

Implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato : A Study of the Experiences of Education Students

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Abstract: This study explores the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program as part of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, focusing on the experiences of education students at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato, a rural secondary school in North Nias, Indonesia. The problem addressed in this study is the limited empirical documentation of MBKM implementation in remote educational settings with constrained infrastructure and unique pedagogical cultures. The primary objective is to investigate how teaching assistance contributes to the development of pedagogical, social, and adaptive competencies among student-teachers. A qualitative descriptive case study approach was applied, involving participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings indicate that the program significantly enhances students' pedagogical skills, including lesson planning, classroom management, and reflective teaching. Collaboration with mentor teachers and contextual adaptation emerged as crucial factors in successful implementation. The program also had a positive impact on student engagement in classrooms. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the role of experiential learning in bridging theory and practice within teacher education, particularly in underrepresented rural contexts. It also offers recommendations for policy design and curriculum development in teacher training programs. The study concludes that meaningful field experiences, supported by collaborative mentorship and reflective practice, are key to producing competent and adaptive future educators.

Keywords: Teaching Assistance Program, Experiential Learning, Rural Education, Teacher Competency, MBKM Policy

1. Introduction

The quality of education is a key determinant in creating superior, adaptive, and competitive human resources amidst global disruption marked by technological acceleration, social change, and the complexity of future challenges. In the Indonesian context, the transformation of higher education is directed at strengthening the capacity of graduates to meet the challenges of a dynamic workforce, while simultaneously addressing structural problems that persist in the primary and secondary education sectors, such as disparities in teacher quality, unequal access, and limited innovation in the learning process. One strategic effort implemented by the government through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) is the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program (PAM), an integral part of the Independent Learning and Independent Campus (MBKM) policy. This program aims to strengthen the competency of education students through direct involvement in the teaching and learning process in primary and secondary education units.

This research focuses on the implementation of PAM at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato, an educational institution in a rural area of Nias Regency, North Sumatra. This context is important because, to date, there have been few studies specifically examining the implementation of the MBKM program in challenging geographic contexts, such as island regions, remote areas, or areas with limited educational infrastructure. Most of the available literature focuses on implementation in urban areas or leading schools with relatively established

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learning ecosystems. Therefore, this study explicitly positions the rural context as the primary analytical lens to understand the dynamics of program implementation and its influence on the development of professional competencies in student teachers.

Various approaches have been used to evaluate field-based practice programs in higher education. The experiential learning approach, developed by Kolb (1984) and based on Dewey's (1938) constructivist theory, states that meaningful learning is not solely achieved through narrow cognitive activity, but rather through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in the context of teacher education (Suprihatiningrum, 2014; Nursalim & Fauziah, 2020), where students involved in teaching practice tend to have higher levels of professional readiness and self-confidence than those who only receive theoretical learning on campus. The advantage of this approach is the process of personal transformation through social interactions in the field; while its weaknesses lie in its dependence on the quality of guidance from school partners and the lack of standardization of experiences between individuals.

The research problem in this study stems from the gap between macro policies of higher education that emphasize experiential learning and the reality in the field, where students face various challenges: limited facilities and infrastructure, variations in pedagogical approaches between teachers, and limited time in actualizing student-oriented learning. This study raises key questions: How are the dynamics of the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato? To what extent is this program able to strengthen the pedagogical, social, and professional competencies of prospective teacher students?

To answer these questions, a qualitative descriptive approach was used, adopting a single case study method (Yin, 2014) with triangulation of data collection techniques in the form of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. This approach was deemed most relevant for exploring the subjective meaning of student experiences and understanding the complexity of interactions that occur between students, teachers, and students during the assistance process. This study methodologically follows the thematic analysis principles recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), namely through the stages of coding, categorization, and inductive drawing of main themes.

The solution or approach proposed in this study is holistic: it not only examines program implementation from an administrative perspective, but also analyzes how social interactions, school organizational structures, and teacher guidance patterns influence the quality of students' learning experiences. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to significantly contribute to the development of teacher education models based on contextual interactions and reflective practice. Furthermore, this approach also enriches perspectives in the development of higher education policy, particularly in designing programs that respond to the real needs of schools in remote areas.

The main contributions of this article include: (1) providing an empirical understanding of the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program in a rural context that has not been widely explored; (2) identifying dimensions of students' experiences in the role of teaching assistants, including challenges, adaptation strategies, and the formation of professional identity; (3) offering a conceptual model based on field findings that can be used as a reference in evaluating MBKM policies in the field of education; and (4) strengthening the argument about the need to reorient the higher education curriculum to be more contextual, reflective, and based on authentic experiences in the world of work.

This paper is structured systematically. The second section explains the research design and methods, including the location context, data collection techniques, and the thematic analysis procedures used. The third section presents the research results and a discussion, highlighting the main themes emerging from the empirical data, linked to theory and previous studies. The fourth section presents the conclusions and implications of the research, both for student competency development, strengthening campus-school collaboration, and formulating relevant future educational policies.

Through this integrative and field-based approach, it is hoped that this research can provide academic and practical contributions to the discourse on practice-based higher education transformation, as well as broaden understanding of how prospective teachers experience, interpret, and navigate the complexities of the world of education directly.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

In higher education, the integration of pedagogical theory and field practice has become a primary focus in teacher education curriculum development in various countries. Teaching assistantship programs, as part of experiential-based education, are a response to the increasingly complex and dynamic needs of the educational landscape. Previous studies have shown that direct classroom experience has positive implications for the formation of teachers' professional identities, strengthening pedagogical competencies, and developing the reflective capacities of education students (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). However, the implementation of such programs in underdeveloped or remote areas has been relatively rarely studied in depth.

Experience-Based Education and the Experiential Learning Model

The experiential learning model developed by Kolb (1984) emphasizes the importance of a four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, observational reflection, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This theory has been widely adopted in the design of field practice programs for prospective teachers. In the Indonesian context, several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of this approach in strengthening the readiness of education students to face real-life classroom dynamics (Suprihatiningrum, 2014; Suryana, 2019). However, most studies still focus on urban contexts or reference schools with adequate infrastructure. Few studies have specifically examined how this experiential learning cycle occurs in schools with limited human resources and infrastructure.

Implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program and Curriculum Transformation

A study by Nursalim and Fauziah (2020) showed that the involvement of education students in a teaching assistantship program positively impacted communication skills, classroom management, and the development of lesson plans responsive to student needs. Similar findings were also presented by Putra and Handayani (2022), who observed that the MBKM program was able to bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially for final-semester students. However, some of these studies did not specifically address how students' experiences were shaped by the geographic, social, and cultural context of the schools where they served as assistantships.

In comparison, an international study by Ronfeldt et al. (2013) emphasized the importance of the quality of placement schools in determining the success of prospective teachers' field practicums. Schools with collaborative climates, strong pedagogical leadership, and reflective cultures tend to provide more meaningful assistance experiences. Therefore, contextualizing the results of international studies within the heterogeneous realities of Indonesian education is crucial to enrich academic discourse in this field.

Implementation Challenges in Rural Areas

The literature also highlights the challenges of implementing fieldwork in remote areas. Research by Anderson and Stillman (2011) shows that students placed in schools with high challenges (e.g., limited teacher resources, low parental involvement, or high social inequality) tend to experience greater adaptation burdens, but also exhibit greater problem-solving skills and professional resilience. Unfortunately, in Indonesia, the site-based approach has not yet fully become an analytical variable in studies of teaching assistantship implementation.

Meanwhile, Zamroni's (2020) study found that MBKM programs tend to operate in a normative and administrative manner in many institutions, without systematic documentation of student reflection processes or feedback mechanisms from schools. Therefore, research focused on rural areas, such as Bawolato, would provide important empirical contributions to enriching the study of the diversity of MBKM practices.

Contribution of This Study

From various previous studies, it can be concluded that there is a significant research gap in the following areas: (1) limited studies related to the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program in challenging geographic and socio-cultural contexts; (2) the lack of a complete picture of how students experience and navigate the complexity of learning in a rural context; and (3) the lack of a conceptual model based on field data that is able to explain the relationship between assistance experience, quality of guidance, and the development of professional competencies.

Therefore, this study takes a critical stance to fill this gap by integrating an experiential learning approach into an empirical analytical framework that draws on the experiences of

students at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato. Through data triangulation and thematic analysis, this research is expected to provide new contributions to the development of context-adaptive teacher education policy designs and encourage the formation of collaborative learning ecosystems between campuses and schools across Indonesia, including underdeveloped areas.

3. Proposed Method

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method, focusing on the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program by education students at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato. This method was chosen based on the need to explore phenomena in depth in a natural and complex context, particularly related to students' learning experiences in the field. Qualitative studies allow researchers to understand the social dynamics, interactions, and adaptation processes of students in real-life learning practices in a reflective and contextual manner.

Methodology Stages

The methodological steps in this research are designed in several main phases as follows:

1. *Identify the Context and Subject of Research*

The researchers first identified a partner school (SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato) as the study location. The subjects were education students participating in the Teaching Assistance Program at the school, as well as supervising teachers and students as supporting staff.

2. *Data Collection*

Data collection techniques used include:

- Participatory observation: carried out to directly observe student involvement in the teaching and learning process.
- In-depth interviews: conducted in a semi-structured manner with students, supervising teachers, and students to explore their perceptions and experiences.
- Documentation: in the form of daily activity notes, activity photos, student reports, and MBKM program documents.

3. *Validation and Triangulation*

The data obtained was validated using source and method triangulation techniques to ensure the validity of the information from various perspectives.

4. *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed qualitatively using a thematic analysis approach. The steps included:

- Data reduction (transcripts, notes, documentation)
- Initial coding
- Data categorization by topic
- Main theme withdrawal
- Reflection and interpretation of meaning

Research Procedure Flowchart

Below is a flowchart of the research procedure to make it easier to understand the research work process.

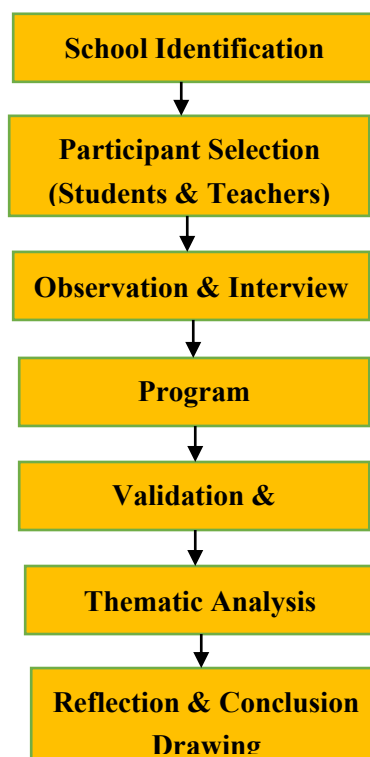


Figure 1. *Research Procedure Flowchart*

Methodological Justification

The selection of a qualitative approach with a case study method is highly appropriate in this context because it allows researchers to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the social and pedagogical context of program implementation. Furthermore, a thematic approach to data analysis supports the exploration of emergent and unstructured insights, in line with the spirit of the MBKM policy, which emphasizes autonomous, reflective, and reality-based learning. This methodology can also be replicated or further developed in the form of mixed-methods measurements, if researchers wish to incorporate quantitative data such as perception measurements, competency rubrics, or score-based learning indicators at a later stage.

4. Results and Discussion

This research yields several important findings related to the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program (PAM) at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato. The results are presented based on a thematic analysis of data collected through field observations, in-depth interviews with student participants and supervising teachers, and documentation of learning activities.

Strengthening Students' Pedagogical Competence

One of the key findings was a significant improvement in the pedagogical competence of the program's students. They demonstrated improved abilities in developing lesson plans (RPP), conducting formative assessments, and managing classroom dynamics with a more humanistic approach. In interviews, the majority of students stated that they learned not only from successes but also from mistakes in hands-on practice. This reflects the reflective learning process at the heart of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

"I learned a lot from my first teaching session. It turns out that classroom theory is very different from real-world situations. I had to change my approach to get students more enthusiastic," said one student participant.

Collaboration with Supervising Teachers

The interaction between students and their mentors is a crucial factor in the program's effectiveness. At this school, collaboration was found to take two forms: formal mentoring and peer collaboration. In the mentoring context, teachers provide regular feedback, evaluate students' learning plans, and provide space for post-lesson discussions. However, not all teachers provide intensive mentoring. Students who receive extensive mentoring tend to feel more confident and adapt more quickly.

Table 1 below shows students' perceptions of the role of the supervising teacher:

Table 1. Student Perceptions of the Role of Supervisors

Guidance Aspects	Very Supportive	Quite Supportive	Less Supportive
Evaluation of Lesson Plans and Syllabus	68%	22%	10%
Class Observation	75%	20%	5%
Post-Teaching Feedback	60%	30%	10%
Emotional Support	55%	35%	10%

Source: Researcher's Process, 2025

From the table above, it can be seen that 60–75% of students feel they receive optimal support from teachers, although there is still room for improvement in the aspects of emotional support and in-depth reflection.

Implementation Challenges in Rural Contexts

Students face a number of unique challenges at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato, which differ from schools in urban areas. These challenges include:

- Limited learning facilities and media, which forces students to innovate using whatever tools are available;
- The heterogeneous character of students, especially in terms of basic abilities and learning motivation;
- Differences in pedagogical culture, where students who are accustomed to modern strategies on campus have to adapt to conventional methods at school.

However, these challenges actually develop students' resilience and pedagogical flexibility. This supports Anderson and Stillman's (2011) study that found that experience in high-risk contexts can enhance prospective teachers' adaptive capacity.

Impact of the Program on Students and Schools

In addition to students, this program also had a positive impact on classroom dynamics. Students became more enthusiastic about lessons due to the variety of teaching methods and the close age proximity to the students. Teachers reported that the presence of students helped lighten their workload, especially in managing large classes.

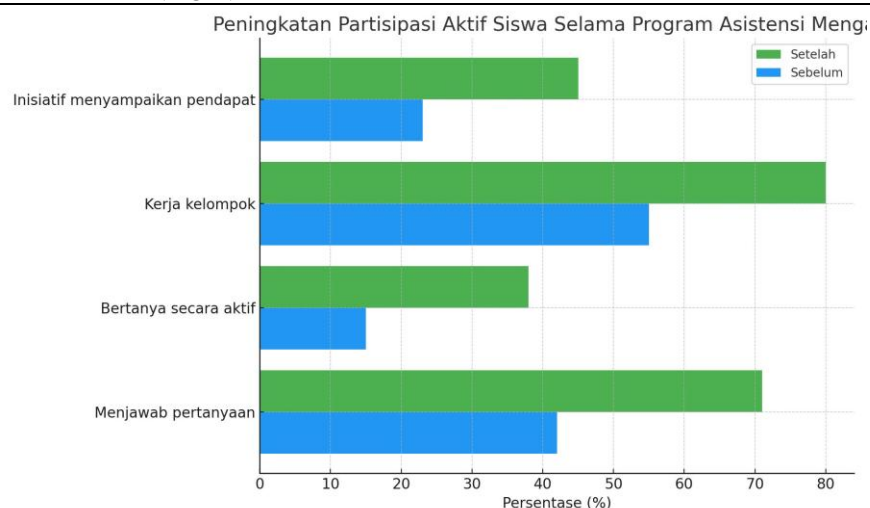


Figure 1. Increasing Student Active Participation During the Teaching Assistance Program

A 20–30% increase in student participation across multiple indicators indicates that the program provides a more interactive and motivating learning experience.

4.5. Integration of Theory and Practice

The findings of this study confirm that PAM serves as a tangible bridge between pedagogical theory taught on campus and real-world classroom needs. Students explicitly stated that this experience broadened their perspectives on the role of teachers, encompassing not only knowledge transfer but also emotional management, interpersonal communication, and adapting to the dynamics of students' social environments.

As Zeichner (2010) defined it, effective teacher education is one that enables students to construct knowledge from experience and critically reflect on their practice. This study demonstrates that this has occurred in the research context, with students as active actors who not only carry out instructions but also reformulate their strategies independently based on classroom realities.

5. Comparison

To strengthen the validity and relevance of the research findings, it is important to compare the results of this study with similar studies in both local and global contexts. The comparison focused on three main aspects: the implementation context, the methodological approach, and the outcomes related to the development of prospective teacher competencies.

Implementation Context

Most previous research on teaching assistance practices has been conducted in urban contexts with relatively adequate educational infrastructure. For example, a study by Putra and Handayani (2022), which evaluated the MBKM program at a leading school in a large city, showed that students had easy access to learning media and received intensive mentoring from their supervising teachers. This contrasts significantly with the findings at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato, where students faced limited facilities, a lack of access to digital learning technology, and an imbalance in the number of teachers.

This difference in context demonstrates that this research's contribution lies in exploring the dynamics of assistance programs in rural contexts, which have been underrepresented in both national and international literature. This aligns with the findings of Anderson and Stillman (2011) who emphasized the importance of social and geographic context in influencing the effectiveness of education students' fieldwork.

Methodological Approach

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for in-depth exploration of students' experiences in a contextualized manner. This approach differs from the survey-based quantitative methods often used in previous studies (e.g., Nugroho, 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2023), which focus more on measuring participants' perceptions and satisfaction levels.

With a more reflective and narrative approach, this research not only produces descriptive data but also conceptual insights into how students develop pedagogical competencies in

challenging real-world settings. Thus, the methodological contribution of this research is the presentation of a context-rich empirical narrative that can be used to develop educational policies based on real-world practices (policy from the field).

Contribution to Student Competency Development

Table 2 below presents a comparison between the results of this study and three similar studies previously published. The comparison focuses on student competency outcomes and their engagement in classroom dynamics.

Table 2. Comparison with Related Studies

Study / Source	Location Context	Methodology	Key Results
Putra & Handayani (2022)	Urban School (Jakarta)	Quantitative	Improvement of theoretical pedagogical knowledge
Nursalim & Fauziah (2020)	Semi-urban school	Mix	Students are active as co-teachers
Rahmawati et al. (2023)	College only	Online survey	Positive perception of MBKM policy
This research	Rural, remote	Qualitative narrative	Real strengthening of pedagogical, social, and adaptive competencies

Source: Researcher's Process, 2025

The table above demonstrates the uniqueness of this study in terms of context and depth of reflection on student experiences. While other studies have focused more on administrative perceptions and accomplishments, this study offers empirical data from real-world classroom practice with limited resources.

6. Conclusions

This study has provided an in-depth description of the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program (PAM) at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato and the experiences of the education students involved. Key findings indicate that the program significantly contributes to strengthening students' pedagogical, social, and adaptive competencies, particularly in the context of rural education, which presents its own challenges. Students are able to practically internalize learning concepts through direct classroom engagement, reflecting the effectiveness of the experiential learning approach in building the professional readiness of prospective educators.

A synthesis of the findings demonstrates a strong link between students' field experiences and the program's initial goal, which is to bridge the gap between campus theory and classroom learning practices. The program's success is determined by factors such as the quality of teacher guidance, the availability of supporting resources, and the students' ability to adapt teaching strategies to real-world classroom conditions. The research also confirms that constructive social interactions and collaboration between students, teachers, and students are key components in achieving positive outcomes.

In terms of scientific contribution, this research broadens understanding of how higher education policies such as MBKM can be effectively implemented in remote areas. Thus, it provides important empirical evidence that the success of higher education transformation depends not only on policies at the central level but also on the capacity of local institutions and actors to adapt these policies into practice. Practically, the results of this research can serve as a reference for teacher education curriculum developers and teaching assistantship program designers in similar settings.

However, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the scope of the study was limited to a single partner school in a rural area, so generalization of the results should be done with caution. Second, the relatively short duration of the assistance program may have impacted the depth of students' experiences in navigating more complex learning cycles. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the program's location and duration, as well as incorporate a mixed-methods approach, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the long-term impact of the assistance program on the professional development of future teachers.

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