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Leadership and Strategic Partnerships in Educational Management: Empowering Communities and Businesses in Senior and Vocational High Schools

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ABSTRACT: Educational management increasingly requires school leadership capable of coordinating internal resources and mobilizing external stakeholders. This qualitative multiple-case study examines the implementation of leadership-based educational management and strategic partnerships through community and business engagement in senior and vocational high schools in Kolaka Regency, Indonesia. The study covered SMK Negeri 1 Kolaka, SMA Negeri 2 Kolaka, SMA Negeri 1 Wundulako, and SMK Negeri 7 Wundulako, with perspectives from the Southeast Sulawesi Provincial Education Office. Informants were purposively selected. Data were obtained through non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis and interpreted using data reduction, display, conclusion drawing, and verification, supported by triangulation. Findings indicate that school leaders adopted collaborative, participatory, and adaptive approaches but configured partnerships differently by school type. Vocational schools emphasized industry-oriented curriculum alignment, workplace learning, guest instructors, competency certification, job placement services, graduate tracking, and school production units. General senior high schools emphasized school committees, parents, community leaders, and public-sector participation in school programs, character education, entrepreneurship, and life skills. Constraints included limited local industry absorption capacity, uneven participation, resource and competency gaps, and technological and regulatory changes. The study develops a context-sensitive interpretation of school leadership as a coordinating mechanism connecting educational management with community and business ecosystems. Policy and managerial implications include institutionalizing stakeholder engagement, strengthening staff capabilities, and sustaining partnerships beyond individual initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective educational management requires more than the internal coordination of teaching, administration, and resources. Schools also depend on external actors who contribute knowledge, legitimacy, opportunities, and accountability. This challenge is especially consequential in upper-secondary education, where general and vocational schools serve partly different educational pathways. In this setting, leadership must align institutional goals with stakeholder expectations while safeguarding educational purposes (Arikunto, 2008; Danim, 2007; Kristiawan et al., 2017).

Leadership and partnership are frequently considered separately: leadership research examines organizational direction and teacher performance, whereas school–industry studies emphasize employability, curricular relevance, and workplace practice (Hanim et al., 2020; Hidayati et al., 2021; Rojaki et al., 2021). Community participation research, meanwhile, focuses on parent involvement, shared decision-making, and public accountability (Munadi, 2008; Pakniany et al., 2020). Considering these strands together offers a means of understanding how schools coordinate diverse partners rather than merely accumulate agreements.

The distinction between senior high schools (SMA) and vocational high schools (SMK) is analytically important. The former can prioritize broad academic development and community participation, whereas the latter require stronger coordination with businesses and industry for practical competencies and transitions to work. Yet both types must navigate resource constraints, uneven stakeholder participation, and changing technological demands. The Kolaka Regency context provides an opportunity to examine these differing configurations within a common regional educational environment (Sunarti, 2026).

This article investigates how collaborative school leadership organizes partnerships and empowers community and business stakeholders across four public upper-secondary schools. It asks: (1) how are leadership and partnerships enacted in school management; (2) how do partnership priorities differ between SMA and SMK; and (3) what obstacles and improvement strategies emerge? The intended contribution is an integrated, context-sensitive account of leadership as an intermediary between internal school management and external educational ecosystems. This is an interpretive contribution rather than a statistically tested causal model.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research design and setting

A qualitative multiple-case design was used to examine educational management practices in their institutional settings. The cases were SMK Negeri 1 Kolaka, SMA Negeri 2 Kolaka, SMA Negeri 1 Wundulako, and SMK Negeri 7 Wundulako. The Southeast Sulawesi Provincial Education Office provided an additional policy-level perspective. These settings and the methodological description follow the underlying dissertation (Sunarti, 2026).

2.2. Informants and data collection

Informants were selected purposively according to their involvement in, and knowledge of, school leadership, community participation, and cooperation with business and industry. The dissertation reports non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document study. The published article should retain only quotations and participant descriptors that can be traced to the original transcripts and records; no new interview quotations are introduced here.

2.3. Data analysis and trustworthiness

The dissertation describes analysis following the Miles and Huberman sequence of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, with triangulation to strengthen credibility. This article reorganizes the reported findings into cross-case themes covering leadership practices, partnership configurations, implementation constraints, and improvement strategies. The thematic synthesis is descriptive and interpretive; it does not imply numerical comparisons or estimates of effects (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Sugiyono, 2016).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Case characteristics and partnership priorities

Across the four schools, collaborative, participatory, and adaptive leadership was reported as a common management orientation. The principal difference concerned which external stakeholders and activities received greatest attention. Vocational schools foregrounded business and industry alignment; general senior high schools foregrounded community participation and wider student development. These are differences in reported emphasis, not exclusive categories: both school types may involve both community and business actors.

Table 1. Schools included in the qualitative multiple-case study

School	Type	Reported partnership emphasis
SMK Negeri 1 Kolaka	Vocational	Business and industry cooperation, practical learning
SMK Negeri 7 Wundulako	Vocational	Business and industry cooperation, practical learning
SMA Negeri 2 Kolaka	General	Community, parents, committees, student development
SMA Negeri 1 Wundulako	General	Community, parents, committees, student development

Source: Synthesis of findings by the author 2026

3.2. Leadership as a coordinating mechanism

The findings portray principals as organizers of collective direction rather than solely administrative authorities. Collaborative practices involved coordinating teachers, school committees, parents, community representatives, and external partners; participatory practices opened school programming to stakeholder input; and adaptive practices responded to local capacity and changing policy demands. This synthesis is consistent with the management emphasis on leadership, supervision, and organizational coordination described by Hanim et al. (2020), Husaini and Fitria (2019), and Saputra (2022). The empirical contribution is the observation that these leadership orientations are applied to different partnership ecosystems within the same regional context.

3.3. Industry-oriented partnerships in vocational schools

In the two SMK cases, the dissertation identifies several mechanisms for engaging the business and industrial sector: curriculum synchronization, fieldwork practice (PKL), guest instructors, professional certification institutions (LSP), special job placement units (BKK), graduate tracer studies, and school production units. These practices connect school-based instruction with workplace requirements and potential transitions to employment. They also indicate that partnerships can involve curriculum, instruction, assessment, and placement rather than isolated sponsorship arrangements. However, the dissertation also identifies limited local industry absorption capacity, which may constrain opportunities even when school leadership actively builds partnerships (Hidayati et al., 2021; Prunawati and Yahya, 2019; Rojaki et al., 2021).

3.4. Community-oriented partnerships in general senior high schools

In the two SMA cases, the reported focus was engagement of teachers, school committees, parents, community leaders, and government stakeholders in program development, character education, entrepreneurship, and life skills. This configuration positions community empowerment as a mechanism for broadening participation in educational decision-making and school activities. Community engagement is thus treated not simply as a funding source but as a contribution to institutional legitimacy, social learning, and responsiveness. The findings resonate with discussions of community participation in school governance (Munadi, 2008; Pakniany et al., 2020; Mariana, 2017).

Table 2. Cross-case thematic synthesis of leadership and partnership implementation

Analytical dimension	Vocational schools (SMK)	General schools (SMA)
Leadership orientation	Collaborative, participatory, adaptive	Collaborative, participatory, adaptive
Principal external actors	Business and industry; vocational support institutions	Parents; school committees; community leaders; government
Reported mechanisms	Curriculum alignment; PKL; guest teachers; LSP; BKK; tracer studies; production units	School programs; character development; entrepreneurship; life-skills activities
Primary implementation challenge	Limited local industry absorption and resources	Uneven community participation and resources

Source: Synthesis of findings by the author 2026

3.5. Implementation barriers and improvement strategies

The dissertation identifies five broad barriers: limited industry absorption capacity, suboptimal community participation, constrained facilities and budgets, uneven staff competencies, and technological or regulatory changes. These factors cut across institutional boundaries and help explain why partnership-building cannot be reduced to individual leadership style. Proposed responses include stronger principal leadership, sustained stakeholder cooperation, professional development for teachers and education personnel, adaptive curriculum development, and more effective school committee and community participation.

Table 3. Reported barriers and corresponding management responses

Reported barrier	Management response identified in the study
Limited business absorption capacity	Broaden and sustain business partnerships; adapt curriculum
Uneven community participation	Strengthen school committees and stakeholder engagement
Limited facilities and budgets	Improve resource coordination and external collaboration
Uneven personnel competence	Develop teacher and staff competencies
Technological and regulatory changes	Use adaptive leadership and curriculum renewal

Source: Synthesis of findings by the author 2026

3.6. Theoretical and practical implications

Read together, the cases suggest a context-sensitive framework in which collaborative leadership aligns internal management functions with different external partner systems. Leadership provides direction and coordination; partnerships provide resources, expertise, participation, and opportunities; and school type influences the emphasis of those partnerships. This integrated interpretation is the article's principal conceptual contribution. It should not be represented as a newly validated theory or as evidence of causal impacts.

For practitioners, the findings suggest that school leaders should embed partnership management in routine curriculum planning, resource allocation, stakeholder communication, and program evaluation. For policymakers, the findings imply that support for vocational education should account for local industry capacity, while support for general secondary schools should enable meaningful community participation. Future research could test the framework across additional regions, assess the durability of partnerships, and incorporate perspectives from students, parents, employers, and teachers.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study finds that collaborative, participatory, and adaptive leadership supports the implementation of educational management through different partnership priorities in SMA and SMK settings. Vocational schools emphasize alignment with business and industry through practical learning and employment-related mechanisms, whereas general senior high schools emphasize community involvement in educational programs and student development. Limited industry capacity, uneven participation, resource constraints, staff competency gaps, and changing external demands remain significant barriers. The findings support treating leadership and partnership management as interconnected aspects of school governance. Their transferability should be assessed with attention to school type and local stakeholder capacity.

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