



Democratic Leadership of Quality-Based Principals in Public Junior High School in Merauke Regency

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v13i1.7300>

Abstract

Democracy in Indonesia faces problems such as the disruption of freedom of expression in criticizing the government, physical violence committed by a junior high school principal against a teacher in Jombang Regency, East Java. Principals who are far from democratic values such as deliberation or expressing opinions, Public Junior High Schools in Merauke are less able to control subordinates. This study aims to analyze the implementation of quality-based democratic leadership by Public Junior High School principals in Merauke Regency and identify supporting and inhibiting factors. The method used in this study is a qualitative descriptive approach with primary data sources in the form of in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation in five Public Junior High Schools in Merauke, as well as secondary data in the form of archives and educational regulations. The results show that a quality-based democratic leadership style can create a collaborative work climate that improves teacher performance and the quality of educational services, if balanced with effective coordination, continuous motivation, and transparency in decision-making. However, obstacles were also found in the form of a lack of firmness of leaders in enforcing discipline, weak consistency in providing examples, and the influence of local culture that gives rise to personal sentiments. Supporting factors include active teacher involvement in school program planning, support from local government policies, and school accreditation that encourages quality improvement. The conclusion of this study is that democratic leadership of quality-oriented school principals is effectively implemented if accompanied by increased managerial competence, strengthening the role of the school principal as a motivator, and a commitment to transparency and professionalism.

Keywords: *Democratic Leadership; Education Quality; School Principal*

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in helping humans achieve freedom in life. As rational beings, humans are born with free will, granted by their Creator, leading to independence in life. Education is one way to achieve this independence or freedom (Ndoa & Hulu, 2023). Education is provided through various educational institutions, both formal and informal, which serve as "places" for students and educational providers. In Indonesia, these institutions are known by terms such as schools, study groups,

community learning centers, course institutions, and others, all of which fall under the category of public service organizations.

As a logical consequence, every educational unit has an organizational structure that regulates specific functions and positions. Typically, this organization consists of leadership elements and operational service implementers. The Indonesian education system is divided into four levels: early childhood education and kindergarten, primary education, secondary education, and higher education. These four levels are regulated by Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. These educational services are provided by state educational institutions managed by the government and private educational institutions managed by foundations or individuals (National Education System, 2003). Education is delivered by professional personnel, namely teachers and lecturers. Teachers work at the early childhood through secondary education levels, while lecturers teach at the higher education level. Both professions are regulated by Law Number 14 of 2005 concerning Teachers and Lecturers, which emphasizes that their primary mission is to "enlighten the life of the nation" (Teachers and Lecturers, 2005). Both formal and informal educational institutions have the same responsibility in providing educational services to the community and have similar organizational structures. At the primary and secondary education levels, these institutions are called schools, which are led by principals and supported by teachers.

Currently, freedom of expression in Indonesia is often compromised. In Lampung Province, the reporting of Bima Yudho Saputro, a content creator from East Lampung Regency, after criticizing the Lampung regional government on social media, revealed the narrowing of freedom of expression in the digital realm due to restrictions imposed by certain parties. Yet, social media, with its open nature, can be an alternative avenue for the public who do not always have access to voice their criticism through state institutions. This is bad news for Indonesian democracy.

Nenden Sekar Arum, Head of the Freedom of Expression Division of the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (Safenet), stated that what happened to Bima demonstrates the narrowing of space for public expression due to public officials who are resistant to criticism. This is regrettable, especially since Bima expressed his disappointment with Lampung's development through social media. Social media has traditionally been an alternative for the public who do not have access to formal institutions to express their aspirations (Rahayu, 2023).

At the school level, school principals have committed several acts of violence that are far from democratic values. The Jombang Police Resort (Polres) is still investigating reports of alleged physical violence perpetrated by a junior high school (SMP) principal against a teacher in Jombang Regency, East Java (Jatim). The investigation is being conducted by the Criminal Investigation Unit (Satreskrim) of the Jombang Police, through the General Crimes Unit (Tipidum). The Head of the Tipidum Investigation Unit 1, Ipda Rendro Lastono, stated that all parties involved have been questioned in this investigation. This case of violence against the principal has captured public attention, because it involves educators who should be role models in the school environment.

The police emphasized that the legal process is proceeding according to established procedures. As previously reported, a 60-year-old female teacher at a junior high school in Ploso District, Jombang Regency, East Java, reported her immediate superior, the principal, to the police. She was summoned to meet with the principal. According to her testimony, the meeting escalated into a confrontation involving alleged violence. "As soon as I entered the principal's office, I was immediately accused of having an affair with a fellow teacher. The accusations are completely baseless," SU stated to reporters. SU claimed that when she tried to explain and defend herself, she was instead subjected to rough treatment. She stated that the principal hit her head with a desk calendar. The incident was witnessed by a witness, DI, who was in the room when the incident occurred (Widodo, 2025).

To prevent violence in Indonesia and at the school level, principals must possess democratic skills. Democracy is a human effort to guarantee and protect human rights, as it is a political system that respects basic human rights. Democracy is not merely about civil and political rights; in its development, democracy is also closely linked to the extent to which the economic and socio-cultural rights of its citizens are guaranteed (Rosana, 2020).

In the school hierarchy, a principal is a teacher assigned the additional task of leading an educational unit. He or she is responsible for overseeing the implementation of educational services from elementary to high school and is usually assisted by a vice principal, particularly in the area of curriculum (Surya, 2008). A principal possesses a diverse leadership style, which influences the performance of teachers in carrying out their duties. The principal is tasked with ensuring that teachers are able to provide educational services effectively and in accordance with the expectations of the community as recipients of the services. However, in practice, the performance of educational services in Indonesia tends to decline, resulting in students' low ability to understand the material.

Principals have significant authority in managing school policies, so their role requires serious attention to improve the quality of education in Indonesia. Principals employ various leadership styles, such as democratic, authoritarian, delegative, totalitarian, and laissez-faire, influenced by their individual experiences and insights. In Merauke Regency, primary and secondary education services are provided by the local government and the private sector. However, the dynamics of education in Merauke differ from other regions due to cultural, traditional, social, and political differences. The main problems frequently encountered are limited facilities and the number of teaching staff (Riyanti & Prasetyo, 2019).

Based on initial observations, the leadership style of principals in Merauke is also a significant issue, as the relatively strict character of Eastern Indonesian society influences leadership styles. Although teachers in Merauke function as professional educators, some teachers complain that principals grant too much freedom, which actually undermines the professionalism of teachers who lack accountability. Teacher satisfaction in public junior high schools in Merauke is relatively low, as principals are perceived as incapable of motivating and controlling teachers who neglect their duties. Meetings often discuss administration rather than learning evaluation, which is the core of education.

In addition to observations, researchers also conducted interviews with the Merauke Regency Education Office, which confirmed that some principals are indeed unable to motivate teachers and tend to be temperamental, resulting in teachers feeling fearful or apathetic. Principals' managerial problems are exacerbated by their lack of role models. Some principals tolerate indiscipline, lack commitment to the learning process, show favoritism, and are not open to teacher development programs. Therefore, it is hoped that principals, who have significant authority in managing their schools, can maintain a strong democratic attitude to prevent acts of violence such as those described above.

The first category, with a percentage of 43%, can be described as being in the fairly good category with a percentage of 63%, representing 22 out of 35 respondents. The second category, appreciating the potential of each subordinate, can be described as being in the fairly good category with a percentage of 49%, representing 17 out of 35 respondents. The third category, listening to criticism, suggestions, and opinions from subordinates, can also be described as being in the less good category, as seen from the percentage of 40%, representing 14 out of 35 respondents. Then, the fourth category, collaborating with subordinates, can be described as being in the good category, as seen from the percentage of 54%, representing 19 out of 35 respondents.

Second, the research by Hotami et al., (Hotami et al., 2023) entitled "The Principal's Leadership Style in Improving Teacher Work Quality at SMPIT Ibnu Abbas Klaten." The results of this study are that the leadership style applied at SMPIT Ibnu Abbas is Democratic leadership, although on the other hand

the principal uses a democratic-participatory and Bureaucratic model, of course the principal in this case adjusts to the conditions of his work environment. Qualification standards are determined at the beginning of recruitment, Employee recruitment works together with the Human Resources Unit (HRD) so that we get employees who meet the qualification standards of the foundation), There is also a special award, namely getting an Umrah prize with costs from the Islamic boarding school/Foundation.

Third, the research by Muman et al. (2022) entitled "The Democratic Leadership Style of School Principals in Developing the Professionalism of Islamic Religious Education Teachers." The results of this study indicate that the democratic leadership style of school principals in developing the professionalism of Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMA Negeri 30 Garut significantly influences the development of Islamic Religious Education teachers. This can be seen in the enthusiasm of the teachers, particularly the Islamic Religious Education teachers, for teaching. Teachers regularly participate in training (workshops), both held at the school and by other institutions. However, some teachers still do not understand the rules of the game at school and are unwilling to develop their potential.

The difference between this study and the aforementioned studies concerning the democratic leadership of school principals is that this study was conducted in Merauke Regency, where teachers come from diverse backgrounds and is a public school, whereas the previous study was conducted in a religious-based school. Therefore, based on cases of violations of democracy in Indonesia and the problem of principals who are less able to motivate teachers in Merauke, researchers are interested in conducting research on "Quality-Based Democratic Leadership of Principals in Public Junior High Schools in Merauke Regency".

Research Method

In this study, the author used a qualitative descriptive method, which aims to provide a systematic and factual overview of the phenomena being studied. Qualitative research is naturalistic, focuses on meaning, and emphasizes direct interaction between researchers and subjects in the field. This approach is based on constructivist philosophy, which views reality as complex and socially interpreted (Sugiyono, 2019). Data sources are the sources of information obtained by researchers from the research location. According to Moleong (2015), the primary sources in qualitative research are words and actions, while documents are complementary. The data types in this study are divided into Data: Obtained directly from informants through interviews and field interaction secondary data in the form of documents, reports, and archives relevant to the research topic.

Sugiyono (2018) states that data collection techniques are the initial process in determining data in the field. In this study, the research method applied was a case study. To obtain data on the Quality-Based Democratic Leadership of School Principals in Public Junior High Schools in Merauke Regency, researchers went directly to the field to collect data through observation, interviews, and documentation. In this study, to ensure the validity of the qualitative research data as part of scientific research, it is crucial to apply data validity tests. Sugiyono (2018) classifies several types of triangulation that can be used to check the credibility of data, as follows Source Triangulation and Technical Triangulation. The data analysis technique in this study consists of three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (1994).

Result and Discussion

Result

This research on quality-based democratic leadership by public junior high school principals in Merauke Regency lasted four months. The study was conducted in five public junior high schools: SMPN 1 Merauke, SMPN 9 Merauke, SMPN Buti, SMPN Gudang Arang, and SMPN Satu Atap Wasur. The aim was to examine the implementation of quality-based democratic leadership, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors in its implementation. Merauke Regency, part of South Papua Province, is responsible for providing secondary education services in accordance with the National Education System Law No. 20 of 2003. Research data was obtained through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and staff, as well as field observations and documentation. Narrative analysis revealed key findings related to the application of democratic leadership by principals in improving the quality of educational services in public junior high schools in Merauke Regency.

1. Performance

Performance is the performance or work results demonstrated by individuals or groups within an organization. In education, performance relates to how educators and education personnel carry out their duties in accordance with the applicable curriculum and education service standards.

2. Reliability

Reliability is one of the indicators used to extract the concept of quality-based democratic leadership. Reliability represents the ability of an individual or group of people to demonstrate trustworthiness from others. To determine the level of trustworthiness of principals at public junior high schools in Merauke Regency, the researcher presents several in-depth interview results obtained from research informants.

An informant from SMP Negeri 1 in Merauke Regency revealed that the level of trustworthiness of his principal was measured using parameters that reflect the principal's level of confidence when carrying out crucial tasks in the educational unit he leads. According to him, these crucial tasks reflect a principal's true ability to carry out their primary duties and functions as a leader in the educational unit.

3. Responsiveness

The level of responsiveness also plays a crucial role in the application of a leadership style. Responsiveness reflects the speed with which a party responds to a problem. Responsiveness also indicates concern for others involved. Moreover, for a leader, responsiveness is a crucial element, given the numerous relationships a leader maintains.

Responsiveness is a crucial attribute in the implementation of service activities. The theory used in this research is responsiveness, as proposed by Adam Smith, which defines responsiveness as the ability to provide what society demands (Nawi, 2017). In other words, in the context of service, responsiveness must also be present to meet community demands, in this case, of course, one form of service is education.

Discussion

Based on research findings, quality-based democratic leadership has become a common style adopted by public junior high school principals in Merauke Regency. This leadership style prioritizes democratic principles in carrying out duties, such as openness, participation, and equitable distribution of tasks in school management.

This research identified six key attributes of quality-based democratic leadership: performance, reliability, responsiveness, transparency, aspirational attitude, and delegative. Interviews with five teachers from various public junior high schools in Merauke showed that all these attributes received generally positive assessments. The principals were assessed as having good performance, being reliable in decision-making, responsive to needs and problems, transparent in conveying information, open to teacher aspirations, and able to delegate tasks appropriately according to their competencies. The leadership implemented by these principals illustrates the complex dynamics of educational service delivery in the region, but overall, they create a conducive work climate and support the improvement of educational quality. However, several challenges and room for improvement remain to make quality-based democratic leadership more effective.

1. Principal Performance, The majority of teachers assessed that the principals have demonstrated good performance, demonstrated discipline, responsibility, and brought about positive change. However, some schools are still less than optimal, especially in non-academic achievements. This performance reflects a democratic leadership style that needs to be maintained and improved.
2. Reliability, The principal is generally considered reliable and professional, although there are cases of policy changes without agreement. Reliability is key to successful democratic leadership.
3. Responsiveness, Most principals are responsive to school needs and open to input. However, some are less responsive, indicating a need to improve their proactive attitude.
4. Transparency, The principal is considered quite transparent and involves teachers in decision-making. However, unilateral decisions are still found, which need to be minimized.
5. Aspirational Attitude, The principal provides space for teachers to express ideas, which often form the basis for policies. This attitude fosters a collaborative atmosphere and encourages active participation.
6. Delegation of Tasks, The principal is able to delegate tasks according to teacher competencies, which increases a sense of responsibility and participation. Teachers hope the principal will continue to innovate and build synergy for educational quality.

Conclusion

The quality-based democratic leadership implemented by several public junior high school principals in Merauke Regency has demonstrated positive impacts. Aspects of work performance, reliability, responsiveness, transparency, openness to aspirations, and delegation of tasks are implemented constructively. The principal's performance directly impacts the performance of teachers and other educational staff, while transparency and aspirations build trust and a positive work attitude. Thus, this leadership style has proven relevant in driving improvements in educational quality. The main supporting factors for quality-based democratic leadership are the commitment and mentality of the leaders. Conversely, inhibiting factors stem from culture, traditions, or customs still steeped in feudal values. Commitment and a positive mentality enable principals to adopt a democratic approach, while an authoritarian culture hinders the practice of open and participatory leadership.

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