The Effectiveness of Multicultural School Principals in Indonesia

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The purpose of this study is to explain the effectiveness of elementary school principals in Indonesia from the perspective of their multicultural personality characteristics. This study used a mixed method procedure with an explanatory sequential design. Although the school principals are effective multicultural leaders, there are still two characteristics which are considered to weaken their leadership. There is a need for multicultural training for principals, as multicultural education is a continuous process and the achievement of its objectives has never been fully realised (Banks, 2004, & Banks and Banks, 2013). Multicultural education is not only needed by students, but also principals, when facing changes in the education system that now prioritises tolerance, relationships between groups and cultural understanding, all of which increase student academic achievement.

Key words: *Effectiveness, Multicultural, School Principal.*

Introduction

Discussing the multicultural leadership of school principals will lead to the examination of concrete behaviours, tendencies or personality characteristics that support their leadership (Setyanto, Kemal, Matin, Suryadi, Soefiajanto, 2020). The natural complexities of multicultural education have challenged and required new demands of school principals who are able to bring multicultural ideas into school governance (Tolo & Lillejord 2006 in Andersen in 2014). More than just preparation programs are needed to ensure that school principals possess multicultural competencies i.e. the knowledge, skills and attitudes to actively function at schools which have become increasingly diverse in language and culture (Andersen, 2014). It is the principals whose roles are significant in consistently providing equal opportunities for all students to get an education regardless of their race, ethnicity,

social class or gender (Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis, 2016 in Rissanen, 2019, and Banks and Banks, 2010).

In this study, multicultural leaders are the school principals, i.e. the leaders with multicultural competencies required to skilfully handle needs and issues presented by multiculturalism and diversity (Smith, 1996 in Jason, 2000). Their competencies enable them to consider the integration of cultures in areas of curriculum and instructional practices, gender bias, workforce diversity, student/student and student/teacher interactions, and the organisational environment (Jason, 2000). Effective multicultural principals are those who inspire the group and envisage and support diversity at all levels in their community. These principals use symbols and tradition to value cultural and language differences that exist within the community. Their considerations are built on their knowledge of multicultural issues, their capability to communicate to their diverse followers, and their respect toward differences. Critics are encouraged and fairness are self-commitment to personal's and group's interest (Bass, 2006). School principals are considered multicultural individuals when they can see multiple sides of an ethical dilemma. That is, ethics are seen to be relative to the context (Hrenyk, J., Szymanski, M., Kar, A., & Fitzsimmons, S.R, 2016) and weighed in their decision making.

The purpose of this study is to explain the effectiveness of elementary school principals in Indonesia as multicultural leaders, from the perspective of their multicultural personality characteristics (Kemal, Setyanto, 2017). The principal has a strategic role in the improvement of educational quality (Supadi, et.al., 2019). These characteristics are essential for the school principal to effectively function in multicultural settings. The results of this study will benefit the government to develop an effective preparation model to develop multicultural leadership in the elementary schools, and for school principals to reflect on their leadership in multicultural setting.

This research based its inquiry on the assumption that collecting diverse types of data best provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative data alone. This study used mixed method procedures with explanatory sequential design to explain the effectiveness of multicultural leadership by elementary school principals in Jakarta, Indonesia. Jakarta was chosen because this city represents the diversity of cultures of Indonesia. It is sequential because the study has begun with a broad survey in order to generalise results to a population, called the initial quantitative phase. Then, in the next phase, the study focuses on qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect detailed views from participants to help explain the initial quantitative survey. This study presented the challenge of identifying the quantitative results for further exploration through qualitative research, as well as the unequal sample sizes for each phase of the study (Cresswell and Cresswell, 2018).

Multicultural Leadership of Elementary Schools in Indonesia

Known as one of the largest island countries, Indonesia represents the multicultural community, or multiculturalism, on considerable scale. Generally, Indonesian people live quite harmoniously despite great diversity in demographics, culture, and language. Conflicts that emerge are mostly caused by political and economic interests of some groups. These groups provoke people's sensitivity to the diversities, and, as a consequence, conflicts are triggered.

The government of Indonesia enshrined multiculturalism within *Pancasila*, the ideology of Indonesia, and through its national motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" which means "unity in diversity". Both statements are declarations to embrace the diversity within Indonesia and to build strong national integration. One of the government's efforts to overcome multicultural conflict has been to implement multicultural education through the subject of civics across elementary and secondary school. The implementation at the elementary level is a necessity, as elementary school is the first large group or organisation that a child enters (Setyanto, Sulhan, Miranti, Kemal, 2020). The implementation of multiculturalism at this level constructs the child's patterns of thinking so that the child internalises the idea that students might come from different genders, social classes, ethnicities, races, and cultural characteristics, but that, regardless, all students have the right to learn at school (Stane, 2013).

To implement multicultural education, the government needs principals with multicultural competencies to guarantee that the delivery of education is equal regardless of students' differences in demographics, culture and language. It is expected that with their multicultural leadership, school principals are able to consider the integration of cultures in areas of curriculum, instructional practices, gender bias, workforce diversity, student/student and student/teacher interactions, and the school environment. In addition, effective multicultural principals will inspire teachers, staff, students and other school citizens to support diversity at school.

In this study, it has been assumed that elementary school principals in Indonesia are all multicultural leaders. The overarching question is how effective their multicultural leadership is based on their multicultural personality characteristics. Based on their characteristics, the principals' individual strategies and personal preferences are revealed. As there are five dimensions supporting individual's effectiveness in the multicultural setting, which dimensions are the most dominant and which ones are less dominant, leads to the implication that it is necessary to improve the less dominant ones so that principals can be more effective multicultural leaders (Suryadi, Kemal, Setyanto, Rachmadtullah, 2020).

Method

Quantitative Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

A Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (henceforth MPQ) was used to measure and predict how effective a person is when in a multicultural-based work environment. As the predictor of a person's multicultural effectiveness, it determines individual strategies to function and respond to life (Gregersen, Black, & Ferzandi, 2006 in Zee, et.al., 2013). It also explains personal preferences and behaviour (Tkalcic, 2015). Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000) outlined five dimensions of personality characteristics that they regarded relevant to measuring the effectiveness of a person in a multicultural environment.

In the MPQ short form, there are 40 items for five dimensions: *cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, flexibility* and *social initiative. Cultural Empathy* refers to the ability to empathizse with feelings, thoughts and behaviours towards cultural diversity. *Open-mindedness* reflects an open and unprejudiced attitude toward cultural diversity regarding norms and values. *Emotional stability* reflects the ability to stay calm under novel and stressful conditions. *Social initiative* refers to actively approaching social situations and demonstrating initiative in these interactions. Finally, *flexibility* refers to interpreting novel situations as a positive challenge and adapting to these situations accordingly (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2000, 2001, 2013). Each of these items is placed on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants' responses are then collected as numerical data. The data, was subsequently analysed based on descriptive statistics and frequency distribution.

Quantitative Data Results

The initial quantitative phase involved 72 elementary school principals in Jakarta. The average age of the participating principals in Jakarta was between 51 and 52 years old. The oldest participants were 59 and the youngest was 43 years old. Most participants were female (46 of 72 participants). There were five different ethnicities represented by the participants. These were Javanese, Sundanese, Betawinese, Batak, Minang, and Nias. Javanese was the most dominant ethnicity (26 of 72 participants) followed by the other ethnicities listed, respectively. The last feature of demographics surveyed was principals' religious affiliation. It was found that 61 participants were Muslims, followed in decreasing number by Christians, Catholics, Hindus and Buddhists.

Based on descriptive statistics and frequency distribution, it was found that the most dominant dimensions were open-mindedness, emotional stability, and flexibility, leaving cultural empathy and social initiatives less dominant. This means that, as a multicultural leader, elementary school principals in Jakarta are open-minded, emotionally stable, and

flexible. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and frequency distribution of elementary school principals' multicultural leadership.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Frequency Distribution of Elementary School Principals' Multicultural Leadership

Dimensions	Categories	Descriptive Statistics	Frequency Distribution
Cultural Empathy	High	34	47%
	Low	38	53%
Openmindedness	High	41	57%
	Low	31	43%
Social Initiatives	High	30	42%
	Low	42	58%
Emotional Stability	High	45	63%
	Low	27	37%
Flexible	High	37	51%
	Low	35	49%
Total Participants =72 (100%)			

There are several important findings that can be inferred from the table. First, the elementary school principals in Jakarta have high levels of open-mindedness. They have an open and unprejudiced attitude towards people in their circle such as teachers, staff, students, parents and school partners. They are open to new ideas and other cultural values and norms. Next, as they are emotionally stable, they remain calm in stressful situations. They do not exhibit strong emotional reactions. Third, conflicts emerging because of economic and social gaps at school are considered challenges. They are responsive to unexpected or constrained circumstances within another culture by adapting their attitudes. They never stick to a single behaviour pattern. To effectively function in the multicultural setting, the three characteristics are used as considerations to value cultural or language differences existing in the community.

Meanwhile, the less dominant dimensions or characteristics of principals' effectiveness in multicultural settings are cultural empathy and social initiatives. To collect detailed views on these two dimensions, the qualitative phase was proceeded.

Qualitative Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

The second phase, the qualitative interview, was conducted by interviewing the school principals (the samples) one on one. The interviews began with the assumption that the principals' views are meaningful, and that they can be collected and interpreted explicitly.

Interview guides were prepared and used to ensure that there was a similar basis when questioning samples during the interview. This made the interviews more systematic and comprehensive by limiting the problem to be explored (Patton, 2002). The questions asked were open-ended, making the interviewer free to build a conversation so that the available time could be utilised (Kemal, Suryadi, Rosyidi, 2019). Interviews were conducted in an atmosphere that did not make the principal feel intimidated. During the interview process, samples' answers were recorded by the researchers and then transcribed so that the meaning-making could be done, and the core consistency and meaning could be identified (Patton, 2002 and Cresswell, 2012). Using one on one interviews was quite time consuming and costly, but there is no doubt of their usefulness in terms of data completeness. Meanwhile, content analysis was applied to reveal the patterns of principals' perceptions (Boyatzis, 1998 in Patton, 2002).

Qualitative data analysis was carried out through four stages. They were condensation, coding, categorisation, and theorising. First, after the data were collected, condensation was performed by sorting principals' statements that were relevant to the principals' less dominant dimensions or characteristics (Miles, et.al., 2014). Second, the transcribed interviews were coded based on the system, aspects or thoughts expressed by the principals. Codes are short words or phrases that symbolically provide summative, prominent, essence capturing, and/or evocative attributes for language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2015). In qualitative data analysis, codes are constructs developed by researchers and coding is considered a "critical link" between data collection and the explanation of their meaning (Charmaz, 2001 in Saldana, 2015). After capturing the essence of the statements, in the third stage, similar statements were grouped to generalise meaning and obtain categories. Finally, the theorising stage was performed. This stage aimed at achieving the conceptual constructs of the categories obtained in the previous stages, and seeing how they might be interconnected and how they influence each other as part of an abstract construct (Richards & Morse, 2013 in Saldana, 2015). In this study, the representativeness of sampling, data collection and data analysis were validated by the evaluation and criticism of two experts in education management and qualitative research. Validation was also done by asking participants to examine and determine whether researchers had accurately reported their perceptions, called the *member validation method* (Koelsch, 2013).

Qualitative Data Result

In this phase, the researchers focused on getting detailed views of the less dominant dimensions from participants to explain the initial quantitative survey. There are two codes constructed

Code "Cultural Empathy"

Although it appeared in the survey that principals encountered difficulties in identifying feelings, thoughts and behaviours, during interviews, the researcher found that this was the principals' personal strategy to be effective leaders in the multicultural context. That is, they avoided intensive interaction with other people in their circle such as teaching staff, administrative staff or parents so that they can notice when someone is in trouble. In fact, they try to give their best effort to setting teaching and administrative staff at ease to work and interact. Principals are still the key actors in supporting teachers' professional development and careers. It was found that principals are attentive to other people's feelings. They try to be good listeners by enjoying people's stories and experiences. When dealing with parents, common multicultural contexts encountered was the low level of parents' sense of belonging. This made several parents disengage with co-curricular activities organised by schools, parents or independent organisations. There are feelings of being different with others in terms of either cultural or social differences. This disengagement then has an effect on students' activities. In short, principals do not want to be emotionally attached with parents to be in harmony.

Code "Social Initiatives"

Findings from the survey revealed that principals tended to be passive in social situations rather than take initiative. They considered that they hardly interacted with people from different cultures, nor made friends outside of their culture. Similar to the explanation in code "cultural empathy", principals find significant work in family disengagement because of economic and social gaps. During the interviews, principals accepted that sometimes they did not take the lead on particular conditions, especially when parents or school's partners were involved. This was to avoid conflict or disharmony, as principals are considered "for" or "against" a plan of co-curricular activity. Again, diversity in social and economic backgrounds can trigger conflict.

Discussion

There are three dimensions which are considered dominant in building the multicultural leadership of elementary school principals in Indonesia. They are *emotional stability*, *open-mindedness* and *flexibility*. The first dominant dimension of principals' effectiveness as multicultural leaders is emotional stability. This dimension is the reflection of principals' ability to stay calm under novel and stressful conditions, i.e. not to show strong emotional reactions in stressful environments (Zee. 2000 and 2013). Their responses in the questionnaires showed that their strategies to remain emotionally stable in multicultural

situations are to not get upset easily and to be calm when things do not go well. Although they also worry being in the stressful situation and environment.

Meanwhile, they admit that there are situations or conditions which might lead to multicultural conflicts. For example, the policies to wear particular religious clothing, to recite and study holy books, to celebrate religious holidays or to decide which culture will be the theme for the graduation might result in parent objection. Parents expect school management to enact policies that complement all religions and tribes. From the principals' perspectives, such situations are confusing as there are six religions and more than five tribes at school.

The second dominant dimension supporting principals' multicultural leadership is open-mindedness. This dimension shows their freedom from prejudice by the promotion of self-initiatives that look at new ways or approaches to attain their goals as multicultural leaders, and create schools that value individual differences.

The third dominant dimension is flexibility, which refers to principals' interpretations of multicultural situations as positive challenges requiring their best effort to adapt to these situations. Based on the quantitative research, 51% of school principals in Jakarta have high levels of flexibility. They always work according to what they have previously planned. This is to ensure that they can achieve what they have set as targets. Moreover, they prefer to look for regularity to play their roles as multicultural leaders. In short, there are two principals' personal strategies, which are predicting and planning. To predict means to reconsider possibilities or consequences which might emerge and to plan their activities in detail.

It was also found in the interview that the biggest challenge of principals' flexibility is to emphasise and communicate that school is a diverse society to parents and communities involved in the delivery of educational programs. Often, principals reminded parents to refer to the national motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" when discussion and negotiation has been tough and has led to multicultural conflict.

These similar expressions given by principals concerning their strategies, are:

*"It is impossible to avoid problems. The important thing is we have to keep in mind we are meant to live in a **diverse society**".*

*"Different perception is acceptable, isn't it common to come across different perception in our **multicultural country**?"*

*"Well, we are brothers and sisters. It is in our daily life to be different in perceptions. We live in a **multicultural country**, don't we?*

Weakening Dimensions of Multicultural Leadership

There are two dimensions found to be weaker in terms of school principals' multicultural leadership. They are cultural empathy and social initiatives. Zee (2000) believed that principals with low levels of cultural empathy have difficulty identifying with the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of people and groups with different cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, principals whose levels are low on social initiatives are less inclined to take initiative. They will be rather reserved and stay in the background.

Confirming what was found in the qualitative phase, it was surprising that principals made sense the two characteristics from different perspectives. Principals prefer to be passive in social situations by restraining themselves from showing emotional reactions toward multicultural differences. This was a common personal strategy to prevent conflict. For example, as the school leaders in a multicultural learning community, principals are expected to be the driving force of school improvements. Principals' efforts to improve the school can have different interpretations. The implementation of discipline of teachers can be interpreted as principals pointing out teachers' mistakes. Meanwhile, principals' responses to a policy might be seen as an overreaction. In short, these two characteristics are represented in different manners.

Implications

Communication effectiveness in education has turned into a prime indicator of effective multicultural leadership. Principals' awareness of situation-led multicultural conflicts at school, the knowledge of what principals should do through detailed planning, and the initiatives to make improvement defines multicultural leadership.

The practical implication of this research is that there is a need for training to improve the abilities of principals within the three dimensions for which they fall into the low category. This comes from the theory developed by Banks (2004) and Banks and Banks (2013) that says multicultural education is carried out in a continuous process and the achievement of its objectives has never been fully realised. Multicultural education is not only needed by students but also principals when facing changes in the education system that prioritises tolerance and relationships between groups and cultural understanding, so as to increase student academic achievement.

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