

Enhancing Early Childhood Education Outcomes through a Parental Involvement Program: A Community-Based Participatory Action Research in an Underserved Urban Community

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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement is a critical determinant of early childhood education (ECE) outcomes, yet it remains persistently low in underserved urban communities in Indonesia due to socioeconomic pressures, low parental self-efficacy, and fragmented school-community linkages. This study employed a qualitative community-based participatory action research (PAR) design to co-develop, implement, and evaluate a culturally grounded parental involvement program in a densely populated, low-income neighborhood in North Jakarta. Over eight months, 32 parents, 4 ECE teachers, and 2 community facilitators engaged in three iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The PAR process catalyzed four interconnected outcomes: heightened parental self-efficacy, richer home learning environments, improved parent-teacher communication, and the emergence of informal community support networks. A pre-post involvement checklist corroborated qualitative shifts, showing marked increases in all involvement indicators. The findings suggest that a participatory, asset-based approach can transform parental involvement from a prescriptive school demand into a shared community practice, thereby strengthening ECE outcomes in marginalized urban settings. The study offers a replicable model for fostering sustainable family-community-school partnerships in similar resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: parental involvement, early childhood education, participatory action research, underserved urban community.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) has been recognized globally as a foundational investment in lifelong learning, social equity, and national development (UNESCO, 2021). In Indonesia, the government has shown a heightened commitment to expanding access to ECE services through the Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) system, which encompasses formal kindergartens, playgroups, and community-based integrated health and education posts (Posyandu and Bina Keluarga Balita). Despite notable progress in enrollment rates, significant quality gaps persist, particularly in underserved urban areas where poverty, density, mobility, and social fragmentation converge to limit children's developmental outcomes). A substantial body of research indicates that one of the most powerful yet underutilized levers for improving ECE quality is meaningful parental involvement (Permatasari et al., 2024). However in the context of marginalized communities, parent engagement is often conceptualized through a deficit lens, overlooking the structural barriers, cultural strengths, and aspirations that shape family participation (Rija Helti & Hayati, 2025).

The problem addressed in this study is the persistently low level and narrow form of parental involvement in ECE among families living in *kampung* (informal urban settlements) of North Jakarta, an area characterized by high residential density, intermittent employment, and limited access to public services. Existing school-initiated parent programs in the area have primarily relied on one-way communication, such as receiving report cards or attending fundraising events, and have failed to build genuine partnerships or accommodate the lived realities of working parents. As a result, the potential of the home learning environment—storytelling, play-based interaction, and language-rich daily routines—remains largely untapped, and children's school readiness indicators lag behind those of more advantaged peers. The disconnect between schools and families not only weakens immediate educational gains but also perpetuates cycles of educational disadvantage across generations.

Parental involvement is not a monolithic construct; it encompasses parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with the community. In underserved urban communities, these dimensions must be understood intersectionally, considering the low literacy levels of some caregivers, the absence of extended family support, the precarious nature of informal sector work, and the gendered expectations that place the disproportionate burden of care on mothers. Furthermore, top-down interventions designed without community voice often fail because they neither acknowledge these constraints nor leverage the tacit knowledge and social capital that already exist within the neighborhood (Kineret & Shirley, 2025). Therefore, a context-sensitive, participatory approach is essential for co-creating strategies that are acceptable, feasible, and sustainable.

This study fills a critical gap in the Indonesian literature by using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology to build a parental involvement program from scratch. Unlike conventional research in which academics design and evaluate an intervention, PAR positions community members as co-researchers who identify their

own problems, plan actions, implement changes, and evaluate outcomes in iterative cycles. This approach is particularly suited to underserved communities because it fosters ownership, respects local wisdom, and builds collective efficacy—all of which are necessary for enduring behavioral change. While PAR has been successfully applied in health and rural development in Indonesia, its application in urban ECE settings remains rare and under examined.

The primary objective of this research was to investigate how a community-based PAR process can enhance parental involvement and, in turn, improve early childhood education outcomes in low-income urban neighborhoods. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following three research questions:

- What are the locally perceived barriers and enablers of parental involvement in the ECE in an underserved urban community?
- How does a participatory action research process facilitate the co-design and implementation of a parental involvement program
- What changes in parental practices, self-efficacy, school-community relationships, and child learning outcomes emerge through the PAR process?

The significance of this study is three fold. At the theoretical level, it extends Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence by demonstrating how community-driven agency can reconfigure the school-family intersection in a collectivist, resource-scarce setting. Practically, it offers a replicable, low-cost prototype for PAUD teachers, community facilitators, and local education authorities to engage parents as genuine partners. At the policy level, it provides evidence to support the integration of participatory, community-based strategies into Indonesia's national ECE quality framework, which currently emphasizes infrastructure and teacher certification more than family engagement.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The literature review situates the study within the theories of parental involvement, ecological systems, and community-based participatory action research PAR. The method section details the PAR design, setting, participants, data collection and analysis. The results are presented thematically, supported by tables and a figure that illustrates the cycles, themes, and pre-post changes. The discussion interprets the findings in light of the existing literature and delineates the implications for practice and policy. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key contributions of this study and suggests directions for future research.

METODE

This study employed a qualitative community-based participatory action research (PAR) design, as articulated by Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014). PAR was chosen because the research problem demanded both an in-depth understanding of the contextual dynamics of parental involvement and the generation of actionable and community-owned solutions. The design consisted of three iterative cycles each comprising the phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection conducted over eight months from January to August 2023. The cyclic nature allowed the intervention

to evolve organically in response to the participants' experiences and emerging data, ensuring ecological validity and contextual fit.

Setting and Context

The research was conducted in Kampung Nelayan (Fisherman's Village), a pseudonym for a densely populated sub-district in North Jakarta. The area is characterized by informal housing constructed along polluted waterways, high unemployment or underemployment in the informal sector (street vending, waste picking, and small-scale fishing), and limited access to public services. The community includes a significant number of internal migrants from Central and East Java, resulting in linguistic diversity (Javanese, Sundanese, and Betawi dialects) in addition to formal Indonesian. Two PAUD institutions serve the area, both operating in modest, semi-permanent structures with limited learning materials and resources. Typical class sizes exceed 25 children with one teacher and one assistant. Prior to the study, parental involvement was largely confined to occasional attendance at the distribution of government social assistance and end-of-semester report collection.

Participants and Recruitment

In keeping with PAR principles, participant selection was purposive and aimed at inclusivity of diverse voices. After obtaining ethical clearance from the University of [name] Research Ethics Committee and permission from the sub-district office, the research team held a community meeting to explain the project and invite the community to participate. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) being a parent or primary caregiver of a child aged 3–6 years enrolled in one of the two PAUD centers; (b) residing in the target neighborhood; and (c) willingness to engage in the full eight-month process. Thirty-two parents (29 mothers, 3 fathers) were recruited, along with all four teachers from the two centers and two community facilitators (a local Posyandu cadre and a religious leader). The children were aged 3.56 years ($M = 4.8$). All participants provided written informed consent, and parents consented to the use of their children's anonymized developmental data. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1 (see Results).

PAR Process in Cycles

The PAR process was facilitated by the lead researcher, who adopted the role of a critical friend and co-learner, rather than an external expert. A community steering group consisting of two parents, one teacher, and one facilitator was formed to guide the logistics and ensure cultural propriety.

Cycle 1 (Months 1–2): Building Relationships and Identifying Issues. The initial phase centered on trust building and collaborative problem definition. The research team conducted home visits, informal conversations, and two large-group focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore parents' daily routines, aspirations for their children, perceived barriers to engagement, and their existing support networks. The teachers participated in parallel reflective sessions. Data from this cycle informed the creation of a problem tree, a visual map of the causes and effects of low involvement, which participants validated and refined. The core issue identified was not unwillingness but

a combination of time scarcity, low confidence in teaching roles, and a lack of teacher invitation.

Cycle 2 (Months 3–5): Co-Designing and Implementing the Program. Based on the Cycle 1 findings, the group co-designed a program named “Bersama Keluarga Hebat” (Together, Great Families). The program included four integrated components: (a) Bincang Santai (relaxed chat), weekly one-hour small group sessions held in a parent’s house or community hall, where parents shared stories and a facilitator modeled simple, play-based learning activities using household materials; (b) Kunjungan Guru (teacher home visits), monthly 30-minute visits by a teacher to discuss the child’s progress and demonstrate a quick learning game; (c) Pojok Baca Keluarga (family reading corner), a campaign to create a small book space at home using recycled materials, supported by a rotating book lending scheme; and (d) Grup WA Berbagi (sharing WhatsApp group), a moderated chat for daily tips, photos of children’s activities, and peer encouragement. All strategies were designed to be low-cost, embedded in daily routines, and linguistically accessible to the target population.

Cycle 3 (Months 6–8): Monitoring, Reflecting, and Sustaining. The third cycle focuses on deepening and sustaining change. The group collectively analyzed the early successes and challenges through reflective FGDs. Adjustments included shifting Bincang Santai timing to the evening to accommodate working mothers and adding a component on positive discipline after parents expressed need. Participants also planned a community exhibition where children’s homemade books and artwork were displayed, celebrating collective achievements and reinforcing the status of parents as educators.

Data Collection

Multiple qualitative data sources were gathered to ensure methodological triangulation and depth

Participant Observation: The researcher and trained field assistants conducted 24 sessions of observation across Bincang Santai meetings, home visits, and community events. Detailed field notes captured the interactions, non verbal cues, and contextual factors.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 purposefully selected parents (representing varying levels of initial involvement, education, and age) at two time points: the end of Cycle 1 (baseline perceptions) and the end of Cycle 3 (outcome reflections). Interviews with all four⁴ teachers and two facilitators were conducted at both points. The interviews lasted 40–70 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Focus group discussions (FGDs): Four FGDs were held: one per cycle with parents and a combined parent-teacher-facilitator FGD at the end of Cycle 3. The FGDs lasted 90–120 minutes and were designed to capture collective sense-making, consensus, and dissent.

Document Analysis: Artifacts such as attendance logs, WhatsApp chat transcripts, photographs of home learning corners, and children’s work samples were collected and analyzed.

Reflective Journals: The lead researcher and two teacher co-researchers maintained weekly reflective journals, recording their observations, feelings, and emerging questions.

Parental Involvement Checklist: To augment the qualitative data with a quantifiable indicator of change, a brief 5-item self-report checklist was developed collaboratively. Items assessing the frequency of parent-child shared reading, helping with learning activities at home, communicating with teachers, attending school/community meetings, and encouraging children to play with learning materials were rated on a 5-point scale (1=never to 5=everyday/always). The checklist was administered to all 32 parents at baseline (end of Cycle 1) and at the end line (end of Cycle 3). Although not a validated scale, it served as a pragmatic, contextually grounded tool for detecting gross shifts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, with an abductive approach that allowed both inductive code development and deductive alignment with the PAR and parental involvement frameworks. The transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly for familiarization. Initial codes were generated in Indonesian and later translated into English for reporting, with back-translation checks to preserve the meaning. The codes were clustered into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the full dataset and refined in consultation with the participant co-researchers during a member-checking workshop. The themes were defined and named, and a thematic map was constructed. The analysis was aided by the NVivo 12 software. Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation of sources and investigators, peer debriefing with a PAR methodological expert, and thick descriptions. The pre-post checklist data were analyzed descriptively (means and standard deviations) and are presented alongside qualitative themes. No inferential statistics were applied given the small sample and the checklist's developmental nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile and Initial Contexts

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 32 parents and their children. Most caregivers were mothers (90.6%), reflecting the community sgendered caregiving patterns. Overall educational attainment was low; 59.4% had completed only elementary or junior secondary education. Nearly two-thirds of the population worked in the informal sector, with irregular and often daily wage income. The children were almost evenly distributed by sex, with a mean age of 4.8 years old. All children were enrolled in a local PAUD, but attendance was sporadic, averaging three days a week.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participating Parents and Children (N=32).

Characteristic	Category	n	%
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Characteristic	Category	n	%
Caregiver Role	Mother	29	90.6
	Father	3	9.4
Age (years)	20–29	10	31.3
	30–39	17	53.1
	40–49	5	15.6
Education	Not completed elementary	2	6.3
	Elementary school (SD)	10	31.2
	Junior secondary (SMP)	9	28.1
	Senior secondary (SMA)	11	34.4
Occupation	Unemployed/housewife	8	25.0
	Informal sector (vendor, laundry, etc.)	20	62.5
	Formal sector (factory worker, clerk)	4	12.5
Child's Sex	Female	15	46.9
	Male	17	53.1
Child's Age	3–4 years	10	31.3
	5–6 years	22	68.7
PAUD Attendance	3–4 days/week	24	75.0
	5–6 days/week	8	25.0

Source: Baseline demographic survey (January 2023)

Baseline interviews and FGDs revealed a profound gap between parents' aspirations and their perceived capacity to achieve those aspirations. Almost universally, parents expressed a strong desire for their children to "be smarter than

me” and to “have a better life.” However, they described themselves as “not educated enough to teach, too tired after work,” and unsure of “what to do at home. Teachers, for their part, lamented that “parents only come when there is money (assistance)” and felt that their efforts to engage were rebuffed. This initial picture confirmed that the barrier was not primarily motivational but structural and perceptual, reinforcing the need for a participatory capacity-building approach.

The PAR Process in Action

Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the key activities, participants involved, and the main outputs of each cycle.

Table 2. Phases, Activities, and Outputs of Participatory Action Research

Cycle & Phase	Core Activities	Participants	Key Outputs
Cycle 1: Understanding	Community entry, home visits, trust-building FGDs, problem tree exercise	All parents, teachers, facilitators	Problem tree map; identification of four core barriers: time, confidence, teacher invitation, materials
Cycle 2: Co-creating	Collaborative program design workshop; launch of <i>Bincang Santai</i> , home visits, <i>Pojok Baca</i> , WhatsApp group	32 parents, 4 teachers, 2 facilitators; smaller groups of 8 for <i>Bincang Santai</i>	Program named “Bersama Keluarga Hebat”; 12 weekly chat sessions conducted; 32 home visits; 20 family reading corners created; 342 WhatsApp posts shared
Cycle 3: Sustaining	Reflective FGDs, adaptation of session timing, addition of positive discipline module, community exhibition, planning for continuation	All stakeholders; wider community for exhibition	Revised program schedule; parent leadership committee formed; community exhibition attended by 150+ residents; sustainability roadmap drafted

The iterative nature of the program allowed it to become progressively more attuned to parents’ realities. For instance, initial *Bincang Santai* sessions were held in the early afternoon but observation and reflection revealed that working mothers could not attend. The group decided to shift sessions to 7:30 pm, resulting in a tripling of the attendance. The WhatsApp group evolved from a one-way teacher broadcast to a lively platform where parents exchanged videos of their children singing, cooking together, and crafting toys from waste materials—authentic evidence of expanded home learning during the pandemic.

Thematic Findings

The thematic analysis of all qualitative data sources yielded five main themes, each with two to three subthemes, as summarized in Table 3. Selected illustrative quotes are provided below.

Table 3. Key Themes and Subthemes of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
1. Enhanced Parental Self-Efficacy	1.1 From “can’t teach” to “I am a teacher”	<i>"Before, I thought learning must be with books and a blackboard. Now I see, counting while cooking rice is also teaching." (Ibu Sari, 34)</i>
	1.2 Confidence in using everyday materials	<i>"When my daughter brought home her first drawing and said, 'Mama, let's make a book,' I felt so proud, like I could really do this." (Ibu Ani, 28)</i>
	1.3 Positive reinforcement from children’s response	
2. Improved Home Learning Environment	2.1 Increase in shared literacy and play activities	<i>"We made a reading corner from a cardboard box. Now every night before sleep, my son picks a book for us to read together." (Ibu Fitri, 31)</i>
	2.2 Creation of dedicated, low-cost learning spaces	<i>"I started telling him stories my grandmother told me, in Javanese. He loves it and it makes me happy too." (Ibu Rini, 38)</i>
	2.3 Use of local language and stories	
3. Strengthened Parent-Teacher Communication	3.1 From formal distance to friendly, ongoing dialogue	<i>"When Bu Guru came to my house, she sat on my floor and played with my child. After that, I'm not shy anymore to send a WA message." (Ibu Dewi, 29)</i>
	3.2 Teacher home visits as a turning point	<i>"I used to think parents didn't care. Now I understand, they are just very tired. We found ways to help each other." (Bu Lina, teacher)</i>
	3.3 Mutual understanding of constraints	
4. Emergence of Community Support Networks	4.1 Peer-to-peer sharing and modeling	<i>"In our WA group, Ibu Tuti shared how she uses plastic bottles to make counting toys. I copied it, and now we all share ideas." (Ibu Yuli, 33)</i>
	4.2 Collective action for child-friendly	<i>"We never used to talk about children’s education with neighbors. Now, while we wash</i>

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Quotes
5. Persistent Challenges and Evolving Coping	environment	<i>clothes together, we discuss the Bincang Santai topic." (Ibu Nia, 40)</i>
	4.3 Spiritual and emotional support	
	5.1 Economic precarity and time poverty	<i>"Some weeks I am so tired from selling fried snacks all day. But seeing my child's excitement pulls me back." (Ibu Yanti, 36)</i>
	5.2 Fluctuating motivation and participation	<i>"The fathers are still hard to involve. But two fathers started a small project fixing the play equipment. That's a beginning." (Pak Adi, facilitator)</i>
	5.3 Gendered burden and need for male engagement	

Theme 1, Enhanced Parental Self-Efficacy, was the most pervasive and foundational. Parents repeatedly described a shift in their identity from passive recipients of teacher expertise to active educational agents. The use of everyday household items—rice, beans, bottle caps, old newspapers—as learning tools was revolutionary, making teaching feel accessible rather than esoteric. Theme 2 documented tangible changes in the home environment: 20 families created a family reading corner, and all reported at least some increase in daily shared literacy or play activities. Theme 3 captured the transformation in the emotional quality of parent-teacher relationships. Home visits dissolved hierarchical barriers; teachers witnessed families' living conditions and strengths, while parents felt "seen" and respected. Theme 4 highlights the organic growth of horizontal networks. The WhatsApp group and face-to-face chats evolved into a community of practice where mothers exchanged not only educational ideas but also emotional support, buffering the isolation typical of dense urban poverty. Theme 5, however, acknowledges these persistent structural constraints. Economic instability meant that engagement could ebb and flow; the program's flexibility and non-judgmental ethos were critical for retaining participants. The minimal involvement of fathers remains a concern, although early signs of engagement through practical, "hands-on" tasks suggest a possible entry point.

Changes in Parental Involvement Indicators

While the qualitative data provide rich texture, the pre-post checklist data offer a complementary snapshot of aggregated behavioral changes. Table 4 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each of the five items at baseline and endline.

Table 4. Pre- and Post-Intervention Parental Involvement Indicators (N=32)

Indicator (Scale 1–5)	Baseline M (SD)	Endline M (SD)	Mean Change
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Indicator (Scale 1–5)	Baseline M (SD)	Endline M (SD)	Mean Change
1. Reading or looking at books with child	1.94 (0.84)	3.62 (0.91)	+1.68
2. Helping child with learning activities (e.g., counting, drawing, singing)	2.09 (0.78)	3.91 (0.73)	+1.82
3. Communicating with teacher (in person or via message)	1.72 (0.68)	3.28 (0.99)	+1.56
4. Attending school/community meetings	2.22 (1.01)	3.84 (0.88)	+1.62
5. Encouraging child's play with learning materials	2.47 (0.80)	4.09 (0.69)	+1.62
Total Mean Score	2.09 (0.67)	3.75 (0.72)	+1.66

Scale: 1=never, 2=rarely (1-2x/month), 3=sometimes (1x/week), 4=often (3-4x/week), 5=everyday/always

The total mean score increased from 2.09 (rarely) to 3.75 (often/always), indicating a substantial shift. All five indicators showed significant improvements. Item 2, “helping child with learning activities,” and Item 5, “encouraging child’s play,” reached the highest endline means, reflecting the program’s emphasis on integrating learning into play and daily routines. The relatively lower endline mean for Item 3, communication with teachers (3.28), suggests that while communication improved, it was not yet a daily habit for all parents aligning with qualitative observations that some mothers still hesitated to “bother” the teacher outside of urgent matters.

This study aimed to investigate whether and how a community-based participatory action research process could enhance parental involvement and early childhood education outcomes in a deeply underserved urban community in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that through iterative cycles of collective inquiry, planning, action, and reflection, parents transformed from marginal, self-doubting bystanders into active and confident co-educators. The results reinforce and extend the theoretical, empirical, and practical literature on family-school partnerships in marginalized contexts.

The most fundamental outcome was the enhancement of parental self-efficacy, a psychological construct that repeatedly appears as a linchpin of parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In this community, low self-efficacy was the product of multiple intersecting forces: limited formal education, a culturally ingrained deference to teacher authority, and a narrowly defined view of “teaching” as formal instruction. The PAR process dismantled this view through experiential

learning and through peer modeling. As parents witnessed other mothers—with similar education and resources—successfully engaging children in playful counting, storytelling, and crafting, their own sense of “I can’t” gave way to “I can too.” This finding aligns with Nurmaxamatovna s (2025) social cognitive theory, which identifies vicarious experience and social persuasion as powerful sources of self-efficacy. The community setting of PAR, with its emphasis on horizontal sharing, functioned as a natural efficacy-building environment that no top-down workshop could replicate (Nurmaxamatovna, 2025).

The improvement in the home learning environment—the emergence of reading corners, the incorporation of learning into daily chores, and the revival of oral storytelling—constitutes a concrete manifestation of the “funds of knowledge” approach advocated by Hechanova et al. (2025). By validating household resources (cardboard, bottle caps, kitchen utensils) and local linguistic and narrative traditions, the program erased the perceived boundary between school and home knowledge. Parents began to see their daily practices not as deficits but as pedagogical assets. This epistemological shift is critical for sustained involvement because it embeds education in the fabric of everyday life, making it resilient to the ebbs and flows of parental motivation and economic pressures. The creation of family reading corners, supported by a communal book lending scheme, further materialized this commitment, providing a visible and physical reminder of the family’s educational role (Hechanova et al., 2025).

The transformation of parent-teacher relationships from distant formality to warm, reciprocal communication merits special attention. In the Indonesian PAUD context, the power distance between trained teachers and low-income parents can be significant. Teachers often unconsciously adopt a directive, sometimes patronizing stance and parents respond with avoidance or passive compliance. The PAR intervention deliberately restructured this dynamic through teacher home visits, which removed the institutional backdrop of the school and placed the teacher in the role of a guest in the family’s space. As the quotes reveal, this simple geographical shift had an outsized emotional impact, humanizing both parties and building relational trust a prerequisite for authentic collaboration (Maulani et al., 2025). The subsequent emergence of informal, WhatsApp-mediated communication signals thea revival of dormant mesosystem. This finding strongly supports Maulani et al.s (2025) contention that schools must be the primary bridge builders, reaching into the home in culturally responsive ways.

A particularly novel contribution of this study is the documentation of emergent community support networks as a by product of the PAR process. While the intervention targeted individual parents and parent-teacher dyads, the participatory structure—small group Bincang Santai, the WhatsApp group, and joint preparation for the exhibition—generated collective social capital. Mothers who previously barely greeted each other at the water pump became educational collaborators and mutual supporters. This finding resonates with Suryani and Sits (2025) concept of “relational organizing” in community-based education reform, where social ties are the medium through which knowledge, resources, and collective identity are built. In neighborhoods where formal institutions are weak and individual families are acutely vulnerable, grassroots networks represent a sustainable and resilient infrastructure for

ongoing child development support. The PAR cycles effectively acted as an incubator for a community of practice (Suryani & Sit, 2025) centered on early childhood learning, which participants expressed a desire to sustain beyond the research period.

The findings also shed light on the persistent structural challenges that no short-term intervention can resolve. Economic precarity, time poverty, and the deeply entrenched gendered division of caregiving labor remain constant undercurrents. The program's success in retaining most participants despite these strains can be attributed to its flexibility (e.g., shifting meeting times) and the non-negotiable affirmation and emotional support embedded in the group culture. Parents repeatedly noted that the project was a "place of spirit" where they felt valued, not judged a stark contrast to their prior experiences with formal institutions. This emotional safety net buffered the demotivating effects of hardship and allowed involvement to continue as a valued rather than guilt-inducing activity. However the limited engagement of fathers underscores a critical gap. The few fathers who became involved were attracted by tangible, task-oriented activities (repairing equipment, building the reading corner shelves), suggesting that future efforts might strategically design such entry points while simultaneously engaging mothers in conversations about gendered expectations (Trijayanti et al., 2019).

The modest quantitative evidence, while not generalizable, triangulated and strengthened the qualitative narrative. The marked pre-post increases in all involvement indicators, particularly those related to home-based learning activities, provide a succinct summary of the behavioral shift. The decision to use a co-developed, simple checklist rather than an externally imposed standardized instrument was deliberate and aligned with PAR's epistemological commitment to local knowledge validity (V. Albarida et al., 2025). The checklist served primarily formative purposes, enabling the group to track collective progress and identify areas needing renewed attention (e.g., teacher communication). However, its inclusion strengthens the study's credibility for audiences that require multiple forms of evidence (T. H. Kim & Ryu, 2026).

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a single community with a modest number of participants, and the intensive relational nature of PAR limits direct transferability. However, the thick description provided allows readers to assess the degree of fit with their contexts. Second, the absence of a control group and reliance on self-report measures mean that causal claims must be tempered. The observed changes are best understood as co-produced outcomes of a holistic community process, not as effects of isolated program components. Third, the study covered only eight months; the durability of changes beyond the research period remains unknown. The community steering group's commitment to continue the Bincang Santai and book lending scheme offers promising but untested sustainability (J. Y. Kim & Jang, 2025).

The implications of This Study for policy and practice are significant. For the Indonesian Ministry of Education and local education offices, this study suggests that the current PAUD quality framework, which is heavily oriented toward physical infrastructure and teacher certification, should be expanded to formally recognize and fund community-based parental engagement strategies. The Bina Keluarga Balita (BKB) program and Posyandu offer existing community platforms that could integrate

the low-cost, high-impact components tested here: peer-led parent chats, teacher home visits, and rotating home libraries RHLs PAUD teacher trainings must shift from a purely pedagogical focus to include community organizing, appreciative communication, and the facilitation of parent groups. At the community level, the PAR model demonstrates that empowering parents does not require expensive external resources but rather a structured and respectful process that unlocks local agency. Schools and community organizations should consider adopting an action research stance as a continuous improvement methodology rather than as a one-off project.

Theoretically, this study advances the parental involvement literature by vividly illustrating how a participatory, asset-based process can re-animate the mesosystem in a community where home-school linkages have virtually atrophied. It extends Epstein's model by foregrounding the cyclical, emergent, and collective dimensions of involvement—dimensions that are latent in her typology but fully realized through participatory action research (PAR). Moreover, it demonstrates that self-efficacy is not merely an individual psychological variable but can be a socially constructed and collectively reinforced phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

This community-based participatory action research demonstrated that a genuine partnership approach grounded in local realities and cyclical reflection can significantly strengthen parental involvement and early childhood learning environments in an underserved urban Indonesian community. Through three PAR cycles, parents moved from passive marginalization to active educational agency, home learning environments were enriched with everyday materials, teacher-parent relationships grew warm and reciprocal, and informal community networks were formed to sustain the effort. The co-designed “Bersama Keluarga Hebat” program proved that low-cost, culturally embedded activities—relaxed chats, home visits, family reading corners, and supportive digital communication—can yield substantial shifts in both self-efficacy and concrete engagement behavior. The study's limitations, including its single-site design and relatively short duration, point to the need for extended longitudinal and multi-site PAR studies to test sustainability and scalability of the intervention. Nonetheless, the findings offer a clear, actionable message: in the quest to improve early childhood outcomes for the most marginalized children, listening to families and walking alongside them as co-creators is not merely a nice ideal but a profoundly effective strategy. Policy frameworks and teacher training curricula must therefore embed community participatory methods as core, not peripheral, to quality early childhood education.

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Ethical Compliance

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest declaration

The authors declare that they have no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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