



Development of a learning leadership model for vocational high school principals to foster student well-being within the framework of Merdeka Belajar

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to (1) determine the necessity of a learning leadership model for vocational school principals to realise student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar, (2) develop a theoretically and empirically valid learning leadership model for vocational high school principals to achieve student well-being (KPK-SW model) within the context of Merdeka Belajar, and (3) assess the effectiveness of the learning leadership model for vocational high school principals in achieving student well-being within the Merdeka Belajar framework. This research employed the Research and Development method, consisting of four phases: the initial phase, the planning phase, the testing, evaluation, and revision phase, and the implementation phase. The testing process was carried out in three stages: an initial trial involving 10 experts and education practitioners. The data were collected through focus group discussions, questionnaires, documents, observations, and interviews. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire instruments were ensured through expert validation. The validity of qualitative data was confirmed through informant review and data triangulation models. Quantitative data analysis was done using descriptive analysis techniques, while qualitative data was analysed using an interactive analysis model. The research findings indicate that the KPK-SW model fosters student well-being. The level of importance, according to users, includes scores of 4.44 from the Head of the Education Department of DIY, 4.39 from school supervisors, 3.32 from the Secondary Education Office, and 4.38 from education experts. The total average score is 4.38, suggesting this model is highly significant and suitable for implementation.

Keywords: learning leadership model, school principal, vocational high school, student well-being

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INTRODUCTION

According to Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System, education consists of several aspects: academic performance, religion, self-control, personality, noble character, and skills. This contradicts the current practice in the field, which focuses more on achieving learning scores and undermining the multifaceted values of Indonesian national education. Focusing on academic performance can also lead to academic stress, as students face pressure to perform well. This situation opposes the concept of well-being as envisioned by the Merdeka Belajar policy launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019. Moreover, the diverse characteristics of learners suggest that learning strategies should not follow a one-size-fits-all approach.

Successful schools cannot be separated from the role of the principal as an instructional leader. Principals are key in managing the educational process and improving the quality of education at the school level (Gawlik, 2018; González-Falcón et al., 2020; Hallinger et al., 2018). Principals play a strategic role in improving teacher professionalism and providing guidance, encouragement, motivation, and inspiration to teachers, staff, and students to achieve school goals

and improve the quality of learning (Freeman & Fields, 2023; Huang et al., 2020; Khanal et al., 2020). Therefore, school principals' managerial and academic work functions require special attention, especially regarding their performance and implementation (Yuliana et al., 2023). Principals are to possess various competencies, including personality and social skills, leadership in learning, school development, and resource management. They are also responsible for entrepreneurship, supervision, service, achievement, the integration of technology into management and learning in schools, as well as the implementation of culture-based education (Prasojo & Yuliana, 2021; Saifurrahman et al., 2021; Sebastian et al., 2019; Yuliana et al., 2022).

As school leaders, principals have significant roles and responsibilities in managing available resources to improve the quality of education (Bryson, 2018). It is expected that there is synergy between *das sein* (the current state) and *das sollen* (the ideal state). Vocational high schools (known as SMK) in Yogyakarta have various levels of quality, ranging from excellent or level A to unaccredited. This suggests that there is a push for comprehensive reform of vocational high schools. This is reflected in the role of the principal as part of the team responsible for overseeing the education process in vocational high schools.

Data from Yuliana et al. (2019) shows that 70 vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta were still unaccredited. Of these, four vocational high schools had a C rating, 38 schools a B rating, and 105 schools an A rating. Sleman Regency had a total of 120 vocational high schools, most of which had been accredited with an A rating. Several private vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta remained unaccredited. In the Sleman district, 14 schools had not been accredited, while in the Bantul and Gunung Kidul districts, 17 and 16 schools were still awaiting accreditation. A school must fulfil all the established standards to achieve a high or good accreditation score. School principals play a significant role in improving the quality of education so that schools can achieve the National Education Standards effectively. Thus, the principal is the key to ensuring sustainable improvements in school quality. One of the important competencies of school principals is instructional leadership, which is closely related to managing school learning activities.

To realise learning that is beneficial and addresses the diverse needs of the students, managing learning activities is of high urgency. As a leader, the principal plays a crucial role in ensuring that learning goes well. Therefore, it is important that a principal can put learning at the centre of all decisions made, leading to what is known as learning leadership. Learning leadership, or instructional leadership, encompasses leadership that prioritises teaching and learning, including professional learning that adapts to learner growth. (Southworth, 2002). The principal's learning leadership model significantly contributes to improving the quality of education. Effective schools require strong instructional leadership from their principals, significantly impacting student well-being (Akmaliyah et al., 2020). This model must be adaptive to the development of digital technology, requiring an appropriate management system.

Murphy explains the theory of the Instructional Leadership Model, suggesting that instructional leadership has four fundamental dimensions that can create a positive school environment (school well-being): (1) developing the school's mission and goals, (2) managing the educational administration functions, (3) promoting the school's academic climate, and (4) creating a conducive work environment (Murphy & Brennan, 2024). All aspects and objectives of instructional leadership contribute to forming a leadership model that supports the success of school well-being. However, field data shows that most school principals in Indonesia have not yet implemented instructional leadership effectively. As a result, ineffective implementation presents challenges in achieving quality learning in schools. A survey conducted by the Tanoto Foundation in 2018, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, revealed that only 32% of school principals had applied the instructional leadership model, while 22% had yet to implement it, indicating ineffective learning process (Tanoto Foundation, 2019). This suggests the need for research to develop an instructional leadership model for school principals aimed at maintaining student well-being in vocational high schools.

METHOD

This research employed the Research and Development (R&D) model. Gall et al. (1996) define Educational R&D as “An industry-based development model in which the findings of the research are used to design new products and procedures, which are then systematically field-tested, evaluated, and refined until they meet specified criteria of effectiveness, quality, or similar standards.” The development model in this research followed their 10-step model, with the number of trial subjects increasing at each stage. The procedure employed in this research modifies these steps into four development procedures. These procedures were 1) exploration, 2) prototype development, 3) field testing, and 4) final validation.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using SEM-PLS modelling techniques aided by SmartPLS 3.0 software. Meanwhile, qualitative data was analysed using the interactive model (Permana & Arris, 2013). The three analysis components in this model were data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. These activities were carried out interactively, with the iterative data collection process forming a continuous cycle.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study used the Research and Development (R&D) method consisting of four stages: (1) the exploration stage involved gathering information about the existing leadership model of vocational high school principals; (2) the development stage of a prototype model of the learning leadership of vocational high school principals in the Special Region of Yogyakarta to realise student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar, (3) the field trial, evaluation, and revision stage conducted through preliminary and main trials, and (4) the final validation stage to find the effective vocational high school principal instructional leadership model. The study involved 10 education experts and practitioners as test subjects, with the data collected through forum group discussions, questionnaires, documents, observations, and interviews. Instrument validity and reliability were assessed through expert validation, and qualitative data were validated through informant review and triangulation. Quantitative data analysis was conducted using descriptive analysis, while qualitative data was analysed using an interactive model.

Based on the results of discussions between researchers and experts, a theoretical agreement on the leadership model was reached, referred to as the Learning Leadership Model of Vocational High School Principals to Realise Student Well-Being or KPK-SW Model. This model was developed to assess the leadership of vocational school principals in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Through the process of Research and Development, pre-survey, theoretical studies, needs analysis, empirical trials, and field practice, the concept of the KPK-SW Model was developed. Following discussions and validation by education management experts and practitioners, the results of the field trial show that the KPK-SW Model is necessary to assess the leadership of vocational high school principals, both in Yogyakarta and nationally.

Based on the needs and feasibility study conducted with 10 experts, it was found that the development of the learning leadership model of vocational secondary school principals to promote student well-being has been carried out with systematic procedures. The results of the initial stage of the research show that the KPK-SW model is very important. The level of importance was assessed by the head of the DIY education office (4.44), school supervisors (4.39), and the Deputy Head of the Secondary Education Office (4.32), resulting in an average score of 4.39, which indicates the significance of this model. In addition, 10 experts gave an average score of 4.38 for the KPK-SW model, confirming its importance.

The need for this leadership model was assessed by 10 educational evaluation and management experts, using a five-point scale, with a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 5. The average results of the first stage assessment of the feasibility of the KPK-SW model show that the model is both very important and feasible for realising student well-being within the Merdeka Belajar framework in vocational high schools.

Table 1. Results of the head of education office’s assessment of the importance of the model

No.	Assessment Aspect	Average Score
1.	Setting learning objectives	4.40
2.	The principal’s role as a resource person	4.50
3.	Creating a conducive learning atmosphere	4.60
4.	Communicating school vision and mission to staff	4.50
5.	Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.30
6.	Developing teacher professionalism	4.40
7.	Demonstrating positivity toward teachers, staff, students, and parents	4.20
8.	General assessment of the importance of the model	4.60
Average Total Score		4.44

Based on the assessment results from the head of the education office, the average score shows that the learning leadership model of KPK-SW in the context of Merdeka Belajar for vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta is considered important or very important. The model received an average score of 4.44, placing it in the ‘good’ category (ranging from >3.5 to 4.2). In addition to their assessment, the heads of education offices were asked to provide comments and suggestions regarding the clarity of the KPK-SW model. The recommendations were used to improve the model further.

Table 2. Results of the assessment of the deputy head of the secondary education office on the importance of the model

No.	Assessment Aspect	Average Score
1.	Setting learning objectives	4.30
2.	The principal’s role as a resource person	4.20
3.	Creating a conducive learning atmosphere	4.30
4.	Communicating school vision and mission to staff	4.40
5.	Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.40
6.	Developing teacher professionalism	4.30
7.	Demonstrating positivity toward teachers, staff, students, and parents	4.40
8.	General assessment of the importance of the model	4.30
Average Total Score		4.32

Based on the assessment results from the head of the education centre, the KPK-SW learning leadership model received an average score of 4.32. Overall and per item, this score places the model in the ‘good’ category (ranging from >4.2 to 5.0). In addition to their assessment, the validators were asked to provide comments and feedback on the leadership model. The recommendations from the Deputy Head of the Secondary Education Office include aspects of instrument readability, such as indicators, structure, terms, and concepts related to the learning leadership model.

Table 3. Results of school supervisors' assessment on the importance of the model

No.	Assessment Aspect	Average Score
1.	Setting learning objectives	4.30
2.	The principal’s role as a resource person	4.40
3.	Creating a conducive learning atmosphere	4.50
4.	Communicating school vision and mission to staff	4.30
5.	Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.40
6.	Developing teacher professionalism	4.50
7.	Demonstrating positivity toward teachers, staff, students, and parents	4.40
8.	General assessment of the importance of the model	4.30
Average Total Score		4.39

Based on the assessment results from school supervisors, the KPS-SW model for the vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta was considered very important. The model received an average score of 4.39, placing it in the 'good' category, ranging from >3.5 to 4.2. In addition to their assessment, school supervisors were also asked to provide comments regarding the clarity of the KPK-SW model. The feedback from school supervisors, along with the input from experts, the head of the education office, and the head of the education centre, were used to improve the KPK-SW model.

Table 4. Results of experts' assessment of the importance of the model

No.	Assessment Aspect	Average Score
1.	Setting learning objectives	4.40
2.	The principal's role as a resource person	4.40
3.	Creating a conducive learning atmosphere	4.30
4.	Communicating school vision and mission to staff	4.40
5.	Guiding staff to achieve school goals	4.50
6.	Developing teacher professionalism	4.30
7.	Demonstrating positivity toward teachers, staff, students, and parents	4.30
8.	General assessment of the importance of the model	4.40
Average Total Score		4.38

Based on the assessment of 10 experts in the first stage, the average score shows that the KPK-SW learning leadership model was considered highly necessary, with an average score of 4.38, placing it in the very important category with a score ranging from >3.5 to 4.2. In addition, students were also invited to comment on the clarity of the leadership model. The feedback provided by the experts on this leadership model was combined with the students' opinions and input from school supervisors and education offices to refine the model. These results show that the first stage of the assessment confirmed that the KPK-SW model is highly significant based on the experts' assessment.

The validation results from 10 experts show an average score of 4.38, which falls into the very important category. All components assessed by the experts scored within the range of >3.5 to 4.2, indicating the importance of continuing the development of the KPK-SW model. The assessment results from the head of the education office also reflect a high level of importance with a score of 4.44, which is in the very good category. The assessment from the head of the education centre shows the same level of importance, with a score of 4.32. In addition, the assessment from school supervisors also showed a score of 4.39, further supporting the importance of developing this model. These assessment results fall within the range of >3.5 to 4.2, underscoring the importance of developing this KPK-SW model.

Discussion

This study shows that developing a learning leadership model for vocational high school (SMK) principals to promote student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar is highly significant and relevant to the vocational high schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Based on the validation results involving 10 experts, this model obtained an average score of 4.38, categorised as 'very important' to be developed. All model components assessed by the experts scored above 3.5, indicating that the main aspects of learning leadership have been considered highly relevant for implementation in vocational high schools. Similar assessments by the head of the education office, the head of the education centre, and the school supervisors also show similar results, with an average score above 4.32. This indicates that the model is theoretically relevant and supported by education practitioners for practical implementation.

The results of this study confirm that the development of the principal's learning leadership model is highly relevant to promoting student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar policy in vocational high schools. Strong validation from educational experts and practitioners indicates that this model could serve as a valuable instrument for improving the quality of education in vocational high schools. This is in line with instructional leadership theory, which emphasizes the

role of principals in supporting effective learning and prioritising student well-being (Bush & Glover, 2014). This model reflects the central role of principals in creating an environment that supports students' physical, mental, and social health, which are core components of student well-being (Howells, 2018).

Effective learning leadership requires principals to focus on academic outcomes and achieving holistic student well-being (Day et al., 2020). This aligns with the principles of student-centred learning, which emphasise prioritising students' needs in all learning activities, as reflected in the Merdeka Belajar policy (Prasetyo, 2023). Student well-being encompasses both academic achievement and social and emotional aspects, which are important for increasing learning motivation and student engagement (Pietarinen et al., 2014). This model also supports the transformational leadership theory, which positions school principals as agents of change who inspire teachers and students to adapt to new educational challenges (Day et al., 2016). The implementation of Merdeka Belajar in vocational high schools requires principals to have the ability to lead changes that emphasise curriculum flexibility and student welfare (Harris & Jones, 2017).

In addition, the importance of emotional intelligence in school leadership is recognised as one of the important aspects of creating positive relationships with teachers and students, as highlighted in a recent study (Al Shehhi et al., 2021). Principals with high emotional intelligence can motivate teachers and create an inclusive learning environment that supports students' well-being. This research also shows that the developed leadership model embodies the concept of collaborative leadership, involving teachers and staff in the decision-making process related to student well-being (Day et al., 2016). Vocational high school principals who adopt the collaborative leadership model tend to be more effective in building positive relationships with education stakeholders, which is an important factor in fostering a school culture that supports student well-being.

According to recent research, student well-being in schools relies not only on policies but also on the active role of principals in creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). With the implementation of Merdeka Belajar, principals have greater responsibility for ensuring that students receive learning experiences that suit their needs and potential, supporting their overall social and emotional development (Ingtias et al., 2022). The high validation scores from education practitioners also indicate that the model improves the overall quality of education. This finding is in line with the view that student well-being is an important element in improving students' learning motivation and engagement in the classroom. Through this model, vocational high school principals can support meaningful, relevant, and enjoyable student learning experiences more effectively.

CONCLUSION

The research shows the need and significance of developing a learning leadership model for vocational high school principals to promote student well-being in the context of Merdeka Belajar in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Based on the validation results involving 10 experts, the model received an average score of 4.38. Similarly, the head of the education office provided an average score of 4.44, the head of the education centre assessed the importance level at 4.32 on average, and the school supervisors gave an average score of 4.39. All these assessments categorise the model as 'very important', underscoring its relevance and significant role in supporting student well-being and improving the quality of education.

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