


Principal Leadership in Implementing Center of Excellence Programs: A Case Study of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon, Indonesia

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 05/27/2023 Revised: 06/17/2023 Accepted: 06/30/2023</p>	<p>Purpose – This study aims to investigate the role of school principals in implementing the Center of Excellence (CoE) program, aligning with the Ministry of Education and Culture's objectives. Specifically, the research focuses on understanding the principal's leadership style, strategies, and involvement in executing the CoE program at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon.</p>
<p>Keywords: <i>Implementation of the CoE SMK Vocational School, Leadership Style, Principal Role, Principal Strategy</i></p>	<p>Design/methods/approach – Conducted as qualitative field research, this study is situated at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon. Data collection involves observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion to explore the principal's leadership style, strategies, and involvement in CoE program implementation.</p> <p>Findings – The study reveals that the principal at SMK Mekanika effectively implements the CoE program by the Minister of Education and Culture's Decree No. 17/M/2021. This includes the construction of CoE laboratories, productive teacher internships, workshops, post-training monitoring and evaluation, and learning implementation supervised by managerial supervisors. The principal employs a strategy focusing on educator and staff quality enhancement, collaboration with companies, partnerships with universities, and establishing relationships with other CoE-affiliated schools. The principal's leadership role spans educator, manager, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator.</p> <p>Research implications/limitations – The research implies the critical role of school principals in successfully implementing the CoE program. Rules include the specific context of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon, which may limit generalizability.</p> <p>Practical implications – The findings offer valuable insights for school leaders and policymakers involved in CoE program implementation. Understanding effective leadership styles and strategies can guide other educational institutions in achieving successful CoE initiatives.</p> <p>Originality/value – This research contributes to the literature by exploring the principal's role in executing the CoE program, encompassing leadership styles, strategies, and practical involvement. The study's originality lies in its specific focus on a school context and its potential to inform best practices for successful CoE program implementation in similar educational settings.</p> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;">  <p>© 2023 by the authors. It was submitted for possible open-access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> </div>

Introduction

Quality education is expected to develop skills and talents that are thought to help humans navigate an unpredictable world. The overall aim of SMK is to create competent employees who can meet the demanding needs and requirements of the workplace and build their capacity to embrace and adapt to advances in science, technology, and the arts. Meanwhile, the CoE Vocational School program (Center of Excellence) aims to produce graduates who are absorbed into the world of work or become entrepreneurs through an in-depth and comprehensive alignment of vocational education and the world of work. It is also hoped that they will be able to function as a center for quality improvement and reference for other vocational schools ("Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan RI No. 17 Tahun 2021 Tentang Program Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Pusat Keunggulan," 2021). In line with the CoE *program (Center of Excellence)*, one of the stakeholders who play an essential role in determining the success of this program is the school principal. The principal has the highest position in the school and plays a vital role in an educational institution. Whether a school is good or bad depends on how the principal manages the educational institution (Ujang Saefullah, 2012).

The principal is the most knowledgeable person in the educational unit about the status and resources of the school. In principle, the person responsible must provide views and ideas regarding educational institutions' management efforts and strategic decisions. One of the most critical aspects of the principal's behavior and actions towards his subordinates is that he develops into a good and desired leader because a successful leader can create social conditions that allow everyone to maximize their power and creativity (Zakariyah, 1992).

Cirebon Islamic Boarding School Buntet Mechanics Vocational School, especially the Light Vehicle Engineering program, is one of the private vocational schools that received assistance for developing CoE (Center of Excellence) Vocational Schools. Construction of practicum laboratory facilities, procurement of practicum equipment, and learning activities are some of the three actions that must be completed in the program. However, the reality on the ground is that the development of the CoE Vocational School program still faces many obstacles. The main block to date is the need for more exploration from the ministry regarding teachers' and staff's understanding, facilities, and infrastructure for implementing the CoE Vocational School program. This research focuses on the principal's leadership role in implementing the CoE Program.

Methods

In this research, researchers used a qualitative approach. This qualitative research is carried out on-site (field research) or field research. Triangulation (combination) of data is used to ensure that the conclusions of this qualitative study prioritize meaning over generalizations (M. P. K. Sugiyono, 2014). Qualitative research is a research method that aims to gain an understanding of reality through an inductive thinking process. Through qualitative research, you can get to know informants and feel what they experience daily. Researchers used data collection techniques to obtain relevant information, including observation, interviews, and documentation (Prof. D. Sugiyono, 2010). Data analysis techniques use data reduction techniques, data presentation, and conclusions. The researcher's data validity technique uses the triangulation method. Triangulation is described in the context of credibility testing as verifying data from multiple sources in various ways and over several periods. In this research, the data validity technique used is the triangulation method, which includes birth, technical, and time triangulation, all of which are required in the triangulation method. The informants in this research were the school principal, the head of the program, the director of curriculum, and the students (Sugiyono, 2013).

Results

1. Implementation of the Vocational School CoE (Center of Excellence) Program at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon

With the designation of the Buntet Pesantren Mechanics Vocational School in Cirebon as a center of excellence or CoE (Center of Excellence) by the Ministry of Education and Culture through the Directorate of Vocational High Schools in the field of Engineering, it is a matter of pride, especially for the residents of the Buntet Pesantren Mechanics Vocational School, Cirebon. The priority Vocational School CoE (Center of Excellence) program in the engineering sector is a center of excellence development program for Vocational Schools that aims to improve the quality of Vocational School education ("Instruksi Presiden RI Nomor 9 Tahun 2016: Tentang Revitalisasi Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Dalam Rangka Peningkatan Kualitas Dan Daya Saing Sumber Daya Manusia Indonesia," 2016). Buntet Pesantren Cirebon Mechanics Vocational School, especially TKRO skills competency, is one of the schools that received the assistance program. This program includes three (3) activities that must be carried out: construction of a practical laboratory building, procurement of helpful equipment, and learning activities. The committee collaborated with a team of development planning technicians on the experimental laboratory building construction activities carried out in the CoE (Center of Excellence) program at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon.

Based on the results of an interview with the Principal of the Mechanics Vocational School, Buntet Islamic Boarding School, Cirebon, to realize excellence in the automotive sector, several stages have been passed through the Vocational School of Mechanics, Buntet Islamic Boarding School, Cirebon in implementing the CoE (Center of Excellence) Program. First, the socialization of the CoE (Center of Excellence) program was held on October 21, 2020. The socialization was carried out directly by Mr. Dr. Amos P Buranda as CoE (Center Of Excellence) consultant and Mr. Alfian Yogo Pambudi, representative of the Iduka team from the Toyota Auto 2000 Jatiwangi Majalengka workshop. The socialization participants were TKRO engineering teachers from the Buntet Islamic Boarding School Mechanics Vocational School, Cirebon. Also present at this activity was Mr. Eang Umar, S.Sos., MM, as a representative from the Branch Head of the West Java Provincial Education Service, and Mr. Drs. Surya Kammarakeh, M.Pd., MMPd.

Second, the CoE (Center of Excellence) laboratory will be constructed from September 2020 to January 2021. Development funds come from RPS project assistance funds from the APBN. Currently, the construction process is being completed according to established standards. Third, the productive teacher internship was conducted directly at Toyota Auto 2000 Jatiwangi Majalengka from 19 November 2020 to 19 December 2020. Meanwhile, teacher training was carried out in the meeting room of the Buntet Pesantren Mechanics Vocational School, Cirebon, which was held on December 11, 2020. The movement was guided directly by an automotive expert consultant from Auto 2000, Mr. Dudi Media Johan Permana, ST. These internships and workshops are valuable opportunities to gain the best vocational education knowledge and experience according to industry needs. Fourth, post-training monitoring and evaluation for teachers and technicians and implementation of learning were carried out on 18 – 20 December 2020 by Drs. Surya Kammarakeh, M.Pd., MMPd and Mohammad Lutfi Yusuf NZ, MA. Monev aims to discover things that have been done, problems faced in schools in implementing learning, and actions that will be taken after participating in workshops and teacher internships. Apart from that, it is also essential to see the school's readiness to prepare laboratories and supporting equipment to welcome the arrival of practical equipment assistance.

2. The Leadership Role of School Principals in Implementing the CoE Program

The role of the school principal as a leader in implementing the CoE program determines success. According to M. Greetings, the principal's leadership role is divided into seven indicators: 1). The principal as an educator, 2). The principal as manager 3). The principal as administrator 4). The principal as supervisor 5). The principal as leader 6). School

principals as innovators and, 7). The school principal is a motivator (Salam, 2017). Based on the results of research that researchers have conducted using three data collection techniques, including interviews, observation, and documentation, the leadership role of school principals in implementing the CoE Vocational School program is quite good, including the principal's role as an Educator, namely guiding educators and education staff. to work professionally, apart from that, the principal of the mechanics school always sets an excellent example with the aim that his subordinates emulate him. In carrying out his function as an educator, the school principal must have the right strategy to increase the professionalism of the education staff in his school. Creating a conducive school climate, advising the school community, encouraging all education staff, and implementing an exciting learning model (Rusdiana, 2018). As a manager, the principal has several responsibilities: planning, coordinating activities, implementing supervision, evaluating activities, holding meetings, making decisions, organizing the learning process, managing administration, students, personnel, facilities and infrastructure, and school finances. Furthermore, the school principal must be able to empower human resources in the context of teamwork in the school environment (Fitri, 2020). This was done by the principal of the Mechanics Vocational School by giving tasks to educators cooperatively and providing opportunities for educators and education staff to increase teacher professionalism. As a supervisor, the principal must monitor and assess teacher work and inspire the team to improve, increase quality, and build a better learning process (Muflihah, 2018).

The principal of SMK Mekanaika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon provides several coaching to staff, including 1). They are preparing program planning by making proposals with the team. 2) Carry out coaching to improve teacher quality 3). Constantly evaluate each activity for program progress. As a leader, the principal must have a variety of personality abilities, as well as an understanding of educational stakeholders, the school's vision and mission, decision-making abilities, and communication skills to fulfill this role (Fitrah, 2017). The principal of Mechanics Vocational School has a caring, disciplined, initiative, open, and wise personality towards the staff. Apart from that, the Principal of the Mechanics Vocational School understands the CoE program very well, so if human resources need help understanding, he always provides education. Then, when making decisions, the principal always consults with all human resources elements in the school. The aim is to establish good communication and realize the CoE program together. According to Fitrah, in the results of her research, a school principal will be reflected as an innovator, which can be seen from the way he carries out his work rationally, objectively, exemplary, disciplined, and gives birth to new ideas to realize the goals to be achieved in a program (Fitrah, 2017). In this case, after researchers conducted interviews and field observations, the principal of the Mechanics Vocational School, after taking office in 2020, innovated to develop the Mechanics Vocational School by implementing the CoE program from the Ministry of Education and Culture. Apart from that, the principal of the Mechanics Vocational School, after developing the CoE program, innovated again with the staff and teachers to build it into a PK Vocational School. As a motivator, this means that the principal provides motivation and encouragement to educators, educational staff, students, and even student parents to achieve school goals (Hardiansyah & Aryani, 2016). Based on the reality in the field, during interviews and observations with the head of the CoE program, the school principal always motivates the team and educators to carry out their duties optimally. Apart from that, the school principal always creates a conducive working atmosphere, such as meetings. Then, the school principal has a disciplinary attitude towards educators, education staff, and students. Apart from that, the school principal always gives rewards as appreciation and motivates others to have high enthusiasm.

3. *Principal Leadership Strategy in Implementing the CoE Vocational School Program*

Strategy is an approach process related to planning, organizing, and implementing within a certain period to realize a goal effectively (Kusen et al., 2019). The CoE Vocational School Program aims to develop Vocational Schools with special skills programs to improve quality and performance, which is supported by partnerships and alignment with the Industrial

World of Work (IDUKA), as well as becoming a pilot Vocational School and center for improving the quality and performance of other Vocational Schools. The Mechanics Vocational School principal implemented several strategies based on the field research results.

They were the first to develop the quality of educators and education personnel—school principals to build elements of educators and educational staff. The principal provides direction and movement guidance to all levels of educators and academic staff at the Mechanics Vocational School. According to Israpil, there are two indicators that teaching staff can be said to have good quality: qualifications and certification (Israpil, 2018). Based on the stuff, the Buntet Pesantren Cirebon Mechanics Vocational School teacher has a diploma and expertise certificate. Almost all educators are Bachelor's degree graduates by National Education Minister Regulation NO. 16 of 2007, which states that SMA/SMK educators must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree. Then, in certification, based on the results of the documentation that researchers have found, the educators at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon have been professionally certified.

Second, after developing the quality of educators and educational staff, the strategy developed by the Principal of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon was to build collaboration with external parties (outside the school), one of which was the company. The company that collaborates with SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon is the company PT. Toyota Auto 2000. This collaboration aims to provide guidance and development of vocational secondary education, including Designing Toyota-assisted classes, Implementing industrial work practices (Prakerind), Teams of examiners or assessors for Competency Tests (UJK) or Vocational Practice Exams (UPK), Instructors from the World of Work Industry (IDUKA), Internships for Teachers and students in the World of Work Industry (IDUKA), Teacher training by the World of Work Industry (IDUKA), Recruitment or distribution of graduates for students who excel. With the MOU or collaboration, the agreement between the two parties has official and definite status so that it has binding force, and no party will feel at a loss financially or non-financially.

Third, regional university collaboration. To improve the quality and service of students in the field of education, the CoE Vocational School program, in particular, has a companion from higher education who acts as a companion for the CoE program. Apart from that, universities exchange experiences, especially in partnering with industry, to encourage the emergence of new potential between universities, vocational schools, and industry. The priority program that the Principal of the Buntet Pesantren Mekanika Vocational School hopes for in Cirebon is curriculum alignment and the involvement of mentors from higher education as partners in research or research activities, development, and mentoring of students in the CoE program learning so that new learning innovations emerge. So, with this collaboration, the Principal can develop the CoE program to be more relevant to answer the demands of the times. Fourth, to create the CoE program, school principals establish communication with schools that have the CoE program to improve competence. Apart from that, collaboration can promote and market vocational school products.

Discussion

This research focuses on the leadership role of school principals in implementing the CoE Vocational School Program at the Buntet Pesantren Mechanics Vocational School in Cirebon, highlighting the importance of leadership in vocational education by national policy (Instruction of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 9 of 2016). In this context, school principals act as administrators, innovators, and educational motivators. This reflects the findings of Özgenel, M., Aksu, T. (Özgenel & Aksu, 2020), which emphasize the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and the health of educational organizations. This study also aligns with the findings of Navaridas-Nalda, F. et al. (Navaridas-Nalda et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of principals' perceptions of digital resources in educational transformation. This conclusion underscores the role of the principal as a catalyst in implementing effective educational programs.

The main findings show the effectiveness of the principal in implementing the CoE Vocational School Program at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon, reflecting a multifaceted leadership role (Faridah et al., 2022). The school principal successfully integrated various aspects of the program, from outreach to developing educational infrastructure. This is in line with research by Al-Mughyirah, S. et al. (Al-Mughyirah et al., 2023), which highlights the role of principals in the education of gifted students. Although the contexts are different, both studies demonstrate the importance of leadership that is adaptive and responsive to educational needs. These findings emphasize that effective leadership is the key to successful educational program implementation.

The results of this research align with previous studies on leadership in education, showing that effective leadership can improve the performance of educational organizations (Özgenel & Aksu, 2020) (Özgenel, M. et al., 2022). The administration of the principal at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon showed a significant influence on program implementation, supporting the findings of Özgenel, M. et al. (Özgenel et al., 2022). However, there is a contrast with the results of Al-Mughyirah, S. et al. (Al-Mughyirah et al., 2023), which highlights the leadership role of female principals in the education of gifted students. These differences suggest that schools' context and specific needs influence leadership approaches. Therefore, this research adds new insights into how leadership can be adapted to different educational contexts.

The principal at SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon has demonstrated effective leadership in various aspects. As educators, they have ensured that education personnel and staff develop the professionalism necessary for the program's success (Rusdiana, 2018). As managers, they have coordinated resources and activities efficiently, according to the responsibilities explained by Fitri (Fitri, 2020). Administrators ensure the smooth running of school administration, which is vital to the program's success. The focus on these aspects reflects a deep understanding of the specific needs of vocational education.

In their role as supervisors, principals have effectively monitored and assessed teacher performance, inspiring improvement in the quality of learning (Muflihini, 2018). As a leader, the principal has demonstrated the ability to communicate with educational stakeholders, make wise decisions, and develop the school's vision and mission (Fitrah, 2017). This capability is essential to ensure schools keep up with current standards and adapt to future changes. The role of school principals as innovators has been reflected in the development and implementation of the CoE program, demonstrating their ability to present new ideas relevant to the demands of modern education.

As motivators, school principals play a crucial role in encouraging and inspiring educators and education staff (Hardiansyah & Aryani, 2016). They have created a conducive working atmosphere, given awards as a form of appreciation, and instilled high morale among staff. This approach has produced positive results in implementing the CoE program, ensuring all team members are actively involved and enthusiastic in achieving common goals. This shows that the principal understands the importance of morals and motivation in realizing a compelling educational vision.

Conclusion

The principal of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon, in implementing the SMK CoE program, has complied with the procedures in the Minister of Education and Culture's decision number 17/M/2021. The implementation that has been carried out by the principal of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon is to socialize the CoE program on October 21, 2020, build a CoE laboratory from September 2020-January 2021, carry out productive teacher internships and teacher workshops on November 19, 2020 - December 19, 2020 and December 11, 2020. The school principal also carried out post-training monitoring and evaluation for teachers and technicians and implemented learning, which Drs carried out on 18 - 20 December 2020. Surya Kammarakeh, M.Pd., MMPd as managerial supervisor of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon and Mohammad Lutfi Yusuf NZ, MA as principal of SMK Mekanika Buntet Pesantren Cirebon. The principal's leadership role in implementing the CoE

program involves implementing several functions: As an educator and a manager. As a supervisor, as a leader, as an innovator, as a motivator. The strategy developed by the principal in implementing the CoE program at SMK (Mekanika et al. 1). Producing the quality of educators and education personnel 2). Building cooperation with companies 3). Collaboration with universities 4). Establish relationships with schools with CoE.

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