

The Dynamics of School Principals' Decision-Making in Managing Opinion and Strategic Policy Consensus in Education

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Abstract

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This study aims to explore the dynamics of organizational politics in the strategic decision-making process of school principals through the lens of heresthetics theory and Machiavellian strategy. Schools are often perceived as neutral administrative institutions; however, in reality, they are arenas of contestation of interests involving negotiations between leaders and influential groups, particularly senior teachers. Using a qualitative case study approach involving eight key informants, data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña to map the behind-the-scenes tactics employed by leaders. The findings reveal that principals act as skillful herestheticians through three main strategies: strict agenda setting to prevent disorder, the use of "the fox" tactic to co-opt senior teachers through informal channels, and issue reframing to transform perceptions of loss into collective gain. These findings indicate that the resulting consensus is often pseudo-democratic, where policy legitimacy is built upon carefully designed political strategies to appear as shared aspirations. This study contributes scientifically by offering a pragmatic perspective on educational leadership, emphasizing that political competence is a crucial element in ensuring organizational stability and the sustainability of strategic policies.

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INTRODUCTION

Schools are often perceived as sacred institutions far removed from conflicts of interest, whereas in reality, educational organizations are highly fluid political arenas. Every strategic decision made by school leaders is not merely an administrative act but a product of influence struggles among various actors. Problems arise when the principal's vision clashes with the interests of senior teachers who have long controlled school culture. If this dynamic is not properly managed, policies will remain mere formalities without real support from subordinates. Modern educational leaders are required to have sharp navigational skills to read the political climate within their environment to maintain organizational stability. Decisions in schools are essentially the result of the intersection between operational needs and highly complex sociopolitical considerations (Klein, 2023; Villavicencio, 2023). Understanding how leaders manage opinion becomes a key factor in ensuring that institutions continue to operate harmoniously amid differing interests (Makki & Nurjaman, 2022).

Studies on organizational politics are no longer viewed as the dark side of leadership but rather as a legitimate negotiation tool to align visions. Recent trends show

that successful school management largely depends on how leaders build bridges over differences of opinion through strategic bargaining processes. Organizational politics functions as a medium to unify various aspirations to create collective commitment toward school goals (Alim, 2025; Balqis et al., 2025). In addition, a leader's political competence becomes a determining variable in increasing participation and a sense of ownership among staff toward new programs. Mastery of this political aspect helps leaders gain trust and full dedication from their teams (Basit, 2020). Researchers have also begun to view schools as networks of structural power requiring an ecological approach to understand power distribution within them (Trinidad, 2024). The current focus of the literature is on how leaders can direct opinion without appearing dominant while still maintaining their authority effectively (Mandinach, 2022).

Although leadership literature is highly diverse, most studies remain confined to participatory and idealistic narratives. There is still a significant gap in explaining how school leaders deal with resistance from elite groups of senior teachers through behind-the-scenes tactical steps. Many studies overlook the pragmatic side of decision-making, which often involves maneuvers to secure consensus before issues are brought to formal meetings. Educational policies are often born from specific political pressures that are rarely discussed in depth at the micro school level (Darsyah & Chanifudin, 2020). Moreover, policymakers often face rigid strategic limitations, making it difficult to accurately map opposing forces (Trinidad, 2025). This gap indicates the need for a more realistic perspective in dissecting how agreements are systematically constructed. Without examining these hidden tactics, understanding the dynamics of school leadership will remain superficial and fail to address root problems.

This study introduces novelty by using heresthetics theory and Machiavellian strategy to analyze the principal's role as a skilled manager of choices. Unlike previous studies, this research positions leaders as experts in issue framing who can transform perceptions of loss into collective benefits (Northouse, 2021). The use of reframing techniques is highly effective in overcoming behavioral barriers such as fear of change or reluctance to leave comfort zones among school staff (Askari et al., 2025). By adopting the fox tactic, leaders can recognize interest traps while building consensus that appears organic and democratic to the public. Leaders consciously build influence through symbolic interaction to ensure that every strategic decision maintains strong legitimacy (Citraningsih & Noviandari, 2022). The integration of manipulating choice structures and managing opinion provides a new dimension in understanding leadership effectiveness in educational settings. This tactical focus contributes significantly to enriching contemporary educational management theory.

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze in depth the tactics of school principals in managing opinion and building consensus on strategic policies. The main focus is on how agenda-setting mechanisms are implemented to prevent disorder and subtly neutralize opposition voices from influential groups. It is important to examine how political models are applied as alternatives to rational models that often fail in practice (Datnow, 2017; Nengsih, 2025). Additionally, this study seeks to reveal the use

of legitimacy tactics to ensure that controversial policies are still perceived as collective needs by all organizational members. These tactics serve as crucial instruments for leaders to gain voluntary compliance without displaying authoritarian power (Lichtenstein, 2022). Through achieving these objectives, it is expected that a strategic guide will be created for school leaders to navigate conflicts of interest intelligently and ethically (Pless et al., 2022). The ultimate outcome is a clear depiction of how strong consensus can be built upon well-designed political strategies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply explore the politically driven dynamics of decision-making within school environments. The case study approach is considered highly appropriate because it allows for the dissection of contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, particularly interactions involving negotiation and closed agenda-setting processes. The researcher selected eight informants using purposive sampling to ensure data relevance to the main theme of heresthetics or the art of manipulating choice structures. These informants consisted of one principal as the main intellectual actor and seven senior teachers representing influential groups or the nobility within the school's organizational structure. This number was deemed sufficient as the informants were directly involved in strategic policy formulation and understood behind-the-scenes dynamics often unnoticed by other teachers (Alim, 2025). Through this specific selection, the researcher was able to map how the fox tactic was used by leaders to identify potential obstacles while subtly building policy consensus (Citraningsih & Noviardari, 2022).

The data analysis process refers to the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña to ensure scientifically credible and objective findings. The analysis stages began with data condensation, where raw interview data were filtered and organized into thematic units relevant to organizational political strategies and opinion management. The data were then presented in descriptive narratives and relational matrices to facilitate identification of heresthetic patterns employed by principals in influencing teachers' perceptions (Miles et al., 2014). The final step involved drawing conclusions and continuous verification to ensure interpretations were supported by consistent and solid field evidence. The researcher also applied triangulation of techniques and sources to validate information and avoid excessive subjectivity in analyzing school organizational sociology (Trinidad, 2024). Through this systematic analytical framework, each power maneuver and legitimacy tactic could be sharply dissected, providing a clear depiction of political realities in educational settings (Lichtenstein, 2022).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Agenda Setting: Navigating Issues to Prevent Organizational Disorder

The findings indicate that the school principal performs the role of a highly strict agenda setter to ensure that the stability of the school environment is maintained. The principal consciously filters which issues will be brought into formal teacher council meetings and which issues must be resolved through personal channels. This is done to avoid chaos of opinions that could undermine leadership authority in the eyes of teachers. This agenda setting is not merely a technical matter of meeting schedules but rather a political strategy to limit discussion space to matters whose outcomes have already been anticipated by the leader. The timing of launching a strategic policy is also chosen very carefully to avoid coinciding with sensitive periods within the school. This strategy is crucial because any uncontrolled issue can become a spark that fuels resistance among staff (Klein, 2023). By controlling what is discussed and what is concealed, the principal successfully creates the perception that the organization is always in a calm and controlled condition (Hajar, 2025).

In an in-depth interview, the principal (KS) explained their tactic in controlling the flow of information in meeting spaces. The principal stated that not everything needs to be disclosed openly in plenary meetings because some policies, if presented without preparation, could trigger unnecessary debates. The principal prefers to refine issues within a small circle first before presenting them as final drafts ready for approval. According to the principal, the key to maintaining school stability lies in the leader's ability to close gaps that allow the emergence of uncontrolled issues that may divide factions within the school. This statement shows that agenda setting functions as the first line of defense in protecting the leader's strategic vision from destructive opinion disturbances. This aligns with the perspective of organizational sociology that views schools as arenas requiring strong structural management (Alqahtani & Wafula, 2025). Through this pattern, the principal ensures that every narrative developed in the school remains within the desired framework without appearing coercive.

The Fox Tactic in Managing Opposition from Senior Teachers

The findings reveal the use of the fox strategy by the principal in managing the influence of senior teachers, who often act as hidden opposition. The principal realizes that senior teachers possess significant social capital and influence over younger teachers; therefore, open confrontation would be highly risky. Consequently, the principal adopts a subtle personal approach by assigning special roles to key figures among senior teachers before a policy is officially announced. By making them feel part of the policy formulation process, the principal effectively neutralizes potential criticism. Such political competence is necessary for leaders to recognize interest traps within school bureaucracy (Basit, 2020). The management of influential figures is carried out carefully so that they feel respected while still aligning with the established strategic vision (Citraningsih & Noviandari, 2022).

An informant (GS-1), a senior teacher, explained that they felt involved in decision-making processes. The principal often invited informal discussions before major policies were finalized. This made the informant feel valued and morally responsible to support the policy when presented to other teachers. The informant believed their suggestions were accommodated, although the policy direction had already been structured by the principal. This demonstrates the effectiveness of heresthetic tactics in embracing opposition so that policies are no longer perceived as threats but as recognition of their position. In this context, the principal successfully transforms potential opponents into strategic allies, facilitating broader consensus (Abbas, 2025).

Heresthetics and the Construction of Pseudo-Democratic Consensus

The study finds that consensus achieved in schools is often pseudo-democratic, where agreements appear natural but are systematically framed. The principal applies heresthetic techniques by altering the dimensions of an issue to make it more appealing to the majority of teachers. If a policy is initially perceived as an additional workload, the principal reframes it as an opportunity for professional development or long-term reputation investment. This shift is highly effective in overcoming teachers' reluctance to change and reducing fear of potential losses (Alev, 2025; Askari et al., 2025). Through strategic framing, policies that initially face strong resistance are gradually accepted as shared aspirations. Such legitimacy tactics enable the principal to gain full approval without resorting to authoritarian power that could trigger long-term conflict (Milton, 2021).

A young teacher informant explained that initially the policy felt burdensome, but after listening to the principal's explanation, it appeared to be a long-awaited solution. The teacher felt involved and heard, even though they were guided toward agreeing with pre-structured choices. This consensus construction creates voluntary and lasting compliance, as staff feel they have contributed significantly. This reflects the principal's skill in managing the opinion arena so that decisions appear democratic and acceptable (Darsyah & Chanifudin, 2020). Ultimately, consensus built through mature political strategy proves more stable than top-down imposed decisions.

Discussion

Analysis of Agenda Setting as a Defensive Strategy

The analysis of the agenda-setting findings indicates that the principal performs the role of a highly strategic information curator to ensure that institutional stability is maintained. From the perspective of organizational politics, filtering issues before presenting them in formal forums constitutes a form of narrative control aimed at preventing fragmentation of opinions among teachers. The principal understands that uncontrolled total transparency often triggers unproductive turmoil and may gradually erode leadership authority (Ahtiainen et al., 2024). By refining policies within smaller circles first, the leader is essentially building a strong foundation of support before facing

a broader audience. Klein emphasizes that the ability to navigate political realities and control the flow of issues is an essential competence for educational leaders to avoid destructive pressures. Through proper issue management, the principal succeeds in creating a work environment that appears calm, even though behind the scenes there is a very strict filtering process (Klein, 2023).

The selection of timing in launching an agenda also becomes a determining factor in the success of a heresthetician in minimizing organizational resistance. The principal tends to wait for the right momentum when the psychological condition of teachers is stable or when there are no other sensitive issues developing within the school environment. This defensive strategy aims to close opportunities for opposition that may exploit policy weaknesses to trigger larger internal conflicts. This is aligned with the effort to avoid disorder, which is a fundamental principle in maintaining harmonious and effective power sustainability. Nengsih argues that politically driven planning requires firmness in determining topic boundaries so that discussions remain within the corridor of achieving organizational vision (Hajar, 2025; Nengsih, 2025). By mastering the agenda-setting stage, the principal ensures that the direction of discussion in meeting rooms remains under their control without the need to display excessive authoritarian attitudes (Agirdag & Muijs, 2023).

Theoretically, the effectiveness of this agenda-setting strategy depends heavily on the leader's ability to map which actors have the potential to disrupt the stability of formal meetings. A skillful principal will resolve issues gradually, starting from the smallest units before bringing them to the plenary level. This step ensures that every opposing voice has been managed personally so that when decisions are made, there are no significant ripples on the surface. Trinidad notes that structural understanding of school organizations greatly assists leaders in distributing policies safely and efficiently (Trinidad, 2025). Success in managing the agenda reflects that educational leadership is not merely about administrative correctness but also about intelligence in managing information flow. The final result is a strong policy legitimacy, as the process appears to run without coercion while still following the strategic design prepared by the leader.

The Dynamics of Managing Opposition Among Senior Teachers

The principal's intelligence in using the fox tactic to embrace senior teacher groups provides a clear illustration of how power is managed through subtle negotiation mechanisms. The researcher observes that assigning special roles to senior teachers through informal channels is a highly effective co-optation strategy to eliminate resistance at an early stage. Senior teachers, who possess high social capital, often become major obstacles if they feel excluded from strategic decision-making processes that affect the broader organization. By inviting them into personal discussions, the principal is securing their support so that during plenary meetings, this influential group becomes a defender of leadership policies. That organizational politics is the art of negotiation in which leaders must be able to align various interests through approaches that are more humane and non-confrontational (Alim, 2025; Anzia, 2020).

This informal engagement strategy also proves that political competence is far more decisive in determining leadership success in schools than merely relying on formal authority attached to the leadership position. The principal is able to identify traps that may be set by parties whose interests are threatened by building strong emotional relationships with key figures. This approach makes opposition groups feel that their aspirations have been fully accommodated, even though substantively the policy direction still follows the leader's original vision. Basit observes that strong political skills increase the involvement of organizational members because they feel their opinions are valued and recognized by leadership (Basit, 2020). Through this approach, the principal successfully transforms potential conflict into supportive energy that facilitates the organization's movement toward achieving its officially established strategic goals (Alqatan et al., 2025).

Further analysis reveals that this fox tactic is highly relevant within the Indonesian educational context, which strongly upholds seniority values and respect for influential figures. Principals who fail to acknowledge the position of senior teachers often face subtle sabotage in policy implementation, causing programs to fall short of optimal outcomes. Conversely, tactically oriented leadership positions senior teachers as strategic partners or mentors in change processes to ensure smooth policy transitions. Citraningsih add that through appropriate symbolic interaction, leaders can influence how organizational members interpret decisions without making them feel pressured. The success in embracing this nobility within the school demonstrates that organizational stability can be maintained through intelligent distribution of respect and recognition within existing social structures (Citraningsih & Noviandari, 2022).

Finally, it is important to note that opposition management does not aim to eliminate differences of opinion but rather to manage them so that they do not escalate into open conflict. The principal utilizes emotional intelligence to listen to complaints and inputs from senior teachers in order to make minor technical adjustments to policies. These small adjustments are often sufficient to make opposition groups feel morally victorious, even though strategically the overall direction of the policy remains unchanged. The importance of mapping strategies and limitations for change agents to ensure that every action taken maintains high acceptability among stakeholders. By positioning themselves as good listeners, principals are effectively conducting strong internal diplomacy to ensure the sustainability of their leadership in the future (Amani, 2023; Trinidad, 2025). The result is a solid consensus in which every element of the organization feels like an integral part of the institution's broader journey.

Heresthetics and the Construction of Pseudo-Democratic Consensus

The analysis of the consensus-building process reveals that heresthetic techniques, particularly through issue reframing, serve as the primary key in gaining majority support from younger teachers and staff. Resistance to new policies is generally driven by loss aversion, where change is perceived as a threat to work comfort or the existing status quo (Northouse, 2021). A skillful principal shifts the dimension of

discussion from administrative burden to professional development or long-term value investment for teachers themselves. Behavioral barriers in policy implementation can be effectively addressed through reframing strategies that shift perceptions from risk to benefit (Askari et al., 2025). Through this approach, policies that initially appear burdensome transform into collective needs desired by the entire school community without any apparent coercion.

Although the resulting consensus is often pseudo-democratic, since its trajectory has been systematically designed by the principal, the legitimacy that emerges from this process remains very strong. Teachers feel that the agreement is the result of their aspirations being heard within meeting spaces that appear inclusive and open to all parties. Lichtenstein states that legitimacy tactics are crucial in building lasting compliance without relying on rigid and coercive authoritarian power (Lichtenstein, 2022). Through subtle manipulation of choice structures, the principal successfully maintains organizational stability while ensuring that strategic visions are achieved without significant resistance from any faction. Ultimately, this success demonstrates that strong consensus within schools is not the product of spontaneous agreement, but rather the result of well-designed political strategies and intelligent issue framing. The positive impact is the creation of a harmonious organizational culture in which every individual feels they have a meaningful contribution to each policy success that has been decided.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully reveals that strategic decision-making within school environments is not a sterile administrative process, but rather a complex art of political navigation. The main findings indicate that the success of school principals in achieving consensus is highly dependent on their ability to perform as skilled herestheticians who are capable of managing agendas and reframing issues. The fox strategy, implemented through personal approaches toward groups of senior teachers, has proven effective in mitigating resistance before issues reach formal forums. In addition, the construction of pseudo-democratic consensus demonstrates that organizational stability is often achieved through subtle manipulation of choice structures, where staff feel actively involved even though policy directions have been systematically designed by leadership. Thus, consensus within schools is a product of well-crafted political design, rather than merely a spontaneous agreement among organizational members.

From a scientific perspective, this study makes an important contribution to the development of educational management theory by integrating the concepts of Heresthetics and Machiavellian strategy into the micro-context of school organizations. This study enriches the body of literature by offering a more realistic and pragmatic perspective, moving beyond participatory leadership models that are often considered overly idealistic. The novelty of this research lies in its examination of behind-the-scenes tactics that explain how leaders overcome behavioral barriers, such as loss aversion, through the reframing of policy dimensions. These findings confirm that political

competence is a crucial capability that must be possessed by educational leaders to ensure the sustainability of innovation within conservative power structures.

As a recommendation, future research is expected to expand its focus on the long-term impact of heresthetic strategies on organizational integrity and trust as a whole. Considering that this study is limited to a qualitative case study, the use of quantitative methods to measure the correlation between principals' political skills and teachers' job satisfaction would provide a more generalizable understanding. In addition, it is important for future researchers to explore the ethical dimensions of the use of political tactics to ensure that leadership practices remain aligned with educational values. It is also recommended that school leadership training providers begin to incorporate curricula on organizational political literacy and strategic negotiation techniques to equip prospective leaders in facing dynamic and interest-laden real-world conditions.

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