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Participative Leadership and Work Culture in Resource-Constrained Vocational High Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the participative leadership of school principals in building organizational work culture at a vocational high school in a peripheral region. The research provides empirical contributions by revealing concrete forms of participative leadership implementation in school contexts and its impact on organizational work culture dynamics. A qualitative descriptive approach with case study design was employed, involving in-depth interviews with the school principal, teachers, and educational staff at SMKN 1 Agribisnis dan Agroteknologi Serui, Yapen Islands Regency, Papua. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentary studies. Data validity was established through source and method triangulation as well as peer discussion. The interactive model of data analysis was applied, comprising data reduction, data display, and verification. The findings indicate that the school principal's participative leadership was manifested through school member involvement in program planning, decision-making, and school activity evaluation. This leadership implementation contributed to increased work motivation, sense of ownership toward the school, and the creation of a collaborative work climate. However, differences in readiness levels and participation among school members posed challenges to implementation. These findings affirm that the effectiveness of school principals' participative leadership requires strengthened communication and continuous development to be optimally implemented. The study extends participative leadership theory by demonstrating its viability in resource-constrained vocational education settings.

Keywords: *Collaborative Work Climate, Organizational Work Culture, Participative Leadership, School Principal, Vocational Education*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational work culture represents a set of values, beliefs, and practices that are collectively understood and implemented by organizational members in carrying out their roles and responsibilities (Mochklas, 2022; Schein & Schein, 2016). Work culture functions as a behavioral framework that guides organizational members to act consistently, with discipline, and in alignment with the organization's vision and objectives (Fernandes et al., 2023; Wicaksono et al., 2025). In this context, organizational sustainability and effectiveness are not solely determined by strategy and resource availability but are significantly influenced by the quality of the work culture being developed. A strong work culture can create cohesion, enhance efficiency, and minimize internal conflicts, whereas a weak work culture has the potential to reduce work motivation and hinder the achievement of organizational goals (Mehendale & Hande, 2025).

Within the educational context, organizational work culture in schools plays a strategic role because schools function not only as institutions for knowledge transfer, but also as spaces for character formation and the development of student work ethic (Chanthoun, 2024). Therefore, schools are required to maintain a professional, disciplined, and collaborative work culture in order to create a conducive academic climate. A positive school work culture serves as an essential foundation for improving the quality of educational services and supporting the achievement of national educational standards (Putri et al., 2025).

One key factor influencing the formation of organizational work culture in schools is the leadership of the school principal. Leadership in the educational context is understood not merely as structural authority, but as the ability of the school principal to influence, direct, and motivate all school members to work synergistically (Sari et al., 2025). The school principal plays a strategic role in determining communication patterns, decision-making mechanisms, and the working climate that develops within the school environment (Mehmood et al., 2023; Mousena & Raptis, 2021). Various leadership models have been applied in educational organizations, including transformational, transactional, authoritarian, democratic, and participative leadership, each possessing distinct characteristics and implications for organizational work culture (Harianto et al., 2025).

Among these various models, participative leadership is considered relevant to the demands of modern school management, which emphasizes collaboration and the involvement of school members. A number of studies have demonstrated that participative leadership is capable of creating a positive work community and enhancing teacher and staff performance through active involvement in planning and decision-making processes (Asyibli et al., 2025; Yantoni, 2020). Lisdawati and Faizah (2025) and Soewondo et al. (2023) also affirmed that the implementation of participative leadership by school principals has an impact on increasing motivation and sense of ownership among school members. Theoretically, Northouse (2021)

explained that participative leadership is characterized by subordinate involvement in decision-making, two-way communication, openness and transparency, empowerment, as well as strengthened commitment and job satisfaction, characteristics that hold strong potential in shaping organizational work culture.

Nevertheless, research on participative leadership in school settings has generally focused on its influence on teacher performance in mainstream schools or urban areas. These studies tend to emphasize output achievements such as productivity increases or work results, without examining in depth the process of internalizing work culture values formed through participative leadership. Furthermore, studies on participative leadership in the context of vocational education, particularly at Vocational High Schools (SMK) in peripheral regions with limited infrastructure and geographical challenges, remain relatively scarce.

Stemming from this research gap, this study takes as its locus SMK Negeri 1 Agribisnis dan Agroteknologi Serui, Yapen Islands Regency, Papua, a vocational education school located in a peripheral region with distinctive geographical conditions, resource limitations, and a C accreditation status. The uniqueness of this context provides a different analytical space, particularly in understanding how the school principal's participative leadership is implemented to build organizational work culture amidst existing constraints. This research examines not only the final outcomes of leadership, but places greater emphasis on the process of forming and strengthening work culture through participative involvement of school members. Thus, this study becomes important and relevant because it offers a new perspective on the effectiveness of school principals' participative leadership in building organizational work culture in the context of vocational high schools in the island regions of Papua.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design at SMK Negeri 1 Agribisnis dan Agroteknologi Serui. The qualitative method serves as a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observable behaviors. Creswell and Creswell (2022) stated that qualitative research aims to explore phenomena in natural and complex situations, where the variables involved are difficult to measure quantitatively. This research does not attempt to generalize findings, but rather seeks to obtain in-depth understanding of situations, behaviors, and perspectives from participants. The descriptive approach was used to provide a systematic and accurate description of how participative leadership builds organizational work culture. According to Sugiyono (2022), this approach is very useful in providing a clearer understanding of the actual conditions of a phenomenon or problem without conducting interventions that alter those conditions. This approach is highly suitable for examining the participative leadership of school principals in building

organizational work culture in the context of a vocational school located in a peripheral region with distinctive geographical conditions and resource limitations.

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the validity of findings. Primary data sources included in-depth interviews with ten informants consisting of the school principal, vice principals, teachers, and educational staff. Observations were conducted to examine leadership practices and organizational work culture in authentic school contexts. Documentary analysis was also performed on relevant school documents, including policy documents, meeting minutes, work programs, and other administrative records that reflected the implementation of participative leadership and organizational work culture. The data analysis process followed the interactive model, which consists of three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data from field notes and transcripts. Data display involved organizing and assembling information in a structured manner through matrices, charts, or narrative descriptions that allowed for systematic data examination. The final stage involved interpreting the displayed data to identify patterns, themes, relationships, and meanings that emerged from the data, with conclusions continuously verified throughout the research process by returning to field notes, cross-checking with participants, and examining consistency across different data sources.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several criteria were applied, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources and methods, and member checking to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the research context and processes, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings to other settings. Dependability was maintained through careful documentation of research procedures and decision-making processes. Confirmability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail and reflexive practice throughout the research process, acknowledging the researcher's potential biases and their influence on data collection and interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on data analysis obtained through in-depth interviews with ten informants consisting of the school principal, vice principals, teachers, and educational staff, and reinforced by participatory observation and document study, the findings indicate that the school principal has implemented participative leadership by involving subordinates in decision-making, establishing two-way communication, promoting openness and transparency, empowering subordinates, adopting consultative and collaborative approaches, recognizing subordinate

capabilities, and enhancing work commitment and job satisfaction in building organizational work culture.

Involvement of subordinates in decision-making was manifested through meetings and deliberations. Each decision was discussed collectively with consideration for the interests of all vocational programs. This involvement fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among school members toward the implementation of agreed decisions. Additionally, two-way communication was established through direct face-to-face interactions as well as online communication systems. Teachers and educational staff were given space to express opinions and provide input. This communication pattern created harmonious working relationships and reduced potential conflicts within the school organization. Openness and transparency were evident in the delivery of policy information, work programs, and school budget management. Teachers and educational staff were informed of the school's policy direction and felt trusted by the leadership.

Empowerment of subordinates was carried out by assigning tasks and responsibilities according to competencies, such as appointments as department heads, laboratory coordinators, homeroom teachers, and school committee members. This empowerment increased teachers' sense of responsibility and professionalism. A consultative and collaborative approach was implemented through discussions, evaluation meetings, and coordination in executing school programs. Each important decision was discussed collectively before being finalized. Recognition of subordinate capabilities was demonstrated by acknowledging the abilities and performance of teachers and educational staff through verbal appreciation, non-material rewards, and entrusting them with task implementation. Enhancement of commitment and job satisfaction was manifested in school members feeling valued, comfortable, and possessing high work morale.

The findings of this study affirm that the participative leadership of the school principal plays a significant role in building organizational work culture at SMKN 1 Agribisnis dan Agroteknologi Serui. However, the effectiveness of participative leadership cannot be understood as a process free from challenges. Participative leadership is a dynamic and contextual practice, the success of which depends heavily on individual readiness, initial organizational culture, and the school principal's leadership capacity in managing differences and resistance.

Involvement of Subordinates in Decision-Making: Between Inclusivity and Efficiency

The involvement of teachers and educational staff in decision-making through deliberations strengthened sense of ownership and collective responsibility. However, research findings also indicate that the level of subordinate participation was not always uniform. Some school members still tended to be passive or dependent on leadership directives, causing the decision-making process to potentially proceed more slowly. This condition reflects a paradox of

participative leadership: while it increases inclusivity on one hand, it can reduce efficiency on the other if not balanced with clear role definitions and authority boundaries. These findings extend the results of Tikiawati and Sulistyaningrum (2024) by demonstrating that organizational commitment increased through participation still requires firm structural management to avoid obscuring accountability.

Two-Way Communication: Dialogue Space and Risk of Ambiguity

Open two-way communication proved to enhance coordination and minimize conflict. However, overly informal communication without a clear framework has the potential to create policy ambiguity, especially when leadership messages are interpreted differently by school members. In this context, participative leadership demands strategic communication skills that are not only dialogical but also assertive. Consistent with Soelistya (2021), two-way communication increases leadership effectiveness, but this research emphasizes that such effectiveness is highly determined by message clarity and consistency in leadership follow-through.

Openness and Transparency: Building Trust and Managing Expectations

The school principal's openness and transparency in policy and budget management strengthened school members' trust (Zuo, 2025). However, transparency also brings the consequence of increased school member expectations regarding the speed and quality of leadership decision-making. Under conditions of limited resources and the school's accreditation status, not all aspirations can be optimally accommodated. This requires the school principal to manage expectations through realistic communication, so that transparency does not result in disappointment or covert resistance.

Empowerment of Subordinates: Between Trust and Competency Readiness

Subordinate empowerment through delegation of authority promotes professionalism and active participation (Albayrak & Ertürk, 2021). However, this research found that differences in competency levels and individual readiness pose challenges in empowerment implementation. Without continuous coaching, empowerment has the potential to create workload imbalances and variations in task execution quality. These findings strengthen the view that participative leadership cannot be separated from supervisory functions and systematic human resource capacity development.

Consultative and Collaborative Approach: Decision Quality and Risk of Pseudo-Consensus

Consultative and collaborative approaches enable the emergence of more contextual and collectively accepted decisions. However, there is a risk of pseudo-consensus emerging, namely agreements built more from social pressure than substantive understanding. In such situations, subordinates tend to approve

leadership decisions without expressing critical views. Therefore, the school principal needs to ensure that consultation processes occur authentically and encourage the courage to express opinions, as emphasized by Hasibuan (2017).

Recognition of Subordinate Capabilities: Motivation and Perceptual Justice

Recognition and appreciation of subordinate performance increase motivation and positive work behavior. However, if not managed objectively and transparently, appreciation practices have the potential to create perceptions of injustice among school members. This emphasizes the importance of clear and measurable recognition criteria so that leadership acknowledgment truly strengthens a fair and professional work culture, as reminded by Deng and Guan (2017).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry important theoretical implications for understanding participative leadership in educational contexts. First, this research demonstrates that participative leadership theory, while originating from Western organizational contexts, can be meaningfully applied and adapted to non-Western, resource-constrained educational settings. However, the adaptation requires careful attention to local cultural contexts, organizational capacity, and individual readiness levels. Second, the study reveals that participative leadership operates through complex, non-linear processes that involve both enabling and constraining factors operating simultaneously. This complexity suggests the need for more sophisticated theoretical models that account for contextual contingencies and implementation challenges rather than assuming straightforward relationships between leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes.

From a practical perspective, these findings offer several important insights for educational leaders and policymakers. School principals implementing participative leadership must recognize that participation itself does not automatically translate into effective decision-making or enhanced organizational culture. Rather, participative structures must be accompanied by capacity-building initiatives, clear role definitions, effective communication protocols, and transparent recognition systems. Furthermore, educational administrators in peripheral regions must adapt participative leadership practices to local constraints while maintaining core principles of inclusion, transparency, and empowerment. Policymakers should recognize that effective participative leadership in resource-limited settings requires institutional support, professional development opportunities, and realistic performance expectations that account for contextual challenges.

Reflective Critique of Research Findings

Although the participative leadership of the school principal proved to play a role in building organizational work culture at SMKN 1 Agribisnis dan

Agroteknologi Serui, its implementation is not free from several challenges. The involvement of school members in decision-making increased sense of ownership and commitment, but differences in readiness levels and courage to express opinions caused participation to not yet be fully equitable and potentially slow down the decision-making process. This indicates that participative leadership needs to be balanced with clear role definitions and authority boundaries to remain effective. These tensions between participative ideals and practical constraints highlight the need for context-sensitive leadership approaches that can flexibly navigate between inclusive processes and operational efficiency while maintaining core democratic principles in educational governance.

The findings of this study provide empirical support for and extend the theoretical framework of participative leadership proposed by Northouse (2021), who identified key characteristics including subordinate involvement in decision-making, two-way communication, openness and transparency, empowerment, and enhanced commitment and job satisfaction. This research confirms that these characteristics are not merely theoretical constructs but are observable and implementable in the context of vocational schools in peripheral regions with limited resources. More importantly, this study extends Northouse's framework by revealing the challenges and paradoxes inherent in each characteristic when applied in resource-constrained educational settings, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of participative leadership implementation.

The findings also align with and extend the research by few researchers who demonstrated that participative leadership creates positive work communities and enhances teacher performance through active involvement in planning and decision-making (Asyibli et al., 2025; Yantoni, 2020). This study confirms these findings but provides additional insight by examining not only the positive outcomes but also the process mechanisms and challenges involved in creating such involvement. Specifically, while Asyibli et al. (2025) focused on performance outcomes in general schools, this research reveals how participative leadership functions differently in vocational education contexts where technical competencies and practical skill development require more specialized forms of collaboration and decision-making. Furthermore, this study extends their findings by documenting the uneven levels of participation among school members, suggesting that participative leadership effectiveness is mediated by individual readiness and organizational capacity, factors not extensively explored in previous studies.

Soewondo et al. (2023) assertion that participative leadership implementation increases motivation and sense of ownership among school members is strongly supported by the present findings. However, this research provides critical extension by identifying the conditions under which such increases occur and the potential barriers that may limit their realization. The current study reveals that while sense of ownership increases through participative processes, this increase is

not uniform across all staff members, and passive tendencies among some individuals can undermine the intended benefits of participation. This finding suggests that the relationship between participative leadership and sense of ownership is more complex than previously understood, requiring deliberate capacity-building interventions alongside participative structures.

Importantly, this study addresses a significant gap in existing research by examining participative leadership in a vocational high school located in a peripheral island region with distinctive geographical challenges, resource limitations, and low accreditation status. Previous studies on participative leadership have predominantly focused on mainstream schools in urban settings, leaving the question of how such leadership operates in marginalized educational contexts largely unexplored. The present research demonstrates that participative leadership remains viable and beneficial even in resource-constrained environments, but its implementation requires adaptation to local contexts and careful management of heightened expectations that may arise from increased transparency and participation. This represents a novel contribution to the literature, extending the applicability of participative leadership theory to underserved educational settings and highlighting the importance of contextual sensitivity in leadership practice.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the participative leadership of the school principal at SMKN 1 Agribisnis dan Agroteknologi Serui constitutes a strategic approach oriented not only toward formal involvement of school members, but also toward strengthening work relations based on trust, openness, and collaboration. The implementation of participative leadership was reflected in practices of collective decision-making, intensive two-way communication, transparent school management, and empowerment of teachers and educational staff according to their respective capacities and roles. These practices contributed significantly to increased commitment, job satisfaction, and sense of ownership among school members toward the organization. The study confirms that participative leadership characteristics theorized by Northouse (2018) are applicable in resource-constrained vocational education contexts, while also revealing implementation challenges related to uneven participation levels, potential efficiency trade-offs, and the need for continuous capacity building to support authentic participatory processes.

The implications of these findings affirm that participative leadership plays an important role in building a conducive organizational work culture in schools, characterized by increased collective responsibility, psychological safety, and collaborative work climate. School principals are therefore recommended to consistently develop participative leadership patterns through strengthened communication, creation of inclusive dialogue spaces, and continuous development

of school members to accommodate differences in individual readiness and participation levels. Furthermore, educational stakeholders, including supervisors and education offices, need to support the strengthening of school principal leadership capacity through sustained training and mentoring programs. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends existing participative leadership literature by demonstrating its viability and contextual adaptation requirements in peripheral educational settings, suggesting that leadership theories developed in Western, resource-rich contexts can be meaningfully applied elsewhere with appropriate modifications.

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research scope was limited to a single educational institution, which restricts the transferability of findings to other contexts. Second, the use of a qualitative descriptive approach, while providing depth, does not allow for broad generalization or statistical inference regarding the relationship between participative leadership and organizational outcomes. Third, the study focused primarily on process mechanisms rather than quantifiable performance indicators. Future research is recommended to involve multiple school contexts across different geographical and resource settings, employ mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative depth with quantitative measurement of leadership effectiveness, and examine the relationship between participative leadership and other school performance indicators such as student achievement, teacher retention, and organizational innovation. Such research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of participative leadership effectiveness in diverse educational contexts and provide stronger evidence for policy and practice recommendations.

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