

## **Implementation of Inter-School Collaboration as a Strategy in Enhancing School Principal Competencies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A school principal requires adequate competencies to provide effective leadership to manage teaching and learning processes at school. This study examines the effectiveness of an inter-school collaboration on the principals' competencies in a rural area. It is believed that the inter-school collaboration has a significant impact not only on educational but also on social aspects. This study draws insights into ways to improve the competencies of the principal in school management using an action research approach. It evaluated the impact of an intervention by implementing a partnership between schools. One level A accredited school and three level B/C accredited schools in Kebumen, Central Java, Indonesia, were selected to participate in the inter-school collaboration. Within the collaboration programme, the level B/C accredited schools actively seek opportunities to improve their teaching and school management under the guidance of their counterparts from level A accredited schools. Several actions such as benchmark, workshop and training were performed during the intervention phase. The research results indicate that the partnership model optimises the competencies of principals of primary schools in Kebumen Regency, especially their managerial, entrepreneurship and supervision competencies and this has led to improvement in the competencies of teachers and school administrative personnel, as well as that of their educational service.

*Keywords:* Competencies, educational service, inter-school collaboration, school principal

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### **INTRODUCTION**

It has been clearly understood that a school principal is key to the success of an educational unit and plays a crucial role in improving not only the conditions of the school and classroom but also the students'

learning (Bouchamma, Basque, & Marcotte, 2014; Yasin, Mustamin, & Tahir, 2013). As the leader of the school, the principal is expected to organise relevant information, human resources, materials and finances in relation to the school's current position and its intentions for the future. The school principals should ensure the performance of their students through schools' vision, mission and objective (Yasin et al., 2013). It is stated by Chau (2002) that the principal is the person who develops goals and policies, as well as provides suitable administrative and technical support to plan, organise, coordinate and implement those policies in schools. The competencies of the principal will enable the school to articulate and publicise the school's aim to address its short- and long-term targets.

The development of school principals' competencies has become the focus of attention among the governments in several countries. As reported by Yasin et al. (2013), a gradual licensed certificate system has been implemented in many developed countries to develop the competencies of school principals. In Indonesia, the development of the professional competencies of school principals has been a priority as part of the improvement programme of national education quality. According to the Indonesian education standard, a school principal should acquire competencies related to personality, management, entrepreneurship, supervision, and social skills (ACDP Indonesia, 2016). However, it is reported that the principals have not acquired the competencies towards

accomplishing the set goals as clearly indicated in the Indonesian National Education Standard (SNP) (Yasin et al., 2013). The facts on the ground revealed that it is not easy to obtain skilled school principals. A report in 2013 found that, in general, principal's competency is rated as low, especially in the supervision competency dimension, and in using ICT for management, teaching and learning purposes (ACDP Balitbang, 2013). The competency of entrepreneurship was identified as an area for further development, other than the ability to implement innovations in the school. It also worth noting that principals in remote and rural locations and principals of level B and C accredited schools have lower ratings of competency compared to their counterparts.

In improving student learning outcomes, the improvement of principal and supervisor competency should be done in better planned and integrated programmes which involve the cooperation between the local government and key stakeholders. It is believed that principals' competency development programmes will require more than just the provision of more training programmes. The inter-school collaboration model has been initiated by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture as part of a programme to enhance the competencies of school principals. The collaboration consists of two or more schools, some of which are high performing, while others are low performing. The performance of school is represented from its accredited level issued by the Ministry. In this case, the level

A accredited school acted as a partner to one or more level B or C accredited schools that aim(s) to work together to bring about educational improvement.

Networking and collaboration have popular and prominent strategies in education to create a self-improving school system. In general, there are various forms of inter-school collaboration that can be interchangeable to an extent and depth of the collaborative relationship (Atkinson, Springate, Johnson, & Halsey, 2007). However, those different forms refer to some form of schools working together to achieve a common goal. The partnerships involving two or more schools of different phases and types exist for a multitude reasons over different timelines and with varying degrees of success in terms of impact and sustainability (Armstrong, 2015). Inter-school collaboration has existed for increasing educational outcomes, particularly in the areas of pupil attainment, engagement and performance. Collaborative learning has been implemented as a teaching method wherein the students collaborate with students from other schools using various online and offline communication tools (Chapman, Muijs, & MacAllister, 2011; Inagaki, 2007; Little, 1999; Stevens, 2007). This approach leads to the development of a virtual education environment so that teaching and learning can be shared across dispersed sites. It has been found that the academy partnerships have a positive impact on student outcomes.

There were also several reports presenting the impact of the school partnership model on social outcomes. As reported by Duffy and Gallagher (2015), the policy of school collaboration initiated by the Northern Ireland government results not only in promoting cross-sectoral shared learning in core areas of the curriculum but also in improving the community relations between different ethnic and political lines. The school improvement partnership programme conducted in UK was also reported to have resulted in the creation of professional learning of staff at all levels (Chapman et al., 2015).

Overall, while the inter-school collaboration has a positive impact on educational and social outcomes, the evidence is not clear as to how this model can be implemented to optimise the school leadership. This study examined the implementation of inter-school collaboration to enhance the competency of school principals in a rural area in Central Java, Indonesia.

## **METHODS**

An action research was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the inter-school collaboration model in developing principals' competencies (Pathak, 2008). The principals' competence in school management and learning systems were examined. Four school principals were nominated for their position in the accredited schools in Kebumen, Central

Java, Indonesia. They represented a level A accredited school that had been appointed as the model school and three level B/C accredited schools which were volunteered to be the influenced schools.

The action research helps in evolving suitable measures and programmes through a scientific approach by analysing the problems, finding effective solution, and improving the work of the educational institutions. Using the action research approach, it is expected that all person involved in the programmes will collectively work for improving the quality of their decisions and actions. In this research, the researchers serve a key role in collaborating with school personnel in conducting action research to develop system-level interventions. Through integrating the key characteristics of the action research process employed by Cardno and Piggot (1996), this study follows a series of six phases derived from Ho (2002). The six phases are described below, along with a description of each phase.

### **Phase 1: Forming Collaborations with Key Stakeholders**

In this phase, the researcher initiates a process of building collaborations with the principals from all schools participating in this programme. An important part of this first phase was identifying the school that is capable of being the model school and those which have a vested interest in the interventions to be developed. The selected

school principals were then recruited to be equal partners and full participants in the research process. Once the team was formed, the researchers started to facilitate the partnership programme between the schools involved.

### **Phase 2: Problem Identification for Action Research**

In the second phase, the team identifies the specific focus of the problem to be addressed. This involves reviewing the policies and existing theories and practices related to the school management. This process helps the researchers and the school principals participating in this project to integrate the theoretical perspectives with the empirical findings.

### **Phase 3: Data Collection and Analysis**

In this phase, the team collects and analyses data for the purpose of identifying critical variables during the programme. These data help to achieve an understanding of the problem as a guidance to develop specific interventions (actions).

### **Phase 4: Data Synthesis and Generation of Recommendations**

In the fourth phase, the team synthesises the data and findings from the previous phase through a series of discussions between the participating principals. During this phase, specific recommendations for action are generated.

### **Phase 5: Design of Data-Driven Action/ Intervention**

In this phase, the researchers and the school principals engage in decision making based on the recommendations from the previous phase to design specific interventions. Those intervention actions may involve the modification or adaptation of a predesigned intervention to fit the needs of the influenced schools.

### **Phase 6: Evaluation of Interventions**

In the sixth phase, the researchers examine the acceptability and effectiveness of the programme with the principals. A self-assessment questionnaire was developed to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention specifically toward the principals' competencies. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: 1) School management-related competencies, 2) Learning system-related competencies, and 3) Community empowerment-related competencies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Forming Collaboration and Problem Identification**

The case study is a partnership programme between a model school and some influenced schools. The A-level accredited primary school chosen as the model school is a government-owned school located in Kutosari, Kebumen, Central Java, while the other level B and C accredited schools which had agreed to take the role of the influenced schools are three primary schools

located in Wergonayan, Kebumen. Those influenced schools were directed to perform a benchmarking process in order to improve the competencies of the principals in leading the school management activities. The researchers were involved in this project by initiating the inter-school collaboration using the guidance of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture.

In this phase, the researchers conducted a visit to all the schools participating in this programme to discuss the objectives and scope of the inter-school collaboration programme. During the visits, it was found that the principals and staff members in those schools positively responded to the programme. They expected to gain advantages in improving their school performance by joining this programme.

Intensive meetings between the researchers and all the participating principals were carried out to identify the priorities for improvement in each school. The following problems were identified as the most important considerations by the influenced schools:

- (1) Most parents were not actively involved in the schools, including in supporting the teachers and principals to achieve the National Education Standard. Working parents' limited time tended to reduce the engagement of the parents in their children's education.
- (2) The school principals require clear guidance in implementing school-based management as it decentralises authority from the central government to the school level.

(3) The change in the National Curriculum Standard made by the government in 2013 challenges the school leaders to manage the teaching reforms. The challenge is to provide the necessary support for teachers as they follow these new directions.

It is expected that the school principals are capable of managing the available resources to achieve the National Standard of Education. The standard established by the government in 2015 (Government Regulation Number 19 of 2005 on National Education Standards amended by Government Regulation Number 13 of 2015) requires all Indonesian schools to fulfil minimal requirements in learning contents, learning processes, competencies of the graduates, academic and administration staff, school facilities, learning management, financing, and learning assessment standards.

### **Recommendations and Design of Interventions**

The problems identified in the previous phases drive changes in leadership patterns. The leadership does not merely focus on administration but also on students' processes of attitude change to the achievement of key competencies such as spiritual things, social, knowledge, and skills. As identified in the previous phases, the intervention actions of this project were in the form of inter-school collaboration providing opportunities for all the participants in

sharing best practices and benchmarking. It focused on the enhancement of school leaders' competencies in school-related management.

### **Benchmarking**

Benchmarking is the process of analysing and comparing the performance of other organisations considered as the good practices with the aim to improve the current performance of an organisation (Kelly, 2005). During the inter-school collaboration programme, the level B/C accredited schools, as the influenced schools, performed a benchmarking process by studying what the level A accredited school did, as the model school. This comparative benchmarking focused on the analysis and comparison of the critical functions identified as the priorities of improvement in the previous phase. According to Kelly (2005), the process laid in understanding how the critical functions are achieved rather than what is achieved.

The functional processes chosen during the benchmarking and conducted within this partnership programme are listed below.

#### **(1) Facilities management**

It is commonly believed that school facilities can have a profound impact not only on the student outcomes but also on teacher retention. From the visit to the model school, it was reported that that school provides adequate school facilities in supporting the learning process. According to the National Education Standard, it scored 100% in

facility assessment, while the influenced schools scored 80%, 70% and 50%, respectively.

(2) Learning management

The leaders from the influenced schools studied how the model school manages the learning process. A documents review performed during school visit focused on the curriculum, syllabi and lesson plans. Due to the implementation of the 2013 National Curriculum, it was found that the model school encourages parents' involvement in the learning process.

(3) Financial management

In meeting the standard in school's financial management, the model school plans the budget not only with the internal school staff but also with the school committee and parent representatives. The information on education-related expenses which are not covered by the government is shared with all the stakeholders for further action.

### Workshop

In achieving the standard of learning content, especially related to the changes in the curriculum, the researchers initiated a workshop attended by all principals participating in the project. The workshop aimed to develop the lesson plans according to the 2013 National Curriculum. Another workshop on developing budgets and activity plans was also performed in the following session.

### Evaluation of Interventions

#### Observations

A series of observations were performed to evaluate the impact of the inter-school collaboration project. In term of facilities management, the principals of the influenced schools have successfully encouraged the parents, especially for procurement of text books and an LCD projector in classroom. It was found that the capability of principals in managing the learning process had improved, as proven by significant changes in learning approaches and assessment methods implemented in the influenced schools. The teachers implemented scientific approach by encouraging the students to observe, ask, think, try and communicate about the subject matter. The learning assessment was conducted by assessing the learning process, learning results and portfolio through an authenticable assessment which contains clear descriptor.

However, due to different socio-economic conditions, the influenced schools can fully adapted the way the principal of the model school manages the financial aspect. In the model school, most of the parents are white-collar workers, while most parents in the influenced schools are farmers. This affected the parents' involvement in supporting the educational cost incurred.

#### Interview

A set of questionnaires was developed to evaluate how the inter-school collaboration programme influenced the performance of the school members. Table 1 below concludes the results of the interview.

Table 1  
*Questionnaire results on School Management*

Aspects	Not Influential	Less Influential	Hesitant	Influential	Strongly Influential
Influence on Teachers	0	0	5	11	14
Influence on School Principals	0	0	0	4	26
Influence on School Administrative Personnel	0	10	4	11	5
Total	0	10	9	42	29

Table 1 shows questionnaire results on the influence of the optimisation of school principals' competencies through the inter-school collaboration on teachers, school principals, and school administrative personnel about school management. Out of 30 respondents, 87% stated that it is strongly influential to school principals in terms of school management. This is corroborated by the results of research conducted by Bouchamma et al. (2014) that respondents gave greater weight to

the management of education services, followed by human resources, educational environment, and finally, administration. A significant difference was observed between administrative management and the teaching level and school size. The principals whose professional development activities consisted of conventions and seminars also felt a greater sense of personal efficacy on this factor compared to the principals whose professional development was done through mentoring.

Table 2  
*Questionnaire Results on Learning System*

Aspects	Not Influential	Less Influential	Hesitant	Influential	Strongly Influential
Influence on Teachers	0	0	3	20	7
Influence on School Principals	0	0	0	23	7
Influence on School Administrative Personnel	4	10	6	5	5
Total	4	11	11	45	19

Table 2 above lists the optimisation of school administrative personnel's competencies through partnership model on school principals. It demonstrates that 77% of the respondents consider that the optimisation is influential, while 23% consider that it is

strongly influential on the school principals. Hence, inter-school collaboration also can improve the learning system. The results of observations of a principal at another school may be transmitted to the teacher who then followed up in the classroom learning. It also

motivates teachers to actively collaborate between friends, teachers to enhance the learning system. This is in accordance with the findings of research by Burton (2015) that effective teacher collaboration incorporates shared or common goals, teacher efficacy, and positive interdependence of teachers. Other related themes also emerged such as effective collaborative practices that enhance the learning environment. This study also reveals how the role of school leadership is needed to encourage and monitor teacher collaboration in order to increase its effectiveness. The three tables denote that the partnership model gives influence to teachers and school administrative personnel. The improvement of school principals' competencies in school management and learning systems influences teachers and school administrative personnel, and finally enables them to enhance the educational service.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that: (1) the implementation of the inter-school collaboration model in optimising school principals' competencies to improve the educational services of primary schools in Kebumen Regency was conducted through several steps: (a) prior verification to determine feasibility to be pilot project schools and targeted schools, (b) the first regular training meeting (known as Regular Guidance), (c) on-the-job training, (d) the second regular training meeting, (e) in-house training, (f)

mentoring and monitoring/assessment, and (g) dissemination; and (2) the inter-school collaboration model enables optimisation of school principals' competencies to improve the educational services of primary schools in Kebumen Regency. Evidently, from 30 respondents, 87% said it affects the principal in the School of Management and 77% expressed an impact on the selection of principals in the learning system. Thus, the impact most often felt by the principal of the inter-school collaboration model is on school management. In addition, this model exerts influence on teachers and school administrative personnel.

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