



Principal Leadership in the 'Merdeka Belajar' Era: Fostering Synergy for Educational Transformation

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ABSTRACT

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The research will explore how school principals work together with various stakeholders, show work intensity, and show innovative learning attitudes to improve the quality of education. The purpose of this study is to describe the leadership of the principal of dRais School Kindergarten Bandar Lampung in creating synergy in the era of 'Merdeka Belajar' using the method popularized by Miles and Huberman. The research data was obtained from participants, namely the principal and teachers. Data collection was carried out through interviews, observation, and documentation. Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The results showed that the leadership of the principal of dRais School Kindergarten in creating synergy is achieved in three ways: by collaborating, showing work intensity, and always trying to show an innovative learning attitude.

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INTRODUCTION

School leadership is an organizational management skill that must be possessed by a principal when managing a school (Sebastian et al., 2019; Wijaya et al., 2022). Principal leadership is an essential and influential component of teachers' job satisfaction in a school (Ardoin et al., 2020; Diana & Zaini, 2023). Principal leadership affects teachers, students, and the general climate of the school (Baptiste, 2019; Yanti & Hayati, 2022). A good principal will always pay attention to the expectations of his subordinates and let them know these expectations so they can synergize with each other to achieve their expectations (Clauzet & Murphy, 2012; Saleem et al., 2020).

Synergistic partnerships may result from principal solid leadership, which improves and informs a school's educational program (Crippen, 2019). The leaders employ a style that promotes synergistic group commitment, are adept at handling challenging real-world circumstances, and are responsive to governmental directives (Fuchs et al., 2022). Students can develop and improve attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills that prepare them for positive action

through leaders who support their schools in creating synergistic spaces through collaboration in addressing various issues (Ardoin et al., 2020; Rafi & Sapuding, 2023). To create a synergistic relationship, the principal must be able to collaborate with various parties and position them as managers, as well as partners who are involved in policy making and planning in education, so that they can contribute to the development of educational institutions, which ultimately affect the development of students (M. et al., 2020; Taufiq, 2022).

Leadership has a social impact, especially in improving the work environment and organizational performance (Campos et al., 2020). Collaboration can create synergies to achieve multiple educational goals (Carney et al., 2019). In carrying out his leadership duties, a principal needs social competence related to social sensitivity, providing assistance to others, communicating, cooperating, and participating in social activities and school community relations (Bafadal et al., 2019). The synergy between structured school visits and involvement in theoretically grounded learning groups can create the motivation and willingness of principals to initiate the change process in their area of leadership (Aas & Paulsen, 2019).

Merdeka Belajar is the educational path to raise the standard of Indonesia's human resources (Arief et al. Faqih 2023). Various transformations need to be carried out in implementing the 'Merdeka Belajar' program, including the transformation of the school curriculum and learning, the transformation of national education management, and the transformation of regional education management and school autonomy (Prahani et al., 2020). The transformation of education has become an inevitable necessity to keep up with the flow of disruption (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Educators, parents, and the community must understand the importance of character-based education transformation, education that forms a professional, independent, and Islamic person (Azmiyah & Astutik, 2021). Education can be interpreted as an effort to transform science (transfer of knowledge), enrichment of values (transfer of value), knowledge of cultural character (transfer of culture), and instillation of religious values (transfer of religion) towards the orientation of changes in individual behaviour patterns so that they have noble values and are intelligent and skilled (Huda et al., 2019). At the early childhood education level, principals who can work with teams through creativity and innovation can implement changes through the vision, mission, and goals to develop the school (Prahani et al., 2020).

Merdeka belajar is a concept that has an excellent opportunity to improve the quality of education in Indonesia, especially if it starts with early childhood education and is well-prepared (Elihami et al., 2022). Students will be guided toward 21st-century competencies: communication, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and independent learning (Meneses, 2021). In the foundation

phase, these competencies will be achieved if the principal can synergize with various components in the school to apply the principles of assessment based on developmental outcomes directed at religious and ethical values, identity, and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) (Hastuti et al., 2022).

In the implementation of education in the early phase, principals who can involve various parties and provide assistance to socialize school programs can increase awareness of the importance of cooperation in parenting, character education in the family environment, socialization of PAUD programs, children's learning patterns at home, and joint evaluation of child development (Gawrisch et al., 2020; Halimah et al., 2020; Zaini & Syafaruddin, 2020). *Educational problems* are a shared responsibility, for which synergy and collaboration are needed from various parties who act as motivators for fellow teachers in the school environment and motivate students (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021). The portrait of education is constantly experiencing dynamics and changes (Fuchs, 2022). Various education components influence each other to achieve quality education (Schildkamp, 2019). Leaders can improve the quality of education in the future if they have the freedom to learn and co-create (Pedde et al., 2021). Based on these explanations, it is essential to conduct this research to analyze how the leadership of kindergarten principals in Bandar Lampung creates synergy in the era of 'Merdeka belajar.'

RESEARCH METHODS

This study attempts to describe and analyze in depth how the leadership of kindergarten principals in Bandar Lampung created synergy in the era of 'Merdeka belajar' using the method described by Miles and Huberman. Based on the data obtained, d'Rais School Kindergarten, one of the kindergartens in Bandar Lampung that is also preparing to welcome 'Merdeka belajar', will be the location of this research.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary tool of the research process (Peterson et al., 2002). Researchers try to describe and understand social or community phenomena regarding how people see themselves (learning from people) or as emic factors. Data in this study were collected through observations of the principal's leadership in kindergarten in creating synergy and interviews with principals, teachers, and vice principals using interview guidelines made before going to the research location. The interview guidelines used the open-ended principle and probing questions. The final step in the data collection of this research is the study of relevant documentation with achievement documents (Barry et al., 2020).

Triangulation is the basis of data validity in this research. Triangulation confirms a finding by proving that the independent measure is by the finding or

does not contradict it (Pilkington & H, 2022). Data analysis was conducted in three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The first is data reduction, the initial stage in analyzing the information collected in this study. Researchers summarize, select the main things and focus on essential things, look for themes and main problems, simplify, abstract, and convert data into notes and transcripts, called "data reduction."

Thus, the data that has been reduced will provide a clearer picture and make it easier for researchers to carry out further data collection and search for it if needed. The second type of data display is data visualization, a collection of organized and concentrated information that allows conclusions to be drawn, depicted, and actions to be taken. The third step is to conclude after completing data reduction and data display. In this stage, researchers use an inductive analysis approach, namely analyzing data by presenting specific facts or concrete events. Then, from these particular facts, general conclusions can be drawn.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Synergy is about interaction and cooperation. The hallmark of synergy is not uniformity but diversity or difference. Therefore, we must complement all differences to achieve maximum results in carrying out synergy. Synergy also means respecting all differences, both opinions and plans and being willing to share. This means that synergy should not be selfish but rather think so that both parties win and no party is harmed or feels harmed (Johnson & Bradshaw, 2021).

The research results at dRaise School Kindergarten show that the principal tries to create synergy by seeking cooperation with every school community member; he also shows high work intensity and an innovative learning attitude.

In the school environment, cooperation is carried out through participation between the principal and stakeholders (teachers, employees, parents, and the community). The cooperative behaviors that are shown include a) discussing school activities in meetings, b) making rules to behave in a disciplined manner jointly, c) making a teacher picket schedule, d) fostering motivation for teachers and employees, e) jointly maintaining the good name of the school and, f) guiding teachers and employees to improve the quality of education.

Additionally, principals always try to support their staff members by finding solutions, offering support and direction when necessary, fostering positive relationships, and mediating conflicts between coworkers. In addition, the principal supports his staff members in achieving school objectives by constantly inspiring them to work together to continue to develop high-quality instruction, encouraging them to achieve their goals, offering guidance, and

providing resources that support the smooth operation of a good learning process. The principal always remembers to share information with his subordinates. Information is usually given directly or verbally during routine meetings or morning briefings and through short messages and social media.

Innovative learning is a behaviour that refers to introducing and applying new ideas obtained by developing the potential as much as possible to solve the problems faced directly (Mora et al., 2020). The attitude of innovative learning is part of the synergy that the principal of dRaise School Kindergarten also carries out. The principal shows an innovative learning attitude by constantly trying to solve the problems that are happening with the best solution, providing new strategies in the learning process and leadership process, improving the quality of education at diaris School Kindergarten, and always trying to develop the potential of the school as much as possible.

Principals also try to learn from experience because experience is the most valuable teacher. From experience, it can be seen which sides have succeeded and which still require further handling. The principal demonstrates the attitude of learning from experience by constantly evaluating and improving something that has yet to be done optimally, following up on each activity, and attempting to avoid repeating past mistakes.

The principal also tries to control the programs running at school. This is accomplished by continuously evaluating the programs put in place for better improvement, sharing the evaluation's findings with relevant parties, including teachers, students, parents, and others, and carrying out follow-up if the programs at the school are improved. New ideas are also constantly trying to be presented so that the learning process at school is varied. Principals can look for new ideas by trying to find inspiration through social media, visiting other schools, and sharing them with subordinates.

The seriousness and enthusiasm of a person's work can be seen from the intensity of his work (Stefanidis & Strogilos, 2021). Work intensity is another component that must be realized in creating synergy. The principal shows his work intensity by always being present on time at school, doing his duties as well as possible, and participating in all activities at school. In addition, the principal demonstrates activeness at work by diligently communicating with subordinates, always being present on time at school, and always participating in school activities. Principals also consistently complete their work on time, enthusiastically, and by their obligations.

Motivation is a process that explains the intensity, direction, and perseverance of an individual in achieving his goals. With motivation, there will be encouragement from within the leader and his subordinates to achieve what has become a predetermined goal. Therefore, the principal always tries to

provide work motivation to his subordinates; he encourages and tries to create a safe and comfortable work environment, establishes good communication, sets an example for his subordinates, behaves pretty, and tries to form goals together with his subordinates.

The principal always tries to establish relationships and cooperate with teachers, parents, students, and the community around the school. In establishing relationships and conducting cooperation, the principal communicates well by interacting directly and diligently, meeting and greeting anyone face-to-face in the school environment, and always trying to show a friendly attitude. New ideas are fundamental to advance the school with various innovations; for this reason, the principal always tries to create school programs and activities that are more creative and innovative, follow the development and progress of education, prepare himself and his subordinates to carry out education by national standards, namely the independent curriculum, and follow up on the results of evaluations that have been carried out on existing programs at the school.

CONCLUSION

Based on the study results, it is concluded that the leadership of the principal of dRais School Kindergarten in creating synergy is achieved in three ways: by collaborating, showing work intensity, and always trying to show an innovative learning attitude. Cooperation is shown by helping each other among coworkers, giving each other encouragement, and sharing information. Work intensity is shown by activeness at work, work completeness, and work motivation. Meanwhile, innovative learning attitudes are demonstrated by constantly learning from experience, reviewing existing programs, and trying to find new ideas.

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