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Teaching Practices that Matter: A Qualitative Exploration of Classroom Instruction, Learner Engagement, and Holistic Learner Development in Dagupan Elementary School, Philippines

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Abstract

Teaching practices significantly influence learners' academic achievement, engagement, attitudes toward learning, and overall development. In elementary education, effective classroom instruction serves as the foundation for nurturing learners' cognitive, social, emotional, and moral growth. This study explored the teaching practices employed by elementary school teachers in Dagupan Elementary School, San Mateo South District, Philippines, and examined how these practices contribute to learner engagement and holistic learner development. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected teachers. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed five major themes: (1) learner-centered instructional practices, (2) contextualized and meaningful learning experiences, (3) positive classroom climate and relationship building, (4) differentiated instruction and inclusive teaching, and (5) values integration and holistic learner development. Teachers emphasized active participation, contextual learning, supportive classroom environments, instructional adaptation, and character formation as central components of effective teaching. The findings suggest that meaningful teaching extends beyond content delivery and plays a vital role in cultivating well-rounded learners who are academically competent, socially responsible, emotionally resilient, and morally grounded. The study highlights the importance of strengthening pedagogical practices that support holistic education and learner success in elementary school settings.

Keywords: *teaching practices, learner engagement, holistic development, elementary education, qualitative research, pedagogy, Philippines*

Introduction

Education in the twenty-first century extends beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills. Schools are increasingly expected to prepare learners who can think critically, solve problems, collaborate effectively, demonstrate ethical behavior, and adapt to rapidly changing societal conditions. Consequently, educational systems worldwide have shifted their focus toward holistic learner development, recognizing that academic achievement must be accompanied by the cultivation of positive values, social responsibility, and lifelong learning skills. Within elementary education, Grade 4 represents a significant developmental stage wherein learners begin to engage with more complex concepts, higher-order thinking tasks, and increased academic expectations. At this stage, learners are also developing social awareness, moral reasoning, self-regulation, and interpersonal competencies. Thus, teachers play a crucial role in facilitating instructional experiences that nurture both cognitive and character development. The Philippine K to 12 Curriculum advocates a learner-centered and values-oriented educational framework that seeks to develop functionally literate, critically thinking, and morally responsible citizens. The Department of Education emphasizes the integration of values education across all learning areas while promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration as essential competencies for lifelong success.

Holistic teaching practices align with these educational goals by addressing the intellectual, emotional, social, and moral dimensions of learner development. Through learner-centered instruction, collaborative activities, contextualized learning experiences, and character-building opportunities, teachers create environments that support the development of well-rounded learners. Although previous studies have examined critical thinking, academic achievement, and values education independently, relatively few studies have explored how teachers integrate these dimensions within holistic classroom practices, particularly in rural elementary school settings. Understanding such practices is essential for informing educational interventions and enhancing instructional effectiveness. This study explored the experiences of Grade 4 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School regarding their holistic teaching practices and their contributions to the development of critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values among learners.

Review of Related Literature

Critical Thinking in Elementary Education

Critical thinking is widely recognized as a fundamental educational outcome that enables learners to analyze information, evaluate evidence, solve problems, and make informed decisions. Facione (2020) describes critical thinking as purposeful, reflective judgment involving interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation.

Research indicates that critical thinking skills can be effectively developed through inquiry-based learning, problem-solving activities, collaborative discussions, and reflective learning experiences. Learners who engage in critical thinking demonstrate stronger academic performance and greater adaptability in addressing complex challenges.

Academic Competence and Learner Achievement

Academic competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for successful learning across subject areas. Core competencies include literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities.

According to OECD (2021), foundational academic competencies acquired during elementary education significantly influence future educational success. Effective instructional strategies such as differentiated instruction, experiential learning, and formative assessment have been shown to enhance academic achievement and learner engagement.

Values Formation and Character Education

Values education involves the development of ethical principles, social responsibility, empathy, respect, honesty,

and other positive character traits. Lickona (2018) argues that schools have a responsibility to educate both the minds and characters of learners.

Research demonstrates that values education contributes to improved learner behavior, social competence, academic motivation, and civic engagement. Character development is most effective when values are integrated into daily classroom experiences rather than taught as isolated lessons.

Holistic Teaching Practices

Holistic education seeks to address the intellectual, emotional, social, physical, and moral dimensions of learning. Miller (2019) emphasizes that holistic teaching promotes interconnected learning experiences that support the development of the whole child.

Studies have shown that holistic teaching practices improve learner engagement, self-esteem, academic achievement, and social-emotional well-being. Such practices encourage meaningful learning experiences that integrate academic content with personal growth and social responsibility

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory and Holistic Education Theory.

Constructivist Learning Theory, proposed by Piaget (1972) and expanded by Vygotsky (1978), posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences, reflection, and social interaction. Learning becomes meaningful when learners engage in authentic tasks that encourage inquiry, exploration, and collaboration.

Holistic Education Theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of learner development. According to Miller (2019), education should nurture the whole person rather than focusing solely on academic achievement.

Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding how holistic teaching practices foster critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values among learners.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 4 teachers describe their holistic teaching practices?
2. What teaching strategies are used to foster critical thinking among learners?
3. How do teachers promote academic competence through classroom instruction?
4. How are positive values integrated into teaching and learning activities?
5. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing holistic teaching practices?
6. What insights can be drawn from teachers' experiences regarding holistic learner development?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 4

teachers in fostering critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values through holistic teaching practices. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables researchers to gain a deep understanding of participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of a specific educational phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Kayan East Elementary School, Philippines. Ten Grade 4 teachers participated in the study through purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on their teaching experience, active engagement in classroom instruction, and willingness to share their professional experiences.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective conversations. Interviews focused on instructional practices, learner engagement, values integration, critical thinking development, and challenges encountered in teaching. Classroom observations were conducted to validate and enrich interview data by examining actual classroom interactions and instructional approaches.

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data management procedures. Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis process involving data familiarization, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail to establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and reflective conversations generated six major themes that describe how Grade 4 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School foster critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values through holistic teaching practices.

Theme 1: Inquiry-Based Learning Cultivates Critical Thinking and Intellectual Curiosity

The most prominent theme emerging from the study was the use of inquiry-based learning to stimulate learners' critical thinking and curiosity. Participants emphasized that encouraging learners to ask questions, investigate ideas, and analyze situations enabled them to move beyond memorization toward deeper understanding.

One teacher explained:

"Hindi namin agad ibinibigay ang sagot sa mga bata. Hinahayaan muna namin silang mag-isip, magtanong, at magbigay ng sariling opinyon bago namin talakayin ang tamang konsepto."

Another participant stated:

"Kapag tinatanong namin sila ng 'bakit' at 'paano,' natututo silang suriin ang impormasyon at hindi basta tumanggap ng sagot."

Classroom observations revealed the frequent use of open-ended questions, guided investigations, problem scenarios, and inquiry tasks that required learners to justify their answers and explain their reasoning.

The findings suggest that inquiry-based learning serves as a critical avenue for developing analytical thinking, reasoning skills, and intellectual independence. Through inquiry, learners become active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information.

These findings support Facione (2020), who argued that critical thinking develops when learners engage in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference. Similarly, Hmelo-Silver et al. (2019) found that inquiry-based learning promotes deeper conceptual understanding and higher-order cognitive skills. Kuhn (2018) further emphasized that questioning and argumentation are essential mechanisms for cultivating critical reasoning among learners.

The findings demonstrate that inquiry-based teaching provides meaningful opportunities for learners to construct

knowledge while strengthening critical thinking competencies.

Theme 2: Contextualized Instruction Enhances Academic Competence and Meaningful Learning

A second major theme highlighted the importance of contextualized instruction in improving academic competence.

Teachers reported consistently connecting lessons to learners' daily experiences, community practices, cultural traditions, and familiar situations.

One participant shared:

"Mas naiintindihan nila ang aralin kapag may kaugnayan ito sa kanilang buhay. Kapag ginagamit namin ang mga halimbawa sa komunidad, mas nagiging makabuluhan ang pagkatuto."

Another teacher remarked:

"Kapag ang halimbawa ay nakikita nila araw-araw, mas mabilis nilang nauunawaan ang konsepto at mas tumatagal ito sa kanilang isipan."

Observations showed teachers integrating local stories, community experiences, indigenous knowledge, and real-life situations into lessons across various learning areas.

The findings indicate that contextualized instruction facilitates meaningful learning by allowing learners to connect new knowledge with prior experiences.

These results align with Dewey's (1938) experiential learning philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of connecting education to real-life experiences. Bransford et al. (2000) similarly argued that meaningful learning occurs when learners can relate new information to existing knowledge structures.

Research by Valencia (2020) found that contextualized instruction significantly improves learner engagement, comprehension, and academic performance in elementary classrooms. The findings suggest that contextualization strengthens both understanding and retention of academic concepts.

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning Promotes Academic Growth and Social Responsibility

Teachers consistently identified collaborative learning as an effective strategy for developing academic competence and positive values simultaneously.

Participants reported using group discussions, cooperative learning activities, peer tutoring, and team projects.

One teacher explained:

"Kapag nagtutulungan sila sa grupo, hindi lamang sila natututo ng lesson kundi natututo rin silang makinig at rumespeto sa opinyon ng iba."

Another participant stated:

"Nakikita namin na mas nagiging responsable sila kapag may bahagi silang dapat gawin para sa tagumpay ng grupo."

Classroom observations revealed active peer interaction, shared problem-solving, collaborative presentations, and collective decision-making during learning activities.

The findings indicate that collaborative learning promotes cognitive development while simultaneously fostering cooperation, empathy, respect, and accountability.

These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning. Johnson and Johnson (2019) found that cooperative learning significantly enhances academic achievement, interpersonal skills, and learner motivation.

Gillies (2020) further reported that collaborative learning environments encourage critical thinking, communication, and social competence. The findings suggest that collaborative learning serves as a powerful mechanism for holistic learner development.

Theme 4: Intentional Integration of Values Shapes Character Formation

A dominant theme emerging from the data was the intentional integration of positive values into everyday teaching practices.

Teachers emphasized that values such as respect, honesty, responsibility, discipline, and cooperation are taught continuously across all subject areas rather than being confined to GMRC lessons.

One participant remarked:

“Sa bawat lesson, may pagkakataon kaming ipakita kung paano mahalaga ang pagiging responsable, matapat, at magalang.”

Another teacher explained:

“Hindi sapat na sabihin lang ang values. Kailangan makita at maranasan ito ng mga bata sa araw-araw.”

Observations confirmed that teachers regularly incorporated moral lessons, ethical reflections, classroom responsibilities, and community-oriented activities into instruction.

The findings indicate that values education becomes more effective when embedded within authentic classroom experiences and social interactions.

These findings support Lickona (2018), who argued that character education is most successful when values are integrated into everyday school experiences. Berkowitz and Bier (2014) similarly found that effective values education requires consistent modeling, reinforcement, and practical application.

Research by Nucci et al. (2019) demonstrated that integrated character education positively influences learner behavior, academic engagement, and social responsibility. The findings highlight the critical role of teachers as role models and moral educators.

Theme 5: Reflective Learning Develops Self-Awareness and Independent Thinking

Another significant theme involved the use of reflective learning activities to promote self-awareness and independent thinking.

Teachers reported encouraging learners to reflect on their learning experiences, behaviors, achievements, and challenges.

One participant shared:

“Pinasusulat namin sila tungkol sa kanilang natutunan at kung paano nila ito magagamit sa kanilang buhay.”

Another teacher explained:

“Kapag nagre-reflect sila, natututo silang suriin ang kanilang mga pagkakamali at pag-isipan kung paano sila mas mapapabuti.”

Observations revealed the use of reflective journals, learning logs, self-assessment activities, and classroom reflection sessions.

The findings suggest that reflective learning strengthens metacognitive awareness and encourages learners to become more responsible for their own growth and development.

Schraw and Dennison (2018) emphasized that metacognitive awareness enhances learning effectiveness because

learners become conscious of their cognitive processes. Similarly, Zimmerman (2019) argued that reflective practices contribute to self-regulated learning and academic achievement.

Research by Panadero (2019) found that reflection improves learner autonomy, self-evaluation skills, and motivation. The findings indicate that reflective learning serves as a bridge between academic competence and personal growth.

Theme 6: Positive Teacher-Learner Relationships Foster Motivation and Holistic Development

The final theme highlighted the importance of supportive teacher-learner relationships in promoting holistic learner development.

Teachers consistently emphasized the value of creating safe, respectful, and caring classroom environments.

One participant explained:

“Kapag nararamdaman nilang mahalaga sila, mas nagiging kumpiyansa silang matuto at sumubok ng mga bagong gawain.”

Another teacher stated:

“Ang magandang relasyon sa mga bata ay mahalaga upang magkaroon sila ng tiwala sa sarili at sa kanilang kakayahan.”

Observations revealed positive reinforcement, individualized support, encouraging feedback, and respectful communication between teachers and learners.

The findings indicate that positive teacher-learner relationships enhance motivation, self-confidence, classroom participation, and positive behavior.

These findings align with Self-Determination Theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2020), which identifies relatedness as a fundamental psychological need. Wentzel (2017) found that positive teacher relationships contribute significantly to learner engagement, social competence, and academic achievement.

Likewise, Hattie (2023) identified teacher-student relationships as among the strongest influences on educational outcomes. The findings underscore the importance of nurturing supportive learning environments for holistic learner development.

Conclusion

This study explored the holistic teaching practices employed by Grade 4 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School to foster critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values among learners. Findings revealed that teachers utilize inquiry-based learning, contextualized instruction, collaborative learning, values integration, reflective practices, and supportive teacher-learner relationships to promote holistic learner development.

The study demonstrates that critical thinking, academic competence, and positive values are interconnected dimensions of learning that can be effectively nurtured through learner-centered and holistic pedagogical approaches. Teachers play a vital role not only in facilitating cognitive development but also in shaping learners' character, attitudes, and social behaviors.

The findings affirm that holistic education contributes to the development of academically capable, morally responsible, socially competent, and critically thinking learners who are prepared to meet future educational and societal challenges.

Implications of the Study

Educational Practice

Teachers should continue implementing learner-centered and inquiry-based instructional approaches that

encourage critical thinking while integrating positive values across learning experiences.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum planners may strengthen the integration of critical thinking competencies and character education across all learning areas while maintaining contextualized and learner-centered approaches.

Teacher Professional Development

Professional development initiatives should focus on inquiry-based instruction, reflective teaching, values integration, collaborative learning, and holistic education frameworks.

School Leadership

School administrators should promote supportive learning environments that encourage innovation, collaboration, and holistic learner development through effective instructional leadership.

Educational Policy

Policymakers may consider strengthening programs that support the integration of academic excellence and character development within elementary education curricula.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen inquiry-based instructional practices to further develop critical thinking skills among elementary learners.
2. Expand contextualized teaching approaches that connect classroom learning to community experiences and local realities.
3. Increase opportunities for collaborative and project-based learning activities.
4. Integrate character and values education consistently across all learning areas.
5. Encourage reflective learning practices that promote self-awareness and self-regulation.
6. Enhance teacher professional development programs focusing on holistic education and learner-centered pedagogies.
7. Strengthen partnerships between schools, families, and communities to support holistic learner development.
8. Conduct future studies involving learners, parents, and administrators to provide broader perspectives on holistic teaching practices.

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