



The Impact of Primary Schools Merger in Semarang, Indonesia

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Education policy changes initiated by the government—acting as a stakeholder in education—for completing the homework in education related to 21st century globalization has been accomplished. One of the policies is the school regrouping known as the merger of some schools into one. Theoretically, this merger is defined as an intervention to raise the strength of an organization by merging it with another organization into one entity. In Semarang, Indonesia, during 2008–2012, the number of primary schools decreased gradually from 476 to 347 schools. This is qualitative research with case study which involved eight teachers and three principals from three primary schools from three different districts in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia. Data were collected through interviews, focus group, observation and documentation. Data analysis used descriptive and thematic analysis. Research findings showed that the change in leadership made the organization's members felt more confident because of the absence of leadership vacuum, more resources in terms of infrastructure and human resources. From financial and administrative perspectives, it eases school's work in management and arranging reports. Teachers' workload did not experience significant changes, but the principal is currently managing more teachers than before. Adjustment still exists especially in data collection. This research is expected to give another perspective in schools merger happened in Semarang.

Keywords: Primary School, Merger, Organizational Change, Impact, Case Study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Formal education remains as the most effective mean in improving human resources' quality. Education holds the key to a country's development, although indicators have shown that Indonesia's education's quality has shown a rather dissatisfying progress compared to international standard. A survey by the Human Development Index in 2012 revealed that Indonesia was at 121st rank.¹ Also, PISA 2012 survey focusing on recognizing students' skill in math, literature, science and problem solving placed Indonesia in a competitive position.²

Thus, the government has done numerous efforts by executing several education policies related to globalization and the development of information technology rapidly began, there was a shift of authority and responsibility in education from the national to the local government. Improvement in school management system has been applied through school-based management, school accountability, accreditation and digitalized education data. The centered school management style, now, has shifted as district autonomy.

One policy declared by the central government as the leading authority in national education is the school regrouping. Regrouping is a unification of some schools into one school only. This

policy is one of the local/city government's commitment in managing local resources and improving public services efficiently and effectively.³ This regrouping policy, known as merger, does not always receive positive public respond. It becomes a polemic as there are some disadvantaged people, especially those who are affected by this change, such as teachers, students and parents. By far, merger is done merely in industrial and organizational terms as one intervention method in managing human resources to improve the organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

Based on earlier findings, in academic year 2013/2014, there were 18 primary schools in Semarang which were merged into 9 schools. Compared to the overall number of primary schools in Semarang, the number reached 5%. In the previous years, similar thing also occurred as statistics revealed that the number of primary schools had declined gradually since 2008. It began in 2008 with 476 primary schools, then, it dipped to 458 in 2009. It continued to fall reaching 456 schools in 2010 and 347 both in 2011 and 2012.⁴

Merger as an intervention applied to a specific institution—in this case, school—is a form of government's policy based on several applied law products. Theoretically, merger can be defined as an intervention to gather force from an organization by combining it with other organizations to form a new entity.⁵ Merger is a complex strategic adjustment which integrates several interventions such as human process, techno-structural and human

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resources. Basically, a merger acts as an organization development program aimed to improve the organization's effectiveness and health. Hence, it must receive a full support from the top management, in this case, the government.⁶

There were three phases in merger;⁵ pre-combination, legal combination and operational combination. In pre-combination phase, it includes planning to ensure the success of the merger by identifying the future merged organizations, co-operating to gain crucial information, and planning the whole implementation process. The second phase includes legal and financial aspects. Lastly, the operational combination includes official communication and actions to initiate the implementation, physical changes, structural changes, work design, standard operational procedures, and introduction of the newly-merged organization's culture. In a school merger, there are some aspects needed to be considered, such as leadership, cultural change, law or regulation and financial aspects. These aspects should be considered carefully to ensure the success of the changes in the future.

Lewin's force-field theory mentioned that two forces will be unearthed from the merger of two contradictive organizations; driving force and resistance force.⁷ If the change involves an organization with huge number of individuals in it, resistance force will likely be born. In this research, the change being described is a merger process. The emotion handling in merged organizations mentioned by a merger syndrome experienced by organization's members after the merger process is executed. A merger syndrome is initiated by a change in organization's identity and culture, centralized decision making, tendency to feel anxious, insecure, disbelief, unmotivated, uncommitted, and low productivity.⁸ For that reason, the psychological effects experienced by teachers and students after the merger process need to be observed. Since reforms in schools, likely to fail in the face of cultural resistance, although has been well conceptualized.⁹

There were four types of merger according to the organization's field of activity; horizontal, vertical, conglomerated, and concentric.⁸ From those criteria, it can be concluded that schools merger can be classified as a horizontal merger, as it merges two similar organizations with two identical fields of activity (education). On one side, primary education is definitely government's responsibility. On the other, primary education is a public service provided by the government which must be conducted with minimum standard service. Thus, there is a conflict of interest between putting the humanity value first and the economic value. Moreover, primary schools merger involves many elements, such as students, teachers, principals, and school's committee.

Merger in education institution, such as school, takes place in several districts in Indonesia, mostly primary schools.³ Actually, this process does not only occur in Indonesia since some literatures also mention its occurrence in China,¹⁰ USA¹¹ and Norway.¹²

Previous research on schools merger in Indonesia was conducted, it research came to conclude that the regrouping policy was not supported by the technical operation related to the infrastructure and parallel classes' management.¹³ It provided positive outcome to school's cost efficiency but it was proven inefficient in managing assets which resulted in lower academic achievement. It concluded that both future-merged schools had discussed the regrouping planning involving schools' principals, teachers, school committee, local authority, and local education service.¹⁴ While, the regrouping of two schools could actually improve the

teaching efficiency using the increase in efficiency index score as an indicator.¹⁴ Also, regrouping was proven to be able to improve the quality of education through infrastructure improvement.

On the other side, regrouping can cause problems in organization, students, curriculum, employment, cost, social relationship, and application because the merger had already been done but the official document concerning the merger had not been released.¹⁴ It concluded that the socialization and implementation process of the merger required full co-operative and participative from the stakeholder, the government.³ In addition, a manual guidance related to the application of managing the infrastructure, adjoining the students and the learning process is also needed. The success of a merger must also be backed up with clear and simple vision which must be communicated. If such things are not well-considered, the merger will give negative impact to the schools involved. Such incident happened in USA.¹¹ Planning and implementation of school mergers are generally carried out in a top-down by the political intervention. The merger of schools is a very complex process that often leads to conflict and controversy. The issue that often arises is the difficulty to build a unified identity for the new institutions.¹⁵

A merger will cause some adjustments which are not easy to be handled by some people. In every change there will be those who resist and eager to maintain their status quo. Thus, the psychological effects of a merger are quite appealing to be studied. Taking all consideration into account, it is interesting to study the process of merger along with its impact in primary schools in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia.

2. METHOD

This research was aimed to obtain deeper understanding in the proposed study to produce scientific explanation on the related subject with interpretive orientation. This could be reached through qualitative research method using case study strategy.^{16,17} It focused on explaining the primary schools merger process along with the post-merger impact.

2.1. Participants

In a qualitative research, samples taken do not have to be in large numbers as they cannot be decided stiffly since the beginning. However, the number can be adjusted based on the developing conceptual understanding in the research and is not directed to representativeness.¹⁸ This research was done to three recently merged public schools which were a merger from six schools. Two of them merged into one school, while one school experienced two merger processes from four to two continued by another merger process into one school. Those schools are located in three different sub-districts in Semarang. The respondents for this research were principals and teachers from those schools, while the analysis unit in this research is the schools themselves. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three principals from those schools and focus group discussion were conducted with eight teachers which come from two school. The respondent agreed to be interviewed, recorded electronically using a digital voice recorder and transcribed.

2.2. Procedures

It began by obtaining the official list of merged schools in 2014 from the city education service in Semarang. From those data,

three schools from three different sub-districts were chosen and letter of permission was proposed to those schools. The data collection for this research involved interviews, focused group discussion, and observation. Interviews and focused group discussion were done semi-structurally by using the general interview guideline. This method was selected to prevent subject's manipulative behavior. In a case study's data collection, there were three principles in collecting data; using multi source data, creating a case study based data and creating a link among obtained data from several data collection methods to increase the research's reliability.¹⁶ The researchers entered the respondent lives, sought information and doing interpretation.¹⁹

2.3. Data Analysis

The data of this research were analyzed qualitatively. Analyzing is to break, to separate or to solve the mystery in a research into parts, fragments, pieces, elements or units.¹⁸ It can also be said that, analyzing data includes arranging, grouping, and categorizing data in themes. Data analysis begins with data reduction process, data selection, and simplification after which they were coded in emerging themes.²⁰ The stages in analyzing the data are: data obtained from interviews transcribed, reduced into units of analysis and categorized to certain themes. Next, coding process, those reduced units of analysis will be coded and analyzed descriptively and thematically based on the findings from the field.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research found several themes which illustrated the process of executing schools merger and its impact. Although each school has its own trademarks, there were similar patterns appeared as impacts. Related to the ideas of primary schools merger, the official paper was handed by the city education service but the idea was given by the technical execution in sub-districts and continued by application made by the schools.

Due to those changes, school's internal element, such as teachers felt there was no significant problem since they were adapted to work in one complex:

"Everyone supports this decision. Actually, it feels more comfortable to be one big family."

"We feel happy, both back then and now because basically we still only have one local office. So, there is no difference at all. After the regrouping, one campus is for one united school. Previously, we had two principals, now we have one principal, one uniform."

The three schools experiencing the merger process now have used their own campus. The changes only appeared in the number of study groups. Before the merger, school "X" had 18 study groups while after the merger it became 12. While, school "Y" remained to have the same 24 study groups before or after the merger. Similarly, school "Z" also maintained 12 study groups.

Responds from external factors such as students and parents are not quite distinctive since parents had the same perspective from the beginning. In school "X", parents actually felt happier as, now, their children start their study since the morning.

"They are happy when children can start their study from the morning."

"There is no difference. So, from the outside we are one although previously we were 1, 2, 3, and 4. Now, we have one policy."

In a merger process, the difference comes from the leadership and organization structure perspectives. Meanwhile, teachers' job description remains the same as they still served for the same function. Changes also occur in easier and simpler report and administrative work because previously they had to make two reports which are simplified into one report only.

"For teachers, there are no considerable changes in job description since they still do the same job as previously. However, leadership is slimmed from four to two. Normally, when they have more than one leader, conflict tends to surface easier due to different opinions or ideas."

After the merger, the organization atmosphere became more positive as it only had one central leader. Thus, everyone seemed to assist and support each other. School's asset became clearer and improved in numbers.

"I think it is more comfortable because previously we were divided into different groups but now we become one unity. Also, school becomes more conducive."

"I feel positive because, now, we are one. One vision, one mission."

Teachers expected that by having a merger or regrouping, they will have better co-operation and more solid bond to boost their academic achievement.

"Hopefully, by regrouping, this school will have better quality which can boost our academic achievement."

Based on the explanation above, it can be seen that there were some effects persisted after the primary schools merger process in Semarang, Indonesia. The main changes occurred in leadership. By merging two schools into one entity, a school will have a clear leader who holds the responsibility to lead the institution so that it has a clear path to go. Before the merger, there was a sense of individualist concerning schools' infrastructure facilities, from books, teaching aids, classes to principals. By contrast, after the merger, there was a more positive atmosphere as schools' resources were managed in single management system which resulted in easier and simpler management.

Leader has important role in the organizational change, it supported with opinion that said principal as a leader in a school can give a positive influence on school climate by their leadership behaviour.²¹ Leadership behaviours need to be developed better in Indonesian educations. This is contrasted with the reality which indicates that the principal is still dominant in resolving administrative issues than developing leadership.²² Moreover, the principal faced with the task to managing cost and budget in their school.²³

From three school respondents, all claimed that the merger brought positive impact as each school now has a clear principal,

and more resources and assets. Though, one school experienced a reduction of study group number, and teachers' rotation system, it was taken care by the local education service. The other benefit is that, now, students can start studying from the morning. For merged schools whose official documents were released in early 2014, their teachers have not received their mutation assignment letter. Currently, the changes in students' and teachers' data are being taken care of through central education data.

According to Lewin in his force-field theory, schools merger process basically is an organization transformation process which will give birth of two contradictive forces, resistance and supporting.²⁴ Moreover, Lewin explained the transformation in stages; unfreezing, freezing, change and refreezing. During the research, the observed schools entered the refreezing stage where changes had occurred and been implemented. However, not all attribute had been changed due to financial reason. Some schools even still used the same old names. Recently, the process of collecting and inputting the data of teachers' and students' mutation into the system is still on progress.

In one school, several teachers still do their old behavior from their previous school and it is considered as a cause of resistance to changes. It occurs as changes are considered as a threat to behavior.^{25,26} The reluctance to let go some old working behaviors is a general characteristic of resisting changes as the person has reached his/her comfort zone.²⁷ The different evidence found at school consolidation between adults and children, which adults had more difficulty forming new social and academic relationships, while the students more quickly adapted.²⁸

Successful transformation occurs to those who are not threatened by changes although the name of the school has been changed. They consider that they will still be teachers with the same salary each month. Thus, they feel secured as there is no threat in their status and financial reward. In two respondent schools, by far, teachers have already considered that they have worked together under the same roof each day, so there is no considerable change in their interpersonal relationship. Also, both schools remain to be led by the same principal which means there is no change in policy maker.

4. CONCLUSION

Recently, the phenomena of schools merger have been introduced in Indonesia. This research is expected to give another perspective in schools merger happened in Semarang. From this research, it can be concluded that:

- (1) A change in leadership has made the organization members feel more certain and secured as the leadership position is no longer vacant.
- (2) Schools merger ensures schools to possess better infrastructure and human resources.
- (3) From financial and administration perspectives, arranging reports and managing the school becomes a lot easier and simpler.
- (4) After a years, there are still some adjustments needed to be done, especially in gathering data.

- (5) Teachers remain to have the same main job description while principals are, now, responsible to lead more teachers.

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