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Strengthening Teachers' Capacity through Psychological First Aid Education in Kasimpar Village

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Abstract

Purpose: This community service program aimed to strengthen the basic capacity of teachers in a remote rural area with no dedicated guidance and counselling personnel to recognise signs of psychological distress in students and to provide a safe, supportive first response using the principles of Psychological First Aid (PFA).

Method: A participatory training program was delivered in Kasimpar Village, Petungkriyono District, to 23 teachers from seven schools (kindergarten to senior high school) through presentations, discussions, case analyses, and role-play simulations. KKN students of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan (65th cohort, Group 54) also delivered an educational session on emotional awareness and help-seeking to over 80 elementary school pupils. The evaluation relied on observations of simulations, case discussions, and informal conversations with the pupils.

Results: During simulations, teachers practiced building trust and listening attentively, two basic first-response steps that many had not previously applied. In informal conversations after the sessions, more than 15 of the more than 80 pupils reported that they had begun to share problems with teachers or KKN students; most had not done so. Because there was no baseline and the two activities occurred together, this finding is preliminary and cannot be attributed to either activity.

Conclusion: Short participatory training can introduce teachers to practicable first-response skills, but a single session is insufficient. Follow-up, school-level referral procedures, safeguarding pupil disclosures, and systematic evaluation are needed before the effect can be judged. PFA by teachers is not a diagnosis; rather, it is a safe, empathetic, non-judgmental initial response that helps identify students who need professional support.

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Introduction

Psychological distress in students refers to emotional conditions that may arise from unpleasant experiences and affect their feelings, thought patterns, and behaviours (Greenwell-Barnden et al., 2026). In children and adolescents, emotional and behavioral problems are commonly examined across five domains: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, difficulties in peer relationships, and prosocial behavior (Speyer et al., 2022). In the school environment, such conditions are not always immediately visible, and teachers often find it difficult to determine which emotional and behavioural problems require further intervention and which do not (Maten et al., 2022). The family also matters: a child who feels secure at home can explore and learn more freely, whereas a child who feels unsafe tends to spend energy on self-regulation and has fewer opportunities to learn (Nurmalitasari, 2015). Therefore, attention from both school and family environments is necessary to recognise such changes (Williamson et al., 2022).

Teachers hold a strategic position in recognising students' psychological conditions because teacher–student interactions occur directly and repeatedly throughout learning activities (Nalipay et al., 2025). Within the framework of guidance and counselling services, teachers' roles extend beyond instruction to include functions related to understanding, prevention, and addressing students' developmental concerns (Leslie & Oberg, 2025). Teachers need to be able to identify emotional and behavioural changes in students and distinguish them from ordinary misbehaviour (Page & Cunningham, 2024). Changes in emotional expression, behaviour, concentration or activity level, peer relationships, and physical complaints may serve as initial indicators that require attention (Memmott-Elison & Toseeb, 2023).

The context of Kasimpar Village is highly relevant, as this community service initiative targets teachers from kindergarten to high school. Interviews conducted in July 2026 with local junior and senior high school principals revealed that a shortage of teaching staff meant that these schools lacked dedicated guidance and counselling teachers. Direct observations made by the service team during visits and teaching activities at local kindergartens and elementary schools in July 2026 confirmed a similar situation: the absence of counseling teachers, resulting

In the classroom, teachers also assume the role of homeroom teachers. Consequently, at all these levels, teachers perform a dual role—serving as both instructors and homeroom teachers—meaning that the responsibility for addressing student issues falls entirely upon them. In this context, teachers require a basic understanding of how to recognise changes in

their students and provide an appropriate initial response. Strengthening teacher capacity is not intended to replace the role of trained professionals; rather, the goal is to enable teachers to identify issues early, foster a sense of safety, and connect students with the necessary support they need.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an immediate and pragmatic humanitarian intervention intended to help reduce acute distress, address basic needs, and facilitate initial recovery (Hermosilla et al., 2023a). PFA differs from psychotherapy or formal counselling because teachers are not expected to explore students' traumatic experiences in detail (WHO, 2011). Instead, its focus is on creating a sense of safety, being empathetically present, listening without pressure, supporting emotional regulation, providing relevant information, and connecting students with social support and appropriate services (Nurmalitasari, 2015).
Based on these needs, this KKN community service activity was designed to strengthen teachers' understanding of the causes and forms of psychological distress, the roles of teachers and schools in early identification, the provision of Psychological First Aid, the development of students' resilience and coping skills, and the strengthening of collaboration and referral systems at the school level.

Method

This program is part of the community service activities of the 65th cohort, Group 54, conducted by students from UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan in Kasimpar Village, Petungkriyono District. The target participants were teachers at all school levels, from kindergarten to senior high school. Participants were selected based on the strategic role of teachers as individuals who interact regularly with students and have the opportunity to observe changes in students' behaviours, emotions, and learning processes. A total of 23 teachers from seven schools participated in the activity. In addition, the KKN students delivered an educational session on emotional awareness, positive communication, and help-seeking to more than 80 elementary school (SD) pupils. The pupil component was limited to the elementary level only.

This activity employed the PAR (Participatory Action Research) approach, This positions teachers as the primary agents of change—not merely as research subjects. The material was delivered through presentations, discussions, direct practice simulations, question-and-answer sessions, and analyses of situations related to the school life. This approach was used to ensure that teachers not only gain theoretical knowledge but also relate the material to the circumstances of the students they encounter in their daily teaching activities.

The evaluation focused on the participants' understanding of the materials and their ability to identify appropriate initial response steps. The training was conducted interactively through response-handling simulations and case discussions based on situations encountered in the participants' respective schools. After the session with teachers, the KKN

students also informally asked pupils about their experiences at school to observe any changes in teacher–pupil communication. Therefore, the evaluation relied on observation and informal conversations rather than systematic measurement, and the program covered only the initial stage of the first response; no follow-up or referral activity had been carried out at the time of reporting.

Table 1. Stages of the Community Service Activity

No.	Activity Stage	Description
1	Needs Analysis	Identification of school conditions and teachers' need for understanding students' psychological well-being in Kasimpar Village.
2	Material Preparation	Materials covered the introduction to psychological distress, Psychological First Aid (PFA), resilience and coping, as well as referral systems.
3	Implementation of Activities	Material presentation, discussions, direct practice simulations, and question-and-answer sessions with kindergarten through senior high school teachers; educational session for elementary school pupils.
4	Evaluation	Assessment through observation of simulations, discussions, reflection, and informal follow-up conversations with pupils.

Results

Initial Condition and Outcomes of the Activity

Initial observation and discussion indicated that many of the 23 participating teachers from 7 schools had not yet applied basic first-response steps when students showed signs of psychological distress. During practice simulations, teachers practiced building trust with students and listening attentively to them. The KKN students also delivered an educational session to more than 80 elementary school (SD) pupils.

After the session with teachers, the KKN students asked the pupils about their experiences at school. More than 15 of the more than 80 elementary pupils reported that they had begun to share their problems with their teachers and the KKN students, while most had not yet done so. This suggests an early increase in the willingness of the pupils to open up. However, it cannot be determined whether this was due to teachers' changed responses, pupil education delivered by the KKN students, or both. The finding rests on informal conversations rather than systematic measurements, and the program did not extend beyond the initial approach. The following subsections summarise the content of the educational program delivered to the teachers.

Contributing Factors and Types of Psychological Distress in Students

Drawing on the literature, students' psychological conditions may be influenced by various factors originating from family, peers, and school environments (Agrest et al., 2024). Family related issues, such as limited communication between parents and children, inappropriate parenting practices, family conflict, and lack of attention, may contribute to students' emotional conditions. In addition, peer relationships may also have an influence, particularly when students experience friendship conflicts, rejection by peer groups, teasing, or bullying.

The school environment may also influence students' psychological condition. Learning-related pressure, demands to achieve good academic performance, difficulties in adapting to the school environment, and experiences of receiving unpleasant treatment may contribute to emotional distress among students.

Psychological distress in students may manifest in various forms. Emotional and behavioral problems in children and adolescents have been grouped into emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relationship difficulties, and prosocial behavior (Sutomo et al., 2022). In line with these domains, some students may become quieter, withdraw from social interactions, or become easily angered, while others may lose interest in activities, have difficulty concentrating, or experience conflicts with peers. Teachers' difficulty in telling which problems require further intervention (Mathews et al., 2021) which shows why they need to learn to identify relevant signs without labelling students. Identification also serves to separate students who need further support from those showing ordinary misbehaviour, and it is the starting point for referral to experts when needed (Green et al., 2022). Understanding the contributing factors and manifestations of psychological distress thus provides an important foundation for educating teachers so that they do not label students but instead help identify relevant signs and determine appropriate forms of support.

The Role of Teachers and Schools in Identifying Students' Psychological Distress

Teachers have close and regular interactions with students through daily learning activities. This proximity enables teachers to observe changes in students' behaviour and their emotional conditions. Teachers can pay attention to changes, such as students suddenly becoming quieter, frequently being absent from activities, experiencing decreased concentration, becoming easily irritated, or showing changes in their relationships with peers.

Early identification of students' psychological conditions should be conducted using an empathetic approach. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering instructional materials but also serve as trusted adults who provide students with a sense of safety when they encounter difficulties. An open attitude, non-judgmental listening, and opportunities for students to express their feelings can contribute to creating a more supportive school

environment.

In addition to teachers, schools play an important role in establishing systems that support students' psychological well-being. Schools can provide spaces for communication with students, strengthen coordination among homeroom teachers, guidance and counselling teachers, and parents, and provide education on psychological well-being and healthy social relationships. Thus, identifying psychological distress does not mean labelling students; rather, it serves as an initial step toward understanding the changes they experience and determining the appropriate support.

Application of Psychological First Aid by Teachers

Teachers occupy a strategic position within the education system to identify students' psychological conditions at an early stage. As individuals who interact directly and repeatedly with students over an extended period, teachers have a unique opportunity to observe behavioural changes that may indicate psychological distress (Deaton et al., 2022). In the guidance and counselling framework, this role concerns understanding, prevention, and addressing students' developmental concerns (Rahmah & Chudari, 2021) in this program, it was applied to teachers in general, not only to guidance and counseling teachers.



Figure 1. Simulasi P3LP kepada Siswa.

Indicators that teachers should consider when recognising students' psychological conditions can be grouped into emotional, behavioural, attentional, social, and physical dimensions. Emotionally, signs of emotional symptoms or disproportionate emotional outbursts, and conversely, a flat affect, may indicate difficulties in emotional regulation. Sudden changes in conduct and learning habits warrant serious attention. In terms of attention, restlessness, and decreased concentration may signal distress. Socially, difficulties in peer relationships are an important sign of depression (Bellaert et al., 2024). From a physical perspective, recurrent complaints without a clear medical cause should be noted (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia 2021). The identification of these indicators

does not constitute a diagnosis. Its purpose is to decide whether a student needs further support and, if so, to begin a referral to the appropriate professionals (Goodman-Scott et al., 2023).

The provision of Psychological First Aid (PFA) by teachers is an immediate and pragmatic humanitarian intervention intended to reduce acute distress, address basic needs, and facilitate the initial psychological recovery of students experiencing a crisis or exposure to a traumatic event (Kamel et al., 2025). The principles of PFA that can be applied by teachers include: (1) ensuring students' safety and physical comfort; (2) listening without pressure; (3) providing reassurance and helping students regulate their emotional responses; (4) providing accurate and relevant, (5) Connecting students with appropriate social support and services (Hermosilla et al., 2023b).

Teachers can implement PFA through several practical approaches relevant to the Indonesian cultural context and local values. The first step was to create a safe and private setting for conversation away from crowded areas. Simple emotional regulation techniques that can be taught include slow, deep breathing (Kramer et al., 2023), for example, in a 4-7-8 rhythm, and grounding techniques that use sensory awareness to help students reconnect with the present moment. Approaches that incorporate the values of family connectedness, *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), and spirituality may enhance acceptance and effectiveness because they resonate with value systems that are deeply rooted in Indonesian society.

Follow-up after the provision of PFA is equally important to the initial intervention in ensuring that students' psychological recovery is comprehensive and sustainable. Ideally, follow-up mechanisms should be implemented through multidisciplinary coordination involving classroom teachers, guidance and counselling teachers, school principals, and, when necessary, parents and mental health professionals outside the school premises. The success of guidance services should not be measured solely by the quality of the initial intervention but also by the consistency and appropriateness of follow-up processes that enable students to gradually and meaningfully develop their coping capacities.

Strategies for Student Resilience and Coping in Dealing with Psychological Distress

Students have different abilities and ways of responding to unpleasant experiences. The ability to endure, adapt, and resume daily activities after experiencing stress is associated with resilience. Coping refers to the various efforts made by individuals to deal with and manage the stress or difficulties they experience.

Coping strategies that can be developed among students include recognising and appropriately expressing emotions, talking to trusted individuals, engaging in positive activities, maintaining healthy social relationships, and seeking help when problems become too difficult to manage independently. Social support plays an important role in building students' resilience. Families, teachers, peers, and school environments can all serve as

sources of support for students.

The KKN students also delivered an educational session to more than 80 elementary school (SD) pupils. The pupils were provided with materials on emotional awareness, building self-confidence, positive communication, problem-solving, and the importance of seeking help for mental health issues. Strengthening resilience does not mean requiring pupils to face all their problems alone; rather, pupils need to understand that seeking help is an important coping strategy.

Strengthening Collaboration and Referral Systems at the School Level

The following describes the recommended steps for schools, which had not yet been implemented at the time of this report. The initial step in establishing a referral system is to ensure that each school has clear Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). These SOPs should include procedures for prevention, reporting, response, and referral when students experience violence or psychological issues. This provision is consistent with the Regulation of the Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology No. 46 of 2023, which regulates the establishment of the Violence Prevention and Response Team (Tim Pencegahan dan Penanganan Kekerasan/TPPK) (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2023).

Established SOPs do not function optimally without adequate teacher capacity. Therefore, teacher capacity building must be conducted through continuous training. A gatekeeper training approach can be implemented to equip teachers, particularly guidance and counselling teachers, with the ability to recognise the early signs of psychological distress and provide appropriate initial responses (Liu et al., 2025).

Schools also need to establish partnerships with various institutions that can provide follow-up services for students, such as psychologists, child protection service organisations, the Family Learning Center (Pusat Pembelajaran Keluarga/PUSPAGA), a family counselling and parenting service developed under the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (Fitriati et al., 2023), and other institutions with relevant authority according to students' needs. Ideally, inter-institutional partnerships should be formalised through memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or written cooperation agreements.

Guidance and counselling teachers play an important role in ensuring that students' management and referral processes are appropriately carried out. Referral procedures should be accompanied by the application of professional ethics in guidance and counseling, particularly the principles of confidentiality, integrity, and competence (Kusuma et al., 2025). Technology can also be utilised to strengthen reporting and case-recording mechanisms in schools, including digital reporting systems that provide anonymous reporting options and case monitoring features (Messman et al., 2024).

Program Relevance to School Conditions in Kasimpar Village

This activity is particularly relevant to the school context in Kasimpar Village because its target participants included teachers from kindergarten through senior high school, while there is also a need to strengthen teachers' understanding of students' psychological conditions. In situations where educational personnel, particularly guidance and counselling professionals, are limited, all teachers' basic understanding of indicators of changes in students becomes an important component of early support within the school environment.



Figure 2. Penyampain Materi P3LP kepada guru di Desa Kasimpar.

Strengthening teachers' capacity is not intended for teachers to provide diagnoses or to assume the responsibilities of professional practitioners. Teachers' roles are focused on initial identification, providing a sense of safety, offering initial support, communicating in a non-judgmental manner, maintaining proportionate records, and coordinating with the school, family, and professional services when necessary. The support system should also consider the relatively small school size and student population, in which confidentiality, empathy, and the best interests of students should be prioritised throughout every stage of the response process.

Discussion

Teachers in Petungkriyono District have potential to contribute to the early identifying students' psychological conditions, particularly because of their regular and close interaction with students. This is consistent with (Maclean & Law, 2022) who emphasised that teachers play a crucial role in the early detection of students' psychological problems in elementary schools, given that teachers are among the adults who interact most frequently and directly with students. Simultaneously, the finding that many of the 23 participating teachers had not yet applied basic first-response steps shows that this potential is not yet fully realised.

The provision of PFA by teachers fundamentally differs from psychotherapy or formal counselling. Teachers are not expected to explore the details of students' traumatic experiences; rather, they focus on creating a sense of safety and addressing immediate

practical needs (Berger et al., 2021). This is in line with (Rusli et al., 2026), who reported that improving teachers' competence in applying PFA as an early response to students' psychosocial problems can enhance their preparedness and confidence. In the present program, the simulations focused on building trust and listening attentively, two basic steps that do not require teachers to probe into traumatic details.

Pupils' resilience and coping were addressed through educational sessions delivered to elementary pupils. (Asshidiqy et al., 2026) emphasised that emotional regulation and social support are key protective factors that help students cope with stress. The material also drew on local values such as family connectedness and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), which were designed to fit the value system of Indonesian students.

After the session, more than 15 of the more than 80 pupils began to share their problems with teachers and KKN students, while most had not yet done so. This suggests an early increase in pupils' willingness to open up. That most pupils had not yet opened up indicates that a single session is insufficient, and that teachers' consistent application of first-response steps, together with follow-up, is needed to build pupils' trust over time.

Strengthening referral systems and inter-institutional collaboration is another component that cannot be overlooked. A study evaluating services for child victims of violence, conducted by the Regional Technical Implementation Unit for the Protection of Women and Children (UPTD PPA), found that the absence of clear SOPs and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) constituted a major obstacle to sustained inter-institutional coordination (Samolo & Muharudin, 2026). Although that study concerned a city-level child protection services rather than schools, it suggests that SOPs and inter-institutional agreements should be developed in participating schools as the next step toward a sustainable system for protecting students' psychological well-being.

Limitations

This report is limited by the absence of systematic pre- and post-measurements, reliance on informal pupil feedback, a pupil sample restricted to the elementary level, lack of follow-up after the initial response, and inability to separate the effect of teacher training from that of pupil education. The finding that some pupils began to open up cannot therefore be generalised to kindergarten, junior high, or senior high students.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, teachers should be supported to better understand and consistently apply the steps of direct first response when students show signs of psychological distress, beginning with building trust and listening attentively and extending to creating a sense of safety and referring students when needed. Because the program covered only the initial stage, schools are encouraged to develop follow-up and referral procedures, and future activities should include a systematic evaluation. Education for

pupils should also be extended to other school levels, since this program only reached elementary pupils.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, teachers should be supported to better understand and consistently apply the steps of direct first response when students show signs of psychological distress, beginning with building trust and listening attentively, and extending to creating a sense of safety and referring students when needed. Because the program covered only the initial stage, schools are encouraged to develop follow-up and referral procedures, and future activities should include systematic evaluation. Education for pupils should also be extended to other school levels, since this program reached only elementary pupils.

Conclusion

This community service program with teachers in Kasimpar Village positioned teachers as an important component in the early identification of students' psychological conditions. Psychological distress may be influenced by family, peer, and school environments and may manifest as changes in students' behaviour, emotions, concentration, social relationships, and physical conditions.

The provision of Psychological First Aid by teachers focuses on safety, comfort, empathetic presence, non-judgmental listening, assistance with emotional regulation, and connecting students with appropriate support. Students' resilience and coping should also be strengthened through the ability to recognize emotions, seek support, maintain healthy social relationships, engage in positive activities, and seek help when problems become too difficult to manage independently.

At the school level, this support needs to be strengthened through clear SOPs, continuous teacher capacity building, referral networks, the role of guidance and counselling personnel within their professional competencies, confidentiality safeguards, proper documentation, and ongoing monitoring, and evaluation. Thus, psychological first aid can be provided safely, non-judgmentally, and sustainably without replacing the role of qualified professionals.

The program showed early signs that pupils were willing to open up: more than 15 of the more than 80 elementary pupils began to share their problems with teachers and KKN students. However, this finding is preliminary, and many teachers still need support to consistently apply first-response steps.

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