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Pragmatic distributed leadership in the implementation of the free nutritious meal program policy: A holistic single case study in an Indonesian madrasah

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Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal program launched on January 6, 2025, represents a national priority policy requiring effective leadership at the school level. This study explores the manifestation of distributed leadership in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal program at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, a private madrasah in the non-urban area of Malang Regency. Employing a qualitative approach with a holistic single case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight informants (principal, program coordinator, staff, teachers, and students), non-participant observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal three key dimensions of distributed leadership: trust-based delegation providing substantial autonomy to the program coordinator, pragmatic role distribution protecting teachers' instructional time through concentrated responsibility on non-teaching staff, and limited collaboration focused on coordinator-staff partnership while maintaining space for student participation. The findings indicate that distributed leadership in resource-constrained contexts manifests as "pragmatic distributed leadership", a rational adaptation emphasizing trust, coordination efficiency, and protection of core learning tasks. This pattern effectively implements complex national programs without extensive collaborative structures. This research contributes to understanding distributed leadership in the context of educational policy implementation in Indonesian madrasahs and provides practical insights that schools with limited capacity can successfully implement national programs through lean yet high-trust leadership approaches.

Keywords: *distributed leadership; free nutritious meal; education policy implementation; school leadership; case study*

Abstrak

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) yang diluncurkan pada 6 Januari 2025 merupakan kebijakan prioritas nasional yang menuntut kepemimpinan efektif di tingkat sekolah. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi manifestasi kepemimpinan terdistribusi (distributed leadership) dalam implementasi program MBG di MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, sebuah madrasah swasta di wilayah non-urban Kabupaten Malang. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus tunggal holistik, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan delapan informan (kepala madrasah, koordinator program, staf, guru, dan siswa), observasi non-partisipan, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan mengungkap tiga dimensi utama: delegasi berbasis kepercayaan yang memberikan otonomi substansial kepada koordinator program, distribusi peran pragmatis yang melindungi waktu mengajar guru melalui pemusatan tanggung jawab pada tenaga non-pengajar, serta kolaborasi terbatas yang berfokus pada kemitraan koordinator–staf dengan tetap membuka ruang

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partisipasi siswa. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan terdistribusi dalam konteks keterbatasan sumber daya terwujud sebagai "pragmatic distributed leadership", yaitu adaptasi rasional yang menekankan kepercayaan, efisiensi koordinasi, dan perlindungan terhadap tugas inti pembelajaran. Pola ini terbukti efektif menjalankan program nasional yang kompleks tanpa struktur kolaboratif yang ekstensif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman kepemimpinan terdistribusi dalam implementasi kebijakan pendidikan di madrasah Indonesia sekaligus memberikan wawasan praktis bahwa sekolah berkapasitas terbatas dapat berhasil menjalankan program nasional melalui pendekatan kepemimpinan yang ramping namun berbasis kepercayaan tinggi.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan terdistribusi; makan bergizi gratis; implementasi kebijakan pendidikan; kepemimpinan sekolah; studi kasus

Introduction

The Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis / MBG) program, launched on January 6, 2025, is a national priority policy of President Prabowo Subianto's administration aimed at improving nutritional quality, reducing stunting, and strengthening the quality of Indonesian human resources toward Golden Indonesia 2045 (Kemenko Polkam, 2025). This program targets 82.9 million beneficiaries, including students from early childhood education (PAUD) to senior high/vocational schools (SMA/SMK), pregnant and lactating mothers, and toddlers, with a budget allocation of IDR 71 trillion in its first year (Sekretariat Negara, 2025). As of July 2025, the program has reached more than 7.3 million beneficiaries through 2,375 active nutrition community kitchens across 38 provinces, creating over 100,000 new jobs and driving the local economy by involving MSMEs, farmers, and fishermen (Kemenko Polkam, 2025). The success of MBG implementation at the school level heavily depends on the effectiveness of leadership in coordinating various stakeholders, managing resources, and ensuring program sustainability. Implementation in private schools and madrasahs faces unique complexities related to organizational characteristics, culture, and resource constraints (The Indonesian Institute, 2025; WFP, 2024), which demand adaptive and collaborative leadership models.

Distributed leadership has emerged as a relevant leadership paradigm in contemporary educational contexts, shifting from traditional hierarchical models toward more collaborative and inclusive practices (Harris & Spillane, 2008). According to Spillane (2006), distributed leadership is a leadership practice stretched across various individuals and manifested through the interaction among leaders, followers, and their situation; it is not an individual attribute but rather a collective activity arising from social interaction. Recent research demonstrates the positive impact of distributed leadership on school effectiveness: distributed leadership exerts a highly positive influence on school and student outcomes, with some patterns of distribution being more effective than others (Leithwood et al., 2020). Distributed leadership also enhances teachers' capacity to change and adapt to educational innovations (Amels et al., 2020), and impacts school climate, student engagement, and academic achievement (Nadeem, 2024). However, the literature also acknowledges its complexities: structural distributed leadership (SDL) can negatively impact teacher empowerment if not implemented properly, whereas functional distributed leadership (FDL) tends to be positively associated with job satisfaction and performance (Tucaliuc et al., 2023). In Indonesia,

the madrasah context, infused with religious values and a culture of gotong royong (mutual cooperation), potentially facilitates distributed leadership practices (Ikhwan, 2019); yet, research within the context of national policy implementation in madrasahs remains very limited.

Globally, school meal programs have been proven to deliver positive impacts on student health, attendance, and academic performance. The Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) policy in the United States increased participation in lunch programs by 10 percentage points and breakfast by 8 percentage points (Ramponi et al., 2025). School meal programs enhance academic achievement through improvements in concentration and cognitive function (Anderson et al., 2018; Schwartz & Rothbart, 2020), elevate well-being and educational outcomes (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2023; Sapkota et al., 2025), strengthen equity by reducing stigma (Heim et al., 2022; Illøkken et al., 2021), and generate significant economic impacts by reducing family food expenditure burdens and creating job opportunities (Cohen et al., 2021; Spill et al., 2024; Raveenthiranathan et al., 2024; Bandoni et al., 2023; McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2023). However, implementation faces challenges: infrastructural limitations, human resource capacity, funding sustainability, and stakeholder coordination (Drake et al., 2020; Chabrol, 2023). In Indonesia, MBG encounters additional challenges, such as geographical diversity, economic disparities, a lack of nutritional education, mistargeting, weak safety standards, and inadequate monitoring systems (The Indonesian Institute, 2025). Successful programs require strong leadership, multisectoral coordination, and community involvement (Chabrol, 2023; WFP, 2024), where distributed leadership offers a framework to understand how dispersed leadership can facilitate complex policy implementation (Bain & Company, 2020).

Although the literature on distributed leadership and school meal programs has expanded, research integrating the two remains highly limited, particularly within the context of policy implementation in Indonesia. Leadership studies in Indonesian educational policy implementation tend to focus on traditional hierarchical models and have not yet explored how distributed leadership practices facilitate national policy implementation at the school level. This research is vital because: First, MBG is a large-scale national policy involving complex coordination at the school level. Second, the non-urban madrasah context possesses distinct characteristics yet suffers from a lack of research. Third, understanding distributed leadership in MBG implementation provides practical insights for more effective implementation strategies.

MA Al-Hidayah Wajak was selected based on several strategic considerations: First, a private madrasah in a non-urban area represents grassroots implementation with limited resources. Second, the timing of the study during the initial phase (two months since October 2025) allows for capturing the emergence of distributed leadership in real-time before it becomes institutionalized. Third, initial observations indicated strong signs of distributed leadership, with a team sharing roles without rigid hierarchies. Fourth, with 240 students, the complexity is ideal for a single case study. Fifth, the collaborative madrasah culture potentially facilitates distributed leadership practices.

This study aims to explore how distributed leadership manifests in the implementation of MBG at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, answering the question: How is

distributed leadership practice realized in coordination, role distribution, and stakeholder interaction? This research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution by expanding the understanding of distributed leadership within the context of educational policy in Indonesian madrasahs, as well as practical insights for policymakers and practitioners regarding effective leadership strategies in implementing complex national programs with limited resources.

Research Method

Research Design This study employs a qualitative approach with a holistic single case study design (Yin, 2018). MA Al-Hidayah Wajak was selected as the single case because this school has been implementing the Free Nutritious Meal program since October 2025, and initial observations indicated signs of distributed leadership practices in program coordination. The holistic single case study design allows the researchers to deeply explore how distributed leadership manifests within the specific context of national policy implementation at the madrasah level. Research Setting and Timeline The research was conducted at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, Malang Regency, East Java. Data collection was carried out in November 2025, with interviews conducted on November 3 and 14, 2025. The timing of the study was based on the consideration that the school had been implementing the MBG program for approximately two months, a period that allowed the researchers to capture the emergence of distributed leadership before the practices became institutionalized and turned into a routine.

Research Subjects Research participants were selected purposively based on the criteria of direct involvement in the implementation of the MBG program. The eight informants consisted of: (1) the school principal as the decision-maker at the school level; (2) the head of administration as the MBG program coordinator appointed by the principal; (3) two classroom teachers involved in the daily execution of the program, consisting of one female teacher and one male teacher to obtain a gender perspective; and (4) three students from different grade levels as the direct beneficiaries of the program. The selection of informants from various levels of the organizational hierarchy aimed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership practices from multiple stakeholder perspectives. The profiles of the eight informants who participated in this study, including their roles and specific involvement in the MBG program, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

No	Code	Role / Position	Involvement in the MBG Program
1	KM01	Principal (*Kepala Madrasah*)	Strategic decision-maker; appoints the coordinator; handles escalated decisions affecting learning
2	PJ01	Head of Administration	MBG program coordinator; full operational responsibility across the program cycle
3	PJ02	Administrative Staff	Supporting staff; checks the quantity and completeness of the *ompreng*
4	G1	Classroom Teacher (female)	Program socialization; postpones lessons during distribution delays
5	G2	Classroom Teacher (male)	Program socialization; postpones lessons during distribution delays
6	S1	Student (different grade level)	Beneficiary; classroom-duty distribution; conveys feedback

7	S2	Student (different grade level)	Beneficiary; classroom-duty distribution; conveys feedback
8	S3	Student (different grade level)	Beneficiary; classroom-duty distribution; conveys feedback

Source: Developed by the authors based on the research findings (2025)

Procedures The study began by seeking research permission from the principal of MA Al-Hidayah Wajak. After receiving approval, the researchers conducted initial observations to identify key informants and understand the context of the MBG program implementation at the school. Subsequently, the researchers contacted potential informants to explain the research objectives and request their willingness to participate. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to the execution of interviews and observations. The data collection process was carried out simultaneously through interviews, observations, and document analysis to enable data triangulation.

Data, Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques The research data were gathered through three primary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews lasting 30–60 minutes were conducted with each informant, using an interview guide focused on three aspects of distributed leadership manifestation: coordination among stakeholders, distribution of roles and responsibilities, and collaborative practices in the implementation of the MBG program. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Second, non-participant observations were conducted regarding the food distribution process, program coordination meetings, and interactions among stakeholders in the execution of MBG. The observation findings were documented in field notes. Third, document analysis included the school organizational structure, Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for MBG execution, food distribution schedules, and coordination sheets with the Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit (SPPG). These documents were utilized to understand the formal structure and coordination mechanisms in the policy implementation.

Data Analysis Techniques Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with a combined deductive-inductive approach. The analysis process began with reading and understanding the dataset as a whole (familiarization). Subsequently, deductive coding was performed based on Spillane's (2006) theoretical distributed leadership framework, which focuses on three dimensions: collaborative practice, coordinated distribution, and collective leadership. Concurrently, inductive coding was conducted to identify emergent themes arising from the data. The codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were subsequently reviewed and redefined to ensure consistency and relevance to the research questions. The analysis was executed manually using a matrix to track patterns of leadership practices emerging from various data sources and informants.

The trustworthiness of the research was maintained through several strategies. First, data source triangulation was achieved by gathering data from eight informants with distinct positions, and method triangulation was fulfilled by utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis. Second, member checking was performed by presenting the findings to key informants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations. Third, thick description is provided in the reporting of findings to enable transferability to similar contexts. Fourth, an audit trail was maintained by documenting the entire research process from data collection to analysis. Fifth, reflexivity was practiced by

reflecting on the researchers' positioning and potential biases throughout the entire research process.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that distributed leadership practices in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal (MBG) program at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak manifest across three main dimensions: trust-based delegation in program coordination, role distribution and operational autonomy, and limited collaboration with student participation mechanisms. These three dimensions reflect a pragmatic and adaptive pattern of distributed leadership tailored to the context of resource constraints within a private madrasah. Table 2 summarizes these three dimensions, their key characteristics, and the data sources from which each was derived, before they are elaborated in the following discussion.

Table 2. Manifestation of Distributed Leadership in the MBG Program Policy

Dimension	Key Characteristics	Data Source
Trust-based delegation	Full delegation to the coordinator with high trust; situational and non-routine coordination; no MBG-specific regular meetings (lean structure)	KM01, PJ01
Role distribution & operational autonomy	Concentrated responsibility over the full operational cycle; coordinator-staff partnership; strategic non-distribution to teachers to protect instructional time	KM01, PJ01, PJ02, G1, G2
Limited collaboration & student participation	Selective coordinator-staff collaboration; situational teacher involvement; student feedback channel and classroom-duty system	PJ01, PJ02, G1, G2, S1–S3

Source: Developed by the authors based on the research findings (2025)

Trust-Based Delegation in MBG Program Coordination The implementation of the MBG program at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak demonstrates a vertical leadership distribution pattern based on full delegation with high trust. The principal, as the head of the organizational hierarchy, consciously distributed leadership responsibilities to the head of administration as the program coordinator. This is revealed in the principal's statement:

> "Based on the meeting results, we agreed that the head of administration would be the person in charge of implementing MBG at this school. The consideration is that when the MBG arrives, the teachers are teaching in class, so it is impossible to sacrifice the class; thus, the head of administration and the staff are the ones who can carry out this responsibility." (KM01)

This statement indicates a deliberative decision-making process through meeting forums, yet the decision leads to a concentrated distribution where one individual is fully trusted to run the program. This pattern aligns with the findings of O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc (2025), who identified that distributed leadership in practice often manifests as "directed delegation," where responsibilities are distributed but remain within a framework of hierarchical control. However, unlike critics who argue that such delegation potentially becomes a control mechanism, the data in this study show the existence of substantive trust given to the coordinator.

This trust is manifested in the significant level of autonomy granted to the coordinator. The principal emphasized that all responsibilities are held by the person in charge, except when major decisions need to be made, which are then coordinated with

the principal (KM01). A similar sentiment was confirmed by the program coordinator, who felt highly trusted in executing the MBG program at the school (PJ01). This pattern demonstrates what Bain & Company (2020) conceptualize as "leading a team of leaders," where senior leaders are able to step back and delegate authority to empower middle-level leaders. This trust, as the foundation of distributed leadership, is consistent with research findings in Islamic contexts emphasizing the importance of trust in distributed leadership practices, where trusted teachers show a greater desire to contribute more (Hilal et al., 2025).

The coordination mechanisms established are situational and pragmatic. Intensive coordination only occurs when situations require strategic decisions or involve disruptions to learning activities. The principal explained a concrete example when the MBG arrived late, outside of recess time, which forced the coordinator to consult whether the lesson could be postponed so that the children could eat first (KM01). This situation reflects what Spillane (2006) conceptualizes as "stretched leadership," where leadership practice is stretched across various actors and situations. Coordination is not routine and structured but rather responsive to specific contexts and needs. This pattern contrasts with the ideal distributed leadership models in the literature that emphasize the importance of regular forums or meetings (Nadeem, 2024) and effective communication channels (Teacher's Notes, 2025). The absence of specific routine meetings for the MBG program, as stated by the coordinator that special routine meetings to discuss MBG do not exist except for progress reports during monthly routine meetings (PJ01), indicates that distributed leadership at MA Al-Hidayah is lean and efficient, avoiding excessive bureaucracy.

This situational coordination pattern can be understood within the context of resource limitations. The literature indicates that successful distributed leadership requires deliberate design along with clear roles and responsibilities (Nadeem, 2024). However, in the context of schools with limited capacity like MA Al-Hidayah, a more flexible and pragmatic approach becomes a rational adaptation. This aligns with the argument that some patterns of distribution are more effective than others (Leithwood et al., 2020), and the effectiveness of a distribution pattern depends heavily on the specific context of the organization. Role Distribution and Operational Autonomy The distribution of responsibilities in implementing the MBG program shows a clear division based on the capacity and availability of organizational actors. The program coordinator explained the scope of responsibilities comprehensively:

> "My duties start from receiving the SPPG (Nutrition Fulfillment Service Unit) when they arrive at school, managing the administration, distributing the meals to the classrooms, collecting the plates or what we call ompreng, filling out the checklist documents from the SPPG, until the SPPG leaves the school." (PJ01)

This description reveals that the coordinator has comprehensive responsibility over the entire operational cycle of the MBG program, from reception to reporting. This pattern reflects a concentrated distribution where one individual holds full control over a specific domain. However, contrary to concerns regarding increased teacher workloads without appropriate compensation (Wing Institute, 2020), this role distribution is perceived positively by the coordinator, who feels highly trusted and fully supported.

The operational autonomy possessed by the coordinator is highly substantive. The coordinator has full authority to make decisions related to the technical and administrative aspects of the program, such as administration, distribution, and accountability for the SPPG ompreng equipment (PJ01). Only decisions that impact the learning process require escalation to the principal. This pattern aligns with the principle of subsidiarity in distributed leadership, where decisions are made at the level closest to implementation. Teacher's Notes (2025) emphasize that distributed leadership involves the delegation of authority and decision-making responsibility across the school, rather than just superficial delegation. The data from this study confirm that the delegation occurring at MA Al-Hidayah is a substantive delegation accompanied by a genuine transfer of authority.

The structure of the implementation team shows a pragmatic partnership pattern between the coordinator and the supporting staff. The coordinator explained that they act as partners, though the coordinator engages more in supervision (PJ01). Supporting staff members have specific duties, such as checking the quantity and completeness of the ompreng (PJ02), yet they work within a tight coordination framework with the coordinator. This pattern reflects what the Wing Institute (2020) identifies as assigning leadership tasks based on expertise patterns within the school, where task distribution is adjusted to the capacity and expertise of each team member.

Interestingly, there is minimal involvement of teachers in the operational execution of the program. The principal stated that so far, teachers have only assisted during the initial socialization phase (KM01). This statement was confirmed by the teachers, who noted that they have no involvement in the MBG execution itself because a coordinator and staff are already in place (G1/G2). This pattern can be understood as a strategic non-distribution, where program leadership is intentionally not distributed to teachers to maintain their focus on their core task of teaching. This aligns with the argument by Bain & Company (2020) that distributed leadership allows principals to relinquish more managerial responsibilities to focus on instructional leadership. In the case of MA Al-Hidayah, the same logic is applied to protect teachers' instructional time from the administrative burdens of non-instructional programs.

However, the minimal involvement of teachers also potentially limits the capacity for collective leadership, which is one of the primary benefits of distributed leadership (New Leaders, 2020). The literature emphasizes that distributed leadership enhances teachers' leadership capacity and strengthens the impact of teacher leaders (New Leaders, 2020). Studies within the Indonesian school context indicate that a principal's transformational leadership model that empowers teachers can serve as vital capital in developing a multicultural and inclusive educational environment (Ubaidillah, 2020). At MA Al-Hidayah, the tension between operational efficiency versus the development of collective leadership capacity seems to lean toward prioritizing efficiency. This is understandable given that the MBG program is a new initiative that requires operational stabilization before expanding participation.

Limited Collaboration and Student Participation Mechanisms Collaborative practices in the implementation of the MBG program show a selective and limited pattern. The primary collaboration occurs in a two-way partnership between the

coordinator and the supporting staff. The coordinator explained that they always communicate directly with the staff (PJ01). The staff confirmed this, stating that they always communicate regarding all matters (PJ02). The high intensity of communication within this dyad creates what Teacher's Notes (2025) describe as a culture of trust and empowerment on a micro scale. However, this collaboration does not extend to the entire school community.

Teacher involvement remains minimal and situational. Teachers only become involved in two situations: the initial program socialization and handling food distribution delays. In delayed situations, teachers act as facilitators by postponing lessons so that the children can eat (G1/G2, S1–S3). This pattern reflects a limited collaboration where teamwork occurs within highly specific boundaries and does not expand into a broader collective effort. This stands in contrast to the ideal definition of distributed leadership as a collective effort involving various stakeholders (Nadeem, 2024) and collaborative leadership that emphasizes teamwork and sharing ideas (Teacher's Notes, 2025).

This limitation of collaboration can be explained through two perspectives. First, from an efficiency perspective: in the context of a program that is operationally straightforward (receiving, distributing, collecting), involving too many actors could create role confusion and ambiguity, which are recognized challenges of distributed leadership (Nadeem, 2024). Second, from a core task protection perspective: by intentionally limiting teacher involvement, the school protects its instructional focus from fragmentation. This aligns with the principle that leadership tasks should avoid placing excessive burdens on teacher leaders (Wing Institute, 2020).

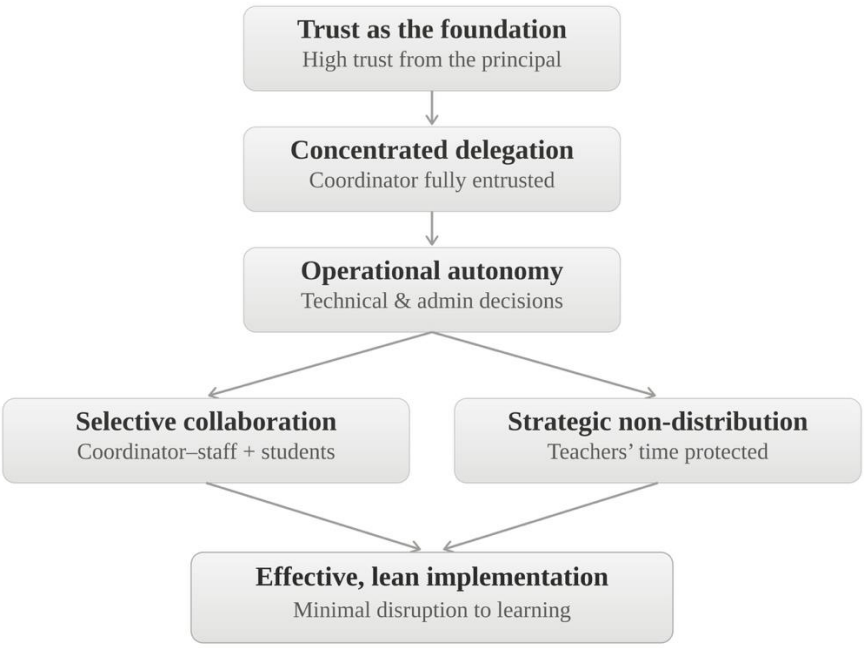
Nonetheless, limited collaboration does not mean an absence of feedback mechanisms within the program. The data show a fairly functional channel for student participation. Students have direct access to convey complaints or suggestions to the staff members (S1–S3) and perceive this accessibility positively, noting that the staff are easily approachable and not strict (S1–S3). Students also reported concrete experiences of sharing suggestions, such as asking to increase the food portions because sometimes the rice was too little (S1–S3). Although these suggestions were not fully acted upon, as they were only given an explanation that the portion already matched the nutritional measurements (S1–S3), the existence of an aspiration channel and the responsiveness of the coordinator demonstrate elements of inclusive leadership, which is a core value of distributed leadership.

Student participation is also realized in operational involvement through the classroom duty system. Students explained that the classroom duty officers, usually consisting of three people, directly collect the food ompreng to be distributed in class (S1–S3). Involving students in food distribution reflects the distributed leadership principle that leadership is not limited to formal positions and can involve students as part of the school community (Hilal et al., 2025). Although on a limited scale, this student involvement represents a distributed agency where responsibility is not solely in the hands of adult leaders but is also shared with student leaders.

Furthermore, students demonstrated positive perceptions toward the program and its execution. They stated that the program is orderly (S1–S3) and appreciated the good

coordination, noting that if the delivery is late and falls outside of recess, teachers usually postpone the class so they can eat, and they frequently receive surplus portions rather than facing shortages (S1–S3). This positive perception indicates that although the applied distributed leadership pattern is not fully participatory and collaborative in an ideal sense, it remains effective in producing good outcomes from the perspective of the beneficiaries.

Distributed Leadership in Resource-Constrained Contexts: A Critical Discussion The research findings reveal that distributed leadership at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak manifests in a form that can be termed "pragmatic distributed leadership," which is an adaptation of the ideal distributed leadership model adjusted to the realities of resource constraints and operational needs of a private madrasah. This pattern possesses several distinct characteristics that need to be critically discussed in dialogue with the literature. The overall pattern that emerges from these findings is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows how trust functions as the foundation from which concentrated delegation, operational autonomy, and selective collaboration flow toward the effective yet lean implementation of the MBG program.



Source: Developed by the authors based on the research findings (2025)

Figure 1. Model of Pragmatic Distributed Leadership in the Implementation of the MBG Program at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak

First, this study confirms the findings of the meta-synthesis by Hilal et al. (2025) regarding distributed leadership in the Muslim world, which often takes a constrained form characterized by hierarchical delegation and limited consultation. The pattern of concentrated delegation to the coordinator, the lack of routine consultative forums, and the limited involvement of teachers reflects this constrained distribution. However, unlike critics who argue that this pattern reflects a retention of control by school leaders, the data in this study show that the constraint is driven more by a pragmatic adaptation

to capacity limitations (teachers are teaching during distribution) rather than a resistance from leaders to share authority.

Second, these findings challenge the assumption in the literature that effective distributed leadership always requires a collaborative learning community and continuous professional development (Nadeem, 2024). In the context of MA Al-Hidayah, the operational effectiveness of the program was achieved without extensive collaborative structures. This indicates that for relatively simple and bounded tasks like food distribution, high levels of collaboration might not be a prerequisite. This aligns with Leithwood et al. (2020), who argue that some patterns of distribution are more effective than others, and effectiveness depends on the context of the task.

Third, this study enriches the understanding of trust as the foundation of distributed leadership. The literature emphasizes the importance of a culture of trust and empowerment (Teacher's Notes, 2025; Hilal et al., 2025). The data from this study confirm that trust is a key driver: the principal trusts the coordinator to run the program autonomously, the coordinator trusts the staff to perform specific duties, and even the students trust the coordinator to be responsive to their voices. Trust as the foundation of distributed leadership is consistent with research findings in Islamic contexts (Hilal et al., 2025). In the context of Indonesian education, trust has also proven to be an important predictor in the relationship between academic service quality and stakeholder satisfaction (Supriyanto et al., 2025). However, this trust is not distributed equally across the organization, as teachers are intentionally excluded from operational responsibilities. This shows that distributed trust does not have to mean universal trust; instead, it can be a selective trust granted to key actors who possess the capacity and availability.

Fourth, the minimal involvement of teachers in the MBG program has a dual implication. On one hand, it protects teachers' core instructional time and avoids teacher burnout due to increased responsibilities (Teacher's Notes, 2025), which is a common critique of distributed leadership. On the other hand, it also limits leadership capacity building, which is one of the main benefits of distributed leadership (New Leaders, 2020; Bain & Company, 2020). In the short term, this trade-off may be rational to ensure the operational stability of the program without sacrificing learning quality. However, in the long term, the school may need to consider how to open spaces for teachers to engage in non-instructional program leadership as part of their professional growth.

Fifth, the involvement of students in the program, though limited, represents a progressive element of distributed leadership. The literature indicates that student voice and student leadership are vital dimensions of inclusive distributed leadership (Hilal et al., 2025). MA Al-Hidayah has created an accessible channel for student feedback and involved them in operational tasks through the duty system. This demonstrates that even in resource-constrained contexts, schools can create space for student agency.

Sixth, the situational coordination pattern found in this study offers an alternative model to the assumption that distributed leadership requires regular meetings and structured forums (Nadeem, 2024). In the context of schools with limited capacity, a lean and responsive coordination model may be more sustainable than a meeting-heavy model that could overwhelm the time and energy of key actors. This aligns with adaptive

leadership principles that emphasize flexibility and responsiveness to context (Nadeem, 2024).

Finally, the findings of this study have important implications for the discussion of distributed leadership within the context of policy implementation in resource-limited schools. The literature on school meal programs emphasizes the importance of strong leadership and cross-sector coordination (Chabrol, 2023; WFP, 2024). The results of this study show that in the context of a small school with a bounded program, strong leadership can manifest not in the form of wide distribution, but rather as a strategic concentration with high delegation and trust. This pattern may be more feasible and sustainable for similar schools rather than attempting to implement a highly participatory distributed leadership model that might exceed the organization's limited capacity.

Overall, this study demonstrates that distributed leadership is not a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a framework that can be adapted to the specific context of an organization. In the context of MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, "pragmatic distributed leadership", characterized by trust-based concentrated delegation, substantive operational autonomy, and selective collaboration, proved effective in implementing the MBG program. While this pattern does not fully align with the participatory and collaborative ideals of distributed leadership found in the literature, it represents a rational adaptation that enables a resource-constrained school to successfully implement a complex national program. These findings underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity in understanding and evaluating distributed leadership practices, particularly within the context of private madrasahs in non-urban areas of Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how distributed leadership manifests in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal program at MA Al-Hidayah Wajak, a resource-constrained private madrasah, by analyzing how leadership practice is realized through coordination, role distribution, and the interaction of the principal, program coordinator, supporting staff, teachers, and students. In directly answering this objective, the study found that leadership is enacted through three interrelated practices. The first is a trust-based delegation in which the principal transfers full operational responsibility to the program coordinator while retaining strategic oversight, so that authority is genuinely handed over rather than merely assigned. The second is a pragmatic distribution of roles that concentrates operational duties on non-teaching staff in order to shield teachers' instructional time and thereby safeguard the quality of classroom learning. The third is a deliberately bounded form of collaboration centered on the coordinator-staff partnership while still preserving meaningful space for student participation through accessible feedback channels and involvement in daily food distribution. Taken together, these practices show that in a capacity-constrained madrasah, distributed leadership does not appear as the broad, participatory collaboration idealized in much of the literature but instead crystallizes into a form best captured by the concept of "pragmatic distributed leadership", a rational and context-sensitive adaptation that privileges trust, operational autonomy, and coordination

efficiency over extensive collaborative structures, with trust operating as the foundational mechanism that allows substantive delegation to function without rigid supervisory hierarchies or time-consuming consultative forums. This pattern enabled a complex national program to be implemented with minimal disruption to the school's core educational mission, and it carries a clear theoretical and practical contribution: theoretically, it extends the understanding of distributed leadership into the underexplored setting of national policy implementation within Indonesian madrasahs and demonstrates that the concept is not a fixed template but a framework adaptable to specific organizational realities; practically, it shows policymakers and school leaders that the successful delivery of large-scale programs in resource-limited schools need not depend on elaborate or highly participatory leadership arrangements, since a leaner, trust-driven, and strategically concentrated approach can be equally effective and, in many respects, more sustainable. As a holistic single case study, these conclusions are analytically rather than statistically generalizable, and they invite further inquiry into how this pragmatic pattern evolves as the program matures beyond its initial phase and how comparable patterns operate across madrasahs and public schools in different regions, sectors, and resource conditions.

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