

BAB I

PENDAHULUAN

1.1 Latar Belakang Masalah

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 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.

1.2 Rumusan Masalah

This study is guided by the need to understand the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato and its contribution to the professional development of education students. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

1. How is the Teaching Assistance Program implemented at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato?
2. How does the Teaching Assistance Program contribute to the development of the pedagogical, social, and adaptive competencies of education students?
3. What challenges and supporting factors influence the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program in a rural school context?

1.3 Tujuan Penelitian

This study aims to examine the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program at SMP Negeri 1 Bawolato and to analyze the experiences of education students throughout the program. Specifically, the objectives are to describe the implementation process of the Teaching Assistance Program, analyze its contribution to the development of students' pedagogical, social, and adaptive competencies, and identify the challenges and supporting factors that affect the effectiveness of the program within a rural educational setting.

1.4 Manfaat Penelitian

This research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of teacher education. Theoretically, it enriches the body of knowledge concerning experiential learning and the implementation of the Teaching Assistance Program within the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) framework, particularly in rural educational contexts. Practically, the findings provide valuable insights for higher education institutions in improving teacher education curricula, for partner schools in strengthening collaboration and mentoring practices, for policymakers in refining the implementation of MBKM programs, and for future researchers as a reference for further studies on teaching assistance programs and competency development among prospective teachers.