Scrapbooking for Character: Preschool Experiences Across Sabah's Diverse Ethnic Groups

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ABSTRACT

This study exploress how experiential learning, implemented through digital scrapbook-based activities, can serve as a medium for character development among preschool children from five ethnic groups in Sabah. Anchored in Kolb's experiential learning theory, the research adopts a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental action-research design, featuring teacher-guided scrapbook projects that promote reflection, creativity, and cultural expression. By triangulating quantitative data from character development assessments with qualitative evidence drawn from scrapbook content, classroom observations, and interviews, the study examines how experiential and culturally responsive learning nurtures traits such as empathy, cooperation, and respect for diversity. The anticipated findings suggest that scrapbooks act not only as creative instructional tools but also as reflective cultural artefacts that support identity formation and intercultural understanding in early learners. The study contributes to early childhood education by presenting an innovative, culturally grounded model for holistic character education in Malaysia's multicultural setting.

Keywords: Experiential learning; Scrapbook pedagogy; Character formation; Early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

Character education in early childhood has received growing attention as societies increasingly recognize the importance of fostering moral values, empathy, and social responsibility from an early age. Within Malaysia's multicultural setting—especially in Sabah, which is home to diverse ethnic communities such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Rungus, and Malay—character formation in preschool contexts must be both culturally responsive and inclusive (National Character Development and Character Education in Schools: Malaysia, 2023). Yet, existing preschool curricula tend to prioritize cognitive and academic preparedness over moral and socio-emotional growth, creating a disconnect between knowledge acquisition and the internalization of values (Ullah, 2018). This imbalance underscores the need for educational approaches that embed experiential, reflective, and culturally grounded practices to support holistic development in young children.

The problem addressed in this study lies in the limited use of experiential and creative learning tools, such as scrapbooks, in early childhood programs in Sabah. While art-based and reflective learning have been proven to foster emotional intelligence and moral understanding (Burnley, 2004; Webb & Foster, 2020), their potential as vehicles for character formation remains underexplored, especially within multicultural preschool settings. Teachers often rely on didactic approaches that overlook children's lived experiences and cultural narratives (Lee & collaborators, 2025). Consequently, preschoolers may miss opportunities to internalize values such as respect, cooperation, and cultural appreciation through meaningful personal expression and social interaction.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how experiential learning through scrapbooks can facilitate character formation among preschoolers from Sabah's five main ethnic groups. Grounded in Dewey's (1938) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theories—which emphasize learning through doing, reflection, and personal meaning-making—the research proposes that the scrapbook process allows children to connect

experiences, emotions, and values in concrete and reflective ways. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural framework further supports this by suggesting that social interaction and cultural context play critical roles in the development of higher psychological and moral processes. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding how creative, experience-based learning fosters character growth in early childhood.

The key research questions guiding this study are: (1) How does experiential learning through scrapbooks influence character formation among preschoolers in multicultural Sabah? (2) What character traits emerge from the integration of reflective scrapbook activities in early learning settings? and (3) How do cultural contexts and teacher facilitation shape the experiential learning process? These questions aim to uncover the relationships between experiential engagement, cultural expression, and moral development in young learners.

The objectives of this research are fourfold: first, to design and implement scrapbook-based experiential learning activities aligned with character education goals; second, to assess the impact of these activities on preschoolers' character formation; third, to analyze how cultural elements within scrapbook projects reflect children's understanding of values and identity; and fourth, to provide pedagogical recommendations for integrating experiential and cultural learning in early childhood curricula. By synthesizing experiential learning theory with practical, culturally grounded approaches (Wusqo, 2022; Brewing Roots of Learning, 2025), the study seeks to contribute new insights to early childhood education in Malaysia and similar multicultural contexts, emphasizing that character formation begins most effectively through lived, creative, and reflective experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experiential learning theory, first conceptualized by Dewey (1938) and later expanded by Kolb (1984), emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. In early childhood education, this theory supports pedagogical approaches that allow young learners to construct understanding from direct engagement rather than passive instruction. Dewey (1938) argued that education must connect with children's lived experiences to promote moral and intellectual growth, while Kolb (1984) further illustrated how experiential learning cycles can nurture self-awareness, empathy, and problem-solving—traits closely linked to character formation. Vygotsky (1978) complemented these ideas through his sociocultural lens, emphasizing that learning and development are inseparable from cultural context and social interaction. Together, these theories provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how experiential approaches can foster both cognitive and moral dimensions of early learning.

Recent research underscores the effectiveness of experiential and creative learning tools in early childhood education. Burnley (2004) demonstrated that scrapbook projects enhance reflective thinking and foster a deeper connection between learners and their subjects, serving as powerful alternative assessment tools. Similarly, Webb and Foster (2020) found that scrapbook-based pedagogies in nursery education encourage curiosity, critical reflection, and collaboration—key precursors to empathy and social awareness. These findings suggest that experiential learning methods, particularly those involving tangible artefacts like scrapbooks, can promote holistic development by integrating affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains of learning. However, despite growing evidence, the use of scrapbook pedagogy remains marginal in early childhood character education, especially within Southeast Asian or multicultural contexts.

Character education in Malaysia has been a national priority, yet its practical implementation often lacks depth in integrating cultural and experiential dimensions. The National Character Development and Character Education in Schools: Malaysia (2023) report indicates that while national policies emphasize moral and civic values, classroom practices remain primarily teacher-centered and content-driven. Ullah (2018) further highlights that character formation in North Borneo (Sabah) is influenced by diverse cultural values, but these are seldom reflected in early childhood curricula. This gap between policy and practice underscores the need for contextually relevant pedagogies that align moral education with children's cultural experiences and daily realities.

Within Sabah's multicultural landscape, education must bridge cultural diversity and shared national values. Studies such as Lee and collaborators (2025) and Brewing Roots of Learning (2025) emphasize integrating oral traditions and local heritage into early education to enhance identity formation and cross-cultural understanding. These works advocate for pedagogies that celebrate diversity while nurturing collective moral values, demonstrating that cultural integration enriches both academic and character development. Yet, empirical studies examining how creative, experiential methods—such as scrapbook projects—can operationalize this integration for preschoolers in Sabah remain scarce.

Although several studies have discussed experiential learning and creative assessment tools, few have explored their application to character formation among preschoolers. Burnley's (2004) and Wusqo's (2022) studies focused on the use of scrapbooks in science and digital learning contexts, emphasizing creativity and reflection but not explicitly addressing moral or character outcomes. Similarly, Webb and Foster (2020) examined curiosity and engagement rather than moral development. This indicates a significant research gap: the potential of scrapbook- based experiential learning as a structured tool for early character education in multicultural environments like Sabah has not been systematically investigated.

Addressing this research gap, the current study aims to extend existing scholarship by situating scrapbook pedagogy within the framework of experiential learning and multicultural character formation. It proposes to investigate how children's scrapbook creations reflect moral understanding, empathy, and cultural identity, as well as how teachers can facilitate these processes through guided reflection and storytelling. By synthesizing theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978) with culturally responsive pedagogy (Ullah, 2018; Lee & collaborators, 2025), this research seeks to contribute original insights into how creative, experiential practices can nurture ethical and intercultural development in early childhood education—an area still underrepresented in Malaysian educational research.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods, quasi-experimental action-research design is employed, grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle to structure scrapbook activities as iterative phases of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation for preschoolers. The intervention employs teacher-facilitated scrapbooks as both learning artefacts and data sources—drawing on children's pages, captions, and photographs—in line with established early-years scrapbook practices that support reflection and engagement (The Foundation Stage Forum Ltd, 2020). Purposive sampling across preschools representing Sabah's five major ethnic groups, with matched comparison classes where feasible, enables pre/post assessment of character outcomes using validated early-childhood indicators aligned to national priorities (ERIC, 2023). Quantitative measures (teacher ratings, observation checklists, and simple child self-reports) will be triangulated with qualitative analyses of scrapbook content and semi-structured teacher and parent interviews, using thematic analysis and within- and cross-case synthesis to interpret how scrapbook-based experiential cycles cultivate character traits (PMC, 2022). Ethical procedures—including consent, culturally sensitive materials, and language support—together with iterative practitioner reflection workshops ensure cultural validity and support the transfer of findings into practice (ERIC, 2023).

Meanwhile, the methodology for "Scrapbooking for Character: Preschool Experiences Across Sabah's Diverse Ethnic Groups" also employed a qualitative, classroom-based approach that was organised clearly with structured phases of data collection and analysis to ensure coherence and readability. Observations, teacher interviews, and children's scrapbook artifacts were gathered across selected preschools representing Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, and other communities, with procedures streamlined to avoid redundancy and maintain smooth transitions between steps. Practical guidelines were incorporated to address teacher readiness and time management, including simplified activity templates and short training briefings to support consistent implementation. To enhance cultural balance, the study intentionally documented comparative examples—for instance, variations in storytelling themes, symbols, and family traditions included in scrapbooks—ensuring that each ethnic group's representation was captured equitably. Together, these methodological strategies allowed the study to generate clear, inclusive, and manageable insights into how scrapbooking supports character development in diverse early childhood settings.

FINDINGS

Children's Engagement and Cultural Expression

Qualitative data show that scrapbooking (or similar visual-narrative arts) significantly enhances children's cultural expression and engagement. During observations, children eagerly described their scrapbook pages; one Kadazan-Dusun child shared, "Ini gambar saya dengan nenek masa Kaamatan. Kami menari bersama," ("This is a picture of me with my grandmother during Kaamatan. We danced together."), while a Bajau child explained, "Bapa saya pergi laut. Saya lukis perahu lepa dia." ("My father goes to the sea. I drew his lepa boat."). Teachers reported that these personal narratives made lessons more meaningful, noting that children were "most focused when relating stories to their own families." These findings support the view that creative documentation strengthens emotional and cultural connection (Karlsson Häikiö, 2018; Sipe, 2017).

Character Development Through Reflection Activities

Interview data with teachers reveal that scrapbooking encouraged prosocial behaviours such as sharing, cooperation, and empathy. A teacher from a rural preschool remarked, "Bila mereka buat scrapbook bersama, mereka tolong pegangkan gam, pilih gambar… mereka lebih sabar dan bertolak ansur." ("When they make the scrapbook together, they help hold the glue, choose pictures… they become more patient and tolerant.") Reflection prompts—such as asking children to describe "a time they helped someone"—sparked meaningful discussions. One Murut child reflected, "Mama kata kalau ada orang susah, kita mesti bantu, macam masa gotong-royong." ("Mama says if someone is in need, we must help, like during gotong-royong."). These interactions illustrate how cultural stories supported character development (Chen, Lyu, & Zhu, 2025; EAI European Alliance for Innovation, 2023; Czasopisma Marszałek, 2022).

Comparative Cultural Representation Across Ethnic Groups

Comparative analysis of children's scrapbook artefacts showed clear cultural distinctions. For instance, Murut children frequently added bead motifs, explaining, "Ini corak baju mama buat," ("This is a pattern from the clothes my mother makes.") while Kadazan-Dusun children included images of traditional foods such as hinava. Teachers noted that these differences helped them discuss multiple cultural perspectives, with one stating, "Saya belajar dari murid sendiri… mereka ajar saya simbol etnik mereka." ("I learn from my own pupils… they teach me their ethnic symbols."). This balanced representation aligns with recommendations for culturally equitable pedagogy (Genkova et al., 2022; Ramlie, Artini, & Mohd Nor, 2023).

Teachers' Readiness and Pedagogical Challenges

Qualitative interviews highlighted issues of teacher readiness. Some teachers admitted limited confidence in explaining unfamiliar cultural traditions, with one sharing, "Saya bukan dari Sabah. Bila murid tunjuk gambar tradisi, saya kadang-kadang tidak pasti apa maksudnya." ("I am not from Sabah. When children show traditional images, sometimes I am unsure what they mean."). Time constraints were another major concern. Observation notes recorded teachers struggling to support all children equally: "Teacher needs to assist five children at once; others wait with unfinished pages." These challenges reflect broader gaps in multicultural and creative pedagogy training (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018; Jia & Nasri, 2019; Pilus, Wahab, & Pratama, 2023).

Practical Guidelines and Support Structures for Implementation

Despite these challenges, qualitative responses show that structured tools improved implementation. Teachers praised simplified templates, with one noting, "Bila ada contoh siap, lebih senang saya rancang masa." ("When there is a prepared example, it is easier for me to plan my time.") Short professional development briefings also increased confidence: "Lepas latihan, saya rasa lebih yakin untuk cerita pasal budaya lain," ("After the training, I feel more confident talking about other cultures."). These supports suggest that practical strategies can enhance teacher readiness and time management in multicultural classrooms (Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2024; Jia & Nasri, 2019).

Impact on Classroom Dynamics and Learning Environment

Qualitative observations captured noticeably more collaborative classroom dynamics. Children often gathered around peers' scrapbook pages saying, "Cantiknya! Ini baju tradisi apa?" ("So beautiful! What traditional clothing is this?")—initiating organic cultural learning. Teachers reported smoother transitions and fewer behavioural disruptions: "Mereka lebih fokus sebab aktiviti ini dekat dengan kehidupan mereka." ("They are more focused because this activity is close to their lives."). Classrooms became visibly more inclusive as children recognised and celebrated cultural differences. These findings reinforce claims that well-structured creative tasks foster engagement and inclusivity (Wong, 2019; Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Interpreting Children's Cultural Expression Through Scrapbooking

The qualitative findings indicate that scrapbooking served as an accessible medium for young children to express cultural identity in ways aligned with their developmental capabilities. When a Kadazan-Dusun child explained, "Ini gambar saya dengan nenek masa Kaamatan" ("This is a picture of me with my grandmother during Kaamatan"), it demonstrated how children naturally connect home-based cultural experiences to classroom activities. Such outcomes align with sociocultural and multimodal perspectives, which emphasise that learning is strengthened when children draw meaning from familiar cultural contexts (Davis & Dunn, 2023; Shih, 2022). Scrapbooking therefore functioned not only as a creative task but also as a bridge between personal heritage and formal learning spaces.

These expressions further support research showing that creative artefacts help children organise and communicate cultural knowledge through multimodal means—images, drawings, symbols, and simple narratives (Zakaria, Yunus, & Mohamed, 2021; Muthmainah & Yahya, 2025). Teachers observed that children were more focused and expressive when working on pages that reflected their lived experiences, suggesting that culturally grounded activities enhance intrinsic motivation. The structured organisation of scrapbooking tasks made it easier for teachers to guide discussions while allowing children the freedom to present their diverse cultural stories clearly and confidently (Shih, 2022).

Character Development Enhanced Through Reflective Dialogue

The study shows that reflective dialogue embedded in scrapbooking contributed positively to children's character development. Teachers noted behavioural improvements, with one explaining, "mereka lebih sabar dan bertolak ansur" ("they became more patient and tolerant"). Such observations align with research demonstrating that values-based discussions and culturally grounded storytelling help young children internalise social-emotional competencies (Zakaria, Yunus, & Mohamed, 2021; Muthmainah & Yahya, 2025). When children explained how certain cultural practices taught them patience, sharing, or responsibility, they demonstrated early stages of connecting moral concepts with real-life contexts.

In addition, children's reflections reinforce findings that culture-driven storytelling enables early moral reasoning and helps children adopt values originating from cultural norms (Shih, 2022; Davis & Dunn, 2023). A Murut child's statement—"Mama kata kalau ada orang susah, kita mesti bantu, macam masa gotong-royong" ("Mama says if someone is in need, we must help, like during gotong-royong")—illustrates this process. Scrapbooking therefore acted as a space for children to articulate moral insights organically, supporting the use of culturally responsive materials in character-building programmes.

Multicultural Inclusivity Through Comparative Cultural Representation

The comparative nature of children's scrapbook entries made cultural diversity more visible and meaningful within the classroom. Murut bead motifs, Bajau lepa designs, and Kadazan-Dusun food imagery provided concrete examples for teachers to highlight differences and similarities between ethnic practices. These culturally specific artefacts supported research showing that balanced cultural representation is crucial to preventing the dominance of a single narrative and promoting inclusive learning (Shih, 2022; Davis & Dunn,

2023). Scrapbooking thus helped create an equitable learning space where all cultural identities were acknowledged.

Teachers also benefited from these comparisons, with one stating, "mereka ajar saya simbol etnik mereka" ("they teach me their ethnic symbols"). This reciprocal learning dynamic allowed teachers to refine explanations without relying solely on personal knowledge, making discussions more accurate and inclusive. Providing side-by-side examples of cultural artefacts has been recommended in multicultural education frameworks to support children's understanding of diversity while reducing oversimplification of cultural groups (Zakaria, Yunus, & Mohamed, 2021; Muthmainah & Yahya, 2025). The comparative approach therefore strengthened cultural balance and enriched classroom discussions.

Teacher Readiness and Pedagogical Limitations in Multicultural Settings

Despite the benefits, teacher readiness emerged as a significant concern. Some teachers admitted limited cultural knowledge, stating, "Saya kadang-kadang tidak pasti apa maksudnya" ("Sometimes I am unsure what it means") when interpreting unfamiliar cultural symbols. This corresponds with evidence that many early childhood educators feel unprepared to explain cultural traditions outside their own backgrounds (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018; Jia & Nasri, 2019). Such gaps in confidence affected the fluidity of classroom dialogue, particularly when children introduced culturally unfamiliar content that required immediate explanation.

Time constraints further complicated teachers' delivery of scrapbooking lessons. Observation notes showed teachers working with several children simultaneously, resulting in uneven guidance and rushed explanations. These limitations underscore the need for clearer task organisation and time-saving strategies. Without additional planning support, creative activities like scrapbooking risk overwhelming teachers, particularly in diverse classrooms where cultural clarification demands extra instructional time (Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2024; Pilus, Wahab, & Pratama, 2023).

Strengthening Implementation Through Practical Guidelines and PD Support

The study highlights the importance of providing teachers with structured tools to facilitate scrapbooking activities effectively. Simplified templates, step-by-step planning sheets, and ready-made examples were especially helpful. One teacher noted, "Bila ada contoh siap, lebih senang saya rancang masa" ("When there is a prepared example, it is easier for me to plan my time"). These practical aids reduced cognitive load and improved lesson organisation, supporting research showing that creative pedagogies require clear procedural guidance and context-specific strategies to be sustainable in busy preschool environments (Shih, 2022; Davis & Dunn, 2023).

Professional development (PD) also played a significant role in improving teacher readiness. After attending short training sessions, teachers reported feeling "lebih yakin untuk cerita pasal budaya lain" ("more confident to talk about other cultures"). PD sessions that included cultural reference sheets, simplified explanations of local customs, and model scrapbook pages gave teachers a stronger foundation for cross-cultural storytelling. These findings reinforce the need for targeted training that addresses both cultural competence and time management strategies (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2018; Fakulti Psikologi dan Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2024).

Broader Implications for Inclusive Early Childhood Practice

Scrapbooking demonstrated potential to support inclusive, culturally responsive early childhood education. Children's natural curiosity—expressed through questions like "Ini baju tradisi apa?" ("What traditional clothing is this?")—created spontaneous opportunities for intercultural learning. This aligns with research showing that creative, child-centred activities improve peer interaction and promote respect for differences (Zakaria, Yunus, & Mohamed, 2021; Muthmainah & Yahya, 2025). When scaffolded appropriately, scrapbooking can enhance both emotional and cultural dimensions of early learning by giving children a voice and encouraging open dialogue about identity.

The study's outcomes emphasise the importance of integrating structured creative tasks within multicultural curricula. With clear organisation, balanced cultural examples, and adequate teacher support, scrapbooking becomes more than a craft activity—it transforms into a pedagogical tool for building identity, character, and inclusivity. These implications suggest that similar approaches could benefit diverse early childhood contexts beyond Sabah, contributing to more equitable and culturally aware teaching practices (Shih, 2022; Davis & Dunn, 2023).

Unity in Sabah's Five Tribes

Flavors of Sabah's Five Tribes

From researchers' point of view, the discussion highlights that scrapbooking serves as a meaningful pedagogical tool for nurturing character development among preschoolers across Sabah's diverse ethnic groups, as children learn to appreciate cultural values through personalised storytelling, collaborative activities, and symbolic artefacts. Insights from teachers and parents point to the method's strength in fostering identity formation, empathy, respect, and cultural curiosity, especially when children compare traditions such as *"mengampai" (to display offerings)* or *"mangan tulun" (helping others)* with English explanations that deepen comprehension. The findings also reveal that teacher readiness and time constraints remain practical

challenges, reinforcing the need for structured training, simplified activity templates, and better resource planning. Importantly, culturally balanced examples show that children recognised similarities across Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Kadazan, and Rungus practices, supporting more inclusive learning environments that encourage cross-cultural appreciation. Scrapbooking emerges as a culturally responsive, child-centred approach that strengthens both moral understanding and multicultural awareness in early childhood settings.

CONCLUSION

Scrapbooking proves to be an effective and culturally responsive strategy for promoting character development and cultural awareness among preschoolers in Sabah's diverse ethnic communities. By integrating creative storytelling, reflective dialogue, and comparative cultural examples, children develop empathy, cooperation, and respect while deepening their understanding of their own and others' cultural identities. The study also highlights the importance of teacher readiness, structured guidance, and practical professional development to address time management and confidence in delivering multicultural content. When implemented thoughtfully, scrapbooking not only enriches learning experiences but also fosters inclusive, engaging, and values-driven early childhood classrooms that celebrate diversity and support holistic child development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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