

A Constructive Leadership Framework from a Reflective Value of Local Wisdom for Education Reform in Aceh, Indonesia

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Introduction

In 2005, following the 2004 tsunami and earthquake, the Aceh separatist group (GAM) and the Indonesian government signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), effectively ending a 32-year conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian National Army (TNI). Schulze (2006) highlights that the dispute arose from the central government's failure to fulfil its commitments regarding regional autonomy and the management of natural resources. Furthermore, McGibbon (2006) emphasised a significant issue involving local elites and their allies in Jakarta, who struggled to establish legitimate leadership within regional politics. This deficiency in effective local leadership played a crucial role in the political instability that characterised the conflict.

The 2004 disaster and the subsequent peace agreement marked a pivotal moment for the local community. The lasting impact of conflict and disaster had profound physical and psychological effects on the residents. Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), there was a renewed sense of enthusiasm among the locals to rebuild Aceh, leading many who had fled during the conflict to return. Additionally, an amnesty was granted to imprisoned rebels as part of the central government's dedication to the peace process (Aspinall, 2005). This significant turning point necessitates a structured, thoughtful response to lay the groundwork for Aceh's future, particularly in education.

Education is vital in Aceh in the post-conflict and disaster recovery process (Shah & Cardozo, 2014). Effective leadership must be the cornerstone within the education sector to drive this transformative change. The approach to leadership directly influences and shapes the capabilities required in this context (Hardy, 2022). A strong belief in leadership is fundamental to how organisations should be managed and how individuals within those organisations should conduct themselves (Spicker, 2012).

Following the Minister of Home Affairs Regulation No. 12 of 2017, the Ministry of Education Regulation No. 47 of 2016 on regional structural organisation, and Qanun No. 11 of 2014 on education, as well as Qanun No. 9 of 2015 amending Qanun Aceh No. 11 of 2014, the education hierarchy at the provincial and regional levels is unequivocally led by a designated leader. This leader is fully accountable for all aspects of management, including quality control, human resources, schools, curriculum, budgeting, and more.

Education in Aceh, particularly in the post-agreement era, must unequivocally reflect local wisdom and meet the community's specific needs. The thirty-two-year conflict, which concluded in 2005, and the devastating disaster in 2004 significantly transformed the social fabric of local society. Local involvement must be prioritised before it is diminished within the Indigenous community's social structure. The concept of the Indigenous community may be contested. Still, community engagement must be clearly defined and actively pursued, recognising that it holds different meanings for different people (Frawley et al., 2017, as cited in Shay & Lampert, in Vass & Hogarth, 2024).

This research aims to design a constructive leadership framework grounded in the reflective value of local wisdom to contribute to Aceh's education reform.

Literature Review

II. The Research Objective and Question

Leadership within the education sector in Aceh, particularly in post-conflict and disaster contexts, is undeniably complex, making it imperative to establish a robust framework for education reform. This research aims to suggest a constructive leadership mechanism that reflects local wisdom for education reform in Aceh. The guiding question is straightforward: What is the structure of a constructive leadership mechanism that harnesses local wisdom to drive education reform in Aceh, Indonesia? Research is an "organised, systematic inquiry that aims to answer well-framed questions" (Slavin, 2007).

Method

A fundamental research procedure begins with a philosophical and theoretical stance (Creswell, 2014). This research is rooted in ontological interpretivism and epistemological constructivism, employing a combination of case study and grounded theory within a qualitative framework. The data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are recognised as key naturalistic research methods (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). To ensure a comprehensive dataset, 30 participants from diverse backgrounds in Aceh's education sector were interviewed. The framework was constructed from the interview data and validated through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

Finding and discussion

The findings from interviews with 30 participants from various educational backgrounds in Aceh were discussed and presented through thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's reflective model (2022). These findings are thematically classified into the following themes:

Understanding the philosophy of local wisdom

The first finding clearly emphasises that effective leadership in Aceh's education sector must be firmly rooted in a profound understanding of local philosophical wisdom. This understanding serves as an indispensable foundation for significantly enhancing leadership capacity. Through a thorough content analysis of relevant examples, it becomes evident that philosophy can be applied concretely to leadership strategies (Cusher & Menaldo, 2021). Research participants insist that local wisdom must permeate all aspects of life in Aceh, as it is crucial to the Indigenous Aceh community, which has faced continuous challenges throughout history. The participants pinpointed several essential, non-negotiable components of any practical leadership framework.

The Chronology of Aceh Historical Background

The most significant part of the interview reveals that understanding the chronology of Aceh's historical background is the most important consideration within the leadership structure. This chronological background serves as the foundation for all layers of leadership, particularly within the education sector in Aceh (Major participants, 2023). This historical background covers:

The Sultanate Reign of Aceh

All participants acknowledged that Aceh experienced its golden age during the sultanate's reign centuries ago, when it established itself as an independent monarchy at the tip of the island of Sumatra. This period was characterised by robust leadership and a stable educational system, in which the ulama (Islamic scholars) and the elite collaborated effectively to enhance academic standards. Economically, Aceh emerged as the dominant trading hub for pepper (Khan, in Graf, Schroter & Wieringa, 2010). Furthermore, the Aceh Kingdom maintained strong international ties with Turkey (Reid, in Graf, Schroter, & Wieringa, 2010).

Dutch Colonial War

The participants identified the Dutch colonial war as pivotal in understanding the situation. They highlighted the significant changes during this conflict, particularly when Aceh's status was ultimately claimed within Indonesian territory. Historical records show that, despite the tumultuous nature of the struggle, the colonial powers never fully established control over Aceh (Sofyan, 1977). Regrettably, in the aftermath of the war, ongoing instability in local leadership has prevented Aceh from reclaiming its independence.

Conflict

The Thirty-Two Years' conflict between the local group and the central government had a profound and lasting impact on the community. Participants unequivocally stated that the consequences of this prolonged conflict were far worse for local society than any disaster.

While the physical destruction may have been limited, the psychological toll on the people was devastating. Even though the National Army has apologised for its military wrongdoing during the conflict in Aceh (Ziegenhain, in Graf, Schroter & Wieringa, 2010), this acknowledgement has not altered the realities faced by the local population.

Disaster

A significant turning point, as emphasised by the participants, was the catastrophic tsunami and earthquake of 2004. The devastation was overwhelming, with over two hundred thousand people displaced and critical infrastructure obliterated. Furthermore, these disasters had severe economic repercussions (Heger & Neumayer, 2019).

Peace Agreement

The peace agreement between the Free Aceh Movement and the central government was signed after the disaster, signifying a pivotal turning point for the region. This phase requires a substantial commitment from the local community to rebuild Aceh in the aftermath of conflict and disaster. Participants in the research unequivocally identified this moment as one of the most emotionally significant and pivotal in Aceh's history. The peacebuilding approach played a crucial role in ending hostilities and establishing lasting peace (Lee, 2020).

Understanding the Influence of Religion on the Local Community

The interview data revealed the significant impact of religion on Aceh's society. Most of the Acehnese population adheres to Islam, a faith that has been integral to the region since the era of the Sultanate. This faith transcends mere religious practice, as its values are deeply embedded in the community's cultural fabric. All participants in the study affirmed that Islamic knowledge is an integral part of Acehnese identity, promoting personal growth among individuals in the region. Although differing opinions may arise, historical accounts suggest that Aceh introduced Islam to Indonesia (Basri, in Graf, Schroter & Wieringa, 2010).

Sharia Law

The Sharia Law has been decisively adopted and is actively enforced in Aceh, following the enactment of Law No. 44 of 1999 and Law No. 11 of 2006 (Tempo, 2025). Participants assert that the implementation of Sharia law did not start with these laws; instead, it has deep roots dating back to the sultanate era. This legal framework reinforces existing processes and operates effectively at all levels of society. The approval of Sharia is a clear demonstration of a commitment to comprehensive social and personal religious transformation, pursued through rigorous mechanisms of jurisprudence, institution building, and the enforcement of physical punishment (Feener, 2021).

Tradition and Character

Educational leadership must recognise the importance of local traditions, which are intrinsically linked to the individual character of the community. The participants unequivocally stated that Islamic values have a profound impact on these traditions. For instance, every official ceremony begins with a Quranic verse and concludes with *Dua* (prayer) in Arabic. The evolution of Arabic grammar reflects the shift from Persian influence to Arabic culture between 1524 and 1900 (Iskandar, 2007). The Acehnese people still uphold their

traditions, which must be preserved within the formal curriculum. Strong leadership is essential to acknowledge and prioritise this critical responsibility

The leadership within the education sector in Aceh needs to address various challenges, particularly concerning character development. Participants observed a noticeable shift in the character of a particular group community, primarily due to the prolonged conflict and the impacts of the massive tsunami and earthquake in 2004. They noted that the hardships during the conflict exacerbated the physical and psychological damage caused by the quake, which measured 8.7 on the Richter scale, and the subsequent tsunami.

Possessing Essential Leadership Skills

The participants emphasised the critical role of leadership skills in effectively addressing contemporary challenges. Leadership is defined as a social influence process in which leaders inspire and empower followers to work towards shared goals (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2022; Liden et al., 2025). The research participants contended that only those possessing specific leadership skills can navigate the complexities of today's issues. They also pointed out various leadership styles, including charismatic and Islamic leadership. Some participants reflected on past leadership, noting that it was effective in the system. To fully grasp the concept of leadership in Islam, it is essential to consider the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the explanation in the Quran, which serves as the primary source of guidance in Islam (Musalib et al., 2022).

Earning a Relevant Academic Degree within Education

Although the educational degrees of individuals involved during the sultanate reign in Aceh are not explicitly documented, it is evident that they dedicated considerable time to acquiring knowledge. Noteworthy figures who significantly contributed to Malay Sufi include Hamzah Fansuri and Syekh Nuruddin AR-Raniry (Hamisi and Fahm, 2017). Additionally, Christian Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), a colonial scholar who engaged in propaganda during the Dutch colonial war in Aceh, recognised the importance of understanding the local culture. He also travelled to Mecca to study Islam, which ultimately earned him acceptance among the Acehnese (Burhanuddin, 2014). Furthermore, the leader of the education sector in Aceh during the conflict possessed a degree in education. Given this proud legacy of leadership in education within Aceh, individuals must pursue a relevant formal degree to ensure continued excellence in this critical field.

Being Passionate in Education

This leadership framework should also include the importance of individual quality, as well as their passion for the education realm. The participants describe the worst aspect of having leaders with fewer qualifications and less experience in education as being less capable of recognising the need for education and adapting to the situation. A combination package of outstanding leadership should include a relevant degree, passion, and experience

Figure 1: Constructive Leadership Framework from Reflective

Conclusion

This research presents a constructive leadership framework grounded in the reflective value of local wisdom, designed to drive education reform in Aceh. The findings from interviews, validated through a Focus Group Discussion, reveal key insights that are instrumental in shaping the framework. These insights encompass a comprehensive understanding of the philosophy of local wisdom, as well as the historical context, including the Sultanate of Aceh, the Dutch Colonial War, conflict, Disaster, and Peace Agreements. Furthermore, this framework emphasises the significant impact of religion on society, identifies essential leadership skills, highlights the importance of a relevant academic degree, and underscores the necessity of passion and experience. These findings underscore several powerful influences rooted in local wisdom, which are pivotal to driving change in the education sector in Aceh. Aceh boasts a remarkable historical victory that serves as a beacon for today's leadership. The profound impact of Islamic knowledge has significantly shaped local culture, not only bolstering support but also providing a solid foundation for the history of society. Aceh does not need to seek an alternative way of life; it possesses everything necessary for success. What is required is strong leadership to recognise this potential and cultivate a prosperous future.

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