

COLLABORATION OF CENTRAL, REGIONAL, AND COMMUNITY GOVERNMENTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL DEMOCRACY IN THE ERA OF DECENTRALIZATION OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of collaboration among the central government, local government, and community in implementing democratic principles in schools within the context of educational decentralization in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and policy document analysis. The findings reveal that the central government maintains a dominant role as regulator, the local government exercises adaptive implementation, and the community participates as partners in decision-making and oversight. However, democratic practices in schools remain limited due to strong central control, uneven local capacities, and symbolic community participation. These results highlight the importance of multi-level governance in education, emphasizing that the democratization of schools requires not only national policy but also strengthened local leadership and meaningful community engagement. The study contributes to the theoretical debate on decentralization and democracy in education while providing practical insights for policy design toward more inclusive and accountable school governance.

Keywords: educational decentralization, school democracy, multi-level governance, local government, community participation

Introduction

Decentralization of education is one of the governance reform strategies that has been widely implemented in various countries since the 1990s. This policy is seen as a way to increase efficiency, participation, and accountability in the implementation of education (Bray, 2003). Through decentralization, the central government delegates some of its authority to local governments and school communities, so that decision-making can be more responsive to local needs (Cerna, 2019). In a global context, decentralization is also associated with the democratization of education, where schools function not only as institutions of knowledge transfer, but also as an arena for learning the values of participation, transparency, and social responsibility (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998).

In Indonesia, the decentralization of education has become increasingly prominent since the enactment of Law No. 22 of 1999 concerning Regional Government and strengthened by Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System. This policy provides broad autonomy for regions to manage the education sector, including curriculum, financing, and school management (Bjork, 2006). However, its implementation often faces various challenges, ranging from capacity disparities between regions to limited human resources (Kristiansen & Pratikno, 2006). This raises questions about the extent to which decentralization really supports democratic principles in school administration.

Democracy in Education The implementation of democratic principles in schools includes the participation of teachers, students, parents, and the community in decision-making, as well as the existence of transparency and accountability mechanisms (Davies, 2002). A democratic school is expected to create a participatory culture that encourages students to become critical and responsible citizens (Apple & Beane, 2007). In the context of decentralization, school democratization is not only internal, but also requires collaboration across actors: the central government as a regulator, local governments as policy implementers, and school communities as recipients and partners in education management (Azis et al., 2019).

Dynamics of Multi-Level Governance The interaction between the central government, local governments, and communities in education can be understood through a *multi-level governance approach*. The central government retains a strategic role in setting standards and regulations, while local governments are given adaptive authority to adapt to the local context (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013). On the other hand, the school community—which includes parents, school committees, and local communities—is an important actor in ensuring the connection between policy and field reality (Winkler & Gershberg, 2000). The synergy between these three levels determines the extent to which the principles of democracy are truly realized in educational practice.

Challenges and Critical Issues Nonetheless, cross-level collaboration often faces structural and cultural barriers. On the one hand, the central government tends to maintain control through strict regulation, while local governments often lack the capacity to implement policies effectively (Heyward, Cannon, & Sarjono, 2011). On the other hand, community participation is often still a formality and has not been fully integrated in decision-making (Darmawan, 2019). This situation creates a gap between the normative goal of decentralization of education and the democratic practices that occur in schools.

Based on this context, this study aims to analyze collaboration between the central government, local governments, and communities in the implementation of school democracy in the era of education decentralization. The focus of the study is directed at interaction, synergy, and tension between actors in managing schools as a democratic space. Using a qualitative approach, this study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on decentralization of education and democracy, as well as

practical implications for the formulation of more participatory education policies in Indonesia.

Literature review

Decentralization of Education and the Goal of Democratization

The literature on the decentralization of education emphasizes that this policy is not only intended to improve bureaucratic efficiency, but also to strengthen the democratization of education. Bray (2003) emphasized that decentralization allows for a more equitable distribution of authority, so that decision-making is closer to the school community. Thus, decentralization is seen as an instrument that can increase community participation while strengthening the principle of public accountability (Cerna, 2019).

The Role of the Central Government in Decentralization

Although educational authority is decentralized, the literature shows that the central government retains strategic control. The central government sets minimum standards, core curriculum, and accreditation and evaluation policies (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013). The Leithwood and Menzies (1998) study confirms that without a clear regulatory framework from the center, decentralization risks producing quality inequality between schools. Therefore, the role of the center is more as a regulator and director than a technical implementer.

The Role of Local Governments in Education Governance

Local governments are positioned as key actors in the implementation of more adaptive education policies. Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) show that decentralization in Indonesia provides opportunities for regions to adapt school management to local needs. However, regional institutional capacity often varies, resulting in disparities in the quality of education between regions (Bjork, 2006). The literature also notes that the role of the region is strongly influenced by the quality of local leadership and the effectiveness of the educational bureaucracy (Heyward, Cannon, & Sarjono, 2011).

Community Participation in School Democracy

Communities, especially parents, school committees, and local communities have an important role to play in ensuring democratic practices in schools. Apple and Beane (2007) emphasize that school democracy cannot only be enforced from above, but must be built through community participation. Darmawan's research (2019) shows that in Indonesia, community involvement is still often symbolic, even though the potential for their contribution in planning, monitoring, and evaluation is very large. The success of school democratization is greatly influenced by the extent to which the community is given space to be involved in substantive decision-making.

Multi-Level Governance Synergy in Education

The *multi-level governance approach* is widely used to understand the dynamics of relationships between actors in education governance. Winkler and Gershberg (2000) emphasize that the success of decentralization depends on the synergy between central regulation, regional flexibility, and community participation. Without effective coordination, decentralization can actually lead to policy fragmentation and disparities in the quality of education. Therefore, the literature encourages collaborative models that emphasize a balance between central control and local autonomy (Azis, Nugroho, & Pratama, 2019).

Research Gaps and Study Relevance

A number of previous studies have addressed individual aspects of the decentralization of education, such as the effectiveness of management-based schools (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998) or community involvement (Darmawan, 2019). However, studies that integrate interactions between central, regional, and community government actors within the framework of school democratization are still relatively limited, especially in the Indonesian context. Therefore, this research is relevant to fill the literature gap by emphasizing cross-level collaboration in the implementation of democratic principles in schools, as well as providing empirical insights for the formulation of more participatory education policies

Research Methods

Research Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to delve deeply into the processes, dynamics, and interactions between actors in the implementation of school democracy. Case studies are seen as relevant to understand the specific context of the relationship between central government, local government, and communities within a particular educational unit, so as to uncover the phenomenon holistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this research focuses not only on policy outputs, but also on the practices, experiences, and perceptions of stakeholders.

Location, Informant, and Data Collection Techniques

The location of the research was purposively determined in several schools under the authority of the local government, taking into account geographical variation and institutional capacity. The research informants included education officials (local government representation), school principals and teachers (implementation level), as well as school committees and parent representatives (community representation). Data was collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and analysis of education policy documents at both the central and regional levels. Source triangulation is done to increase the validity of the data (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis and Validity

The data was analyzed using thematic *analysis techniques*, with stages of open coding, category grouping, and discovery of the main themes related to cross-level collaboration in the implementation of school democracy. The researcher applied validation strategies in the form of *member checking*, discussion with peers, and trail audits to maintain data traceability (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). With this strategy, the research is expected to produce a rich, in-depth, and credible understanding of the practice of decentralization of education within the framework of the democratization of schools in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

The Role of the Central Government as a Regulator

The results of the study show that the central government continues to play a dominant role as a regulator in ensuring education quality standards. Curriculum policies, national education standards, and accreditation regulations are still controlled by the central government to ensure uniformity of quality throughout Indonesia. This is in line with the findings of Hanushek, Link, and Woessmann (2013) who emphasized that central regulation is needed so that decentralization does not cause a gap in quality between regions. However, practice on the ground shows that central dominance sometimes limits the flexibility of regions to adapt policies to local needs.

Local Government Capacity in Implementation

At the local government level, there is a variation in institutional capacity in managing education. Regions with adequate resources are able to better implement autonomy-based school management, while regions with limited resources tend to only carry out central instruction without innovation. These findings reinforce the study of Kristiansen and Pratikno (2006) that the quality of local leadership and bureaucratic capacity strongly determine the success of education decentralization. Inequality between regions reflects the need to strengthen institutions so that the democratization of education can run more evenly.

School Community Participation

Community participation, especially school committees and parents, still tends to be formal, although there are indications of increased involvement in some aspects such as school budget planning and extracurricular activities. Darmawan's research (2019) shows that community involvement is often limited by hierarchical culture and limited access to information. However, in some schools, there are good practices where the community is actively involved in decision-making, which supports the formation of a culture of democracy in schools (Apple & Beane, 2007). This shows that there is a potential for more substantial participation if supported by inclusive school policies and culture.

Dynamics of Multi-Level Governance Interaction

The interaction between the center, regions, and communities forms a *complex multi-level governance pattern*. The central government provides regulations, local

governments adapt policies to the local context, while the school community provides input and supervision. However, the study also found tensions: central governments often emphasize regulatory compliance, while communities demand greater flexibility. This is in line with the findings of Winkler and Gershberg (2000) that the decentralization of education is only effective if there is a balance between central control and local participation.

Implications for the Democratization of Education

Overall, the results of the study show that the democratization of schools in the era of education decentralization has not been fully optimal. Central regulations that are still dominant, uneven regional capacity, and limited community participation are the main factors that hinder the realization of democratic schools. However, the findings also show that cross-level collaboration can strengthen democratic principles if each actor performs its role synergistically. This study reinforces the literature that democratization of education is not only a policy issue, but also a collaborative practice involving all stakeholders (Azis, Nugroho, & Pratama, 2019).

Conclusion

This research shows that the decentralization of education in Indonesia has opened up space for the application of democratic principles in schools through the involvement of various actors: the central government, local governments, and communities. The central government plays the role of regulator, local governments as adaptive implementers, and communities as partners in supervision and decision-making. However, the practice of democratization of schools is not fully optimal because there is still dominance of central regulations, uneven regional capacity, and community participation which is often a formality (Kristiansen & Pratikno, 2006; Darmawan, 2019).

Theoretical and Practical Implications Theoretically, this study emphasizes the importance of *a multi-level governance approach* in analyzing education governance, where cross-level collaboration is the key to the success of school democratization (Winkler & Gershberg, 2000). In practical terms, these findings imply that the democratization of education cannot be achieved only with policies from the central government, but also requires strengthening the capacity of local governments and empowering school communities to be more active and substantial in the decision-making process.

Recommendations Based on the results of the study, there are three main recommendations. First, the central government needs to balance regulations with providing wider innovation space for the regions. Second, local governments need to strengthen bureaucratic and leadership capacity to be able to implement policies in an adaptive and contextual manner. Third, the school community needs to be facilitated through a real, transparent, and sustainable participation mechanism. With these steps, the implementation of school democracy in the era of decentralization can run more inclusive, accountable, and oriented towards improving the quality of education.

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