


Situational Leadership in Special Education During COVID-19: A Study of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 05/27/2022 Revised: 06/17/2023 Accepted: 07/01/2024</p> <p>Keywords: COVID-19, Indonesia, Remote Learning, Situational Leadership, Special Education</p>	<p>Purpose – This research aimed to explore the application of situational leadership by the Headmaster of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in managing teaching and learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Design/methods/approach – The study employed a qualitative descriptive methodology. Data was collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis from a selected group of school staff.</p> <p>Findings – The study revealed that the school's primary response consisted of curriculum adaptation, strategic use of technology, financial refocusing, and maintaining the mental wellness of the school community. Challenges such as remote communication difficulties, decreased physical and psychological health, sudden policy changes and reduced character education were identified. Strategies were utilized to tackle these issues, such as improved communication, enhanced character education, parental involvement, and using appropriate learning media.</p> <p>Research implications/limitations – The study underscores the significant role of situational leadership in managing crises in the educational sector. Further research is needed to substantiate these findings and delve deeper into the role of situational leadership during crises.</p> <p>Practical implications – The findings provide an understanding of how schools can adapt during crises, pointing towards strategic leadership as a crucial factor in maintaining the continuity of education. Schools facing similar challenges can take cues from the strategies employed by SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta.</p> <p>Originality/value – This study contributes uniquely by providing an in-depth exploration of the use of situational leadership in an educational setting during a global health crisis. It showcases the value of strategic leadership in ensuring effective teaching and learning despite unprecedented challenges.</p> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center; margin-top: 10px;">  <p>© 2024 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>

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, since its emergence in late 2019, has been a global crisis affecting nearly all aspects of human life, including economic, political, and educational systems (Schleicher, 2018). The swift and unrelenting virus spread required governments worldwide, including Indonesia, to implement strategies to minimize direct interactions among people (Hastuti & Djanah, 2020). One of the significant areas impacted was the education sector, which underwent a considerable shift in its operational patterns. Educational institutions, specifically schools, were compelled to redesign their teaching-learning processes to adapt to the new reality. The need for situation-specific leadership in schools, particularly for children with special needs, emerged as a critical factor for ensuring effective learning during this unprecedented crisis.

Previous research has highlighted the significance of situational leadership in various organizational contexts, including job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee performance (Pasaribu et al., 2022). Studies have also noted situational leadership's emergence and positive impact in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its ability to influence work motivation and job satisfaction (Aslam et al., 2022). Additionally, the effects of situational leadership on work satisfaction and employment performance have been studied in depth (Nor et al., 2023). In education, the influence of the school headmaster's situational leadership on teachers' performance has been reported (Ardianto et al., 2022). However, few studies have addressed the implementation and outcomes of situational leadership in special needs schools during a pandemic (Pratiwi et al., 2022).

Research examining the relevance of situational leadership in educational settings has been comprehensive. The role of situational leadership in maintaining teachers' achievement motivation in high schools was explored by Zohair and Shooroq (2021), underscoring the importance of contextual leadership in an educational environment. In a more specific context, Bedford and Gehlert (2013) applied situational leadership to clinical supervision, demonstrating its effectiveness in managing and guiding teams in clinical settings. Additionally, Rabarison et al. (2013) successfully applied situational leadership to the national voluntary public health accreditation process, emphasizing its versatility and effectiveness across different professional landscapes.

The scope of situational leadership in handling crises has also been emphasized in recent research. Nonailada and Martin (2022) effectively demonstrated the application of situational leadership in managing faculty and staff redeployment during emergency conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Nigam et al. (2023) detailed how situational leadership was instrumental in organizing a transboundary crisis during the pandemic in the context of a hospital. These studies further illustrate the applicability of situational leadership in situations, including those engendered by a health pandemic.

On a more nuanced note, situational leadership has been integrated with other theories and models to maximize its effectiveness. Widyadharmas et al. (2020) combined situational leadership with genetic intelligence, improving communication patterns between superiors and subordinates. Furthermore, situational leadership has been associated with financial sustainability in project management (Princes & Said, 2022) and has been adapted into the Person-Centred Situational Leadership Framework to enhance person-centered care within nursing homes (Lynch et al., 2018). These studies highlight situational leadership's adaptability and emphasize its significant contribution across various fields.

The previous work, although insightful, needs to thoroughly explore the unique challenges and adaptations required in special needs education, especially during a pandemic. These schools, often called Exceptional Schools (Sekolah et al. or SLB in Indonesia), cater to children with unique learning needs requiring specific treatments and educational methods (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). The limited focus on this context, particularly the role of situational leadership in managing teaching-learning activities during an unpredictable crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, presents a significant gap in current knowledge.

This study focuses on understanding the Headmaster's efforts and situational leadership implementation in conducting teaching and learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic at SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta, an Exceptional School in Indonesia. We seek to delve deeper into the leadership strategies and approaches the Headmaster took in adapting to the rapidly evolving pandemic situation and ensuring effective learning. The results of this study will shed light on the impact of situational leadership in special needs education during a global health crisis and contribute valuable insights to the field.

Methods

The study implemented a qualitative descriptive research design to systematically investigate the situational leadership of school principals during teaching and learning activities at SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Indra et al., 2022). Specific procedures were followed to gather data, relying on interview techniques, direct observations, and document analysis. Eight informants were purposively selected for the study, divided into three categories: a key informant from the curriculum staff, primary informants that included the school principal, a second-grade student, a second-grade teacher, and the head of the administrative department, and supporting informants that involved a physical education teacher, a deputy principal in charge of the curriculum, a history teacher, and a member of the school committee. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, firsthand observations, and the examination of relevant documents, then analyzed using a method that involved transcription, coding, grouping, comparing, contrasting, and interpreting. Transcription ensured all verbal and non-verbal information was converted into written form, coding assigned symbols or codes to data sections, grouping categorized data based on common attributes, comparing and contrasting identified similarities and differences within the data, and interpretation helped comprehend the meaning behind the data. The study's reliability and validity were ensured through data triangulation, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data, data displaying organized data to facilitate conclusion drawing, and conclusion drawing or confirmation of interpreted data patterns to formulate decisions based on the findings, ensuring the robustness of the study's conclusions (Mezmir, 2020).

Results

1. Efforts Made by the Principal of State Special School 2 Yogyakarta in Implementing Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the principal of State Special School 2 Yogyakarta had to make various adjustments in terms of educational management. This includes aspects such as the management of teaching staff, educational staff, and students, curriculum management, infrastructure management, and financial management. They faced new challenges, such as conducting distance learning, which requires understanding technology and different learning models. However, its implementation had many obstacles, including resistance from students who preferred face-to-face learning methods. (TZ/8/14.02.22)

"When the pandemic started, learning was revised to be conducted through distance learning, but the teachers still treated it as if it was face-to-face learning, giving all students homework. ... Some students refuse to submit their assignments, so they want it to be like it was during face-to-face classes. There are assignments. They do it and submit it immediately."

In response to these challenges, the principal decided to change the curriculum, creating what is known as an "emergency curriculum." This curriculum considers the limitations of direct interaction and aims to maintain the educational process. The learning content was reduced, and students' learning time was limited to only two hours per day, with

teachers instructed not to give excessive homework. The main goal was to create a learning environment that could adapt to the pandemic and students' conditions.

The principal collaborated with the Deputy Principal for the curriculum in formulating this curriculum. While the curriculum of State Special School 2 Yogyakarta still followed the guidelines from the Ministry of Education, they had to consider the conditions and abilities of each student. Creativity and innovation were also key in implementing this curriculum, including using learning management systems like Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom. (NH/1/01.03.22)

"So, the curriculum in our school is based on the student's abilities. There are reference curriculums, but we adjust them so that they can be modified. The curriculum in our school can be modified, especially for students with intellectual disabilities."

Some changes in this "emergency curriculum" include more flexible learning hours, thematic learning content adapted to the pandemic, and canceling competitions and events to minimize the risk of virus transmission. Instead, the funds allocated for these activities were redirected to COVID-19 response efforts. (TZ/13/14.02.22)

"The learning content is made thematic. Because now it is COVID time, the themes are related to COVID. Parents can understand it too. It is made adaptive to the current situation. For example, student A in grade 3 has a thematic subject with the teacher today. That is it. There should be no other subjects."

The minimum passing criteria (KKM) for children with intellectual disabilities were also adjusted according to the students' conditions. Though different from regular schools, this adaptation was essential in helping students adapt and develop amid these challenging circumstances. (NH/2/01.01.22) "If a child could not socialize before coming here and now they can, that is already an achievement for us."

The challenges of distance learning (PJJ) and Limited Face-to-Face Education (PTMT) during the COVID-19 pandemic demanded an improvement in the competencies of teaching and educational staff at State Special School 2 Yogyakarta. The principal focused on developing teachers' technological skills as the main learning medium. Workshops and training provided by the education office were among the methods to enhance these abilities. (TZ/5/14.02.22) "So, during PJJ, we need to prepare what is necessary. Teachers must be tech-savvy; what used to be relaxed learning before, now they must learn it seriously and be capable."

In practice, the learning media used by teachers varied, from WhatsApp groups and blogs to instructional videos. However, these required technological proficiency that not all teachers might possess, making creativity and innovation crucial. If students faced difficulties accessing online materials, the school provided alternatives, such as printed materials that parents could collect or send via courier. (NH/7/01.03.22)

"We communicate with the parents. I offer solutions. Suppose they cannot do a video call. In that case, there may be issues with internet data packages, and we are aware of the parents' economic conditions, so we provide offline materials for them to do at home."

The principal also carried out supervisory duties through daily communication via telephone, ensuring the effectiveness of the teaching and educational staff's performance. Additionally, the principal encouraged teachers' innovation and creativity in creating learning media, such as making instructional videos. (TZ/13/14.02.22)

"To recover mentally for all of us, teachers, the Principal, students, parents, among others. To enhance our devotion to Allah. During this pandemic, it is crucial. It must be instilled; we must maintain hope. We must remain confident, knowing that this is fate and destiny. So, we conduct virtual religious studies."

During distance learning, students had to take turns coming to school, resulting in classes being attended by only two or three students per day. This highlighted the importance of parental involvement and participation in supporting their children's learning at home. In this context, the principal established a good relationship with the school committee as representatives of the student's parents.

Addressing mental health issues became another challenge during the pandemic. To address this, the principal organized virtual religious studies to maintain the school community's mental balance. Two-way communication between the principal and the committee was also crucial in conveying information related to learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. (TZ/13/14.02.22)

"Almost seventy percent of our financial management was reallocated to COVID-related matters. So, many of our activities were canceled or redirected to COVID, such as procuring hand sanitizers, masks, PPE, disinfectants, medications, vitamins, temperature checks, and handwashing facilities."

The principal of State Special School 2 Yogyakarta has undertaken coherent efforts in implementing learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Infrastructure and financial management are two main challenges in these efforts. In a continuously changing and challenging situation, the principal carries a dual responsibility – ensuring the smooth continuation of education while safeguarding the school community's health. To anticipate the spread of the coronavirus in the school, various facilities such as handwashing stations, hand sanitizers, disinfectant sprays, and other preventive measures have been put in place. All of these steps require funding, and as a result, some school funds have been allocated for COVID-19 prevention purposes based on the principal's instructions.

Moreover, the Administrative Division of State Special School 2 Yogyakarta faced financial challenges during the pandemic. It is stated that the main problem lies in reallocating the budget. However, this issue differs from that private schools face, which also needs help with paying teachers' honorariums, irregular tuition payments, and the procurement of teaching facilities. Whether it is a public or private school, the steps remain the same: consistent budget planning, prioritizing budget usage, and implementing transparency and accountability in educational management.

2. The Basis of Implementing the Situational Leadership of the School Principal in Teaching and Learning Activities at Special Needs School 2 Yogyakarta during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The implementation of situational leadership by the School Principal at Special Needs School 2 Yogyakarta during the COVID-19 pandemic in teaching and learning activities (TLA) is underpinned by external and internal factors.

External factors involve the execution of leadership and managerial functions by the School Principal despite facing the pandemic crisis. Despite the challenging conditions, the School Principal adapted and endeavored to continue the TLA process (TZ/4/14.02.22). "We all feel it, the very challenging situation. We had to adapt suddenly. We were unprepared, but the situation demanded it, so we had to remain adaptive to the best of our abilities."

According to situational leadership theory, applying this leadership style is influenced by the leader, the followers, and the situation. In this context, the School Principal adjusted his approach based on the conditions of students with special needs who still required education during the pandemic. Throughout this period, the School Principal ensured that learning continued following the Ministry of Education's instructions, prioritizing health while providing education continued (TZ/5/14.02.22). "We have an obligation, following the guidance from the Ministry of Education and Ristek [Research and Technology] Minister Nadim, education during the pandemic must continue. Health is our priority, but we must not lose sight of education."

Internal factors play a role in implementing situational leadership by the School Principal. Utilizing previous leadership approaches during the pandemic would add complexity to the learning process and hinder the School Principal's performance (TZ/8/14.02.22). "Yes, that is right. It is about adapting to the situation. I would be stressed if we used the leadership style from before during COVID. Everything changed, and we have to adjust to the pandemic situation."

The School Principal, known for being creative, faces significant challenges and potential stress. However, research indicates that those who can adapt and manage situations

well can transform anxiety into eustress, becoming more creative and productive (Upadyaya et al., 2021).

Experience is also crucial in implementing situational leadership, particularly in educating students with special needs. With adequate knowledge and expertise, the school could conduct TLA, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the School Principal of Special Needs School 2 Yogyakarta has extensive experience adapting teaching models during the pandemic, supported by their experience teaching in Special Needs Schools (TZ/26/14.02.22). "... It is not easy; it requires a lot of experience, time, and events. That is what strengthens our mindset."

3. Challenges in Implementing Situational Leadership in Teaching and Learning Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unique challenges in implementing teaching and learning activities, especially at Special Needs School 2 Yogyakarta. Remote communication becomes the main obstacle to the educational process (TZ/24/14.02.22). "... Communication, some children have motoric obstacles, intellectual limitations and lack of self-care."

These difficulties are acknowledged by various parties, including the School Principal, administrative staff, classroom teachers, and curriculum personnel. The issue continues with limited access to media and technology and the additional burden of internet data costs (SJ/5/24.02.22).

"Regarding the interaction or communication with teachers, this also includes handling administrative personnel matters. For instance, teachers working from home need signatures, and we need to have discussions. We face difficulties and must wait until the next day to meet."

Moreover, the majority of students at Special Needs School 2 Yogyakarta are children with intellectual disabilities, and they struggle to comprehend the pandemic situation. In response, the School Principal emphasizes the role of teachers, parents, and media in helping students understand the dangers of COVID-19 (TZ/4/14.02.22).

"Their comprehension abilities might be challenging, but with the assistance of parents and various media at home, such as television and newspapers, teachers frequently discuss COVID-19 so that the children can hopefully understand that COVID-19 is invisible. It would be easier if red or green, but this is COVID, and we can only illustrate it with images."

Nevertheless, students remain enthusiastic about participating in the learning process. One student, TBR, revealed that the pandemic situation did not dampen her enthusiasm for learning, although she missed face-to-face interactions with friends and teachers (TBR/6/14.02.22).

"Yes, it is exciting, just like usual. Still enthusiastic about learning and exercising and happy to meet friends. It is just that I miss meeting my friends and my teachers directly. For example, I once hugged my teacher and said, 'Teacher, let us meet in person.'"

Overall, despite the various challenges posed by the pandemic during the learning process, it also creates opportunities for students to participate in virtual learning. This offers unique possibilities for children with special needs to grow and build their confidence in using technology.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing situational leadership in teaching and learning activities encountered several obstacles. The decline in the physical and mental health of the school community became a significant challenge. The School Principal had to pay attention to the health conditions of all parties involved, especially mental health, due to the drastic changes in daily activities, which disrupted the psychological stability of students, teachers, parents, and even the School Principal himself (TZ/6/14.02.22). In this regard, students also experienced psychological disturbances and mood swings, posing unique challenges in home-based learning (NW/6/02.03.22).

"To be honest, it is challenging. Because my child has Down syndrome, his mood fluctuates. During the pandemic, he experienced setbacks in his psychology. His

psychology was disturbed, so he became emotional, frequently this and that. He even gets emotional when not studying; bathing, which used to be easy for daily activities or independence, has become difficult. He gets angry over anything, let alone when it comes to learning."

Another challenge was the sudden policy changes, which the administrative staff felt while collaborating with the School Principal (SJ/7/24.02.22).

"There was a time when the School Principal suddenly instructed the implementation of certain activities. However, it had yet to be accounted for in the budget plan, so we had to adjust it. For example, the School Operational Fund (BOS) budget was not feasible during the pandemic. We had to change it to meet the needs."

The sudden policy changes required careful consideration from the School Principal, especially in managing and leading during the pandemic. Students also faced difficulties focusing on their learning at home, primarily because they had to assist their parents (AT/12/14.02.22).

"Yes, it is exciting, just like usual. Still enthusiastic about learning and exercising and happy to meet friends. It is just that I miss meeting my friends and my teachers directly. For example, I hugged my teacher and said, 'Teacher, let us meet in person. Teacher: "Her mother sells things, so she is asked to help."

Parents play a crucial role in maintaining their children's emotions and enthusiasm during distance learning. Character education among students also experienced a decline due to reduced interactions among members of the school community. Therefore, the School Principal, teachers, and parents need to collaborate to re-establish the values of character education as before the pandemic.

The application of situational leadership by the School Principal of Special Needs School 2 during the COVID-19 pandemic has proven effective despite encountering several obstacles. This research has a broader scope compared to previous studies related to this theme, with a focus on the leadership of the School Principal in teaching and learning activities for children with special needs during the pandemic.

Discussion

The objective of the current research was to investigate the application of situational leadership by the headmaster of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta in response to the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of special needs education. This investigation was undertaken in light of existing literature which has demonstrated the pivotal role of situational leadership in organizational citizenship behavior, employee performance, work motivation, and job satisfaction (Aslam et al., 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2022), and its effectiveness in managing faculty and staff redeployment during emergency conditions (Nonailada & Martin, 2022). Our research findings indicate the strategic measures the headmaster of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta took to navigate the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emphasizing adaptive curriculum management, digital literacy among educators, effective use of online learning platforms, and the mental well-being of the school community, the headmaster demonstrated an adept use of situational leadership. Moreover, an explicit situational leadership approach was observed where the headmaster responded to external and internal factors, such as conforming to national directives, while valuing the school's creativity, experience, and skills (Saputro & Darim, 2022).

When compared to previous studies, our results demonstrate the adaptive use of situational leadership in a novel context, the educational sector during the pandemic, which further corroborates the broader applicability of this leadership style (Aslam et al., 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2022). Additionally, the findings echo the role of situational leadership in managing challenges during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Nonailada & Martin, 2022). The identified barriers, including communication difficulties, lack of understanding of the pandemic among special needs students, deterioration of physical and mental health, and issues with focus and character education, highlight the complexities associated with implementing situational leadership during a crisis (Jamil et al., 2021). The

headmaster's responses to these challenges—strengthening effective communication, emphasizing character education, enhancing the role of educators and parents, using appropriate learning methods, and paying attention to the mental and physical health of the school community—demonstrate the flexible and adaptive nature of situational leadership in this unique context (Carvalho et al., 2021).

The findings of this study are significant as they highlight the role of situational leadership in ensuring the continuity of education and the well-being of students and staff during an unprecedented crisis. Further, these findings suggest that situational leadership may be particularly effective in special needs education, where flexibility and adaptability are crucial (Fahmi, 2020). However, these results should be interpreted cautiously due to the study's specific context and sample size. These findings carry implications for educational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners. The demonstrated success of situational leadership in navigating the teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic at SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta suggests that this leadership style can be effectively employed in other educational settings. Moreover, it highlights the importance of preparing educational leaders for crises by equipping them with the necessary skills to adapt their leadership style to the situation (Yulianti & Mukminin, 2021). Future research may extend this investigation to other settings to validate the findings and further explore the applicability of situational leadership in the context of education during a crisis.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to probe the efforts and strategies of the Headmaster of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta in conducting teaching and learning activities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, explicitly focusing on applying situational leadership. The results demonstrate the Headmaster's innovative approach to managing the curriculum, staff, and students through practical technology usage, curriculum adaptations, and building synergy with all stakeholders. Despite the encountered limitations such as distance communication barriers, the inability of special needs students to comprehend the pandemic situation, declining physical and mental health, abrupt policy changes, and decreased character education, the Headmaster exhibited resilient leadership by proposing solutions to these challenges, thus highlighting the importance and effectiveness of situational leadership. The findings carry significant implications for educational leaders, policymakers, and practitioners. The demonstrated success of situational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic at SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta suggests that this leadership style could be beneficially employed in other educational settings, accentuating the necessity of preparing educational leaders with skills to adapt their leadership style in response to different situations. Despite the study's specific geographical and situational context, it recommends extending this research to other settings and various types of crises, which could aid in validating these findings and further exploring the applicability of situational leadership in diverse educational contexts during an emergency.

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