

**Rethinking early childhood pedagogy, curriculum and co-creators of knowledge: Insights from participatory community-driven action research in multidimensionally deprived rural communities**

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## Abstract

**Purpose.** Efforts to strengthen evidence-informed policy and decisions in ECE contexts require a critical rethinking of what counts as education. Across rural Africa, a plethora of challenges constrains the provision and access to formal ECE for younger children aged 3–6 years; absent ECE infrastructure, long travel distances, minimal parental involvement, and marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems in the ECE curricula. Thus, learning becomes inaccessible and unresponsive to local realities, requiring the identification of community-based alternatives. Consequently, this study explores how parents use indigenous pedagogies to address learning deficits and develop children aged 3–6 years in communities without formal ECE and infrastructure.

**Methodology.** An exploratory qualitative study was conducted in 12 rural, deprived communities in Northern and Southern Ghana. Face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a stratified gender-diverse community actors. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify indigenous early pedagogies across communities.

**Findings.** Early childhood learning and development practices are deeply embedded in culture, and community-driven practices that function as legitimate and effective forms of evidence. Parents draw on cultural, environment-based, and social pedagogies that foster children's cognitive, socioemotional, moral, ecological stewardship behaviours, and develop cooperative, empathy, social responsibility dispositions among younger children. These pedagogies are complemented with oral traditions, play-based learning and everyday economic activities such as buying and selling, serving as practical for developing literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills. These indigenous approaches are characterised by experiential, participatory, and intergenerational learning processes that position parents, elders and community members as key knowledge holders. Importantly, the findings challenge dominant deficit narratives about indigenous actors and communities by demonstrating that robust, contextually relevant learning systems already exist outside formal schooling structures.

**Significance/contributions.** The study contributes to ongoing discourses on the legitimacy and ownership of education and evidence, foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems as credible, scalable and policy-relevant. It reinforces calls for the integrations of community-based pedagogies into ECE frameworks and emphasises the need for inclusive evidence ecosystems that recognises and institutionalises locally grounded practices. The study therefore, offers pathways for reimagining early learning and strengthening evidence-informed policy and practice across similar contexts.