



Investigating the Challenges in Enhancing Students' Learning Outcomes of a Vocational School (SMK)

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Abstract

This study aimed to see the effectiveness of the project-based learning model in improving learning outcomes and learning activities in the Electric Motor Installation subjects. This research was a research with a Quasi-Experiment approach. The research subjects were all students of class XI of the Department of Electricity at SMK N 5 Padang, which totaled 57 students. The study design used a non-equivalent control group design. The research subjects were class XI students of the Department of Electricity at SMK N 5 Padang by dividing the two groups as experimental groups and control groups. Data collection used test instruments and non-test instruments. Data analysis was carried out by descriptive and parametric analysis. The results obtained from this study can be concluded that the project-based learning model effectively improves learning outcomes and student learning activities in the Electric Motor Installation subjects.

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INTRODUCTION

More than a decade, Indonesian government has paid special attention to the development of secondary vocational school education (SMK). As a result, there are more SMK established each year and, in total, there are 11738 SMK in all provinces of Indonesia consisting of 3037 state SMK and 8701 private SMK (SMK Directorate, 2015). An SMK established by government called state or government funded SMK and those run and owned by an individual, cooperating individuals, voluntary agencies or faith-based organizations are called private SMK (Agi, 2013). In West Nusa Tenggara, there are 237 SMK comprising of 88 state-owned SMK and 149 private SMK (SMK Directorate, 2015). Further, the Number of SMK in East Lombok Regency is 63 SMK, 11 state-owned SMK and the other 52 are private organized SMK.

Supports from national and provincial authorities to SMK was indicated the by the big amount of funding allocated to the development and quality improvement of these SMK. This measure was taken due the vital role SMK carry out to reduce unemployment which come especially from secondary school leavers who are unable to attend higher education. Indonesian National Education System (SISDIKNAS) No. 20 year 2003 states that SMK focuses on preparing the learners to be able to work in particular areas. Vocational education is further claimed to be the most suitable education system to face globalization challenges as it is industry oriented, which emphasize the relevance or links and match between learning and competencies required by industries (Arifin, 2015, n.d). in addition, vocational education provides three interrelated learning components, that is learning for work, learning about work and understanding the nature of work (Pavlova, 2009, pp.).

As these SMK were mainly organized by individual or organizations, therefore private SMK should be able to contribute greatly to the unemployment reduction in West Nusa Tenggara, particularly in East Lombok Regency.

Despite this, most of students of these private SMK have yet to perform better and attain the learning outcomes as expected by national curriculum, schools and the courses.

To tackle such an issue Ministry of Indonesian education along with the local governments, have tried their best by providing financial supports and training to all SMK components. Consequently, there are more private schools which have been well equipped and courses which have gained accreditation from the secondary schools National Accreditation Body (BAN-SM) as well. The efforts of all private owned SMK elements to meet all the national standards of education deserve our appreciation in that these private schools have contributed greatly to the community development in East Lombok. Despite this, private SMK still face a number of disadvantages such as lack of funding and low image in terms of quality.

We have spent almost a decade to actively participate in managing and teaching in some of private SMK. My intensive interaction in developing and discussing any related issues concerning SMK led me to identify any obvious issues requiring immediate solution, especially the quality of these private SMK. Despite the increasing number of private SMK, the learning outcomes attainment is still a critical issue. Many of these SMK are facing some advantages such as lack of facility, poor teachers' quality and school management leadership. Limitation on these areas would affect the learners learning outcomes, defined as school expectations for student learning, student learning objectives, and or expected student competencies (Hoey, 2010). As a result, it has been a common place that many of private SMK graduates do not attain all the required skills in their majors. The present study investigated factors which prevent private owned vocational schools to meet the learning outcomes as set by the national standard.

Similar to that definition, University of Virginia (2015) also defines learning outcomes as "the accumulated knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students develop during a course of study". It further classifies three learning

outcomes which can be assessed: knowledge, skills and attitude.

Stated learning outcomes can be attained when school has a good learning system which provides comprehensive education to all children and teenagers and prepare them with skills needed to work, live in a community and in their lives (Fredriksson, 2004). Fredriksson offers almost ideal concept of a quality education which meet the learners with diverse needs, potential and age as well as prepare the students with important quality to survive after leaving schools. Fredriksson further argues that quality education is determined by its ability to “embrace the development of every member’s potential in every new generation.”

Schools providing high quality education is also called effective schools and there are number of indicators should be met to be in that category. Agustina (2011) in her study on students, parents, and teachers identified eight indicators of an effective school including: 1) school leadership and management, 2) teachers’ professionalism (competencies and diligence), 3) parents and community participation; 4) students’ potential and responsibilities; 5) enjoyable learning atmosphere with achievement orientation, discipline with high and clear working standard; 6) extracurricular programs; 7) class size and students number per class; 8) effective and efficient teaching learning activities. In her study, Agustina argues that the school will become less effective when one of these criteria is missing.

Learning outcomes are affected by school quality. In this regards, Detlor et al. (2010) show that students’ learning outcomes are affected by greater amounts of active instruction, more senior students, and more positive perceptions of the quality of and satisfaction with ILI. School quality can be enhanced when all education stakeholders work closely together. National Accreditation Body for Indonesian Secondary Schools, **BAN-SM** 2014, p.14 states that education quality in a school level does not stand alone and many sub systems (input, process and outcomes) contribute to it. BAN-SM further suggests that a school quality can be

attained when all school component give their best. In the private school context, teachers, school principals, school owners, governments, parents, and students should work together to achieve the stated learning outcomes (Budimansyah, et al., 2009, p. 19).

A wide scale research was conducted by Supriadi (2004, p. 211) in government funded SMK in six provinces. His study revealed that students in schools allocating more education fee gained higher achievement than those with lower tuition fee (See also Syamsudin, 2009; Supriadi, 2004). The findings of this study explicitly suggest that education quality can be enhanced by raising the school fee. However, this measure would be dilemmatic to students coming from low income families. Despite such an issue, schools can still increase the school budget for quality improvement if they run business (Suroso cited in Sugiyono, 2009, p.228), for instance by optimizing the role of vocational school business unit and by trying to find donators to support the schools.

School quality is also affected by how the school principal leads and manages the schools. Professional school principal could bring positive impacts, causes fundamental changes, i.e. school quality improvement (Mulyasa, 2004, p. 89), and a school principal also becomes key person for quality improvement particularly in school employing school based management. Further, World Bank report cited in Mulyasa (2004, p. 42) point out that lack of principal professionalism reduces school quality (see also Agustina, 2011). For this reason, it is vital for a school principal to upgrade his insights and practical leadership and managerial skills.

Besides school principal, teachers also play very critical roles to increase school quality (Hasbi, 2013). They also become vital players to maintain high quality who “have a significant impact upon the quality of teaching and learning in our schools” (European Commission, 2013, p. 4). Their direct intensive interaction with the students will allow them to influence the learners’ attitude and insights. There are many more responsibilities which teachers are in

charge and for this reason they deserve better rewards and their capacity should be improved.

Hasbi's study (2013) reveals six barriers to educational quality, including: curriculum, lack of teachers' professionalism, facilities, lack of students' motivation to study, low quality of students input and "poor" school management. This study is also confirmed by Sifuna and Sawamura (8) in Sub Saharan African region who found that that lack of facilities and teaching-learning materials also become as stumbling block to achieve the stated school objectives. Similar issues were officially reported by Government of East Java province (2013). These include: a) students in remote area were unable to access vocational education as most of the SMK in East Java were located in town; b) most SMK have yet to meet the ideal standard, making their graduate unable to meet the requirement of industries; c) poor school management; and) vocational schools were still unable to show their ability to be reliable education sectors.

METHOD

This study was conducted in a private SMK which was owned by private social organization, which is situated in a remote area of East Lombok regency.

The school had stated a clear vision and mission for the next 2020, that is to create **religious, insightful, skilled, competitive and self-reliant students**. The school mission clearly shows the quality which becomes the final goal of teaching learning process in that SMK. Besides, the school has also determined the graduate profiles including: a) having broad understanding in Islamic theology; b) being well behaved based on the religious, national, and cultural values; c) mastering all of vocational competencies stated in the school curriculum; d) being able to use Indonesian language properly; e) being able to communicate in spoken English actively; f) being skillful in using ICT for learning and working purposes; g) earning academic and non- academic achievement. Both school mission and graduate profiles

explicitly indicate what outcomes that each of the students in this SMK should achieve upon the completion of their study.

Although the school has been well equipped and earned its accreditation, researcher's initial observation and discussion with the SMK stakeholders found that the quality learning process and learning outcomes were not satisfying yet. As a result, this affected the school overall image in the local community. For this reason, an investigation to identify the challenges facing teachers and school principal is urgent so that relevant solution can be proposed. Further, although a number of research (see. United Nation, 2015; Hasbi, 2013) has been conducted to discuss barriers to quality education, not much have been done to investigate the challenges encountered by school principal and teachers at a private vocational school in Indonesia.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the existing challenges that school principal and teachers deal with in their attempts to improve students' learning outcomes. To do this study, proper research method is required as research method is a set of plans to gain answers for the research questions being asked in a study (Polite et al., 2004, p.175). As I did not attempt to give any treatment to research subject, instead to gain understanding about the related issue, thus qualitative research was employed. Qualitative method is used to understand phenomenon experienced by research subjects, such as their motivation, perceptions or opinions and behaviors (Moloeng, 2010, p. 6).

This study was primarily a case study in nature. Case study was used to conduct this study in that it allows the researcher to study one or more cases or social phenomenon to gain deep understanding about events, relations, experience and process occurring in a social situation (Denscombe, 2010, p.52). It also allows the researcher to see the different point of views (Yin, 2003) about the challenges facing the school teachers and principal. Further, Zaidah (2007, 2007, p.1) argues that case study provides opportunity to collect information more deeply, by using a number of different sources which

makes a rich description about the investigated issue (Geertz, 1973). There were 16 participants interviewed in this study which consisted of seven teachers, a school principal, two vice principal, two school owners, and four students. The study was implemented in two phases which happened iteratively: data collection and data analysis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participants observation. Collected data were then analyzed separately in line with the research question. Any irrelevant data to the research topic was deleted. Data were then categorized into challenges that teachers and school principal faced to enhance the students' learning outcomes in that private SMK.

As this research was done qualitatively, ethical issues were highly considered. At first, I sought participants' approval to get involved in this study. They were asked to fill a participating form which explained the research purpose, the

benefits and how the study would be conducted. In the form, they were informed that their participation was voluntarily and they could stop being participants without any consequence. It was also emphasized that their identities would be protected and any information given will be unidentified. When publishing, their names would be unidentified or replaced with pseudonym.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges to enhance learning outcomes in the private owned SMK

The findings of this study reveal nine issues which teachers and school principal encounter to enhance the learning outcomes and to achieve the mission and graduate profile stated by the school. They are shown in the following table 1.

Table 1. challenges which teachers and school principal encountered to enhance learning outcomes

Findings
Teachers' professionalism
Demotivated students
Limited Education Funding
School Development Orientation
Minimum Support from Parents and Community
Different perspective on learning outcome among teachers, principal and school owners
Minimum support from the school owners
Ineffective Principal management and leadership
Internal conflict

Teachers' professionalism

Teachers play very critical roles in determining the quality of education. As front liners in schools, they interact directly with the students, transfer knowledge, transforms attitude, and train the students in order that the students can succeed achieving the stated learning outcomes. Other components, such as school principal, parents, administrative staffs and governments along with facilities, act as teachers' supporters. Further, the core practice of education lies in interaction between teachers and students. European Commission (2013, p.4) point out that teacher education play crucial role

to maintain and improve the high quality of the teaching workforce who can have significant impact upon the quality of teaching in learning in schools.

From the interviews and researcher's observation, the teachers of the SMK have yet to perform optimally to carry out their teaching tasks. This is shown by their absences to teach which made the learning process become ineffective. The minimum percentage of teachers' attendance was caused by a number of factors. First, some of the teachers seemed to be lack of sense of responsibilities. Second, most of the teachers were also doing other jobs (i.e.

running personal business) or teaching in other schools in order to earn for living as the school could not pay them sufficient amount of salary. Further, another informant claimed that most of these teachers did not feel comfortable to teach. This is partly due to minimum support from school owner and principal. They also felt demotivated to teach as the result of poor communication between school principal and the teachers. Communication only occurred when there were monthly meetings or before the beginning or after the completion of each semester. From my observation, I rarely found teachers talk to the school leader. Other cause of this negative feeling was the teachers' salary which was not paid on time.

The findings above obviously suggest how urgent it is to ensure that school to be a comfortable place for teaching and learning as such feeling would directly influence the quality process which in turn can affect the learning outcomes. One of the informants held strong belief that positive working atmosphere would affect the learning effectiveness. The same argument is also proposed by Budimansyah, et al. (2009, p. 9) who claimed that the learning process would run effectively when teachers feel comfortable. To sum up, comfort affects the attainment of high-quality learning and its unavailability becomes the challenges to enhance the learning outcome.

Demotivated students

Researcher's observation indicated that the students seem to be demotivated to learn. Some of the students prefer to stay outside the class although their teachers were teaching in their class. It was also found that the students would not call their teacher to teach and some students would prefer to have no teacher teaching them and be cheerful to go home earlier. Teachers' minimum attendances also influence their motivation to learn. These students admitted that they had been used to having to no teacher teaching on particular days. At first, they complained about the situation, however, after experiencing this for a few meetings, they began to get used to it. Even,

they looked happy to know that their teachers were not coming as this would enable them to go home earlier or to chat outside the class. Supporting this finding, interview with a teacher suggested that most of the students were lack of motivation to learn. When she was teaching for instance, some of the students would prefer chatting in the classroom. Another informant said that students were "forced" to study in the SMK, especially in the beginning of the school establishment. Further, the informant mentioned that the students would prefer to escape the school rather than attending the intensive program offered by school.

Further, students' lack of motivation to learn was also caused they rarely have practicum and the students in grade twelve only focused studying the subjects which would be tested in the national examination and paid less attention to other subject which are not tested. To confirm these findings, I also interviewed some of the students. They mentioned four things which discourage them to learn. These are: a) the learning process was not so active due to teachers' absences; b) they were disappointed because the school did not keep its promises; c) They had financial issues; and d) Their teachers paid little attention to supervise them.

Limited Education Funding

Cost of education affects the quality of learning process and outcomes (Syamsudin, 2009; Supriadi, 2004). As the school did not have any other financial support to run all the planned programs, thus, this led to the failure in achieving the entire school mission optimally. It only relied on government's funding which would be paid only twice a year. Therefore, the school was not able to afford many practicum tools and materials as the school had no sufficient funding. This has made the teachers unable to conduct the practicum subjects; instead they will give theories on vocational subjects. Further, when there is a delay, in terms of funding, from government, it would affect almost all of the school programs, including the payment of teachers' salary. In addition, as mentioned above, lack of teachers' attendance

was also caused by financial issue. School inability to increase their salary and to pay on time was caused by the school minimum budget. All research participants agreed that funding become a very critical issue.

School Development Orientation

This study also reveals that school has yet to focus on quality attainment. Since 2007 up to 2015, the major orientation of the school development was concerned in bulding the infrastructure. For almost eight years (2007-2015), the school owners and management focused their attention on completing the facilities, yet ignoring the quality of teaching learning process and the students' learning outcomes. Although they have tried to discuss quality issues in school meetings, they main actions were still in the facilities such as practicum room, laboratory and classrooms.

Minimum Support from Parents and Community

Since 2007 to 2009, the school did not have its own building for classroom or office, therefore teaching learning activities were carried out by borrowing other school's classroom. In 2009, the school owners and community initiated to build four classrooms. Both parents and students participated in the building process. Some of them donated building materials. These supports were earned after the school owners and management tried to communicate intensively and build relation with the students' parents. This fact suggest that communication can help earning supports for instance to build the school classroom. A study by Fuadi (2012) revealed that well planned and good communication between school and parents would be able to create positive impacts to teachers, parents and school community and to support the quality of learning process, graduate quality, and students' personal growth.

In addition, the parents' support is of great importance to ensure successful implementation of school based management in vocational school in order to attain high quality learning Mulyasa (2004, p. 37). Besides, their

participations are required to shape the school mission and to decide the SMK graduate profile as well as to control the quality directly. Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) conducted an intensive study to identify the most effective teaching strategies in the Foundation Stage. Their study reveals that good learning progress could take place even in the absence of good practice when school (professional educators) can build special relationship with other school components to share the school programs.

According to the informants, the parents and community involvement was incredibly high toward the SMK program at first. However, this began to decrease over the years. This could be seen from the building process of school laboratory or library. Only paid workers did the construction projects. Such dramatic decrease of parents' involvement was caused by communication breakdown between school owners and management with them. Other cause was that the school did not have a set plan to communicate with the students' parents and school community.

Another informant proposed different view why parents' participation was getting decreased. He suggested that community and parents have yet to support the school program optimally. As he said:

“Parents influence the students' motivation to learn and to be an achiever at school. What parents have in their mind is only to send their children to school, without caring their achievement”.

Implicitly, there are two things that the informant was trying to say. First, he believed that parents played a very critical role to enhance their children learning outcomes, for instance by giving emotional supports. Second, parents were not fully aware of the significance of vocational education for their children future. As a result, parents have yet to encourage their children to learn more optimally at school or at home.

Different perspectives on learning outcome among teachers, principal and school owners

In general, all informants agreed that the school quality was not as they expected. One of the informants believed that there were many national standards that were not achieved yet by the school. This was partly because not all school stakeholders worked optimally to reach the national standard. Further, the school had not been able to give sufficient financial benefits to all of the school components. For instance, the school was not able to give standard salary to principal, teachers and staff. It had not benefited to wider community around the school, neither. However, one of teachers, teaching social sciences, argued that the school has attained positive development if seeing the students' behavior and facilities for learning as well as the students' non academic achievement. The same opinion was also expressed by another informant who claimed that this school performed better than other private schools in the regency. In tone with this, informant three argued "the students (in this SMK) have performed better despite the limited sources for learning"

To enhance the learning outcomes, it requires the all school members or components to work together toward the stated mission of the SMK. The first thing and foremost is that every school components should have the same definition of what constitutes a quality learning and what are needed to attain the students learning outcome at this school. If there is varied perspective about the school mission, then it would be difficult to execute the school program successfully as success is not defined in the same way. In this regard, an informant argued that the existing school components have yet to agree the same perspective concerning the targeted learning outcome in a vocational school. He further, claimed that this was as the result of different educational background between teachers, school principal and parents. It was also caused by minimum communication among the school members. As stated by an informant that different perception would affect many

things for instance the performance of school principal.

Minimum support from the school owners

In many countries "private schools have run as profit-oriented enterprises, often owned by an individual, cooperating individuals, voluntary agencies or faith-based organizations" (Agi, 2013). In Indonesia, particularly in West Nusa Tenggara, private vocational schools (SMK) are owned by individual or and faith-based organizations for instance Nahdlatul Wathan, Nahdlatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah. The owners of SMK play very critical role to enhance the learning outcome. Not only responsible to provide the learning facilities, they are also in charge to monitor and control the school quality. As an informant said the SMK would attain high quality when the school owners could manage the school better. The informant further argued that the owner of this SMK has yet to implement a good management and leadership optimally for instance to control and supervise all the school programs. This is due to their lack of understanding concerning vocational school education and management. Other informant also had the same argument. He believed that a private school would perform better when the school's owners provide financial supports, employ proper management and be able to meet all the requirements needed to enhance learning outcomes.

Ineffective Principal management and leadership

As the school driver, principal has multi functions and becomes a key to ensure the school quality (see Mulyasa, 2004, p.24; Hasbi, 2013). This requires him to have a number of competencies to be able to lead and manage the school successfully. Mulyasa (ibid, p.26) further argued that a school principal must have clear vision and mission and ability to manage school with quality oriented. This is because a school principal becomes vital player to maintain and ensure the school quality of teaching and learning (European Commission, 2013:4). Louis, et al (2010) study reveals that there was

an empirical link school leadership and improved student achievement. A school principal should also be a community builder to lead effectively.

In its early years, the school principal was not appointed based on his capacity to lead and to manage, instead he was appointed because there was no other person who was prepared to be a school leader. Therefore, the school management was based on "trial and error" concept or by employing "what works concept". Up to 2015, the school has appointed three school principals. According to the teachers, each of them has different style of leading and managing. However, all of them were indicated to be unable to communicate the school missions and programs to all teachers. As a result, the teachers did not do their tasks optimally.

Based on the interviews, it was found that the school principals failed to manage the internal conflict occurring in the school. The teachers assumed that the school principal was not open about financial matters to teachers and to the school owners. This assumption and gossips spread to all teachers and resulted in negative atmosphere at school. Unfortunately, the school principal did not respond to it promptly. The main cause this issue was because the principal did not communicate all the school programs intensively and report the use of school funding to teachers and school owners. In brief, we can conclude that the school principal has yet to lead and manage effectively.

Internal conflict

Another source of teachers' inconvenience to teach in the SMK came from the internal conflict occurring among school principal, school owners and teachers themselves. The teachers and school owners demanded financial transparency from the school principal, while the school principal demanded financial supports from the school owners. Both parties stood on their own position and claimed to have done their parts to contribute to the school. Further, school principal blamed that school owners has yet to

give optimum support specially to deal with school budget while the school owners demand the principal's transparency concerning the school funding. Teachers also often felt disappointed with the late payment of their salary from the school. This affected their diligence to teach and neglected their duties. School principal on the other hand argued that teachers are not professional while admitting the school inability to pay the teachers' salary on time. From the interviews and observation, there are two main causes of the internal conflict, first the school principal policy which was not well communicated to all school members and school owners lack of control to the school management. Such a situation caused teachers' demotivation to work hard to enhance students' learning outcomes.

To deal with this conflict, some informants suggested that school principal need to be more open regarding the school programs or educational budgets and provide regular reports to all school elements. Thus, school should have a good communication system as bias of information occurs as the result of the absence of well-designed information system (Mulyasa, 2004, p. 39) which can be used as the trusted communication channels.

CONCLUSION

Despite the government supports and school elements efforts to improve quality of education in vocational schools, there are some challenges which teachers and school principal to enhance the students learning outcomes in a private SMK. The findings of this study revealed nine challenges which teachers and principal of private SMK encounter in their attempts to enhance the students learning outcome. These barriers are 1) teachers' professionalism; 2) demotivated students 3) limited education funding, 4) school development orientation, 5) minimum support from parents and community, 6) different perspective on learning outcome among teachers, principal and school owners, 7) ineffective principal management and leadership, 8) internal conflict. As these

challenges come from the school elements themselves such as teachers, school principal, school owners and parents. Therefore, all school elements should work together to tackle them. Further research concerning this issue is necessary to carry out, for instance, by employing multi cases study or by using survey in order to gain more comprehensive data. Another interesting aspect to investigate further is related the internal conflict in private schools. Some suggestions are recommended to school owners, principal and teachers. First, school owners along with school principal and teachers need to make a better plan and to have the same understanding concerning the quality which would be the school targets. Second, the school elements need to intensify formal and informal communication concerning school policies and programs. Third, it is urgent to run the school business unit from which school could earn more funding without relying too much on government financial support. As this study was conducted on a single site, thus, the findings of this study is limited to school as the research subject. Thus, the findings of this study may not be generalized, but to those having similar research context..

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