THE ROLE OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN PROMOTING COLLABORATION AND COMPETITION AMONG SCHOOLS

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Abstract: This article aims to determine the impact of education management reforms on school autonomy in encouraging collaboration and competition between schools conducted in Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi. This qualitative case study research was conducted over two months using data collection techniques through interviews, observation, and documentation. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 12 school principals in Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi, who were selected using purposeful sampling. Data analysis used triangulation techniques. The results showed that government decisions related to school autonomy and similar matters significantly influence relationships (collaboration and competition) between schools. The implications of these findings trigger a discussion on the impact of education management reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy in the context of school-to-school relationships. This study showed that educational management associated with school autonomy significantly influences relationships between schools. Decreasing the role of the state and increasing school autonomy exert different effects on school-to-school relationships depending on the governance model adopted. This study also shows that the experience of school collaboration and competition depends largely on the current policy of reorganizing school networks in cities and districts.

Keywords: School Autonomy, Education Management, School Cooperation, School Competition

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the implementation of neoliberal education policies in various countries has promoted increased school autonomy and introduced competition within the education market by reducing the state's involvement in educational management (Chapman, 2015; Keddie, 2016). Despite the ongoing decentralization reforms, there is currently insufficient evidence to establish a direct correlation between the level of school autonomy and student's academic achievement (Cheng et al., 2016; Higham & Earley, 2013; Keddie, 2014). Researchers suggest this may be due to the inadequate focus on developing autonomous managerial capacity within schools (Woods & Simkins, 2014). According to Monkevičius & Urbanovič (2016), the success of the reform is influenced by the leadership capabilities within schools. Hence, collaboration between schools can be seen as a step towards enhancing school management and leadership. However, many countries' education management reforms based on neoliberal ideology do not prioritize collaborative initiatives (Altrichter et al., 2014; Chapman, 2013). This is because the perception of the public as consumers with freedom of choice in education services encourages educational providers to compete against each other.

Decentralization has been a notable change in education management over the past decade, resulting in increased school autonomy (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013). This transformation has led to increased managerial responsibility and the transfer of decision-making authority to the school level, facilitating the development of school self-regulation and other related aspects. The underlying objective of these educational management reforms is to enhance school autonomy and provide greater freedom to principals, teachers, parents, and sometimes students or other members of the school community in matters of teaching, finances, staffing, and resources (Gobby, 2013; Hanushek et al., 2013). Several studies propose that increased school autonomy can enable school leaders to better address their schools' unique needs, eliminate inefficiencies associated with bureaucratic governance, and stimulate innovation and efficient resource utilization, thereby improving the overall public education system (Glatter, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012).

The problem underlying this research is the concern and anxiety about the impact of education management reforms related to school autonomy in encouraging collaboration and competition among schools in the cities of Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi. Although school autonomy is expected to provide freedom for each school to manage education programs and policies according to their needs, the decreasing role of the government and increasing school autonomy may also affect the dynamics of relationships between schools. Moreover, the implementation of school autonomy may vary depending on the governance model adopted by each school, leading to variations in the experience

of collaboration and competition between schools. Therefore, this research was conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of how the current school autonomy policy impacts school-to-school relationships in the region, and through this research, it is hoped to provide a basis for debating and improving education management focusing on school autonomy and school-to-school relationships to improve the quality of education in the cities of Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi.

Previous research has included Keddie (2014), who explored a deeper understanding of how geographical context can influence the dynamics between schools in the context of autonomy. In addition, Cheng et al. (2016) examined how managerial capacity at the school level affects the implementation of school autonomy. This study provides insights into effective self-management practices and guides other schools to improve their autonomy. In addition, Higham & Earley (2013) provided a more comprehensive picture of collaboration's benefits and an empirical foundation to encourage cooperation between schools. And research from Monkevičius & Urbanovič (2016) investigated the impact of inter-school collaboration on students' transition from primary to secondary school. This study provides insights into how collaboration can facilitate a smoother and more successful transition for students and how a lack of collaboration can cause challenges in this transition phase.

Previous research has identified a key determinant of successful implementation of school autonomy: managerial capacity at the school level. However, a research gap that still needs to be further explored is how to improve this self-management capacity through collaboration and competition among schools. Research focusing on this collaborative and competitive approach will provide novelty and understanding of how schools can share best practices and utilize available resources to improve the effectiveness of school autonomy. This article aims to determine the impact of education management reforms related to school autonomy in promoting collaboration and competition among schools conducted in the cities of Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi.

METHODS

The research method used is qualitative research in the form of case studies. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to focus more on the main research questions and identify the uniqueness of each case studied (Creswell et al., 2007). Thus, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the role of certain elements in the governance of the education system and school autonomy that affect relationships between schools. Data were collected through observations in Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi and semi-structured interviews with 12 school principals in November-December 2022. Informants were selected based on their knowledge of education management

reform and active involvement in daily activities. The research also considered the principals' managerial competence and experience in school management. A phased sampling strategy was used to select schools from different Jakarta, Bogor, and Bekasi areas, including metropolitan areas, city centers, and rural areas, considering school size. The research participants consisted of 4 public and four private schools, selected by considering the diversity of public and private schools based on official data from the local education office.

All data that has been collected will be analyzed using the analysis technique developed by Miles et al. (2014). This analysis consists of three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The first stage, data condensation, is the initial process where data will be sorted, focused, and abstracted to make it more organized and easy to understand. Furthermore, in the data presentation stage, the collected information will be organized, neat, and structured, making it possible to draw conclusions and make informed decisions. The final stage, conclusion drawing, involves continuous verification and evaluation of the analyzed results throughout the research process to ensure that the conclusions drawn are accurate and reliable. This analysis process aims to ensure that the research results can be interpreted correctly and have high validity (Miles et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this study, the data were classified using categorical analysis by the researcher. The initial categorical analysis provided a summary of the results, which then served as a basis for conducting a thematic analysis. The purpose of the thematic analysis was to examine how education management reforms aimed at enhancing school autonomy impact the relationships between schools.

Cooperation inter-schools

School principals were requested to provide feedback on how educational management reforms promote collaboration between schools and to rate their own experiences with collaboration. The responses from principals were then categorized based on the reasons, types, and objectives of school-to-school collaboration.

Although there is no mandatory requirement for schools to collaborate, nor an official recommendation, the research data enables the identification of several fundamental forms of school collaboration. These include collaboration with distant schools, local neighborhood schools, schools with similar characteristics, and schools sharing the same name.

Table 1. School collaboration categories and codes

Categories	Codes
Collaboration factors	authority point of view;
	strategic planning of cities;
	the size and location of the school;
	financial and material situation;
Collaboration types	with distant schools;
	with nearby schools;
	with similar (the same level);
Collaboration objectives	to improve educational processes and outcomes;
	to reduce/facilitate the transition period;
	to improve the qualifications of teachers;
	to develop students' social skills;

Schools usually tend to collaborate more with schools located outside the city or other regions, which are not competing in recruiting students, teachers, and so on.

To be honest, the more cooperation we have is with schools that are located far away from us and are not potential competitors, and are close in location (Principal 1).

If there is no effort from the city government to trigger competition among schools, then it is likely that schools will be more inclined to cooperate with nearby schools.

We have a closer relationship with different city secondary schools or junior secondary schools because of the potential to attract students to enroll in our school (Principal 1).

This study found that schools tend to collaborate with similar schools (provided that they are not competing for the same students). This is due to the similarity of programs or school types. Public schools tend to collaborate with fellow public schools. The same applies to private schools. However, this cooperation is not absolute.

Yes, we cooperate with the nearest high school. We have cooperated because we have a working association of public school principals. And usually, public school principals have a clear rotation around their area (Principal 2).

The principal of a private school also expressed the same thing because of the interests of the school and especially the ideology he held.

Yes, we cooperate with schools with the same interests (ideology). Some schools have religious programs similar to ours. We often organize competitions and student exchanges, and they also often organize events by inviting our school (Principal 5).

From the research results, it was found that collaboration between neighboring schools that have different education programs. In this case, collaboration helps each other monitor student achievement more effectively and improve the education process based on inputs in the principals' working meeting forum. Typically, schools that provide religious education programs in junior secondary schools tend to collaborate with schools that offer higher-level education programs, such as senior secondary schools that specialize in religious studies.

> *To fulfill the higher admission indicator, we ensure that students continue to schools of the same ideology, so we collaborate with junior high schools. We also collaborate to evaluate the quality of the school and continue to help prepare students to assess themselves well. This is one way for us to improve the education process and ensure a better quality of education* (Principal 6).

Schools in Bogor prefer collaborating with schools further away from each other to share best practices on study tours. These collaborations usually involve studying more advanced schools or those that have collaborations to jointly improve quality.

> *We do a study tour visit to another school to get to know each other, observe lessons, discuss, and look around; then, we return to our school to put it into practice. The school also visits our school, and we show them everything we have. In this case, this is a form of collaborative development between the schools* (Principal 3).

> *I bring the best practices from each school I visit, and I am very happy because I go to a school with better quality to learn something new...*(Principal 4)

In many cases, even if competing, schools must cooperate to achieve the same educational goals. Human resources are often limited, especially for small schools or those in the suburbs or rural areas, so they have to work together to evaluate student performance or cope with unexpected situations in the principals' working meeting forum.

> *We work together to evaluate student performance. This is common in most small schools, where we must evaluate the school's educational performance, especially in the independent curriculum* (Principal 7).

The research results show that when school autonomy is enhanced, collaboration between schools becomes an important factor in strengthening principals' leadership. Collaboration between schools allows principals to support and advise fellow principals in solving various problems schools face.

I am very active in collaborating with other schools because I am an education expert and a national instructor. So I share experiences and consult with each other (Principal 3).

In these situations, principals exchange ideas and experiences to implement certain changes or innovations in the principals' working meeting forum:

City, district, and village principals call each other every month; we gather at school, share experiences, make procedures, discuss the interpretation of the latest curriculum (independent curriculum), we tell each other what we are doing (Principal 7).

Competition inter-schools

The second aim of the study was to identify the managerial factors that initiate competition among schools and the corresponding advantages. The analysis of the responses led to the formation of the following categories:

Table 2. Categories of competition between schools

Categories	Codes
Reasons for competition	struggling to find school-ranking students
Concurrent competition	seeking higher quality school insulation; consumerism

In this study, one of the aims was to determine the organizational factors that foster competition among schools and the advantages associated with it. The findings reveal that the highest level of competition occurs among schools vying for the same pool of students.

There is competition for new students. Sometimes that competition is not very good (Principal 7)

...there is a recruitment problem because the competition overlaps, especially with public schools. With the competition for student recruitment, we need the children more for the school's operation (Principal 8).

In addition to competition for students, school ranking also affects the competitive relationship between schools.

Currently, a school's accreditation status uses various criteria to evaluate schools. This affects the perception of the community, especially parents, towards schools. As a result, there is competition to achieve higher accreditation ratings (Principal 1).

Principals also noted that excessive competition rooted in the principle of school choice could promote a consumeristic mindset towards education and result in a decline in educational quality standards:

Competition can be a disaster as it encourages a reduction in standards. It can humiliate teachers and negatively affect the school's reputation. In addition, competition also encourages a consumerist mindset, especially in parents choosing schools for their children (Principal 5).

Although principals generally hold a predominantly negative view towards competition among schools, they also acknowledged the positive aspects of competition:

I see competition as a powerful tool to progress, grow, and become better...(Principal 3)

It can be concluded that the same governance factors influence school-to-school relationships, but their impact may vary depending on the situation and context. There are both positive and negative consequences that may result from school linkages. In the phenomenon of decentralized authority in Indonesia, school autonomy is enhanced to enable participation in a competitive environment, creating a special profile and seeking innovations. In the spirit of the new curriculum change with the slogan 'independent curriculum', school autonomy is needed to empower communities and facilitate their participation. This model of school autonomy includes a competitive element, especially as parents have a choice in selecting schools, albeit a limited one. However, it also has an element of participation, demonstrated by the aspiration to create democratic community schools.

One of the main factors influencing the relationship between schools is the education decentralization reform, in which municipalities and schools are given more freedom and responsibility. However, different accounts of the decentralization process show that while education decentralization encourages schools to work together and provides greater autonomy, decentralization of education management and market-directed regulation increases competition between schools. Other research highlights the important role of city governments in maintaining cooperation between schools. For example, Monkevičius & Urbanovič (2016) concluded that city or district governments play an important role in the productive functioning of school groups. It is crucial to maintain the autonomy of schools even as the local government promotes collaborative efforts. Schools should address individualized concerns while the city or district government offers guidance and assistance. Effective group work occurs when a clear purpose explicitly respects the participating schools' autonomy.

The results show that inter-school cooperation has developed significantly. It can be seen from several experiences from abroad that cooperation between schools can be a solution to improving school performance. Schools may be forced to join cooperation networks due to poor performance

ratings or negative inspection reports (Banoğlu, 2011; Herlambang et al., 2021; Pusporini et al., 2019). In addition, the government has also initiated specific programs to support cooperation between schools, such as the "driving school" program. This program is an officially designated "preferred" school that acts as a central resource to support other schools in teacher education and inter-school support as an implementation of the "Merdeka Curriculum". In addition, cooperation between schools can also improve the quality of education in more rural or less developed areas by sharing resources and information (Bahçelioğlu et al., 2020; Fagnani & Guimarães, 2017). However, there are challenges in implementing inter-school cooperation, such as finding common goals, overcoming differences in perceptions and ideologies, and maintaining school autonomy in cooperation. Therefore, the role of the city or district government and school principals is crucial in managing and facilitating inter-school collaboration, considering each school's unique needs and characteristics.

The findings of this study corroborate previous research studies that highlight the advantages of school collaboration (Budihardjo et al., 2021; Hartanti et al., 2022). Despite the highly competitive nature of the local context, the majority of principals expressed a positive stance towards inter-school collaboration. Collaborative efforts between schools offer invaluable support in enabling schools to concentrate on their educational objectives and internal requirements. Principals unanimously agree that collaborating with other schools, particularly smaller ones, is crucial for enhancing the learning environment for students. As noted by Monkevičius & Urbanovič (2016), cooperation between schools yields superior outcomes. Consequently, collaboration among schools holds significant potential for fostering school development and promoting student achievement.

In principle, the presence of competition among schools serves as a driving force for schools to strive for enhanced educational quality. When students and/or parents have the opportunity to select the most suitable school from a range of options, they are inclined to choose the institution that offers superior educational standards (Cheng et al., 2016; Keddie, 2016). Nevertheless, this study affirms that such competition harms the quality of school learning outcomes, particularly when schools engage in a race to attract more students. Furthermore, this competitive environment can result in a decline in educational standards due to fragmented processes and tensions that arise both between and within schools. Despite the increased autonomy granted to schools within a competitive setting, this can paradoxically lead to lower educational quality. This observation aligns with previous research conducted by Monkevičius & Urbanovič (2016) and Woods and Simkins (2014). As a result, in bureaucratic models of educational governance characterized by centralized solutions and territorial divisions, where informal cooperation is absent, and conditions for fostering competition between schools are lacking, school autonomy is at its lowest point.

Schools perceive this as beneficial in fostering stability and cultivating amicable relationships among educational institutions. A key aspect of education management reform lies in the provision of school choice, which creates a competitive atmosphere among schools. Within this environment, schools enjoy a reasonable level of autonomy, but the extent of their autonomy is often influenced by the principals' leadership abilities and the school community's collaborative efforts. In larger cities where collaborative school networks are established, schools experience a decreased level of autonomy, yet they still uphold a sense of responsibility towards their network partners and the shared objective of delivering high-quality education (Chapman, 2015).

This research supports the conclusion that bureaucracy, market competition, and network collaboration can interact and coexist (Woods & Simkins, 2014). When schools compete to attract the same students in the same area, they become part of the market. However, when schools cooperate with schools located in different places, they can be part of a unified network or collaborate with schools outside the community. Therefore, while schools can compete in the market, they can cooperate with other schools in collaborative networks or bureaucratic hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The results of the research conducted show that decisions taken by the government about school autonomy and similar issues have a significant influence on relationships between schools, both in the form of collaboration and competition. The implications of these findings open up a wide discussion on the impact of education management reforms aimed at enhancing school autonomy, especially in the context of inter-school relations. The results of this study indicate that education management related to the implementation of school autonomy has a significant impact on relationships between schools. The decreasing role of the state and increasing school autonomy have diverse effects on interactions between schools, which are determined by the governance model adopted by each school. In addition, this study also found that the experience of collaboration and competition between schools is strongly influenced by the current school network reorganization policy at the city and district levels. This suggests that existing governance structures can have a significant influence on the dynamics of relationships between schools. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of how school autonomy can affect relationships between schools and how education policies that focus on school autonomy can shape the education landscape at the local level. The implications of this study can provide guidance and input for policymakers in formulating education policies that are more effective and have a positive impact on the education

system at the local level, especially in terms of enhancing cooperation and healthy competition between schools.

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