial screening through the Surabaya Guidance and Counseling Teachers' Council (MGBK), initial contact, criteria verification, and the signing of informed consent — consistent with recommended practices for rigorous and ethical participant selection in qualitative research (Brinkmann, 2022; Campbell et al., 2020). The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until new participants no longer yielded significant new themes relevant to the focus of the study; saturation was reached at the third participant, which supports the exploratory scope of this study.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Code	Age	Gender	Length of Service	School
G1	30 years	Female	8 years	SMP Negeri 61 Surabaya
G2	41 years	Male	17 years	SMP Negeri 48 Surabaya
G3	34 years	Female	12 years	SMP Negeri 53 Surabaya

Data Collection

The research data comprised primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation of the three counselors, as well as secondary data from books (published in 2016 and onward) and journal articles (published in 2020 and onward) concerning *Tepa Selira* and empathy; an exception was made for foundational classic works that constitute the primary conceptual basis of this study (e.g., Magnis-Suseno, 1984; Hardjowirogo, 1989), which were not bound by these year restrictions given their irreplaceable theoretical standing.

The instrument for this study involved the researcher as the human instrument, supported by a semi-structured interview guide and an observation guide; both were developed based on the five indicators of *Tepa Selira* (*rukun, ngajeni liyan, mulat sarira/ngukur batin, unggah-ungguh lan solah bawa, and mangerteni papan/sangkan paran*) derived from the conceptual review. The interview guide followed the semi-structured framework of DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), combining grand-tour, core, and planned follow-up questions that had been designed for each sub-indicator. For example, for the *rukun* indicator, participants were first given a grand-tour question ("How would you describe the everyday atmosphere of your relationships with students in the counseling room?"), followed by a core question probing whether they considered the impact of their words on that relationship, and planned follow-up questions requesting concrete examples of how they adjusted their approach to maintain harmony with students.

Observations were conducted in a non-participant manner across three sessions per participant in informal settings — such as the teachers' room or school corridors during break time — rather than in formal counseling sessions, in order to observe whether behaviors reflecting *Tepa Selira* persisted outside a structured counseling context. Observation sessions lasted between three and five hours (G1: 4 hours; G2: 5 hours; G3: 3 hours), guided by an observation sheet that distinguished between

descriptive and reflective field notes based on the five indicators of *Tepa Selira* (Creswell and Poth, 2018). All interview data, originally collected in Indonesian, were translated into English by the researcher.

Researcher's Position and Reflexivity

The researcher shared the same Javanese cultural background as the subjects of this study, which provided an in-depth insider understanding of the implicit meanings of *Tepa Selira* and facilitated the establishment of good rapport with participants during interviews and observations. At the same time, this closeness necessitated active reflexivity to avoid uncritically projecting the researcher's personal understanding of the value onto participants' accounts; accordingly, the codes and themes that emerged were repeatedly examined against the verbatim data and discussed with a research team member to prevent interpretive bias that might arise from this shared cultural background.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis through six recursive phases — familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022) — supported by a coding sheet used during the coding, theme-generation, and theme-review phases. The resulting themes were then compared against the components and types of empathy recognized in the counseling literature to assess their conceptual congruence.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established through triangulation and member checking. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data across the three participants and cross-checking it against the conceptual framework derived from the literature review. Researcher triangulation involved consultation and cross-examination of the coding process and thematic interpretation with a research team member; this process functioned as a form of peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), helping to test the researcher's reasoning and reveal potential unconscious biases (Denzin, 1978, as cited in Natow, 2020). Member checking was conducted with all three participants through face-to-face meetings, in which interview transcripts and the researcher's thematic interpretations were returned to them for verification — a procedure intended to ensure that the researcher's categories and interpretations accurately reflected participants' own accounts (Erdmann and Potthoff, 2023). All three participants confirmed that the transcripts and interpretations accurately represented their experiences, requiring no corrections or additions.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, all participants provided written informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose, data collection procedures, and their rights, including the right to decline or withdraw at any time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. During the coding phase, 44 codes were generated from the interview and observation data of the three participants, comprising 29 codes from interview transcripts and 15 codes from observation notes, as documented in the Code Tracking Table. Through the subsequent processes of theme generation and review, these codes were organized into 12 themes and mapped onto the five indicators of *Tepa Selira*: *Rukun* (Social Harmony), *Ngajeni Liyan* (Respect and Appreciation), *Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin* (Self-Reflection and Introspection), *Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa* (Communicative Etiquette), and *Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* (Understanding Others' Position and Context). The distribution of these themes, their supporting participants, data sources, and representative excerpts is presented in Table 2. Themes by *Tepa Selira* Indicator. Of the 12 themes identified, eight were supported through triangulation across participants and/or data sources, while four represented individual variations that were consistently corroborated by both interview and observation data from the respective participant.

***Rukun* (Social Harmony)**

The *Rukun* indicator was reflected through the themes of Proactive Relational Harmony and Emotional Self-Regulation. All three participants actively built and maintained harmonious relationships with students and colleagues rather than merely avoiding conflict. G1 described her relationship with students as relatively equal rather than hierarchical and prioritized clarification before asserting her own views: "... *I don't insert my own perspective... then we reflect on the feelings or message being conveyed, and only then draw a conclusion*" (DW/G1/B1, B4). G2 was careful in choosing words to avoid causing offense and to maintain stable two-way communication (DW/G2/B4), while G3 first reduced students' emotional tension before addressing the main issue and was willing to set aside her personal comfort to preserve the relationship with a difficult student (DW/G3/B4, B6). Observations supported this pattern in informal contexts outside counseling sessions. G1 responded calmly to a colleague's objection and directed the conversation toward a practical solution (DO/G1/25.06.26/SMP61/11:20), while G3 offered tea to a colleague who arrived late without showing irritation (DO/G3/30.06.26/SMP53/12:15). Emotional Self-Regulation was particularly evident in G2. Although his emotions were sometimes triggered, he was able to recover and continue communicating constructively: "...*sometimes as counselors we get emotionally triggered. Not physically, just raising our voice a bit. But eventually we soften again, and good communication continues*" (DW/G2/B5). Observation confirmed that G2 briefly raised his tone when teased by a colleague but lowered it again within seconds (DO/G2/29.06.26/SMP48/10:30). The consistency between interview and observation data indicates that emotional self-regulation formed an important part of how G2 maintained relational harmony.

Table 2. Themes by *Tepa Selira* Indicator

No	Theme	Supporting Participants	Data Source	Supporting Data Excerpt
A. Rukun (Social Harmony)				
1	Proactive Relational Harmony	G1, G2, G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"It's not that I'm the teacher and they're the student, so in the end they're afraid of me... it's more like I'm a friend to the students." (G1/DW/B1)</i>
2	Emotional Self-Regulation	G2	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...sometimes as a school counselor, our emotions get triggered... but eventually we have to soften, and in the end good communication happens." (G2/DW/B5)</i>
B. Ngajeni Liyan (Respect and Appreciation)				
1	Appreciation through Closeness	G1, G2, G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...I talk to them the way I would to my own child... when their eyes start to well up, that means I've been able to reach their heart." (G3/DW/B9)</i>
2	Non-Judgmental Acceptance	G1, G2	Interviews	<i>"...I follow the values and beliefs that are within me, meaning I don't pass judgment ..." (G1/DW/B11)</i>
C. Mulat Sarira / Ngukur Batin (Self-Reflection and Introspection)				
1	Consistent Self-Evaluation	G1, G2, G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...I go through my handling of the case from beginning to end so I know where I might have gone wrong... it's for my own evaluation." (G3/DW/B16)</i>
2	Post-Session Reflection	G2	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...sometimes I realize it too late. It's only after the process is finished (laughs) that it comes to me." (G2/DW/B20)</i>
3	Maintaining Emotional Boundaries	G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"There was a time... I ended up crying, when I should have stayed professional... I have to stay professional when handling a case." (G3/DW/B18)</i>
D. Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa (Communicative Etiquette)				
1	Firm yet Gentle	G1, G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...when students cause problems repeatedly, sometimes I speak firmly with them. Firm in the sense of not going as far as being harsh or angry." (G3/DW/B25)</i>
2	Attentiveness through Nonverbal Cues	G1, G2	Interviews + Observation	<i>"I keep making eye contact... so they feel that they're getting my full attention, Mr. G2's attention." (G2/DW/B27)</i>
3	Situationally Reactive Tone	G2	Interviews + Observation	<i>"...my tone does rise at times, that's for sure. But even then, there are still principles within me that I have to uphold as a matter of a teacher's dignity." (G2/DW/B25)</i>
E. Mangerteni Papan / Sangkan Paran (Understanding Others' Position and Context)				
1	Proactive Contextual Understanding	G1, G2, G3	Interviews + Observation	<i>"I need to know what the student's home life is like, what number child they are, what their family situation is like... not just show up without understanding." (G3/DW/B32)</i>
2	Individual Context Verification	G2	Observation	<i>"...children from that area are usually like this..." — before then adding that he still checks each student's individual condition directly." (G2/DO/29.06.26/RG/13:50)</i>

Ngajeni Liyan (Respect and Appreciation)

The *Ngajeni Liyan* indicator was manifested through Appreciation through Closeness and Non-Judgmental Acceptance. Appreciation through Closeness was most prominent in G3, who described her relationship with students as close and personal rather than merely formal. Her involvement extended to communicating directly with a student's parents in a bullying case, as reflected in her statement: *"...I talk to them the*

way *I would to my own child...*” (DW/G3/B9,B10). Observations showed similar patterns among all three participants, although with different levels of intensity. G1 greeted students by name and listened without interrupting (DO/G1/25.06.26/SMP61/12:05), G2 helped move files without being asked despite his generally direct communication style (DO/G2/29.06.26/SMP48/11:15), and G3 showed the broadest pattern by greeting nearly everyone, including non-teaching staff (DO/G3/30.06.26/SMP53/13:05). Non-Judgmental Acceptance was especially visible in G1, who emphasized respecting students' beliefs even when they differed from her own values: “*...I still respect what they express... even if it differs from my own values, meaning I don't judge, I don't intervene, I still provide options*” (DW/G1/B11). G2 also respected students' feelings, although he tended to guide them using his own personal experiences when he considered their views to be less appropriate (DW/G2/B9, B11). These findings indicate different styles of appreciation, with G1 showing a more non-directive approach and G2 a more directive one.

Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin (Self-Reflection and Introspection)

The *Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin* indicator was represented by Consistent Self-Evaluation, Post-Session Reflection, and Maintaining Emotional Boundaries. All three participants demonstrated systematic self-evaluation. G1 regularly requested feedback from students as material for reflection: “*...before I end the session, I always ask whether there's anything they've said that they'd like to add to or dispute... as material for my own reflection*” (DW/G1/B15). She also openly acknowledged mistakes when she considered her response inappropriate: “*...if I feel I was wrong, I say so, okay, so I was wrong on this point, I'm sorry if I got it wrong*” (DW/G1/B20). G3 documented her handling of cases in writing as a basis for evaluation (DW/G3/B16), while G2 engaged in self-calming when he felt that a case had not been handled successfully (DW/G2/B15). Observation further supported this theme when G1 spontaneously corrected herself after realizing that her assumption had been mistaken (DO/G1/25.06.26/SMP61/13:10). Post-Session Reflection was specifically identified in G2, whose reflective process often occurred after a particular interaction or session had ended. He acknowledged this pattern by saying, “*yes, sometimes I only think about it afterward, oh, why did I respond like that earlier... but sometimes I realize it too late. It's only after the process is finished that it comes to me (laughs)*” (DW/G2/B20). Observation confirmed that G2 later admitted that his opinion had been “too hasty” after a discussion had already taken place (DO/G2/29.06.26/SMP48/12:40). Maintaining Emotional Boundaries was most evident in G3, who admitted that she had cried during a counseling session while still trying to remain professional: “*There was a time... I cried, when I should have been professional... it's fine to cry but not to the point of sobbing... I have to stay professional when handling a case*” (DW/G3/B18). Observation also showed G3 becoming emotional while recounting a difficult case before regaining composure and continuing in a calm tone (DO/G3/30.06.2026/SMP53/13:45).

Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa (Communicative Etiquette)

The *Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa* indicator appeared through the themes of Firm yet Gentle, Attentiveness through Nonverbal Cues, and Situationally Reactive Tone. G1 and G3 adjusted the firmness of their tone according to the situation without losing their underlying gentleness. G1 explained that she would raise her voice only when necessary as a warning: *"...I still use a tone that's... somewhat firm but assertive. So when the children are being noisy I let it go for a little while first... only when it becomes uncontrollable do I raise my voice, as a warning"* (DW/G1/B26). G3 similarly stated, *"...with children who keep causing problems, I sometimes speak firmly. Firm, but not to the point of shouting in anger. That's not allowed"* (DW/G3/B25). Observation confirmed this pattern when G3 responded to repeated joking about her tardiness with a slightly firmer tone without shouting or belittling the other person (DO/G3/30.06.26/SMP53/SO). G3 also explained that her choice of words often emerged spontaneously from her emotional closeness with students rather than from deliberate calculation (DW/G3/B23). Attentiveness through Nonverbal Cues was particularly visible in G2, who intentionally maintained eye contact during counseling: *"I keep trying to maintain eye contact. Looking at the person I'm speaking with, especially in counseling. So they feel they're getting my full attention"* (DW/G2/B27). A four-hour observation of G1 further demonstrated that nonverbal attentiveness appeared as a stable everyday pattern rather than a situational performance (DO/G1/25.06.26/SMP61/SO). Situationally Reactive Tone was specific to G2, who acknowledged that his tone occasionally rose but remained within limits that he set for himself: *"...my tone does rise at times, that's for sure. But there are still inner principles I have to uphold, befitting a teacher's dignity"* (DW/G2/B25). Observation confirmed that G2's tone was more responsive to situational dynamics than those of G1 and G3, who tended to remain more stable (DO/G2/29.06.26/SMP48/SO).

***Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* (Understanding Others' Position and Context)**

The *Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* indicator was reflected in Proactive Contextual Understanding and Individual Context Verification. Proactive Contextual Understanding was the most strongly supported theme across all three participants. G1 emphasized the importance of conducting an in-depth assessment that went beyond administrative data, as reflected in her statements, *"we do an assessment first..."* (DW/G1/B29) and *"...looking for the background first, the root of the problem first"* (DW/G1/B32). G2 sought to identify the underlying causes behind surface-level symptoms and collaborated with homeroom teachers (DW/G2/B29, B34). G3 demonstrated the most proactive approach by conducting home visits without waiting for a problem to arise and by seeking comprehensive information from homeroom teachers (DW/G3/B30, B32). Observation confirmed that this orientation also appeared in informal interactions. G1 withheld judgment and asked about background before commenting (DO/G1/25.06.26/SMP61/14:15), while G3 naturally asked about the family background of a new colleague (DO/G3/30.06.26/SMP53/14:30). Individual Context Verification emerged solely from observation of G2 and was not disclosed during the interview. In an informal conversation in the teachers' room, G2 described the typical

characteristics of students from a particular area by saying that “*kids from there are usually like this*”, but he then emphasized the need to check each student’s individual situation before drawing conclusions (DO/G2/29.06.26/SMP48/13:50). This finding demonstrates the added value of observation in complementing self-report data, particularly in identifying tendencies that may not be consciously recognized or explicitly reported by participants.

Discussion

This discussion examines the study’s findings in three parts: participants’ understanding and internalization of *Tepa Selira* in relation to its classical conceptualization in Javanese cultural literature and the character of *arek Suroboyo* culture; the correspondence between the concrete manifestations of *Tepa Selira* and the components, types, and basic attitudes of empathy in guidance and counseling; and its practical contribution to developing school counselors’ empathic competence. Each finding is examined not only in terms of its alignment with existing theory, but also in terms of the tensions or nuances that enrich our understanding of how *Tepa Selira* and empathy operate in the everyday practice of school counselors.

Understanding and Internalization of *Tepa Selira*

1. Congruence with the Classical Definition of *Tepa Selira*

The way the three participants interpreted and enacted *Tepa Selira* showed strong congruence with its classical conceptualization in Javanese cultural literature, even though the research instrument did not include explicit definitional questions. Magnis-Suseno (1984) asserted that *Tepa Selira* is not merely a normative social rule, but an inner awareness born of refined sensitivity (*kehalusan rasa*). This was reflected in G1’s positioning of herself as a “friend to students” rather than a distant authority figure, and in G3’s habit of treating students “like my own child.” Neither expression was a response to professional obligation. Instead, both reflected an internalized worldview, indicating that participants were not merely “complying with” *Tepa Selira*, but had come to embody it in their everyday attitudes.

A similar congruence emerged with Hardjowirogo’s (1989) concept of *ngukur batin*, which refers to inner reflection as a prerequisite for understanding others’ inner states. This was reflected in the themes of Consistent Self-Evaluation and Post-Session Reflection under *mulat sarira*. G1’s habit of directly requesting feedback from students and G3’s practice of documenting her case handling in writing are concrete manifestations of *ngukur batin*. Meanwhile, Endraswara’s (2006) notion of *Tepa Selira* as “measuring by oneself” (*yen dijiwit lara aja njiwit*, meaning if being pinched hurts, one should not pinch others) was manifested in G3’s relational pattern, which repeatedly drew on familial metaphors. Her willingness to set aside personal comfort for the sake of a difficult student showed that an awareness of others’ hardship genuinely underlay her actions rather than remaining merely a cognitive concept.

This finding also confirms Lestari's (2016) thesis on the dynamics of *Tepa Selira* amid individualistic modern life, as reflected in G2's variation in emotional regulation. Rather than displaying constant refined sensitivity, *Tepa Selira* in G2 was manifested through his ability to recover after becoming emotionally triggered. This adaptation still preserved the essence of relational harmony, although it differed from the idealized image of Javanese court (*keraton*) society. The finding reinforces Lestari's argument that *Tepa Selira* is dynamic across generations without losing its essence as an orientation toward harmony and respect for others.

2. Links to the Formative Factors of *Tepa Selira*

As noted earlier, this study did not specifically trace the developmental history of *Tepa Selira* within participants through explicit questions. Therefore, its connection to the four formative factors identified by Casmini (2020), namely *piwulang sepuh* (ancestral teachings), a socio-cultural environment upholding *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *pendhidhikan budi* (character education), and the internalization of *kejawen*, can only be traced tentatively based on patterns of language and speech style found in the data. This limitation is acknowledged as a methodological boundary and also opens space for future research to examine directly the developmental history of this value's internalization.

Nevertheless, G3's repeated use of familial metaphors such as "my child" and "like my own child" suggests a possible dominant influence of *piwulang sepuh*. Casmini (2020) explained that *piwulang sepuh* is passed down through direct example rather than formal instruction. This pattern appears to have influenced the way G3 treated students as family members. Her willingness to conduct proactive home visits and communicate directly with students' parents further reinforces this indication.

In contrast, G1's more structured style, including the use of technical terms such as counseling data cards and systematic assessment, suggests a possible stronger influence from *pendhidhikan budi* through formal professional education. Meanwhile, G2's repeated references to "inner principles" and "a school counselor's dignity" as boundaries he maintained even when his emotions ran high suggest an influence from the socio-cultural environment and a collective awareness of his social role. This influence appeared more dominant than the more personal *piwulang sepuh*. These tentative patterns suggest that, although the participants shared the same Javanese cultural background, the pathways through which *Tepa Selira* is internalized may differ across individuals. This possibility deserves further examination through research that specifically traces participants' life histories.

3. Tensions and Adaptations within the *Arek Suroboyo* Cultural Context

Soedarso et al. (2013) explained that Javanese society in Surabaya exhibits the *arek Suroboyo* character, which is more open, assertive, and egalitarian than the refined speech traditionally associated with the Javanese royal court (*keraton*), long regarded as a classical reference point for *Tepa Selira*. Nissa et al. (2022) also affirmed that Surabaya's status as a multicultural city means that Javanese values continually interact with diverse cultural influences. The question posed in the

background regarding whether *Tepa Selira* remains intact within such a cultural climate can therefore be addressed empirically. The findings indicate that *Tepa Selira* has not disappeared, but has undergone an identifiable adaptation in form.

This adaptation was most evident in G2, who consistently displayed a pattern of "being emotionally triggered and then recovering" under *rukun*, as well as a "situationally reactive tone" under *unggah-ungguh*. This pattern aligns with the more forthright *arek Suroboyo* character, in which emotional expression is not always suppressed in the manner often associated with the idealized image of Javanese court refinement. Instead, emotions may surface naturally and are followed by a conscious effort to restore harmony. G2 explicitly referred to "inner principles" and "a school counselor's dignity" as boundaries he continued to uphold. This indicates that, for him, *Tepa Selira* functions as a mechanism for restoration and boundary-setting after emotional expression occurs rather than as a means of suppressing expression from the outset.

A comparison across the three participants revealed that variation in maintaining harmony appears to be influenced not only by regional factors but also by individual personality. G1 and G3, although both practicing in Surabaya, displayed patterns of *Tepa Selira* that were closer to the classical image. This suggests that the *arek Suroboyo* character interacts with individual personality in complex ways rather than serving as the sole determining factor. Overall, within an urban Javanese context such as Surabaya, *Tepa Selira* remains a strong value orientation, while its concrete manifestations adapt according to the interaction between regional cultural characteristics and individual personality.

Manifestation and Congruence with Empathy

1. *Rukun* (Social Harmony)

The theme of Proactive Relational Harmony corresponded strongly with the behavioral component of empathy described by Davis (1983) and Gladding (2022) — the tangible expression of understanding through observable verbal and nonverbal responses. G1's practice of clarifying a message before drawing a conclusion and G3's practice of de-escalating a situation before addressing the core issue represent forms of expressed empathy (Gladding, 2022) — empathy that is actively communicated rather than merely felt internally. Meanwhile, the theme of Emotional Self-Regulation in G2 corresponded with emotion regulation within cognitive empathy (Thompson et al., 2022): individuals with high cognitive empathy tend to be able to process emotional states in a structured manner even after being momentarily triggered.

Viewed through Carkhuff (1969) typology, this manifestation of *rukun* reflects primary-level empathy rather than advanced empathy — clarification and de-escalation are oriented toward creating a safe condition for communication to take place, rather than toward the deeper excavation of implicit meaning. This classification is logical: *rukun* functions as the foundation that enables advanced empathy to occur at a later stage, rather than constituting advanced empathy itself.

Rukun also corresponded with other basic counselor attitudes: consistency and patience (Ardimen et al., 2024; Corey et al., 2019; Safaria, 2026; Willis, 2017). G1's and G3's consistency in maintaining composure in both formal sessions and informal interactions reflects a stability that builds client trust. Patience was evident in G3's strategy of de-escalating a situation before addressing the core issue. *Rukun* thus encompasses more than a single dimension of school counselors' professional competence at once.

2. *Ngajeni Liyan* (Respect and Appreciation)

The theme of Appreciation through Closeness in G3 corresponded closely with the affective component of empathy (Davis, 1983; Reniers et al., 2022), which involves the capacity to spontaneously feel another person's emotional state. G3's approach of treating students "like my own child" reflects subjective empathy (Clark, 2022; Habibpour et al., 2026), one of the most personal components of the counseling process. In contrast, the theme of Non-Judgmental Acceptance in G1 was more closely aligned with Rogers' (1957, as cited in Corey, 2021) concept of unconditional positive regard, which helps create a safe space for clients to explore their experiences.

G2's tendency to guide students' views through his own personal experience, while still respecting their feelings, revealed an interesting tension with Rogers' principle of non-directiveness. On one hand, this could be understood as assertiveness (Egan, 2014), an element of primary empathy. On the other hand, using personal experience as a value reference may shift the interaction from pure acceptance toward implicit value-directing. This does not indicate that *ngajeni liyan* was weaker in G2. Rather, it reflects a variation in counseling orientation. G1 leaned toward a non-directive, person-centered approach, while G2 was more directive. Both approaches, however, remained rooted in the intention to respect students, although they were expressed through different strategies.

This indicator also corresponded with listening skills (Willis, 2017). All three participants greeted students and colleagues by name, listened without interrupting, and paid attention to personal circumstances outside formal contexts. These behaviors reflect the active listening that underlies authentic appreciation. *Ngajeni liyan* therefore encompasses the affective dimension of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and active listening skills, giving it one of the broadest scopes of congruence among the indicators.

3. *Mulat Sarira*/Ngukur Batin (Self-Reflection and Introspection)

This indicator corresponded directly with the cognitive component of empathy, particularly perspective-taking (Davis, 1983; Reniers et al., 2022), which involves setting aside one's own perspective in order to understand another person accurately. G1's habit of requesting feedback from students and G3's systematic documentation reflect a deliberate top-down inferential process (Reniers et al., 2022).

The theme of Post-Session Reflection in G2 offered a novel nuance. Although G2's self-reflection occurred with a time lag, the process of *mulat sarira* still took

place; the difference lay primarily in timing. The literature (Reniers et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022) does not indicate that this cognitive process must occur instantaneously. G2's experience therefore broadens the understanding of *mulat sarira* by showing that reflective processes may unfold after an interaction while still retaining their significance. This finding offers a small but meaningful contribution to understanding reflective practice in high-pressure counseling situations.

The theme of Maintaining Emotional Boundaries in G3 corresponded with the self-other distinction in Guthridge and Giummarra's (2021) meta-definition of empathy. Healthy empathy requires the ability to experience another person's affective state while maintaining a separate sense of self-awareness. G3's admission that crying is "fine, but not to the point of sobbing" reflects an awareness of this boundary rather than a failure of empathy. This finding supports the view that *mulat sarira* can function as a prerequisite for advanced empathy to occur in a healthy manner. Without such self-awareness, counselors may experience personal distress (Davis, 1983), which can reduce the effectiveness of the helping process.

4. *Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa* (Communicative Etiquette)

The themes of Firm yet Gentle and Attentiveness through Nonverbal Cues corresponded clearly with the behavioral and communicative components of empathy (Davis, 1983; Fuller et al., 2021; Gladding, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2021), including open body language, appropriate eye contact, and a non-judgmental tone. G2's habit of maintaining eye contact reflects the attending skill described by Willis (2017), which helps create an atmosphere in which clients feel accepted and attended to.

However, the theme of Situationally Reactive Tone in G2 and G3's admission that her choice of words "just flowed naturally" offer a critical nuance to the theoretical definition of *unggah-ungguh* as deliberate carefulness (Magnis-Suseno, 1984; Hardjowirogo, 1989). In G3's case, her gentleness of speech appeared to arise from spontaneous emotional resonance. This is more closely aligned with the bottom-up mechanism of the affective component of empathy described by Reniers et al. (2022), in which responses may occur automatically without a complex cognitive process. This suggests that *unggah-ungguh* does not always originate purely from cognitive deliberation, as emphasized in classical literature, but may also emerge from spontaneous affective responses depending on individual characteristics.

In terms of types of empathy, *unggah-ungguh* showed a dual correspondence. In routine communication, it more closely reflects primary empathy through attending behavior and a stable tone. In difficult or sensitive situations, however, it requires a capacity closer to advanced empathy, particularly immediacy (Egan, 2014; Eryılmaz and Başal, 2024; Shang and Jin, 2025), which involves addressing relational dynamics directly without damaging the relationship. G1's ability to adjust her tone between a noisy classroom and a calm individual session demonstrates this flexibility and reflects a level of contextual sensitivity that extends beyond basic communication skills.

5. *Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* (Understanding Others' Position and Context)

The theme of Proactive Contextual Understanding, which was the most strongly supported theme in the study, corresponded closely with advanced empathy (Carkhuff, 1969; Egan, 2014). Advanced empathy requires counselors to grasp implicit meanings, including those that clients themselves may not yet fully recognize. G1's practice of conducting in-depth assessment beyond administrative data, G2's effort to trace root causes behind surface-level symptoms, and G3's proactive home visits all reflect attempts to understand what lies beyond what is immediately apparent.

This correspondence can also be understood through Hardjowirogo's (1989) concept of *sangkan paran*, which emphasizes understanding a person's origins and life context in order to comprehend their actions without rushing to judgment. This concept also relates to assertiveness within Egan's (2014) primary empathy, although in this study it extended further into an active effort to seek contextual information. G3's initiative to conduct home visits before problems became severe illustrates this proactive orientation. Such practice suggests that *mangerteni papan* is not merely reactive, but may also function anticipatorily by encouraging counselors to seek relevant contextual information before making interpretations or decisions.

In contrast, the theme of Individual Context Verification in G2 introduces an important caveat. The tendency to generalize from group background before examining individual circumstances may conflict with the principle of advanced empathy, which requires recognition of individual uniqueness. Within Clark's (2022) framework, this tendency may be understood as a temporary limitation in objective empathy because group-based assumptions can interfere with individual understanding. Nevertheless, G2's willingness to verify each student's condition individually demonstrates an effort to return to the principle of authentic *mangerteni papan*. This pattern is therefore better understood as an ongoing process toward more advanced empathic understanding rather than as an absence of *mangerteni papan*. The overall congruence between *Tepa Selira* and empathy is summarized in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the five indicators of *Tepa Selira* collectively encompass all three components of empathy (cognitive, affective, behavioral) and both types of empathy (primary and advanced), in a fairly systematic pattern: *Rukun* and *Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa* tend to operate at the level of primary empathy as the foundation of everyday relationships, *Ngajeni Liyan* shows the closest correspondence with the affective component of empathy as well as the basic attitude of unconditional positive regard, *Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin* functions as a cognitive prerequisite, and *Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran* reaches the most complex level of advanced empathy. This pattern indicates that *Tepa Selira*, as a single cultural value, in fact encompasses a broader and more integrated range of congruence than the component-and-type model of empathy, which tends to be mapped separately in the Western guidance and counseling literature—

a finding that constitutes an important conceptual contribution of this study to the development of indigenization research in Indonesian guidance and counseling.

Tabel 3. Congruence between Tepa Selira and Empathy

<i>Tepa Selira</i> Indicator	Empirical Theme Found	Corresponding Empathy Component	Corresponding Empathy Type	Related Basic Counselor Attitude
<i>Rukun</i>	Proactive Relational Harmony; Emotional Self-Regulation	Behavioral; Cognitive	Primary	Consistency; Patience
<i>Ngajeni Liyan</i>	Appreciation through Closeness; Non- Judgmental Acceptance	Affective	Primary– Advanced	Unconditional Positive Regard; Listening Skills
<i>Mulat Sarira/Ngukur Batin</i>	Consistent Self- Evaluation; Post-Session Reflection; Maintaining Emotional Boundaries	Cognitive	Precondition for Advanced	Self-Awareness; Integrity
<i>Unggah-Ungguh lan Solah Bawa</i>	Firm yet Gentle; Nonverbal Attentiveness; Situational Reactive Tone	Behavioral; Affective	Primary (routine)– Advanced (difficult situations)	Attending; Communication Skills
<i>Mangerteni Papan/Sangkan Paran</i>	Proactive Contextual Understanding; Individual Context Verification	Cognitive	Advanced	Objective Empathy; Adaptability

Practical Implications for Guidance and Counseling

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the findings of this study suggest several practical directions for strengthening counseling practice in school settings. These implications are derived directly from the ways *Tepa Selira* was manifested through relational harmony, contextual understanding, self-reflection, and communicative sensitivity among the participating school counselors.

First, counselor training should strengthen the ability to combine firmness with warmth as a relational competency. This implication is supported by the themes of Firm yet Gentle and Proactive Relational Harmony, in which participants adjusted their tone and responses without sacrificing respect or relational safety. Such a pattern is consistent with the behavioral dimension of empathy and the importance of attending and relational communication in counseling (Gladding, 2022; Willis, 2017). In practice, counselors need to provide clear and honest feedback while maintaining emotional presence and avoiding unnecessarily harsh or overly procedural responses. This is particularly relevant in interactions with students who may require both structure and a sense of psychological safety.

Second, contextual sensitivity should be explicitly incorporated into case conceptualization and assessment training. The theme of Proactive Contextual Understanding showed that the participants did not rely solely on students' observable behavior, but sought information about family background, social context, and underlying

causes before responding. This finding is consistent with the principle of advanced empathy, which requires counselors to move beyond surface-level information and understand the client's broader context (Carkhuff, 1969; Egan, 2014). Therefore, counselor education should train students to gather contextual information systematically, verify assumptions, and avoid premature generalization based on group or social background.

Third, the findings support the integration of local cultural values into counselor education and professional supervision. The participants' empathic attitudes were not expressed only through formally learned counseling techniques, but were also closely connected to the internalization of *Tepa Selira*. This supports previous arguments that culturally sensitive counseling should be grounded in local values and social realities rather than relying exclusively on imported theoretical frameworks (Naqiyah et al., 2022; Almasi et al., 2025). Incorporating indigenous values such as *Tepa Selira* into counselor education may therefore strengthen culturally responsive practice while preserving the core principles of professional counseling.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Tepa Selira*, a core Javanese cultural value, corresponds substantively with empathy in guidance and counseling. Rather than functioning merely as theoretical knowledge, *Tepa Selira* appears as an internalized relational orientation that is expressed dynamically and personally in counselors' everyday attitudes. Within the *arek Suroboyo* cultural context, its expression may vary in form while retaining its central orientation toward harmony, respect, and sensitivity to others.

The five indicators of *Tepa Selira* correspond with different dimensions of empathy. *Rukun* and *unggah-ungguh lan solah bawa* are closely associated with primary empathy and everyday relational communication; *ngajeni liyan* reflects the affective dimension of empathy and unconditional positive regard; *mulat sarira/ngukur batin* supports cognitive reflection and self-awareness; and *mangerteni papan/sangkan paran* shows the strongest correspondence with advanced empathy through contextual understanding. These findings suggest that *Tepa Selira* can be understood as a culturally grounded expression of empathic competence among Javanese school counselors and may provide a meaningful local framework for strengthening culturally responsive counseling practice.

This study is limited by its exploratory design, involving three counselors from a single city who shared a Javanese cultural background. The findings therefore represent in-depth patterns of meaning rather than generalizable conclusions. In addition, although interview data were strengthened through observation and triangulation, some aspects of *Tepa Selira* that operate implicitly may not have been fully articulated by participants.

Future research may examine *Tepa Selira* among counselors from different regions and cultural backgrounds, use quantitative or mixed-methods designs to investigate its relationship with empathy on a broader scale, and employ longitudinal

approaches to explore how this cultural orientation develops across counselors' professional experiences. Overall, the findings highlight the potential of indigenous cultural values to contribute to the development of empathic competence in counselor education and practice.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

In the preparation of this manuscript, the authors utilized Grammarly to assist with grammar checking and language editing. All outputs were subsequently reviewed and revised by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Dwi Puspita Sari contributed to conceptualization, data curation, investigation, and writing – original draft. Najlatun Naqiyah contributed to formal analysis, resources, and writing – review and editing. Evi Winingsih contributed to supervision, validation, and writing – review and editing. Muhamad Afifudin Ghozali contributed to methodology, validation, and writing – review and editing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts, observation field notes, and coding sheets, are not publicly available due to participant privacy and ethical considerations but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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