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EDITED BY

Marta Moskal,
University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY

Nandita Chattopadhyay,
MGM Medical College, India
Linda Biersteker,
DataDrive2030, South Africa

*CORRESPONDENCE

Er-Menam Amaniampong
✉ researchfellow@associatesforchange.org

Yirenkyiwa Gyebi Eyison

✉ researchfellow2@associatesforchange.org
Festus Akuetteh Ankrah
✉ consultingmanager@associatesforchange.org

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Parents and community agency in early childhood education and development in rural Ghana: towards an indigenous home-based early learning model

Leslie Casely-Hayford¹, Doreen Apuswin Aboyella¹,
Er-Menam Amaniampong^{1,2*}, Yirenkyiwa Gyebi Eyison^{1,3*},
Abigail Esi Nkrumah¹, Festus Akuetteh Ankrah^{1*} and
Martin Kanyagui¹

¹Associates for Change, Accra, Ghana, ²Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, ³Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Basic and Applied Science, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana

Introduction: This study addresses a critical gap in Ghana's efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2 by exploring how indigenous, play-oriented pedagogies support children's holistic development across 12 rural communities in northern and southern Ghana. Despite Ghana's early childhood education (ECE) policy, which emphasises scaling evidence-based best practices to strengthen the capacity of parents and communities to deliver ECE, scalable culturally grounded practices remain underexplored.

Implications: The findings reinforce the roles of families and communities as co-creators of culturally responsive, play-based pedagogies. The study underscores the need for ECE policies and curricula to integrate community-led indigenous pedagogies, ensuring that formal systems are enriched rather than disconnected from the sociocultural contexts in which children develop and learn.

Methods: Using a heterogeneous sample, the study engaged parents, community members, and traditional leaders through individual face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed that parents, primarily mothers, creatively use locally available materials and indigenous resources to facilitate traditional games and storytelling, embedding early literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, and emotion regulation in everyday play. Fathers highlighted indigenous play as a means of strengthening parent-child bonds, fostering emotional intelligence, and creating safe spaces for emotional expression. These practices, informed by prior volunteer play-based teaching experiences, demonstrate a dynamic interplay between local knowledge and broader ECE goals.

KEYWORDS

early childhood education, home-based early learning, indigenous knowledge, parents, play-based learning, rural communities, SDG 4

1 Introduction

Globally, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 cannot be realised without enrolling 1.4 million children and the corresponding 6 million educators (UNESCO, 2024). However, children in rural regions of developing sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), those born to less educated mothers, and those from the poorest households are likely to face challenges in accessing at least 1 year of early childhood education (ECE) before 2030 (McCoy et al., 2018; Raikes et al., 2023), despite years of country-level efforts to achieve SDG 4.2. The implication is that most children in these areas risk missing out on the holistic developmental benefits associated with ECE, such as numeracy sense, literacy, socio-emotional learning, and other skills (Bleses et al., 2024). Also, children from these deprived and marginalised areas across Africa may not have access to formal pre-primary education despite government commitments (Nampijja et al., 2024). Yet, play-based learning (PBL) has been recognised as an effective pedagogical approach that develops children holistically and preserves cultural practices that enrich the ECE landscape (Adams et al., 2024; Bautista et al., 2023; Bidzakin, 2021; Larsen et al., 2025).

Piaget (1951) argued that children should be seen as active learners capable of constructing knowledge through play, making PBL an important teaching approach either through peers and/or adults. Through play, children are able to mimic and imitate others (Parker et al., 2022). Sociocultural theorists, despite agreeing to this, assert that trained teachers play an important role in promoting and guiding children's active play by acting as facilitators, resource providers, and co-participants (Pyle et al., 2023; Ryoo and Kekelis, 2018). However, the performance of these roles is limited by inadequate professional training and skills, poor funding, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of infrastructure and resources (Bidzakin, 2021; Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Quartey et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024). Evidence from meta-analyses and primary studies indicates that educators and practitioners across different contexts face challenges in implementing PBL in formal schools due to rigid curricula, policy pressures, and uncertainties regarding how to implement PBL in terms of time, manner, or structure and the extent of involvement (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Larsen et al., 2025). Another challenge encountered by formally trained ECE teachers, particularly within the SSA context, is integrating indigenous play-based pedagogies into the curriculum and classroom teaching. Previous empirical studies (Mwinsa and Dagada, 2024, 2025; Nampijja et al., 2024; Tetteh et al., 2025) in their respective research conducted in Zambian and Ghanaian formal ECE settings illustrate that trained teachers lack cultural knowledge, storytelling skills, and fluency in local languages, making it difficult for them to synchronise and implement indigenous play-based learning in the classroom. This finding underpins the conclusion of Bonato et al. (2024), who argue that although culturally relevant pedagogies act as enablers for PBL, their implementation remains limited because of lack of cultural awareness among teachers. These difficulties are acute in the SSA context, where the education system marginalises indigenous knowledge while hegemonising Western education models that see local actors as incapable of educating their children and undermines the pedagogical value of culturally

rooted practices. These deficit narratives and beliefs place potential limitations on the implementation of culturally relevant practices and the development of cultural competence of educators (Dani and Harrison, 2021; Ejuu, 2019; Matafwali and Mofu, 2023).

Notwithstanding these challenges, PBL grounded in indigenous knowledge can improve literacy and numeracy skills, cultural identity, engagement, and active class participation. Through indigenous PBL, children also acquire social skills such as teamwork, cooperation, resilience, and self-confidence while fostering cultural appreciation, respect for elders, and an understanding of values, morals, and customs (Amoah, 2023; Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Mwinsa and Dagada, 2024; Nampijja et al., 2024; Tetteh et al., 2025). This means that ECE educators require significant training and support in culturally appropriate pedagogies, inclusivity, and sustainability (Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Wright et al., 2023). However, in most rural communities in Ghana, the responsibility for implementation falls to “socio-culturally trained” community members—parents and elders—whose roles are vital to the success of PBL in the absence of ECE opportunities and trained ECE teachers. Therefore, significant others (i.e., parents and communities), even without formal education, can facilitate, resource, and co-participate in PBL. In rural communities, these significant actors enrich children's play-related experiences and growth (Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain, 2016; Keung and Cheung, 2019, 2023; Mwinsa and Dagada, 2025; Pyle et al., 2023; Siu and Keung, 2022). A relatively small number of studies (Amoah, 2023; Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Tetteh et al., 2025) have examined the integration of indigenous play pedagogies into formal settings. None has so far explored play-based learning in rural Ghanaian communities without ECE opportunities.

This study, therefore, explores how parents and communities in historically marginalised areas design, use, and sustain traditional play pedagogies to foster the holistic development of children aged 3–6 years. This study is important because policymakers and practitioners often view cultural and indigenous practices as primitive and deficient, assuming that they require remedial interventions and are incapable of delivering age-appropriate early learning pedagogies (Ejuu, 2015), including PBL. In Ghana, this could be attributed to the relatively low literacy rates in rural areas [Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) 2022]. Secondly, beyond the need to train more pre-primary educators and enrol more children before 2030, the pedagogical quality and cultural responsiveness of ECE teachers are important, given the difficulties associated with embedding PBL and indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and play pedagogies into existing curricula. This gap is consequential since evidence shows that when teachers and learners are familiar with indigenous-infused PBL, early learning improves significantly (Ejuu, 2019). Thus, adequately preparing ECE teachers to implement culturally grounded PBL is a prerequisite for achieving the inclusive and high-quality ECE envisioned under SDG 4.2. This study provides initial context-specific insights that could inform in-service and pre-service training and development for ECE teachers. Importantly, Ghana's ECE policy identifies a mismatch between how parents expect their children to learn and the play-based pedagogy used in the curriculum. In both state and non-state ECE centers, the policy

emphasises the role of family and community, as well as inclusive play-based pedagogies, in promoting holistic development of children (Ministry of Education, 2018, pp. 13–14). This aligns with the need to understand children’s learning within broader sociocultural and family contexts and recognises that engaging children’s immediate teachers (i.e., parents and communities) hastens their pedagogical life and early learning (Ejuu, 2021; Oliva-Olson et al., 2021; Yngvesson and Garvis, 2021). Building on the above, the present study provides timely contextual evidence to inform Ghana’s ECE policy and guide targeted interventions aimed at advancing the realisation of SDG 4.2.

2 Methods

2.1 Context and research design

This study forms part of a larger research project, “Scaling inclusive home-based early learning initiative (SIHELI).” The project aims to adapt and scale the evidence-based strategies of the Inclusive Home-based Early Learning Programme (Ejuu et al., 2022; Ejuu and Opiyo, 2022), which was initially piloted in Eastern Africa, to diverse contexts across the West African sub-region. However, the findings reported in this study reflect interactions with community stakeholders regarding indigenous play-based learning between parents and their children aged 3–6 years. The study employed an exploratory qualitative design that enabled researchers to explore in depth the scalable indigenous early childhood pedagogical approaches used by parents and community members to address learning challenges in 12 communities across the Ekumfi and Nanton districts in southern and northern Ghana. These districts were purposively selected to capture contextual diversity in early childhood practices and community dynamics that influence low-resource settings. In addition, these districts were chosen because of their higher multidimensional poverty, characterised by significant deprivation in access to education and educational infrastructure, including ECE, which causes 3–6-year-old

children to travel more than 2 km to nearby communities to access ECE services (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). Characteristically, these are indigenous communities (Toledo, 2013; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025) whose whose livelihoods are largely based on small-scale, labour-intensive cultivation (e.g., shea butter, maize, millet, cassava), handicrafts, and animal rearing (e.g., goats, sheep, cattle, guinea fowl); these communities are politically organised at the community level, with decisions made through consensus; they share common religious and moral values, forms of clothing, language, and other identifying features and territory and are intimately familiar with each other (see Figure 1).

2.2 Participants and procedures

Participants were selected purposively, prioritising maximum variations in the selection of participants. This approach enhanced the richness and depth of insights obtained from diverse community stakeholder groups. A total of 326 eligible participants were recruited from the 12 communities across three key categories: (1) parents of child(ren) aged 3–6 years, (2) other community members without a 3–6-year-old child(ren), and (3) community leaders. This triangulation enabled parents to provide direct accounts of home practices, while community members and leaders provided shared or community-level narratives and insights about early learning practices observed within their communities. Participants were eligible if they were permanent residents of the selected rural communities without formal and informal ECE opportunities, belonged to one of the three categories (parent of at least one child aged 3–6 years, adult community members with or without a 3–6-year-old child, and recognised community leaders), and provided informed consent. The study excluded temporary residents or visitors, non-residents in the communities, and those unable to provide informed consent. All participants in the study, however, were willing to participate and provided verbal consent. In line with the maximum variation principle, sample heterogeneity was ensured

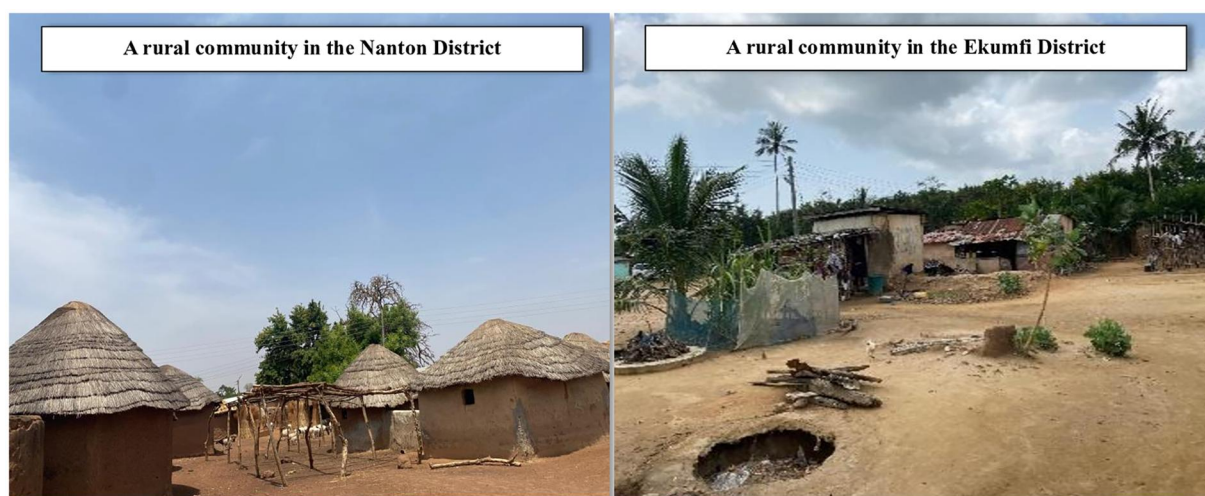


FIGURE 1
Selected rural and indigenous communities in the study districts.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Items	Classification	Frequency (n)
Gender	Male	182
	Female	144
Age (in years)	–	41.0 (average)
Number of years in the community	–	30.0 (average)
Number of children (3–6 years)	–	2 (average)
Education	No formal education	206
	Primary education	47
	Junior high or secondary education	44
	Senior or secondary education	28
	Tertiary education	1
Economic activity	Farming and cattle rearing	267
	Fishing/fish mongering	14
	Petty trade	20
	Charcoal production	5
	Weaving/dressmaking	4
	Retired teacher	1
	Commercial transport driver	1
	Construction (masonry and carpentry)	4
Ethnicity	Not employed	10
	Dagomba	197
	Akan	101
	Ewe	26
	Fulani	1
	Others	1

based on gender and position within the community (Carter and Little, 2007; Levitt et al., 2021). Recruitments were facilitated through collaboration with traditional leadership structures, who serve as gatekeepers in the selected communities, and district education officials. This approach ensured cultural appropriateness and strengthened community buy-in.

As presented in Table 1, participants were predominantly men, with an average age of 36 years. On average, all participants had lived in their respective communities for 27 years. Also, at the time of the study, all parent/caregiver participants cared for at least two children aged 3–6 years. The majority have never enrolled in any formal education (no formal education prior to the study), and their predominant economic activities were crop farming and livestock rearing (cattle, sheep and goats) (see Table 1).

Two complementary qualitative data collection approaches—focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one semi-structured interviews—were employed, ensuring data richness and allowing for cross-validation of emerging findings (Campbell et al., 2020; Creswell and Poth, 2017). The semi-structured interviews and FGDs explored three broad questions: (1) Do you engage in play activities with your children? (2) What are some of the play activities you engage your children in to help them learn, and why? (3) Why do you engage your children in these activities? A total of 33 FGDs were conducted with community members and leaders without a 3–6-year-old child. In the Ekumfi District, 11 FGDs were conducted, including seven with parents without young children and four with community leaders. Similarly, 22 FGDs were conducted in the Nanton District, including 14 with parents without young children and 8 with community leaders. Given the patriarchal social structure of the study communities, FGDs were conducted separately for women and men. This approach minimised power asymmetries that could inhibit participation of women in mixed-gender discussions, created culturally appropriate spaces for participants to openly speak, and reduced social desirability pressures that could arise in the presence of men. These discussions were complemented by individual, in-depth face-to-face interviews to elicit personal practices and perspectives, particularly from parents of children aged 3–6 years. A total of 156 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted across the study districts, including 42 interviews in the Ekumfi District and 114 in the Nanton District (see Table 2).

The FGDs and interviews followed semi-structured protocols, allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions while encouraging detailed, open conversations about indigenous PBL strategies used by parents and communities, as well as the underlying reasons. Twenty researchers and research assistants received training on the research objectives and qualitative data collection procedures. All interviews were conducted in participants' residences, in local languages (Fante, Twi, Ewe, and

TABLE 2 Selection of participants across the study districts.

S. no.	Category	Participants (n = 326)	Ekumfi District, Southern Ghana		Nanton District, Northern Ghana	
			FGD (n = 11)	One-on-one (n = 42)	FGD (n = 22)	One-on-one (n = 114)
1	Parents with a child aged 3–6 years	156	–	42	–	114
2	Parents and community members without a 3–6-year-old child	119	7	–	14	–
3	Community leaders	51	4	–	8	–

Dagbani), and were audio-recorded with participants' approval. Recording interviews enabled researchers to focus on participants' responses, gestures, and the flow of questioning without being distracted by the need to take notes. During the interviews, researchers used non-directional and echo probes thoughtfully and thoroughly to deepen the narratives, ensuring the collection of diverse and detailed information. On average, each discussion and interview lasted between 60 and 180 min and was conducted between November and December 2024.

2.3 Data analysis

While the research questions guided data collection, themes were identified through inductive thematic analysis using iterative coding to detect emerging ideas and patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2019). All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in the local languages and then translated into English (back-translation). The resulting transcripts were anonymised using participant pseudonyms. For example, CL001 and P001 were uniquely generated to represent the first community leader and the first parent interviewed, respectively. Each author independently conducted repeated readings to become familiar and note emerging preliminary ideas while allowing the team to proofread and validate transcripts. Subsequently, all interview transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo 12 software. Although interviews and FGDs were conducted, the analyses followed the same iterative thematic procedure. The researchers read and coded individual interview transcripts to identify personal practices and, where available, potential divergent views. FGD transcripts were also read to identify and code collective narratives and normative patterns, providing an opportunity to examine potential differences and consensus between responses from individual interviews and FGDs. This enabled cross-data comparisons and interpretation of the data. Descriptive phrases reflecting participants' responses were used to code related responses appropriately and in alignment with the guiding research question. The codes that emerged were then compared and clustered into possible themes based on their similarities and relationships. Participants' responses such as "...sometimes I play ampe with my children to keep their bodies healthy" and "we play with our children. Games like ludo, oware, asosomba" were presented under the theme "indigenous games." Each theme was reviewed, agreed on, and refined by the research team to ensure relevance and then assigned a well-defined name. Narrations were developed from the themes and supported by participants' verbatim quotes alongside their unique pseudonyms.

2.4 Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ghana Health Service Ethics Review Committee (GHS-ERC: 025/07/24). Prior to the interviews, all participants were verbally informed about the study and their rights. Participants' consents were then obtained before inclusion in the study. All parents and community members who participated in the study provided verbal consent for their inclusion.

2.5 Reflexivity and positionality of researchers

The research team approaches indigenous knowledge as a valuable and often underrecognised resource and foundation for early childhood development. However, we acknowledge that indigenous practices alone may not address all the competences required for formal schooling and early grade success, particularly in areas such as print awareness, familiarity with writing tools, and structured literacy and numeracy exposure. Our interpretation therefore positions indigenous knowledge and pedagogies, as well as parent-initiated home-based learning, as foundational yet complementary to formal pedagogies rather than as substitutes for formal early childhood education preparation. We emphasise that in communities with little or no government assistance for ECE, indigenous approaches can provide a strong foundation and create opportunities for transition into formal schooling.

3 Findings

3.1 Indigenous play pedagogical approaches

The study explored play-based learning activities between parents and their children, the role of indigenous play activities in early childhood development, and perspectives on children's capacity to lead their peers in indigenous PBL (stories and games). Most parents reported engaging in play activities with their children, which were mostly indigenous in nature. According to participants, they usually engaged their children in play activities when they are free from work or at home, as clarified by them:

"Yes, I play with my children every time that I am in the house." (FGD, female, Nanton District)

"The mothers in this community do well. They play with their children, especially when they return from their trading activities and the children are also back from school. You will find them playing with them in various ways." (Woman, Owofa, Ekumfi District)

"Yes, as for that, we play with them when I am free at home. For instance, if after today's engagement I am unable to get to work, I will stay back at home and be playing with the little ones. And I can engage them in a play that they would not want you to leave them for any place, or they will run to you anytime you arrive home and gather around you because of how you have been playing with them." (FGD, Male, Sakpali, Nanton District)

"I played our games with my children and that I believe helped them to learn some things. Currently, I still play such games with their children [my grandchildren] who are under my care." (Community leader, Adanseimaim, Ekumfi District)

Participants' repeated emphasis on "when I am free" and "every time I am in the house" clearly illustrate parents' conscious prioritisation and intentionality despite the socioeconomic constraints they face. These phrases also imply that adult-child play was occasional based on parents' occupational demands. However, some male participants in this study noted that, in addition to work demands, fathers, unlike mothers, perceive the possibility of "privileged disrespect" arising during occasional play. They argued that engaging in consistent play with a child provides an avenue for the child to portray disrespectful acts or behaviours towards paternal authority. This concern was recounted by some male participants:

"Yes, we do but sometimes they say that when you are playing with your children, they become arrogant towards you." (R001, Male, Sindigu, Nanton District)

"Yes, I do play with my children at home and because of the play sometimes they do not take me serious on other issues as compared to their mother..." (R007, Male, Kparigulanyili, Nanton District)

3.1.1 Use of local materials

During play activities, locally sourced materials are obtained from participants' immediate environment and used to facilitate play activities. Some of the materials used by parents include bottles and container lids. Container lids are arranged according to their different colours so that children can correctly identify each colour. If a child fails to identify the appropriate colour, the activity is repeated until the child is able to identify it correctly. Also, parents place stones in bottle containers and shake them. The child is then asked to identify and differentiate between the ones that make noise and those that do not while also comparing the objects to determine differences in their weights. These were described as follows:

"Yes, I play with my children most of the time...For instance when we they return from school, and I put down the lids of containers and bottles in different colors (red, blue, black, yellow etc) in a form of a long queue and then ask the children their colors and they will tell based on the colors they know. If it is red and the child say white, I tell him/her no and ask him to repeat until they are correct." (FGD, female, Kparigulanyili community, Nanton District)

"Yes, we play a lot. I relate well with all my children... Sometimes I look for a container and put in a number of stones let us say 4 in one and a container without stones. So I ask the child which container makes noise and the child will say. Then I ask again which one of it does not make noise and the child will say again..." (FGD, female, Kparigulanyili community, Nanton District)

"We play and teach them through play by weighing objects and listening to the sound and determine the one that has

more weight." (FGD, female, Sakpali community, Nanton District)

In addition to guiding the child through the colour identification process, R5, a female participant and parent from a northern community in this study, also shared the relevance of using objects or materials from the immediate environment to engage in various play activities with her child:

"...we play a lot with our children. We play when we are sitting with them. During the play I teach the child for instance picking a bottle lead and ask the child what color it represents. If the child does not know, I teach the child this is red (zag zhie), yellow meaning (Zag dozim) in Dagbani. This is a stick, and this is a walking stick. When the child goes to the school is taught a similar thing and he does not understand when he remembers what I taught him/her at home the child will understand fast. We have time for the children in this community because when you are setting with a child, and you do not play with them they might want to discuss something with you, but are afraid to discuss it as a child. Because of that the children are closer to their mothers compared to their fathers." (FGD, R5, females, Zali community, Nanton District)

3.1.2 Indigenous games

Parents also use local games to facilitate play activities with their children. The findings show that parents play with their children whenever they are at home, which makes the children excited and eager to be around their parent all the time. Some respondents also reported playing traditional games such as ampe¹ with their children, which helps keep them physically fit and healthy. Others mentioned playing local games such as "ludo," "oware,"² "asosomma" [throw and catch pebbles] with their children using alphabets:

"Sometimes I play Ampe with my children to keep their bodies healthy." (FGD, R2, female, Gushei community, Nanton District)

"Yes, I play with my children at home, we play ampe, we draw lines and play 'tumatu' and use A, B, C, D to sing." (P021, female, Owofa community, Ekumfi District)

"We play with our children. Games like ludo, oware, asosomba." (Owofa District, WFGD).

¹Ampe is a simple game played by school-age children in Ghana and other places. The game is played by two or more players and can look more like a dance than a game. The leader and another player jump up at the same time, clap, and thrust one foot forward when they jump up.

²Four seeds are placed in each house on a board consisting of two rows of six houses, making a total of 12. Each row of six houses represents the territory of the player sitting nearest to that row. Two end houses serve as stores for captured seeds. The objective of the game is to capture as many seeds (nickers) as possible (see details here).

3.1.3 Use of local stories/songs

Another interesting activity parents engage in with children is storytelling. Parents narrate stories and sometimes tell local stories and sing local songs, particularly when they notice that the child is sad, providing opportunities for children to ask questions and strengthening parent–child bonding. These stories intend to make the child happy and serve as a “sleeping pill” or “sleeping aid” for the child:

“Yes, I play with my children, and we share local stories.” (FGD, female, Adanseimaim community, Ekumfi District)

“I play games like ludo, sharing riddles with them. Currently I still play such games with my grandchildren” (FGD, TL005, Adanseimaim community, Ekumfi District)

“Yes, we play with them. Sometimes, through the stories we give them they ask questions through them, and we answer. If we do not play with them, I do not think they can come close to me or anyone for stories. For instance, after eating in the night my younger child will tell me to give them stories and the process he will just sleep.” (FGD, female, Kparigulaanyili, Nanton District)

“When I am sitting with them [the children], I tell them the stories I know. I mostly do that when I realise, they are sad.” (Woman, FGD, Gushei, Nanton District)

A few participants added that play activities are used as emotional coping strategies for children, especially when they are unhappy. Interestingly, parents sometimes have to create their own local stories for their children when they are sad to make them happy. These parent participants described this practice as follows:

“[Yes, when I am sitting with them, I tell them stories I know.] Especially when I realized they are sad.” (FGD, female, Gushei community, Nanton District)

“The traditional games we engage the children in makes them [the children] happy...” (CL003, Adanseimaim, Ekumfi District)

“...Sometimes I even create stories for them to laugh just to be happy and through that they learn...Before I know children will just gather around me to also play even those who are not my biological children.” (FGD, female, Kparigulaanyili community, Nanton District)

“Yes, we play with them to encourage them to play and to make them happy” (FGD, Female, Nanton District)

Other parent participants revealed engaging in play with their children to build strong rapport with them, making them feel comfortable and confident in expressing their opinion and sharing what bothers them without fear while also fostering togetherness:

“Yes. I play with my children because, I want them to feel comfortable to express their opinions without fear.” (P005, female, Adanseimaim community, Ekumfi District)

“Yes, I play with my children, and it makes them open up to me on anything that bothers them. Also playing with my children brings unity in my home.” (FGD, TL018, Owofa community, Ekumfi District)

“You will observe that the child freely interacts with their parents. I think playing with the child creates the chance for them to open up to you the parent on anything that bothers them...” (Community member, Owofa, Ekumfi District)

Adding to this, some participants suggested that playing with children breaks the generational gaps between fathers and their children, reduces fear, and facilitates emotional development:

“...we want them to get closer and feel comfortable with us. The way children are, if they have close contact with their father, they do not get scared of him unnecessarily and that promotes the development of their emotional intelligence. Sometimes we even give them the names of our grandparents so we can play with them as our grandparents because it is fine in norms to play with one’s grandparents. We play with them so that we can establish that emotional bond with each other.” (CL001, FGD, Male, Chahiyili community, Nanton District)

3.2 Reasons underlying parent–child play-based activities and learning

Parent participants, usually mothers in this study, engaged in play-based activities with their children for several reasons. Some parents from the northern communities reported that their engagement in play activities with their children was influenced by the experience they had gained as volunteer facilitators in the Lively Minds play-based learning project in schools in other communities. This experience improved their ability to engage in play learning with their children, as clarified by some female participants:

“[Yes, I play with my children most of the time.] We play a lot especially because we teach in the other community, and it is about play some of the children know us.” (FGD, female, Kparigulaanyili community, Nanton District)

“Some people came here to select some of us [the women] to train us. They taught us how to play with the children but we do not do it in this community because we do not have a school. So, we go to the nearby communities with schools and go and play with the children when it is time. That is how I realised that it is important to play with my children and other children in this community.” (Woman, Sakpali, Nanton District)

“Yes. I play with my children because, I want them to feel comfortable to express their opinions without fear.” (P005, female, Adansemaim, Ekumfi District)

These responses indicate that fathers tend to view play less as a form of instructional scaffolding, as often emphasised by mothers, and more as a means of fostering relational bonding and emotional development in children.

Others also indicated that during play, they engage children in traditional games to improve their physical health and growth:

“[Sometimes I play AMPE with my children] to keep their bodies healthy.” (FGD, female, Gushei community, Nanton District)

“...the traditional games help develop the children in so many ways. For example, it helps to develop them physically. Games like “Takai”, “Torra”, “Nabiewu”, and “Baamaaya...we engage them in these games to build their physical strength and health.” (Community member, male, Moya, Nanton District)

4 Discussion

Ghana’s rural areas, characterised by indigenous livelihoods, face multidimensional marginalisation and discrimination. In these areas, access to early learning opportunities for children remains largely aspirational at the policy level but problematic practice. This means that despite being recognised as a core pedagogy in Ghana’s ECE policy, children in rural areas are unable to benefit from it. Implementation challenges also persist even in advantaged areas where formal ECE opportunities exist. In the indigenous rural contexts of our study, we therefore explored how parents and communities implement indigenous and culturally informed play pedagogies to support the development of children aged 3–6 years amidst the marginalisation they face in accessing early learning. Contrary to formal settings where challenges in PBL implementation persist to date (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Dzamesi et al., 2025; Pyle et al., 2018; Tetteh et al., 2025), we found that parents and caregivers function as culturally aligned pedagogues who are intentional and resourceful in designing, adapting, and sustaining meaningful play experiences rather than being passive recipients of external interventions. Although parent–child play practices occur in communities, they are occasional due to work demands. In addition, sociocultural norms surrounding male authority play a key role in the enactment of play with children. Compared to mothers, fathers’ concern about maintaining respect appears to moderate the extent to which they engage in play with children. While both mothers and fathers valued indigenous play, maternal engagement was more consistently described as pedagogically intentional and routine. In contrast, fathers’ engagement appeared more situational and relational and was sometimes constrained by norms of authority. These patterns reflect broader gendered caregiving roles within patriarchal community contexts and underscore the importance of gender dynamics in

home-based ECE models. The constraints imposed by work demands and normative assumptions surrounding male authority therefore limit the extent of adult–child play in these rural communities and contribute to its scarcity in African societies (Marfo and Biersteker, 2010; Nyota and Mapara, 2008).

Yet, these parents exhibit what is called “agency,” illustrating the relevance of expertise and willingness to negotiate the structural constraints that rural children face in the education sector (Giddens, 1984; Oosterhoff et al., 2020). The agency of parents and caregivers helps address the resources challenges that trained teachers mostly face in formal ECE settings by using indigenous resources and local materials available in and obtained from their immediate environments. Parents use traditional games such as *ludo*, *ampe*, and *asosomma*, which are unique to their contexts, not only to entertain children but also to support children’s numeracy development, motor skills, physical growth, and social cooperation. These results align with earlier findings, revealing that indigenous games could facilitate children’s holistic development. These studies individually confirm that indigenous games support children’s physical activity and literacy development, cognitive abilities, numeracy skills, and social competencies (Balbawang and Felix, 2023; Hassani and Afazeli, 2024; Iasha et al., 2021; Manzari Tavakoli et al., 2021; Moloi et al., 2021; Mwinsa and Dagada, 2024). These practices are also accompanied by local and traditional songs and storytelling that are adapted to children’s emotional states, helping to comfort them and provide emotional security; such activities also promote parent–child bonding, stimulate curiosity, aid sleep, and support language development. These findings suggest that play, particularly informed by local stories and songs, can enhance children’s socioemotional well-being and may also have therapeutic effects (Courtois et al., 2024; Whitebread, 2018; Zosh et al., 2022). A study conducted in Cameroon, for example, cites that folktales and indigenous music enhance cognitive abilities (creative thinking and imagination), nurture social relationships and bonding, provide emotional benefits, and support language development (Kunike et al., 2025). In line with the work of Ejuu (2019) and Kavuma and Ejuu (2024), parents’ deliberate use of these indigenous play pedagogies could help maintain children’s cultural identity, foster a sense of belonging, and equip them with the cultural knowledge and values needed to succeed in both traditional and modern contexts. Since trained teachers often struggle to implement and integrate indigenous forms of play into PBL (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle et al., 2018) and lack fluency in local languages or storytelling skills (Tetteh et al., 2025), children enrolled in formal ECE are likely to lack the benefits highlighted above, unlike children in these rural and deprived areas. Consequently, in formal schools, Mwinsa and Dagada (2024) recommended that indigenous and traditional games be incorporated with parental participation and encouraged rigorous teacher training in native games through continuous professional development seminars and workshops, alongside training opportunities for parents. On the other hand, children in these rural areas may also lack exposure to print awareness and other important benefits associated with participation in formal ECE classrooms.

A common challenge reported in the literature is the inadequacy of teaching and learning materials (TLMs) for

implementing PBL in formal ECE settings, even among trained educators (Bidzakin, 2021; Quartey et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2024). The findings of this study show that parents and caregivers in the study communities actively address this gap through resourceful and context-responsive practices. They repurpose everyday household and community items—such as bottle lids, stones, and containers—to facilitate children’s foundational learning, including colour identification, sound discrimination, and basic numeracy (e.g., comparing weights). This agentic and improvisational approach contrasts with evidence from formal ECE contexts, where teachers often express perceived inability to develop or adapt play materials themselves (Muthoni, 2016). The TLM deficit in formal ECE settings appears rooted in two interrelated structural issues. Ghana’s ECE curriculum and, by extension, the conceptualisations of PBL remain substantially influenced by Western versions that are often upheld as “gold standards” (Acharibasam and McVittie, 2020; Almeida and Simoes, 2019; Matsekoleng et al., 2024). This epistemic dominance not only sidelines locally available resources and indigenous knowledge systems but also renders the implementation of PBL excessively expensive. Imported or commercially produced materials required are not affordable for many public ECE kindergartens, especially. Also, ECE educators usually lack both the training and methodological guidance to identify, adapt, and integrate community-based resources into their PBL pedagogy (Acharibasam and McVittie, 2020, 2022; Adu et al., 2024; Akyeampong, 2017). Therefore, even when local materials are abundant, ECE teachers may not recognise their pedagogical potential or possess the confidence to improvise effectively.

Notably, the use of bottle tops to teach colour recognition in this study echoes findings from Kaluba et al. (2021) in Zambian classrooms. Similarly observed in their study, the use of bottle tops for colour recognition involved trained teachers within formal schools. However, in this study, such innovative community-driven and informal pedagogies organically emerge in open spaces within households and communities. This finding underscore taken-for-granted latent but useful pedagogical resource that formal ECE systems could use. Beyond helping children identify colours, parents through this practice expose children to broader developmental benefits associated with ECE, possibly improving their cognitive performance and emotional regulation, both of which are often associated with colours in early learning (Brooker and Franklin, 2016; Stern-Ellran et al., 2016). Crucially, parents and caregivers made play-based learning interactive, iterative, and child-paced. This is characterised by repeated cycles of exploration until the child conceptually understood and mastered the concept. The use of locally available materials not only addresses resource limitations mostly experienced in formal ECE settings but also aligns with established principles of early learning pedagogy, which emphasise iteration and child-centered approaches as natural and effective means of stimulating cognitive development among children (Looijenga et al., 2015). The practice-based manipulation of TLMs is consistent with Dewey’s, (1997) concepts of “sincere knowledge” and “productive understanding.” When parents engage their children in the repeated manipulation of locally available materials, children actively construct an understanding of what they are being

taught through active experimentation (Dewey, 1997). Moreover, previous studies indicate that, in addition to resources, space and class size remain a challenge to the implementation of PBL in formal ECE settings (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016). Most trained teachers do not practise spatial flexibility, thus limiting play-based learning to classrooms alone. On the other hand, parents and communities leverage household and shared community spaces as a dynamic learning environment. Practically, parents adapt to the absence of classrooms and implicitly use spaces as a pedagogical choice that affords children rich, multisensory engagement with their natural and social surroundings, which their counterparts in classrooms may not have. Potentially, children in formal ECE settings, compared to those in this study context, could have their visual, auditory, and tactile connections beyond classrooms constrained. This may restrain incidental learning through observation, exploration, and interaction with nature. Parents’ use of outdoor spaces for PBL has several developmental implications for children. Being able to perceive the natural environment and familiar community spaces as a child learns strengthens curiosity, motor development, ecological awareness, and cultural belonging (Kuo et al., 2019; Nxumalo and Cedillo, 2017).

Importantly, parents not only drew on indigenous and local resources but also demonstrated agency in seeking and applying external knowledge obtained through volunteer PBL teaching roles in schools. This suggests that potential PBL resources are embedded within the school-community relations, which provides parents and caregivers with bridging social capital through formal and informal information channels (Keung and Cheung, 2023; Keung and Ho, 2019). Compared with trained ECE teachers, who require extensive training to implement indigenous PBL (Dzamesi and van Heerden, 2020; Dzamesi et al., 2025; Tetteh et al., 2025), these findings indicate that the capacity to enact play-based learning could be activated with minimal formal interventions. Parents could therefore assist in training ECE educators and in implementing indigenous PBL in formal settings. The findings of this study contrast with evidence from other contexts showing that indigenous Emirati parents, unlike English-speaking parents, reject play as an appropriate approach for instructing preschool learners (Baker, 2014, 2015). In line with the sociocultural theory, parents in this study relied on their personal resources (i.e., knowledge, skills, beliefs, and values) to perform four key roles—play facilitators, material providers, observers, and participants alongside their children—to address education challenges faced. This contrasts with trained ECE teachers, who are constrained by insufficient knowledge, skills, normative cultures, and physical challenges (Khalil et al., 2022).

5 Policy and practice implications

Ghana’s ECE policies and practices need to recognise parents and community stakeholders as co-creators of quality early childhood education, particularly in rural areas characterised by indigenous livelihoods. To achieve this, government and state actors in the education sector should develop and institutionalise a collaborative culture that embraces school–community partnerships while contextualising and decolonising

the ECE curricula and investing in context-responsive teacher training. Also, policymakers and educators should collaborate with parents and communities to identify, document, validate, and integrate appropriate indigenous play pedagogies into the national ECE policy and curriculum. Furthermore, capable parents and community members who are gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge systems and play practices should be identified, trained, and supported to deliver culturally responsive ECE to younger children within and beyond formal schools to improve Ghana's efforts towards addressing the teaching and learner crises in rural and marginalised communities in Ghana. Finally, the study provides evidence that can inform and strengthen teacher capacity building, curriculum integration, stakeholder involvement, and the provision of cost-effective resources for PBL while also supporting the integration of indigenous play pedagogies into the formal early childhood education system.

6 Conclusion

This study demonstrates the pedagogical agency of parents and communities that challenges deficit narratives reinforced by Eurocentric assumptions about who is qualified to “teach” younger children and what constitutes quality play-based learning. While mothers emphasise micro-practices that reflect structured and instructional play embedded within everyday routines, fathers are predominantly situational, relational, and norm-based in enacting play activities with the children. This collaborative home-based approach to play shows parents' capabilities in enacting intentional, cost-effective child-centred and holistic play-based pedagogies using indigenous and local resources—games, stories, household resources, and community spaces—that can foster cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional, and physical development while reinforcing cultural identity and belonging—a practice often missing in formal ECE settings constrained by Western curricula, inadequate educator training and professional development, and rigid classroom environments.

7 Limitations and future directions

These findings are based on a purposive selection of parents from selected rural communities in Nanton and Ekumfi Districts in the northern and southern parts of Ghana. The findings cannot be generalised to other rural communities. We recommend that future studies be conducted in rural and marginalised communities across Ghana, particularly in areas where there are no formal ECE services and schools. Longitudinal studies that adopt ethnographic and creative methods to examine indigenous play-based pedagogies are encouraged to complement and strengthen the initial insights from this study. While this study explored parents' perspectives and revealed the potential benefits of indigenous play pedagogies for children, it did not study the child-related outcomes of these pedagogies. Their perspectives regarding the effectiveness of

indigenous approaches are therefore more interpretive than outcome-informed. Therefore, future qualitative and quantitative research should address the impacts of indigenous pedagogies on children's developmental outcomes, particularly in rural Ghana. Furthermore, because of the diverse ethnic and cultural groups in Ghana, there is a need for comparative studies that aim to identify variations in indigenous play pedagogies and how each variation shapes children's development and learning outcomes. In this study, gender-disaggregated analysis was conducted only descriptively and did not follow a systematic gender analytical frame. Therefore, further studies are needed to explore the gender differences in the use of indigenous play pedagogies in greater depth. Such studies could help provide nuanced insights into whether these practices depend on the traditional sex of the parents and/or the child.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Ethics statement

The study involving humans was approved by the Ghana Health Service Ethics Review Committee. The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

LC-H: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. DA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. E-MA: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. YE: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. AN: Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft. FA: Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. MK: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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