

Principal Leadership Practices in the Early Stages of Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis

Dwi Esti Andriani^{1*}, Ria Annisa¹, Baiquni Rahmat¹, Pandit Isbianti¹, Danang Dewantoro¹, Slamet Lestari¹, Devi Monita Kristyningsih²

¹Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, DIY, Indonesia

²Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom

*Corresponding author: Dwi Esti Andriani (e-mail: dwi_esti@uny.ac.id)

Abstract: This study aimed to explore principal leadership at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. This study employed a qualitative approach that was exploratory and naturalistic with the purpose of gaining an understanding of a phenomenon in its natural setting. Data collection was carried out by semi-structured in-depth interviews with six elementary school principals who were selected purposefully using certain criteria. The collected data were then analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory methods. The member check technique was applied to assure data credibility. The results showed that principal leadership at the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic crisis was more concerned with achieving health for the school community than academic achievement. Therefore, they provided flexibility to teachers in managing instructions, created safe communication channels among all the school members, directly monitored and evaluated online learning, empowered competent teachers to develop the ICT skills of their colleagues, and fostered collaboration with stakeholders.

Keywords: principal leadership, crisis leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

The world is currently facing challenges caused by the Covid-19 virus. In just a few months, Covid-19 has become a “supernova” (Azorin, 2020) that creates unavoidable chaos (Hargreaves, 2020) and rocks education. As of January 18, 2021, only 11 countries in the world we’re currently free from the Covid-19 virus, which consisted of: The Cook Island, Tuvalu, Tonga, Pitcairn Islands, Palau, Niue, Nauru, Kiribati, Tokelau, Micronesia, and Turkmenistan (<https://health.detik.com/berita-detikhealth/d-5338356/11-negara-ini-masih-bebas-covid-19-mana-saja>). Meanwhile, other countries that have been infected with the Covid-19 virus are struggling to reduce the mortality rate with uncertainty, including Indonesia.

In Indonesia, the number of people who have contracted the virus is increasing day by day. The limited number of hospitals and supporting facilities as well as the increasing risk of medical staff's health in the face of the Covid-19 attacks have prompted the government to work hard to reduce the number of deaths and the increasing number of cases of Covid-19 sufferers through various programs. One of which is through education. The government closed schools and issued the policies of learning and working from home through the Minister of Education and Culture Decree number 3 of 2020 and the Minister of Education and Culture Decree number 4 of 2020. School activities relied mainly on technology and shifted online (Harris, 2020) making the teaching and learning process possible from home but with many obstacles.

The survey results of the implementation of the learning from home (LfH) policy published in August 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Culture showed that most teachers and students from preschool to secondary education in disadvantaged and less-developed areas lacked facilities including internet quotas, ICT devices, and gadgets. Teachers also needed more training on information and communication technology (ICT) for instruction (MoEC, 2020a, b). While teachers were still in the process of adapting on how to conduct online learning, many parents had difficulties to accompany and help their children to learn from home (Widyastuti, 2021: 55).

This study aims to explore the leadership practices of principals in the early Covid-19 pandemics crisis requiring them to manage and lead online learning. This study took place in Tangerang Regency, an industrial region. This location was chosen considering the high number of people suffering from Covid-19 in this district. On May 14, 2020, the number of patients who were confirmed positive for Covid-19 had reached 110 people, and this number had increased from the previous three days, which still amounted to 102 cases (Banten Hits, 2020). This condition had significant effects on schools. A total of 1,335 elementary schools in Tangerang Regency were required to close their schools and shifted direct instruction to online learning in the early period of the pandemic (Kemendikbud Referensi Data, 2021). Therefore, this research question is "What are the leadership practices of elementary school principals in the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic crisis?"

1.1 Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on national education

Covid-19 is a virus that can cause respiratory tract infections. It is called the Coronavirus because the structure of this virus is similar to the corona of the sun (Baharuddin & Rumpa, 2020: 3). This coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019. This virus then spread to many countries around the world, including Indonesia (WHO, 2020). The impact of the Covid-19 virus is different in each country, depending on the quality of the health protection system the country has and the actions taken by the government. As of June 9, 2021, positive confirmed cases in Indonesia had reached more than 1.8 million cases, and globally it had exceeded 173.6 million cases (covid19.go.id, 2021).

This virus can spread through small droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected person when coughing or sneezing (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). To prevent the transmission of Covid-19, the WHO has suggested several precautions. These actions include social distancing by maintaining a minimum distance of 1 meter, wearing a face mask when interacting with other people, avoiding being in closed and crowded places, not having close contact with other people, and cleaning used objects with disinfectants as often as possible - especially those that are frequently used or touched such as doorknobs, water faucets, and also mobile phone screens (WHO, 2020).

To anticipate the spread of Covid-19, the Government of Indonesia has issued many policies; two of them have major impacts on the implementation of education, such as Penetapan Kedaruratan Kesehatan Masyarakat (Public Health Emergency policy of Coronavirus disease 2019) through Presidential Decree Number 11 of 2020 and Large-Scale Social Restrictions through Regulations Government (PP) Number 21 of 2020 concerning Large-Scale Social Restrictions in order to accelerate the mitigation of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Article 4 in PP Number 21 of 2020, which regulates Large-Scale Social Restrictions in the Context of Accelerating the Handling of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) requires schools to be closed to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The policy takes into account the needs and conditions of education in each region. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Culture issued the policy of learning from home (LfH).

The LfH policy was strengthened by a Circular Letter from the Minister of Education and Culture Number 4 of 2020 concerning the Implementation of Educational Policies in the

Emergency Period of Covid-19 pandemics. The letter imposes the implementation of LfH as follows.

- 1) LfH through online/distance learning is carried out to provide a meaningful learning experience for students without being burdened with the demands of completing all curriculum standards for grade promotion and graduation;
- 2) LfH can focus on life skills education;
- 3) Learning activities and tasks of LfH may vary among students depending on their individual interests and conditions and the gaps in access/facilities for learning at home;
- 4) Evidence or learning products from home are given qualitative and useful feedback without quantitative scores/values from teachers.

The LfH was implemented using two approaches: online distance learning and offline distance learning. In practice, each school could determine the best approach for their school depending on the availability and readiness of resources and facilities. Online distance learning could be introduced with the use of mobile phones or laptops through the platforms and applications provided by the government. On the other hand, offline distance learning was carried out through television, radio, worksheets, student handouts, and learning media from objects around the students' environment.

1.2 Principal leadership practices in the early stages of Covid -19 crisis pandemic

The covid-19 pandemic, which has a major impact on schools, requires principals to be able to manage and lead with different approaches and ways (Harris, 2020). The targets they want to achieve need to be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate in a crisis situation. They also need to act quickly but carefully considering the impact of their actions on the future (Netolicky, 2020) and have the behaviors and mindsets that can prevent overreaction to crises and how to deal with crises (Kaulu, Vijay & Hashem, 2020; D' Auria & De Smet, 2020). For that, they need to process information quickly, determine what needs to be prioritized, and are brave to take responsibility for the decisions they make (Kalbe, 2020).

The study results suggest that in a pandemic crisis like this, school leaders need to prioritize mental health, safety, and well-being of the staff, students, and their families rather than meeting curriculum, pedagogical and assessment targets (Netolicky, 2020; Ronchon, 2021). Principals need to be innovative and responsive to a crisis situation so that educational services can continue to run; however, the safety and health of the school community is still

maintained (Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021; Khairuddin, 2020). For example, school principals may convey covid-19 prevention literacy to students, teachers, and staff by distributing posters containing information about how to prevent the spread of covid-19, such as washing hands with hand soap, wearing masks, exercising, and getting enough rest, as well as consuming nutritious food and drinking an adequate amount of water.

Principals also need to communicate with the stakeholders about government policies and crisis situations (Marsen, 2020). For this reason, they need to establish good official communication channels that can be easily accessed by all parties to convey messages orally and in written forms. To avoid crowds, schools can use online-based electronic media and manage online platforms or applications (Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021). If effective, the communication can build trust and help create shared understandings, common steps, and shared commitment from stakeholders to support the success of teaching and learning activities during a crisis (Faherty, Schwartz, Ahmed, Zheteyeva, Uzicanin, & Uscher-Pines, et al.; 2019, Lucero et al., 2009).

Leaders also need to develop teacher professionalism, especially in the aspect of online teaching competence. As a result, principals should empower teachers by forming learning teamwork and providing virtual training, especially related to science and technology so that teachers can use online learning media (Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021). Taking all of the points above, the distributive leadership form becomes very relevant. It means principals share leadership roles with others, strengthen collaboration and network in dealing with crises (Harris, 2020). In addition, home-based distance learning has made parents the "closest person" or "the best learning resource" for students. For instance, when a child learns mathematics, he can be assisted by his parents in calculating or contextualizing mathematics within his daily life (Burgess & Sieversten, 2020). In other words, school leadership during the pandemic must be able to optimize the role of parents.

Principals also need to support teachers in developing good quality of learning by conducting academic supervision (Murnie, 2020). In this kind of crisis, supervision plays an essential role in directing, empowering, and coaching teachers to help them face the teaching difficulties (Mujiyono, 2017). Supervision needs to provide flexibility and opportunities for teachers to carry out the learning process in their best ways (Murnie, 2020). In addition, a leader is also expected to be able to motivate his subordinates and make them stay focused on the goal (Kaulu, Vijay & Hashem, 2020).

II. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Type of research

This study is qualitative research that is exploratory, naturalistic, and aims to gain an understanding of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Raco 2010; Rosyada, 2020) namely the leadership practices of public elementary school principals in an industrial region. For this reason, the procedures and methodologies are very specific, based on the correspondence theory, and highly appreciate the diversity of field data without a tendency to generalize (Rosyada, 2020: 28).

2.2 Research subject

The subjects of this study are 6 (six) principals of public elementary schools in the industrial area of Tangerang Regency. They were selected purposefully in which the sampling subjects were selected using certain criteria (Sugiyono, 2011: 300). The criteria used to select schools was school location which must be in an industrial area where the school continues to provide education amidst the high number of COVID-19 cases in the early stages of the pandemic. The selected schools of this study were SDN PS 1, SDN C1, SDN C3, SDN PG 3, SDN PG 2, SDN T2. In addition, the principals of the selected schools have led the school since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 Data collection methods

The data in this study were collected through a semi-structured interview. This type of interview uses a list of questions that can be developed during the process of interviews with the purpose of having questions that can bring information relevant to answer the objectives of the study (Mustari & Taufiq, 2012: 54). It allows researchers to capture the meanings given by participants based on their experiences (Raco, 2010: 117).

A semi-structured interview guide that contained initial questions was developed. The questions might be developed through the interview process as needed to gain rich and in-depth information. This interview guide enables a researcher to get accurate, complete, and systematic data (Sugiyono, 2005). The following interview guide was developed as follows.

Table 1. Interview guide

Research question	Interview guide
What are the leadership practices of elementary school principals in the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the educational goals that the principal wants to achieve in the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic crisis? ▪ What are the actions of the principal to achieve these educational goals? ▪ Why are the actions chosen or taken? ▪ What are the results and benefits obtained by the principal by achieving these goals?

The interview questions developed along with the development of the information obtained during the process of interviews.

2.4 Data analysis method

The data that have been collected were then analyzed using the grounded theory data analysis method. This method consists of three stages, namely: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

- Open coding is the stage in which the initial category of information about the studied phenomenon is given by segmenting information, such as naming it according to its substance, breaking down symptoms, and categorizing the findings found during the interview.
- Axial coding is the second stage in which data are explored, namely the procedure of relocating the data in new ways by making links between categories.
- Selective coding is the final stage in which a story line is identified and written. The story integrates the categories generated from the axial coding model. The steps taken are to simplify the data by combining all categories to produce a special theme that is more abstract than the previous coding or from axial coding (Wardhono, 2011: 28-31).

2.5 The quality of the data

To ensure the quality of the data, this study employed member checks. Member check aims to adjust the data obtained with what is intended by the data source or informants (Sugiyono, 2018: 375). The mechanism used in the member check method is that researchers coordinate directly with data sources or informants, all of which includes 6 (six) public elementary school principals in the industrial area of Tangerang Regency. The form of coordination refers to presenting the obtained and analyzed data to the principals to further check their accuracy.

After the data presented align with the principals' views, the principals will give approval to the data and the researcher will produce credible or accurate data.

III. RESULTS

This study generates five themes of principal leadership practices during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. They are giving flexibility in managing learning, facilitating communication channels, providing direct supervision and evaluating online learning, empowering and developing teachers' ICT skills, and strengthening cooperation with stakeholders. The following presents the results of the study in more detail.

3.1 Giving flexibility to teachers in managing learning

The results showed that the principal gave flexibility to the teachers in managing learning. They allowed teachers to organize learning that suited the requirements, in this case, to put the health protocols in place. They said:

We conduct offline learning with a home visit system in groups for students who have limited online learning support tools, such as mobile phones/gadgets. Otherwise, they don't study. His parents are inattentive (W3. AS. PG 3)

I asked the teacher to serve three students who do not have cellphones to study at school by complying with the health protocols (W4. D. PG 2).

There are student parents who want to meet in person to talk with me or the teacher. They come to school. Yes, we serve. (W1.S.PS1)

Principals also prioritized health on top of academic targets. They said:

In the crisis situation at the beginning of the pandemic, I can't talk about the results, the important thing is that teachers and students are happy and healthy (W2. MD. C3)

I try to make students enjoy themselves, and there is no burden in learning. If they don't, I'm afraid they are vulnerable to Covid. Emotions affect immunity... (W5. E. C1)

The situation above shows that at the beginning of the pandemic, school principals were very concerned about the health aspects of the students and teachers, as well as paying attention to health protocols in leading and managing the school.

3.2 Establishing good and safe communication channels

The results of the study reveal that in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, school principals tried to build easy lines of communication for all. They took the advantage of digital applications that were popular in the society, such as Whatsapp for group or personal communication while simultaneously supporting social distancing. They say:

We created a WA group for class and a teacher WA group to communicate (W2. MD. C3)

We submit an invitation letter for the teacher council meeting and disperse letters for parents via WhatsApp... (W5. E. C1)

We convey our message to students, parents, and society through classroom teachers, who convey our message via WhatsApp (W3. AS. PG 3)

Several school principals conveyed the similar reasons for using the WhatsApp application as follows:

I chose Whatsapp as a means of communication and learning in the early days of the pandemic because I think it is the most effective media. Parents are familiar with it, and it avoids crowds too" W2. MD. C3

We decided to use WA at that time, because we considered WA as an application that could support and be accessible to everyone" W1. S.PS 1

The situation above shows that the principal pays attention to health protocols, especially the social distancing aspect by utilizing technology as a medium of communication to all school members. By having these good and safe communication lines, the school community could be well informed without having the risk of contracting the virus.

3.3 Supervising and evaluating the learning

The results showed that the principal directly monitored online learning to ensure that the learning process was run effectively and obstacles or learning problems that might arise were identified. They say:

I joined the class Whatsapp group to see how the teachers conducted teaching (W2. MD. C3)

I monitor the learning process directly by joining the video conference held by the teachers (W3 AS. PG 3)

To find out the learning process in the classroom, I asked the teacher directly so that my supervision was carried out online (W1. S. PS1)

I provide direct personal assistance to teachers who may have problems in providing education. I use good and polite language so that the teacher does not feel offended (W4. D. PG 2)

The situation above shows that at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, school principals were directly involved in the learning. They believe it is necessary to do it to find out learning issues that arise and provide appropriate assistance for teachers in need.

3.4 Developing teachers' ICT skills

The results of the study indicate that the principals provided teacher professional development programs, especially teachers' ICT skill development. They say:

Here we facilitate training to operate laptops and supporting applications such as Zoom, and thank God from there the teachers' ICT literacy and skills began to improve. For the training, I empowered 3 teachers who had good IT knowledge and asked them to train other teachers with their knowledge and skills. Two of them are school operators (W4. D. PG 2).

In this school, there are teachers who have already been proficient in ICT. I empowered them to train their fellow teachers. They teach how to operate Google Meet, Google Classroom and to create class groups (W5. E. C1)

I'm just directing. If there is someone who needs assistance, I direct them to learn from their friends who are smarter than me in ICT. (W1.S.PS1)

Every week I gather teachers to improve their knowledge. We call it 'a week a piece of knowledge' starting from making learning implementation plans during the Covid period and making scenarios in group chats or voice notes. The teacher also understands that I ask them to share knowledge with other teachers who do not understand, so it's basically helping each other (W2. MD. C3)

Until now, we have never brought presenters from outside to improve teachers' ICT skills. We rely more on the sharing system from teachers who may have IT knowledge. So, the training is flexible, it could be from the teacher, it could be from me" (W6. C. T2)

In addition, the results of the study indicate that the principal of the elementary public schools in this study provide online learning facilities to teachers. "During the pandemic, I gave teachers some funds for internet access" (W4. D. PG 2). There is even a school principal who

provided a laptop to the teachers “Here in this school, we lend a laptop to teachers who don't have access to it” (W5. E. C1).

3.5 Expanding cooperation with the stakeholders

The results of the study indicate that the principals developed cooperation with stakeholders.

They say:

We have cooperation with companies. At the beginning of the pandemic, the company provided assistance in the form of uniforms, stationery and nutritious food (W4. D. PG 2)

We strengthen cooperation with parents. They are a liaison between teachers and students. Without their cooperation, the online learning process does not work (W1. S. PS1)

The involvement of parents in learning during the pandemic is very high. I say that in order to achieve our common mission, we must work together and collaborate (W2. MD. C3)

In this pandemic condition, POMG (Parent Student and Teacher Association) is a liaison between teachers and students in collecting assignments. For example, to avoid close contact with people or the crowds, oftentimes, POMG representatives submit student assignments once a week and hand them in to the teacher” W5. E. C1

This situation shows that during the pandemic crisis, the need to cooperate and collaborate with various parties, especially parents, is considered vital by the school principals.

IV. DISCUSSION

In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, school principals in the industrial area of Tangerang Regency tried to prioritize the health of all school members compared to learning achievement. Teachers are given the flexibility to manage learning that is safe from the covid-19 virus for everyone involved. The results of this study support the view of Netolicky (2020) that at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, school leaders need to prioritize the health, safety, and welfare of school members over the achievement of the curriculum and learning goals alone. They need to be leaders who are compassionate, supportive (Kwatubana & Molaidi, 2021), and empathetic (Don, 2020). For this reason, the results of the research carried out by Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma (2021) and Khairuddin (2020: 180-181) suggest that school principals as leaders of educational institutions make various educational innovations as a form of adjustment to the ongoing needs and conditions. Doing so, educational services continue running while the health and safety of the school members are promoted.

The results also show that the principal seeks ways to facilitate formal communication channels for all by utilizing the popular communication media, namely Whatsapp. According to Aitsl (2020), this principal's action is necessary in this pandemic crisis situation. Schools need to build official communication channels that are effective, easy and safe for all school communities to maintain verbal and written communication related to learning (Aitsl, 2020; Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021) as well as to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Pollock, 2020). Such communication channels will help principals to process information quickly and to determine what are the priorities in times of crisis (Kalbe, 2020). Moreover, the principal is the holder of control and policymaker who should be able to select strategies and make flexible decisions when situations are difficult (Kaulu, Vijay & Hashem, 2020; Khodijah & Haq, 2021).

In addition, the principal conducts direct monitoring of learning in online classes to ensure online learning runs and to understand the learning barriers faced by teachers. This action is important because, generally, teachers teach online with less preparation and the facilities are inadequate (Netolicky, 2020). In addition, the majority of elementary school teachers have not mastered ICT well. The results of a study in Canada in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic showed similar conditions. Principals need to act as digital instructional leaders. They need to provide support and ensure that technology-based learning through various web applications and platforms runs effectively. Also, they need to pay attention to hardware and software issues such as the availability of wifi, learning devices such as tablets, laptops, or smartphones) as well as the various skills needed to interact effectively through these various platforms experienced by students, teachers, and themselves (Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021; Pollock, 2020).

The results also show that principals develop the ICT competencies of their teachers primarily by empowering competent teachers. They created a sharing forum where IT competent teachers teach their knowledge and skills to other teachers. Consequently, teachers are expected to be able to carry out online learning. The results of this study support various leadership research results related to this topic. Principals need to create a platform that familiarizes teachers with working collaboratively in teams to overcome problems and challenges that their school faces. Teams also can use Facebook, Whatsapp chats, video calls, or other platforms when the internet connection is good. The formation of this team not only provides social support and assistance to teachers in managing their workload but also promotes their well-being (Kwatubana & Moladi, 2021). Moreover, school principals,

whenever available, can provide virtual training on how to use online learning media to teachers (Desfiyanti, Gitituati, & Rifma, 2021). At the same time, in times of crisis, they are also expected to motivate their staff and stay focused on the main goal (Kaulu, Vijay, & Hashem, 2020).

The results also show that school principals need to strengthen cooperation with stakeholders. Cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders are important for school success and excellence (Randall & Coakley, 2007) especially in a pandemic situation. Bagwell (2020: 32) emphasizes the importance of principals building collaborations with community mental health institutions, social welfare organizations, local non-profit organizations, and businesses to collaborate on various problems and challenges during the pandemic (Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Such cooperation will determine the sustainability and welfare of school members (Aitsl, 2020), which in turn, lead to the improvement of organizational performance (Setiyanti, 2012).

V. CONCLUSION

The leadership of elementary school principals in the Tangerang industrial area was responsive to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. They strived to keep the learning going with high attention to aspects of the safety of school members from virus transmission and their well-being. For this reason, they provide flexibility to teachers in learning management, simplify communication lines, directly monitor and evaluate online learning, empower and develop competencies using teachers' ICT skills, and strengthen collaboration with stakeholders.

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