

Original Research

Community-Based Learning Practices in a Down Syndrome Family (POTADS) Community

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 01 11, 2026

Revised 02 21, 2026

Accepted 03 23, 2026

Keywords:

Community-based learning

Family involvement

Down syndrome

Community education

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the implementation of *Community-Based Learning* (CBL) within the POTADS West Java community as a family-based community of children with Down syndrome. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with an observational design, based on four direct observations supported by documentation of community activities. The analysis was guided by key CBL indicators, including active participation, contextual and experiential learning, collaboration and equality, problem-solving orientation, and the community as the learning agent. The findings reveal that all CBL indicators were consistently manifested across various community activities. The learning process was participatory, grounded in real-life experiences, and involved collaborative interactions among children, parents, volunteers, and professionals. In addition, the activities were oriented toward addressing real challenges faced by community members and were collectively managed by the community itself. These findings confirm that CBL is not merely a theoretical construct but is empirically implemented within disability-oriented communities. Furthermore, the study highlights the central role of family involvement in strengthening the implementation of CBL within community contexts. Thus, the POTADS West Java community represents a concrete example of inclusive, contextual, and sustainable community-based learning. This study contributes to the understanding of CBL implementation in family-based community settings and emphasizes the importance of integrating family roles in the development of adaptive and inclusive non-formal education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Non-formal and informal education constitute an integral part of the education system, functioning to complement, supplement, and/or substitute formal education, particularly for social groups that are not optimally reached by the school-based pathway. Non-formal education is oriented toward the real needs of the community, characterized by flexibility, and positions learners as active subjects in the learning process (Ali & Skandrani, 2025). In line with this, UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that non-formal education plays a strategic role in promoting lifelong learning and inclusive social development, especially for vulnerable and marginalized groups.

From the perspective of community education, learning processes do not always take place in classrooms or through structured curricula; rather, they may emerge organically from lived experiences, social interactions, and community dynamics. Callanan et al. (2011), Dushkova & Ivlieva (2024), and Ahmad & Talib (2015) refers to this phenomenon as informal community-based learning, in which communities act as primary agents who manage, determine, and interpret their own learning processes according to their socio-cultural contexts. Based on this perspective, Community-Based Learning (CBL) has developed as an approach that emphasizes participation, equality, and contextual, experience-based learning (Akman et al., 2026). The relevance of the CBL approach becomes particularly significant when examined in the context of children with special needs, especially those with Down syndrome (Diemert, 2023). Formal education systems, which tend to rely on standardized curricula, institutional regulations, and performance-based assessments, often fail to accommodate the diverse developmental profiles of children with disabilities. In contrast, non-formal and community-based learning environments offer greater flexibility, adaptability, and proximity to everyday life contexts (Belete et al., 2022). In this setting, learning is not limited to the child but also involves the family as the closest and most influential environment supporting the child's development. However, most studies on Community-Based Learning still position individuals as the primary unit of learning and tend to treat the community merely as a contextual setting. In communities with specific needs, such as families of children with Down syndrome, learning processes cannot be separated from the role of the family as an interconnected system. Therefore, a more contextualized understanding is required to examine how CBL theory is implemented within communities characterized by specific, needs-based structures.

Based on four field observations conducted within the Association of Parents of Children with Down Syndrome or *Persatuan Orang Tua Anak dengan Down Syndrome* (POTADS) of West Java, this study found that the learning practices occurring within the community clearly reflect the core principles of Community-Based Learning. Learning activities are not structured through a formal curriculum but instead evolve participatively based on the actual needs of community members. Various activities, including therapy sessions, life skills training, arts-based activities, parental education, and social advocacy, function as learning spaces involving children, parents, volunteers, and professionals collaboratively. Conceptually, these practices align with key CBL principles, including active community participation, contextual and experiential learning, collaboration and equality among participants, and a strong orientation toward addressing real life problems faced by the community. Furthermore, CBL positions the community as the primary subject in determining both the direction and process of learning, whereby knowledge is not merely transmitted but collectively constructed through social interaction and shared experiences.

These data indicate that Community-Based Learning is not merely a theoretical construct but is concretely implemented within need-based communities such as POTADS West Java. Moreover, the practices observed reveal a more complex form of community-based learning, where learning processes involve not only individuals but also families as central, active systems within the learning environment. In this context, the community functions not only as a learning space but also as a social ecosystem that integrates learning processes, social support, and empowerment simultaneously. Despite this potential, academic studies explicitly linking Community-Based Learning theory with real practices in disability-oriented family communities remain limited. Existing research tends to be descriptive and has not sufficiently positioned such community practices as theoretical contributions that can be comparatively analyzed. For instance, Mooren et al. (2018) explicitly frame their study of family support networks for parents of children with disabilities as "a descriptive study" focused on feasibility rather than theoretical development. Similarly, Harty (2024) employs a qualitative descriptive approach to document educational service innovations without advancing theoretical frameworks. Abdullah et al. (2023) acknowledge this limitation by calling for future research to contribute more substantively to the existing body of literature. Even in comprehensive collections such as Lo & Xu's (2019) volume on family-school-community partnerships, the emphasis remains on documenting evidence-based practices rather than developing comparative theoretical models that integrate community-based learning with family-centered approaches. This gap suggests the absence of a conceptual framework that systematically integrates community-based learning with family-centered approaches in disability contexts. Without such integration, theoretical models risk overlooking how learning, social support, and empowerment intersect within real community settings.

Based on this background, this article aims to conduct a comparative analysis between Community-Based Learning as a theoretical framework and the learning practices observed in the POTADS West Java community. This analysis seeks to demonstrate the alignment between CBL principles and empirical practices, while also identifying elements of novelty emerging from disability-based community contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its explicit effort to bridge the existing gap between the theoretical concept of Community-Based Learning, which traditionally centers on the individual, and the complex empirical reality of need-based communities, where the family functions as a unified learning system. Unlike prior descriptive studies, this research offers a comparative analysis that positions community practices not merely as applications of theory but as a source of theoretical refinement. By examining how CBL principles are collectively reconstructed through the interaction of children, parents, and professionals within a family-oriented ecosystem, this study develops a novel conceptual integration that combines community-based learning with a family-centered approach. This integration is essential for understanding how learning, social support, and empowerment intersect simultaneously a dynamic often overlooked in conventional CBL literature. Therefore, this study is expected not only to strengthen the validity of Community-Based Learning theory but also to contribute to the development of more inclusive, contextual, and family oriented community-based learning models.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with an observational design to identify the implementation of Community-Based Learning (CBL) within the POTADS West Java community. This approach was selected to enable a contextual and systematic understanding of naturally occurring learning processes within a community setting, without requiring prolonged engagement as typically expected in in-depth case study research. Furthermore, this approach is appropriate for examining the alignment between theoretical constructs and empirical practices.

This study involved participants from the POTADS West Java community, consisting of children with Down syndrome, parents, volunteers, and professionals. Observations were conducted across four community activities, each involving approximately 15–25 participants. The selection of activities was carried out using purposive sampling, by intentionally choosing activities that met the following criteria: (1) routine community programs, (2) activities involving active participation of multiple actors, and (3) activities that reflect the characteristics of Community-Based Learning.

To ensure analytical rigor and systematic observation, the study employed key principles of *Community-Based Learning* as analytical indicators. These principles are grounded in Wenger's (1998a; 1998b) concept of *communities of practice*, which positions communities as spaces for collective learning through social interaction. In addition, Kolb's (1984) theory of *experiential learning* emphasizes learning through direct experience and reflection. UNESCO (2021) further highlights the importance of participation, contextual relevance, and inclusivity in non-formal education, while Foley (1999) underscores the role of informal learning embedded in everyday community life. Based on these theoretical foundations, the indicators of *Community-Based Learning* used in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Community-Based Learning indicators as observational framework

No	CBL Indicator	Conceptual Description	Observational Focus	Theoretical Sources
1	Active Participation	The active involvement of all community members in the learning process	The participation of children, parents, volunteers, and professionals in community activities	Wenger (1998a); UNESCO (2021)
2	Contextual and Experiential Learning	Learning grounded in real-life experiences and everyday needs	Activities such as therapy, life skills training, arts, and other relevant practices	Kolb (1984); Foley (1999)
3	Collaboration and Equality	Reciprocal interaction and equal relationships among community members	Interaction patterns among parents, volunteers, and professionals (hierarchical vs collaborative)	Wenger (1998b)
4	Problem-Solving Orientation	Learning directed toward addressing real-life challenges faced by the community	Activities that support children with Down syndrome and address family needs	UNESCO (2021); Foley (1999)
5	Community as the Learning Agent	The community as the main actor in determining and managing learning processes	Decision-making processes, activity planning, and community autonomy in learning	Wenger (1998a); UNESCO (2021)

Table 1 serves as an analytical framework to assess the extent to which learning practices within the POTADS West Java community align with the principles of *Community-Based Learning*. These indicators were operationalized as observational lenses to systematically identify the presence of CBL practices in the field. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, in which observational and documentation data

were categorized and interpreted based on the predefined CBL indicators. This study does not aim to generate new theoretical constructs but rather to examine the alignment between existing CBL theory and empirical practices observed in a specific community context. Thus, this research provides a contextual understanding of how *Community-Based Learning* is implemented within a disability-oriented community, particularly highlighting the integration of family participation as a central component of the learning process for children with Down syndrome.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion in an integrated manner, guided by the indicators of *Community-Based Learning* (CBL) established in the methodology. The analysis aims to examine the alignment between theoretical principles of CBL and the empirical practices observed within the POTADS West Java community. The findings are based on four observational sessions, which consistently revealed recurring patterns across different community activities.

3.1. Active participation within the community

Observational findings indicate that all members of the community, including children with Down syndrome, parents, volunteers, and professionals, were actively involved in the learning activities. Parents were not merely acting as companions but were directly engaged in the learning process, such as assisting children during therapy sessions, participating in group discussions, and sharing experiences with other members. This pattern of involvement was consistently observed across all sessions. This finding reflects the principle of active participation in *Community-Based Learning*, where learning occurs through the direct engagement of community members in shared activities (Wenger, 1998a). Furthermore, UNESCO (2021) emphasizes participation as a key element in inclusive non-formal education. Therefore, the learning practices within the POTADS community demonstrate a strong alignment with the participatory nature of CBL. This alignment, however, signifies more than just methodological consistency; it points to the emergence of a robust micro-social ecosystem where the traditional hierarchy between "expert" and "caregiver" begins to dissolve.

By positioning parents as co-facilitators rather than passive observers, the community operationalizes a form of distributed expertise (Dale et al., 2025; Kervick, 2017; Prest et al., 2025). This has profound implications for the sustainability of the intervention: when caregivers are embedded as active agents in the learning process, the transfer of skills from the formal therapeutic setting to the home environment becomes seamless. Consequently, the community mitigates the common phenomenon of "skill regression" often observed when children with special needs transition between isolated therapy sessions and their daily lives. Moreover, this structure implicitly challenges the conventional medical model of disability, which tends to centralize authority in professionals. Instead, the POTADS community fosters a social model approach where knowledge is co-constructed. For the broader context of inclusive education policy, this finding suggests that non-formal learning spaces can serve as incubators for pedagogical innovation. They demonstrate that inclusion is not merely about physical placement in mainstream institutions but about the deliberate redistribution of roles to empower families as legitimate knowledge holders (Graff, 2021; Means, 2023; Whitbread et al., 2007). The implication for practitioners is that scaling such models requires a shift in focus from solely training professionals to developing structured protocols that scaffold parental involvement—turning what is often an informal support network into the core engine of the educational process.

3.2. Contextual and experiential learning

The observations also revealed that learning activities within the POTADS community were not based on formal curricula but were developed according to the real needs of children and their families. Activities such as therapy sessions, life skills training, and arts-based programs were closely connected to the daily experiences of participants. This indicates that learning was grounded in real-life contexts rather than abstract instruction. Such practices are consistent with Kolb's (1984) theory of *experiential learning*, which highlights learning through direct experience and reflection. In addition, Foley (1999) argues that community learning often takes place informally within everyday life contexts. Thus, the practices observed in POTADS reflect the principle of contextual and experience-based learning within CBL.

This alignment with experiential learning theory, however, takes on a distinctive character within the POTADS community due to the specific nature of the learners and their circumstances. Unlike conventional experiential learning settings where experiences are often designed or simulated for educational purposes, the learning processes observed here emerged organically from the lived realities of caregiving, therapy, and daily coping (Craig et al., 2023; Jeter & Hardin, 2024). In this context, learning is not merely experiential but hyper-contextual, meaning that the boundaries between learning, living, and problem-solving become almost indistinguishable. Children with Down syndrome acquire life skills not in decontextualized exercises but through authentic participation in routines such as self-care, communication, and social interaction, with parents and peers serving as immediate scaffolds (Mendoza-García et al., 2025; Walsh et al., 2024). Similarly, parents develop practical knowledge—ranging from therapeutic techniques to advocacy strategies—through

situated problem-solving alongside professionals and fellow caregivers. This dynamic resonates with Lave & Wenger's (1991) notion of situated learning, where knowledge is inseparable from the social and material contexts in which it is used. Moreover, the integration of arts-based activities such as music, dance, and visual arts further illustrates how the community leverages culturally meaningful and emotionally resonant mediums to facilitate developmental outcomes.

These activities not only address therapeutic goals but also provide avenues for self-expression, social inclusion, and identity formation—dimensions often overlooked in formal educational settings. By grounding learning in the authentic, everyday experiences of families, the POTADS community transforms what could otherwise be perceived as limitations into rich pedagogical resources. This approach also challenges deficit-based narratives commonly associated with disability, positioning children and families as active agents capable of generating knowledge through lived experience. Therefore, the contextual and experiential learning observed extends beyond mere methodological alignment with CBL principles; it represents a form of emancipatory learning (Freire, 1970), wherein the community collectively constructs knowledge that is both personally meaningful and socially empowering. This deeper understanding underscores the need to reconceptualize community-based learning not simply as a flexible alternative to formal education, but as a distinct pedagogical paradigm uniquely suited to communities navigating complex, intersectional challenges.

3.3. Collaboration and equality in the learning process

The interaction patterns observed within the community demonstrate a collaborative and non-hierarchical structure. Parents, volunteers, and professionals engaged in mutual interaction, shared responsibilities, and collectively supported children's development. There was no rigid distinction between "teacher" and "learner," as all participants contributed to the learning process. This finding aligns with Wenger's (1998a) concept of *communities of practice*, where learning emerges through participation in shared social practices. The presence of equal and reciprocal relationships further reinforces the collaborative nature of learning, which is a core principle of Community-Based Learning. Therefore, the POTADS community reflects a strong implementation of collaboration and equality in its learning practices.

This collaborative dynamic extends beyond mere role flexibility to reflect a fundamental redistribution of epistemic authority—a process wherein the experiential knowledge of parents is valued as highly as the clinical expertise of professionals. In the POTADS community, parents contribute context-rich insights into their children's daily behaviors, communication patterns, and sensory needs, which professionals then integrate into therapeutic planning. Conversely, professionals provide technical knowledge that parents adapt to home and community settings (Forslund et al., 2025; Hayward et al., 2025; Proctor et al., 2024). This reciprocal exchange creates a generative learning loop that aligns with what Freire (1970) conceptualized as a dialogical approach to education, where knowledge is co-constructed through horizontal rather than vertical relationships. Moreover, the absence of rigid hierarchies functions as a form of structural empowerment: parents who initially joined the community seeking guidance gradually transition into peer-mentor roles, supporting newly enrolled families. This iterative process of learning, applying, and teaching consolidates collective competence while strengthening social cohesion. Importantly, this collaborative structure also addresses a persistent challenge in disability interventions—the fragmentation of support services (Basualto et al., 2025; Karcz et al., 2025; Finger & Karcz, 2025). By fostering sustained, trust-based relationships among stakeholders who might otherwise interact only in clinical or institutional settings, the community creates a holistic support ecosystem. In this sense, collaboration and equality within POTADS are not merely pedagogical principles but serve as the organizational architecture that sustains the community's capacity for collective problem-solving, mutual accountability, and long-term resilience.

3.4. Problem-solving orientation

The observed activities were oriented toward addressing real-life challenges faced by children with Down syndrome and their families. These included developmental delays, social interaction difficulties, and social stigma within the broader community. Learning activities were designed not only to enhance individual skills but also to provide collective solutions to these challenges. This orientation is consistent with the principles of CBL, which emphasize the importance of relevance and responsiveness to community needs (UNESCO, 2021). Foley (1999) also highlights that community-based learning often emerges as a response to real-life problems. Therefore, learning within the POTADS community can be understood as both educational and transformative in nature.

This problem-solving orientation, however, operates on a deeper level than merely responding to immediate needs. Within the POTADS community, the process of collectively identifying and addressing challenges such as stigma and developmental delays functions as a mechanism for what Freire (1970) terms "conscientization"—the development of a critical awareness of one's social reality. When parents share strategies for navigating discriminatory attitudes or advocate for their children's rights, they are not only solving individual problems but are also collectively deconstructing the systemic barriers that marginalize their families (Batz & Yadav, 2024; Li et al., 2026). This transforms the learning space into a site of social action,

where experiential knowledge about navigating healthcare, education, and public perception is codified and shared. Consequently, the community moves beyond a support group model to become a collective agent of change. The focus shifts from adapting the child to an unaccommodating environment to empowering the family unit to reshape that environment (Thompson et al., 2017; Wahab & Monoto, 2018). This dynamic illustrates that in need-based communities, problem-solving is inherently political and emancipatory, reinforcing Foley's (1999) assertion that informal learning often serves as a precursor to broader social transformation. By embedding problem-solving within a collaborative framework, the POTADS community demonstrates that sustainable solutions for children with special needs are not found in individualized interventions alone, but in the collective resilience and strategic knowledge-building of the family ecosystem itself.

3.5. Community as the learning agent

The findings further indicate that the POTADS community plays an active role in determining the direction and structure of its learning activities. Programs and activities are not entirely dictated by external institutions but are developed based on the needs and collective agreements of community members. This reflects a level of autonomy and ownership within the learning process. This is consistent with Wenger's (1998b) perspective that communities function as active agents in social learning processes. UNESCO (2021) also emphasizes that community-based education should position communities as subjects rather than objects of learning. Therefore, the POTADS community exemplifies the principle of community as the primary agent in Community-Based Learning.

This autonomy, however, extends beyond mere self-governance to constitute what can be characterized as a negotiated sovereignty over knowledge production. Unlike communities that merely consume externally developed interventions, POTADS actively engages in a process of epistemic customization, wherein therapeutic and educational practices are continuously adapted to align with the collective wisdom of families who share lived experiences. This dynamic challenges the conventional unidirectional flow of expertise from professionals to laypersons. Instead, the community operates as a site of co-production (Gordon et al., 2025; Mulvale et al., 2024), where professional knowledge intersects with experiential knowledge to generate locally relevant practices that are often more sustainable than externally imposed programs.

Moreover, the collective decision-making observed within POTADS serves a dual function: it ensures that activities remain responsive to evolving family needs while simultaneously reinforcing social cohesion and mutual accountability among members. When community members collectively determine learning priorities, they are not merely exercising agency over content but are also collectively validating each other's struggles and aspirations (Glassman et al., 2021; Witter et al., 2025). This process transforms the community from a passive recipient of services into a resilient social infrastructure capable of generating its own solutions (Ziervogel et al., 2016). Such structural autonomy is particularly critical for families of children with Down syndrome, who often experience marginalization within formal institutions; the ability to self-organize and reclaim decision-making power becomes both a pedagogical strategy and a form of psychosocial empowerment. Consequently, the POTADS community illustrates that positioning communities as learning agents is not simply a methodological choice but a fundamental condition for fostering sustainable, dignity-affirming educational practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the principles of *Community-Based Learning* (CBL) are concretely implemented within the learning practices of the POTADS West Java community. Based on observational findings, all core CBL indicators: active participation, contextual and experiential learning, collaboration and equality, problem-solving orientation, and the community as the learning agent were consistently identified across various community activities. These findings confirm that CBL is not merely a conceptual framework but is empirically manifested within disability-oriented community settings. Furthermore, the implementation of CBL within the POTADS community reveals a distinctive characteristic, namely, the integral role of the family as part of the learning system. In this context, learning is not centered solely on individuals but occurs collectively through interactions among children, parents, and the broader community. Thus, the practices observed not only validate the relevance of CBL theory but also extend its understanding by emphasizing the centrality of family involvement within community-based learning processes. Overall, this study affirms that need-based communities such as POTADS West Java represent a concrete form of *Community-Based Learning* that is contextual, inclusive, and sustainable. These findings imply that the development of non-formal community education should position families as central actors in the learning process and recognize organically developed community practices as legitimate forms of learning.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, Community-Based Learning (CBL) should be strengthened as a primary approach in community and non-formal education, particularly in communities with specific needs. The results show that the application of CBL can foster communities that are more active, collaborative, and adaptive. For non-formal education practitioners and community organizers, key CBL principles such as active participation, experiential learning, and collaboration need to be integrated into community activities. The practices observed in the POTADS West Java community demonstrate that CBL can support the development of communities that are more skilled, independent, and mutually supportive. From a policy perspective, there is a need for greater recognition and support for family-based communities as part of the non-formal education system. This support may include capacity building, partnerships, and the facilitation of inclusive community learning spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the Association of Parents of Children with Down Syndrome (POTADS) in West Java for providing a valuable learning space, as well as for their openness and commitment to sharing experiences that informed this study. The community has served as an important source of reflection and insight in understanding inclusive community-based learning practices.

The authors also acknowledge the contributions of scholars and practitioners in the field of community and non-formal education whose works and perspectives have significantly informed the theoretical framework of this article. This research was supported by the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan – LPDP), Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia, through a postgraduate scholarship program. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of LPDP or the Ministry of Finance. In addition, appreciation is extended to all parties who provided intellectual and moral support, directly or indirectly, during the preparation of this manuscript.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

RESEARCH FUNDING

This research did not receive any financial support.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human subjects. All procedures received approval from the Universitas Negeri Malang institutional review board and were carried out with the informed consent of the parents or legal guardians of all participating children. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

AI USE STATEMENT

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

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