

LEGITIMIZING INFORMAL LEARNING: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY LEADERS IN STRENGTHENING THE EXISTENCE OF COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER IN RURAL SETTINGS

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Abstract

This study examines the role of community leaders in sustaining Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in rural Indonesia, with a focus on CLC Kasih in Pacitan Regency. Using a qualitative grounded theory approach, the research explores their strategies, forms of involvement, motivations, and impacts. Findings show that community leaders support CLCs through personal and non-personal communication, financial and infrastructure aid, skill-based training, and public advocacy. Motivated by the social and economic benefits of nonformal education, their involvement enhances learner motivation, institutional legitimacy, and policy support. Community leaders also serve as facilitators and agents of change, strengthening CLC Kasih as a credible and community-driven institution. Their engagement ensures that informal learning remains inclusive, responsive, and aligned with local needs.

Keywords: Nonformal Education, Community Engagement, Community Learning Center, Local Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

Non-formal education plays a strategic role in expanding access to learning opportunities for communities underserved by the formal education system. In Indonesia, Community Learning Centers (CLC's) serve as crucial institutions offering various programs, ranging from equivalency education to vocational and life-skills training tailored to local needs. However, the existence and sustainability of CLC's especially in rural areas face persistent challenges, including limited resources, low community participation, and a lack of institutional legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

The legitimacy of informal learning, particularly in the context of community-based education such as life-skills programs, is strongly influenced by the role and authority of community leaders. These local figures hold key positions in shaping social norms and behavior through their influence within the community. According to Steven et al., (2019), community leaders act as recognized custodians of tradition and can influence behavioral and belief changes especially in health through their social and political authority. In the domain of informal learning, they often serve as trusted sources of information and as role models for expected community behaviors.

Furthermore, community leadership contributes to the sustainability of CLC's by promoting inclusive and collaborative leadership practices. Research by Day & Dragoni, (2015) suggests that effective leadership is often cultivated through interpersonal experience and direct engagement within organizations. In the context of CLC's, leadership models that foster interaction and community involvement can increase participation and strengthen local ownership of learning initiatives. Similarly, Chen & You, (2018) emphasize that opinion leaders can significantly enhance the effectiveness of collaborative learning environments, highlighting the importance of identifying and supporting key influencers within the community.

Community leaders are also in a position to create more participatory and learner-centered environments. Dedicated leaders can help reduce hierarchical barriers and foster productive group interaction by promoting openness and equity in learning spaces (Frykedal et al., 2018). However, the effectiveness of such leadership is contingent not only on positional authority but also on the leader's attitude and commitment to education. Rahmah et al., (2023) caution that negative attitudes from leaders may hinder community engagement and create a vacuum in the role-modeling process essential for learning.

The legitimacy of informal education facilitated through CLC's in rural areas can be significantly strengthened through the active and positive engagement of community leaders. When these figures are able to build trust, establish meaningful social connections, and support collaborative learning efforts, they become critical agents in

cultivating a sustainable and impactful non-formal learning ecosystem. Nevertheless, prior studies have rarely explored in depth the specific strategies used to engage community leaders, the tangible forms of their contribution, their motivations for involvement, and the long-term impact of their participation on institutional sustainability. This study seeks to address that gap by investigating the dynamics of community leader engagement in supporting the existence of CLC's Kasih, a non-formal learning institution located in Kasihan Village, Pacitan Regency. Which has successfully fostered trust and active community participation. This research aims to contribute both theoretically and practically to the body of knowledge on community-based educational management.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach using grounded theory methodology, aimed at constructing a theory based on participants' lived experiences and social interactions in a natural setting. Grounded theory is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena that are not yet well-theorized in the existing literature (Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2022). The focus of this research is on the engagement of community leaders in strengthening the sustainability of Community Learning Centers in rural areas, with CLC's Kasih in Pacitan serving as the research site.

The study was conducted in CLC's Kasih, located in Kasihan Village, Tegalombo District, Pacitan Regency, East Java. This location was selected due to its recognized success in mobilizing community leaders to support non-formal education initiatives. The researcher engaged in a life-in process for two months (February–March 2023), allowing for an immersive understanding of the social dynamics and institutional practices. A total of eight key informants were purposively selected, including the village head, respected community leaders, CLC's administrators, and tutors. The selection criteria emphasized individuals with active involvement in the institution's development.

Data were collected using two primary techniques: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation allowed the researcher to document behaviors, interactions, and cultural nuances in a natural setting (Stahl & King, 2020). Meanwhile, in-depth interviews enabled a deeper exploration of personal motivations, perceptions, and lived experiences related to community leader engagement (Khan, 2014). The researcher maintained reflective field notes, interview transcripts, and analytic memos throughout the data collection process to support analytical rigor and traceability.

The data analysis followed the grounded theory coding process, consisting of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the open coding phase, the researcher identified initial categories from field notes and interview transcripts. During axial coding, relationships between categories were mapped to identify patterns and core themes. In the selective coding stage, a central category was developed that integrated all the findings into a cohesive theoretical model. The entire analysis was carried out using an interactive model (Miles & Huberman, 2018), emphasizing constant comparison between data and emerging concepts.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied Lincoln and Guba's four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Ahmed, 2024). Prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking were employed to strengthen credibility (Elo et al., 2014). A detailed audit trail was maintained to support dependability and confirmability. Transferability was addressed by providing thick description of the context and participants. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, and all informants participated voluntarily with informed consent. The researcher upheld confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Strategies for engaging community leaders at PKBM Kasih, located in Pacitan Regency

This study produced field findings on the strategies for engaging community leaders at CLC's Kasih, located in Pacitan Regency. The findings indicate that the engagement strategies employed to support the existence of CLC's Kasih are carried out through three main approaches: (1) Personal communication, conducted by visiting (sowan) community leaders, and non-personal communication, through the dissemination of CLC's Kasih's programs and activities via social media platforms; (2) Inviting community leaders to participate in activities organized by CLC's, such as during the implementation of the National Assessment (ANBK), and providing them with opportunities to deliver training sessions, such as in traditional Javanese public speaking (sesorah); and (3) CLC's Kasih's active participation in events organized by the Village and Sub-district Governments, including independence parades, local competitions, and village development forums (rembuk desa).

The engagement of community leaders plays a critical role in sustaining the relevance and presence of CLC's Kasih in rural communities. The findings reveal that personal and non-personal communication strategies are central to fostering relationships and building institutional legitimacy. Personal communication—such as sowan or respectful visits to influential local figures including religious leaders, traditional elders, and the village head—serves as an entry point for emotional bonding and trust-building. This form of interaction, which respects local social structures, not only conveys information but also establishes CLC's Kasih as a socially embedded institution. As noted by (Hilmi et al., 2022), direct communication is effective in strengthening collaboration within communities.

These personal interactions go beyond symbolic presence; they provide a platform for two-way communication where CLC'S administrators can receive input, discuss ongoing programs, and listen to the aspirations of community leaders. This interactive dynamic allows CLC'S Kasih to function not just as a service provider but as a strategic community partner. Damayanti & Puspasari, (2022) support this, noting that face-to-face interaction fosters deeper understanding of local contexts and community needs—crucial for successful program implementation.

On the other hand, non-personal communication is carried out through social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook. These digital tools allow CLC'S Kasih to disseminate information broadly and efficiently, especially to tech-savvy younger populations. Social media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and enhancing the visibility of educational institutions (Ramkita & Muslim, 2023; Wahyudi, 2022). By sharing updates, achievements, and upcoming events, CLC'S Kasih fosters transparency and invites community scrutiny key indicators of public trust. Importantly, social media does more than inform; it facilitates participatory engagement. Community members and local leaders can respond, give feedback, and interact through comment sections or direct messages (Arafah, 2023). Participatory digital space strengthens community involvement and mobilization in both educational and social initiatives (Gustavito, 2021). For CLC'S Kasih, this has helped expand its support base while integrating modern communication with traditional leadership engagement.

In addition to communication strategies, the active involvement of community leaders in institutional activities is another core approach. These leaders are not merely ceremonial guests; they serve as facilitators, mentors, and even skill trainers. One example includes training in traditional Javanese public speaking (*sesorah*), which enhances learners' communication skills while preserving cultural heritage (Malla, 2022). The direct involvement of local leaders strengthens social capital and reinforces program credibility (Fernández & Scribner, 2017; Sewu et al., 2023).

CLC'S Kasih participates actively in local government events such as community parades, competitions, and village planning meetings (*rembuk desa*). This involvement integrates CLC'S into the village ecosystem, positioning it as a stakeholder in broader development efforts. (Ratnah & Suastika, 2022) emphasize that village governments can support educational institutions through policy and funding alignment. Furthermore, collaboration with institutions like BUMDes (village-owned enterprises) and the use of village funds to support infrastructure and training programs Pamungkas et al., (2018) make CLC'S a critical partner in local development. These collective efforts not only increase CLC'S's visibility but also establish it as a vital node in the social and developmental fabric of the community (Insari et al., 2022; Mafazi & Ahmad, 2024).

Forms of Community Leader Involvement in the Existence of CLCs

The involvement of community leaders in the development and sustainability CLC's, particularly CLC Kasih, plays a crucial and multi-dimensional role. Field findings indicate that this involvement takes tangible form through both financial contributions and skill-based support. Community leaders at CLC Kasih have donated essential technological resources such as laptops, which directly support the implementation of the Computer-Based National Assessment (ANBK) and digital literacy classes. Additionally, financial assistance for the construction of new classrooms has significantly enhanced the physical infrastructure of the institution. These contributions suggest that community leaders are not merely passive supporters, but key drivers of non-formal educational development in their region.

Donations of laptops and classroom buildings can be seen as long-term investments in educational quality. Adequate infrastructure positively influences learning environments and learner motivation (Hasibuan et al., 2023; Mularsih & Hartini, 2019). The availability of comfortable and proper classrooms contributes to more conducive learning conditions, leading to increased participation and retention among learners. The integration of laptops also strengthens digital literacy among adult learners an essential skill in today's rapidly evolving digital economy. According to (Junianto et al., 2024), access to modern technology is vital in preparing learners for 21st-century challenges and expanding their employment opportunities.

Beyond infrastructure, these contributions impact institutional management. The availability of proper learning spaces allows CLC Kasih to expand its offerings, including skills training and community-based education. Physical learning environments that meet national standards enhance collaborative and interactive learning (Supriyono, 2021). This directly improves the institution's credibility and relevance within the local community, positioning CLC Kasih as a trustworthy educational partner.

Financial support from community leaders serves as a strategic bridge connecting government policy, community interests, and educational institutions. Purwito et al., (2021) emphasized the importance of community leader involvement in building sustainable cooperation between local stakeholders. Their trust and endorsement provide CLCs with social legitimacy, which is crucial in expanding partnerships and securing ongoing support from external entities. This trust also reinforces CLC Kasih's position within the wider community development agenda.

Apart from financial and physical support, community leaders at CLC Kasih also play an active role in human resource development by facilitating practical skills training. The training covers a wide range of areas including agriculture, livestock farming, small business development, and the preservation of local culture. These initiatives are tailored to local economic contexts and support learner independence. Skill-based training is not only relevant but also sustainable, empowering learners with the tools to improve their livelihoods. For instance, agricultural and livestock training improves household productivity, while teaching environmentally friendly techniques such

as organic farming (Utama et al., 2023). Similarly, entrepreneurial training enhances micro-enterprise development and digital business literacy (Kurniawan, 2023; Yulastri et al., 2019).

Cultural-based training is also a core element of community leader engagement. Hayati et al., (2023) explain that utilizing local cultural knowledge, such as traditional culinary practices and handicrafts, not only preserves local identity but also creates opportunities in the creative economy. At CLC Kasih, such training has opened up new platforms for learner expression and innovation, particularly for those from diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, these trainings help foster strong social bonds and mutual support networks within the community, creating a collaborative learning ecosystem. This reinforces the notion that CLCs are not only educational spaces but also social hubs that promote community resilience and inclusivity.

Community leaders further extend their involvement through socialization and outreach efforts. Public forums serve as effective platforms for promoting educational opportunities and building trust between the CLC and the community. As noted by WK et al., (2024) and Adha et al., (2019), such interactions are vital in enhancing moral development and improving educational quality through community participation. Additionally, community leaders facilitate CLC Kasih's participation in public exhibitions, which helps raise its visibility and attractiveness to potential learners. These events align with the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) in education, broadening the institution's public reach and engagement (Oktavera et al., 2023).

Effective public relations and promotion are also vital to CLC development. Azhar et al., (2022) highlight that strong institutional branding and stakeholder relations help ensure long-term success. Through social outreach, community leaders become advocates for CLCs in both formal and informal settings. Their influence helps build broader support networks, increasing awareness of the value of non-formal education. Safitra et al., (2023) further affirm that community engagement in events like exhibitions enhances public interest and learner participation.

The forms of community leader involvement in sustaining CLC Kasih are comprehensive and strategic. Their contributions range from financial support and infrastructure development to skills training, cultural preservation, public advocacy, and promotional facilitation. These efforts not only strengthen the physical and digital capabilities of the institution but also foster a more inclusive, context-based, and community-empowered approach to non-formal education. Community leaders are not peripheral actors, they are central partners in the long-term transformation and sustainability of grassroots education.

Motivations for Community Leader Involvement in the Existence of CLCs

The active involvement of community leaders in CLC Kasih reflects a strong, value-based motivation to uplift the community through education. Leaders such as village heads, religious figures, and cultural elders are not only advocates of the programs but also serve as intermediaries between the institution and the wider community. This type of engagement aligns with Arnstein's (1969) Community Participation Theory at the "partnership" level, wherein stakeholders share in both decision-making and implementation of educational programs. Their participation goes beyond symbolic support; it involves shaping strategy, building awareness, and mobilizing action.

One of the core motivational factors is the recognition of non-formal education's potential to address social challenges such as school dropouts, unemployment, and low workforce competencies. This reinforces the concept of Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1987), which asserts that access to education is a fundamental component of community empowerment. By enabling residents to improve their life outcomes through learning opportunities, community leaders support a model of social transformation that is inclusive and sustainable.

Another significant motivation is the use of digital tools and media to reach wider audiences. Community leaders at CLC Kasih initiated the use of social media platforms to promote learning programs and attract youth participants. This strategy reflects an understanding of the current digital landscape and the importance of expanding outreach through accessible channels. As Rijal et al., (2021) suggest, digital platforms enhance the effectiveness of communication and community participation in non-formal education, helping institutions like CLC Kasih stay relevant and responsive.

Community leaders also serve as legitimizing agents for CLC Kasih, positioning the center as a credible alternative for school dropouts. Their endorsement generates public trust and fosters a sense of ownership among community members. In the context of Empowerment Theory, this legitimization is essential in building community-based institutions that people feel personally connected to further encouraging their active participation and long-term commitment.

Moreover, the facilitation of partnerships with higher education institutions demonstrates the leaders' strategic vision. These collaborations provide access to academic mentorship, research-based learning models, and improved educator capacity. According to Sholeh et al., (2023), such partnerships are instrumental in enhancing the quality of educational programs and ensuring alignment with national standards. Here, community leaders take on the role of transformational agents, bridging grassroots efforts with institutional expertise.

Leaders also play an essential role in developing locally responsive vocational training programs such as organic farming, sewing, and handicrafts that cater to the region's economic realities. This reflects a nuanced understanding of community needs and aspirations. As Nurhayati et al., (2022) argue, localized skills training improves employability and local competitiveness, thus reducing dependency on external assistance. In this sense, community leaders act as change agents, guiding residents toward economic self-reliance and resilience.

Spiritual and moral motivations are equally significant, especially among religious leaders who frame education as an act of service and devotion. They utilize cultural and religious narratives to instill a collective responsibility

for education, reinforcing the social and emotional bonds that support learning engagement. This approach is not only culturally grounded but also highly effective in mobilizing moral support for non-formal education. Additionally, leaders are motivated by the desire to create an economically self-sufficient community. Through the lens of empowerment, they recognize that education is the pathway to reducing reliance on government aid. The programs offered by CLC Kasih serve as platforms for entrepreneurial development and skill mastery, enabling learners to establish independent livelihoods. Lastly, community involvement facilitated by these leaders enhances social cohesion. CLCs become spaces where individuals of different ages, statuses, and professions interact and learn together. According to Kosiah, (2018), community-based learning fosters inclusive social environments where solidarity and mutual support thrive. Leaders play a vital role in sustaining these relationships, ensuring that the CLC remains not just an educational institution but also a social hub that reinforces community identity and unity.

In conclusion, the motivations behind community leader involvement in the existence of CLC Kasih are deeply embedded in the desire to promote educational equity, economic empowerment, social cohesion, and cultural sustainability. Their roles as facilitators, advocates, and strategic partners exemplify meaningful engagement in both the Community Participation Theory and Empowerment Theory frameworks. These findings affirm that community leaders are not peripheral supporters but central actors in the transformation of non-formal education systems at the local level.

The Impact of Community Leader Involvement on the Existence of CLCs

The involvement of community leaders has had a strategic influence on encouraging residents to return to education and skill-building programs. As respected figures, their participation boosts public confidence and validates the relevance of non-formal education. This aligns with Sewu et al., (2023), who argued that the endorsement of local leaders plays a transformative role in shifting societal perceptions, especially among those previously marginalized from the formal education system. Community leaders act not just as symbols of support but as advocates whose presence encourages learners to pursue their goals with greater confidence.

More than that, the involvement of community leaders creates a psychologically supportive environment for adult learners. Their legitimacy enhances learner self-esteem and instills the belief that participating in equivalency programs is both respectable and worthwhile. Supporting this, S.B. & Ismaila, (2022) found that in Ghana, local leadership significantly influenced adult learners particularly women to re-engage with education. Their study illustrates that encouragement from authoritative community figures helps overcome self-doubt and social stigma. Furthermore, community leaders serve as key communicators who disseminate positive narratives about non-formal education. Their role bridges the gap between the CLC and the wider community, turning information into inspiration. Communities led by active, education-oriented leaders tend to be more receptive to public health and education initiatives (Pino et al., 2016). In the case of CLC Kasih, this dynamic enhances institutional legitimacy and public trust, especially among adults returning to education later in life.

The emotional and moral support provided by community leaders also helps rebuild learning motivation, particularly for individuals who have previously dropped out. Muadin, (2022) described such figures as "motivational agents" who reduce psychological barriers and adapt educational approaches to community needs. Similarly, community leaders at CLC Kasih help eliminate the social stigma often attached to adult learners. When authority figures actively support education, they cultivate inclusive environments where returning to school is normalized and celebrated (Lubis, 2020).

The leaders' influence also extends to practical outcomes, particularly the expansion of infrastructure and resources. Due to their broad social networks and community credibility, leaders can facilitate external support from government agencies, NGOs, and private donors. Khusaifan, (2021) noted that community leader involvement often leads to tangible improvements in educational resources. At CLC Kasih, the acquisition of laptops, classrooms, and other facilities illustrates how social leadership translates into material support for learning.

Community leaders further act as strategic connectors between CLCs and key stakeholders. Active local leadership fosters partnerships that enable advocacy for funding and logistical support (Hardika et al., 2020). Their trusted status makes them effective at mobilizing community fundraising, soliciting in-kind contributions, and influencing donor decision-making. These forms of advocacy are essential for the sustainability of non-formal education infrastructure (Rasyad et al., 2019).

In line with Social Capital Theory, community leaders help cultivate inter-institutional trust essential for long-term collaboration. They mediate productive relationships between the CLC and external partners, increasing access to resources that would otherwise be out of reach (Gannon & Roberts, 2020). Capacity for partnership-building directly improves service delivery and educational access for marginalized groups (Listyaningrum et al., 2021).

Importantly, this involvement also inspires community-driven educational initiatives. As Hasan & Utomo (2022) observed, leaders who leverage social capital can mobilize collective action, such as volunteer construction of learning spaces or initiating microenterprises to fund CLC operations. These bottom-up initiatives reflect strong community ownership and foster a sustainable culture of learning. The resulting learning environments become more conducive and inclusive. Physical conditions significantly influence learning focus and comfort (Haidar et al., 2021). Therefore, the infrastructural support provided by community leaders does not only improve physical access but also shapes the learning experience itself, establishing strong foundations for educational continuity

and quality. The presence of community leaders in CLC activities strengthens public perception and enhances institutional credibility. Diana & Hakim (2021) stated that close collaboration between education providers and the community fosters a positive reputation. At CLC Kasih, this collaboration translates into trust, making the institution a legitimate and valued part of local development.

CLC Kasih is now no longer seen as a mere alternative or temporary solution but has become an integral part of local capacity building. Community engagement ensures program relevance and sustainability (DeMatthews, 2018). The involvement of leaders helps align CLC programming with local needs—equivalency education, entrepreneurship, and skills training—enhancing its attractiveness and effectiveness. Their role also cultivates a collective sense of ownership, essential for long-term commitment. Additionally, community leaders serve as communication bridges. Their broad reach enables them to deliver education-related messages persuasively. Community-led communication instills shared values and learning enthusiasm, further mobilizing participation from all societal segments (Juariah & Widiastuti, 2018; Rosari, 2023).

Through strategic partnerships, facilitated by local leaders, CLCs gain access to diversified resources. Meyer, (2022) highlight that external collaboration broadens institutional capacity and improves learning outcomes. In Tegalombo, community leaders helped CLC Kasih connect with donors and government entities, contributing to more sustainable programming (Supriyono, 2021).

Long-term impacts include increased public confidence and sustained learner participation. Verani et al., (2019) noted that the longevity of non-formal education programs depends heavily on local stakeholder involvement. When CLCs are perceived as community assets, maintained and supported by trusted leaders, their relevance and resilience are significantly enhanced.

Community leader involvement has a profound impact on strengthening the motivation of learners, enhancing public trust, improving infrastructure, and positioning CLCs such as CLC Kasih as credible and community-owned institutions. These leaders act as moral authorities, advocates, facilitators, and brokers of resources, effectively bridging the gap between non-formal education and the wider community. Their active participation not only reduces stigma but also empowers communities to co-own and co-develop education solutions. Ultimately, such involvement provides a sustainable foundation for inclusive, responsive, and impactful non-formal education at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

The sustainability and legitimacy of nonformal education in rural settings, particularly at CLC Kasih in Pacitan Regency, are significantly shaped by the strategic involvement of community leaders. Their engagement is manifested through a combination of personal and non-personal communication, active participation in institutional and community activities, and direct support for educational programs. These leaders contribute materially through financial and infrastructure aid, and intellectually through skill-based training and public advocacy. Driven by a collective motivation to improve local quality of life and educational access, their involvement enhances learner motivation, reduces social stigma, and strengthens institutional trust. Moreover, their roles in building partnerships, promoting programs via social media, and supporting policy initiatives position CLC Kasih as not merely a service provider, but a vital community hub for empowerment and inclusive development. In essence, community leaders serve as facilitators, advocates, and agents of change—ensuring that informal learning remains a credible, responsive, and transformative force within rural education systems.

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