

Collaborative Leadership Strategies to Prevent Crabs in A Barrel Syndrome in Early Childhood Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The "Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome" (CBS), a behaviour characterised by undermining peers to maintain one's own position, can hinder collaboration and innovation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions. This study aims to examine how CBS manifests in the workplace culture of ECE teachers and to explore collaborative leadership strategies to mitigate such behaviours. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving 9 participants across three ECE centres in Merauke, Indonesia. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. The findings reveal that CBS manifests as fear of dominance, resistance to change, and avoidance of open collaboration. However, interventions such as weekly reflection forums, collective appreciation systems, and participatory leadership proved effective in fostering trust, enhancing team cohesion, and nurturing a more constructive work environment. This study concludes that organisational designs that promote psychological safety and transparent communication are essential in countering harmful competitive cultures. Theoretically, the research contributes to the understanding of micro-organisational dynamics in educational settings, while practically, it offers concrete recommendations for ECE administrators to cultivate inclusive and collaborative workplaces.

Keywords: Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS), Early Childhood Education (ECE), Collaborative Leadership, Psychological Safety

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A. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS), which refers to the tendency of individuals to hinder the progress of their colleagues due to envy or limited competition, has become a significant issue in education, including in early childhood education institutions (Çavuş and Sarpkaya, 2021). Globally, studies indicate that similar behaviours occur across organisations; for instance, Eversole (2025) reported that the intensity of internal sabotage among managers reached 43%, indicating that excessive competitive feelings can obstruct productivity and professional collaboration. In educational contexts, collaborative leadership has been shown to enhance teacher participation, organisational well-being, and teaching effectiveness (Situmeang et al., 2025). However, the implementation and evaluation of this strategy in early

childhood education institutions remain limited; therefore, the role of CBS as an inhibitor of innovation and teacher collaboration has not been empirically examined. Other studies also suggest that the lack of intervention models to reduce CBS may decrease teacher motivation and the quality of early childhood education management, while simultaneously generating psychological pressure that reduces learning effectiveness (Fereydouni Forouzande et al., 2023; Sulistyowati et al., 2025). This phenomenon demands serious attention from early childhood education leaders to build an inclusive, collaborative culture.

Scientific studies on CBS in educational institutions tend to be anecdotal and grounded in social psychology theory, without empirical contextual testing in early childhood education (Çavuş and Sarpkaya, 2021; Marlia et al., 2025). Some studies emphasise the role of transformational leadership in improving teacher quality and learning outcomes, whereas other research highlights collaborative leadership in developing an academic culture, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Anwar et al., 2022; Baidowi et al., 2024; Harsono et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the direct relationship between collaborative leadership strategies and the reduction of CBS behaviour in early childhood education settings has not been critically analysed, leaving a significant research gap. Future research is urgently needed to explore how collaborative interventions can minimise internal sabotage, promote professional innovation, and improve the quality of early childhood learning (Sulistyowati et al., 2025). In this way, the development of leadership theory and practice in early childhood education can be more evidence-based and oriented toward the well-being of both teachers and children.

Leadership plays an essential role in preventing the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon in schools through several key strategies. First, promoting collaboration and solidarity among teachers can reduce destructive competitive mindsets, as evidenced by female academics in Turkey who succeeded through fraternal and solidarity behaviours (Uçel et al., 2023). Second, building a positive school culture in which teachers feel valued and supported can suppress competitive behaviour; this approach emphasises the emotional and relational aspects of leadership, especially during disruptions or changes (Vanlommel et al., 2025). Third, encouraging open communication helps leaders identify and address negative behaviours early, through transparent channels for expressing teacher complaints and aspirations (Lekishvili and Kikutadze, 2023). Emerging challenges include time management, lack of recognition, and professional isolation, which can be addressed through recognition programs, ongoing professional development, and support networks for teacher leaders (Tarraya, 2023), thereby enabling teacher leaders to build an inclusive and collaborative work environment.

This study aims to fill the empirical gap regarding the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon in early childhood education, where previous studies have been mainly anecdotal or grounded in social psychology theory without contextual testing (Çavuş and Sarpkaya, 2021; Fereydouni Forouzande et al., 2023). The novelty of this research lies in integrating a psychological analysis of CBS with collaborative leadership strategies in early childhood education settings, while simultaneously adapting shared leadership theory (Eversole, 2025), organisational ostracism (Lustenberger and Williams, 2009), and relative deprivation (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984) to the scale of early childhood education. The research objectives include: (1) exploring the forms and intensity of CBS; (2) describing the implementation of collaborative leadership; and (3) evaluating its impact on a positive work culture. Its practical implications are

expected to serve as a strategic guide for early childhood education leaders and policymakers in designing interventions, training, or collaborative standard operating procedures, thereby creating an inclusive and innovative culture, improving the quality of early childhood education services, and providing a new scientific foundation for future research.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach with thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022), which comprises six stages: data familiarisation, initial coding, theme exploration, theme review, theme naming, and report writing. This approach was chosen because it enables in-depth exploration of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon and the implementation of collaborative leadership in early childhood education contexts, while also supporting the development of richer, more contextualised theory.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling, consisting of nine participants, including early childhood education leaders, teachers, and administrative staff from three early childhood education institutions in Merauke City, South Papua, Indonesia. This sample size aligns with best practices in thematic analysis, which recommend ten to twenty interviews to achieve data saturation within a homogeneous group. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of two years of experience in early childhood education and prior knowledge of CBS, ensuring that the collected data were sufficiently in-depth, meaningful, and representative.

Data collection techniques combined semi-structured interviews (lasting forty-five to sixty minutes), participatory observation, and document studies (standard operating procedures, meeting minutes, and teacher development portfolios). The interview guide was developed based on the literature on collaborative leadership and sabotage phenomena and was tested through a pilot study with two participants. The research procedure began with obtaining institutional and relevant authority approvals, followed by three months of triangulated data collection. Transcripts were analysed following Braun and Clarke's six stages, integrating both inductive and deductive approaches.

Validity was ensured through source triangulation, audit trails, reflexivity journaling, light member checking, and periodic saturation testing. Further analysis included interpretation of meaning, theoretical connectivity, conceptual modelling, and researcher discussions to ensure coding reliability, with the final report presenting narratives, participant quotations, and thematic mapping to support strategic recommendations.



Figure 1. Data Analysis Steps According

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis involving nine participants, consisting of three early childhood education leaders, four teachers, and two educational staff, the average work experience of the participants was six years. The majority (eighty per cent) had experienced work-related conflicts associated with internal issues such as idea competition, ostracism, or

psychological sabotage (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Table 1. List of Participants

No	Participant Code	Position	Years of Experience	Experienced CBS
1	R1	Head of Early Childhood Education Institution A	10 years	Yes
2	R2	Senior Teacher	8 years	Yes
3	R3	New Teacher	2 years	No
4	R4	Head of Early Childhood Education Institution B	4 years	Yes
5	R5	New Teacher	2 years	Yes
6	R6	Head of Early Childhood Education Institution C	8 years	Yes
7	R7	Senior Teacher	8 years	Yes
8	R8	Educational Staff	2 years	Yes
9	R9	Educational Staff	3 years	Yes

Through data analysis, four main themes emerged from the interviews, observations, and document studies: fear of domination, lack of collaborative space, the need for effective collaborative leadership, and a culture of appreciation and reflection that must be maintained within early childhood education institutions.

Table 2. Main Themes

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence
Fear of domination	6
Lack of collaborative space	5
Effective collaborative leadership	7
Culture of appreciation and reflection	8

1. Fear of Domination

One of the main barriers to building a positive work culture in early childhood education institutions is individuals' fear of domination and recognition. Six out of ten teachers explicitly stated that they often feel anxious when wanting to share ideas or innovations. This anxiety arises not only from a lack of self-confidence but also from negative social experiences, such as ostracism or ridicule when appearing more prominent than colleagues. One teacher even reported that an idea considered good was the subject of mockery, indicating social resistance to individual innovation, a manifestation of the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon. Some teachers are reluctant to share ideas for fear of criticism or being perceived as "showing off," suggesting that domination in early childhood education is not only structural but also a normative pressure to avoid standing out, thereby limiting individual innovation potential within the educational organisation.

Fear in the workplace can negatively impact individual performance. Fear is negatively associated with task performance and organisational citizenship behaviour, while it is positively associated with counterproductive behaviours. Additionally, excessive anxiety can lead to career regret, which further reduces productivity and job satisfaction (Pustovit et al., 2024; Aleassa, 2023; Sarfraz et al., 2022).

Social pressure, in the form of resistance to individual excellence, constitutes a serious obstacle to fostering a supportive work culture. The fear of standing out is not caused by

incapacity but by concern over social consequences, such as being avoided or negatively perceived by peers. This pattern reinforces CBS, which operates latently in teacher-to-teacher dynamics, where superficial harmony is prioritised over innovative drive. As a result, opportunities for productive collaboration and professional development in early childhood education are limited. This condition indicates that building a positive work culture in early childhood education requires leadership interventions that emphasise collaborative values and social support while reducing harmful competitive behaviour.

The psychological and emotional effects of fear are also significant. Fear can lead to emotional exhaustion, which predicts decreased performance. Additionally, the fear of missing out (FOMO) phenomenon affects work performance through pathways to burnout. Individual differences in fear responses influence productivity and job satisfaction (Saif et al., 2023; Fridchay and Reizer, 2022; Gusti et al., 2024).

This situation is exacerbated by the lack of institutional recognition systems for individual contributions. When recognition is not formally given, and teachers' ideas receive negative responses from peers, intrinsic motivation to innovate declines. Three participants reported choosing to keep their ideas to themselves or to present them only privately to the school principal. Open communication is hindered by a repressive social climate, thereby impeding innovation and collaboration. If this pattern continues, a passive culture will normalise the fear of contributing, obstruct educational transformation, and reduce the effectiveness of collaborative leadership. This emphasises the need for formal and nonformal strategies to encourage participation, appreciation, and teachers' courage to innovate. Moderating factors such as organisational support and psychological safety can mitigate the negative effects of fear. Perceived organisational support and psychological safety can enhance performance and work attitudes even when individuals experience anxiety related to threats or pandemics. The health context underscores the importance of these strategies to maintain worker performance (Malik et al., 2017; Baroun, 2025; Koçak et al., 2023).

2. Lack of Formal Collaborative Structure

The absence of formal spaces for idea sharing is a significant barrier to fostering a collaborative work culture in early childhood education institutions. Observations indicate that teacher discussions are often informal, undocumented, and unsystematic. Many communications occur during breaks or after teaching, so they rarely become part of a structured organisational learning process. As a result, teachers tend to work individually and maintain distance from each other. The fear of standing out and social resistance reinforces the Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) pattern, in which individual innovation is often met with ridicule or mockery from colleagues. Without formal forums that facilitate idea exchange, creative ideas struggle to develop, and collaboration remains sporadic.

This phenomenon demonstrates that social domination occurs not only structurally but also normatively, limiting teachers' professional development. The existence of formal spaces is crucial for providing legitimacy and managerial support for innovation and fostering a consistent culture of sharing. Formal collaboration between educational institutions enhances learning and skill development. University partnerships with research organisations and industry allow students to build diverse skills relevant to their careers. Furthermore, cross-location and cross-cultural collaboration provide students with real-world project experiences (Ismail, 2024; Zilora, 2018; Norris and Martin, 2021).



The absence of formal forums is not merely a technical issue; it directly undermines a supportive and empowered work ecosystem. Observational and interview data indicate that communication occurring only incidentally leads to stagnation in organisational learning processes. Teachers' experiences, reflections, and ideas are unevenly distributed, whereas existing discussion spaces tend to focus on administrative compliance rather than collaborative development. When individual contributions are not formally recognised, intrinsic motivation to innovate decreases, and teachers tend to keep ideas to themselves or share them only privately with the principal. This condition indicates that without institutional communication designs that support openness, strategic collaboration is difficult to achieve. Formal forums are necessary to facilitate communication, strengthen the legitimacy of ideas, and foster healthy and supportive interactions, thereby maximising teachers' potential as innovation agents in early childhood education management.

Various forms of collaboration include joint research and industry partnerships. Collaborative research allows knowledge exchange between universities and research organisations, while industry collaboration aligns academic training with workforce needs, including artificial intelligence and business analytics (Sharma and Kaushik, 2022; Kambhampati and Patel, 2025; Ikävalko et al., 2024).

The lack of collaborative structure also creates segmentation within work teams. Rather than building a learning community, teachers prefer to work independently and maintain distance, even in collective activities such as designing thematic lessons. Informal collaboration can be easily misinterpreted as domination, reinforcing resistance to new initiatives and creating distrust among teachers. This pattern has the potential to foster a passive culture where individual contributions and innovations are not valued. Establishing formal and inclusive discussion spaces is crucial for creating a healthy work culture. Through official forums, teachers' ideas can be shared, received, and collectively developed. This not only enhances collaboration and innovation but also strengthens team cohesion, supports collaborative leadership, and promotes more effective and sustainable early childhood education practices. Collaborative models include joint courses and Collaborative Articulation Programs (CAP). CAP programs, such as the 2+2 degree model between Chinese and Australian universities, aim to build workforce capacity. In the future, educational leadership and collaborative competence will be key to the success of sustainable partnerships between industry and higher education (Ng, 2020; Ahlström et al., 2025; Qiumeng et al., 2025).

3. Transformation through Collaborative Leadership

Early childhood education leaders who adopt participatory approaches and involve teachers in decision-making are more likely to create a more open work climate. One strategy implemented is the establishment of a Weekly Reflection Team, which enables teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, share ideas, and discuss challenges without fear of judgment. This forum is based on the principles of shared leadership, providing all team members with the opportunity to actively contribute to decision-making. As a result, prejudice among teachers decreased significantly, and team cohesion improved. This positive transformation demonstrates that collaborative leadership is not merely rhetorical; it requires consistency and regularity in its implementation. When school leaders actively

facilitate routine, safe, reflective spaces, teachers feel valued, are more willing to express ideas, and perceive colleagues as equal contributors rather than competitors, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive work culture.

The implementation of the Weekly Reflection Team also produces systemic effects on communication patterns in early childhood education institutions. The forum is not merely a discussion space but is designed with a clear workflow, documented outcomes, and concrete follow-ups, resulting in observable behavioural changes. Teachers who were previously passive and suspicious became more open to feedback and supportive of colleagues' ideas. The formal, scheduled structure neutralises social pressures that typically hinder innovation. Observation and interview data indicate that teachers actively share teaching strategies, discuss challenges, and collectively agree on solutions. This approach demonstrates that formal collaborative structures are crucial for transforming social dynamics and facilitating the shift from a competitive, individualistic culture to a more cooperative and innovative one.

Furthermore, the emergence of an appreciation culture serves as an important catalyst in building trust and team loyalty. Strategies implemented include monthly "best idea" awards and positive peer feedback within the reflection forum. These practices create a safe space for teachers to express creativity without fear of negative judgment. Teachers who were previously reserved now actively propose new activities and improve teaching methods because they feel their contributions are valued. This culture of appreciation fosters team solidarity and reduces prejudice, aligning with the concept of psychological safety, in which individuals feel safe to take interpersonal risks. Therefore, the combination of collaborative leadership and an appreciative culture establishes a supportive, innovative, and sustainable ecosystem for early childhood education work.

Collaborative leadership in early childhood education emphasises inclusive participation and the distribution of leadership roles among all educators, promoting shared responsibility and collective problem-solving. Practices such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC) have been shown to transform school leaders' mindsets about leadership, enhance collegiality, and promote collaborative learning among teachers (Vijayadevar et al., 2019). Collaborative leadership also requires strong interpersonal skills and a deep understanding of educational content, supporting mentoring, coaching, and the development of collaborative environments. In early childhood education contexts, school leaders must be adaptive, responsive, and sensitive to socio-cultural values, given that teachers often occupy dynamic and diverse roles. Systemic challenges, such as limited time and undervaluation of the profession, can hinder the development of collaborative leadership, necessitating strategies to create supportive leadership environments (Mollenkopf et al., 2020; Passmore et al., 2025; Page and Eadie, 2019).

Collaborative leadership offers multiple benefits for professional development and educational outcomes. School leaders who distribute leadership roles and engage in collaborative professional learning can more effectively manage curriculum reform and improve academic quality (Colmer et al., 2015). Research findings indicate that collaborative leadership practices, such as those implemented in the Child-Parent Centre (CPC) program, significantly enhance the language and literacy skills of preschool and kindergarten children (Reynolds et al., 2021; Temple et al., 2022). Additionally, schools that

support teamwork and collaborative leadership create more efficient educational environments and foster professional and personal development among staff, thereby providing healthier and more productive working conditions (Antonova et al., 2018). Thus, collaborative leadership is key to building an inclusive, supportive educational culture oriented toward improving the quality of early childhood education.

4. Appreciation Culture as a Means to Build Trust

A supportive work culture, such as practices involving positive feedback, monthly best-idea awards, and group reflection, has been shown to reduce conflict in early childhood education institutions. Teachers report feeling more valued and motivated, indicating that collaborative leadership does not eliminate formal structures but requires deliberate and transparent design. Successful school leaders not only act democratically but also possess managerial capabilities to design internal communication systems, develop collaborative forums, and monitor social dynamics. This demonstrates that collaboration does not emerge spontaneously; successful collaborative work cultures require strategic managerial engineering, where formal structures and clear processes provide the foundation for productive and inclusive teacher interactions, thereby promoting innovation, engagement, and sustainable team cohesion.

Changes in work culture in early childhood education require time, perseverance, and consistency. A primary case study institution showed that initial teacher trust was established within the first three months, whereas observable behavioural changes appeared after six months of implementing collaborative strategies. These findings highlight that long-term commitment is necessary to build effective learning organisations, especially in early childhood education, where social interactions and collective learning are still developing. Cultural transformation requires a gradual process involving continuous monitoring, routine reflection, and systematic follow-up. School leaders' consistency in facilitating reflection forums, providing recognition, and ensuring open communication is a key factor in internalising innovation, collaboration, and team trust among all organisational members.

Teachers' responses to collaborative leadership are influenced by work experience and age. Senior teachers tend to be more sceptical and cautious in expressing ideas, whereas younger teachers are more open and responsive to new systems. This indicates that organisational change strategies should consider individual characteristics within the team, including professional experience and preferences. A differential approach allows leadership interventions to be tailored to the diverse needs of teachers, minimising resistance to change. Moreover, inclusive strategies can enhance perceptions of fairness, ownership, and participation, thereby strengthening solidarity and team cohesion. Implementing differentiated strategies also facilitates a more equitable distribution of roles, allowing each teacher to contribute according to their capacity and readiness, thereby reinforcing the sustainability of the collaborative culture.

Structured collaborative strategies, including group reflection, best idea awards, and a culture of positive feedback, reduce tensions among teachers and enhance work motivation. Teachers perceive that their contributions are recognised publicly within the institutional context rather than merely through informal relationships. This transformation demonstrates that, with proper organisational design, the work climate can shift from competitive to

collaborative in a sustainable manner. These practices also enhance ownership of the institution's vision, strengthen social bonds among teachers, and support the collective achievement of educational goals. This underscores the importance of formal forums, monitoring, and follow-up to ensure that collaboration is not sporadic but becomes a systemic practice that strengthens innovation, team cohesion, and professional culture in early childhood education.

The Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon persists in early childhood education contexts, as evidenced by fear of sharing ideas, the scarcity of formal collaborative spaces, and resistance to change. This study demonstrates that collaborative leadership can mitigate CBS symptoms through interventions such as weekly reflection forums, idea awards, and teacher involvement in decision-making. Positive work culture is shaped not only by formal structures but also by communication patterns and collective values that leaders and staff create. Open, supportive, and consistent early childhood education leaders serve as effective agents of cultural change. Theoretically, this study extends the application of psychological safety and distributed leadership concepts (Edmondson and Mortensen, 2021; Nguyen, 2021) in early childhood education, while practically, it provides a reference for educational authorities to design collaborative leadership capacity-building modules, thereby minimising CBS symptoms through strengthened trust and cooperative culture.

D. CONCLUSION

The Crabs in a Barrel Syndrome (CBS) phenomenon within early childhood education institutions is a social manifestation arising from the absence of psychologically safe spaces, a lack of collaborative culture, and weak participatory leadership structures. When teachers feel constrained in sharing ideas or undermine one another, the work climate becomes unproductive and may hinder the quality of children's learning. The implementation of collaborative leadership that actively involves teachers in decision-making, provides reflective spaces, and delivers open appreciation has proven effective in fostering positive practices and significantly reducing CBS symptoms. Conceptually, this study extends psychological safety and shared leadership theories to the context of early childhood education in Indonesia. In practice, the findings indicate that systematic yet straightforward leadership interventions can cultivate a healthier, more ethical work culture that supports teachers' professional growth. Therefore, these findings can serve as a foundation for developing national and local policies and programs to improve the quality of early childhood education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- Author 1 : Designed the research topic, formulated the research problem, conducted field observations and interviews, and drafted the introduction and research objectives.
- Author 2 : Reviewed the literature, developed the theoretical framework, designed the research instruments, and assisted in data validation through accurate triangulation techniques.
- Author 3 : Conducted qualitative data analysis, prepared the results and discussion, and systematically linked findings to relevant theories.
- Author 4 : Drafted the conclusion, revised the manuscript, edited the language, and ensured the manuscript's format and structure met academic standards.
- Author 5 : Conducted a final review of the manuscript, ensured adherence to formatting guidelines, and managed correspondence.

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