

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN HIGH POWER-DISTANCE CULTURE: PRINCIPAL QUIET LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Abstrak

Program Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) merupakan kebijakan strategis pemberian makanan di sekolah yang dirancang untuk meningkatkan gizi siswa dan mendukung penurunan angka stunting di Indonesia. Namun, implementasinya tidak hanya bergantung pada distribusi makanan, tetapi juga pada kapasitas komunikatif sekolah dalam mengidentifikasi, melaporkan, dan menangani berbagai persoalan pelaksanaan program. Dalam praktiknya, sebagian kepala sekolah cenderung memilih diam ketika menghadapi ketidaksesuaian, seperti rendahnya kualitas makanan, ketidaktepatan sasaran, keterlambatan distribusi, atau adanya ketidakwajaran anggaran. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap bentuk dan makna quiet leadership, yang dipahami sebagai sikap diam strategis kepala sekolah dalam konteks implementasi MBG. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah, guru, dan anggota panitia MBG. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sikap diam kepala sekolah berfungsi sebagai strategi adaptif yang dibentuk oleh tekanan birokrasi, norma budaya kesopanan, dan ketakutan terhadap konsekuensi struktural. Fenomena ini menegaskan perlunya kepemimpinan komunikatif dan budaya organisasi yang terbuka untuk memastikan akuntabilitas serta evaluasi yang efektif dalam implementasi kebijakan publik di sekolah.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi Organisasi, Kepemimpinan Pendidikan, MBG, Keheningan Organisasi, Budaya Sekolah

Abstract

The Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) program is a strategic school-feeding policy designed to improve students' nutrition and support stunting reduction in Indonesia. However, its implementation does not only depend on food distribution, but also on the communicative capacity of schools to identify, report, and address implementation problems. In practice, some school principals tend to remain silent when facing discrepancies such as poor food quality, inaccurate targeting, delayed distribution, or budget irregularities. This study seeks to reveal the forms and meanings of quiet leadership, understood as the principal's strategic silence within the context of MBG implementation. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and MBG committee members. The findings show that the principal's silence functions as an adaptive strategy shaped by bureaucratic pressure, cultural norms of politeness, and fear of structural repercussions. This phenomenon highlights the need for communicative leadership and an open organizational culture to ensure accountability and effective evaluation of public policy implementation in schools.

Keywords: Organizational Communication, Educational Leadership, MBG, Organizational Silence, School Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) constitutes a national policy initiative of the Government of Indonesia, launched in early 2025 as part of a broader strategy to accelerate stunting reduction and enhance the quality of human resources in pursuit of the Indonesia Emas 2045 vision. The program is designed to provide healthy and nutritionally balanced meals to students enrolled in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. By

delivering nutritious meals within the school setting, the government seeks to improve students' learning concentration, reduce the prevalence of malnutrition, and strengthen the overall well-being of learners in both rural and urban contexts. From a public policy perspective, MBG represents a tangible form of human capital investment, wherein nutritional interventions during childhood exert a significant influence on the nation's long-term competitiveness and developmental trajectory.

However, the implementation of the MBG program is not merely technical in nature; it is also highly contingent upon social dynamics and organizational communication at the school level (Kim, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Qin & Men, 2023). As a key actor, the school principal plays a strategic role in supervising program implementation, ensuring budget transparency, and maintaining coordination among teachers, school committees, food providers, and the education authorities. The effectiveness of the principal's leadership in the context of MBG is therefore not solely measured by the success of meal distribution, but also by the capacity to cultivate an open, participatory, and accountable communication climate (Hackman & Johnson, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2021; Qin & Men, 2023). Unfortunately, various field reports and media coverage indicate the emergence of a silence phenomenon in several schools, whereby principals who are aware of irregularities in the implementation of the MBG program such as declining food quality, delayed distribution, or administrative deviations choose not to disclose these issues (Reuters, 2025).

This phenomenon of communicative silence can be understood through the concept of organizational silence (Knoll & van Dick, 2013), which refers to a condition in which individuals within an organization deliberately withhold opinions, criticisms, or disagreements due to fear of negative consequences, whether social or structural in nature. In the school context, hierarchical culture, the value of *ewuh pakewuh* (a culturally embedded sense of reluctance to offend), and deference to authority further reinforce this tendency toward silence (Güzel & Göksoy, 2023). School principals often perceive that criticizing government policies or food vendors may be interpreted as a lack of loyalty, potentially triggering bureaucratic conflict or even affecting performance evaluations. Consequently, communication, which should function as a mechanism of control, is transformed into a space that normalizes irregularities (Lee & Li, 2021; Pham et al., 2025).

In the organizational communication literature, leader silence is often regarded as an indicator of a weak communication climate (Gibb, 1961). A non-supportive communication

climate characterized by low levels of trust, restricted access to information, and the dominance of one-way communication encourages individuals within the organization to remain silent (Qin & Men, 2023; Tkalac Verčič, 2021). In educational settings, such a climate can be detrimental as it inhibits processes of reflection and policy evaluation. When school principals remain silent regarding irregularities in the implementation of the MBG program, teachers, staff, and program participants are likely to emulate this behavior, thereby creating a spiral of silence (Noelle-neumann, 1974).

In the Indonesian context, the MBG program faces complex challenges, including limited kitchen infrastructure in schools, constrained human resource capacity, and a monitoring system that remains largely administratively oriented. Public reports indicate that in several cases there have been incidents of mass food poisoning caused by unsafe meals, reflecting weak control at the implementation level (Reuters, 2025). This situation suggests that the willingness of school principals to voice irregularities is not merely a matter of individual moral courage, but also an integral component of leadership communication that ultimately shapes the success of public policy in the education sector (Claeys & Coombs, 2020; Malecki et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). According to communication leadership theory (Hackman & Johnson, 2018), effective leadership requires the capacity of leaders to function as facilitators of two-way communication rather than merely as one-way communicators. Communicative leaders can create spaces for dialogue, listen to the aspirations of subordinates, and convey criticism constructively (Lee & Kim, 2021; Yue et al., 2023). In the context of the MBG program, school principals should ideally serve as bridge leaders between government bureaucracy and the realities of implementation at the school level, enabling policies to be refined through participatory processes. When such communication fails to develop, a form of silent or quiet leadership may emerge one that appears to maintain organizational stability on the surface, yet in practice postpones problem resolution (Greenleaf, 2002; Longmuir, 2023).

The concept of quiet leadership within the educational context has received limited empirical attention in Indonesia. Conceptually, this term differs from servant leadership, which emphasizes empathy and service. In this study, quiet leadership is understood as an adaptive strategy adopted by school principals who choose silence due to structural pressures, cultural expectations, and social risks. In the short term, such a strategy may help to mitigate conflict; however, in the long term, it has the potential to undermine school transparency and accountability (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Einwiller et al., 2021; Knoll & van Dick, 2013; Sun et al., 2023).

Although school principals occupy leadership roles, they remain embedded within a bureaucratic hierarchy under education authorities and local government. This vertical structure reinforces a sense of reluctance to question or report irregularities. Hofstede (2001) further argues that in high power distance cultures, communication tends to be predominantly top-down with limited critical feedback. As a consequence, organizations may become less adaptive to change due to the erosion of internal corrective mechanisms (Hofstede, 2001; Pham et al., 2025). This dilemma constitutes the core of quiet leadership a form of leadership that chooses silence to preserve organizational stability, even at the expense of transparency (Greenleaf, 2002; Guzzo et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2022).

Several studies indicate that organizational silence has significant implications for the effectiveness of educational institutions. In Indonesia, similar conditions can be observed across many top-down educational policies, where communication tends to be predominantly formal and administrative rather than reflective and participatory (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022; Sheikhgholami et al., 2021). Beyond structural factors, psychological dimensions also influence leaders' silence behavior. Research in organizational psychology suggests that individuals with a high level of fear of negative evaluation tend to avoid confrontation (Van Dyne et al., 2003). In the context of school principals, this fear may arise from the risk of sanctions, unfavorable evaluations from education authorities, or social discomfort

within the workplace. When silence becomes an accepted norm, the organization gradually loses its communicative function (Kim, 2021; Yue et al., 2021).

Therefore, the phenomenon of quiet leadership among school principals in the implementation of the MBG program represents a complex organizational communication issue encompassing structural, cultural, and psychological dimensions. This study is grounded in the concern that the success of the MBG program depends not only on the distribution of meals, but also on the communicative courage and competence of educational leaders. The central questions guiding this research are: why do school principals choose silence when irregularities occur in the implementation of the MBG program, how is this communicative silence manifested, and what are its implications for program effectiveness at the school level?

The urgency of this study lies in the fact that the MBG program is not only a nutritional intervention, but also a public policy that depends heavily on the quality of communication among implementers at the school level. When principals choose silence in response to implementation problems, such silence may delay corrective action, weaken accountability, and normalize administrative or operational irregularities. This issue becomes increasingly important because schools are the final and most direct point of contact between government policy and student welfare. Therefore, examining quiet leadership in MBG implementation is crucial to understanding how communication barriers, bureaucratic pressure, and cultural norms may influence the effectiveness of public education policy in Indonesia.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a single-case study design to understand the phenomenon of *quiet leadership*, or communicative silence, among school principals in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore meanings, contexts, and social experiences in depth, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). The research

participants consisted of one school principal, two teachers, the school treasurer, and one representative of the food provider, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in program implementation (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. The secondary data sources used in this study were selected based on several criteria: their relevance to the implementation of the MBG program at the school level, their official or institutional origin, their temporal relevance to the period of program implementation, and their capacity to support triangulation with interview and observation data. The documents analyzed included activity reports, MBG implementation guidelines issued by the relevant government institution, school meeting minutes, administrative records, and documentation related to food distribution and coordination meetings. These documents were used not as the main source of findings, but as supporting data to verify, contextualize, and strengthen the interpretation of participants' statements and observed communication practices.

Data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This technique was chosen because the study aimed to identify recurring patterns of communicative silence, bureaucratic pressure, and leadership behavior within a specific organizational context (Milles et al., 2014). The interactive model allows researchers to move continuously between empirical data and emerging interpretations, making it suitable for qualitative case study research. In addition, thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013) was used to identify, code, and organize themes related to quiet leadership, organizational silence, and communication climate (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Document analysis was also guided by Bowen's (2009) view that documents can serve as a stable source of contextual evidence and can support triangulation in qualitative research. Therefore, the combination of interactive analysis, thematic analysis, and document analysis enabled the researchers to

interpret the principal's silence not merely as individual behavior, but as a communicative phenomenon shaped by structural, cultural, and organizational conditions.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

General Pattern of Principal Communication in the Implementation of MBG

The findings indicate that the principal's communication pattern in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) was predominantly vertical, formal, and administratively oriented (Safira et al., 2025). Communication was mainly organized around the need to comply with official instructions, complete reporting requirements, and maintain coordination with higher authorities. In routine activities such as coordination meetings, communication was more frequently manifested as the delivery of information, instructions, and administrative reminders than as an interactive forum for reflection, evaluation, and collective problem-solving (Ekawati et al., 2025; Hastasari et al., 2025). This pattern shows that MBG-related communication within the school was not yet fully developed as a participatory mechanism for identifying and addressing implementation problems (Pratama, 2025; Safira et al., 2025).

During an observed MBG coordination meeting, the principal conveyed several key points from the implementation guidelines and instructions received from the education office. The meeting proceeded in an orderly manner, but the communication flow was largely one-directional. Teachers and staff listened, took notes, and confirmed technical matters, yet they did not actively raise questions or express concerns related to field-level problems such as food quality, distribution delays, or coordination with the food provider. This situation suggests that the formal structure of the meeting limited the emergence of critical dialogue (Ekawati et al., 2025). The absence of questions from teachers and staff did not necessarily indicate that there were no problems, but rather reflected a communication climate in which participants tended to avoid openly discussing sensitive issues.

Such a communication pattern reflects the hierarchical culture commonly found in public educational organizations, where communication is often understood as the transmission of directives rather than the collaborative construction of meaning (Ekawati et al., 2025; Hastasari et al., 2025). In this context, the principal was positioned as the main channel of policy information from the education office to the school community. Teachers and staff, on the other hand, tended to act as recipients of information rather than as active contributors to the evaluation process. As one teacher (GK1) described:

“Typically, during MBG meetings, the principal only conveys information received from the education office and rarely discusses field-level issues. If someone wishes to comment, the usual response is: I will forward it to the higher authorities later.”

This excerpt illustrates that communication in MBG implementation remained strongly attached to bureaucratic procedure. The response “it will be forwarded to higher authorities” functioned as a neutral and safe communicative expression. On the one hand, it enabled the principal to show that the issue was acknowledged. On the other hand, it did not necessarily lead to immediate problem-solving at the school level. Consequently, communication became a mechanism for maintaining stability rather than a process for generating corrective action (Pratama, 2025). In several instances, the principal’s silence or brief response was interpreted by teachers as an implicit sign that certain issues should not be discussed further in formal forums.

The researcher’s observation also revealed that the principal’s silence in formal meetings was not incidental, but part of a recurring communicative pattern embedded in bureaucratic routines. When implementation problems emerged, the principal tended to avoid open discussion and preferred to handle them privately or through administrative channels. This practice can be understood as a form of communicative caution. The principal appeared to balance the need to maintain school stability, protect institutional image, and avoid conflict

with external actors such as the education office or food provider. However, this cautious communication also reduced opportunities for collective reflection among school actors (Ekawati et al., 2025; Safira et al., 2025).

This finding is consistent with Gibb’s (1961) notion of defensive communication, which explains that individuals tend to restrain themselves from speaking openly when the communication environment is perceived as psychologically unsafe or evaluative. In the context of MBG implementation, silence operated as a form of self-protection against potential conflict, misunderstanding, or negative assessment from higher authorities. The principal’s communication was therefore shaped not only by personal leadership style, but also by the broader organizational climate surrounding the program.

These dynamics also indicate a relational distance between the principal and teachers, reflecting the high-power distance characteristic of school organizational structures (Hofstede, 2001). Communication was constructed less on the basis of equality and shared problem-solving, and more on the legitimacy of authority and bureaucratic hierarchy. The principal was positioned as a policy transmitter who conveyed instructions from above, rather than as a policy learner who encouraged feedback from below. In such a communication environment, teachers were less likely to express criticism, while the principal was more likely to maintain silence in order to preserve organizational order. It is within this vertical, cautious, and bureaucratically controlled communication pattern that the phenomenon of quiet leadership emerges in the implementation of the MBG program.

Bureaucratic Pressure and Structural Fear

The first prominent theme emerging from the findings is bureaucratic pressure and structural fear in program implementation. The principal operates within a tightly regulated bureaucratic system in which every action must align with central guidelines and administrative reports must be submitted on time. Even minor irregularities in implementation have the potential to trigger negative evaluations from the education authorities or monitoring teams. As the principal (KS) explained:

"The MBG program is a major national initiative, directly mandated by the central government. We are merely implementers. Therefore, if there are shortcomings, we try to resolve them quietly. We fear that if they are reported, it may be perceived as an inability to manage the program."

This statement contains two important aspects: first, an awareness of the principal's subordinate position within the bureaucratic system; second, a fear of evaluative consequences from higher authorities. In organizational silence theory, this condition is referred to as acquiescent silence, a form of silence that emerges from passive acceptance of power structures. Observational data further revealed that the principal often avoided open discussions about MBG-related issues on the grounds of "not wanting to create unnecessary disturbance." In one case, student meals arrived nearly an hour late due to a distribution error by the vendor. Teachers expressed concern, yet the principal responded briefly:

"It's fine, I will handle it directly. There is no need to make it a bigger issue."

This response reflects fear of negative evaluation (Van Dyne et al., 2003), whereby the principal refrains from overt corrective action due to concern that such action might be interpreted as managerial failure. Bureaucratic pressure was also evident in the MBG digital reporting mechanism. The principal was required to complete highly detailed reporting formats, including precise distribution times, daily menus, and photographic documentation. These administrative demands fostered an orientation toward procedural compliance rather than substantive reflection. As a result, the principal became more focused on "completing the report" than on "resolving the problem."

These findings reinforce Denhardt and Denhardt's (2015) concept of bureaucratic inertia, referring to the tendency of public organizations to maintain stability through compliance, even at the expense of effectiveness. In the MBG context, administrative compliance appeared to substitute for moral accountability. Culturally,

this pressure was intensified by a norm of "avoiding mistakes in the eyes of superiors." One teacher (GK2) confirmed:

"Sometimes when problems occur, we hesitate to write them in the report. The principal also says it might become a negative record at the education office."

This structural fear contributes to the formation of a non-supportive communication climate. According to Gibb's (1961) theory of organizational communication climate, such conditions constitute a *defensive climate*—an environment in which individuals feel monitored and fear judgment. Consequently, rather than fostering transparency, the bureaucratic system reinforces a cycle of silence among principals and teachers.

Culture of Reluctance (Sungkan) and Social Harmony

The second prominent theme emerging from the findings is the culture of sungkan (reluctance) as a cultural factor fostering silence. Within the school environment, the principal operates under social norms emphasizing politeness, *tepa selira* (empathic consideration), and the preservation of harmonious relationships. As the principal (KS) stated:

"If there are shortcomings on the part of the catering provider, I usually convey them through the treasurer so as not to offend directly. Here, we must respect one another."

This statement reflects a pattern of indirect communication common in collectivist cultures such as Indonesia (Hofstede, 2001). The principal preferred a subtle communicative pathway to avoid confrontation, even when irregularities were relatively serious. While this strategy was intended to maintain positive relationships, in practice it often delayed problem resolution. This phenomenon corresponds to the concept of *prosocial silence* (Van Dyne et al., 2003), a form of silence motivated by goodwill, intended to protect others from embarrassment or conflict. In the school context, the principal remained silent to safeguard the school's image and the dignity of the food provider. However, this also reduced

opportunities for systemic improvement. One teacher (GK1) provided a concrete example:

"There was a time when the food was undercooked. We wanted to address it directly, but the principal told us to wait, so it wouldn't seem like we were creating trouble."

These findings illustrate how social values such as politeness and harmony shape silence behavior. As proposed by Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) in face negotiation theory, individuals from harmony-oriented cultures tend to avoid open confrontation to preserve the social face of all parties. In this case, the principal sought to protect both personal and relational face. However, when the culture of *sungkan* becomes institutionalized, it generates a domino effect. The principal's silence is followed by the silence of teachers and staff, turning evaluation forums into formalities devoid of substantive discussion. In several observed meetings, teachers offered only general comments such as "hopefully things will improve," without raising concrete concerns.

Durnali (2020) notes that in schools characterized by strong hierarchical culture, organizational silence often emerges as a form of cultural compliance. In this study, such a pattern was clearly evident: silence was not driven solely by fear of sanctions, but also by social norms that perceive criticism as impolite. This culture of *sungkan* placed the principal in a moral dilemma. On the one hand, the principal sought to maintain professional integrity and program accountability; on the other, social norms discouraged "exposing institutional shortcomings." Consequently, silence became a form of moral compromise. In Denhardt and Denhardt's (2015) ethics of communication, this condition is described as moral tension the tension between the values of honesty and social loyalty.

Silence as a Leadership Strategy

The third theme highlights the strategic dimension of the principal's silence. Based on interview findings, silence was often employed as a situational management tool rather than merely a sign of fear or passivity. The principal deliberately chose silence to read policy directions, calm tense situations, or wait for an

appropriate moment to act. As the principal (KS) explained:

"If I reprimand them directly, the catering provider may feel offended and could even withdraw. If I remain silent first, I can call them privately after the meeting."

In this context, silence represents *strategic silence* (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). The principal consciously used silence to prevent conflict escalation. Within a work environment characterized by pressure and interdependence, such a strategy enabled the leader to preserve relationships and institutional reputation. Observational data revealed that the principal employed silence in several recurring situations: (1) when receiving negative reports, (2) during discussions with external actors, and (3) when facing internal disagreements. In the first situation, silence functioned as emotional restraint; in the second, as a form of diplomacy; and in the third, as a strategy to maintain neutrality. However, the long-term consequence of this approach was a diminished sense of urgency in addressing problems. As one teacher (GK2) noted:

"He often prefers to remain silent. But because of that, problems are not always resolved and sometimes reappear the following week."

This phenomenon illustrates that silence as a strategy can be a double-edged sword. In the short term, it maintains stability; in the long term, it erodes the organization's reflective culture. Hackman and Johnson (2018) argue that communicative leaders are those who balance social empathy with ethical courage. When this balance is not achieved, leadership becomes symbolic more concerned with preserving image than addressing substance (Hackman & Johnson, 2018).

From the perspective of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002), silence should ideally create space for active listening. However, in this case, the principal's silence tended to be defensive rather than contemplative. Silence was used not to deepen understanding, but to provide protection. It also functioned as an adaptive strategy in response to dual pressures from government authorities and the school community. The principal acted as a policy

filter, ensuring that criticism from below did not immediately reach higher authorities, while also preventing top-down policies from generating resistance at the grassroots level. Although this function is significant within the Indonesian educational bureaucracy, it risks obscuring transparency. Within the framework of communication leadership, this behavior reflects an administrative leadership style, where the leader functions more as a system stabilizer than as an agent of change. Consequently, communication becomes reactive and formal rather than participatory and reflective

Theoretical Integration

The findings of this study indicate that quiet leadership in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) is not a simple manifestation of silence, passivity, or leadership weakness. Rather, it is a complex communicative phenomenon produced by the interaction of bureaucratic pressure, cultural norms, organizational hierarchy, and personal leadership strategies (Kim, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2025). The three main themes found in this study bureaucratic pressure and structural fear, the culture of *sungkan* and social harmony, and silence as a leadership strategy collectively demonstrate that the principal's silence is embedded in a wider communication structure. This structure shapes how school actors perceive problems, respond to policy instructions, and negotiate the risks of speaking openly. Therefore, quiet leadership should be understood as a contextual leadership practice that emerges when formal authority, cultural expectations, and institutional accountability intersect in the school environment (Longmuir, 2023; Shang et al., 2024).

The first important point emerging from the findings is that silence among school principals is strongly related to the bureaucratic nature of MBG implementation. The MBG program is a national policy implemented through a top-down administrative structure. Schools are positioned as the final units of implementation, while strategic decisions, technical guidelines, and evaluation indicators are largely determined by higher authorities. In

this structure, the principal does not operate as a fully autonomous decision-maker. Instead, the principal functions as an intermediary actor who must translate policy instructions into school-level practices while also ensuring that implementation appears orderly and compliant. This position creates a communication dilemma. On one hand, the principal is responsible for ensuring that the program runs effectively. On the other hand, the principal must avoid being perceived as failing to comply with government instructions (Balliu & Claeys, 2026; Pham et al., 2025).

This bureaucratic condition explains why the principal's communication pattern tends to be vertical, formal, and administratively oriented. Communication about MBG is often centered on reports, documentation, attendance lists, menus, distribution schedules, and coordination records. Such documents are important because they demonstrate that the school has fulfilled formal obligations. However, the dominance of administrative reporting may reduce the space for substantive reflection. When school meetings focus primarily on what must be reported to higher authorities, discussions about field-level problems may become secondary. As a result, communication becomes a mechanism of compliance rather than a mechanism of learning (Einwiller et al., 2021). This finding is in line with Morrison and Milliken's (2000) concept of organizational silence, which explains that hierarchical organizations often discourage open voice because members believe that speaking up may not produce meaningful change or may even create negative consequences.

In the context of this study, the principal's silence reflects a form of structural caution. The principal did not always openly discuss problems such as food delays, menu quality, coordination with the food provider, or the discomfort of teachers in handling complaints. These problems were often acknowledged, but they were not always transformed into collective discussions. Instead, they were handled privately, postponed, or placed within bureaucratic channels. This pattern shows that the principal's silence was not merely a personal preference. It was shaped by the expectation that a good school leader

should maintain order, avoid unnecessary conflict, and ensure that the school appears capable of implementing national policy. In such a situation, speaking openly about problems may be interpreted as exposing institutional weakness (Guzzo et al., 2021; Qin & Men, 2023).

This finding also indicates that bureaucratic pressure can produce a defensive communication climate. According to Gibb (1961), a defensive communication climate emerges when individuals perceive the communication environment as evaluative, controlling, strategic, or unsupportive. In the MBG implementation context, the principal and teachers appeared to communicate cautiously because they were aware that program problems could be interpreted negatively by external authorities. Rather than encouraging honest feedback, the reporting system may unintentionally encourage selective communication. Actors may highlight successful implementation while minimizing sensitive issues. This does not mean that school actors intentionally manipulate information, but rather that they adapt their communication to what is considered safe and acceptable within the bureaucracy (Balliu & Claeys, 2026).

The principal's position within the bureaucratic hierarchy is particularly important. Although the principal is the highest authority within the school, the principal is also subordinate to education authorities and other government actors. This dual position creates a layered power relationship. Toward teachers and staff, the principal represents authority. Toward the education bureaucracy, the principal becomes an implementer who must demonstrate compliance. This layered hierarchy explains why the principal may appear dominant in internal school meetings but cautious when dealing with policy problems. The principal must manage downward communication to teachers and upward communication to authorities. In this process, silence becomes a means of balancing these two directions of communication (Sun et al., 2023).

The findings also show that the implementation of MBG requires more than technical coordination. It requires a communication system that enables problems to be identified and addressed safely. Food

distribution programs involve many actors, including principals, teachers, treasurers, school committees, food providers, parents, students, and education authorities. Each actor may have different concerns. Teachers may observe student reactions to the meals. Treasurers may understand administrative and financial procedures. Food providers may face logistical constraints. Principals must coordinate these actors while maintaining institutional stability. Without open communication, important information from the field may remain fragmented and may not reach the actors who have the authority to make improvements.

The second major finding concerns the role of cultural norms in shaping quiet leadership. The culture of *sungkan*, politeness, and social harmony influences how school actors communicate about problems. In Indonesian social life, direct criticism is often considered sensitive, especially when directed toward people who hold authority or toward partners with whom one must maintain a long-term relationship. In the school context, this cultural pattern becomes more complex because relationships are both professional and social. Teachers, principals, staff, and external partners often interact repeatedly. Maintaining harmony is therefore seen as necessary for smooth cooperation. The principal may avoid direct criticism not only to protect personal relationships, but also to prevent conflict that could disrupt program implementation (Longmuir, 2023; Yue et al., 2023).

The findings suggest that the culture of *sungkan* does not operate separately from bureaucracy. Instead, cultural reluctance and bureaucratic hierarchy reinforce one another. Bureaucracy provides the structural reason for silence, while culture provides the social justification for silence. The principal may remain silent because of fear of negative evaluation, but the silence is also framed as politeness, maturity, or prudence. Teachers may avoid raising concerns because they respect the principal, but also because they assume that formal meetings are not appropriate spaces for direct criticism. This combination creates a communication environment in which silence becomes normalized. It is no longer seen as unusual; it becomes part of how the organization functions (Einwiller et al., 2021).

This normalization of silence is important because it may lead to institutional silence. Knoll and van Dick (2013) explain that employee silence can take different forms, including acquiescent silence, defensive silence, prosocial silence, and opportunistic silence. In this study, the principal's silence appears to contain several of these dimensions. It is defensive because it protects the principal from possible negative consequences. It is prosocial because it is partly intended to maintain harmony and protect others from embarrassment. It is also acquiescent when the principal accepts bureaucratic limitations and chooses not to challenge the system. These forms of silence may overlap in practice. The principal does not remain silent for only one reason; the silence is produced by multiple motivations at once (Qin & Men, 2023).

The third finding concerns silence as a leadership strategy. The principal's silence should not be understood only as a reaction to pressure. It is also used as a way to manage situations. In certain moments, silence allows the principal to observe, control emotions, avoid public confrontation, and decide the most appropriate response. This strategic dimension is important because it shows that silence can have a functional role in leadership. Leaders do not always need to respond immediately or verbally to every problem. In some situations, silence may provide space for reflection and prevent impulsive decisions. However, the problem arises when strategic silence becomes the dominant response to recurring implementation problems (Longmuir, 2023).

This interpretation expands the concept of quiet leadership within the Indonesian educational context. In some leadership literature, quiet leadership is associated with modesty, service, and moral influence. Greenleaf's (2002) notion of servant leadership, for example, emphasizes listening, empathy, and the leader's commitment to serving others. However, the quiet leadership found in this study differs from servant leadership. The principal's silence was not primarily used to empower others or create deeper dialogue. Instead, it was used to manage bureaucratic pressure and preserve institutional stability. This does not mean that the principal lacked concern for students or teachers. Rather, it

shows that the principal's concern was expressed within the constraints of a communication environment that did not fully support openness.

This is where the spiral effect of silence becomes visible. When the principal avoids open discussion, teachers may also avoid raising concerns. When teachers remain silent, the principal may assume that the problem is not serious or that the school community accepts the situation. This creates a cycle in which silence reinforces silence. Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory explains that individuals may refrain from expressing views when they believe their opinions are not supported by the dominant climate. Although this theory was originally developed in the context of public opinion, it is useful for understanding school-level communication. In MBG implementation, teachers may hesitate to express criticism if they sense that the dominant expectation is to maintain a positive image of the program (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2022).

The practical recommendations derived from this discussion can be grouped into three levels. At the school level, principals should develop regular reflective forums involving teachers, treasurers, committee members, and food providers. These forums should focus not only on administrative reporting but also on identifying obstacles, documenting complaints, and agreeing on follow-up actions. At the local government level, education authorities should establish confidential or non-punitive feedback channels. These channels should allow principals to communicate problems without fear that the report will be used solely as a basis for sanction. At the professional development level, principals should receive training in assertive communication, ethical leadership, and conflict-sensitive feedback.

The recommendations should be understood as efforts to transform silence into voice. Voice does not mean uncontrolled criticism. It means responsible communication aimed at improvement. In the MBG context, voice is necessary because the program involves students' welfare. Silence may preserve harmony, but voice protects accountability. The challenge is to develop a communication culture in which voice can be

expressed respectfully. This is particularly important in Indonesian schools, where politeness and hierarchy remain strong. The goal is not to eliminate respect, but to ensure that respect does not prevent honesty.

Conclusion

This study concludes that quiet leadership among school principals in the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) represents a form of communicative silence shaped by bureaucratic pressure, cultural norms of *sungkan*, and adaptive leadership strategies. The principal's silence is not merely a sign of passivity, but a way to maintain institutional stability, avoid conflict, and respond to hierarchical demands within the school bureaucracy. However, this silence may reduce transparency, weaken evaluation, and delay corrective action in program implementation. Theoretically, this study extends the concepts of organizational silence and communication leadership in the context of Indonesian public education policy. Practically, the findings suggest the need for assertive communication training, safe feedback channels, and participatory evaluation forums involving school principals, teachers, committees, and food providers. The success of MBG should therefore be measured not only by nutritional and logistical outcomes, but also by the openness and quality of communication within schools.

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