

Collaborative Leadership in Elementary Education: A Systematic Review of Effective Principal Practices

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative leadership in elementary schools is seen as strategic to address the complexity of education management, although its implementation still faces various challenges. This study systematically examines the collaborative leadership practices of elementary school principals with a focus on principles, managerial strategies, and implementation barriers. A literature review of 14 articles published from 2019 to 2025 obtained through google scholar, Sinta, Garuda, and ScienceDirect. Selection is based on topic relevance, school context, and focus on collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership is rooted in participation, openness, and shared responsibility. The principal acts as a facilitator who encourages the involvement of teachers, staff, parents, and curriculum development. Prominent strategies include role sharing, deliberation, professional coaching, and external collaboration. The main obstacles are individualistic work culture, limited leadership capacity, and lack of policy support. The success of collaborative leadership is not only determined by the principal's vision, but also by the ability to build a sustainable collaborative climate. These findings contribute to the educational leadership literature and practical implications for principals and policymakers. Further research is suggested to explore the impact of collaborative leadership on student learning outcomes and teacher professional development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education has a strategic role in shaping the quality of human resources that are able to face the challenges of the times (Siregar et al., 2024;). Through education, individuals are not only equipped with knowledge and skills, but also life values, character, and the ability to think critically and creatively (Nurlina et al., 2023). In an ever-changing global context, the education system is required to constantly adapt and develop in order to be able to produce a resilient and relevant generation (Tintingon et al., 2023). Therefore, various reform efforts continue to be carried out, both through

policies, curriculum, and educational practices, especially at the elementary school level which is an important foundation for children's development.

Changes in the world of education require school principals, especially at the elementary school level, to play a role more than just administrative managers. School principals are required to be adaptive and communicative learning leaders as well as the main drivers of collaborative work culture in schools (Elmanisar et al., 2024). This demand is getting stronger with the implementation of an independent curriculum that places collaboration as one of the keys to educational success (Selvi et al., 2024; Muzaini et al., 2023; Rumasukun et al., 2024).

In this context, collaborative leadership becomes very relevant. This approach allows school principals to work with teachers, students, parents, and the community to create a healthy, open, and sustainable learning environment (Arnun, 2023). Collaborative leadership is believed to be able to create a warm school atmosphere and support the learning process (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023). The involvement of all elements of the school, including teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community, has a great influence on children's growth and development (Yulianto et al., 2024). School principals who implement collaborative leadership can open up space for dialogue, build mutual trust, and unite visions in the implementation of school programs (Kasmawati, 2021; Karnan & Marimuthu, 2021). In fact, in elementary schools with limited resources, the success of learning programs often depends on the ability of the principal to foster good relationships with all school residents (Sartika, 2022) This is also supported by research that emphasizes the role of women's collaborative leadership in increasing teacher participation in decision-making (Azizah & Mustari, 2024)

However, the implementation of collaborative leadership still faces various obstacles. Not all school principals have adequate leadership capacity to build healthy partnerships with all school residents (Arnun, 2023). Limited leadership training, resistance to changes in work culture, and lack of external support are also recorded as obstacles (Shofwani et al., 2024; Priyadi, 2024).

A number of previous studies have highlighted this dimension. Daulay (2023) found that a collaborative approach is able to increase teacher involvement and build a mutually supportive work culture. Indrayani et al. (2025) emphasized that the success of collaborative leadership is influenced by the ability of school principals to build effective communication. Hulkin et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of continuous leadership training to meet the challenges of organizational culture change. In addition, Ary et al. (2025) show that collaborative leadership styles are able to create a conducive work climate and strengthen teachers' sense of ownership of school programs. Sibarani et al. (2024) found that intensive collaboration between principals and teachers contributes to increased learning innovation and student engagement. Meanwhile, Dakabesi & Wicaksono (2022) emphasized the importance of institutional support and education regulations in creating sustainable collaborative leadership. These findings reinforce the urgency of a more thorough literature review to formulate managerial strategies that are adaptive and relevant to the dynamic context of primary schools.

Thus, although many studies have highlighted collaborative leadership, most studies are still contextual and have not presented a systematic synthesis of principles, strategies, and challenges in collaborative leadership practices in elementary schools. This condition shows that there is a research gap that needs to be filled. Based on these conditions, this study aims to systematically review the literature on collaborative leadership practices of elementary school principals, highlighting the basic principles, implementation strategies, and challenges of implementation. The urgency of this study lies in providing a theoretical and practical basis for collaborative leadership development, to strengthen the effectiveness of school management that is adaptive, participatory, and education-quality-oriented.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize empirical evidence on collaborative leadership practices of elementary school principals. The SLR design was selected to

enable a structured, transparent, and replicable process for identifying, selecting, appraising, and thematically synthesizing relevant studies.

2.2 Data Sources and Search Strategy

A structured literature search was conducted using four databases/indexes: Google Scholar, SINTA, GARUDA, and ScienceDirect. The search focused on publications issued between 2019 and 2025. Keywords were developed around three core concepts: (1) collaborative leadership, (2) principal/school leadership, and (3) elementary school context. Search terms included combinations of:

- *collaborative leadership, shared leadership, distributed leadership, participative leadership*
- *principal, school head, school leadership*
- *elementary school, primary school, sekolah dasar*

These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) and adjusted to match each database's search features. Manual screening of reference lists from eligible articles was also used to identify additional relevant studies.

2.3 Eligibility Criteria

To ensure relevance and analytic consistency, the review applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers with clear scholarly structure.
2. Published between 2019–2025.
3. Written in English or Indonesian.
4. Focused on elementary/primary school leadership contexts.
5. Explicitly examined collaborative leadership or collaborative managerial/organizational practices led by principals.
6. Full text accessible (open access).

Exclusion criteria:

1. Non-scholarly publications (opinion pieces, news, blog posts, non-reviewed reports).
2. Studies outside the elementary/primary school context (secondary, higher, non-formal education).
3. Articles addressing leadership generally without a clear collaborative component.
4. Publications prior to 2019 or inaccessible in full text.
5. Duplicates across databases.

2.4 Study Selection Procedure

The selection process followed PRISMA-aligned stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The initial search produced 124 records. After removing duplicates and clearly irrelevant titles/abstracts, 50 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Of these, 36 were excluded due to not meeting the predefined criteria, leaving 14 studies for final synthesis. The screening and eligibility decisions were documented to ensure traceability of inclusion decisions.

2.5 Data Extraction

A standardized extraction form was used to record key information from each included study, including:

1. author(s) and year of publication
2. country/setting and school context
3. study design and participants
4. leadership constructs examined (e.g., collaborative/distributed practices)
5. principal strategies and implementation mechanisms
6. barriers and enabling factors

7. key outcomes or reported impacts

2.6 Quality Appraisal

To strengthen the credibility of the synthesis, each included study was assessed for methodological rigor using a basic appraisal framework adapted to study design (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods). Appraisal criteria included: clarity of research questions, appropriateness of design, adequacy of data collection and analysis procedures, transparency of reporting, and relevance to the review question. Quality considerations were used to guide interpretation of findings (i.e., stronger emphasis was given to studies with clearer methods and reporting).

2.7 Data Synthesis

The synthesis used thematic analysis to identify patterns across studies. All included articles were read in full and coded iteratively. Initial codes were generated based on repeated concepts and then grouped into higher-order themes. Through iterative refinement, codes were consolidated into three main themes:

1. Principles of collaborative leadership
2. Managerial strategies for implementation
3. Barriers and challenges

Contextual variation (e.g., urban vs rural settings) was captured as a cross-cutting dimension. The thematic synthesis was conducted reflexively, with repeated checks to ensure consistency between coded evidence and theme definitions.

2.8 Limitations of the Review

This review was limited to open-access publications in English and Indonesian and to the selected databases. As a result, relevant paywalled studies or publications indexed elsewhere may not have been captured. Additionally, the final number of included studies (14 articles) may limit the generalizability of conclusions across diverse elementary school contexts.

PRISMA Flowchart of Study Selection

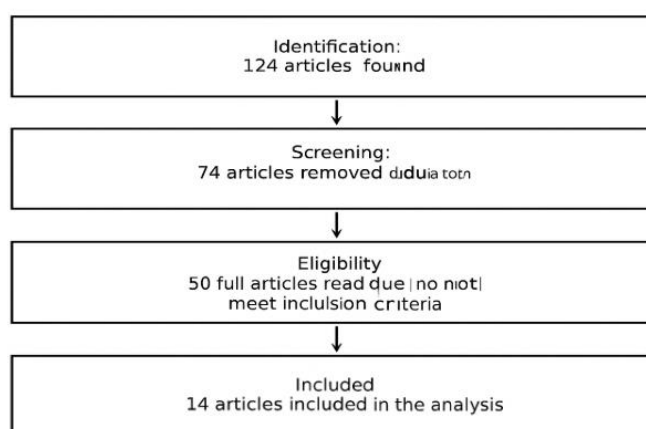


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart of Study Selection

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The literature review of the 14 articles analyzed showed three main themes in collaborative leadership of elementary school principals, namely basic principles, implementation strategies, and

implementation barriers, with additional variations in the school context. First, in the principal aspect, the research emphasizes that collaborative leadership is based on the values of participation, openness, and shared responsibility. School principals play the role of facilitators who encourage the involvement of teachers, education staff, parents, and stakeholders in decision-making and implementation of school programs (Sunaengsih et al., 2019; Jong et al., 2022; Hidayat & Rugaiyah, 2023; Aryani & Haryadi, 2023; Abidin & Alias, 2022; Yulianto et al., 2024).

Second, in terms of strategy, a number of studies show that collaborative leadership is realized through proportional division of roles, deliberation in decision-making, professional development of teachers, the formation of work teams, and external collaboration with communities and other educational institutions (Yuda et al., 2023; Colosseum & Food, 2023; Manuel et al., 2024; Ning, 2024; Miri et al., 2024; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024).

Third, in the dimension of obstacles, the challenges found include a work culture that is still individualistic, limited leadership capacity, limited resources, internal conflicts, and lack of support for policies and organizational structures (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023; Sunaengsih et al., 2019; Jong et al., 2022; Yuda et al., 2023; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024).

In addition, the literature findings also show that there is a variation in context. In urban schools, collaborative leadership practices emphasize more resource utilization and external partnerships, while in rural schools rely more on local community participation and support from the surrounding community (Arong, 2024; Mazhabi, 2025).

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Description / Indicators	Source
Principle	Collaborative leadership is based on the values of participation, openness, and shared responsibility. The principal plays the role of a facilitator who encourages the involvement of teachers, staff, parents, and stakeholders in decision-making and implementation of school programs.	Sunaengsih et al. (2019); Jong et al. (2022); Hidayat & Rugaiyah (2023); Aryani & Haryadi (2023); Abidin & Alias (2022); Yulianto et al. (2024)
Strategy	It is carried out through deliberation in decision-making, proportional division of roles, professional development of teachers, formation of work teams, and external collaboration with other communities and educational institutions.	Yuda et al. (2023); Colosseum & Food (2023); Manuel et al. (2024); Ning (2024); Miri et al. (2024); Balan & Jamaluddin (2024).
Obstacles	Challenges faced include individualistic work culture, limited leadership capacity, limited resources, internal conflicts, and lack of support for policies and organizational structures.	Aryani & Haryadi (2023); Sunaengsih et al. (2019); Jong et al. (2022); Yuda et al. (2023); Balan & Jamaluddin (2024)
Context Variation	In urban schools, collaborative leadership emphasizes resource utilization and partnerships with external institutions. In rural schools, collaborative practices rely more on local community participation and the support of the surrounding community.	Arong (2024); Mazhabi (2025)

Overall, the results of this study show that collaborative leadership of elementary school principals is practiced through the principle of togetherness, participatory managerial strategies, facing various internal and external factors, and influenced by the context of the school environment.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Basic Principles of Collaborative Leadership for Elementary School Principals

The collaborative leadership of elementary school principals is an important foundation in realizing participatory school management and oriented towards improving the quality of education. This approach emphasizes the active involvement of teachers, staff, and stakeholders in decision-making, vision formulation, and implementation of strategic programs (Sunaengsih et al., 2019) In practice, school principals play the role of not a single authority, but rather a facilitator who builds trust, opens up space for dialogue, and encourages shared responsibility (Jong et al., 2022) This principle strengthens a democratic and adaptive school culture that is responsive to change, so that it is able to create an inclusive and sustainable learning environment (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023; Hidayat & Rugaiyah, 2023).

A number of studies also confirm that the principles of collaborative leadership are reflected through strategies that encourage deliberation, fair division of roles, and teacher involvement in curriculum development and learning innovations (Yuda et al., 2023) Support for professional training and development is an integral part of showing the commitment of school principals to increase the capacity of human resources in a sustainable manner (Abidin & Alias, 2022; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024). These practices show that mutual trust and mutual appreciation contribute to creating a productive and change-resilient work environment (Jong et al., 2022; Aryani & Haryadi, 2023; Miri et al., 2024; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024; Mazhabi, 2025).

In the context of crises and educational changes, collaborative leadership has also proven to be relevant. Principals who are open, inclusive, and able to network with local communities as well as other schools are better equipped to respond to complex challenges (Manuel et al., 2024; Mazhabi, 2025). Strategies such as inter-school collaboration, responsibility sharing, and the use of local wisdom strengthen the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented leadership (Mazhabi, 2025). Thus, the success of leadership is not only determined by the personal capacity of the principal, but also by the ability to build an educational ecosystem that supports each other (Hidayat & Rugaiyah, 2023; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024).

Theoretically, these principles are in line with the concept of distributed leadership, which emphasizes the distribution of authority among school citizens, as well as transformational leadership, which places the principal as a driver of change and the development of a shared vision (Karnan & Marimuthu, 2021; Azizah & Mustari, 2024). By combining democratic and participatory principles with this leadership framework, school principals are able to create a sense of belonging, active involvement, and collective responsibility in realizing sustainable quality education (Miri et al., 2024)

3.2.2 Collaborative Leadership Implementation Strategy

The implementation of collaborative leadership in elementary schools is reflected through various managerial measures that emphasize the active participation of all school residents. School principals implement a collective division of responsibilities, form a work team, and utilize a deliberation forum to formulate school policies. This step strengthens a sense of ownership of the school's vision and mission while creating effective communication among members of the school community (Sunaengsih et al., 2019; Jong et al., 2022; Yuda et al., 2023; Aryani & Haryadi, 2023).

Literature review shows that this strategy also includes strengthening interpersonal relationships, both between principals and teachers and with external stakeholders. Principals build strategic partnerships with communities, facilitate training with teachers, and encourage the exchange of ideas through learning communities. (Miri et al., 2024; Ning, 2024). This inclusive approach represents a shift from a top-down leadership style towards a participatory and dialogical model, in which each individual actively contributes to the management of the school (Kolosidou & Kakana, 2023; Manuel et

al., 2024). This practice has been proven to be effective in increasing motivation, innovation, and a sense of shared responsibility for the quality of education (Hidayat & Rugaiyah, 2023; Arong, 2024).

In addition, the principal involves teachers in the planning and evaluation of school programs through the formation of cross-role working teams that identify needs, formulate solutions, and monitor policy implementation. This involvement strengthens a sense of shared ownership and makes teachers equal partners in school management (Abidin & Alias, 2022; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024). This kind of approach also opens up space for constructive dialogue and innovation based on real needs in the field (Jong et al., 2022; Halim & Jamaluddin, 2024).

Teacher professional capacity building is an important strategy in collaborative leadership. The principal not only carries out administrative functions but also plays the role of a human resource developer. Studies show support for training and upskilling programs through workshops, seminars, or collaborations with other educational institutions (Abidin & Alias, 2022; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024; Miri et al., 2024; Yuda et al., 2023; Aryani & Haryadi, 2023). This effort ensures that teachers have competence according to the demands of the curriculum and can contribute to innovative learning.

Furthermore, collaborative strategies show a variety of contexts. In urban schools, principals tend to leverage more abundant resources, develop partnerships with external institutions, and strengthen teacher professionalism (Sibarani et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in rural schools, the implementation of collaborative leadership relies more on local community support and the participation of the surrounding community (Ary et al., 2025; Dakabesi & Wicaksono, 2022). This difference shows that collaborative leadership is adaptive according to social conditions and the school environment.

The implementation of this strategy has resulted in a number of positive outcomes, including increasing teacher motivation and work morale, strengthening a sense of ownership of school programs, encouraging learning innovation, and increasing student involvement (Daulay, 2023; Indrayani et al., 2025; Hulkin et al., 2024). This shows that the success of collaborative strategies not only has an impact on school governance, but also on the quality of the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

3.2.3 Challenges in the Implementation of Collaborative Leadership in Elementary Schools

The implementation of collaborative leadership in elementary schools faces several challenges that come from internal and external factors. One of the main obstacles is the limited understanding of school principals to the concept of collaborative leadership, so that many still rely on traditional models with authoritarian approaches (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023; Sunaengsih et al., 2019). Low access to leadership training and limited systemic support from education authorities have slowed down the transformation towards participatory leadership (Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024).

Another challenge is related to limited resources, both time, funds, and facilities that make it difficult for school principals to create effective collaboration spaces. The high administrative burden and dense curriculum demands make it difficult for teachers and staff to be optimally involved in collaborative processes (Yuda et al., 2023). The strong individualistic work culture in a number of schools is an obstacle to building inclusive collaboration (Jong et al., 2022).

In addition, conflict management is an important challenge in collaborative leadership. Principals need to have the skills to listen, understand different perspectives, and find fair solutions to differences of opinion among teachers, staff, and stakeholders (Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024). This ability is crucial to creating a harmonious and inclusive work atmosphere, where each member of the school feels valued and contributes to a common goal (Yuda et al., 2023).

Challenges also arise in terms of ongoing professional capacity building for teachers and staff. School principals are required not only to improve technical competence, but also to build collaborative, communication, and data-driven decision-making skills (Abidin & Alias, 2022; Young et al., 2022). This effort requires regulatory and policy support that favors strengthening collaboration.

Thus, although collaborative leadership has been proven to be able to strengthen school management and the quality of education, its implementation still faces structural and cultural

obstacles. However, through an inclusive approach, capacity building, and consistent policy support, these challenges can be managed so that collaborative leadership truly becomes a sustainable culture in Primary Schools (Sunaengsih et al., 2019; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024; Abidin & Alias, 2022).

3.2.4 Research Gaps

Although various studies have highlighted the principles, strategies, and challenges of collaborative leadership in elementary schools, there are still several research gaps that need attention. First, most studies focus on the managerial aspects of school principals, such as responsibility sharing strategies, teacher involvement, and professional development (Yuda et al., 2023; Abidin & Alias, 2022; Balan & Jamaluddin, 2024). However, research that directly measures the impact of collaborative leadership on student learning outcomes, learning motivation, or learning quality is still limited (Daulay, 2023; Indrayani et al., 2025).

Second, comparative studies between urban and rural contexts are still rarely conducted. In fact, collaborative strategies carried out by school principals are often influenced by the availability of resources, community support, and socio-cultural conditions around the school (Sibarani et al., 2024; Ary et al., 2025; Dakabesi & Wicaksono, 2022). Cross-contextual research can provide a more complete picture of how collaborative leadership adapts to local dynamics.

Third, although many studies mention the relevance of the concepts of distributed leadership and transformational leadership in collaborative practice, studies that explicitly test the integration of these two frameworks in the context of elementary schools are still very limited (Karnan & Marimuthu, 2021; Azizah & Mustari, 2024). In fact, integration has the potential to provide a deeper understanding of effective leadership models in dealing with changes in the education system.

Therefore, further research needs to be directed at measuring the real impact of collaborative leadership on learning quality, exploration of comparisons across sociocultural contexts, and the development of conceptual models that integrate various leadership frameworks. This is important to enrich literature while providing practical recommendations for improving the quality of basic education management in the future.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review shows that collaborative leadership in elementary schools, which is based on the principles of participation, openness, and shared responsibility, is a strategic approach in strengthening school management, increasing teacher motivation and work morale, encouraging learning innovation, and expanding student involvement, although its implementation still faces challenges in the form of limited resources, individualistic work culture, and lack of policy support. This study has limitations, including the scope of articles, which are limited to the period 2019 to 2025, language limitations because they only use Indonesian and English articles, and the dominance of open access publications, which has the potential to cause bias in the representation of literature. In terms of theoretical contribution, this study enriches the understanding of educational leadership by emphasizing the relevance of the concepts of distributed leadership and transformational leadership in the context of elementary schools, which shows that collaborative leadership is not just a managerial practice, but also a conceptual framework that can explain how principals drive collective participation, build a shared vision, and create an innovative culture that is adaptive to dynamics education. Furthermore, the results of this study open future research space to explore more deeply the impact of collaborative leadership on student learning outcomes, compare its effectiveness between public and private schools, and examine how national policies and regulations shape sustainable collaborative leadership practices.

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