

The Meaningful-Rhizomatic Paradigm of Alternative Education in the Tanoker Ledokombo Community

Moh Irsyad Fahmi MR ^{a,1,*}, Saliman ^{a,2}, Sudrajat ^{a,3}, Satriyo Wibowo ^{a,4}, Danang Ade Agustinova ^{a,5}

^a Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta

¹*mohirsyadfahmi@uny.ac.id

²salimanjaper@uny.ac.id

³sudrajat@uny.ac.id

⁴satriyo@uny.ac.id

⁵danangadeagustinova@uny.ac.id

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

This study examines alternative education practice at the Tanoker Community in Ledokombo, Jember, East Java, through the lens of a meaningful-rhizomatic paradigm that integrates Ausubel's meaningful learning with the rhizomatic learning developed by Deleuze and Guattari and extended by Cormier. Using a qualitative grounded theory design, data were collected over seven months through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with 24 purposively and theoretically sampled informants, four focus group discussions, and documentation study, then analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. Findings show that learning at Tanoker embodies five interrelated elements: egrang (traditional stilt-walking) as a cultural tool integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions; a non-hierarchical learning structure with multiple entry points; learning as a socio-communal process in which knowledge is collectively constructed; learning tightly connected to local reality and context; and collaborative parenting (pengasuhan gotong royong) as a supporting ecosystem. Rhizomatic characteristics manifest through multidirectional connectivity, heterogeneity of actors and methods, multiplicity of learning pathways, and adaptive resilience (asignifying rupture). Meaningfulness was experienced across cognitive, affective, social, and cultural dimensions by children, parents, facilitators, and the wider community. The study contributes a six-component operational model — core learning, child organization, parent empowerment, formal-informal integration, cultural celebration, and community-based tourism — offering a theoretically grounded, fifteen-year-tested reference for developing community-based alternative education in other contexts.

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1. Introduction

The gap between access to education and the quality of education remains a fundamental problem within Indonesia's education system. Gross enrolment rates have risen substantially, reaching 89% at junior secondary level and 83% at senior secondary level (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2020), yet this expansion in access has not been matched by a comparable improvement in learning quality. Results from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show declining scores for Indonesian students across reading, mathematics, and science compared with the previous assessment cycle, placing Indonesia 66th of 81 participating countries (OECD, 2022). More troubling still, the World Bank (2022) reports that 55% of Indonesian students experience functional illiteracy, unable to comprehend and use written information for everyday purposes despite having completed basic education. This quality gap sharpens further along geographic and socioeconomic lines: Rosser and Joshi (2013) document

a persistent divide between urban and rural regions and between higher- and lower-income groups in access to quality education, a divide reflected in a 20.49-point gap in the Human Development Index between DKI Jakarta and Papua (BPS, 2020).

Within this context, alternative education has emerged as a critical response to the rigidity, uniformity, and limited contextual sensitivity of mainstream schooling. Tilaar (2012) argues that alternative education opens space for developing the potential of learners not accommodated within conventional systems, particularly marginalized groups or those with distinctive needs, while Edwards and Usher (2002) define alternative education as a pedagogical practice that challenges the fundamental assumptions of mainstream schooling — its hierarchical structure, rigid curriculum, and narrow focus on academic achievement — in favor of approaches attentive to intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual development. In Indonesia, this has taken diverse forms: Raihani (2020) documents *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) that integrate religious education with character and life-skills development; Sumardiono (2014) traces the growth of homeschooling as a means for families to design education around their own values and needs; and Widodo (2023) examines community literacy initiatives built around learners' own interests and active engagement.

The Tanoker Community in Ledokombo, Jember, East Java, offers a distinctive model of alternative education organized around *egrang* (traditional bamboo stilts) as a transformative learning medium. Tanoker — Madurese for 'cocoon' — began in July 2009 as a children's play space in the backyard of Suporahardjo and Farha Ciciek in Desa Ledokombo (Suporahardjo & Ciciek, 2020). What began as a handful of children playing *egrang* and *djembe* drums has grown into a movement now engaging thousands of children and families. Ledokombo's social context adds particular urgency to this work: the sub-district has for three decades experienced substantial labor out-migration, both domestic and international, with an estimated 30–40% of households including a member working as a migrant laborer. This has produced a significant population of children who, despite having living parents, grow up largely without their parents' day-to-day care — described by participants in this study as 'social orphans' — raised instead by grandparents, other relatives, or largely on their own, and correspondingly vulnerable to dropping out of school, early marriage, substance abuse, and radicalization (Suporahardjo & Ciciek, 2020).

In response, Tanoker developed a model of collaborative parenting (*pengasuhan gotong royong*) that distributes caregiving across families, facilitators, schools, religious institutions, and local government. This ecosystem is realized through programs including *Sekolah Bok-ebok* (a learning group for mothers), *Sekolah Pak-bapak* (for fathers), *Sekolah Eyang-eyang* (for grandparents and other elders), the *Forum Anak Desa* (Village Children's Forum), and *Egrang Goes to School*, which links Tanoker's informal pedagogy with the formal school system. Over fifteen years, the community has moved through several recognizable phases: initial formation and experimentation (2009–2011); consolidation, marked by *egrang*'s formal recognition as a symbol of Ledokombo (2012–2014); expansion, with the founding of the parent-focused learning groups and growing national visibility (2015–2017); ecosystem consolidation, including the formal establishment of the *Forum Anak Desa* and integration with formal schooling (2018–2020); and resilience and adaptation through the COVID-19 period and the development of community-based tourism (2021–2024) (Suporahardjo & Ciciek, 2023). By 2024, *Egrang Goes to School* had partnered with twelve schools and *madrasah* across Jember, and the annual *Festival Egrang* had drawn visits from Indonesia's Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection and Minister of Education and Culture.

Tanoker's practice can be productively read through the convergence of two theoretical traditions. Ausubel's (1963) concept of meaningful learning holds that durable understanding arises when new information is deliberately connected to a learner's existing cognitive structure and concrete experience, a view Novak (2010) extended by emphasizing the integration of thinking, feeling, and acting. In parallel, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome — a root system that grows horizontally without a single center, in contrast to the hierarchical structure of a tree — offers a metaphor for non-linear, decentralized organization. Cormier (2008) applied this metaphor to education through the notion of rhizomatic learning, in which

knowledge is distributed across a community rather than held by an individual, captured in his often-cited claim that 'the community is the curriculum.' Read together, these traditions suggest a meaningful-rhizomatic paradigm: learning that is simultaneously anchored in concrete, relevant experience and organized through flexible, non-hierarchical, multidirectional networks of participation.

Existing studies of Tanoker remain largely descriptive, focusing on community empowerment (Rahman, 2022) or the use of traditional games as a learning medium (Faizah, 2021) without analyzing the underlying pedagogical paradigm in depth. Studies applying rhizomatic learning elsewhere similarly stop short of connecting it to meaningfulness: Watson (2019), working in Latin American indigenous communities, found that rhizomatic approaches produced more dynamic and creative learning outcomes without examining their meaningfulness, while Rodriguez (2021), in a longitudinal study in Spain, confirmed organic and sustained knowledge transfer through rhizomatic learning without linking it to meaningful-learning theory. No study to date has integrated these two perspectives to examine Indonesian community-based alternative education. This study addresses that gap by asking: (1) how does alternative education practice at Tanoker reflect a meaningful-rhizomatic paradigm; (2) how does the learning process at Tanoker manifest the rhizomatic characteristics of connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and asignifying rupture; (3) what dimensions of meaningfulness does learning hold for children, parents, facilitators, and the community; and (4) what operational model of community-based alternative education can be constructed from Tanoker's practice. In addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute both a theoretical integration of meaningful and rhizomatic learning and a practical, field-tested model for community-based alternative education.

2. Metode

This study used a qualitative approach with a grounded theory design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), selected for its capacity to build theory inductively from field data rather than test pre-existing frameworks, consistent with the broader rationale for qualitative inquiry as a means of exploring meaning, process, and context that cannot be captured quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was situated within a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), which treats reality as socially constructed through interaction and interpretation — an orientation well suited to understanding how Tanoker's participants themselves construct meaning around their learning practice, rather than seeking a single, externally verified account of it.

The study was conducted at the Tanoker Community in Ledokombo, Jember, East Java, over twelve months (February 2025–February 2026), with intensive fieldwork concentrated in a seven-month period (April–October 2025). The site was purposively selected for its fifteen-year track record (2009–2024), the complexity of its multi-stakeholder learning ecosystem, and the distinctive social context of labor migration and collaborative parenting that gives its practice particular theoretical interest. Twenty-four informants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which categories emerging from ongoing analysis guide subsequent sampling until theoretical saturation is reached. Informants comprised Tanoker's founders ($n = 2$; 15 years' involvement), facilitators ($n = 4$; 5–12 years), children and adolescents aged 12–18 active in Tanoker and the Forum Anak Desa ($n = 6$; 3–10 years), parents drawn from Sekolah Bok-ebok, Pak-bapak, and Eyang-eyang ($n = 6$; 2–8 years), and teachers, community and religious figures, and a village/sub-district government official ($n = 6$; 2–8 years). Four further focus group discussions were held with children (12 participants), mothers from Sekolah Bok-ebok (15 participants), facilitators (8 participants), and a cross-stakeholder group (18 participants).

Data were collected through four complementary methods to achieve methodological triangulation. Participatory observation was conducted over six months (approximately 60 sessions of 2–6 hours) covering learning activities, social interaction, use of space and materials, and spontaneous events, recorded as structured field notes combining description, reflection, and analytic memos. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (60–120 minutes each) explored

informants' learning experiences, perceived change, and views on what distinguishes Tanoker's pedagogy; all interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, with several informants interviewed more than once for verification and theoretical sampling. Four focus group discussions (90–150 minutes each) captured how meaning is negotiated collectively among peers. Documentation included program archives, learning modules, photographs, video recordings, and social media content, used both as supplementary evidence and, for photographs, as prompts for elicitation during interviews.

Data were analyzed following grounded theory's three-stage coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), conducted iteratively alongside data collection through the constant comparative method and supported by NVivo 14. Open coding — breaking data into units of analysis and assigning provisional labels without being bound by pre-existing theory (Charmaz, 2014) — produced 287 initial codes from interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, subsequently grouped into 45 higher-order concepts. Axial coding related these concepts through a paradigm model of causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action strategies, and consequences, yielding 12 major categories. Selective coding then integrated these categories around a core category — the meaningful-rhizomatic paradigm as a basis for community-based alternative education — through systematic relating of categories, validation against the data, and targeted theoretical sampling to fill remaining gaps.

Trustworthiness was addressed following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, operationalized through source, method, and investigator triangulation; member checking with eight informants; six months of prolonged, persistent engagement in the field; six rounds of peer debriefing with two colleagues from the education field; active search for negative cases; a documented audit trail; thick description; and a reflexive journal maintained throughout the study. An external audit was additionally conducted by a senior qualitative researcher to review the study's data, analysis, and conclusions.

3. Results and Discussion

Research Context and Informant Characteristics

Ledokombo, a sub-district in the northern part of Kabupaten Jember with a population of approximately 65,424 (BPS, 2023), has for three decades been shaped by large-scale labor out-migration, intensified after the 1997–1998 economic crisis. An estimated 30–40% of households include a member working as a domestic or international migrant laborer, producing a substantial population of children who grow up without their parents' direct care despite having living parents — the 'social orphans' referenced throughout this study's interviews. It is this condition that gave rise to Tanoker in 2009 and continues to shape its practice today. The 24 informants comprised founders, facilitators, children and adolescents, parents, and teachers, community figures, and government officials, with 13 female and 11 male participants aged 12 to 65 and 2 to 15 years of involvement with Tanoker (Table 1). This diversity supported the triangulation of perspectives central to the study's grounded theory design.

Table 1. Characteristics of research informants

Category	n	Age (yrs)	Involved (yrs)
Founders	2	58–60	15
Facilitators	4	28–45	5–12
Children/adolescents	6	12–18	3–10
Parents	6	35–65	2–8
Teachers/officials	6	38–60	2–8
Total	24	12–65	2–15

Source: Field data (2025)

Egrang as a Cultural Tool for Transformative Learning

Findings show that learning through egrang satisfies Ausubel's (2000) three conditions for meaningful learning: the material is potentially meaningful, as egrang is already embedded in Ledokombo's everyday cultural life; children bring relevant prior knowledge of balance and movement that anchors new learning; and engagement is intentional, since children choose to play rather than being compelled to. One adolescent participant (RZ, 17) described falling repeatedly while learning to balance on the stilts as a lesson in resilience and self-confidence that extended well beyond the activity itself, reinforced when she later performed the egrang dance at the annual Festival Egrang. One of Tanoker's founders (FC, 58) explained the underlying philosophy in similar terms: play is treated as a serious medium for internalizing values — courage in the face of fear, perseverance, valuing process over outcome, creativity, and cooperation — learned experientially rather than through direct instruction. Observation confirmed that egrang learning integrates cognitive dimensions (balance, center of gravity, problem-solving), affective dimensions (fear managed, frustration regulated, pride in achievement, empathy for struggling peers), and psychomotor dimensions (coordination, strength, agility) simultaneously, consistent with Novak's (2010) emphasis on integrating thinking, feeling, and acting in meaningful learning.

A Non-Hierarchical Structure with Multiple Entry Points

Consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rejection of fixed hierarchy, the roles of 'teacher' and 'learner' at Tanoker are fluid: children who have mastered egrang teach those who have not, facilitators learn creativity in modifying games from children, and parents learn alongside their children. One founder (SH, 60) summarized the guiding motto as 'everyone is a teacher, the whole world is my school' — not a slogan but a working principle in which anyone who can already do something may teach it, official facilitator status notwithstanding. The children's own organizational structure — a chair, secretary, treasurer, and seven interest-based activity clusters — functions less as a hierarchy of authority than as a flexible division of roles; a former child chair (ML, 15) recalled that a proposal of hers was once voted down by peers and the group simply followed the majority. Learning also offers multiple entry points: one adolescent (AF, 16) joined originally through the cooking cluster, later moved into egrang and music, and eventually became secretary of the Forum Anak Desa — a trajectory resembling legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which engagement deepens and roles shift over time rather than remaining fixed at entry.

Learning as a Socio-Communal Process

Learning at Tanoker is understood not as an individual but a collective process, echoing Cormier's (2008) claim that 'the community is the curriculum.' A facilitator (SV, 35) explained that the curriculum is not a predetermined syllabus but emerges from the community's own needs: Sekolah Bok-ebook and Pak-bapak arose when parents struggled with the demands of transnational parenting (Suporahardjo & Ciciek, 2022), the Forum Anak Desa arose from children's own wish for an organizational platform, and collective learning about substance-abuse prevention arose when the issue surfaced within the village. Observation showed that activities such as learning egrang are inherently social — peers offer tips, steady one another against falls, and cheer successes — and that creative outputs such as new egrang variations emerge from collective brainstorming rather than individual invention. This pattern resembles a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which learning is inseparable from participation, and is consistent with sociocultural accounts of cognitive development as socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1978). One child (DN, 14) contrasted this with formal schooling, where learning and grades are individual, describing the peer support at Tanoker as feeling 'like family.'

Learning Connected to Local Reality and Context

Tanoker's curriculum draws directly on issues its participants actually live through — parental migration, care by grandparents, economic hardship, child marriage, and substance abuse —

rather than abstract content divorced from local life. When child marriage became a visible concern in Ledokombo, for instance, the Forum Anak Desa responded with a campaign of drama performances, posters, and talks at local religious gatherings; its chair at the time (SA, 17) described the impetus as coming directly from watching peers who married at 15–16 drop out of school and struggle afterward, rather than from any textbook treatment of the issue. Learning also draws on local material resources — egrang made from readily available bamboo, instruments improvised from everyday objects, banana leaves used as plates in cooking activities — which a facilitator (IM, 32) framed as teaching children to value and make use of what is locally available rather than depend on costly outside resources.

Collaborative Parenting as a Supporting Ecosystem

Learning at Tanoker is embedded within a wider ecosystem of collaborative parenting (pengasuhan gotong royong) involving families, facilitators, schools, religious institutions, and local government, each with a role but without a rigid hierarchy among them — a network structure consistent with the rhizomatic principle that every node in a network matters and remains connected to others. A mother participating in Sekolah Bok-ebok (SL, 42), whose husband works in Malaysia, described the program as replacing the isolation of raising a child largely alone with a community of other mothers and facilitators she can turn to when problems arise. A local religious teacher (MA, 58) reported that children involved in Tanoker showed greater enthusiasm for Qur'anic study, prompting the religious study group itself to adopt more playful, game-based methods — an illustration of the reciprocal, mutually reinforcing character of the collaborative-parenting network, and one consistent with Freire's (1970) view of education as a dialogical, collective process rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge.

Rhizomatic Characteristics and Dimensions of Meaningfulness

Across these five elements, Tanoker's practice manifests the four rhizomatic principles that structured this study's analysis. Multidirectional connectivity, resembling the network-based view of learning proposed by Siemens (2005), appears in pathways that run not only from facilitator to child but between peers, between children and parents, between Tanoker and formal schools, and between Tanoker and religious and government institutions. Heterogeneity is evident in the diversity of participants, methods, and settings described above. Multiplicity appears in the multiple entry points into learning, the multiple pathways toward similar outcomes, and the value placed on multiple interpretations of shared experience rather than a single correct reading. Asignifying rupture — the capacity of a rhizome to be cut and continue growing from a new point — is reflected in the program's continuity through disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in facilitator personnel, each met with adaptation rather than collapse.

These rhizomatic characteristics, in turn, support meaningfulness across four dimensions consistent with Novak's (2010) integration of thinking, feeling, and acting. Cognitively, participants describe durable understanding built on concrete experience rather than rote learning. Affectively, participants describe developing confidence, empathy, and resilience through directly managing fear, frustration, and achievement. Socially, the practice strengthens social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000) and support networks, particularly for parents otherwise isolated by a partner's labor migration. Culturally, the revival of egrang and other traditional games contributes to a collective identity that participants experience as a source of local pride. These results extend earlier accounts of Tanoker, which examined traditional games as a pedagogical medium (Faizah, 2021) or the community's success in building a multi-stakeholder network (Rahman, 2022) largely in descriptive terms, by offering an explicit theoretical account of how these practices function as an integrated pedagogical paradigm rather than a loose collection of activities.

Toward an Operational Model

Synthesizing across these findings, Tanoker's practice can be described through an operational model comprising six interrelated components (Table 2): core learning activities centered on egrang and other traditional games; child organization through the Forum Anak Desa; parent empowerment through Sekolah Bok-ebok, Pak-bapak, and Eyang-eyang; formal–informal integration through Egrang Goes to School; cultural celebration through the annual Festival Egrang; and community-based tourism through the Kampung Wisata Belajar Perdamaian. Rather than treating meaningful learning as dependent on hierarchical instructional design, or rhizomatic learning as valuable independent of content relevance, this model suggests the two are mutually reinforcing: meaningfulness supplies the relevance and motivation that sustain participation in a non-hierarchical structure, while the rhizomatic structure supplies the flexibility and multiple pathways that let meaningfulness be constructed differently by different participants. This is broadly consistent with Watson's (2019) finding that rhizomatic approaches support creativity and resilience and with Rodriguez's (2021) finding of organic, multidirectional knowledge transfer, while extending both by showing how such structures can be deliberately paired with attention to concrete relevance and prior knowledge.

Table 2. Six-component operational model of alternative education at Tanoker

Component	Description
Core learning activities	Learning through egrang and other traditional games, with children as primary actors and facilitators as guides rather than instructors.
Child organization	The Forum Anak Desa, developing children's leadership, participation, and advocacy capacity.
Parent empowerment	Sekolah Bok-ebok, Pak-bapak, and Eyang-eyang, strengthening caregiving capacity across generations.
Formal–informal integration	Egrang Goes to School, linking informal learning with the formal school curriculum.
Cultural celebration	The annual Festival Egrang, an 'ARTvocracy' event mobilizing broad support for child-friendly community initiatives.
Community-based tourism	Kampung Wisata Belajar Perdamaian, integrating learning with community-based tourism across seven learning-tourism destinations.

Source: Adapted from research findings (2025)

4. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how alternative education at the Tanoker Community in Ledokombo can be read through a meaningful-rhizomatic paradigm that integrates meaningful learning with rhizomatic learning. The findings indicate that this integration is not merely conceptual but is enacted concretely through five interrelated elements: egrang as a cultural tool that satisfies the conditions for meaningful learning while integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development; a non-hierarchical structure with multiple entry points in which the roles of teacher and learner remain fluid; learning organized as a socio-communal process in which the community itself functions as curriculum; a tight connection between learning content and the lived realities of labor migration and its consequences for children in Ledokombo; and collaborative parenting as a supporting ecosystem that distributes caregiving across a non-hierarchical network of stakeholders. Read together, these elements show that meaningful learning need not depend on hierarchical, formally structured instruction — at Tanoker it is, if anything, strengthened by a rhizomatic structure in which every participant can act as a source of knowledge.

The study further shows that Tanoker's practice manifests the rhizomatic principles of multidirectional connectivity, heterogeneity of actors and methods, multiplicity of pathways and interpretations, and an adaptive resilience consistent with the principle of asignifying

rupture, and that meaningfulness is experienced across cognitive, affective, social, and cultural dimensions by children, parents, facilitators, and the wider community. These findings support an operational model of six interrelated components: core learning activities, child organization, parent empowerment, formal–informal integration, cultural celebration, and community-based tourism sustained and refined over fifteen years, offering a template that other communities can adapt with attention to their own available cultural tools, local needs, and networks of stakeholders, rather than a fixed recipe to be copied directly.

Theoretically, the study extends meaningful learning theory beyond the hierarchical classroom settings in which it was originally developed and demonstrates the applicability of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome concept, developed within a Global North philosophical tradition, to a rural Indonesian community setting. Practically, it suggests that quality, meaningful, and empowering education need not depend on costly infrastructure or advanced technology but can be built from local cultural resources, social capital, and the creativity of a community's own members. As a single-site qualitative study conducted over twelve months that did not measure long-term or quantitative outcomes such as academic achievement, its findings are not intended to generalize directly to other settings; longitudinal and comparative research, together with action research applying meaningful-rhizomatic principles within formal school settings, would usefully extend this work. For educators and policymakers, the study underscores the value of recognizing and supporting community-based alternative education — including through collaboration mechanisms such as Egrang Goes to School as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, the formal education system.

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