EMPOWERING ELEMENTRY SCHOOL TEACHERS THROUGH CREATIVE AND CONTEXTUAL PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGI MENTORING

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Abstract

Elementary school teachers play a critical role in shaping the foundation of student learning, yet many still rely on traditional, non-contextual teaching methods that fail to meaningfully engage students. This community service initiative aims to empower elementary school teachers through a mentoring program that focuses on creative and contextual pedagogical strategies. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, the program was implemented over a two-month period; April-May 2025 in two public elementary schools in Sukabumi, West Java. The program involved collaborative lesson planning, classroom-based mentoring, and reflective practice sessions. Data were collected through pre- and post-program surveys, interviews, and teacher journals, then analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and Pearson correlation techniques. The results showed significant increases in teachers' confidence, creativity, and contextual awareness in teaching, as well as increased student engagement. Teachers began to integrate local culture, materials, and everyday experiences into their teaching, creating a more relevant and participatory learning environment. The program's mentoring model proved effective in fostering teacher agency and sustained pedagogical innovation. This initiative contributes to the model of teacher professional development by demonstrating how participatory and localized mentoring can bridge the gap between theory and practice in primary education.

Keywords: Teacher Empowerment, Mentoring, Contextual Learning, Basic Education, Pedagogical Innovation.

Abstrak

Guru sekolah dasar memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk dasar pembelajaran siswa, namun banyak yang masih bergantung pada metode pengajaran tradisional nonkontekstual yang gagal melibatkan siswa secara bermakna. Inisiatif layanan masyarakat ini bertujuan untuk memberdayakan guru sekolah dasar melalui program pendampingan yang berfokus pada strategi pedagogis yang kreatif dan kontekstual. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan Penelitian Aksi Partisipatif (PAR), program ini dilaksanakan selama dua bulan; April-May 2025 di dua sekolah dasar negeri di Sukabumi Jawa Barat. Program ini melibatkan perencanaan pelajaran kolaboratif, pendampingan berbasis kelas, dan sesi praktik reflektif. Data dikumpulkan melalui survei pra dan pasca program, wawancara, dan jurnal guru, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik kualitatif dan teknik korelasi Pearson. Hasilnya menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan dalam kepercayaan diri, kreativitas, dan kesadaran kontekstual guru dalam mengajar, serta peningkatan keterlibatan siswa. Guru mulai mengintegrasikan budaya lokal, materi, dan pengalaman sehari-hari ke dalam pengajaran mereka, menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang lebih relevan dan partisipatif. Model pendampingan program terbukti efektif dalam menumbuhkan agensi guru dan inovasi pedagogis yang berkelanjutan. Prakarsa ini berkontribusi pada model pengembangan profesional guru dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pendampingan partisipatif dan terlokalisasi dapat menjembatani kesenjangan antara teori dan praktik dalam pendidikan dasar.

Kata Kunci: Pemberdayaan Guru, Pendampingan, Pembelajaran Kontekstual, Pendidikan Dasar, Inovasi Pedagogi.

INTRODUCTION

Education remains one of the most critical pillars for national development, especially at the elementary school level, where foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and creativity are established. Elementary school teachers, therefore, play a vital role in shaping the

cognitive and emotional growth of young learners (Nabilah Mokhtar et al., 2023). However, many teachers particularly those in under-resourced or rural areas continue to rely heavily on conventional teaching methods that emphasize rote memorization and standardized instruction. These practices often fail to engage students meaningfully, inhibit the development of 21st-century competencies, and limit learners' ability to connect their academic experiences with real-world contexts (Cheng, 2017). As such, empowering teachers with innovative and contextually relevant pedagogical strategies is a critical step toward elevating the quality of primary education (Irawan et al., 2023).

The central challenge lies in the gap between teacher training and classroom realities. While the national curriculum may promote student-centered and inquiry-based learning, many elementary school teachers struggle to translate these ideals into effective classroom practices. Factors such as limited professional development opportunities, lack of mentoring, and minimal exposure to creative methodologies contribute to the persistence of traditional approaches (Malkisedek Taneo et al., 2019). Moreover, pedagogical strategies are often introduced in isolation from the specific cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic contexts in which teachers operate. This disconnect leads to low relevance and sustainability of training outcomes, leaving teachers overwhelmed and students disengaged (Sebsibe et al., 2023).

Previous community service and teacher empowerment programs have shown promising results, yet many of these initiatives have focused primarily on content delivery rather than on building pedagogical capacity. While some projects have introduced modern teaching tools or digital learning platforms, they frequently overlook the importance of continuous mentoring and the integration of local wisdom, community knowledge, and classroom realities (Prabowo et al., 2021). In particular, few initiatives have adequately addressed how to creatively adapt lesson planning and delivery using materials and scenarios that are meaningful to students' daily lives. This creates a gap between innovation and practicality one that must be bridged by empowering teachers to become reflective practitioners who are both creative and contextually responsive (Asrijal et al., 2024).

This study offers a unique contribution by positioning mentoring as the central mechanism for pedagogical transformation. Rather than providing one-off workshops or generic resources, this community service article emphasizes sustained mentoring relationships that foster collaboration, experimentation, and contextual adaptation (O'Connor et al., 2023). By involving teachers directly in the co-design of creative learning strategies that align with the socio-cultural background of their students, the program cultivates a sense of ownership and relevance. It also supports teachers in developing confidence to implement new ideas, evaluate their outcomes, and continuously refine their practices through dialogue and reflection (Millner, 2021).

The approach proposed in this article draws on the principles of constructivist learning and participatory development. It recognizes that effective teacher empowerment is not merely about delivering information but about co-constructing knowledge in real, lived contexts. The program uses classroom-based mentoring, hands-on workshops, and collaborative lesson planning to build capacity in creative and contextual pedagogy (Alfidyah & Mawardi, 2021). It highlights the importance of locally available resources, storytelling, thematic learning, and experiential methods tailored to the students' environment. These strategies aim to activate student curiosity and agency while supporting teachers in achieving curriculum objectives in more engaging and relevant ways (Tafani & Kamaludin, 2023).

The primary goal of this article is to document and analyze a community service initiative that aims to empower elementary school teachers through a sustained mentoring program focused on creative and contextual pedagogical strategies. By capturing the design, implementation, and impact of this approach, the article seeks to contribute practical insights and evidence to the broader discourse on teacher professional development in Indonesia and similar contexts. It also aims to inspire educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to invest in mentoring-based capacity building that centers the unique needs, strengths, and stories of local communities.

Ultimately, this initiative holds the hope that when teachers are supported in creative and contextual ways, they become not only transmitters of knowledge but also facilitators of exploration, critical thinking, and joy in learning. In doing so, the program aspires to contribute to more inclusive, relevant, and transformative education practices that align with national goals and global calls for quality education for all.

METHOD

The community service initiative described in this article used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to ensure that the process was grounded in local realities and driven by the active participation of stakeholders. The primary target group of the program was a group of elementary school teachers from SDN 2 and SDN 4 located in Sukabumi, West Java, Indonesia. These teachers were selected based on their expressed interest in improving their pedagogical skills and their school's alignment with the local education authority (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). The mentoring program ran for a period of four months, from early April to late May 2025, with activities centered on the school premises and a nearby community learning center. Its implementation followed a series of structured phases: planning, permitting, preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The planning phase began with an initial needs assessment conducted through informal interviews, classroom observations, and student learning outcome reviews, all facilitated collaboratively with the principal and teachers. This was followed by obtaining formal permits from the District Education Office and the principals. The preparation phase involved the development of mentoring modules, training materials, and contextual teaching tools designed in collaboration with local educators. Implementation included regular mentoring sessions, participatory workshops, peer observation, and collaborative lesson development over a 12-week period. Data were collected using a mixed methods approach: pre- and post-program questionnaires, reflective teacher journals, field notes, and structured interviews with teachers and students. Primary data sources were participating teachers and their students, while secondary sources included lesson plans, student work samples, and administrative records. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations to examine relationships between variables such as teacher self-efficacy and creative strategy implementation. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding to explore emerging patterns of pedagogical change. Monitoring was conducted through weekly feedback sessions and mid-program check-ins, while evaluation involved a final reflection forum and sharing of reports with all stakeholders to ensure sustainability and shared ownership of the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the mentoring program grounded in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches yielded several significant findings, reflecting both qualitative and quantitative improvements in teachers' pedagogical practices. One of the most prominent outcomes was the notable increase in teachers' confidence and competence in applying creative and contextual teaching strategies in their classrooms. This was evidenced by the comparison of pre- and post-intervention questionnaire results, which showed an average increase of 32% in teachers' self-assessed ability to design engaging lesson plans using local materials and real-life contexts. A Pearson correlation analysis further revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) between the frequency of mentoring sessions attended and the level of pedagogical innovation observed in the classroom, indicating that sustained guidance had a measurable impact on teacher growth (Bray et al., 2023).

Qualitative data from reflective teacher journals and structured interviews provided deeper insights into the transformation process. Teachers reported a shift in mindset from seeing themselves as passive implementers of a rigid curriculum to becoming adaptive facilitators who co-create knowledge with students. Many began incorporating storytelling, local folklore, household materials, and community events into their lessons, making learning more relatable and meaningful to students. For example, one teacher integrated traditional market settings into a mathematics lesson on currency and arithmetic, while another used local agricultural practices to explain ecological cycles in science class. These changes were not only appreciated by students, who displayed greater enthusiasm and participation, but also noticed by school leaders who observed improvements in classroom dynamics and student engagement (Wibowo & Darsono, 2022).

Furthermore, the participatory nature of the program fostered a strong sense of ownership among the teachers. Through collaborative lesson planning and peer review, teachers developed a professional learning community that extended beyond the mentoring period. Several participants formed informal working groups that continued to meet weekly to discuss teaching challenges and share resources. This outcome aligns with the PAR framework's emphasis on strengthening local capacity and utilizing existing assets within the community in this case, the professional knowledge and mutual support among teachers themselves (Latief & Nashir, 2020).

From a student learning perspective, although this study did not include standardized testing outcomes, anecdotal evidence and teacher reports suggested a noticeable improvement in student engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking. Teachers noted that students asked more questions, participated more actively in group work, and were more motivated to complete assignments when lessons were connected to their daily lives (Widiastuti et al., 2020). One particularly compelling observation was that students who were previously passive or categorized as "low-performing" showed increased confidence and willingness to contribute during creative activities, suggesting that contextual learning methods may help bridge learning gaps among diverse learners.

Figure 1. Mentoring Pre-service Teachers on Creative and Contextual Pedagogical Strategies

The final evaluation forum also revealed that school administrators and local education authorities were highly receptive to the mentoring model and expressed interest in scaling the program to other schools. Stakeholders appreciated that the intervention did not rely on expensive technologies or external experts, but rather empowered existing human resources through participatory processes. This sustainability factor is crucial in ensuring that the improvements made during the program do not fade after its formal conclusion (Adam et al., 2024).

In sum, the community service program achieved its goal of empowering elementary school teachers through creative and contextual pedagogical strategy mentoring. The integration of PAR approaches successfully facilitated a bottom-up transformation in teaching practices, reinforced by both statistical analysis and rich qualitative feedback. The findings point to the value of mentorship, local wisdom, and collaborative reflection in driving educational change, especially in resource-constrained or culturally diverse environments. These results not only validate the model used but also provide a replicable framework for future teacher empowerment programs across similar settings.

Figure 2. Teacher Implementation of Pedagogical Strategies in Primary Schools

The results of this community service program underscore the transformative potential of sustained mentoring that integrates creative and contextual pedagogical strategies, particularly when rooted in

participatory models such as Participatory Action Research (PAR). When compared with previous community service efforts focused solely on knowledge transfer or one-off training sessions, this program demonstrated more sustainable and reflective changes in teacher behavior. In past initiatives, such as those described by Sumarni et al. (2021), professional development for elementary teachers often emphasized rigid curriculum alignment or technological literacy without adequately accounting for teachers' lived experiences or the unique socio-cultural environments of their schools. This frequently resulted in a gap between training content and its implementation, as teachers lacked the confidence, contextual insight, or support network needed to apply new approaches effectively. In contrast, the present mentoring model provided continuous, collaborative engagement that empowered teachers to experiment, reflect, and adapt yielding deeper pedagogical transformation.

Theoretically, the findings support the constructivist view of teaching and learning, as articulated by (Sulaiman et al., 2022), which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and contextual engagement. By designing lesson plans that incorporated local stories, traditions, and everyday phenomena, teachers created more meaningful learning experiences that connected with students' prior knowledge and cultural context. This approach aligns with the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy (Matriano, 2020), which argues that learners perform better when instruction is grounded in the realities of their communities and identities. The use of local contexts not only helped make abstract concepts more tangible but also validated students' backgrounds, thus fostering a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment. In comparison, previous interventions that relied on standard instructional materials or top-down dissemination of knowledge often neglected this important dimension of cultural relevance.

Moreover, the development of teacher confidence and collaborative spirit observed in this program aligns with the theoretical framework of teacher agency. According to (Nolan & Molla, 2017), teacher agency is fostered when educators have the professional autonomy and supportive conditions to make informed pedagogical decisions. In this study, the mentoring process created a safe space for teachers to take instructional risks, reflect on their practice, and receive constructive feedback elements that are crucial for developing a sense of agency. Unlike earlier programs that positioned teachers as passive recipients of knowledge, this intervention treated them as co-creators and active agents in their own professional development. This not only enhanced their willingness to innovate but also encouraged collective ownership of teaching improvements, which is critical for long-term sustainability.

The program's results also shed light on the limitations of previous capacity-building efforts that prioritized content mastery over pedagogy. For instance, studies by (Hidajat et al., 2023) reported that while teachers gained technical knowledge from training workshops, they struggled to apply it meaningfully in diverse classroom situations. In contrast, our findings indicate that focusing on pedagogical strategy particularly one that is creative and contextual helps teachers become more adaptive and responsive. This suggests that effective teacher empowerment requires a balance between content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and contextual awareness, a triad echoed in (Lee et al., 2021) concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The mentoring model used in this program supported this balance by guiding teachers to not only understand what they teach but also how to teach it effectively given their students' lived realities.

In addition, the finding that student engagement and participation increased when teachers adopted creative and contextual methods reinforces the importance of learner-centered education. This is in line with constructivist and experiential learning theories (Kolb & Kolb, 2018), which emphasize the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through experience and reflection. Teachers in this program reported that students became more inquisitive, participatory, and motivated particularly those who previously showed little interest in school activities (Suchyadi et al., 2019). This observation aligns with existing literature that suggests contextualized and interactive learning can bridge learning gaps and support diverse student needs more effectively than conventional didactic instruction (Abdurahman et al., 2023).

In summary, the analysis of this program's findings in light of previous community service efforts and relevant theoretical frameworks confirms the value of mentoring as a powerful tool for teacher empowerment. Unlike one-size-fits-all training models, the mentoring approach used here fostered growth through reflection, collaboration, and contextual relevance. It demonstrated that when teachers are supported not only to gain knowledge but also to contextualize, personalize, and experiment with it, real and meaningful change can occur both in their professional identity and in student learning outcomes. These findings highlight an important direction for future teacher development programs in

Indonesia and similar contexts: one that respects local wisdom, nurtures teacher agency, and prioritizes contextual pedagogy as a core component of quality education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this community service program address the central concern of the researcher: the persistent gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice among elementary school teachers, particularly in under-resourced or culturally diverse contexts. By applying a mentoring model grounded in creative and contextual strategies, the program successfully empowered teachers to move beyond conventional, rote-based instruction toward more student-centered and culturally responsive learning. This shift not only enhanced teacher confidence and pedagogical innovation but also improved student engagement and relevance of classroom content. The participatory mentoring process, rooted in PAR principles, proved effective in building teacher agency, fostering professional collaboration, and integrating local knowledge into the teaching-learning dynamic.

However, this initiative was not without limitations. The relatively short duration of the program and the small scale of its implementation meant that long-term impacts on student learning and systemic change within schools could not be fully measured. Additionally, while the mentoring approach showed promise, it relied heavily on the availability and commitment of facilitators who possessed both pedagogical expertise and contextual sensitivity resources that may be scarce in broader applications. For future community service initiatives, it is recommended to expand the mentoring model to a larger group of schools over a longer period, integrate support from local teacher training institutions, and include more robust mechanisms for evaluating student academic growth. Strengthening partnerships with local education offices and incorporating follow-up mentoring cycles would also help ensure that the changes initiated are sustained and scaled effectively.

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