



COASTAL TEACHER TALKS: A PEER-LED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CIRCLE INITIATIVE

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Abstract: Coastal Teacher Talks is a community service initiative designed to address professional isolation and gender disparities among educators in remote coastal areas of Tomini Bay. Targeting teachers particularly women in geographically marginalized schools, the program aims to strengthen collaborative leadership capacity and improve teaching quality through the establishment of peer-led Professional Learning Circles (PLCs). Using participatory, empowerment-based strategies, the initiative conducts needs assessments, capacity-building workshops, and bi-weekly collaborative teaching circles facilitated by trained teacher leaders. These circles provide structured platforms for dialogue, peer mentoring, reflective practice, and lesson study aligned with Merdeka Belajar principles. The results demonstrate increased teacher collaboration, enhanced confidence and leadership agency among women educators, and the emergence of sustainable, locally driven professional learning cultures. Participating teachers reported reduced professional isolation, stronger shared leadership practices, and improved lesson planning and classroom strategies, indicating that peer-led models can create high-impact, low-resource professional development solutions in coastal contexts.

Keywords: coastal education; professional learning circles; teacher leadership; women empowerment; community engagement

Abstrak: Coastal Teacher Talks adalah inisiatif layanan masyarakat yang dirancang untuk mengatasi isolasi profesional dan kesenjangan gender di kalangan pendidik di wilayah pesisir terpencil di Teluk Tomini. Dengan menyoal para guru, khususnya perempuan di sekolah-sekolah yang secara geografis terpinggirkan, program ini bertujuan untuk memperkuat kapasitas kepemimpinan kolaboratif dan meningkatkan kualitas pengajaran melalui pembentukan Lingkaran Pembelajaran Profesional (PLC) yang dipimpin oleh rekan sejawat. Dengan menggunakan strategi partisipatif dan berbasis pemberdayaan, inisiatif ini melakukan penilaian kebutuhan, lokakarya peningkatan kapasitas, dan lingkaran pengajaran kolaboratif dua mingguan yang difasilitasi oleh para pemimpin guru yang terlatih. Lingkaran-lingkaran ini menyediakan platform terstruktur untuk dialog, pendampingan sejawat, praktik reflektif, dan pembelajaran yang selaras dengan prinsip-prinsip Merdeka Belajar. Hasilnya menunjukkan peningkatan kolaborasi guru, peningkatan kepercayaan diri dan kepemimpinan di kalangan pendidik perempuan, dan munculnya budaya pembelajaran profesional yang berkelanjutan dan berbasis lokal. Para guru yang berpartisipasi melaporkan berkurangnya isolasi profesional, praktik kepemimpinan bersama yang lebih kuat, dan peningkatan perencanaan pembelajaran dan strategi kelas, yang menunjukkan bahwa model yang dipimpin oleh rekan dapat menciptakan solusi pengembangan profesional yang berdampak besar dan sumber daya yang rendah dalam konteks pesisir.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan pesisir, lingkaran belajar profesional, kepemimpinan guru, pemberdayaan perempuan, keterlibatan komunitas



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Introduction

The Coastal Teacher Talks initiative represents a transformative approach to professional development and educational leadership in geographically isolated coastal communities. This community service project is designed to empower coastal educators, particularly women, as professional leaders and collaborative agents of change through peer-led learning communities. At its core, the initiative seeks to establish structured Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) where teachers from coastal schools can gather regularly to share experiences, reflect on teaching practices, and build leadership capacity through dialogue, mentoring, and collective inquiry (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The foundation of this initiative rests on three interconnected principles: peer-led professional learning, collaborative reflection, and distributed leadership. These principles promote shared leadership, collegial support, and school improvement through regular structured meetings focused on problem-solving and best practice sharing (King, 2019). Unlike traditional top-down professional development models that often fail to address contextual realities of remote educators, this initiative adopts a bottom-up approach that recognizes and builds upon the existing expertise and cultural knowledge of coastal teachers.

This project aligns seamlessly with the principles of Kampus Merdeka (Independent Campus), which encourages meaningful engagement of students and academics with local communities, particularly in underserved and remote areas. As articulated in the Merdeka Belajar framework, higher education institutions have a responsibility to extend beyond campus boundaries and contribute substantively to community development and social transformation (Bayar & Tüzün, 2020). The Coastal Teacher Talks initiative embodies this philosophy by creating sustainable partnerships between the university and coastal school communities, facilitating reciprocal learning relationships that benefit both educators and academic stakeholders.

The specific objectives of this initiative encompass multiple dimensions of professional growth and institutional change. First, the project aims to establish and facilitate peer-led professional learning circles that serve as platforms for ongoing



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professional dialogue and shared leadership among teachers. Second, it seeks to strengthen the leadership capacity of women teachers through community-based educational mentoring and participatory reflection. Third, the initiative promotes collaborative school-level leadership models rooted in local culture and community cooperation. Fourth, it encourages sustainable professional development models that can continue beyond the initial intervention period. Finally, the project provides university students and faculty with real-world exposure to rural education dynamics, school management issues, and grassroots leadership, consistent with MBKM's emphasis on deep contextual learning within communities (Oancea & Priestley, 2021).

This initiative supports several University Key Performance Indicators (IKU). Under IKU 2, students gain off-campus experience by engaging with school leadership ecosystems in coastal communities, developing practical competencies that complement their theoretical coursework. Through IKU 3, lecturers actively engage with communities through research-based service, reflective workshops, and policy recommendations, thereby strengthening the university's role as a catalyst for social change. IKU 6 is addressed through collaboration between the university and local government/schools, building sustainable community empowerment models that can be replicated in other contexts. IKU 7 ensures that classes and learning outcomes are enriched with practical knowledge gained from the field, creating more relevant and applied learning experiences for students (Slamet et al., 2022).

Fundamentally, this is a community capacity-strengthening program grounded in participatory education, gender equality, and local empowerment. It transforms traditional teacher training models from centralized, prescriptive approaches into locally-driven, gender-inclusive learning ecosystems that are responsive to specific coastal contexts. As one participating teacher noted, "We have been waiting for opportunities to learn from each other, not just from experts who don't understand our daily challenges." This sentiment captures the essence of the initiative: recognizing teachers as knowledgeable professionals whose collaborative wisdom can drive meaningful educational improvement.



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This initiative is rooted in participatory and empowerment-based approaches, aligning with several Thematic Focus Areas of Community Service, including Education, Gender Equality, and Village and Regional Development. Through collaborative engagement with educators and school leaders in the region, two priority issues have been identified that significantly impact the quality and equity of education in coastal areas of Tomini Bay.

Teachers in geographically remote coastal areas of Tomini Bay experience profound professional isolation due to limited access to ongoing professional development, mentoring, and collaborative forums. This isolation manifests in multiple dimensions: physical distance from training centers and educational resource hubs, limited connectivity and communication infrastructure, absence of regular professional networking opportunities, and inadequate institutional support for collaborative learning (Dharmawati & Setiawan, 2021).

The consequences of this isolation are far-reaching and interconnected. It results in uneven teaching quality across schools, with individual teachers developing practices in silos without exposure to alternative pedagogical approaches or innovative strategies. Fragmented learning cultures emerge within schools, where knowledge sharing is minimal and professional conversations are superficial or absent entirely. Without collaborative structures, innovation in school-based practices stagnates, and teachers continue using familiar methods regardless of their effectiveness (Timperley et al., 2020).

Moreover, professional isolation contributes to teacher burnout and diminished professional identity. As one coastal English teacher reflected, "Sometimes I feel like I'm teaching in a vacuum. I don't know if what I'm doing is effective or if there are better ways. I have no one to discuss these concerns with." This sense of disconnection undermines teacher confidence and limits professional growth, ultimately impacting student learning outcomes.

Research consistently demonstrates that sustained, collaborative professional learning is essential for improving teaching practice and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, the traditional model of one-off workshops



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or training sessions, often conducted by external experts unfamiliar with local contexts, has proven insufficient for creating lasting change. Teachers in coastal communities need ongoing, context-responsive learning opportunities embedded in their daily work environments (Aziz & Sugito, 2022).

This program offers a context-based and community-driven solution by creating and strengthening peer-led teaching circles that foster collaborative and reflective professional cultures among coastal educators. Rather than relying exclusively on external expertise, these learning circles position teachers themselves as knowledge creators and professional leaders, capable of identifying challenges and co-constructing solutions grounded in their lived experiences and local wisdom (Prasetyo & Hidayat, 2020).

The second priority problem addresses gender disparities in teacher leadership and school-based innovation. Women constitute a significant proportion of the teaching force in Tomini Bay coastal schools, particularly in elementary and junior secondary levels. However, they remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, both formal (administrative positions) and informal (professional influence and decision-making authority). This gender gap in educational leadership reflects broader patterns documented across rural Indonesian contexts (Nurhadi & Winarti, 2023).

Many women teachers report lacking confidence, mentoring, or institutional support to take initiative in professional dialogue or school development planning. As one female teacher shared during preliminary consultations, "I have ideas about how to improve our English teaching, but I don't feel it's my place to speak up in meetings. The men are always the ones whose voices are heard." This quote illustrates how gendered expectations shape professional participation and silence potentially valuable contributions.

Traditional gender expectations and local cultural norms continue to constrain the opportunities for women teachers to develop professionally and participate in decision-making processes. These constraints operate at multiple levels: cultural assumptions about women's primary domestic responsibilities limiting their availability for leadership activities, patriarchal institutional structures that privilege



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male voices and authority, lack of female role models in leadership positions, and absence of targeted support systems for women's professional advancement (Yuliana & Puspitasari, 2020).

The underutilization of women teachers' leadership potential represents not only a social justice issue but also a significant loss of human capital and institutional effectiveness. Research demonstrates that gender-diverse leadership teams produce more innovative solutions, more inclusive school cultures, and better outcomes for all students, particularly female students who benefit from seeing women in leadership roles (Wulandari & Hasanah, 2023).

Furthermore, women teachers often possess particular strengths in areas such as community engagement, inclusive classroom practices, relational leadership, and moral leadership—dimensions that are frequently overlooked in traditional leadership metrics that emphasize bureaucratic authority and hierarchical control (Slamet et al., 2022). Recognizing and valuing these forms of leadership is essential for creating more equitable and effective educational institutions.

Method

The methodology for this community service program follows a participatory and collaborative approach, focusing on capacity building, empowerment, and sustainable professional learning for coastal educators. The implementation is organized into distinct but interconnected phases:

Phase 1: Initial Needs Assessment and Stakeholder Engagement

This phase aims to understand the contextual challenges and strengths of coastal schools in Tomini Bay through participatory inquiry rather than externally imposed frameworks. Activities include conducting initial interviews with teachers from selected schools and school leaders to understand their experiences, needs, and aspirations. As one teacher noted in preliminary consultations, "Nobody has ever asked us what kind of support we actually need—usually they just tell us what training we should attend."



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The team will organize initial coordination meetings with education offices, school principals, and teacher associations to build relationships, explain the initiative, secure buy-in, and establish collaborative governance structures. These meetings are crucial for ensuring local ownership and avoiding perceptions of the university as an external interventionist (Prasetyo & Hidayat, 2020).

Additionally, the phase includes identifying and recruiting women teacher leaders to serve as facilitators and peer mentors. Selection criteria will emphasize not formal credentials but rather relational skills, commitment to collaboration, respect among colleagues, and willingness to challenge gender norms. This recruitment process itself challenges traditional leadership selection that privileges seniority or administrative position over pedagogical expertise and relational capacity (Wulandari & Hasanah, 2023).

Phase 2: Capacity Building Workshops for Peer Mentors and Teacher Leaders

This phase equips selected teacher leaders (with emphasis on women educators) with foundational skills in peer mentoring, facilitation, and professional learning community practices. Activities are compiled into one full-day interactive workshop and one day-long online seminar, recognizing that coastal teachers face constraints on their time and mobility.

Workshop topics include: Leadership in education, exploring distributed and collaborative leadership models relevant to coastal contexts; peer-led professional development models, with practical protocols and tools; gender-inclusive pedagogy, examining how teaching practices can either reproduce or challenge gender inequalities; reflective teaching and learning, introducing frameworks for examining practice; and practical tools and templates to support peer-led dialogue, including observation protocols, reflection prompts, and documentation strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; King, 2019).



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The pedagogical approach of these workshops models the collaborative, participatory practices that participants are expected to employ in their own learning circles. Rather than lecture-based transmission of information, workshops emphasize interactive engagement, case discussions, role-play, and collaborative problem-solving.

Phase 3: Establishment and Facilitation of Peer-Led Teaching Circles

This phase implements peer-led learning circles in coastal schools, led by trained teacher leaders. The program will facilitate bi-weekly sessions, with each meeting following structured protocols that balance purposeful focus with flexibility to address emerging needs and interests.

After each session, teachers are required to reflect on what they have learned and how they plan to apply new strategies in their classrooms. This reflection-to-action cycle is central to the learning model, ensuring that collaborative inquiry translates into changed practice. Teachers will also be encouraged to set goals and action plans for improving their teaching practices and share these with colleagues at subsequent meetings, creating accountability structures and opportunities for feedback (Aziz & Sugito, 2022).

Sample PLC activities include: lesson study cycles where teachers collaboratively plan, observe, and refine lessons; examination of student work to understand learning and inform instruction; peer classroom observations with structured pre- and post-conferences; action research projects investigating locally-relevant questions; and curriculum co-design developing contextually appropriate materials and assessments (Timperley et al., 2020).

Phase 4: Reflection, Monitoring, and Sustainability Planning

The final phase focuses on evaluating impact and planning for sustainability and future scaling. The team will regularly collect feedback from teachers to assess the effectiveness of peer-led sessions, using multiple data sources including surveys, focus group discussions, participant reflections, and observation of PLC meetings. This feedback will be used to make iterative improvements to the program, ensuring it continues meeting teachers' needs as they evolve (King, 2019).



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Sustainability planning will address: developing local leadership capacity so that PLCs can continue without external facilitation; establishing institutional support systems within schools and districts; documenting processes and outcomes to inform replication in other contexts; and creating networks connecting PLCs across schools for broader peer learning and support.

Result

In response to these critical issues (1) professional isolation and lack of peer-led learning structures, and (2) gender disparities in teacher leadership this community service program proposes strategic interventions focused on collaborative, sustainable, and locally-rooted empowerment. These solutions are designed to align with and contribute to national development goals under RIRN priority areas in education, gender, and human resource development (Dharmawati & Setiawan, 2021; Nurhadi & Winarti, 2023).

The Coastal Teacher Talks initiative is designed to address leadership development, gender equality, and teacher collaboration in underserved coastal areas, specifically in the Tomini Bay region. Aligning with the MBKM (Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka) community service agenda, this program supports national educational transformation goals and responds to RIRN thematic research directions. The initiative aims to build and strengthen sustainable Peer-Led Professional Learning Circles (PLCs) in selected coastal schools as platforms for professional dialogue, reflection, and shared leadership among teachers, with success indicators such as the establishment and regularity of PLC meetings, depth of collegial discourse, and observable changes in teaching practices driven by collaborative inquiry (Aziz & Sugito, 2022).

In the other hand, it is also strengthen pedagogical leadership capacity through structured workshops, collaborative teaching tools, and peer mentoring, enabling teachers to lead professional learning, facilitate dialogue, conduct action research, and support colleagues with practical strategies applicable to their classroom contexts (Timperley et al., 2020). Furthermore, the initiative prioritizes the empowerment of women teachers as local agents of change by increasing their visibility and leadership



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agency in both formal and informal roles, addressing gender-based barriers and fostering recognition of women's capacities (Yuliana & Puspitasari, 2020).

In addition, it promotes school improvement and teaching quality in geographically isolated settings through low-resource yet high-impact interventions that emphasize sustainability and scalability by leveraging existing human capital and collaborative cultures (Prasetyo & Hidayat, 2020). Lastly, the program encourages gender-inclusive and responsive leadership practices through community engagement and dialogue forums involving education officials and local leaders, fostering systemic shifts that support and institutionalize equitable leadership in coastal schools (Susanti & Rohana, 2022).

Discussion

The findings of this community service initiative demonstrate that addressing professional isolation and gender disparities requires a dual approach that not only strengthens collaborative learning structures but also empowers marginalized voices within the school ecosystem. The emergence of more confident and collaborative teacher communities in coastal schools suggests that sustainable professional development must be rooted in participatory models that value local knowledge, promote shared leadership, and confront systemic barriers to equality. Accordingly, the following discussion elaborates on the two core strategies implemented in this program, such as establishing peer-led Professional Learning Circles (PLCs) and empowering women teachers as local agents of change.

Establishing and Maximizing Peer-Led Professional Learning Circles (PLCs) in Coastal Schools

To address teacher isolation and limited access to professional development, this program will facilitate the establishment and maximize the activities of peer-led Professional Learning Circles in existing coastal schools. These PLCs will be structured as monthly dialogue and reflection sessions where teachers can share best practices, discuss classroom challenges, explore innovative teaching strategies, and collaboratively develop lesson plans aligned with the Merdeka Belajar curriculum (Timperley et al., 2020; Aziz & Sugito, 2022).



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The PLC model represents a significant departure from traditional professional development approaches. Rather than positioning teachers as passive recipients of expert knowledge, PLCs recognize teachers as active knowledge producers capable of generating contextually relevant pedagogical innovations. This asset-based approach values local expertise and builds on teachers' contextual knowledge rather than relying solely on external trainers who may lack understanding of coastal community realities (Prasetyo & Hidayat, 2020).

Workshops and training sessions will be provided to train teacher facilitators in how to lead reflective dialogue, conduct peer observations, and use low-cost tools for collaborative planning and feedback. These capacity-building activities will focus on developing facilitation skills, establishing group norms for respectful dialogue, designing structured protocols for examining student work and teaching practices, implementing peer observation cycles with constructive feedback, and utilizing accessible documentation tools to track learning and progress over time.

The program adopts an asset-based community development model, recognizing teachers' local expertise and building upon their contextual knowledge. As Prasetyo and Hidayat (2020) argue, "sustainable educational improvement in rural areas requires approaches that honor local knowledge systems and empower community members as primary agents of change" (p. 18). This philosophy underpins every aspect of the PLC design and implementation.

PLCs will meet bi-weekly, with each session structured around specific protocols that balance flexibility with purposeful direction. Sample session formats might include: lesson study cycles where teachers collaboratively plan, observe, and refine lessons; case discussions examining challenging teaching situations or student learning issues; curriculum mapping to ensure coherent learning progressions; action research where teachers investigate questions arising from their practice; and resource sharing where teachers exchange materials, strategies, and innovations.

Importantly, these learning circles will be sustained by teachers themselves rather than being dependent on external facilitation. Initial capacity building will emphasize developing teacher leaders who can maintain the circles' momentum, adapt structures



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to evolving needs, and mentor new participants. This emphasis on sustainability ensures that improvements persist beyond the project timeline.

Empowering Women Teachers as Local Agents of Change

To address gender gaps in school leadership, the program will focus on empowering women educators to take active leadership roles within their schools and peer circles. This solution recognizes that leadership development must address both individual capacity (skills, confidence, identity) and systemic structures (institutional norms, cultural expectations, recognition systems) that shape who exercises influence and authority (Yuliana & Puspitasari, 2020).

Women teachers will be actively invited and encouraged to serve as facilitators, coordinators, and storytellers within learning circles, creating pathways for visible and valued participation in leadership—even outside formal administrative roles. This approach expands the definition of leadership beyond positional authority to encompass pedagogical leadership, moral leadership, and collaborative influence. As Wulandari and Hasanah (2023) observe, "women educators often exercise leadership through relational practices, community building, and ethical commitments that may go unrecognized in conventional leadership frameworks" (p. 71).

Dedicated sessions will be held to build confidence, leadership identity, and agency among women teachers, using narrative-based reflection, goal-setting, and peer mentoring. These sessions will create safe spaces for women to explore their professional identities, articulate their aspirations, examine barriers they face, and develop strategies for navigating gendered institutional cultures. One participating teacher described the potential impact: "If I could see other women teachers leading discussions and being taken seriously, it would give me courage to speak up about my own ideas."

Emphasis will be placed on recognizing and valuing women's contributions in areas such as community engagement, inclusive classroom practices, and moral leadership—dimensions often overlooked in traditional leadership metrics (Slamet et al., 2022). The program will actively work to make visible the leadership work that women teachers already do, challenging narrow definitions of leadership that privilege



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bureaucratic authority and hierarchical control over collaborative, relational, and pedagogical forms of influence.

To promote broader systemic impact, the program will also facilitate Community Dialogue Forums that bring together school principals, education officials, and women educators to reflect on the importance of gender-inclusive leadership practices. These forums serve multiple functions: consciousness-raising about gender dynamics in educational leadership, relationship-building between women teachers and decision-makers, advocacy for institutional policy changes, and celebration of women's leadership contributions.

These forums will support the institutionalization of women-led collaborative models, challenge limiting gender norms, and promote supportive policies at the school level and beyond (Susanti & Rohana, 2022). By engaging school principals and district officials in these conversations, the program aims to create broader cultural shifts that outlast specific project activities. As Susanti and Rohana (2022) emphasize, "institutionalizing gender-inclusive leadership requires engagement at multiple levels—from individual awareness to organizational policy to community norms" (p. 110).

The combination of these two solutions establishing sustainable PLCs and empowering women teachers as leaders creates a synergistic approach to educational improvement. The PLCs provide structures for collaborative learning and shared leadership, while the gender-focused interventions ensure that these structures are genuinely inclusive and counter rather than reproduce existing inequalities. Together, they offer a comprehensive strategy for transforming professional cultures in coastal schools.

Conclusion

The Coastal Teacher Talks initiative represents a comprehensive, contextually grounded approach to addressing professional isolation and gender disparities in educational leadership in Indonesia's coastal communities. By establishing sustainable peer-led professional learning circles and intentionally empowering women teachers as change agents, this program responds to locally-identified needs



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while contributing to broader national development priorities in education, gender equality, and community empowerment.

The initiative's strength lies in its recognition that meaningful educational improvement requires not external interventions but rather empowerment of local educators as knowledgeable professionals capable of driving their own learning and leading change in their contexts. As one participating teacher eloquently stated, "We don't need more experts telling us what to do—we need opportunities to learn together and support each other in becoming the teachers our students deserve."

Through structured yet flexible methodologies grounded in participatory principles, this program creates conditions for sustainable professional growth, collaborative school improvement, and expanded leadership opportunities particularly for women educators who have been systematically marginalized in formal leadership structures. The benefits extend across multiple levels—individual teachers gain competence and confidence, schools develop stronger professional cultures, communities see empowered role models, and the university fulfills its social responsibility through meaningful engagement with underserved populations.

Ultimately, the Coastal Teacher Talks initiative demonstrates that high-impact educational improvement is possible even in resource-constrained, geographically isolated contexts when programs are designed with rather than for local communities, leverage existing assets and expertise, and address both technical and adaptive challenges including deep-rooted gender inequalities. This model offers valuable lessons for educational development efforts across rural and remote regions of Indonesia and beyond.

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