

# Strategic Partnership Management Leadership in Island Schools in the State of Sabah, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Strategic partnership is a critical element of organisational management in ensuring effective governance and sustainable educational development, particularly in island schools in the state of Sabah, Malaysia, which face geographical isolation, limited resources, and restricted access to external support. This study aims to explore the leadership of school leaders in managing strategic partnerships. The study involved five informants comprising head teachers serving in island schools. The interview protocol was developed based on the Malaysian Education Quality Standard (MEQS Quality@School) Standard 2: Organisational Management, Aspect 2.7: Strategic Partnerships. A qualitative interview-based approach was employed to collect data. The interview transcripts were analysed using ATLAS.ti software. The findings indicate that effective and efficient leadership in managing strategic partnerships ensures systematic organisational activities, empowerment of subordinates, the development of cohesive teams, and the creation of a harmonious working environment to achieve organisational goals and direction. Furthermore, this study provides valuable contributions to the education system, particularly in the development of management and leadership modules for island schools, serving as an important reference across all levels of education.

**Keywords:** Leadership, school leaders, management, strategic partnerships, island schools

## INTRODUCTION

In line with the ninth shift of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM 2013–2025), which emphasises extensive collaboration with parents, communities, and the private sector (Ministry of Education Malaysia [KPM], 2013), school leaders play a vital role in establishing strategic partnerships to achieve sustained excellence in organisational management. Accordingly, efforts to strengthen competitive organisational management require the involvement of all stakeholders, including parents, society, and communities, through active collaboration and strong relational networks. High-quality leadership therefore serves as the primary foundation for fostering a strategic partnership climate that has increasingly gained attention in contemporary educational contexts. Likewise, high-impact leaders exert a direct influence by mobilising and empowering subordinates to strengthen partnerships in addressing twenty-first-century challenges and the effects of globalisation resulting from rapid developments in information and communication technology. Furthermore, strong leadership quality is closely associated with the role of school leaders in administering and managing strategic partnerships systematically and strategically to produce quality schools and enhance student development outcomes.

Building upon this, initiatives to translate actions aimed at achieving management standards related to strategic partnerships, as outlined in the Malaysian Education Quality Standard (MEQS Quality@School), specifically Standard 2: Organisational Management, Aspect 2.7: Strategic Partnerships, into planning and implementation aligned with the context of the school require school leaders to possess effective and efficient leadership competencies to contribute to organisational excellence and achievement (Roslena & Mohd Izham, 2015). In addition, the skills of school leaders acting as change agents in establishing community networks through appropriate mechanisms are emphasised to support continuous student learning towards excellence. Consequently, the MEQS Quality@School document developed by the Inspectorate and Quality Assurance Division (*Jemaah Nazir dan Jaminan Kualiti* (JNJK) serves as a guiding reference for school leaders in ensuring

that educational institutions meet recognised quality standards and are capable of developing more competitive and progressive school management systems (JNJK, 2024). This is because the MEQS Quality@School document adds value to leadership quality and functions as a key reference to enable school organisations to be managed more effectively and systematically.

Every educational institution in Malaysia must place serious emphasis on enhancing organisational excellence. In line with the fifth shift of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM 2013–2025), which focuses on placing high-performing leaders in every school (KPM, 2013), school leaders are required to possess the competence and capacity to lead authentically, particularly with a focus on professional and systematic strategic partnership management. In other words, school leaders are fully responsible for mobilising organisational members to respond to change and ensuring that management and planning processes are implemented comprehensively and effectively. At the same time, school leaders, as mandated administrators, should be able to create a partnership environment that exerts a positive impact on organisational success and improvements in student performance (Vaughan, 2017).

Within the context of organisational management in island schools, which demonstrate distinct leadership patterns and operate in remote and high-risk areas, strategic partnerships are required as a primary driver of governance effectiveness and educational development. Furthermore, island schools possess unique and more challenging characteristics, including remote locations, geographical constraints, limited infrastructure, shortages of teaching staff, restricted facilities, and limited access to local community support. These schools are also situated in areas that are difficult to access due to dense forests, rivers, hilly terrain, swampy areas, and unstable internet connectivity (Sainah et al., 2024). Consequently, this scenario demands leadership capacity that extends beyond internal management to include the ability to establish and manage strategic collaborative networks effectively. Competent leadership is therefore required to manage organisations efficiently and systematically to ensure consistent development, progress, and innovation in schools (Fullan, 2015). Leaders must also possess comprehensive competencies to achieve organisational direction and goals. According to Dexter et al (2020), leadership competence among principals in island schools is regarded as the backbone of school excellence, particularly in realising the objectives of the National Education Philosophy. This study was conducted to obtain detailed information and data from school leaders regarding the management of strategic partnerships in island schools in the state of Sabah.

## Problem Statement

Based on data obtained from the Sabah State Education Department (*Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri* [JPN] Sabah) in 2023, a total of 72 schools in Sabah are categorised as island schools, comprising five secondary schools and 67 primary schools. This data illustrates that school leaders play a crucial role in achieving educational quality, particularly through the establishment of strategic partnerships in island schools to ensure systematic and well-planned implementation. However, school leaders face numerous challenges in ensuring effective and sustainable strategic partnerships, as island schools are characterised by unique geographical conditions, limited access to educational resources, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted external support (Sainah et al., 2024), as well as inconsistent community involvement. Moreover, parental involvement in school activities has yet to reach a satisfactory level and requires further enhancement (Halimah et al., 2017).

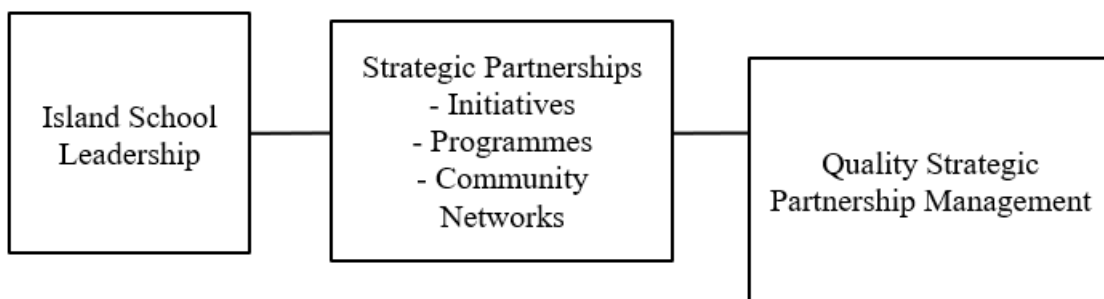
Preliminary observations indicate that parents tend to delegate full responsibility for their children's education to schools (Mohamed Sani et al., 2014). At the same time, parents often lack understanding of the concept and potential benefits of school–community partnerships, hold prejudiced perceptions, and express scepticism towards the quality of school education (Epstein, 2002). Schools, on the other hand, may perceive education as the sole responsibility of schools rather than communities (Mohamed Sani, et al., 2014) and provide limited recognition of the community's role as a learning partner in the educational process (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). In addition, community participation in Parent–Teacher Associations (*Persatuan Ibu Bapa dan Guru* [PIBG]) remains limited and is often confined to specific activities such as canteen days, fundraising, or communal clean-up programmes (Al Muz-Zammil & Moong, 2010).

Although various educational policies and guidelines have been outlined in MEQS Quality@School, particularly under Standard 2: Organisational Management, Aspect 2.7: Strategic Partnerships, the implementation of

strategic partnerships in island schools remains incomplete. Other challenges faced by school leaders include limited leadership capacity, sustainability of collaboration with strategic partners, and the effectiveness of resource management and organisational activities (Halimah, *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of empirical studies focusing on leadership in strategic partnership management makes it difficult to identify best practices and effective strategies for strengthening strategic collaboration (Siti Hajar, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to explore school leaders' leadership in managing strategic partnerships to provide practical guidance for enhancing organisational management in island schools. The objective of this study is exploring leadership in managing strategic partnerships in island schools in the state of Sabah.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study is developed based on the synthesis of selected research findings related to island schools and guided by the Malaysian Education Quality Standard (*SKPM Kualiti@Sekolah*), Standard 2: Organisational Management, Aspect 2.7: Strategic Partnerships (KPM, 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework focusing on strategic partnership management aimed at producing high-quality strategic partnerships in island schools.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Strategic Partnerships in Island Schools**

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Leadership of Island School Leaders

Leadership is defined as a process that emphasises group dynamics and interpersonal relationships among organisational members, while a leader refers to an individual who is able to influence others within an organisation, functioning as the foundation for action by guiding and directing subordinates towards the achievement of specific goals (Evonne & Crispina, 2019). In general, an island school leader refers to the head of an educational organisation located on an island (Sainah et al., 2024). Therefore, every leader bears responsibility for managing an organisation regardless of school locality in order to realise high-performing leadership in every school.

According to Norman et al. (2021), effective leadership in island schools is demonstrated when leaders are able to strategically plan for success, gain the support of all stakeholders, and possess high levels of competence in performing their roles as leaders, mentors, and motivators within the organisation. Consequently, high-performing and effective school leadership is essential, as organisational success is highly dependent on the leadership of school leaders (Institut Aminuddin Baki, 2020). Moreover, school leadership constitutes the core of school transformation and development, while student development outcomes serve as a key indicator of leadership effectiveness. In other words, school leaders must possess the capacity to mobilise collective efforts, integrate skills, and develop competencies that enable the establishment of collaborative and consensus-based relationships with communities and external agencies.

### Strategic Partnerships

The term *permuafakatan* refers to negotiation between two or more parties undertaken to achieve mutual agreement (Kamus Dewan, 2007). Previous research by Gulson, (2013) describes strategic partnerships as a high-level collaborative process involving commitment, knowledge, and skills, reflected through communication

styles that encourage community engagement, voluntary cooperation, mutual respect, and shared decision-making to achieve common goals.

The concept of strategic partnership involves collaboration between at least two parties to achieve shared objectives (Friend & Cook, 2007). School–community partnerships refer to close relationships or agreements in implementing various school programmes and activities (Sheldon, 2015). Accordingly, collaboration and shared decision-making are essential elements in strengthening school–community relationships. Gross et al. (2015) explain that strategic partnerships provide numerous benefits, including improved academic achievement, enhanced learning experiences, increased school safety, and reduced truancy rates. All these benefits are aligned with the shared ultimate goal of improving student achievement and the quality of national education. Therefore, initiatives and programmes that expand stakeholder involvement, particularly local community engagement within the school ecosystem, constitute one of the key initiatives outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM 2013–2025).

In the context of leadership in managing strategic partnerships in island schools in the state of Sabah, school leaders must possess the skills to manage and lead schools effectively as a proactive measure to engage communities and external agencies in realising national education goals and enhancing student development. At the same time, school leaders must strengthen two-way communication, which is critical to the success of strategic partnerships (Christina et al., 2019). This is particularly important given the rapid and complex changes in the current educational landscape, which require school leaders to possess the quality and capacity to establish community networks with private sector organisations through appropriate mechanisms aligned with national education transformation (Siti Aliah et al., 2016).

Strategic partnerships between schools and communities are no longer optional but essential, as the educational process has become increasingly challenging and demands leaders who are equipped with diverse competencies (Siti Aliah et al., 2016). Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that communities play a significant role in supporting children’s learning and development across various contexts, including schools. Epstein (2009) introduced six typologies of partnership activities based on the Overlapping Spheres of Influence Theory, which can be implemented between schools and communities. These typologies include: (i) parenting programmes; (ii) two-way communication between parents and teachers; (iii) volunteer programmes; (iv) learning at home; (v) parental involvement in school committees and safety; and (vi) collaboration with external agencies. Thus, strengthening strategic partnerships through school–community collaboration is viewed as a means of enhancing organisational excellence in managing school change in line with national education transformation.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The methodology of this study constitutes an essential component of the research process. According to Stake (2010), research methodology refers to systematically organised and carefully executed techniques addressing all aspects of the research problem. This study employed a qualitative research design involving face-to-face interviews using an interview protocol. The study was conducted to explore strategic partnership management in enhancing school operational efficiency, particularly among school leaders serving in island schools in the state of Sabah. Island school locations were selected based on the justification that they provided the necessary data sources to address the research questions. A qualitative approach was selected due to its flexibility, as variables are not fixed and may evolve throughout the research process (Merriam, 2009). This study also aligns with the characteristics of qualitative research, which emphasise understanding phenomena from the perspectives of participants who possess experience in school leadership and management (Stake, 2010). The interview protocol was developed based on MEQS Quality@School (JNJK, 2023), Standard 2, Aspect 2.7, and subsequently used for data collection.

### Informants

The informants involved in this study comprised school leaders, specifically head teachers serving in island schools. As this study aimed to obtain a holistic understanding rather than to test hypotheses (Stake, 2010;

Creswell, 2014), five school leaders from different island schools were considered sufficient to provide comprehensive and meaningful data.

## Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data were obtained through participants' lived experiences within specific contexts and settings (Stake, 2010). According to Pang and Lajium (2014), data collection in qualitative research serves as a useful strategy for gathering in-depth information. Accordingly, interviews were selected as the primary data collection method, as they enable researchers to obtain substantial information within a relatively short period (Merriam, 2009). Face-to-face interviews involved direct interaction to explore informants' experiences, thoughts, and further clarification of the issues discussed.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted after the completion of interview transcription. The researcher followed the constant comparative analysis procedures proposed by Stake (2010) and Merriam (2009). ATLAS.ti version 8 software was utilised to support the data analysis process. The data obtained were categorised according to themes to facilitate detailed understanding and interpretation. Coding techniques were employed to strengthen data development, verify information, and facilitate the retrieval of original data.

## FINDINGS

Based on the interview findings, strategic partnerships within leadership and management support the achievement and excellence of student learning. Informant 1 explained that strategic partnership initiatives involve parents, communities, and the private sector. These initiatives need to be incorporated into the school's Organisational Strategic Plan, school calendar, through Parent and Community Involvement (*Penglibatan Ibu Bapa dan Komuniti* [PIBK]), as well as school activities and programmes. Informant 2 explained that strategic partnership initiatives are implemented by empowering the role of the Parent-Teacher Association (*PIBG*), establishing Professional Learning Communities (PLC), creating strategic linkages and networks with external parties, and utilising digital platforms. Informant 3 stated that strategic partnership initiatives are carried out through the role of *PIBG* or *PIBK*, private sector involvement, and companies with vested interests in the school. Informant 4 described strategic partnership initiatives through *PIBG* meetings, collaboration with parents, and private companies. However, Informant 5 expressed the view that strategic partnership initiatives operate within limited scope due to socio-economic constraints that frequently pose challenges.

*"...strategic partnerships involve parents, the community, and the private sector... incorporated into the school's Organisational Strategic Plan... involving PIBK... in addition... activities or programmes are planned... implemented and included in the school calendar..." [Informant 1].*

*"...strategic partnership efforts in schools... empowering the role of PIBG... establishing PLCs, strategic linkages and networks... utilising digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Google Classroom..." [Informant 2].*

*"...school leaders' efforts in strategic partnerships... through PIBG or PIBK... and private sectors such as Petronas... and companies with interests related to the school... such as security service providers..." [Informant 3].*

*"...efforts in strategic partnerships... through PIBG meetings and collaboration with parents and private companies..." [Informant 4].*

*"...strategic partnerships involving parents... the community and the private sector... operating within limited scope... due to socio-economic constraints..." [Informant 5].*

Island school leaders also play a role in managing organisational programmes related to strategic partnerships involving parents, communities, and the private sector. These programmes are implemented according to needs and are carried out creatively, innovatively, and continuously. Informant 1 explained that partnership programmes

are implemented based on the school calendar and Organisational Strategic Plan, with meetings, briefings, and committee formation conducted prior to programme implementation. Informant 2 stated that partnership programmes are carried out through *PIBG*, establishment of networks and linkages, benchmarking visits, skills-sharing activities, and task-based initiatives. Informant 3 explained that partnership programmes are implemented periodically, followed by reporting and programme improvement. Informant 4 described the implementation of partnership programmes through communal activities, sharing sessions, and performance dialogues. Informant 5 emphasised that partnership programmes involving parents, communities, and the private sector require strong collaboration and effective communication to generate positive impacts on organisational excellence.

*“...strategic partnership programmes... usually involve parents... communities and the private sector... implemented according to the school calendar... and based on the Organisational Strategic Plan... but prior to implementation... meetings are conducted... committees are formed to ensure smooth implementation...” [Informant 1].*

*“...partnership programmes... implemented through several strategies... for example... PIBG... establishing partnership networks and linkages... benchmarking visits... and skills-sharing activities...” [Informant 2].*

*“...partnership programmes... implemented periodically... after implementation... reports and follow-up actions are undertaken... meetings and committee formation are also conducted prior to programme implementation...” [Informant 3].*

*“...managing partnership programmes... usually implemented through communal activities... sharing sessions... and performance dialogues with parents...” [Informant 4].*

*“...in this school... strategic partnership programmes also involve parents, communities, and the private sector... but require strong collaboration... and effective communication...” [Informant 5].*

Island school leaders further emphasised strategic partnerships through community networks to enhance continuous organisational management. Informant 1 stated that community networks are established through WhatsApp and Telegram groups, while activities such as communal clean-up programmes, *ziarah cakna* visits, and providing contributions to parents are prioritised. Informant 2 highlighted the use of digital systems, community involvement in activities, utilisation of *PIBG* platforms, visits, and skills-sharing with private sector organisations and government agencies. Informant 3 explained that community networks are established through strategic partners, visits, and group-based partnerships. Informant 4 stated that strategic networking efforts are realised through collaboration with companies, while Informant 5 emphasised effective communication and the use of local language.

*“...school leaders in island schools must be wise... in establishing community network relationships in strategic partnerships... through WhatsApp and Telegram groups... utilising teachers’ expertise such as conducting *ziarah cakna* visits and providing essential contributions to parents...” [Informant 1].*

*“...community networking efforts in strategic partnerships... through digital systems such as Facebook and WhatsApp... community involvement in activities... using the PIBG platform... visits and skills-sharing with private sector organisations and government agencies...” [Informant 2].*

*“...using strategic partners... visits and group partnerships to establish community networks...” [Informant 3].*

*“...establishing community networks... through collaboration with companies... for example... Felcra and Melbon companies on the island...” [Informant 4].*

*“...establishing community networks through effective communication... either via multimedia approaches or the use of local language...” [Informant 5].*

## DISCUSSION

Organisational management in the aspect of strategic partnerships demonstrates that island school leaders manage strategic partnerships through activities involving *PIBG*, *PIBK*, and the private sector, which are systematically

planned and embedded within the school's Organisational Strategic Plan. Activities such as meetings, empowerment of *PIBG* roles, PLCs, strategic linkages with external parties, and the use of digital platforms highlight the importance of relational leadership in strengthening partnerships. These findings indicate that leadership in island schools requires strong relational skills, particularly in empowering *PIBG* and *PIBK*, as well as establishing collaborative partnerships with the private sector through digital platforms.

These findings are consistent with the study by Gulson (2013), which states that strategic partnerships represent a high-level collaborative process involving commitment, knowledge, and skills. Parental involvement and the empowerment of *PIBG* and community participation significantly influence organisational success and excellence (Siti Hajar, 2018). In addition, school leaders realise strong strategic partnerships in island schools through various initiatives to ensure that partnership relationships produce positive impacts, such as benchmarking visits, skills-sharing activities, communal programmes, performance dialogues, strategic networking, effective communication, and proficiency in local languages.

Accordingly, the findings highlight that island school leaders require competencies in relationship-building, creativity, communication skills, local language proficiency, and digital skills. These findings are supported by Christina et al. (2019), who emphasised the importance of strengthening two-way communication to ensure successful partnerships. Furthermore, school leaders must possess the quality and capacity to establish community and private sector networks through appropriate mechanisms (Siti Aliah et al., 2016) in order to realise the aspirations of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (PPPM 2013–2025), particularly the ninth shift, which emphasises the role of school leaders in fostering strategic partnerships with communities and the private sector to achieve organisational excellence, especially in island schools.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, school leaders demonstrate the ability to manage and lead strategic partnerships in island schools through initiatives, programmes, and community networks aligned with their respective school contexts. The collective commitment of stakeholders at various levels affirms the critical importance of strategic partnerships in achieving organisational excellence and quality education. The involvement of parents, communities, society, government agencies, and private sector organisations enables the creation of diverse learning experiences. Strong collaboration enhances human capital quality and subsequently strengthens educational institutions. This study also provides inspiration for researchers in developing new training modules related to organisational leadership and strategic partnership management, particularly in island schools in the state of Sabah.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is recommended to focus on the relationship between strategic partnership management leadership and student learning outcomes, including academic achievement, character development, attendance, and student well-being. It is also suggested that further studies develop and test contextually relevant leadership modules aligned with the realities of island schools to support the implementation of more inclusive education policies. Additionally, future research may be extended to island schools in other countries and to rural schools nationwide.

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