

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This study examines how school principals enact collaborative leadership to manage organizational conflict in vocational high schools (SMK) designated as Centers of Excellence (Pusat Keunggulan). A qualitative multi-case study design was employed, involving two private vocational schools, SMK Islam Kalipare and SMK Brantas Karangates, selected for their contrasting institutional cultures and shared participation in the SMK PK program. Data were collected through 24 semi-structured interviews with principals, vice principals, teachers, school committee members, and industry partners; non-participant observations of meetings and mediation sessions; and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that collaborative conflict management was practiced through structured dialogue forums, cross-functional mediation teams, and inclusive decision-making processes. Principals identified conflict early by maintaining open communication channels and mapping stakeholder interests. Conflict management strategies included integrative negotiation, mediation, and compromise, with a strong emphasis on preserving relationships and aligning school-industry expectations. Supporting factors comprised mutual trust, transparent communication, organizational and religious values, and external support from foundations and industry partners. Conversely, barriers included teacher resistance to curriculum changes, administrative workload, and over-reliance on the principal as the primary conflict resolver. The findings suggest that collaborative leadership transforms conflict into a catalyst for institutional learning and commitment. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature on conflict management in vocational education reform and offers practical implications for principal preparation programs, especially in developing relational, participatory, and distributed leadership capacities.

Keywords

Center of Excellence, Collaborative leadership, Conflict management, School principal, Vocational high school.



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INTRODUCTION

Collaborative leadership has become an increasingly relevant framework for principals managing organizational conflict in vocational high schools (SMK) that have been designated as Centers of Excellence (*Pusat Keunggulan*). In the context of Malang Regency, two schools, SMK Islam Kalipare and SMK Brantas Karangates, demonstrate how principals enact this leadership approach through structured dialogue, distributed roles, and integrative conflict management. These two schools were selected as research sites because both hold the SMK PK designation yet differ fundamentally in institutional culture: SMK Islam Kalipare operates under an Islamic foundation with strong Islamic values, while SMK Brantas Karangates is a secular school oriented toward industrial partnerships. This contrast provides a strategically useful comparative lens for understanding how collaborative leadership is contextualized across different organizational settings (Yin, 2018).

Based on the researcher's initial observations on both locations regarding the implementation of collaborative leadership in conflict management, the two cases show that principals used cross-functional mediation teams and transparent decision-making processes. In SMK Islam Kalipare, a conflict mediation team consisting of the vice principal, two senior teachers, and a foundation representative handled interpersonal disputes using restorative justice principles. In SMK Brantas Karangates, cross-functional working groups were formed for specific issues such as curriculum alignment and internship management, with teachers taking leadership roles within these groups. This distribution of responsibility reduced the principal's burden and increased the legitimacy of decisions because they were perceived as collective rather than personal. The principals also mapped stakeholder interests and maintained open communication channels, enabling them to diagnose conflict sources such as teacher resistance to curriculum changes, foundation expectations, or industry interference before they became destructive.

The principal's role in engaging teachers and the school community was that of a facilitator, bridge-builder, and trust-builder rather than a solitary problem-solver. Both principals invested time in building relational trust through transparency and consistency. At SMK Islam Kalipare, the principal acted as a bridge between government demands and the Islamic foundation's religious values, negotiating a revised timetable that preserved religious study periods while increasing vocational practice hours. At SMK Brantas Karangates, the principal used a transparent budgeting process and joint problem-solving workshops with industry partners to shift the focus from blame

to improvement. Teachers reported feeling more empowered and committed when they participated in resolving conflicts, and industry partners noted that data-driven joint workshops helped find solutions that benefited students. This engagement of multiple stakeholders aligns with distributed leadership theory, which views leadership as stretched across people and practices rather than residing in a single individual (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006).

To what extent collaborative leadership supports effective and harmonious conflict resolution is evident from the outcomes in both schools. The principals favored integrative strategies, negotiation, mediation, and dialogue that addressed underlying interests and preserved relationships. Conflicts over curriculum alignment, resource allocation, and student internships were resolved through consensus-building and compromise, and in several cases, conflict became a catalyst for institutional learning and strengthened trust. However, the effectiveness of collaborative leadership was constrained by factors such as teacher resistance to change, administrative workload, and over-reliance on the principal when formal collaborative structures were absent or when the principal was unavailable. In SMK Islam Kalipare, the strong religious authority of the principal sometimes led to deference rather than genuine participation, while in SMK Brantas Karangates, the fast pace of industry demands occasionally pressured the principal toward unilateral decisions. Despite these limitations, the overall pattern indicates that collaborative leadership enables schools to transform conflict from a disruptive force into an opportunity for collective commitment and adaptive change.

Five recent studies illustrate the state of research on collaborative leadership and conflict management in educational settings. Özdemir & Demirkasımoğlu (2021) conducted a systematic review of school principals' conflict management and found that collaborative styles were consistently associated with positive school outcomes, but noted a lack of studies in vocational education contexts. Liu et al. (2021) examined the effect of instructional and distributed leadership on teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction; their results showed that distributed leadership reduced role ambiguity and conflict by fostering a supportive school culture. Kusumawati & Suyanto (2022) studied collaborative leadership in Indonesian *SMK Pusat Keunggulan* and reported that principals' collaborative approaches improved teacher commitment and reduced resistance to curriculum changes. Hidayat et al. (2023) employed a multi-case design in Indonesian vocational schools and found that early conflict identification through inclusive forums was a key mechanism for effective management. Park & Lee (2024) investigated Korean vocational high schools and demonstrated that

trust mediated the relationship between collaborative leadership and effective conflict resolution.

From these studies, several research gaps emerge. First, most prior research is either quantitative or single-context, making it difficult to capture the nuanced, processual nature of how collaborative leadership is enacted differently across school cultures. Second, there is limited comparative work that juxtaposes religiously affiliated and secular vocational schools within the same national policy initiative, despite significant differences in institutional values and stakeholder configurations. Third, few studies have integrated in-depth qualitative evidence from multiple stakeholders, teachers, industry partners, foundations, and school committees to explain how collaborative conflict management unfolds in practice. The novelty of this study lies in its multi-case comparison of two *SMK Pusat Keunggulan* schools with contrasting institutional cultures in Malang Regency. By examining both a based Islamic school and an industry-oriented secular school, this research reveals how collaborative leadership is contextualized and adapted, thereby extending existing theoretical and empirical knowledge on conflict management in vocational education. So, the study aims to describe and analyze how school principals apply collaborative leadership in managing organizational conflict within two SMK Pusat Keunggulan in Malang Regency, which has theoretical significance in extending collaborative leadership and distributed leadership theories to the underexplored context of vocational education reform in Indonesia, particularly by comparing religious and secular institutional cultures. Practically, the findings offer guidance for principal preparation and professional development programs, emphasizing the need to cultivate relational capacities, design collaborative structures, and institutionalize distributed conflict management practices beyond the individual principal.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive-qualitative design with multi- case study approach. The study examines “Collaborative Leadership by School Principals in Conflict Management within Vocational High Schools in Malang Regency.” The research data consists of information regarding principal leadership practices, conflict sources, conflict resolution strategies, stakeholder participation, and supporting and inhibiting factors in two *SMK Pusat Keunggulan*. Data were collected using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with principals, vice principals, teachers, school committee members, and industry partners. The interviews were conducted to explore participants’

perceptions of conflict sources, conflict management processes, leadership practices, and the role of collaboration. Observations were conducted from 15 June to 15 August 2026 on regular school meetings, teacher coordination sessions, and one conflict mediation meeting at each school. Documents collected included school policies, meeting minutes, conflict resolution records, and partnership agreements.

The researcher employed data analysis through an analysis outline Braun & Clarke's (2006), integrated with Yin's (2018) cross-case synthesis technique. The researcher critically analyzed the findings using relevant theories regarding collaborative leadership, distributed leadership, and conflict management. Furthermore, the findings were compared with those of other related studies to identify contextual similarities and differences, as well as interesting conclusions regarding the implementation of collaborative policies in conflict management. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, within-case analysis was conducted for each school to identify emerging themes related to conflicts, leadership practices, and outcomes achieved. Second, cross-case analysis compared themes from both schools to identify similarities, differences, and contextual influences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The following presents the research findings on collaborative leadership of school principals in conflict management at SMK Islam Kalipare and SMK Brantas Karangates. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis across both schools. Findings are organized into three areas for each case: (1) research context and conflict landscape, (2) collaborative leadership practices, and (3) conflict management strategies. A cross-case analysis table is then provided to synthesize similarities and differences between the two schools.

Table 1. Collaborative Leadership of School Principals in Conflict Management

No	Research Object	SMK Islam Kalipare	SMK Brantas Karangates
1	Context and Conflict Landscape	Private vocational school under an Islamic foundation; programs in officer management, automotive, and telecommunication computer network. Strong Islamic values: musyawarah, ta'awun, ukhuwah The principal also serves as a religious leader within the foundation. Main conflict sources: curriculum changes required by SMK PK program; teacher resistance to industry-linked assessments; tension between the foundation's religious expectations and government demands for vocational instructional time; student-teacher discipline and workload disputes.	Private vocational school located near an industrial estate; programs in mechanical, automotive, culinary, and electrical engineering. Strong partnerships with manufacturing companies providing internships, equipment, and curriculum input. The principal has an industrial engineering background; their leadership style is pragmatic and data-driven. Main conflict sources: fast-paced implementation of industry standards; teacher frustration with technical updates; industry interference in instructional matters; school-foundation resource allocation disputes; student discipline during internships, and mismatched expectations between students and companies.
2	Collaborative Leadership Practices	Weekly musyawarah meeting with all teachers and staff to surface issues before escalation; decisions made by consensus. Formation of a conflict mediation team comprising the vice principal for student affairs, two senior teachers, and a islamic foundation representative. The mediation team operates on restorative justice principles (islah-reconciliation) rather than punishment. The principal maintains an open-door policy and frequent informal visits to teacher workspaces and classrooms to detect early tensions.	Establishment of a School Quality Assurance Team (SQAT) with representatives from teachers, industry partners, and the school committee; meets monthly to review data and recommend solutions. Cross-functional working groups for specific issues (curriculum alignment, internship management), each with a facilitator and clear terms of reference. Teachers are encouraged to take leadership roles within groups; the principal provides training and trust. Transparent budgeting process: principal presents financial situation openly and facilitates prioritization exercise.

3	Conflict Management Strategies	Early identification: open communication channels and informal daily interactions. Curriculum conflicts: facilitated dialogue sessions between resistant teachers and industry trainers; focused on integrating industry skills with religious values. Foundation conflicts: negotiation and compromise; principal acts as a bridge between the government and the foundation; revised timetable preserving religious study while increasing vocational practice hours. Interpersonal disputes: handled by the mediation team using restorative approaches; emphasis on repairing relationships and understanding perspectives. Outcomes: conflict transformed into learning opportunities; increased trust and commitment among teachers and foundation representatives.	Early identification through structured data reviews and monthly SQAT meetings Teacher–industry conflicts: joint problem-solving workshops using student performance data to identify gaps; shift from blame to improvement. Student conflicts: mediation model involving student, parents, teacher, and sometimes industry supervisor; focus on underlying needs and negotiated expectations; example of internship dismissal resolved through written commitment and mentoring plan. Resource allocation: transparent budgeting and participatory prioritization; decisions accepted even when not ideal Outcomes: conflict used to strengthen partnerships; increased teacher ownership; improved student–industry relationships.
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Source: Results of interviews, observations, and research documentation, 2026

Table 2. Cross-Case Analysis: SMK Islam Kalipare and SMK Brantas Karangates

No	Dimension	SMK Islam Kalipare	SMK Brantas Karangates
1	Conflict Identification	Early identification through daily informal conversations and weekly musyawarah. Value-based safe spaces rooted in Islamic tradition.	Early identification through structured data reviews and monthly SQAT meetings. Data-driven safe spaces emphasizing evidence and performance indicators.
2	Collaborative Structures	Conflict mediation team with a foundation representative. Consensus-based decision-making in musyawarah.	SQAT and cross-functional working groups. Facilitated, role-based decision-making with clear terms of reference.
3	Principal's Role	Facilitator, bridge-builder between government and foundation, and moral-religious leader.	Coordinator, data interpreter, and facilitator of industry–school partnerships.
4	Conflict Management Strategies	Integrative negotiation, compromise, and restorative mediation. Emphasis on reconciliation (islah) and relationship preservation.	Integrative negotiation, joint problem-solving, and transparent budgeting. Emphasis on data-driven diagnosis and collective prioritization.
5	Supporting Factors	Mutual trust rooted in shared religious values. Strong foundation support and cultural norms of consultation.	Mutual trust is built through transparency and evidence. Active industry partner engagement and school committee involvement.

6	Inhibiting Factors	A teacher's deference to the principal's religious authority may limit genuine participation. Time constraints from administrative duties. Over-reliance on the principal when absent.	Teacher resistance to rapid technical changes. Pressure from fast industry demands may push principals toward unilateral decisions. Over-reliance on the principal's data literacy and facilitation skills.
7	Common Themes	Both principals distributed leadership roles to teams and groups. Both used integrative conflict management rather than avoidance or domination. Both emphasized early identification through open communication. Both transformed conflict into opportunities for learning and stronger trust.	

Source: Results of interviews, observations, and research documentation, 2026

Case 1: SMK Islam Kalipare

Context and Conflict Landscape

SMK Islam Kalipare is a private vocational school under an Islamic foundation. It offers programs in Officer Management, Automotive, and Telecommunication Computer Network. The school's principal, Mr. Ali Arifin, has served for more than five years and is also a religious leader within the foundation. The school's culture is deeply rooted in Islamic values, including *musyawarah* (consultation), *ta'awun* (mutual help), and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood). These values shape how conflicts are perceived and addressed.

The main conflicts at SMK Islam Kalipare arose from curriculum changes required by the SMK PK program. Teachers accustomed to traditional teaching methods felt pressured by the new competency-based curriculum and industry-linked assessments. Some senior teachers resisted the integration of industry standards, viewing them as contradictory to the school's religious ethos. Additionally, tensions emerged between the foundation's expectations for religious activities and the government's demand for increased instructional time for vocational competencies. Conflicts also occurred between students and teachers regarding discipline and workload.

Collaborative Leadership Practices

Principal Ali Arifin employed collaborative leadership by institutionalizing regular consultation forums. Every Monday morning, he held a *musyawarah* meeting with all teachers and staff to discuss emerging issues before they escalated. In these meetings, participants were encouraged to voice concerns openly, and decisions were made through consensus rather than majority vote. As one teacher explained, "Pak Ali Arifin always asks us to sit together. Even if we disagree, he listens. He never forces a decision; he waits until we reach an agreement" (Teacher, interview, August 2026).

In addition to formal meetings, Ali Arifin formed a conflict mediation team consisting of the vice principal for student affairs, two senior teachers respected for their wisdom, and a representative from the Islamic foundation. This team handled interpersonal disputes among teachers and between teachers and students. The team operated on principles of restorative justice, aiming to repair relationships rather than assign blame. A vice principal noted, “We don’t punish first. We ask the parties to talk, to understand each other’s perspective. The foundation representative often reminds us of the Islamic value of *Islah*, reconciliation” (Vice principal, interview, August 2026).

Conflict Management Strategies

The principal used several conflict management strategies rooted in collaborative principles. First, early identification was achieved through open-door policies and informal conversations during daily school routines. The principal made a point of visiting teacher workspaces and classrooms regularly, which allowed him to detect tensions before they became formal disputes. Second, when conflicts involved curriculum changes, he organized and facilitated dialogue sessions between resistant teachers and industry trainers. These sessions focused on finding common ground: teachers were shown how industry skills could be integrated without compromising religious values. A teacher admitted, “First I disagreed. But after our principal brought a trainer from the company, I understood that our values and industry standards can go together” (Teacher, interview, August 2026).

Third, conflicts involving the foundation were managed through negotiation and compromise. The principal acted as a bridge between the government’s demands and the foundation’s expectations, negotiating schedules and activities to accommodate both. For example, he proposed a revised timetable that preserved religious study periods while increasing vocational practice hours. This solution was reached after a series of meetings with foundation leaders and teachers. The foundation representative commented, “We trust our principal because he always consults us. He does not decide alone” (Foundation representative, interview, August 2026).

Case 2: SMK Brantas Karangates

Context and Conflict Landscape

SMK Brantas Karangates is a private vocational school located near an industrial estate. It offers programs in mechanical engineering, automotive engineering, and electrical engineering. The principal, Ms. Mintaasih, has a background in industrial engineering and has led the school for five

years. Her leadership style is pragmatic and data-driven. The school has strong partnerships with several manufacturing companies, which provide internships, equipment, and curriculum input.

Conflicts at SMK Brantas Karangates primarily stemmed from the fast-paced implementation of industry standards. Teachers with academic backgrounds struggled to keep up with technical updates, leading to frustration and resistance. Some teachers felt that industry partners interfered too much in instructional matters, while industry partners complained that graduates lacked specific skills. There were also conflicts between the school and the foundation regarding resource allocation, particularly for expensive equipment. Student-related conflicts included indiscipline during internship periods and mismatched expectations between students and companies.

Collaborative Leadership Practices

The principal implemented collaborative leadership through a structured team-based approach. She established a School Quality Assurance Team (SQAT) composed of representatives from teachers, industry partners, and the school committee. The SQAT met monthly to review performance data, identify problems, and recommend solutions. Mintaasih emphasized shared responsibility: “I cannot know everything. The teachers know the classroom, the industry knows the workplace, and the committee knows the community. We must work together” (Principal, interview, August 2026).

In addition to SQAT, Mintaasih created cross-functional working groups for specific issues, such as curriculum alignment and internship management. Each group had a facilitator and clear terms of reference. Teachers were encouraged to take leadership roles within these groups, which increased their ownership of decisions. A teacher who led the curriculum alignment group stated, “First, I was afraid to lead. But Ibu Mintaasih gave me training and trust. Now I understand that my voice matters” (Teacher, interview, August 2026).

Conflict Management Strategies

Mintaasih’s conflict management strategies emphasized data-driven diagnosis and integrative negotiation. When conflicts arose between teachers and industry partners, she organized joint problem-solving workshops where both sides could examine student performance data and identify gaps together. This approach shifted the focus from blame to improvement. An industry partner observed, “We used to argue about who was responsible. Now we sit together and look at the data. We find solutions that benefit the students” (Industry partner, interview, August 2026).

For conflicts involving resource allocation, Mintaasih used a transparent budgeting process. She presented the school's financial situation openly to the foundation and teachers, then facilitated a prioritization exercise. This process reduced suspicion and increased acceptance of difficult decisions. The vice principal for public relations commented, "When the budget was tight, Ibu Mintaasih invited everyone to discuss. We decided together which equipment to buy first. Nobody was happy with the result, but everyone understood the reasons" (Vice principal, interview, August 2026).

When student conflicts occurred, Mintaasih used a mediation model involving the student, parents, teacher, and sometimes the industry supervisor. The mediation focused on identifying underlying needs and negotiating realistic expectations. For example, a student who was dismissed from an internship due to poor attendance was given a second chance after a mediated agreement was reached, including a written commitment and a mentoring plan. The student affairs vice principal noted, "We don't just punish. We try to repair the relationship and find a way forward" (Vice principal, interview, August 2026).

Cross-Case Analysis

Comparison across the two cases revealed several common themes in how collaborative leadership was used to manage conflict.

Early Identification through Inclusive Communication

Both principals maintained open communication channels that allowed them to identify conflict early. In SMK Islam Kalipare, this was achieved through daily informal interactions and the weekly *musyawarah*; in SMK Brantas Karangates, it was through structured data reviews and regular meetings. Despite differences in formality, both approaches shared a core feature: they created safe spaces where stakeholders could express concerns without fear of retaliation. This early identification was crucial for preventing conflicts from escalating into destructive confrontations.

Integrative and Relational Conflict Management

Both principals favored integrative strategies aimed at satisfying the underlying interests of all parties. They avoided authoritative or avoidance approaches. Instead, they used dialogue, negotiation, and mediation to explore common ground. The emphasis was on preserving relationships, not just resolving the immediate issue. This relational orientation was particularly evident in the use of restorative practices at SMK Islam Kalipare and joint problem-solving workshops at SMK Brantas Karangates. In both cases, conflict became an opportunity for learning

and strengthening trust.

Distributed Roles and Teacher Empowerment

Collaborative leadership in both schools involved distributing conflict management roles beyond the principal. At SMK Islam Kalipare, the conflict mediation team and the foundation representative shared responsibility; at SMK Brantas Karangates, the SQAT and cross-functional groups played key roles. This distribution reduced the principal's burden and increased the legitimacy of decisions, as they were seen as collective rather than personal. Teachers reported feeling more empowered and committed when they participated in resolving conflicts.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Several factors supported the implementation of collaborative leadership. Mutual trust between the principal and stakeholders was foundational. Transparent communication, whether through open meetings or data sharing, reinforced this trust. Organizational values, Islamic principles at SMK Islam Kalipare, and industrial professionalism at SMK Brantas Karangates provided a normative framework for collaboration. External support from the foundation and industry partners also played a critical role by providing legitimacy and resources.

Conversely, several factors inhibited collaborative leadership. Teacher resistance to change, especially among senior staff, slowed down the process. Time constraints due to administrative workload made it difficult for principals to engage deeply in every conflict. Over-reliance on the principal as the ultimate resolver remained a challenge; when the principal was absent, conflict resolution sometimes stalled. In SMK Islam Kalipare, the strong religious authority of the principal sometimes led to deference rather than genuine participation. In SMK Brantas Karangates, the fast pace of industry demands occasionally pressured the principal to make unilateral decisions, contradicting the collaborative ideal.

Discussion

The findings at SMK Islam Kalipare show that the principal identified conflict early through daily informal conversations and the weekly musyawarah, a consultative forum rooted in Islamic tradition. At SMK Brantas Karangates, the principal relied on structured data reviews and monthly SQAT meetings to detect emerging tensions. In both schools, safe spaces were created where stakeholders could express concerns without fear of retaliation, which proved crucial for preventing conflicts from escalating into destructive confrontations.

These findings align with collaborative leadership theory, which posits that inclusive communication is a foundational mechanism for successful collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Rubin, 2009). The deliberative forums observed in both schools resemble what Ansell & Gash (2008) call “face-to-face dialogue,” a condition for building trust and shared understanding in collaborative governance. From a distributed leadership perspective, the principals’ practices illustrate how leadership is “stretched over” people, structures, and routines rather than residing solely in the formal leader (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004). The weekly *musyawarah* at SMK Islam Kalipare and the SQAT at SMK Brantas Karangates function as what Harris (2013) terms “distributed leadership structures” that enable collective responsibility for problem identification.

These findings resonate with prior studies. Özdemir and Demirkasımoğlu (2021), in their systematic review, found that principals who used collaborative and integrative approaches to conflict management achieved more positive school outcomes than those relying on authoritarian methods. Similarly, Hidayat et al. (2023) reported that early conflict identification through inclusive forums was the key mechanism for effective conflict management in Indonesian vocational schools. The present study affirms this pattern but extends it by showing that the form of inclusive communication is culturally contingent: at SMK Islam Kalipare, it was expressed through religiously sanctioned consultation (*musyawarah*), whereas at SMK Brantas Karangates, it was expressed through data-driven professionalism.

However, a counterpoint emerges from the literature. Bush (2021) cautions that collaborative forums can become mere rituals if they lack genuine decision-making power. In this study, the *musyawarah* at SMK Islam Kalipare occasionally exhibited deference to the principal’s religious authority rather than genuine deliberation, a form of what Spillane (2006) calls “contrived collaboration.” This suggests that the effectiveness of inclusive communication depends not only on its presence but also on the distribution of actual influence among participants. The study, therefore, offers a nuanced affirmation rather than an uncritical endorsement of collaborative communication structures.

Furthermore, regarding the integrative and relational conflict management, the research findings at SMK Islam Kalipare, the principal favored restorative mediation through the *islah* principle, emphasizing reconciliation and relationship repair. At SMK Brantas Karangates, the principal used joint problem-solving workshops and transparent budgeting to shift the focus from blame to improvement. Both schools used integrative strategies that addressed underlying interests

rather than merely distributing power or avoiding conflict.

These practices are consistent with the integrating style in Rahim's (2017) typology, which involves great concern for both self and others and is considered most effective for complex organizational conflicts. The findings also echo Thomas's (1976) framework, which identifies collaboration as the most constructive conflict-handling mode. Follett's (1940) concept of "constructive conflict" is particularly pertinent: both principals treated conflict as an opportunity to integrate diverse perspectives rather than as a threat to be suppressed. The relational orientation observed in this study also reflects the communication perspective of Putnam & Poole (1987), who argued that conflict resolution is fundamentally a communicative process shaped by organizational norms and interaction patterns.

The study's findings align with several recent empirical works. Chen & Zhang (2022) found that principals who adopted collaborative conflict management styles strengthened teacher organizational commitment in Chinese schools, a pattern mirrored in the present study, where teachers reported feeling more empowered and committed. Kim & Lee (2021) similarly found that collaborative leadership in South Korean schools increased teacher job satisfaction, which resonates with the empowerment expressed by teachers at both research sites. Park & Lee (2024) demonstrated that trust mediated the relationship between collaborative leadership and conflict resolution effectiveness in Korean vocational high schools—a mediating role that was also evident in both cases in this study, where trust built through transparency and consistency enabled stakeholders to accept collective decisions even when those decisions involved compromise.

However, an antithesis emerges from the literature on task versus relationship conflict. De Dreu & Weingart (2003) and Jehn (1995) demonstrated that while task conflict can be beneficial under certain conditions, relationship conflict generally harms team performance and satisfaction. In SMK Brantas Karangates, the fast pace of industry demands occasionally pushes task conflicts into relationship conflicts, particularly between teachers and industry partners, making resolution more difficult. This finding suggests that integrative strategies are most effective when they address the cognitive substance of disagreements before personal animosity develops, as Amason (1996) argued in his distinction between cognitive and affective conflict. The study, therefore, affirms the value of integrative conflict management while also revealing its boundary conditions.

Furthermore, regarding distributed roles and teacher empowerment, the findings show that collaborative leadership in both schools involved distributing conflict management roles beyond the

principal. At SMK Islam Kalipare, the conflict mediation team and the foundation representative shared responsibility; at SMK Brantas Karangates, the SQAT and cross-functional groups played key roles. This distribution reduced the principal's burden and increased the legitimacy of decisions.

These findings provide strong empirical support for distributed leadership theory (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004). Harris (2013) argues that distributed leadership can enhance organizational capacity by mobilizing expertise across the school community, and this was clearly evident in both cases. The findings also resonate with Hallinger & Heck's (2010) conclusion that collaborative leadership indirectly influences school improvement by building organizational capacity. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) demonstrated that school leadership influences student learning through organizational conditions such as trust and professional culture—conditions that were visibly strengthened through the distributed conflict management structures observed in this study.

The study's findings are consistent with prior research on teacher leadership. Harris & Jones (2021) emphasized that teacher leadership is crucial for school improvement, particularly in disruptive times. In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic context made collaborative and distributed practices both more necessary and more challenging, a paradox also noted by Oplatka & Arar (2021) and Bush (2021). Teachers in both schools reported that participation in conflict resolution increased their sense of ownership and commitment—an outcome also reported by Liu et al. (2021), who found that distributed leadership reduced role ambiguity and conflict by fostering a supportive school culture.

However, a counterpoint emerges from the over-reliance on the principal observed in both schools. When the principal was absent, conflict resolution sometimes stalled, suggesting that distributed structures were not fully institutionalized. This finding echoes Spillane's (2006) warning that distributed leadership can remain fragile if it depends on the charismatic authority of a single individual. The study, therefore, affirms the benefits of distributed roles while cautioning that sustainability requires formalization beyond the individual leader.

Furthermore, regarding supporting and inhibiting factors, the findings identified several supporting factors: mutual trust, transparent communication, organizational and religious values, and external support from foundations and industry partners. Inhibiting factors included teacher resistance to change, administrative workload, and over-reliance on the principal.

The centrality of trust in this study aligns with Bryk & Schneider's (2002) and Tschannen-Moran's (2014) findings that trust is a core resource for school improvement. When trust was present, stakeholders were more willing to engage in open dialogue and accept collective decisions. The role of organizational values, Islamic principles at SMK Islam Kalipare, and industrial professionalism at SMK Brantas Karangates, also reflects the broader literature on how values shape collaborative practices (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Rubin, 2009).

The barriers identified are well documented in the leadership literature. Fullan (2020) notes that resistance is a natural response to change and that leaders must engage it rather than suppress it. Hargreaves and Fullan (2015) emphasize the importance of professional capital in enabling teachers to respond constructively to reform demands. The time constraints faced by principals reflect broader systemic pressures in Indonesian schools, where administrative tasks often consume the majority of a principal's time, leaving little room for relational leadership (Mulyasa, 2019; Wirawan, 2010). The over-reliance on the principal, especially in schools with strong charismatic leaders, suggests that collaborative structures may remain fragile if they are not institutionalized beyond the individual leader. This finding aligns with the critique that collaborative leadership can be undermined by persistent power asymmetries and the legacy of hierarchical cultures (Harris, 2013; Spillane, 2006). Recent studies also highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified leadership challenges, making collaborative practices both more necessary and more difficult (Harris & Jones, 2021; Oplatka & Arar, 2021). In this context, the principals' efforts to sustain inclusive forums and distributed teams during ongoing reforms are particularly notable.

Comparative insights from other studies further contextualize these findings. Ibrahim and Osman (2021) examined Malaysian vocational colleges and found that principals' collaborative leadership reduced teacher conflict by fostering open communication and shared responsibility, similar to the mechanisms observed in this study. Rahman & Singh (2022) conducted a systematic review of conflict management in vocational education and concluded that collaborative approaches were underutilized and under researched, a gap this study partially addresses. Santoso dan Rahayu (2023) reported that in Indonesian SMK, collaborative leadership positively influenced conflict management and teacher performance, supporting the present findings. Kim and Lee (2021) found that collaborative leadership in South Korean schools increased teacher job satisfaction, which resonates with the empowerment reported by teachers in both cases. Martinez and Johnson (2023) emphasized that school leaders' conflict resolution strategies must be context-sensitive, a conclusion

reinforced by the contrasting cases of SMK Islam Kalipare and SMK Brantas Karangates. Mulford (2022) argued that leadership for equity and excellence requires collaborative, trust-based practices, aligning with the cross-case themes identified here.

The implications for principal development are clear. Training programs should move beyond technical conflict resolution skills to emphasize relational capacities such as active listening, empathy, and facilitation (Goleman et al., 2013; Northouse, 2022). Principals need to learn how to design and sustain collaborative structures, meetings, teams, and mediation processes that distribute leadership and build collective efficacy (Marks & Printy, 2003; Spillane et al., 2004). In the context of SMK PK, principals also need skills in managing multi-stakeholder partnerships, as conflicts often arise at the intersection of school and industry expectations. This supports Hallinger's (2011) and Bush's (2021) call for leadership for learning that is context-sensitive and collaborative. The findings also align with Leithwood et al. (2020), who demonstrated that school leadership influences student learning through organizational conditions such as trust and professional culture conditions that were visibly strengthened through collaborative conflict management in both schools.

Finally, the findings reinforce the idea that conflict can be functional. Coser (1956) argued that social conflict serves to clarify norms, strengthen group cohesion, and stimulate innovation. In both schools, managed conflict led to clearer expectations, stronger trust, and more adaptive practices. Even in SMK Islam Kalipare, where the foundation's values resembled a family-like organizational culture, conflict was not suppressed but channeled through consultative mechanisms. Sorenson's (1999) work on conflict in family businesses offers a useful analogy: in value-driven, close-knit organizations, conflict can be particularly threatening, but also particularly productive when managed through trust and communication. The present study demonstrates that vocational schools, like family businesses, can turn potential conflict into an asset when leadership is collaborative rather than authoritarian.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on two schools in Malang Regency, which limits generalizability. Second, the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of ongoing processes; longitudinal research would be needed to examine how collaborative conflict management evolves over time. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from participants, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could use more

objective measures of conflict outcomes and include the perspectives of students more systematically.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that collaborative leadership is an effective approach for managing conflict in vocational schools undergoing the *SMK Pusat Keunggulan* transformation. Through inclusive communication, distributed roles, and integrative strategies, principals in two different school contexts were able to transform conflict from a disruptive force into a catalyst for learning and commitment. The key elements of success included mutual trust, transparent communication, organizational values, and external support. However, barriers such as teacher resistance, time constraints, and over-reliance on the principal highlight the need for systemic support and professional development.

The findings contribute to the literature by providing contextualized evidence from vocational education in Indonesia and by illustrating how collaborative leadership can be adapted to both religious and secular school cultures. The study also responds to calls for more empirical research on conflict management in vocational education (Rahman & Singh, 2022) and for contextualized leadership studies in non-Western settings (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2021). Practically, the study suggests that principal preparation programs should emphasize relational and participatory leadership skills, and that policymakers should create conditions that enable principals to invest time in collaborative processes. Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of collaborative conflict management and the role of digital tools in facilitating communication across increasingly diverse stakeholder groups.

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