

# International Journal Research Publication Analysis

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## ISSUES, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES IN SUPPORTING HOLISTIC PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY IN KABACAN WEST DISTRICT, COTABATO

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**\*Jay A. Kadalem, Dr. Onofre S. Corpuz**

*Graduate School, Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology, Doroluman,  
Arakan, Cotabato, Philippines.*

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\*Corresponding Author: Jay A. Kadalem

Graduate School, Cotabato Foundation College of Science and Technology, Doroluman,  
Arakan, Cotabato, Philippines.

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of preschool teachers in the West District of Kabacan, Cotabato, Philippines, regarding the issues and challenges they encounter in supporting the holistic development of preschool children, and the coping strategies they employ to address these. A phenomenological design was employed, with 15 preschool teachers as primary informants and 235 child development experts and coordinators as supplementary participants. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Two global themes emerged: (1) Issues and Challenges Confronting Holistic Development — encompassing physical health and nutrition deficits, cognitive development barriers, socio-emotional challenges, and structural-environmental constraints; and (2) Coping Strategies and Interventions — including adaptive pedagogical practices, structured routines and emotional support, home-school collaboration, community health partnerships, and administrative program support. Findings reveal that holistic preschool development in this context is shaped by an ecology of intersecting challenges that substantially exceed classroom boundaries. Teachers respond with creative and multi-pronged strategies, yet systemic institutional support remains insufficient. The proposed KADALEM Intervention Program, validated by experts at  $M = 4.45$  (Highly Valid), offers an ecologically grounded, multi-component response to the identified challenges.

**KEYWORDS:** phenomenological study; holistic development; preschool children; teacher lived experiences; thematic analysis; challenges; coping strategies; KADALEM program; Philippines.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding the lived experiences of preschool teachers is essential for designing evidence-based, contextually responsive interventions that effectively support children's holistic development. While quantitative studies have mapped statistical associations between school-based variables and preschool outcomes, they rarely capture the nuanced, relational realities that define daily teaching practice in resource-constrained rural settings (Creswell, 2013). The West District of Kabacan, Cotabato, represents precisely such a context — rural schools serving agricultural communities, with limited instructional materials, large heterogeneous classes, varied parental engagement, and children from Indigenous Peoples communities with diverse developmental starting points.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides the theoretical foundation for this inquiry, positioning holistic development not as a simple product of classroom instruction but as an outcome of complex interactions across the microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (home-school partnerships), exosystem (community health programs), and macrosystem (cultural values, national policy). This ecological framing explains why school-based interventions, however thoughtfully designed, often show limited statistical effects on preschool outcomes — and why qualitative inquiry is essential to understanding the mechanisms through which teachers actually influence development in practice.

This study addresses two research questions: (1) What are the issues and challenges affecting the holistic development of preschool children as experienced by teachers? (2) How do teachers and stakeholders cope with these challenges to support holistic development? The findings aim to generate theoretically grounded, practically actionable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher educators in Philippine early childhood education.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **5.1 Research Design**

A phenomenological qualitative design was employed to explore the essence of preschool teachers' shared lived experiences in supporting children's holistic development (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is appropriate when the research goal is to uncover the meaning,

structure, and essence of a commonly shared human experience rather than to measure or predict outcomes.

## **5.2 Participants**

Fifteen (15) preschool teachers from six public elementary schools in the West District of Kabacan, Cotabato, served as primary informants. Two hundred thirty-five (235) child development experts and coordinators from the same schools contributed supplementary perspectives through structured group discussions. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct, sustained involvement in preschool teaching and/or administration — the prerequisite for genuine phenomenological insight into the research questions.

## **5.3 Data Collection**

Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions. A researcher-developed interview guide matrix provided open-ended questions across six thematic areas: pre-intervention child development observations, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, program effectiveness, satisfaction, and improvement suggestions. All interviews were conducted face-to-face at school sites during agreed times, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim.

## **5.4 Data Analysis**

Transcribed data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing with data through transcription and repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes based on meaningful data features; (3) searching for themes by categorizing coded extracts into potential themes; (4) reviewing themes for coherence and distinctiveness; (5) defining and naming themes with clear conceptual labels; and (6) producing the report through coherent narrative construction with illustrative verbatim examples. Trustworthiness was established through member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation across informant groups, and reflexive audit trails.

## **6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Global Theme 1: Issues and Challenges Confronting Holistic Preschool Development**

Four organizing themes captured the multi-domain adversity shaping preschool developmental trajectories in Kabacan West District.

Organizing Theme 1.1 – Physical Health and Nutrition Deficits. Teachers universally identified children's physical health and nutritional status as the most immediate barrier to

developmental engagement. Specific themes included hunger and poor nutrition impairing attention and focus, frequent illness-related absenteeism disrupting learning continuity, incomplete immunization schedules, poor home hygiene, and children experiencing fatigue or fainting during physical activities due to inadequate daily nutrition.

*"Some children come to school without eating breakfast. You can see it in their eyes — they cannot focus, they fall asleep, and sometimes they faint during activity time. It is very difficult to teach a hungry child." (T3)*

*"Many of my children miss school because they are sick. When they come back, they have missed so much, and catching them up while managing the rest of the class is a real challenge." (T9)*

These accounts resonate with UNICEF's (2022) emphasis that nutritional security is a foundational prerequisite for cognitive engagement and social participation. The absence of consistently funded school feeding programs at several West District schools represents a structural gap between developmental aspiration and material reality.

Organizing Theme 1.2 – Cognitive Development Barriers. Teachers identified limited home exposure to literacy and numeracy materials as the primary cognitive challenge, compounded by insufficient classroom teaching aids, large heterogeneous class sizes, uneven school readiness among enrolled children, and health-related learning gaps from absenteeism.

*"Many children have not seen a book before entering preschool. They do not know how to hold a pencil, cannot identify letters or numbers. We are starting from zero — and we have 40 children in the class." (T8)*

*"With so many children and so few materials, giving individual attention is nearly impossible. Some children are missed every day." (T12)*

These barriers resonate with Blair and Raver (2015), who found that home-based language exposure and executive function development are stronger determinants of early cognitive growth than classroom instruction alone, and with *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021), which documented that vocabulary growth requires targeted instructional support beyond routine classroom engagement.

Organizing Theme 1.3 – Socio-Emotional Development Challenges. Socio-emotional challenges were pervasive across informant accounts: shyness and social withdrawal, emotional dysregulation and tantrums, peer interaction difficulties (sharing, turn-taking, cooperation), low self-confidence among children from low-income families, and social isolation resulting from absenteeism.

*"There are children who cry every day — not because they are hurt, but because home is difficult. They carry those emotions into the classroom and cannot manage them." (T5)*

*"Some children have never learned to share or take turns at home. Introducing these skills in a class of 40 is a daily challenge." (T11)*

Denham et al. (2003) found that emotional regulation in preschool is primarily shaped by family emotion socialization practices, meaning that classroom-based SEL strategies — while necessary — operate within limits defined by the quality of home emotional climate and parental modeling.

Organizing Theme 1.4 – Structural and Environmental Constraints. Structural challenges included limited instructional materials and classroom resources, large heterogeneous class sizes, inadequate physical facilities, insufficient technology access, and low parental involvement in home-based learning reinforcement.

*"We make our own flashcards from recycled cardboard. We use leaves and stones as counting materials. We improvise everything because there is nothing else." (T2)*

*"The parents trust us to educate their children, but they do not come to meetings, do not help with activities at home. We are alone in this." (T4)*

Barrett et al. (2019) confirmed that school infrastructure conditions influence learning, but effects are modest and contingent on pedagogical use — consistent with the finding that teachers' creative improvisation partially compensates for structural deficiencies, though it cannot fully substitute for adequate resources.

**Table 1. Global Theme 1: Issues and Challenges (Summary).**

<b>Organizing Theme</b>	<b>Specific Themes (Selected)</b>
1.1 Physical Health & Nutrition Deficits	Hunger/malnutrition impairing focus; frequent illness and absenteeism; underweight children fatiguing during activities
1.2 Cognitive Development Barriers	Limited home literacy exposure; insufficient teaching aids; large heterogeneous classes; uneven school readiness
1.3 Socio-Emotional Challenges	Social withdrawal; emotional dysregulation; peer interaction difficulties; low self-confidence
1.4 Structural & Environmental Constraints	Limited materials; inadequate facilities; minimal parental involvement; insufficient technology

## 6.2 Global Theme 2: Coping Strategies and Interventions

Five organizing themes documented the rich repertoire of adaptive strategies, collaborative practices, and institutional mechanisms teachers deploy in response to identified challenges.

Organizing Theme 2.1 – Adaptive and Creative Pedagogical Practices. Teachers employed hands-on activities, interactive games, play-based learning, differentiated instruction,

improvised teaching materials, songs, role-playing, and cooperative play as primary adaptive strategies.

*"We use hands-on activities and interactive games to support learning. Songs and games are the most effective — the children learn without realizing they are learning." (T1, T13)*

*"When resources are limited, we improvise. Plastic bottles become shakers. Leaves become counting tools. Cooperative play develops social skills better than any worksheet." (T2, T11)*

These strategies align with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding model, which foreground observation, imitation, and guided social interaction as primary vehicles of learning in early childhood. Lobo (2023) confirmed from a Philippine context that play-based learning significantly supports holistic development among kindergarten learners.

Organizing Theme 2.2 – Structured Classroom Routines and Emotional Support Strategies. Structured daily routines, positive reinforcement, and mindfulness-based emotion regulation constituted the second cluster of coping practices.

*"Structured routines help manage children's behavior and engagement. When children know what to expect, they feel safe." (T3)*

*"Mindfulness and breathing exercises help children regulate their emotions and focus in class. Positive reinforcement builds their self-confidence day by day." (T7, T8, T15)*

These practices reflect established social-emotional learning (SEL) principles (Zins et al., 2007) and research on the developmental importance of predictable classroom structure for children from unstable home environments (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Organizing Theme 2.3 – Home-School Collaboration and Parental Engagement. Regular parent communication, parent workshops, and collaborative behavioral management strategies formed the third organizing theme.

*"We communicate regularly with parents to support children at home. When parents understand what we are doing in school, they reinforce it at home." (T4)*

*"Parent workshops help reinforce learning at home. Collaboration with parents helps us address behavioral challenges together." (T11, T14)*

Epstein (2021) confirms that strong home-school partnerships are among the most robust predictors of early childhood developmental outcomes, with parental involvement functioning as a crucial bridge between the school microsystem and the home microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Organizing Theme 2.4 – Community and Health Program Partnerships. Teachers mobilized community health infrastructure — barangay health workers, nutrition programs, and immunization advocacy — to address physical health deficits identified in Theme 1.1.

*"Community programs support nutrition and health check-ups for children. Local health workers collaborate with our school for regular monitoring." (T9, T15)*

UNICEF (2022) identifies multi-sectoral health-education partnerships as critical for achieving holistic development outcomes in low-resource preschool communities — underscoring that physical well-being is a foundational prerequisite for learning readiness.

Organizing Theme 2.5 – Administrative and Government Program Support. Institutional supports from school administrators and government programs enabled teachers' professional development and classroom improvement efforts.

*"School administrators provide workshops on early childhood education. Government programs give us training and learning resources that we could not access on our own." (T5, T10)*

Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) identified targeted, practice-based professional development as the most powerful mechanism for improving teacher competence and instructional quality — suggesting that workshop provision by administrators and government programs meaningfully supports teachers' coping capacity, though it must be paired with material resource improvements to be transformative.

**Table 2. Global Theme 2: Coping Strategies and Interventions (Summary).**

<b>Organizing Theme</b>	<b>Specific Themes (Selected)</b>
2.1 Adaptive Pedagogical Practices	Play-based learning; improvised materials; differentiated instruction; songs and role-play
2.2 Structured Routines & Emotional Support	Predictable daily routines; positive reinforcement; mindfulness exercises
2.3 Home-School Collaboration	Regular parent communication; workshops; collaborative behavioral management
2.4 Community & Health Partnerships	Barangay health worker collaboration; nutrition programs; immunization advocacy
2.5 Administrative & Government Support	Administrator-led workshops; government training programs; resource provision

### 6.3 The KADALEM Intervention Program

Based on integrated findings from both global themes, the KADALEM Program (Knowledge Advancement and Development for Learning Enhancement Among Minors) was proposed. It comprises five components: (1) Teacher Professional Development Workshops targeting adaptive pedagogical practices and SEL facilitation; (2) Classroom Resource Enhancement

addressing material deficiencies; (3) Social-Emotional Learning Activities integrating structured SEL into the preschool curriculum; (4) Learning Environment Improvement Projects; and (5) Parent Engagement Activities formalizing home-school partnership mechanisms.

**Table 3. KADALEM Program Expert Validation Results.**

Component	Focus Area	Validation Mean	Rating
Teacher Professional Development	Pedagogy, SEL, classroom management	4.47	Highly Valid
Classroom Resource Enhancement	Teaching materials and technology	4.43	Highly Valid
SEL Activities	Emotional and social skills curriculum	4.44	Highly Valid
Learning Environment Improvement	Facilities and physical environment	4.45	Highly Valid
Parent Engagement Activities	Home-school partnerships	4.46	Highly Valid
Overall Validation Mean		4.45	Highly Valid

## CONCLUSION

The phenomenological inquiry revealed that preschool teachers in the West District of Kabacan navigate a complex ecology of intersecting developmental challenges — physical health deficits, cognitive barriers, socio-emotional struggles, and structural resource constraints — that originate in children's homes and communities and manifest as conditions that classrooms alone cannot fully address. Teacher-initiated coping strategies reflect genuine professional creativity and commitment, but are hampered by insufficient institutional scaffolding. The proposed KADALEM Intervention Program, validated at  $M = 4.45$  (Highly Valid) across five components and four criteria, offers a structured, ecologically informed response to these systemic challenges. The study underscores that effective support for holistic preschool development in resource-constrained Philippine rural contexts requires not only competent teachers but a coordinated web of school, family, community, and government supports — operationalizing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) vision of ecologically integrated child development.

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