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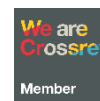
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Institutionalizing collaborative partnerships in inclusive early childhood education: structured parent-school collaboration practices

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examined: What mechanisms enable parent-school partnerships to transcend episodic initiatives and become embedded institutional practices in inclusive PAUD contexts? Data were systematically collected through semi-structured interviews with nine key informants, participant observations of 35 instances, and document analysis over five months. The study's most distinctive contribution documents the institutionalization of parent-school partnerships through eight systematically designed collaborative programs formalized in a comprehensive Parent Guidebook: KINASIH (parent peer learning community), Guest Teacher (parent expertise leveraging), Passion Club (parent skill-sharing), Meja Peradaban (cultural literacy), Market Day (entrepreneurship education), Anjangsana (home visits), monthly Parent Meetings (structured dialogue), and Home Visits (individualized family engagement). Analysis revealed five interconnected dimensions of collaborative leadership operating synergistically: shared vision understood across all stakeholder levels; structured communication mechanisms through multiple channels; democratic participatory decision-making; continuous professional development embedded in daily practice; and adaptive flexibility maintaining philosophical consistency. Findings demonstrate effective partnership institutionalization requires: formalizing programs in accessible documentation; establishing systematic multi-channel communication; embedding professional development in daily reflective forums; involving stakeholders democratically in vision formulation; and building programmatic flexibility while maintaining philosophical consistency.



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Introduction

Indonesian inclusive early childhood education confronts a fundamental implementation paradox that undermines progressive policy intentions and fails children with special needs and their families.

While Indonesia has established comprehensive legal frameworks mandating inclusive education as fundamental right including Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, Law Number 8 of 2016 on Persons with Disabilities, and Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation Number 6 of 2021 providing detailed technical guidelines empirical reality reveals profound disconnection between policy rhetoric and practice outcomes (Phytanza et al., 2023; Prasajo & Mukminin, 2021). This disconnection manifests particularly acutely in parent-school partnerships, where policy documents mandate "authentic collaboration" and "active family participation" yet provide minimal guidance on operationalization, sustainability, or institutionalization beyond individual leader initiatives.

The consequences of this implementation gap manifest across multiple domains. Children with special needs experience educational exclusion despite legal guarantees: UNICEF Indonesia (2023) reports that 36% of children with disabilities remain completely excluded from schooling, while Central Java statistics reveal 275,641 children with special needs (4.19% of ages 5-9) possess severely limited educational access (BPS Jawa Tengah, 2022; Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2022). Families report isolation, frustration, and disempowerment when attempting to navigate educational systems unprepared for genuine collaboration (Supena et al., 2023; Widiastuti & Winaya, 2024). Teachers express uncertainty about inclusive pedagogies without adequate family partnership support (Kurniawati et al., 2023). These failures represent fundamental violations of children's rights and systematic reproduction of educational inequity.

Existing research on inclusive education exhibits three critical limitations this study addresses. First, scholarly attention focuses predominantly on primary and secondary levels (Phytanza et al., 2023), with limited examination of early childhood settings where foundational attitudes toward diversity form and family involvement proves most critical (Alquraini & Rao, 2023). Second, research on collaborative leadership in Indonesian contexts remains largely conceptual and prescriptive, offering normative frameworks without empirical grounding in actual institutional practices (Ilahi, 2022; Masalahah & Rofiah, 2021). Third, sparse literature on parent-school partnerships in PAUD settings documents challenges and barriers but provides limited understanding of how partnerships can be systematically institutionalized to ensure sustainability beyond individual personalities or temporary initiatives (Nurkolis et al., 2023). DeMatthews et al. (2020) and Fitzgerald & Radford (2022) emphasize necessity of in-depth, context-specific studies, yet Indonesian research addressing this call remains scarce.

Critical questions persist unanswered: What concrete mechanisms enable systematic parent-school partnerships to become embedded in organizational culture rather than depending on charismatic individuals? How can collaboration programs be formalized to ensure continuity across leadership changes? Under what conditions do partnership practices transcend episodic initiatives to become institutionalized features of school operations? What role do cultural and contextual factors play in shaping partnership institutionalization in Indonesian PAUD settings?

TK Lebah Putih Salatiga emerges as critical case for examining these questions. Designated as Model Inclusive Kindergarten by Salatiga City Education Office (2022) and serving as sole PAUD institution in Salatiga providing services for seven categories of special needs education, the school demonstrates sustained collaborative partnership practices documented in formal structures. Uniquely, TK Lebah Putih has systematized eight collaborative programs formalized in comprehensive Parent Guidebook distributed to all families representing rare example of partnership institutionalization rather than personality-dependent initiatives. The school's seven-year operational history under consistent leadership provides sufficient temporal depth to examine sustainability mechanisms.

This study examines three interconnected objectives: (1) How do five dimensions of collaborative leadership shared vision, open communication, participatory decision-making, continuous development, and adaptive flexibility manifest in TK Lebah Putih's daily practices? (2) What mechanisms enable parent-school partnership programs to become institutionalized rather than remaining episodic initiatives? (3) Under what contextual conditions do these collaborative leadership practices and partnership institutionalization processes emerge and sustain?

This study contributes to inclusive early childhood education scholarship in several ways. Empirically, it provides first systematic documentation of partnership institutionalization mechanisms in Indonesian inclusive PAUD setting, moving beyond normative prescriptions to describe actual

practices. Theoretically, it extends collaborative leadership literature by examining how abstract principles operate in specific cultural and institutional context. Methodologically, it demonstrates value of intensive single-case analysis for understanding complex organizational phenomena. Practically, it offers concrete framework for PAUD institutions seeking to move from ad hoc parent involvement to systematized collaborative partnerships.

Method

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to examine collaborative leadership and parent-school partnership practices at TK Lebah Putih Salatiga. The case study design was selected because collaborative leadership and partnership institutionalization constitute context-dependent phenomena where boundaries between organizational practices and cultural contexts cannot be meaningfully separated (Yin, 2018; Stake, 2020). Single case intensive examination enables deep understanding of how abstract concepts manifest in concrete settings and what contextual factors shape their operation (Patton, 2022). TK Lebah Putih represents critical case (Yin, 2018): as officially designated Model Inclusive Kindergarten with documented systematized partnership programs, it exemplifies phenomenon of interest while possessing sufficient distinctiveness to yield transferable insights.

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at TK Lebah Putih Salatiga, Central Java, Indonesia, from July 2025 to November 2025. The school serves 42 students aged 4–6 years, including 12 children with special needs across seven categories: autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, speech delay, developmental delays, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and learning disabilities. Established in 2017, the school operates under Salatiga City Education Office oversight and received Model Inclusive Kindergarten designation in 2022.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representational adequacy across the school's collaborative ecosystem. Nine key informants provided diverse perspectives: (1) School principal (female, 7 years tenure, master's degree), serving as primary institutional voice; (2-3) Two classroom teachers (both female, 5 and 3 years experiences, bachelor's degrees), offering frontline practitioner perspectives; (4) School committee representative (male parent of child with autism, 4 years involvement), providing parent leadership perspective; (5-6) Two parents of children with special needs, mother of child with Down syndrome (3 years) and mother of child with ADHD (2 years) representing family experiences; (7) Administrative staff (female, 3 years tenure), offering operational perspective; (8) Custodial staff (male, 5 years tenure), providing non-academic perspective; (9) External occupational therapist (female, 3 years partnership), representing professional collaboration dimension.

Data Collection

Data collection involved three complementary methods enabling triangulation: semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. Interviews with nine informants lasted 60–90 minutes each, conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Interview protocols explored collaborative leadership dimensions, partnership program participation, communication patterns, decision-making processes, and personal experiences. Participant observations covered various events over a period of five months: morning briefings, afternoon briefings, parent meetings, Rebonan, learning observations, learning environment observations, and guest teacher programs. Field notes recorded interactions, communication patterns, and collaborative moments. Document analysis included the school curriculum, school guide book, academic calendar, education reports, organizational structure, school work plans and budgets, decrees on the assignment of the principal, teachers and division of tasks, training documents and certificates, Renjana Karya, learning documents, meeting minutes, activity reports from 8 collaborative programs between parents and schools (Sinarengan, Market Day, Home Visit, WirabUsaha, various workshops), photo documentation, and email/WhatsApp communication archives covering the period 2023–2025.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) interactive model through iterative cycles of data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Analysis commenced during data collection, enabling emergent insights to inform subsequent gathering. First cycle coding employed descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2015) on initial three interview transcripts, generating 78 preliminary codes. Pattern coding in second cycle grouped initial codes into 15 intermediate categories through constant comparison. Final themes emerged through intensive memoing, with five overarching themes aligning with collaborative leadership dimensions: (1) Shared Vision Consistently Understood, (2) Structured Open Communication Mechanisms, (3) Democratic Participatory Decision Making, (4) Continuous Embedded Professional Development, and (5) Adaptive Flexibility Maintaining Philosophy. Verification strategies included member checking with three key informants, peer debriefing sessions, and active search for negative cases. Triangulation across data sources strengthened interpretation confidence.

Results and Discussions

Shared Vision: Foundation of Collaborative Practice

TK Lebah Putih successfully established shared vision understood consistently across all stakeholder levels. The formal vision "Membangun komunitas pendidikan untuk anak dan keluarga yang saleh, unggul, dan bahagia" [Building an educational community for righteous, excellent, and happy children and families] and philosophy "Setiap anak adalah bintang" [Every child is a star] were documented in curriculum and Parent Guidebook.

The principal articulated the vision as a strategic compass. In an interview, he explained:

"Visi itu membimbing setiap keputusan yang kami buat. Ketika kami menghadapi dilema tentang menerima anak dengan perilaku yang menantang atau merancang program yang mungkin kontroversial, kami kembali pada pertanyaan ini: apakah ini membantu membangun komunitas di mana semua anak dan keluarga dapat berkembang?" (Wawancara Kepala Sekolah, September 2025)

Teachers translate the vision into concrete pedagogical principles. Teacher 1 stated:

"Setiap anak adalah bintang berarti saya menerima semua anak apa adanya. A butuh waktu lebih lama untuk memahami konsep, sementara B bergerak lebih cepat, jadi saya menyesuaikan kecepatan dan metode mengajar saya." (Wawancara Guru 1, September 2025)

Parents understand the vision through the freedom they experience. Committee members explained:

"Ini yang kami sebut sekolah kebebasan. Anak saya dengan autisme bisa mengeksplorasi material sensoris dengan kecepatannya sendiri. Keamanan emosional itu adalah apa yang dimaksud 'anak dan keluarga bahagia'." (Wawancara Anggota Komite, Oktober 2025)

Remarkably, non-teaching staff demonstrated a sense of vision. Cleaning staff reflected:

"Saya melihat 'setiap anak Merdeka, ketika anak-anak bermain bebas di halaman. Tugas saya bukan hanya membersihkan, tetapi menciptakan ruang aman bagi mereka untuk berekspres." (Wawancara Staf Kebersihan, Oktober 2025)

These findings extend collaborative leadership literature in several ways. McEwan's (2018) assertion that shared vision functions as guide finds strong empirical support, but our data add critical nuances. The multi-level understanding documented here from principal to custodial staff contradicts Western assumptions that shared vision primarily matters at leadership levels. This aligns with Mowat's (2023) emphasis on inclusive cultures permeating entire organizational ecosystems. However, findings must be understood within TK Lebah Putih's specific enabling conditions: small organizational size (42 students) enabling intensive communication, middle-class demographics providing cultural capital, and leadership continuity (seven years) providing stability.

Open Communication: Building Trust and Transparency

Open and honest communication at TK Lebah Putih manifests through various structured mechanisms involving all stakeholders. Daily briefings constitute the most crucial communication mechanism,

conducted twice daily with complementary functions. Morning briefings last 15 minutes focusing on daily coordination, while afternoon briefings extend 2 hours for deep reflection, learning evaluation, and collaborative problem-solving. This two-session structure reflects a systematic approach in building continuous dialogue that is coordinative, reflective, and transformative.

Communication with parents encompasses multiple channels: WhatsApp groups for daily information, direct face-to-face communication for developmental concerns, and monthly Parent Meetings as structured formal dialogue forums. Home visit programs serve as highly effective strategies for building personal and deep dialogue, allowing families to "tell all our stories in detail" in comfortable home environments. This approach reflects school commitment to understand children holistically within family contexts.

Trust among community members serves as the foundation enabling open dialogue. Administrative staff expressed feeling trusted and valued, with opinions "well received without rejection or ignoring." Teachers receive autonomy to make professional decisions, exploring creative learning solutions through technology and peer consultation during afternoon briefings. Inter-teacher trust manifests in flexible cross-class child handling agreements. Parents trust school responsiveness, noting "school responds quickly" even to detailed concerns like cleanliness. Communication maintains familial quality, "not just when needed but family-like." These findings strongly support [Mowat's \(2023\)](#) assertion about the importance of open communication as the foundation of trust for creating peaceful and supportive schools.

Active Participation: Democratic Decision Making

Vision formulation and adjustment involve active participation from various parties through democratic and bottom-up approaches. Teachers participate in annual workshops for vision review, deliberate before program launches, engage in intensive afternoon discussions, and participate in curriculum and teaching teams. The Parents Guidebook serves as formal evidence of involvement through eight structured programs, demonstrating genuine collaborative leadership beyond tokenism.

The principal's approach of asking "what do parents want?" rather than dictating reflects a fundamental philosophical shift toward genuine partnership recognizing parents as experts on their children. External professionals including therapists participate in collaborative "one frequency" coordination. The curriculum document formally records participatory vision review history from 2022. These findings align with [Agbenyega and Sharma's \(2014\)](#) emphasis that active and participatory collaboration contributes to better decision-making suited to all education service user needs.

Continuous Development: Embedded Professional Learning

Human resource development through continuous development represents collaborative effort where all members unite to learn and grow. Teachers continuously develop pedagogical competence to meet diverse student needs, conducting observations and creating varied learning appropriate for both regular and special needs children. This reflects [Fullan's \(2020\)](#) emphasis that successful organizations place learning at the center of every initiative.

Therapists demonstrate collaborative commitment through information sharing about interventions applicable at home and school, with two-way feedback enabling holistic child development understanding. Commitment to continuous development is systematically documented in the Parent Guidebook containing all collaborative programs with schedules, curriculum containing seven goals and Pancasila Student Profile as vision operationalization, activity reports documenting implementation, and photographic evidence visualizing full stakeholder involvement. This consistency demonstrates that vision genuinely becomes the driving force manifested in concrete, measurable programs, aligning with [Houghton's \(2020\)](#) assertion that effective leadership ensures all members have opportunities to develop needed skills.

Flexibility: Responsive to Evolving Needs

Vision demonstrates dynamism and responsiveness to changing needs through parent community flexibility evolving from "adventure family" to "strengthening team" according to actual needs. Teachers conduct annual vision reviews adjusting to different child conditions each cohort through workshop forums questioning continued appropriateness. Daily afternoon briefings evaluate and

adjust strategies based on actual child conditions, while monthly Parent Meetings evaluate and adjust programs continuously.

This dynamism is documented in curriculum recording vision reviews, activity reports showing program evolution, and Parents Guidebook containing adaptive programs. Vision functions as stable general direction while implementation remains flexible and adaptive, reflecting living document characteristics. These findings align with [Houghton's \(2020\)](#) emphasis that leaders capable of adapting strategies demonstrate responsive effectiveness, and [Mowat's \(2023\)](#) assertion that collaborative leadership must adapt to social, cultural, and policy contexts, opening space for innovation responsive to school community needs.

Parent-School Partnership: The Distinctive Feature

The most distinctive finding lies in the depth and systematization of parent-school collaboration documented in the Parent Guidebook. Unlike many inclusive early childhood institutions where parent involvement remains peripheral, TK Lebah Putih positions parents as genuine educational partners through eight structured collaborative programs serving as multiple entry points for meaningful engagement. These programs are not ad-hoc initiatives but systematically designed, scheduled, and coordinated mechanisms institutionalized as core school practices.

KINASIH creates peer learning community for parenting experience sharing. Guest Teacher program leverages parent expertise, recognizing parents as knowledge resources. Passion Club provides outlet for parents to pursue shared interests, strengthening social bonds. Meja Peradaban (3x per semester) involves parents and children collaboratively learning hospitality and cooperation. Market Day engages parents in creating simulated marketplace developing children's economic literacy and social skills. Anjangsana facilitates inter-class parent relationship building. Monthly Parent Meetings serve as comprehensive communication forums combining information delivery, evaluation, development reporting, and open dialogue sessions "what parents really need, what they really miss."

Formalization documentation in Parent Guidebook distributed to all families makes expectations and involvement opportunities transparent and accessible, functioning as social contract articulating mutual commitments between school and families. This systematization ensures parent participation is institutionalized beyond individual leadership styles, reflecting [Epstein's \(2011\)](#) comprehensive partnership model where school and family share child development responsibility. Home visit program exemplifies personalized partnership dimension, creating psychological safety for authentic dialogue about children within family contexts, acknowledging educational experiences are inseparable from home lives.

In inclusive education contexts, parent-school partnership becomes critical. For children with special needs, collaboration between educators and parents in implementing IEPs determines intervention success. Therapist description of "one frequency" among school, parents, and therapy team illustrates seamless coordination required for supporting children with diverse needs through home visits, regular communications, and joint decision-making sessions. This tripartite collaboration demonstrates essential stakeholder collaboration for successful support program implementation ([Foggett, Conway, & Dally, 2021](#)).

TK Lebah Putih's depth of parent-school collaboration challenges prevalent instrumental views of parent involvement as merely supporting school-initiated activities. Instead, it exemplifies transformative partnership where parents co-construct educational experiences with educators, addressing [Holland and Fitzgerald's \(2023\)](#) finding that stakeholder interaction is crucial for enhancing inclusive education effectiveness. By systematizing parent participation through eight documented programs while maintaining flexibility to adapt to evolving community needs, TK Lebah Putih creates sustainable partnership models transcending individual personalities or temporary enthusiasms.

Conclusions

This case study addressed: What mechanisms enable parent-school partnerships to transcend episodic initiatives and become embedded institutional practices? Findings demonstrate institutionalization occurs through systematic formalization of collaborative programs in accessible documentation,

establishment of multi-level communication channels, embedding of professional development in daily practice, democratic involvement in vision formulation, and maintenance of programmatic flexibility while preserving philosophical consistency.

The study's primary contribution documents how eight systematically designed collaborative programs formalized in Parent Guidebook enable partnership sustainability: KINASIH, Guest Teacher, Passion Club, Meja Peradaban, Market Day, Anjangsana, Parent Meetings, and Home Visits. This documentation creates transparent mutual expectations, positions parents as co-constructors, and ensures continuity across leadership transitions.

Analysis revealed five interconnected dimensions of collaborative leadership operating synergistically: shared vision understood multi-level, structured communication mechanisms, democratic participatory decision-making, continuous professional development, and adaptive flexibility. These dimensions function as integrated system where each reinforces others.

Theoretically, findings extend collaborative leadership literature by documenting multi-level vision understanding, demonstrating formalization enables institutionalization without bureaucratization, and illustrating parents as co-constructors rather than passive recipients. Practically, findings suggest institutions should: formalize programs in comprehensive documentation; establish systematic multi-channel communication; embed professional development in daily forums; involve stakeholders democratically; and build programmatic flexibility while maintaining philosophical consistency.

Study limitations include single case focus limiting understanding across diverse settings, eight-month timeframe providing snapshot of mature practices, and middle-class demographics potentially not representing diverse socioeconomic contexts. Future research should conduct comparative studies across diverse resource levels and contexts, longitudinal research tracking development over years, and research examining parents' perspectives more extensively.

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