

Community as Curriculum: Relational Networks, Mutual Aid, and Collective Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal policy agendas are shaping ECCE, focusing on school readiness, measurable learning outcomes, standardization, and accountability. In this policy world, curriculum is seen as pre-decided knowledge designed by outsiders, including experts from universities and other institutions not part of the school, and implemented by teachers, while families and the community are acknowledged as supportive agents. While much research has theorized parental involvement, community participation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and relational approaches in ECE, relatively little conceptual work theorizes the community itself as curriculum. In response to this conceptual gap, the article presents the Community-as-Curriculum Framework, stating that curriculum emerges through the relational, cultural, and democratic interactions of children, families, educators, and communities and not just externally imposed content. The study adopts a conceptual research design in this article. It undertakes an integrative conceptual analysis to synthesize insights from democratic education, critical pedagogy, relational pedagogy, Indigenous African Early Childhood Care and Education (IECCE), Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, and recent literature on mutual aid and participatory democracy. Through this theoretical synthesis, the article shows that community is to be understood not just as a context of curriculum implementation, but rather its primary source, site, and purpose. Sources taken from community-managed early learning programs, the Indigenous early childhood care and education framework for Africa, the Community-Led Action for Children (CLAC) model, and the English Early Years Coalition show that community-based approaches can promote democratic participation, cultural continuity, shared responsibility, holistic child development, and more. The study presents a new conceptual framework that repositions children, families, educators, and communities as co-constructors of curriculum within interconnected ecological and democratic relationships. Reclaiming ECCE as a community-focused undertaking suggests an alternative means to an increasingly market-oriented and standardized method. Furthermore, it provides possibilities for future empirical research, policy innovation, and pedagogical invention.

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KEYWORDS: *Early Childhood Care and Education; community as curriculum; relational pedagogy; mutual aid; democratic education; Indigenous education; participatory democracy; curriculum theory.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The contribution of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and lifelong development has been recognized, and it has emerged as one of the priority areas of the policy within current educational systems. ECCE, also being a site of growing neoliberal reforms, is more than ever shaped by an emphasis on accountability, standardized learning

outcomes, school readiness, competition in the market, and evidence of impact. In this policy context, the, curriculum is often understood as a technical tool developed by the government or educational experts designed to achieve predetermined educational outcomes. As a result, the organization of learning is increasingly expressed in terms of pre-defined competencies, while families

and communities are often cast as consumers, supporters or implementers of externally designed educational agendas (Abdulkareem, 2025; Fitri et al., 2026; Lodhi & Ahmad, 2025).

The predominant view Freire (1970) likened to the “banking model” of education, whereby knowledge is banked from experts and flows to passive recipients instead of co-created through dialogue and lived experience. While the contemporary ECCE policy increasingly sees parental engagement and community participation as important, they are viewed in an instrumental sense which means as ways to improve endeavor results rather than as the curriculum itself. Young children learn rich cultural, relational and democratic lessons through families and communities, yet these approaches largely overlook them (Charamba & Aloka, 2024; Loftus & Madden, 2020; Sadownik & Višnjić Jevtić, 2023).

A growing body of literature supports the importance of relational pedagogy, democratic education, bioecological development, indigenous knowledge systems, and community education. Taken together, these viewpoints challenge the notion of curriculum as a document or instructional objectives that are prescribed. Learning and understanding grow through relationships, participation, cultural identity, dialogue, and shared responsibility. The existing literature largely uses ‘community’ as a situation where a community can implement a curriculum rather than conceptualize community itself as curriculum. This indicates an essential theoretical gap in ECCE Scholarship (Breitkreuz & Songer, 2022; Ibourk & Morrison, 2026; Kennedy, 2026; Rochester et al., 2026).

This article, in addressing that gap, proposes the Community-as-Curriculum Framework, which reconceptualizes curriculum as a relational ecosystem generated by the interactions of children, families, educators, and communities (Carta et al., 2025; Peltier et al., 2024).

According to the Framework, curriculum is not a product that is designed externally and delivered internally but is, instead, continuously co-constructed through everyday cultural practices, democratic participation, mutual aid, and collective care.

The article draws from these complementary theoretical traditions, namely, three theories – Dewey’s philosophy of democratic education, Freire’s critical pedagogy and Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory, Indigenous African perspectives regarding Early Childhood Care and Education, relational pedagogy, and modern theories of mutual aid and participatory democracy. By the

interdisciplinary joining of a number of ideas in the article, a new conceptual framework is developed, which positions the community not just as a stakeholder in ECCE but as the source, site, and aim of the curriculum (Friedman, 2024; Nkansah, 2025; Sugarman, 2024; Sullivan, 2025).

The article proceeds. after this introduction, the methodology explains the conceptual research design of the study. The next sections build a theoretical grounding of Community-as-Curriculum; illustrate its implementation through selected international examples; integrate these learnings into a conceptual framework; and conclude with implications for research, policy, and classroom practice.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This research features a conceptual research design using integrative conceptual analysis that designs a theory for Understanding Community-as-Curriculum within Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE). Conceptual research involves the examination, critique, and integration of theories and ideas to enhance knowledge. It is different from empirical research which aims to gather evidence to clarify theories. Instead of verifying assumptions or examining firsthand empirical information, theoretical works formulate clear models, which could assist in future research, policy, and professional practice (Ivanova et al., 2025; Korur et al., 2025; McGuire & Lay, 2020; Rakap & Balikci, 2025).

The current research is a response to a significant theoretical gap in ECCE scholarship. While the literature on community participation, parental engagement, culturally responsive education, democratic pedagogy, and Indigenous approaches to learning is extensive, relatively little scholarship has conceptualized community itself as curriculum. To fill this gap, we require a theory-building approach capable of integrating insights from various disciplinary traditions.

2.2. Integrative Conceptual Analysis

The study follows analyses and synthesizes literature from early childhood education, curriculum theory, comparative education, democratic education, Indigenous education, critical pedagogy, social pedagogy, community development, and educational sociology. It employs an integrative conceptual analysis. Jaakkola (2020) notes that integrative conceptual analysis allows the comparison of complementary theoretical perspectives in order to identify conceptual convergence, reconcile differences and create higher-order explanatory frameworks (Shahbazi et al., 2025).

The literature was chosen for its relevance to six interrelated areas of theory.

- Democratic education this work of Dewey (1916).
- Critical Pedagogy and Dialogical Learning (Freire, 1970)
- Bronfenbrenners Bioecological systems theory (1979).
- Frameworks of the Indigenous African Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO IICBA, 2013).
- Relational and social pedagogy as proposed by Rinaldi (2006).
- Working together for the good of the community (Marks, 2021).

Theoretical traditions were selected for their distinctive but complementary perspectives on learning that we see as a fundamentally relational, cultural and socially situated process. By combining the two, it is possible to develop more comprehensive conceptualization than would be possible with a single theory alone.

2.3. Theory Development

The conceptual framework in this paper was generated through the sequential comparison, synthesis and abstraction of theory. Initially, we identify the basic assumptions behind the theory. In the second section, we will look at themes of similarity and difference around relationship, participation, community knowledge, democratic engagement, culture continuity and collective responsibility. The third principle was synthesized into the Community-as-Curriculum Framework. This framework sends a clear message to teachers and school leaders that curriculum is not a pre-determined body of knowledge but an emerging property based on interconnected relationships to each other, our environment, and our wider world.

According to the advice for conceptual scholarship, the research purpose of this article is not to test a theory but to develop a framework that is novel, explanatory, and can be subsequently tested through empirical research and policy development (Barzilai & Chinn, 2024).

2.4. Trustworthiness and Scholarly Contribution

The reliability of conceptual research stems from the consistency, originality, literature integration, and explanatory power of the proposed framework, rather than statistical generalization. To develop a coherent conceptual model, the study uses transparent theoretical synthesis that is critical engagement with established scholarship, and interdisciplinary

integration. By placing community as the first source, site and purpose of curriculum the article offers a new theoretical lens that contributes to our current understanding of curriculum, relational pedagogy and democratic participation in the Early Childhood Care and Education (Bonnett et al., 2025; File et al., 2024; Hao & Tasir, 2024; Piran & Tran, 2024).

3. Theorizing Community as Curriculum: A Relational Ecosystem of Democratic Learning

This article argues that curriculum is not simply something that gets 'taught' in an education setting. Rather, it is something that is emergent, relational and culturally situated. It is generated through the daily interactions of children, families, educators and the broader community. This reconceptualization puts in question prevailing curriculum paradigms which privilege standardization, accountability, and school readiness while marginalizing the lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and collective agency of communities. It is not the external context that helps in implementing curriculum but the community which actually is the curriculum. It is also the community which offers relationships, cultural practices, democratic participation and meaningful shared experiences through which learning gets its significance (Dabie, 2025; Gershon & Helfenbein, 2023).

This theoretical position is built with six complementary perspectives: Dewey and democratic education, Freire and critical pedagogy, Bronfenbrenner and bioecological systems, IECCE, relational pedagogy, and contemporary references relating to mutual-aiding and participatory democracy. Although each tradition is rooted in a different intellectual context, they are remarkably united around a common view of learning as essentially relational, socially constructed, culturally embedded and democratically negotiated. The synthesis forms the theoretical basis of the Community-as-Curriculum Framework.

3.1. Democratic Education and Curriculum as Shared Social Experience

Dewey's (1916) view of education as a form of democracy sourced in a common experience, rather than the transmission of knowledge considered given, provides the philosophical roots to Community-as-Curriculum. According to Dewey, learning is inseparable from social life; it occurs through associations with other people. Democracy is not just a political destination but a way of life, a mode of associated living in which people construct knowledge through communication, inquiry and cooperation (Hooper & Hooper, 2026; Lind, 2023; Lindhult, 2022).

When it comes to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Dewey's outlook rebukes the idea that curriculum is simply a set of learning objectives drawn up by experts. Rather, curriculum refers to the experiential life through which children engage with family, neighbor, culture and community problem-solving. Children's learning happens as a result of their interactions with the social settings that contribute to their identities. For this reason, it is not possible for curricula to be completely severed from the communities in which the child lives as these communities yet create the experiences that make up learning itself (Abdullah et al., 2020; Del et al., 2022; Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2023; Zhang, 2024).

However, Dewey's democratic foundations of education are a partial explanation of the ways in which power shapes curriculum formation. Freire's critical pedagogy responds to this shortcoming by expanding democratic education to emphasize dialogue, agency, and the redistribution of educational authority.

3.2. Critical Pedagogy and the Democratization of Curriculum

The "banking model" of education is critiqued by Freire (1970) in an important extension of Dewey's democratic vision. When knowledge is a commodity that owls experts deposit into the passive, he argued, education becomes oppressive. Such approaches to knowledge undermine local knowledge and legitimize existing power relations while preventing learners from participating in meaning-making (Takona & Takona, 2025).

In the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), neoliberal curriculum reforms often reproduce this banking logic through their highly standardized curricular frameworks, externally imposed learning outcomes, and accountability systems which privilege measurable performance over meaningful participation. Families and communities are frequently called to aid implementation, not take part in curriculum design; hence, the forms of participation are consultative rather than genuinely democratic (Yang et al., 2022).

Also, the Community-as-Curriculum Framework/Model rejects the idea of a hierarchy, positioning children, families, educators, and community equally as knowledge holders. Thus, curriculum is seen as an ongoing communiqué through which participants negotiate meanings, values, cultural practices and collective aspirations. Democratic participation is both the process by which curriculum develops and one of its most significant educational outcomes. Curriculum provides children with experiences of democratic citizenship today

rather than only preparing them for future citizenship by daily participation in their communities (Marsh et al., 2020; Martin, 2025; Thrash, 2026).

Freire's focus on dialogue and power is certainly important, but curriculum also operates in wider ecological systems outside of school. One of the main objectives of Aristotle's political philosophy is the understanding of the state in relation to society.

3.3. Bioecological Systems and the Relational Ecology of Learning

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), community-as-curriculum can be understood through bio-ecological systems theory. Children develop through different systems like families, schools, neighborhoods, social institutions, cultures, and policies which interact with each other in complex ways. Learning, therefore, comes about through relationships rather than education (Arminio & Torres, 2023; Hoang et al., 2024; Jamaludin, 2024).

This viewpoint is fundamentally different from mainstream, and also expands the conventional definition of curriculum. The development of children cannot be separated from interactions across multiple social systems, which suggests that the curriculum cannot be restricted to classroom activities or official curriculum documents. Children's curricula are not isolated from one another; they exist in a tangled web of interconnected relationships with their parents, siblings, grandparents, educators, peers, cultural traditions, community organizations, and local environments. The relevance of learning comes from the contexts which these relationships generate (Baraldi, 2023; Policastro, 2023; Rahayu & Dong, 2023).

To be clear, curriculum is local and systemic, according to Bronfenbrenner. The job status of a family is dictated mainly by the policies and conditions of employment. As a result, Community-as-Curriculum asserts that curriculum is always emerging through ongoing micro-macro interactions. This knowledge draws an important link between democratic participation and wider questions of educational governance and social justice.

3.4. Indigenous African Perspectives: Curriculum as Cultural Continuity

The IECCE Framework created by UNESCO IICBA (2013) from an ecological perspective places curriculum in cultural identity, Indigenous knowledge, and collective responsibility. Further, the framework by UNESCO advocates for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Services. Distinct from curriculum models that are universalized, and which frequently favor Western developmental

assumptions, the IECCE Framework accepts that children's learning is not dissociated from the history, language, tradition, values and daily practices of their respective communities (Sung, 2023).

Within Indigenous African cultures, education is a communal effort. Child development occurs through activities such as helping the family, listening to stories, intergenerational relations, ceremonies, play and everyday social interactions. Collectively learning is not the same as learning individually. Learning is what enables us to maintain our culture as well as our social cohesion. Therefore, education is best understood as acculturating whereby cultures pass on their legacies from one generation to another (Ekeh, 2024; Lancy, 2024; Robyn M. Holmes & Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, 2024; Stimac, 2022).

In this regard, communities are not additional resources for implementing curricula but the holders of education. The curriculum owes its legitimacy to the fact that it represents local histories, cultural practices and collective aspirations. Community control thus takes on both a pedagogical and a decolonizing role in challenging externally imposed models of education.

3.5. Relational Pedagogy, Mutual Aid, and Community Care

With relationships based on trust, reciprocity, care and mutual recognition, learning emerges. This aspect further deepens the Community-as-Curriculum Framework. The quality of education relies upon curriculum content, and the nature of the relationships that connect children, families, educators and communities (Bayraktar et al., 2025; Miriam Hansen et al., 2026; Qiao et al., 2024; Scheie et al., 2025).

This relational view has contemporary traction with scholarship on mutual aid describing communities as networks of response rather than mere agglomerations of service users. The fundamental difference between mutual aid and charity is that mutual aid is organized on a basis of solidarity and shared responsibility. The idea of mutual aid within ECCE allows those who work with children including parents, caregivers and community members to contribute different kinds of expertise while acknowledging that educational knowledge is distributed knowledge rather than the knowledge of the center (Esposito, 2025; Sanchez, 2025).

Also, Ubuntu, an African philosophy affirms the relational character of curriculum by recognizing that personhood is a function of one's relationship with others. The famous saying "a person is a person through other persons" captures an educational philosophy where children's development cannot be

separated from the wellbeing of families and communities. Not the work of individuals but the reflection of collective care (Duvenage, 2025; Koopman & Koopman, 2023).

The traditions concerning relationships challenge views on education that emphasize markets that view families as consumers and schools as providers. They view ECCE as a community of practice that empowers all those involved in the education and care of children (Rehman et al., 2025; Rosenzvaig-Hernandez, 2024).

3.6. Towards the Community-as-Curriculum Framework

The blending of these theories shows that they have a common idea though they come from different intellects.

As the emergence of critical pedagogy brought the notion of curriculum back into the fore, the coining of a new term 'curriculum theorizing' brought a historic consciousness to the idea of curriculum. Curriculum theorizing refers to how it is not simply individual educators who theorize curriculum, but that we each do so in different ways as a community of educators (Norris, 2025; Zeuthen, 2026).

Together, these views suggest that curriculum is not an educational product delivered through formal institutions, but rather, a social process that emerges through relationships, participation, culture, and democratic action. The community, therefore, is not just a setting in which the curriculum is implemented but the main source from which the curriculum draws its meaning, legitimacy and educational purpose (Ignaffo, 2022; Lu & Matheny, 2024; Meadows et al., 2025).

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework proposed in this article integrates these theoretical ideas in a coherent conceptual framework that depicts children, families, educators, and communities as joint creators of learning in ecologically, culturally, and democratically connected systems. As such, it offers a different lens through which to view ECCE; one that pivots, away from standardization and school readiness, towards relational, culturally responsive and socially just early childhood education.

4. Operationalizing Community as Curriculum: Comparative Illustrations from International Practice

This section illustrates, using three complementary international examples, how the Community-as-Curriculum Framework plays out in practice: the Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Education (IECCE) Framework across Africa; Plan International's Community-Led Action for Children

(CLAC) model in Uganda; and the English Early Years Coalition. These initiatives are borne out of diverse socio-political contexts but together they show that curriculum is most meaningful when communities are viewed as active co-constructors rather than passive recipients (Popov et al., 2015, 2016).

Instead of showcasing these initiatives as templates to be unquestionably followed, they're examined in their own rights as evidential illustrations that enact the key principles of Community-as-Curriculum being community ownership, democratic participation, relational pedagogy, cultural continuity, and collective responsibility. Though their conclusion is comparable in nature, their institutional arrangements differ. However, the pedagogical logic behind them is pretty similar.

4.1. Indigenous African ECCE: Community Ownership as Curriculum

The IECCE Framework, created by UNESCO IICBA (2013), is a clear example of a curriculum that emerged from its community - drawn from knowledge and cultural practice. The framework was developed collaboratively from across ten countries in Africa. As such, it rejects universalized curriculum models in favor of an eco-cultural approach that draws from local languages, Indigenous knowledge systems, and community participation (Arias-Ortega & Previl, 2025; Omotosho, 2025; Wheeler, 2025).

In a departure from existing curriculum frameworks that advocate uniform learning outcomes, the IECCE framework defines the curriculum as a living process of cultural transmission. Children learn from everyday community experiences, such as storytelling, intergenerational relationships, traditional games, music, environmental knowledge, ceremonies, and collective social responsibility (Mantiri & Weir, 2026; Mlinarevic et al., 2015).

Hence, learning happens through participating in community life rather than being the delivery of externally constructed educational content.

The focus on community ownership in the framework demonstrates a significant change in governance. Engaging communities is not simply about enhancing implementation, but about ensuring their legitimacy as producers of curriculum knowledge. This approach recognizes that education quality and cultural relevance and local ownership are inseparable. The curriculum must be sufficiently generative to enable communities to adapt to educational experiences to their own histories, languages, and cultural realities (Hadi, 2026; Jennerjohn, 2024; Rachmian et al., 2025; Wan & Leung, 2024).

According to the Community-as-Curriculum Framework, the initiative of IECCE suggests that curriculum obtains its legitimacy through relationships with culture, place and community rather than through external standardization. According to this framework, the repositioning of Indigenous peoples as holders of educational knowledge takes place with a view to having the decolonizing principles put into effect and not simply as receivers of the reforms imposed (Park & Tsukada, 2026).

4.2. The Community-Led Action for Children (CLAC) Model: Mutual Aid and Shared Responsibility

While the IECCE framework is an example of curriculum based on cultural continuity, Plan International's Community-Led Action for Children (CLAC) model shows how curriculum can emerge from collective action and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of children. The CLAC model, introduced in community-based Early Learning Centers in Uganda, engages communities in the planning, management and sustainability of early childhood education programs (Hansen, 2024; Hennessy & Nogueira, 2025; Prins et al., 2025).

One of the characteristics of the CLAC model is the ownership that the community has over the process. Local caregivers, parents, volunteers, and leaders involved in the community help in deciding learning priorities, choosing facilitators, overseeing learning centers and evaluating children's learning. The education offered to an individual becomes a social responsibility rather than a service of the professional educator alone.

The model also embodies the principles of mutual aid found in the Community-as-Curriculum Framework. Educational resources, knowledge, caregiving responsibilities and decision-making are located in the community networks. We recognize that expertise comes in multiple forms rather than a single of expert institutions. Such arrangements strengthen social cohesion while allowing educational practices to meet local needs and cultural expectations more effectively (Kusumawardani et al., 2025; Putrich et al., 2025).

However, the Ugandan experience also reveals major structural constraints. Nagaba (2025) states that many centers continue to lack infrastructure, teaching materials, trained personnel and sustainable finance. There are various levels of participation of the community in view of socio-economic conditions, parents employment and local awareness on the need for early childhood education. Southern African countries, particularly Malawi and Tanzania, continue

to face challenges in providing quality education, especially in primary schools (Nagaba et al., 2025).

The challenges do not negate the Community-as-Curriculum Framework but rather illustrate the importance of looking at community participation with supportive public policy. Communities have a lot of educational capacity, but real engagement requires ongoing funding, institutional support and resources. Community ownership should therefore supplement government's responsibility for high-quality early childhood education, not replace it (Bernard & Bendraou, 2025; Raatikainen et al., 2023; Roche, 2017).

4.3. The English Early Years Coalition: Collective Advocacy as Curriculum-Making

The English Early Years Coalition shows that community as curriculum can refer not just to guided advocacy but also to collective professional advocacy itself as an act of curriculum. A coalition of sixteen early childhood organizations formed in response to proposed changes to the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to co-produce an alternative guidance document created by the sector itself (Archer, 2024; Duncheon et al., 2023).

This initiative, unlike the previous two, was less about program delivery and more about the local community. Rather, it diverted the processes through which authority over the curriculum. According to the coalition, curriculum must not be decided solely through centralized government, but must emerge through dialogue between practitioners, researchers, families, and professional organizations with knowledge of children's educational experiences (Haeger et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Ronfeldt et al., 2025).

The coalition thus exemplifies participatory curriculum governance. Knowledge about education is co-produced through professional dialogue, critical reflection, and democratic engagement, not through top-down policy processes. The coalition argues that ensuring a high-quality education is not possible through centralized accountability and market competition.

The aforementioned process is described as a manifestation of collective agency by Archer (2024). The practitioner's production of alternative curriculum material asserted that they had the capacity not only to implement curriculum but to shape it. According to the Community-as-Curriculum Framework, the curriculum is a pedagogic and political process. Educational purposes, values, and priorities are negotiated by communities, including professional ones, and not merely accepted as given.

4.4. Comparative Synthesis: Operationalizing the Community-as-Curriculum Framework

While these three initiatives have emerged from different cultural, political and institutional contexts, they make the same fundamental point: curriculum is most meaningful when communities are seen as legitimate producers of educational knowledge (Hameed, 2020; Monroe, 2021).

The IECCE framework reveals how community ownership protects continuity of culture and decolonizes curriculum. The collective responsibility and mutual aid enhance educational participation and local sustainability are explained through the CLAC model. The English Early Years Coalition demonstrates that collective advocacy and professional working together in educational governance are part of democratic curriculum-making, not just what happens in classrooms (Cheuk & Org, 2019; Raheem & Rothery, 2025; Salerno, 2025; Singh-Pillay & Madlala, 2026).

It is observed several common principles across the three cases. First, the idea of curriculum is created through relationships, rather than imposed. Next, families, educators, communities and cultural traditions possess educational knowledge rather than outsiders or experts possessing it all. Educational quality and community ownership are strengthened by participation. In conclusion, we can say that curriculum is more than just a teaching plan it is a social process through which a community sustains its cultural identity, social wellbeing and democratic life (Lin & Uysal, 2025; Lindsay DeMartino & Lisa Fetman, 2025a; Russo-Ponsaran et al., 2023).

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework put forth in this article is empirically supported by these similarities. The initiatives show that the ECCE is changing from curriculum as prescribed content to curriculum as relationships, participation, culture and shared responsibility, rather than just being isolated examples of good practice (Choi & Hyun, 2025; Ferris, 2022).

Consequently, Community-as-Curriculum should not be interpreted as a localized innovation. Instead, it is a higher-order conceptual framework that can inform ECCE policy, research, and practices across the settings of diverse cultures and institutional arrangements. The importance of a National Curriculum Framework is not to prescribe a single type of curriculum. However, it re-conceptualizes the curriculum as collective, relational and democratic (Bollas & Bennett, 2026).

5. Discussion: Reimagining Early Childhood Care and Education through the Community-as-Curriculum Framework

5.1. From Community Participation to Community as Curriculum

A key message of the article is that a major change in thinking is required about the curriculum in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) field. Prior scholarship has made significant contributions in the areas of parent engagement, family engagement, community involvement, culturally responsive education and relational pedagogy. Nonetheless, these viewpoints largely continue seeing communities as contexts that support the delivery of the curriculum rather than seeing communities as the curriculum. The Community-as-Curriculum Framework contributes to this ongoing debate by putting forth the argument that curriculum must be understood as an emergent relational ecosystem generated through the constant interactions of children, families, educators, communities, institutions, and broader socio-cultural environments (Aina et al., 2022; Fiharsono et al., 2025; Moncrieffe, 2025; Sanchez, 2024).

The conceptualization goes beyond traditional curriculum theory in that it does not take for granted that the curriculum exists only as an official document that specifies the objectives of learning and the contents of education. The curriculum is a dynamic social process through which children enter

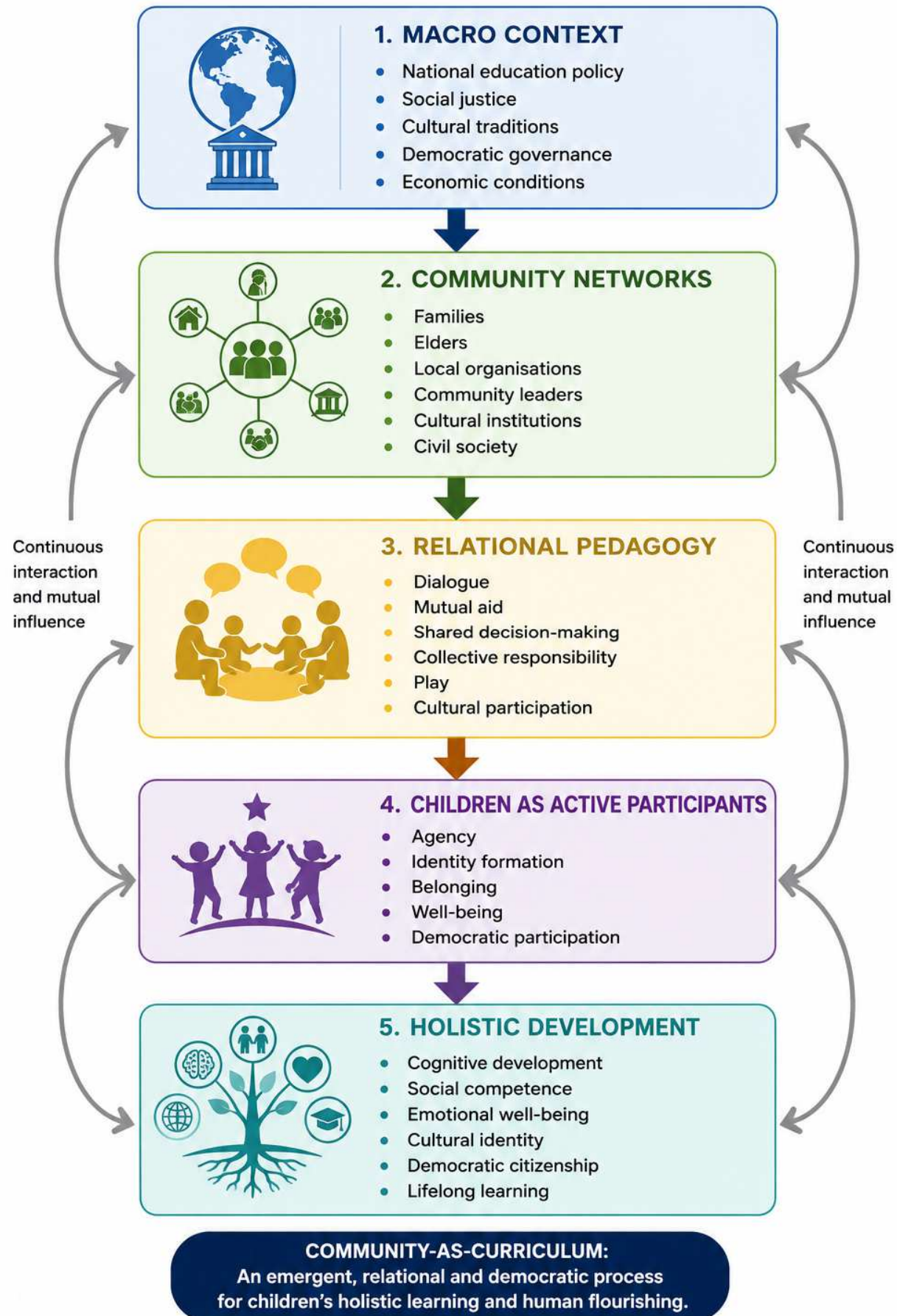
cultural practices, democratic relations, caring collectives and community life. Learning happens not only through formal learning but also through enabling participation in everyday experiences that shape identities, belonging, responsibility, and relationships (Elyan & Harb, 2025; Khumsat & Dech-Siri Nopas, 2026; Larsson & Samuelsson, 2019; Siry et al., 2025).

As a result, the theory of the curriculum places the question “What knowledge should children learn?” less at the center and more “Through what relationships, communities and shared experiences do children become fully human?” This represents a very different philosophical move from curriculum as transmission to curriculum as relational participation (Starlight & Friesen, 2026).

5.2. The Community-as-Curriculum Framework

Building upon the theoretical synthesis presented earlier, this article proposes the Community-as-Curriculum Framework as an integrative model explaining how learning emerges through interconnected ecological, cultural, relational, and democratic systems. Rather than privileging any single educational actor, the framework conceptualizes curriculum as the product of reciprocal interactions among multiple participants operating within broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Barela, 2019a; Wang & Kumar, 2026).

Figure 1. The Community-as-Curriculum Framework



The framework illustrates that the curriculum is neither linear nor hierarchical. Instead, learning emerges through continuous interactions across ecological systems. Children are not passive recipients of curriculum but active participants whose development is shaped through reciprocal engagement with families, educators, peers, and communities. Likewise, communities are not external stakeholders but active producers of educational knowledge whose cultural practices, histories, and collective experiences constitute the substance of curriculum itself (Autret et al., 2024).

Importantly, the framework also demonstrates that curriculum is simultaneously educational and political. Decisions concerning whose knowledge is recognized, whose voices are heard, and whose cultural traditions are legitimized inevitably reflect broader questions of democracy, equity, and social justice. Consequently, curriculum development cannot be separated from debates concerning educational governance and community participation (Bernotaite & Ottesen, 2025; HINNANT-CRAWFORD, 2025; Yana Manyukhina, 2026a).

5.3. Advancing Curriculum Theory

The main theoretical contribution of this paper is to reconceptualize curriculum as a relational and democratic ecosystem, instead of conceiving it as a technical instrument used for delivering pre-given knowledge. Conventional Curriculum Models usually think of learning in linear thing in which Curriculum objectives, Teaching Strategies, Assessment, and Measurable Outcome follow a Logical or Causal Sequence. Even if these approaches enhance educational accountability, they overlook aspects of children's learning which are relational, cultural and political (Belwal et al., 2021; Mohamad et al., 2023).

To address this limitation, the Community-as-Curriculum Framework fuses six complementary theoretical traditions into an explanatory model. The philosophy of Dewey (1916) underpins shared inquiry democratically; Freire (1970) highlights dialogue, agency, and the redistribution of educational power through critical pedagogy; Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological theory anchors learning in the social ecosystem; the Indigenous African ECCE stresses cultural continuity and community ownership; relational pedagogy spotlights trust, reciprocity and care; while mutual aid scholarship illustrates how people produce knowledge educationally through solidarity and common responsibility (Dhar & Chakraborty, 2025; Dolegowski, 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Tilhou, 2020).

Although previously, each perspective was a source for ECCE scholarship, this article demonstrates that

when integrated, they can create a higher order conceptual framework to explain curriculum as a process of relational co-construction. This indicates that the paper is not contributing yet another model of community participation but an alternative framework for understanding curriculum as well.

5.4. Challenging Neoliberal Understandings of ECCE

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework critically responds to contemporary neoliberal reforms influencing ECCE across the globe. In a variety of education systems, curriculum has become closely associated with accountability, measurable performance indicators, school readiness, standardized assessment, and market competition (Finders et al., 2025; Marek et al., 2025). The issue with these reforms is that they seek to improve learning efficiencies. Further, with an overly-narrow focus, they reduce the curriculum to a technical mechanism for producing economically productive future citizens.

The practices in question could restrict children's learning by valuing things we can easily measure over relationships, cultural identity and creativity along with democratic participation and collective wellbeing. The community and family may be positioned as "consumers" of education instead of partners in educational decision-making. And the community is valued for its ability to contribute resources, not educational knowledge (Ojetunde & Chavez, 2024; Sadiki et al., 2025).

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework seeks to challenge these assumptions by repositioning ECCE as a public good in a democratic spirit grounded in care. Instead of inquiring about the methods communities can implement to assist existing curriculum, the framework asks how various curriculum modalities can emerge from the lived experiences, aspirations and knowledge of communities themselves. This view closely relates to other movements that advocate for educational democracy, decolonization and social justice (Cooke et al., 2025; Yana Manyukhina, 2026b; Zama, 2024).

5.5. Implications for Policy and Educational Practice

The ECCE policy and practice will be guided by the framework. Curriculum development ought to be pursued beyond consultations to co-construction with families, Indigenous communities, local organizations and civil society. The expert document suggests educational policy formation to view community knowledge as a primary source of curriculum instead of being just one of the alternatives which is

community knowledge (Koritsaris, 2022; Rushton et al., 2026).

In addition, courses for teacher education must prepare educators to perform as not only implementers of the curriculum but also as facilitators of democratic learning communities. Being competent professionally means acquiring the skills for participatory decision-making, community engagement, culturally responsive pedagogy, relationship building and collaborative leadership (Amanda Moreno & Jeanette Banashak, 2026; Collier-Bacon, 2024).

We must rethink our educational accountability system. Existing mechanisms for quality assurance in education generally give greater importance to measurable academic outcomes, with less priority being given to relational quality, cultural continuity, community participation and children's sense of belonging. Simulation of innovative systems and future evaluation frameworks should incorporate indicators recognizing these broader dimensions of educational quality (Affolter & Yost, 2025; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2023).

Governments should acknowledge the requirement for sustained structural support that meaningful community participation entails. Community ownership will not emerge if early childhood programs are underfunded, unequal and reliant on unpaid volunteer labor. For democratic curriculum-making to transcend symbolism and gain sustainability, public investment is crucial (Barela, 2019b; Lalvani & Bacon, 2019).

5.6. Strengths, Tensions, and Future Development of the Framework

Even though the Community-as-Curriculum Framework has a solid theoretical grounding, there are a number of important tensions to keep in mind. Communities are heterogenous rather than homogenous, and internal inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability, language, and socio-economic status might affect whose knowledge becomes recognized within curriculum development. Idealizing community participation without confronting the underlying power dynamics may replicate exclusion in broader planning discourse (Done, 2025; Furrey, 2024; Siddiqui & Feng, 2026).

Likewise, the framework should not be seen as a denial of professional expertise or the national curriculum. It rather proposes a more harmonious relationship where professional knowledge and community knowledge are seen as complementary knowledge and not as competing knowledge. Thus, effective curriculum emerges through the dialogue of

educational engagement, professional practice, and lived experience.

As this article is conceptual in nature, it does not pull in a verification from the empirical world. Independent of the world's major philosophies or religions, a community-based curriculum (CBC) has potential. Instead, it shows great theoretical promise that will guide other qualitative, comparative, participatory, and mixed methods research on Community-as-Curriculum globally. An essential research activity that will help to refine, further develop and assess the framework.

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework (CAC) advances contemporary ECCE scholarship by suggesting a new conceptual vocabulary for understanding curriculum as democratic, relational and culturally situated. As a result, it is resonating a worldwide call for more inclusion, participation and social justice in early childhood education, while laying the foundation for future theoretical and empirical growth.

6. Theoretical Contributions to Knowledge

A defining characteristic of conceptual scholarship is its ability to extend, integrate, or challenge existing theoretical understandings rather than merely reviewing established literature. The principal contribution of this article lies in advancing a new conceptual understanding of curriculum within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Rather than conceptualizing curriculum as a predetermined body of knowledge designed by external experts and implemented within educational institutions, this article argues that curriculum is fundamentally an emergent, relational, and democratic process generated through the everyday interactions of children, families, educators, and communities. In doing so, the paper offers several interrelated theoretical contributions to contemporary ECCE scholarship (Kangas et al., 2021; Li, 2025; Wood & Hedges, 2016).

6.1. Reconceptualizing Community from Stakeholder to Curriculum

The article's main contribution is the rethinking of community from a supporting stakeholder to the curriculum itself. The significance of parental involvement, family engagement and community participation has been acknowledged through existing ECCE scholarship. Nevertheless, such perspectives tend to see communities as implementers of curricula rather than as the source from which curricula emerge (Charamba & Aloka, 2024b; Damaševičius, 2025).

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework contests this assumption, postulating that participation in

community life's cultural practices, relationships, democratic engagement and collective experiences shapes children's learning. In that sense, curriculum is not merely delivered to communities, rather communities are continuously negotiating shared meanings, identities, values and social responsibilities that produce curriculum. This shift is a significant conceptual advance because it moves educational authority away from externally specified curriculum documents towards the relational ecology in which children develop (Linares, 2022; Linsay DeMartino & Lisa Fetman, 2025b; Major & Weiner, 2021).

6.2. Integrating Diverse Theoretical Traditions into a Unified Conceptual Framework

The second contribution consists of a coherent integration of six different theoretical traditions that complement each other. Theories of Dewey's democratic education, Freire's critical pedagogy, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, Indigenous African ECCE, relational pedagogy and mutual aid scholarship have separately impacted ECCE research but have not been conceptualized within one agreed framework (José & Harper, 2025; Shaik, 2024).

The article shows how these views have common elements: learning is relational not individualistic; knowledge is socially and culturally constructed; democratic participation in educational improvement boosts their quality; and communities are legitimate producers of educational knowledge.

The formation of a higher-level theoretical framework which can explain curriculum as being emergent through relational engagement across ecological, cultural and institutional systems. The synthesis offers an extension to curricula theory - one that captures how learning is conceived in complex communities.

6.3. Extending Relational Pedagogy through Ecological and Democratic Systems

The article further extends relational pedagogy to an ecological and democratic system beyond the classroom. Much of the prior literature has concentrated on the relationship between educators and children or the relationship between educators and families. These relationships are considered important elements which affect the quality of learning. These relationships are still important, but the Community-as-Curriculum Framework shows us this relational pedagogy goes beyond relationships to include networks, cultural practices, civil society organizations and democratic frameworks (Liang et al., 2026).

This larger framing positions relationships as not just pedagogical tools, but as the very infrastructure through which curriculum is generated.

Thus, relational pedagogy is educational, cultural, ecological and political, which results in a more comprehensive theoretical account of children's learning experiences in different social settings.

6.4. Advancing a Decolonial Perspective on Curriculum

Another contribution is the development of a decolonial perspective on curriculum that centers Indigenous knowledge systems and community ownership. The article, Using the Indigenous Early Childhood Care and Education (IECC) Framework for Africa to Critique Program Quality, uses the IECC Framework for Africa to challenge universalized curricula that entrench Western assumptions about the developmental tasks of early childhood and quality in early childhood education and care (Maleq et al., 2022; Miuka & Tufu, 2025; Serpell & Mukela, 2018).

This proposed structure embodies the idea that the knowledge of Indigenous communities is the legitimate producer of educational knowledge. It recognizes that Indigenous languages, histories, cultures and social institutions are vital components of curriculum. As a pedagogical principle and a strategy of epistemic justice, community ownership contributes to wider discussions on decolonization, culturally sustaining pedagogy and educational equity.

6.5. Providing a Foundation for Future Research and Policy

This article goes a long way in laying the theoretical framework to guide further empirical research and policy making. The Community-as-Curriculum Framework provides researchers with a lens for examining how curriculum is generated through community relations in varied cultural-institutional-national context. It gives policymakers a conceptual underpinning for designing early childhood systems that go beyond narrowly defined school readiness agendas to more democratic, culturally responsive and community-centered approaches.

Instead of a model that prescribes how things should turn out, the framework is useful as a generative theory for different educational situations. In the future, qualitative, comparative, participatory, and mixed-methods analyses can assess, enhance and extend its explanatory power, including an exploration of how various kinds of community participation affect children's learning, wellbeing, and educational outcomes.

Together, these contributions position the Community-as-Curriculum Framework as an important conceptual advance within contemporary ECCE scholarship. The article that redefines curriculum as an emergent ecosystem of relationships, culture, participation and shared responsibility opens up new avenues for curriculum theory, educational policy and early childhood practice.

Further studies should investigate how the Community-as-Curriculum Framework can be applied in different parts of the world and with groups that come from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds using designs such as qualitative, participatory, comparative and mixed-methods designs. The focus of longitudinal studies could be on investigating the manner in which a community-centered curriculum influences the holistic development of children. Similarly, policy analyses could examine how various governance arrangements either facilitate or constrain democratic curriculum-making. Research of this kind will be important for further refining and developing the framework and assessing its appropriateness for educational systems.

7. Conclusion

This article has put forward a major re-thinking of curriculum in Early Childhood Care and Education by claiming that it is not just a context in which curriculum is enacted but the curriculum itself. In light of the neoliberal ideas that have increased standardization, accountability, and school readiness, the paper has proposed the Community-as-Curriculum Framework as a powerful counter-narrative grounded in democratic participation, relational pedagogy, cultural continuity, ecological systems thinking and collective responsibility.

Using the lens of Dewey's philosophy of education for democracy, Freire's critical pedagogy, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, Indigenous African Early Childhood Care and Education, relational pedagogy, and recent scholarship on mutual aid, the article has shown that these diverse traditions share a commonality of understanding learning as relational, social construction and culture bound processes. The interconnectedness of curriculum, children, families, educators, and communities as co-constructors within ecological and democratic systems has been developed as a concept.

A comparative analysis of the Indigenous ECEC Framework, the Community-Led Action for Children model, and the English Early Years Coalition shows that community-centered approaches are not isolated innovations. Rather, they are reflective of an

international trend towards more participatory, culturally-relevant and socially just forms of early childhood education. While the national context and institutional design vary, these initiatives collectively demonstrate that educational quality is enhanced when communities are seen as legitimate producers of educational knowledge, rather than as passive receivers of imposed knowledge.

The Community-as-Curriculum Framework extends current ideas within relational pedagogy, democratic education and community participation, and thus furthers debates in the field of curriculum theory. The framework considers relationships, culture and participation as fundamental to the curriculum, not only as additional features of it. By taking this approach, it opens the door to a different conception of curriculum one that is technical and managerial which reduces learning to measurable. Unlike a fixed curriculum with unchanging content, we can imagine a curriculum as a living and evolving process. When we view curriculum as a process, we see how children develop identity, belonging, agency, cultural understanding and civic and democratic citizenship.

The changing landscape means that profits may become much less certain. The framework allows researchers to examine how curriculum emerges through community relations in various cultural and institutional contexts. By generating feedback, this highlights for policymakers the need to create governance structures that allow for meaningful community input in curriculum development, not just consultation or implementation. This highlights the importance of developing partnerships with families and communities that acknowledge different forms of knowledge and share responsibility for children's learning and wellbeing.

This article is a conceptual study and does not assume any empirical validation. Instead, it serves as a theoretically motivated model meant to encourage further thought. The main argument that was made throughout this article is that the future of the Early Childhood Care and Education system will depend not just on improving the curriculum but on reimagining what we understand by curriculum. Communities cannot be left out of curriculum theory if children learn through relationships, culture, participation and collective care. It must be occupied the center. Reclaiming community as curriculum is a powerful pathway toward democratic, culturally sustaining, equitable, and socially responsive early childhood education. The recent reconceptualization of early childhood care and education (ECCE) invites educators, researchers, policymakers and communities to see ECCE not as the delivery of

ready-made knowledge but as a shared public project of human flourishing, democratic life and collective responsibility in a world driven more and more by standardization and marketisation.

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