

Peer Counselor Training Grounded in Local Wisdom: Fostering Mental Resilience and Character Development among Junior High School Students in Border and Coastal Regions

*A. Ahmad Ridha^{1,a)}, Kusumawati^{2,b)}, Ari Rahmi Hasfaraini^{1,c)},
Muhammad Daffa Hanifian^{2,d)}, Faisal^{2,e)}*

¹Psychology, University of Borneo Tarakan, Tarakan, Indonesia

²Guidance and Counseling, University of Borneo Tarakan, Tarakan, Indonesia

^{a)}Corresponding author: a.ahmad.ridha@borneo.ac.id

^{b)}kusuma@borneo.ac.id

^{c)}arirahmi@borneo.ac.id

^{d)}mdaffahanifian@gmail.com

^{e)}faisalharun733@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Adolescents in border and coastal areas face complex psychosocial challenges, ranging from limited access to information and inadequate educational facilities to pressures in balancing local cultural values with the flow of globalization. These conditions may weaken mental resilience and hinder the development of positive character. To address this issue, a team of lecturers and students from the University of Borneo Tarakan conducted the Peer Counselor Training Based on Local Wisdom program at SMP Negeri 6 Tarakan on August 8–22, 2025. This activity was carried out under the Community Partnership Empowerment scheme with full support from the school. The implementation methods included socialization, ten training sessions, peer counseling practice, and reflection on local cultural values such as cooperation, respect for parents, and care for the coastal environment. The results indicated improvements in students' empathic communication skills, public speaking confidence, and active listening abilities. The school counselor reported a decrease in minor conflicts among students, as some problems were resolved through peer counseling. The program not only enhanced individual capacity but also strengthened collective awareness of the importance of mental resilience and character building rooted in local culture. Therefore, peer counselor training based on local wisdom has the potential to serve as a model for strengthening mental health and character education that can be replicated in other schools across the border and coastal regions.

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INTRODUCTION

State Junior High School 6 Tarakan is one of the educational institutions located in the coastal area of Tarakan City, North Kalimantan. Its geographical position in a coastal and border area gives the school unique characteristics and challenges. In general, schools in border regions face barriers in accessing educational services, including in meeting the needs of guidance and counseling. Yet, guidance and counseling services are an essential component of the education system, functioning not only to help students solve academic problems but also to develop their personal, social, and career aspects (American School Counselor Association, 2025).

The condition of State Junior High School 6 Tarakan reflects these challenges. At present, the school has only one guidance counselor serving more than 600 students, with a service ratio of 1:669. This figure is far from the standard recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which is 1:250, and even higher than the national average ratio in the United States, which remains around 1:376–408. This comparison shows that the need for counseling services in coastal and border schools remains very high, necessitating alternative strategies to expand service reach.

Adolescence is a complex developmental stage. Erikson (Santrock, 2012) describes this phase as identity versus role confusion, where individuals strive to build a coherent sense of identity. Rapid biological changes, combined with social and academic demands, often trigger intense emotional dynamics. Without adequate support, adolescents are vulnerable to difficulties in managing stress, making decisions, and building healthy social relationships. Recent studies indicate that adolescent mental health in Indonesia faces serious challenges: about 15.5% of adolescents reported experiencing symptoms of depression, and 12.4% reported excessive anxiety (Ministry of Health, Republic of Indonesia, 2023). This underscores the importance of school-based psychosocial interventions, especially in areas with limited access, such as Tarakan.

In the psychosocial context, peer relationships are one of the key factors influencing adolescent development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (Santrock, 2012) emphasizes that interactions at the microsystem level, including with peers, are crucial in shaping behavior and personality. Adolescents tend to be more open with their peers than with adults, making peer counseling a relevant approach. Peer counselor programs allow trained students to provide initial support, share experiences, and help classmates experiencing difficulties. Karcher (2007) found that peer counseling programs significantly enhance empathy, social skills, and reduce aggressive behaviors among adolescents.

Beyond individual developmental factors, local wisdom also contributes significantly to strengthening counseling services. Cultural values such as solidarity, cooperation, and a strong sense of community remain deeply rooted in the social life of coastal and border communities in Tarakan. Integrating local wisdom into counseling practices is considered to enhance student acceptance of the program, while also reinforcing cultural identity and pride. Wibowo (2018) highlighted that counseling based on local cultural values is more effective in building equitable counseling relationships, as the values applied are familiar to students and their communities. Thus, the Peer Counselor Training Program Based on Local Wisdom not only emphasizes psychological aspects but also grounds character formation in cultural roots.

A needs assessment at State Junior High School 6 Tarakan reveals potential that can be further developed. An internal survey identified around 15% of students with high empathy and interest in engaging in peer counseling activities. This potential represents important social capital, as adolescents

inclined to help others can become agents of change within their environment. Peer counseling programs are expected not only to ease the burden of the school counselor but also to foster a more supportive, inclusive, and adaptive school culture in response to students' psychosocial needs.

The school's geographical conditions are also an important consideration in designing this program. State Junior High School 6 Tarakan is located at the edge of the island with limited transportation access. Such geographical characteristics often leave coastal and border schools isolated from comprehensive educational and health services. A study by UNICEF (2022) emphasized that the lack of access to psychosocial services in remote areas can be addressed through community empowerment strategies and the active involvement of students in school-based programs. Therefore, a peer counseling-based approach becomes an adaptive solution suited to the school's geographical context.

Based on the above, it can be understood that State Junior High School 6 Tarakan faces both challenges and opportunities in the development of guidance and counseling services. The shortage of counselors, the dynamics of adolescent development, students' socio-economic backgrounds, and geographical isolation justify the urgency of innovative counseling services. On the other hand, the presence of socially caring students and the strong influence of local wisdom provide strategic opportunities. The Peer Counselor Training Program Based on Local Wisdom is designed to address these needs. This program aims to strengthen counseling services, empower student potential, raise mental health awareness, and create a sustainable and culturally contextual support system for students.

METHOD

The implementation of this community service program aims to strengthen the mental resilience and character of junior high school students in border and coastal areas through peer counselor training based on local wisdom. The solution offered involves several main stages, namely socialization, training, technology implementation, mentoring and evaluation, as well as program sustainability. This approach ensures that students not only acquire counseling skills but are also able to apply them in daily life with the support of schools and the community.



FIGURE 1. State of Service Activities

Socialization

This stage introduces the concept of peer counselors based on local wisdom to schools, teachers, and students. The activity begins with meetings involving the principal and school counselors to explain the goals and benefits of the program for students. Subsequently, socialization sessions are conducted

with selected students who will serve as peer counselors, providing them with an understanding of their role in supporting peers facing psychosocial challenges.

Training

The purpose of this stage is to provide basic counseling skills to selected students. The training includes techniques such as active listening, empathy, effective communication, and problem-solving strategies. Students are also introduced to local wisdom values that can be integrated into the counseling process, such as cooperation, deliberation, and relevant cultural traditions. Training activities are conducted interactively through simulations, role plays, and case discussions to help students better understand and apply peer counseling techniques.

Technology Implementation

This stage aims to enhance the effectiveness and reach of peer counseling. Students are trained in the use of simple technologies, such as utilizing social media platforms to provide psychological support for peers. Technology is also used to monitor and document cases handled by peer counselors while maintaining ethics and confidentiality.

Mentoring And Evaluation

Students who have completed the training begin to apply peer counseling skills in the school environment under the guidance of school counselors and the community service team. Mentoring is carried out through regular supervision sessions, group discussions, and reflection on experiences as peer counselors. Evaluation is conducted to assess program effectiveness based on feedback from students and teachers. Additionally, the program measures improvements in students' counseling skills and the impact on mental resilience and character development.

Program Sustainability

To ensure sustainability, the program is designed to continue independently within schools after the completion of community service. One of the strategies is establishing a peer counselor community managed by school counselors, with new students recruited annually to ensure continuity. Schools are provided with program guidelines and access to training materials for long-term use. Furthermore, the community service team will collaborate with schools to conduct refresher sessions and capacity-building activities for peer counselors in the future. In this way, the program is expected to continuously benefit students in developing mental resilience and character.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the Peer Counselor Training Program Based on Local Wisdom at State Junior High School 6 Tarakan was attended by 10 students appointed by the school. The participants took part in 10 training sessions covering basic understanding of peer counseling, empathetic communication skills, emotion management, conflict resolution, as well as the application of local wisdom values in strengthening students' mental resilience and character.

To measure the effectiveness of the training, a pre-test and post-test were conducted. The results showed improvement in almost all participants. The average pre-test score was 61.7, while the average

post-test score increased to 79.0. Thus, there was an average increase of +17.3 points, or approximately 28% from the initial score.

Individually, 8 out of 10 participants showed significant improvement (ranging from 6 to 27 points), while 1 participant remained stagnant and 1 participant showed only a minimal increase. This indicates that the training program was generally effective, although further assistance is needed for participants with lower levels of development.

Observations also revealed improvements in students' self-confidence when speaking in front of groups, their ability to engage in active listening when peers were speaking, their understanding of local wisdom values such as cooperation, respect for others, and deliberation, as well as participants' initiative in playing the role of peer counselor during simulations.

Effectiveness of Training in Enhancing Understanding

The improvement in test scores indicates that the training successfully enhanced participants' understanding and basic skills. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Santrock, 2015), effective learning occurs when students are allowed to observe, imitate, and practice new skills. In this activity, role-play and simulation methods served as the main medium for students to practice peer counseling skills.

Furthermore, the significant improvement among most participants is consistent with the findings of Arjanggi & Suprihatin (2010), who discovered that peer counseling can enhance adolescents' social skills and problem-solving abilities.

Previous research by Ridha (2019) highlighted the effectiveness of peer counselors in strengthening guidance and counseling services in schools. The study showed that peer counseling programs were able to address the limited number of school counselors and improve students' access to counseling services. In addition, the number of students consulting with peer counselors during breaks increased. The implementation of peer counselors also made students more open in expressing their problems, thereby making counseling services more effective and comprehensive. These findings emphasize that proper selection and training are crucial for peer counselors to perform their roles optimally.



FIGURE 2. Material Delivery

Peer Counseling as a Strategy for Strengthening Adolescents' Mental Resilience

Peer counseling is an approach that emphasizes equal relationships among students. According to Tindall and Black (2009), the effectiveness of peer counseling lies in adolescents' tendency to be more

open with their peers than with adults. This was also reflected during the training, where some initially passive students became more active when engaging in small group discussions.

In line with this, research by Akbar et al. (2024) found that peer mentoring training was effective in helping university students cope with academic stress through social interaction and peer support. This approach not only enhances social skills but also promotes participants' psychological well-being.

These findings further affirm the relevance of peer counseling in border and coastal school contexts, where the number of school counselors is limited. Through training, students can serve as extensions of school counselors by providing initial support, enabling early identification of problems before they are further addressed by professionals.

In addition, the community service program conducted by Putri et al. (2022) demonstrated that the formation of peer counselors was effective in providing information and counseling services for adolescents in schools. This finding is relevant to the community service program we implemented, as both focus on empowering students to become agents of psychosocial support through peer counselor training. The difference lies in our program's emphasis on the context of border and coastal areas with a local wisdom-based approach, which is expected to address the specific challenges of these regions while simultaneously strengthening students' mental resilience and character.

The results of the community service program by Rafiola et al. (2022) also showed that the establishment of peer counselors can help address various adolescent issues that are not easily accessible to school counselors, particularly those related to peer relationships. Meanwhile, the findings of the community service programs by Triana and Marlina (2022) and Kusumawaty et al. (2020) indicated that continuous training is necessary to maintain the performance of peer counselors.

Integration of Local Wisdom

A distinctive feature of this program is the integration of local wisdom from North Kalimantan, particularly the values of cooperation, deliberation, and customary respect for others. According to Geertz (Laba, 2000), local cultural values can function as a social glue that strengthens solidarity and collective identity. By embedding these values, the training not only develops competent peer counselors but also cultivates character aligned with students' socio-cultural contexts.

The integration of local wisdom also supports the concept of character education emphasized by Lickona (Susanti, 2022), namely, learning that instills moral virtues, care, and social responsibility. Salim and Kusumawati (2022) further highlight the importance of incorporating local wisdom in shaping adolescents' character and psychological resilience.

In addition, the peer counselor training conducted by Salmiati, Hasbahuddin, and Bakhtar (2018) demonstrated that such training was proven to improve the performance of counseling services, prevent negative adolescent behaviors, and enhance students' skills to support school counselors. These results serve as an important foundation for our community service program in border and coastal schools, with an emphasis on local wisdom.



FIGURE 3. Role-playing as a peer counselor

Challenges and Limitations

Although the training demonstrated promising results, several limitations were identified: (1) The number of participants was still limited (10 students), so the impact at the school-wide level has not yet been comprehensive; (2) Not all students experienced significant improvement, indicating the need for differentiated approaches; and (3) Time constraints meant that some materials could only be introduced briefly. Nevertheless, through follow-up activities such as mentoring and the use of the cyber counseling platform “Sahabat Sebaya Online”, peer counseling is expected to become more sustainable. This aligns with previous findings by Zola et al. (2024), which highlighted online counseling as a solution to the shortage of school counselors in certain regions.

Implications

This activity carries important implications for the development of Guidance and Counseling services in border schools: (1) Peer counseling serves as a solution to the shortage of school counselors; (2) Adolescents learn empathy, care, and responsibility through their role as peer counselors; and (3) Local values can serve as a foundation for building students’ character and mental resilience. Thus, this training not only enhances the skills of peer counselors but also strengthens the synergy between schools and universities in supporting the mental resilience of adolescents in border areas.

CONCLUSION

The community service program peer counselor training based on local wisdom: building mental resilience and character of junior high school students in border and coastal areas was successfully implemented with the support and collaboration of smp negeri 6 Tarakan as the partner school, where participating students showed high enthusiasm and were able to understand and internalize the training materials. This program had a positive impact in enhancing the knowledge and skills of peer counselors by integrating local cultural values, thereby contributing to strengthening students’ mental resilience and character in border and coastal areas. Nevertheless, the optimal achievement of the program’s objectives still requires continuous mentoring and further evaluation to ensure the effective and sustainable implementation of peer counseling in schools.

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