



Growing Through Place and Play: Exploring Holistic Learning Experiences Among Kindergarten Learners in an Indigenous Rural Community Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Holistic early childhood education recognizes that young children develop through interconnected cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, physical, creative, cultural, and environmental experiences. This qualitative study explored the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners at Tabag Primary School in Hapao, Hungduan, Ifugao, Philippines, with particular attention to the roles of play, place, social interaction, cultural context, and the natural environment in children's learning. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation. Kindergarten learners who regularly participated in play-based, contextualized, and integrated classroom experiences were purposively selected. Data were generated through child-friendly conversations, classroom and outdoor observations, learner drawings and creative outputs, and teacher-supported reflective activities. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret recurring patterns across the data. Five interconnected themes structured the findings: (1) Place as a Living Classroom, (2) Play as a Pathway to Discovery and Meaning-Making, (3) Learning Together Through Relationships and Community, (4) Culture and Everyday Life as Resources for Learning, and (5) Growing as a Whole Child Through Integrated Experiences. The findings suggest that holistic learning was strengthened when classroom experiences connected language, mathematics, environmental exploration, socio-emotional development, movement, creativity, and locally meaningful experiences rather than treating developmental domains as isolated areas. The study highlights the importance of culturally responsive, place-conscious, play-based, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for kindergarten learners in rural Indigenous communities.

Keywords: holistic learning, kindergarten education, play-based learning, place-based education, Indigenous education, rural education, culturally responsive pedagogy, Ifugao

Received: 05-06-2026

Revised: 06-13 2026

Accented: 07-24- 2026

Published: 08-30-2026

ISSN:3116-2991





Introduction

Early childhood education represents a critical period in which children develop cognitive, linguistic, physical, socio-emotional, creative, cultural, and interpersonal competencies that provide foundations for subsequent learning and participation in society. Contemporary perspectives on early childhood education increasingly recognize that these developmental dimensions are interconnected rather than independent. Children simultaneously develop language, reasoning, movement, creativity, emotional regulation, social relationships, and understandings of their environment as they interact with people, materials, places, and experiences. Consequently, holistic early childhood education emphasizes educating the whole child through meaningful experiences rather than separating learning into narrowly defined academic domains. Research on holistic learning further demonstrates that young children's learning can emerge through interconnected physical, social, emotional, imaginative, and cognitive experiences, particularly during play and environmental exploration (Björger et al., 2024).

Play occupies a central position within this holistic understanding of childhood development. Through play, children manipulate objects, communicate ideas, negotiate roles, solve problems, experiment with possibilities, create representations, regulate emotions, and establish relationships with others. A systematic review and meta-analysis of game-based learning in early childhood education found positive effects across cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, and engagement outcomes, demonstrating the multidimensional potential of appropriately designed playful learning experiences (Alotaibi, 2024). Similarly, Skene et al. (2022) found that guided play can provide advantages for particular learning outcomes, including early mathematics, shape knowledge, task switching, and spatial vocabulary. These findings suggest that play should not simply be viewed as recreation or as time separate from learning; rather, carefully supported play can create conditions through which children explore ideas while retaining meaningful levels of agency.

The educational value of play, however, depends partly on how opportunities are designed and supported. Evidence does not suggest that all forms of unstructured play automatically generate the same developmental outcomes. A systematic review of randomized controlled trials concluded that free play may contribute to aspects of children's development, particularly when combined with other pedagogical approaches, but should not necessarily be regarded as superior to structured or guided learning in every developmental area (Sánchez-Lastra et al., 2024). This distinction is particularly important for kindergarten pedagogy because it suggests that teachers have an active role in designing environments, providing materials, asking questions, observing children's interests, and extending children's thinking without unnecessarily controlling their play.

Recent evidence further supports the multidimensional contribution of play-based pedagogy. A broad scoping review examining studies of children aged four to six found that play-based



learning was associated with cognitive, academic, socio-emotional, independence, and problem-solving outcomes, while also identifying implementation quality as an important consideration (Jensen et al., 2026). Thus, play-based pedagogy can be understood as a flexible educational space in which different aspects of children's development intersect.

Beyond play, place represents another significant dimension of early childhood learning. Children do not encounter knowledge in social or environmental isolation. Their understandings are shaped by the physical environments, languages, families, community relationships, landscapes, stories, cultural practices, and everyday activities that surround them. Place-based and place-conscious approaches challenge the assumption that meaningful educational knowledge exists only within formal classroom materials. Instead, local environments can function as resources for observation, inquiry, storytelling, problem solving, creativity, environmental awareness, and identity development.

Malone and Truong (2023), for example, conceptualized “Learning with Place” as an approach in which local places are recognized as active components of educational experiences. Their framework includes relationships with landscapes, waterways, plants, animals, histories, local stories, and Indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, place-based educational research has demonstrated that engagement with local environments can support cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral dimensions of learning while encouraging children to develop relationships with their immediate surroundings (Green et al., 2023). In early childhood settings, these relationships can be particularly powerful because young children frequently construct understanding through concrete experiences involving observation, movement, touch, conversation, experimentation, and representation.

Outdoor learning can further provide opportunities for holistic development because natural environments contain diverse materials, sensory experiences, physical challenges, living organisms, and changing conditions that invite children's curiosity. Bjørgen et al. (2024) observed that children's self-initiated outdoor play involved physical experiences, imagination, social interaction, emotional negotiation, relationships with other living things, and engagement with objects, illustrating how multiple dimensions of development can converge within a single play experience. Such findings reinforce the proposition that the environment should not be viewed merely as the location where education happens; it can become part of what and how children learn.

The connection among place, culture, and education becomes especially significant within Indigenous communities. Indigenous children may enter formal schooling with knowledge, experiences, languages, relationships, and understandings grounded in their families and communities. Culturally responsive education therefore requires more than inserting occasional cultural symbols, festivals, stories, or examples into standardized lessons. It requires recognition that community knowledge, relationships with land, cultural identities, and Indigenous ways of knowing may constitute legitimate foundations for educational meaning-making.

Land-based education has consequently received increasing attention as an approach for



supporting Indigenous children's learning and cultural continuity. Henward and Aikau (2023), examining Indigenous early childhood and primary education in Pacific contexts, emphasized the significance of relationships among children, land, stories, community knowledge, and cultural survivance. Likewise, Hsin and Wu (2023) demonstrated through work involving young children in Indigenous and urban settings that contextualized project-based experiences could support children's engagement with scientific practices. These studies indicate that locally grounded education can support academic learning while simultaneously recognizing the importance of identity, relationships, culture, and environment.

This perspective has particular relevance to Philippine early childhood education. Recent scholarship has argued that Filipino Indigenous epistemologies can contribute to more relational and holistic understandings of early childhood education. Oropilla et al. (2026), for instance, conceptualized *kapwa* as a relational pedagogical perspective emphasizing interconnectedness, reciprocity, collective well-being, and relationships that can extend from human communities to the natural environment. Such a perspective is relevant to holistic education because it challenges highly individualistic interpretations of learning and instead recognizes that children's development occurs within networks of relationships involving other people, community, culture, and place.

Within an Indigenous rural community such as Hapao, Hungduan, Ifugao, these perspectives provide an important foundation for examining kindergarten learning. The local environment may offer opportunities for children to encounter plants, animals, weather, landforms, pathways, community spaces, household practices, cultural expressions, and everyday activities that can become meaningful starting points for language, mathematical thinking, environmental inquiry, creativity, movement, and socio-emotional learning. However, the educational significance of these experiences should not be presumed simply because the school is located within an Indigenous community. Rather, research should examine how children actually experience these relationships and how local contexts enter their classroom and play-based learning.

The present study therefore explored the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners at Tabag Primary School in Hapao, Hungduan, Ifugao. Instead of investigating Language, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics, Makabansa, Physical and Natural Environment, Socio-Emotional Development, and Creative and Aesthetic Development as isolated outcomes, the study examined how these dimensions intersected through children's experiences of place, play, relationships, culture, environmental exploration, and integrated learning. By foregrounding children's experiences, the inquiry sought to contribute to the growing literature on holistic, culturally responsive, and place-conscious early childhood education while providing a locally grounded understanding of kindergarten learning within a rural Indigenous Philippine context. play, place, relationships, cultural context, and children's everyday experiences.

2. Objectives of the Study



The study generally aimed to explore the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners at Tabag Primary School. Specifically, it sought to describe how children experienced play as a means of exploring, communicating, creating, and solving problems; examine how the local natural and social environment contributed to children's learning; explore how interaction with classmates, teachers, families, and community experiences influenced socio-emotional development; understand how culturally and locally familiar experiences became resources for language, mathematics, environmental understanding, and creativity; and interpret how integrated learning experiences contributed to children's cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, physical, and creative development.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation to explore the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners at Tabag Primary School in Hapao, Hungduan, Ifugao. This design was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how children experienced and made meaning from play, place, relationships, environmental exploration, and integrated classroom activities rather than measuring predetermined developmental outcomes. Participants consisted of purposively selected kindergarten learners who had regularly participated in classroom and outdoor experiences involving language and literacy, mathematics, Makabansa, exploration of the physical and natural environment, socio-emotional activities, creative expression, and play. Because the participants were young children, developmentally appropriate methods were employed, including brief child-friendly conversations, participant-sensitive classroom observations, outdoor learning observations, drawings and creative outputs, and teacher-supported conversations about children's activities and experiences.

Observations focused on how children communicated during play, explored objects and natural materials, solved simple problems, collaborated with classmates, expressed emotions, participated in movement and creative activities, and connected classroom concepts with familiar experiences. Children's drawings and other representations were interpreted alongside their verbal explanations rather than independently assigning adult meanings to their work. Data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis involving familiarization, initial coding, construction of candidate themes, refinement of patterns, and interpretive development of the final themes. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation of conversations, observations, and learner outputs; documentation of analytical decisions; attention to contrasting experiences; and researcher reflexivity. Given the participants' age and the Indigenous community context, appropriate institutional ethical approval, parental or guardian informed consent, child assent, confidentiality, respect for community knowledge, and culturally sensitive research procedures were observed.

4. Results and Findings

The thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes that captured the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners: (1) Place as a Living Classroom, (2) Play as a Pathway to Discovery and Meaning-Making, (3) Learning Together Through Relationships and Community, (4) Culture and Everyday Life as Resources for Learning, and (5) Growing as a Whole Child



Through Integrated Experiences. These themes demonstrated that children's learning experiences were not confined to individual developmental domains but emerged through relationships among environment, play, social interaction, cultural familiarity, creativity, language, and problem solving.

Theme 1: Place as a Living Classroom

The first theme captured how children's immediate surroundings functioned as meaningful resources for observation, conversation, exploration, comparison, classification, and meaning-making. Learners encountered plants, leaves, animals, weather conditions, landscapes, natural materials, and other familiar environmental features that could become starting points for language development, mathematical reasoning, environmental awareness, creativity, and inquiry.

One learner described this experience:

Learner 3: "Outside, we see different plants and leaves. Some are big and some are small. We collect them and tell what is different."

Another learner explained:

Learner 7: "I like going outside because we can see things that Teacher talks about. I can show what I already know."

These accounts suggest that the local environment functioned as a living pedagogical resource, allowing children to connect ideas discussed in school with phenomena that could be directly observed, touched, compared, described, and questioned. Malone and Truong (2023) similarly emphasized that place-conscious learning can involve relationships with local landscapes, plants, animals, histories, stories, and Indigenous knowledges rather than positioning the environment as a passive setting for education. Place-based education has also been associated with opportunities for cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral learning, particularly when learners actively engage with local environmental contexts (Green et al., 2023).

The participants' experiences therefore suggest that learning through place may be especially appropriate for young children because kindergarten learners often construct meaning through concrete encounters. A leaf, for example, may simultaneously become an object for describing color and texture, comparing size, counting, classifying, drawing, discussing living things, and expressing personal experiences. Such activities illustrate how one locally available object can provide opportunities for several developmental domains to intersect. This interpretation is further supported by Bjørgen et al. (2024), who demonstrated that outdoor environments can provide opportunities for children's physical, imaginative, social, emotional, and cognitive experiences to converge during play. The process emerging from this theme can therefore be interpreted as place → observation → exploration → questioning → connection → meaning-making.

Theme 2: Play as a Pathway to Discovery and Meaning-Making



The second theme revealed that play served as an important pathway through which children explored concepts, relationships, objects, roles, and problems. Through building, pretending, sorting, counting, drawing, singing, moving, manipulating materials, and participating in imaginative situations, learners engaged with multiple forms of knowledge without necessarily perceiving these experiences as separate academic lessons.

One learner stated:

Learner 5: “We made a house with blocks. We counted how many blocks we needed, and my friend helped me when it fell.”

Another explained:

Learner 9: “When we play store, I count the things and talk to my classmates like they are buying.”

These responses illustrate how a single play experience could simultaneously involve mathematical reasoning, oral language, problem solving, creativity, motor coordination, cooperation, and socio-emotional regulation. Contemporary research provides substantial support for this multidimensional understanding of play. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that game-based learning in early childhood education produced positive effects across cognitive, social, emotional, motivational, and engagement outcomes (Alotaibi, 2024). Similarly, Skene et al. (2022) reported that guided play demonstrated advantages for particular early learning outcomes, including mathematics, spatial vocabulary, and cognitive flexibility.

Recent synthesis of play-based learning research further suggests that play can support children's cognitive, academic, socio-emotional, independence, and problem-solving development, although the quality and structure of implementation remain important (Jensen et al., 2026). The present findings therefore indicate that play should not be interpreted as the absence of learning or teaching. Rather, it can function as a developmentally appropriate learning architecture in which children exercise agency while teachers provide materials, questions, encouragement, and appropriate scaffolding. The interpretive progression emerging from participants' accounts can be expressed as play → exploration → experimentation → problem solving → discovery → integrated learning.

Theme 3: Learning Together Through Relationships and Community

The third theme emphasized that learning occurred through relationships with classmates, teachers, families, and the broader social environment. Children described experiences involving sharing materials, taking turns, asking for assistance, helping classmates, communicating ideas, participating in group activities, and resolving minor disagreements. These interactions created authentic opportunities for developing oral communication and socio-emotional competencies alongside cognitive learning.

One learner explained:

Learner 4: “When my classmate does not know, I show him. Sometimes he also helps me when I cannot do it.”



Another stated:

Learner 11: “We need to wait because everyone wants to use the toys. Teacher tells us to share and take turns.”

The accounts demonstrate that interaction served both as a means of learning and an object of learning. Children learned through other people while simultaneously learning how to participate with others. Play-based research supports this relational dimension, with evidence showing that game and play experiences can contribute to social and emotional development in addition to cognitive outcomes (Alotaibi, 2024).

This relational interpretation also resonates with emerging Philippine scholarship on *kapwa*, which emphasizes interconnectedness, reciprocity, shared identity, collective well-being, and relationships between individuals, communities, and environments (Oropilla et al., 2026). While the present study should not automatically impose *kapwa* as an interpretation of children's experiences, the participants' emphasis on helping, sharing, cooperating, and learning together provides a meaningful point of dialogue with relational approaches to Filipino early childhood education. The theme therefore suggests a developmental process of participation → interaction → negotiation → cooperation → relational and socio-emotional growth.

Theme 4: Culture and Everyday Life as Resources for Learning

The fourth theme reflected how children's familiar experiences provided meaningful foundations for classroom learning. Participants brought knowledge derived from homes, families, environments, and community experiences into classroom conversations, drawings, stories, pretend play, and environmental activities. Rather than entering school as empty recipients of knowledge, children brought experiences that could serve as cognitive and cultural resources for understanding new concepts.

One learner explained:

Learner 6: “I know this because I saw it with my family. I told Teacher what we do when we are there.”

Another shared:

Learner 12: “When we draw our place, I know what to put because I see these things when I go home.”

These accounts suggest that familiarity facilitated meaning-making by providing children with experiential reference points for interpreting classroom ideas. Indigenous and place-based education scholarship similarly emphasizes the importance of relationships among children, land, community knowledge, stories, and cultural experience (Henward & Aikau, 2023). Research involving young learners in Indigenous contexts has also demonstrated that contextualized learning experiences can support children's engagement with disciplinary practices when instruction connects meaningfully with their learning environments (Hsin & Wu, 2023).

The finding is particularly important because culturally responsive pedagogy should not be



reduced to displaying Indigenous artifacts or occasionally mentioning local practices. Meaningful contextualization requires educators to recognize children's existing experiences and community knowledge as resources for learning while ensuring that cultural knowledge is treated respectfully and, where appropriate, with community participation. Philippine scholarship on Indigenous and relational early childhood education similarly calls for approaches that foreground rather than merely append Indigenous knowledge systems (Oropilla et al., 2026). The interpretive process can therefore be represented as lived experience → recognition → classroom connection → new meaning → culturally relevant learning.

Theme 5: Growing as a Whole Child Through Integrated Experiences

The fifth theme represented the convergence of the previous themes and captured the fundamentally interconnected character of kindergarten development. Children's accounts and observed experiences suggested that language, mathematical thinking, environmental awareness, socio-emotional development, physical movement, creativity, and problem solving frequently occurred within the same activity rather than in isolation.

One learner explained:

Learner 2: "We found leaves, counted them, put the same ones together, and then we made a picture."

Another stated:

Learner 10: "I like activities where we can talk, draw, move, and work with our friends because we can do many things."

These accounts demonstrate that holistic learning does not simply mean teaching many subjects during the same day. Rather, it involves providing sufficiently rich experiences through which children can mobilize multiple competencies simultaneously. In the example involving leaves, children could engage in environmental observation, classification, mathematical counting, oral description, fine-motor activity, aesthetic representation, and social interaction within one coherent experience.

Bjorgen et al. (2024) similarly found that children's outdoor play involved interconnected physical, imaginative, relational, emotional, and environmental experiences, supporting the interpretation of play as a context for holistic learning. A broader scoping review of play-based learning likewise found evidence across cognitive, academic, socio-emotional, independence, and problem-solving domains (Jensen et al., 2026). However, systematic evidence also cautions against assuming that unstructured play alone automatically produces optimal outcomes across every developmental area; the combination of play with appropriate guidance and complementary pedagogical strategies can be important (Sánchez-Lastra et al., 2024; Skene et al., 2022).

The findings therefore position the kindergarten teacher not as a passive observer but as a facilitator of integrated developmental experiences. Teachers can notice children's interests, provide appropriate materials, ask productive questions, introduce new vocabulary, support



social negotiation, and extend emerging ideas without removing children's agency. The process reflected in this theme can be conceptualized as integrated experience → active participation → interconnected competencies → meaning-making → holistic development.

Taken together, the five themes indicate that kindergarten learning at Tabag Primary School can be conceptualized through an interconnected relationship among place, play, relationships, culture, and holistic development. Place provided materials and meaningful experiences; play enabled active exploration; relationships created opportunities for communication, cooperation, and emotional growth; cultural and everyday experiences connected school learning with children's existing knowledge; and integrated activities enabled linguistic, mathematical, physical, creative, environmental, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies to operate together. These interpretations are consistent with international research emphasizing the multidimensional developmental possibilities of play-based and place-conscious learning (Alotaibi, 2024; Bjørgen et al., 2024; Malone & Truong, 2023; Skene et al., 2022). They also resonate with Indigenous educational scholarship emphasizing relationships among children, community, culture, land, and knowledge (Henward & Aikau, 2023; Oropilla et al., 2026).

The overall interpretive progression can therefore be represented as:

Place and Cultural Experience → Play and Exploration → Interaction and Relationships → Connected Meaning-Making → Holistic Child Development

Importantly, this progression should not be interpreted as a rigid developmental sequence. The dimensions were mutually reinforcing: children played within particular places, interacted with peers during exploration, drew upon familiar experiences when interpreting new situations, and developed multiple competencies through the same activities. The findings therefore suggest that the value of holistic kindergarten education lies not in simply combining several subject areas but in creating meaningful, culturally responsive, relational, place-conscious, and developmentally appropriate experiences through which the whole child can participate and grow.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the holistic learning experiences of kindergarten learners at Tabag Primary School can be understood through the interconnected influences of place, play, relationships, cultural context, and integrated learning. The local environment provided meaningful opportunities for observation and exploration, while play allowed children to experiment, communicate, solve problems, create, and collaborate. Relationships with teachers and peers supported communication and socio-emotional development, while familiar community experiences provided bridges between children's existing knowledge and classroom learning. Most importantly, the findings suggest that young children's developmental domains should not be understood in isolation. Language, mathematics, environmental understanding, creativity, movement, and socio-emotional development frequently intersected within the same meaningful activities. Holistic kindergarten pedagogy in rural Indigenous communities should therefore recognize children as active learners whose development is embedded in their



relationships with people, culture, community, and place.

6. Implications

The findings have implications for kindergarten pedagogy, culturally responsive education, curriculum contextualization, and teacher development. Kindergarten teachers may strengthen holistic learning by designing experiences that integrate language, mathematics, environmental exploration, movement, creativity, and socio-emotional learning around meaningful themes rather than approaching each developmental domain as an isolated instructional task. Play should remain a central pedagogical process because it enables young children to explore, imagine, communicate, collaborate, and construct meaning in developmentally appropriate ways, consistent with the Philippine Kindergarten Curriculum (DepEd, 2023).

In rural Indigenous communities, teachers may also draw carefully and respectfully from locally familiar environments, stories, experiences, materials, and community knowledge while avoiding superficial or stereotypical representations of Indigenous culture. Community members and families can be valuable partners in identifying which local knowledge and practices are appropriate for educational use. This participatory orientation is consistent with scholarship advocating meaningful Indigenous community involvement in culturally responsive curriculum development (Bucal, 2025). At Tabag Primary School, the surrounding physical and social environment may therefore be approached not merely as the background of children's education but as a potential partner in learning, enabling kindergarten experiences to become more culturally meaningful, environmentally grounded, developmentally appropriate, and responsive to the whole child.

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International Journal of Education, Literacies, and Curriculum Studies

ISSN: 3116-2991

Volume 2 Issue 3- 2026

<https://ijelcs.minduraresearch.com/journal/index>

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