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**Abstract:** Educational quality disparity remains a central issue in Indonesia. The national 'Sekolah Penggerak' (Driving School) Program was initiated to foster quality transformation through school leadership. This study aims to analyze the implementation of strategic management by an early childhood education (ECE) principal within this program. A qualitative case study was conducted at TK Fathul Mubiin in Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara. Data were collected through observations, interviews with the principal and teachers, and documentation review. The findings reveal that the principal's strategic management process involved: (1) participatory strategic planning through internal and external environment analysis; (2) strategy implementation focused on clear communication, active stakeholder engagement, and competency-based task delegation; and (3) evaluative measures emphasizing performance benchmarking and corrective actions. The study concludes that the principal's active role in these three phases is critical to navigating the program's challenges. It implies that sustainable educational improvement programs require strengthening strategic leadership competencies at the ECE level. This case offers valuable insights for policymakers and school leaders aiming to implement similar transformative programs in similar contexts.

**Keywords:** Strategic Management, Educational Leadership, Early Childhood Education, Driving School, School Improvement.

### Introduction

Educational equity and quality remain persistent challenges for education systems worldwide, particularly in large and diverse countries like Indonesia (BPS NTB, 2021; OECD, 2015). Despite constitutional mandates guaranteeing every citizen's right to quality education (UUD 1945, Article 31(1); Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System), significant disparities persist across its regions.

National and international assessments highlight these geographical disparities. The Indonesian Student Competency Assessment (AKSI) reveals a stark performance gap in mathematics, reading, and science between students in regions like DKI Jakarta and Yogyakarta and those in Eastern Indonesia such as Sulawesi, Papua, and West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) [Education Assessment Center, 2019]. Furthermore, the national average Teacher Competency Test (UKG) score of 57 out of 100 points to a critical challenge in human resource quality [Regional Education Balance, 2019]. The local context of West Nusa Tenggara Province (NTB) exemplifies this struggle. While school participation rates for ages 7-15 are high (over 98%), the rate drops significantly for ages 16-18 (77.49%). Moreover, NTB's Human Development Index (HDI) of 68.65 ranks 29th out of 34 provinces, with an average years of schooling of only 7.38, indicating that the average adult population has not completed junior high school [BPS NTB, 2021].

Confronting these challenges requires innovative, systemic interventions. As Serdyukov (2017) argues, education needs effective, scalable innovations focused on teaching, learning, and the broader community. In response, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture launched the Sekolah Penggerak (Driving School) Program. This program aims to create a catalyst for quality improvement by empowering selected schools to transform their learning ecosystems and subsequently disseminate best practices to neighboring schools. The program's success hinges on effective school leadership, particularly the principal's ability to formulate, implement, and evaluate strategic plans (Kepmendikbudristek No. 162/M/2021).

Previous research has highlighted general factors for improving education quality, such as teacher competency, infrastructure, school-based management (SBM), and community cooperation (Aritonang, 2018). Studies on strategic management in education often focus on primary or secondary levels. However, there is a distinct lack of empirical research exploring the specific implementation of strategic management by Early Childhood Education (ECE) principals within innovative national programs like Sekolah Penggerak. This gap is critical, as ECE lays the foundational character and cognitive skills for future learning, embodied in the program's goal of achieving the Pancasila Student Profile.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative case study analysis. It seeks to investigate how an ECE principal implements strategic management—encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation—within the Sekolah Penggerak Program at TK Fathul Mubiin in Mataram, NTB. The findings are expected to provide a model for other ECE institutions and offer practical insights for policymakers to enhance the support system for school leaders in similar transformative programs.

## **Research Methods**

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design [Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018]. This approach was deemed most appropriate to gain an in-depth, holistic, and contextual understanding of the complex process of implementing strategic management within the unique setting of the Driving School Program at TK Fathul Mubiin.

### *Research Setting and Participants*

The research was conducted at TK Fathul Mubiin, a private kindergarten in Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. This school was purposefully selected as it is an active participant in the third cohort (2022) of the national Driving School Program, providing a rich context for investigation.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to identify key informants who possessed the most relevant knowledge and experience related to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants included:

1. The School Principal (1 person): The primary actor in strategic management.
2. Teachers (4 persons): Key implementers of the strategies.
3. A member of the School Committee (1 person): A representative of external stakeholders.

All participants provided verbal and written informed consent before their involvement. To ensure anonymity, all identifiers were removed, and participants are referred to by pseudonyms (e.g., "Principal," "Teacher A," "Committee Member") in this report.

### *Data Collection Techniques*

Data were collected over a three-month period (August - October 2023) through triangulation of the following methods:

1. In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all six participants using an interview protocol that guided questions around the themes of strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed verbatim.
2. Participant Observation: The first author conducted non-participant observations of strategic planning meetings, classroom activities, and school events related to the Driving School Program. Field notes were taken to record activities, interactions, and informal conversations.
3. Document Analysis: Various documents were reviewed to corroborate evidence from interviews and observations. These documents included the school's strategic plan (RKJM, RKT), meeting minutes, activity reports, teacher assessment records, and school accreditation documents.

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive model of qualitative data analysis as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

1. **Data Condensation:** This involved the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data (transcripts, field notes, documents). This was done through open coding to identify initial codes, which were then grouped into categories.
2. **Data Display:** Organized, compressed assemblies of information were created in the form of thematic matrices and narrative summaries. This display helped in identifying patterns and relationships between the categories related to the three phases of strategic management.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification:** Throughout the analysis, initial conclusions were drawn. These conclusions were continually verified by checking back to the raw data and comparing evidence from different data sources (triangulation) to ensure their validity and reliability. Member checking was also conducted by sharing a summary of findings with participants to confirm accuracy.

### *Ethical Considerations*

This study adhered to standard ethical principles for social science research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Data are stored securely and will be destroyed after the mandatory retention period.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Contextual Data: Profile of TK Fathul Mubiin***

TK Fathul Mubiin is a private kindergarten participating in the Driving School Program. At the time of the study, it had 6 educational staff (3 certified teachers, 3 in the certification process) and 56 students. The school was adequately equipped with facilities, including classrooms, a musalla, a library, and learning aids.

### ***Findings***

The analysis revealed how strategic management was implemented across three phases. Direct quotes from participants are included (translated from Bahasa Indonesia) and labeled (e.g., Principal, Teacher A).

#### *Strategic Planning: Participatory Problem Analysis*

The principal did not just identify problems alone but facilitated a collaborative process. The internal analysis, involving all teachers, identified key strengths (e.g., "Three teachers are already certified, and our facilities are quite complete" - Principal) and weaknesses (e.g., "Some teachers still lack proficiency in using technology for learning administration" - Teacher B).

The external analysis focused on community expectations and national policy demands. A major challenge identified was "aligning our curriculum and projects with the achievement indicators of the Pancasila Student Profile mandated by the Driving School Program" (Principal). This participatory planning resulted in a detailed work plan that included targets for teacher training, student assessment, and community engagement.

#### *Strategy Implementation: Communication and Structured Collaboration*

The implementation phase was characterized by two key themes:

First, transparent communication was crucial. The principal held regular meetings to socialize the program's progress. "We have a weekly briefing every Monday to align our understanding and tasks for the week based on the plan," stated Teacher C.

Second, structured collaboration based on competency was evident. Tasks were delegated according to individual teacher strengths. For example, a teacher skilled in technology was assigned to lead the digitalization of student reports, while another known for creativity was tasked with developing project-based learning modules. The principal acted as a coach, stating, "I don't just assign tasks; I mentor them to ensure they have the capacity to execute them."

### *Strategy Evaluation: Data-Driven Corrective Actions*

Evaluation was not merely a ceremonial activity. The school established clear performance standards based on Driving School Program indicators. They then collected information through classroom observations, assessment of student portfolios, and feedback from parents.

The principal explained a specific instance of corrective action: "Our initial data showed low parental involvement in student projects. The actual performance did not meet our standard. So, we took corrective action by creating a special WhatsApp group to share student progress weekly and invite parents to simple workshops. This significantly improved participation." This demonstrates a move from simple evaluation to a continuous improvement cycle.

### **Discussion**

This study demonstrates that the success of the Driving School Program at the ECE level is heavily dependent on the principal's role as a strategic leader who enables participation, communication, and data-based reflection.

The finding that participatory planning is central aligns with the theory of Pearce and Robinson (2008), who argue that strategic decisions are improved through group interaction. This study provides empirical evidence that in the context of Indonesian ECE, this approach helps in building ownership and identifying context-specific challenges, such as the gap in technological proficiency, which might be missed in a top-down approach.

Furthermore, the importance of transparent communication and structured collaboration supports the work of Hanover Research (2014) and Armstrong (2015). This research extends their findings by showing how this is operationalized in a resource-constrained setting: through simple, routine mechanisms like weekly briefings and delegation based on existing teacher competencies rather than formal positions. This is a practical adaptation of theoretical collaboration models.

Finally, the evaluation process observed moves beyond a simple bureaucratic exercise. The principal's ability to manage information—collecting, evaluating, and using it for corrective action—as emphasized by Keengwe and Byamukama (2019), was critical. The case of improving parental involvement through a WhatsApp group is a quintessential example of a low-cost, high-impact innovation driven by data-based evaluation, addressing the very need for effective innovation called for by Serdyukov (2017).

In summary, the strategic management process at TK Fathul Mubiin was not a rigid application of theory but a dynamic, adaptive practice. The principal's key contribution was creating a structured yet flexible environment where teachers could contribute to planning, received clear communication and support during implementation, and were part of a culture that used data to learn and adapt, ultimately driving the school towards its goals.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

This case study elucidates the intricate process of strategic management implementation by an ECE principal within Indonesia's Driving School Program. Moving beyond a mere summary, the findings lead to three core conclusions:

1. **Strategic Planning as a Participatory Foundation:** Effective planning is not a solitary act of the principal but a collaborative endeavor. The success of the Driving School Program at the ECE level is predicated on a principal's ability to facilitate a thorough and honest internal and external environmental analysis, engaging teachers to collectively identify strengths, weaknesses, and contextual challenges, such as technological adaptation and curriculum alignment.
2. **Implementation Through Communication and Empowerment:** The translation of strategy into action hinges on transparent, continuous communication and the strategic empowerment of staff. The principal's role shifts from a top-down commander to a communicative coach who delegates tasks based on individual competencies, fostering a sense of ownership and structured collaboration among teachers.

3. Evaluation for Continuous Improvement: Strategy evaluation transcends mere assessment; it functions as an engine for continuous improvement. The principal's capacity to set clear standards, gather meaningful data on performance, and—most importantly—implement timely, context-specific corrective actions (e.g., leveraging WhatsApp to boost parental engagement) is what closes the loop and ensures the strategy remains dynamic and responsive.

In essence, this study concludes that the principal's role in the Driving School Program is that of a strategic facilitator and adaptive leader. The program's success in an ECE setting is less about rigid adherence to a national blueprint and more about the principal's ability to contextualize, communicate, collaborate, and cultivate a data-informed culture of learning and adaptation among their staff.

### ***Implications and Suggestions***

Based on the conclusions, this study offers the following implications and suggestions:

#### ***Practical Implications***

1. For Policymakers (e.g., Mataram City Education Office): Sustainable program implementation requires more than just training; it needs ongoing consultative mentoring. Support should focus on strengthening principals' skills in facilitating participatory planning, strategic communication, and data-driven decision-making, rather than merely administering compliance checks.
2. For School Practitioners (Other Schools): Rather than viewing TK Fathul Mubiin as a model to be copied, other schools should emulate the underlying processes it demonstrates. The key takeaways are the practices of collaborative needs assessment, competency-based task delegation, and the use of simple technology for evaluation and engagement. The focus should be on adapting these *processes* to their own unique contexts.

#### ***Theoretical Implications and Future Research***

This study contributes to the literature on educational leadership by providing a nuanced, process-oriented view of strategic management in a previously understudied context: Indonesian ECE. It demonstrates how universal management principles are adapted in a resource-constrained, high-potential environment.

1. Limitations: This study is limited by its nature as a qualitative case study of a single institution. Therefore, the findings are not statistically generalizable but offer deep insights transferable to similar contexts.
2. Suggestions for Future Research: Future studies could:
  - 1) Employ a quantitative or mixed-methods approach to measure the correlation between strategic management practices and student learning outcomes across a larger sample of Driving Schools.
  - 2) Conduct a multi-case study to compare and contrast the implementation of strategic management in different socio-cultural contexts within Indonesia.
  - 3) Investigate the long-term sustainability of the changes implemented through the Driving School Program after the initial support period ends.

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