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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Core Academic Competencies and Positive Values among Grade 3 Learners: A Qualitative Study of Holistic Teaching Practices in Kayan East Elementary School, Philippines

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Abstract

The development of core academic competencies and positive values among elementary learners remains a fundamental objective of basic education. While literacy, numeracy, communication, and critical thinking skills are essential for academic achievement, values such as responsibility, respect, cooperation, honesty, and perseverance are equally important in shaping learners' holistic development. This study explored the holistic teaching practices employed by Grade 3 teachers in developing core academic competencies and positive values among learners in Kayan East Elementary School, Philippines. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective conversations with ten Grade 3 teachers. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed that teachers employ integrated instructional strategies that simultaneously enhance academic competencies and character development through contextualized learning, experiential activities, collaborative learning, values integration, positive classroom culture, and family involvement. The study highlights the significance of holistic teaching approaches in fostering balanced learner development. Findings suggest that meaningful learning experiences, supportive teacher-learner relationships, and value-laden instructional practices contribute significantly to both academic success and positive behavioral outcomes. Implications for classroom practice, curriculum implementation, and teacher professional development are discussed.

Keywords: holistic education, academic competencies, values formation, learner development, elementary education, qualitative research, Philippines

Introduction

Education serves a vital role in preparing learners not only for academic success but also for responsible citizenship and lifelong personal development. Contemporary educational systems increasingly recognize that schools must cultivate both cognitive competencies and positive character traits to address the demands of the twenty-first century. In elementary education, the simultaneous development of literacy, numeracy, communication skills, critical thinking, and values formation creates a strong foundation for future learning and social participation.

Grade 3 represents a critical stage in learners' educational journey. At this level, children transition from acquiring basic foundational skills toward applying these competencies in increasingly complex academic tasks. Simultaneously, learners continue to develop personal values, social behaviors, and attitudes that influence their interactions with peers, teachers, families, and communities. Consequently, teachers are expected to facilitate learning experiences that promote both academic growth and character development.

The Philippine K to 12 Curriculum emphasizes holistic learner development by integrating knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes across learning areas. The Department of Education advocates learner-centered and values-oriented pedagogies that nurture well-rounded individuals capable of contributing positively to society. This educational vision aligns with global perspectives emphasizing social-emotional learning, character education, and competency-based education.

Holistic teaching practices involve addressing the intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and behavioral dimensions of learner development. Such approaches recognize that academic achievement cannot be separated from learners' values, attitudes, and social experiences. Through meaningful and authentic learning experiences, teachers create environments that foster both academic excellence and positive character formation.

Although numerous studies have examined academic achievement and values education separately, limited research has explored how teachers integrate these dimensions within everyday classroom practices, particularly in rural Philippine elementary schools. Understanding these practices can provide valuable insights into effective approaches for nurturing holistic learner development.

This study explored the experiences of Grade 3 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School regarding their efforts to develop core academic competencies and positive values among learners through holistic teaching practices.

Review of Related Literature

Holistic Education and Learner Development

Holistic education emphasizes the development of the whole child by addressing intellectual, emotional, social, physical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of learning. According to Miller (2019), holistic education seeks to cultivate balanced individuals capable of meaningful participation in society. Rather than focusing exclusively on academic achievement, holistic approaches encourage the integration of knowledge, values, relationships, and personal growth.

Research suggests that holistic educational practices contribute to improved academic performance, learner engagement, emotional well-being, and social competence. Learners who experience holistic learning environments demonstrate stronger motivation, greater self-confidence, and more positive attitudes toward education.

Development of Core Academic Competencies

Core academic competencies include literacy, numeracy, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills. These competencies serve as essential building blocks for future academic success and lifelong learning. According to OECD (2021), foundational competencies acquired during elementary education significantly influence learners' educational trajectories and future opportunities.

Studies indicate that effective teaching practices such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and contextualized teaching enhance learners' academic competencies by promoting active engagement and deeper understanding.

Values Formation in Elementary Education

Values formation refers to the development of desirable attitudes, behaviors, ethical principles, and social responsibilities. Lickona (2018) argues that schools play a critical role in helping learners develop moral character through explicit instruction, modeling, and meaningful social interactions.

Research demonstrates that values education positively influences learner behavior, interpersonal relationships, civic responsibility, and academic engagement. Teachers serve as significant role models whose actions and interactions contribute to learners' character development.

Learner-Centered and Constructivist Approaches

Constructivist theories emphasize that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences, reflection, and social interaction. Piaget (1972) and Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning occurs most effectively when learners engage meaningfully with their environment and collaborate with others.

Learner-centered teaching practices align with holistic education by promoting active participation, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and autonomy. Such practices enable learners to develop both cognitive competencies and social-emotional skills.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory and Holistic Education Theory. Constructivism explains how learners actively construct understanding through experiences and interactions, while Holistic Education Theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of intellectual, emotional, social, and moral development. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how holistic teaching practices contribute to academic competence and values formation.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 3 teachers describe their holistic teaching practices?
2. What instructional strategies are employed to develop core academic competencies among learners?
3. How are positive values integrated into classroom instruction and daily learning experiences?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing holistic teaching practices?
5. What insights can be derived from teachers' experiences in promoting holistic learner development?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 3 teachers regarding the implementation of holistic teaching practices that foster core academic competencies and positive values among learners. Phenomenology was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' perceptions, meanings, and experiences related to a particular educational phenomenon.

The study was conducted at Kayan East Elementary School, Philippines. Participants consisted of ten Grade 3 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Teachers were chosen based on their teaching experience, active classroom involvement, and willingness to participate in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective conversations. Interview questions focused on instructional strategies, values integration, learner development, classroom experiences, and implementation challenges. Classroom observations allowed the researcher to validate teacher practices within authentic learning environments, while reflective discussions provided opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants voluntarily participated

after providing informed consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' rights were protected throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis process involving familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of findings.

5. Findings and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, classroom observations, and reflective conversations generated six major themes that explain how Grade 3 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School develop core academic competencies and positive values among learners through holistic teaching practices.

Theme 1: Contextualized and Meaningful Learning Strengthens Academic Competencies

The first theme revealed that teachers consistently contextualize lessons by connecting academic concepts to learners' daily experiences, local culture, family life, and community realities. Participants emphasized that learners understand lessons more effectively when learning activities are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

One teacher explained:

"Mas mabilis nilang naiintindihan ang aralin kapag iniuugnay namin ito sa kanilang karanasan sa bahay at sa komunidad. Kapag nakikita nila ang koneksyon ng aralin sa totoong buhay, mas nagiging interesado silang matuto."

Another participant shared:

"Kapag nagtuturo kami ng Math, gumagamit kami ng mga sitwasyon na nararanasan nila tulad ng pagbili sa tindahan o pagtulong sa magulang sa hanapbuhay."

Classroom observations showed that teachers frequently used local examples, community-based scenarios, storytelling, indigenous knowledge, and familiar situations to facilitate learning. Learners actively participated in discussions because they could easily relate academic concepts to their personal experiences.

The findings suggest that contextualized learning enhances learner engagement, comprehension, and retention. By connecting lessons to authentic experiences, teachers help learners construct meaningful understanding rather than merely memorizing information.

These findings support the work of Dewey (1938), who argued that learning becomes meaningful when connected to real-life experiences. Similarly, Bransford et al. (2000) emphasized that meaningful learning occurs when learners can relate new knowledge to existing experiences. In the Philippine context, contextualization is strongly promoted by the Department of Education as a means of improving learning outcomes and cultural relevance. Research by Valencia (2020) found that contextualized instruction significantly improves learner engagement, academic performance, and conceptual understanding.

The findings demonstrate that contextualized learning serves as a foundational strategy for developing literacy, numeracy, communication, and critical thinking competencies among Grade 3 learners.

Theme 2: Experiential and Interactive Learning Enhances Skill Development

The second theme highlighted the importance of experiential and interactive learning activities in fostering academic competencies and learner participation.

Teachers reported using games, role-playing activities, experiments, hands-on tasks, simulations, and learning stations to make lessons engaging and meaningful.

One participant stated:

“Mas natututo ang mga bata kapag sila mismo ang gumagawa. Hindi sapat ang lecture lamang. Kailangan nilang maranasan ang konsepto upang mas maintindihan nila.”

Another teacher remarked:

“Kapag may mga activity na nangangailangan ng paggalaw, pakikipag-usap, at pagtutulungan, mas nagiging masaya at epektibo ang pagkatuto.”

Observations revealed learners actively participating in science demonstrations, mathematical manipulative activities, storytelling exercises, collaborative games, and practical applications of classroom lessons.

The findings indicate that experiential learning promotes deeper understanding because learners actively engage with content rather than passively receiving information.

Kolb (2015) emphasized that meaningful learning occurs through concrete experiences followed by reflection and application. Similarly, Bonwell and Eison (1991) found that active learning strategies significantly improve critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and academic achievement. Experiential learning allows learners to construct knowledge through direct interaction with learning materials and situations.

Research by Prince (2004) further demonstrated that active participation increases learner motivation, engagement, and retention of knowledge. The findings suggest that experiential learning strengthens both cognitive development and positive attitudes toward learning.

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning Promotes Academic Growth and Social Responsibility

The third theme focused on the use of collaborative learning as a strategy for developing both academic competencies and positive values.

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of group work, peer tutoring, cooperative activities, and team-based projects.

One teacher explained:

“Kapag nagtutulungan sila sa grupo, hindi lamang sila natututo ng aralin kundi natututo rin silang makinig, magbahagi, at gumalang sa opinyon ng iba.”

Another participant shared:

“May mga batang nahihirapan sa lesson ngunit natutulungan sila ng kanilang mga kaklase. Natututo silang maging responsable sa isa’t isa.”

Classroom observations showed learners working together to solve problems, complete projects, discuss ideas, and support classmates experiencing learning difficulties.

The findings indicate that collaborative learning simultaneously develops academic competencies and social values such as cooperation, empathy, responsibility, and respect.

These findings support Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Johnson and Johnson (2019) found that cooperative learning significantly improves academic achievement while strengthening interpersonal skills and positive social behaviors.

Gillies (2020) further argued that collaborative learning environments promote higher-order thinking, communication skills, and shared responsibility for learning. The findings highlight how collaborative learning contributes to holistic learner development by integrating cognitive and social growth.

Theme 4: Intentional Values Integration Shapes Character Formation

A major theme emerging from the study was the deliberate integration of values education into everyday classroom instruction.

Teachers reported that values formation is not limited to GMRC lessons but is incorporated across all subject areas and classroom activities.

One participant stated:

“Hindi lamang sa GMRC tinuturuan ang values. Sa lahat ng asignatura, may pagkakataon kaming ituro ang respeto, katapatan, at pananagutan.”

Another teacher explained:

“Kapag may group activities, tinatalakay namin ang kahalagahan ng pagtutulongan, paggalang, at pagiging responsable.”

Observations revealed that teachers regularly connected lesson content to moral lessons, ethical decision-making, community responsibility, and positive behavioral expectations.

The findings suggest that values formation becomes more meaningful when integrated into authentic learning experiences rather than taught as isolated concepts.

Lickona (2018) emphasized that effective character education requires the integration of moral values into everyday school experiences. Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier (2014) argued that character development is most successful when values are consistently modeled, reinforced, and practiced across learning contexts.

Research by Nucci et al. (2019) found that integrated character education positively influences learner behavior, academic engagement, and social competence. The findings underscore the role of teachers as moral educators who intentionally nurture positive values alongside academic competencies.

Theme 5: Positive Teacher-Learner Relationships Foster Confidence and Motivation

Participants consistently emphasized that positive relationships between teachers and learners create conditions that support both academic achievement and character development.

Teachers described creating supportive, caring, and respectful classroom environments where learners feel safe to express themselves.

One teacher shared:

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

Another participant remarked:

“Mahalaga ang magandang relasyon sa mga bata dahil kapag may tiwala sila sa guro, mas bukas silang matuto at magpakita ng mabuting asal.”

Observations revealed frequent positive reinforcement, encouragement, individualized support, and respectful interactions between teachers and learners.

The findings suggest that supportive teacher-learner relationships contribute significantly to learner motivation, self-confidence, and classroom participation.

These findings align with Self-Determination Theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2020), which identifies relatedness as a fundamental psychological need influencing motivation and engagement. Wentzel (2017) found that positive teacher relationships enhance academic motivation, classroom participation, and social development.

Similarly, Hattie (2023) identified teacher-student relationships as one of the strongest influences on learner achievement. The findings demonstrate that nurturing relationships serve as an essential component of holistic education.

Theme 6: Family Involvement Reinforces Academic Learning and Values Formation

The final theme highlighted the significant role of family involvement in supporting holistic learner development.

Teachers emphasized that parents serve as partners in reinforcing both academic learning and positive values at home.

One participant explained:

“Mas nagiging matagumpay ang pagtuturo kapag nakikipagtulungan ang mga magulang sa paghubog ng pag-aaral at pag-uugali ng kanilang mga anak.”

Another teacher shared:

“Kapag may suporta mula sa bahay, mas nagiging responsable ang mga bata sa kanilang mga gawain at pag-aaral.”

Teachers reported maintaining communication with parents through meetings, home visits, learning monitoring, and regular feedback.

The findings indicate that family involvement strengthens consistency between school and home environments, creating opportunities for sustained academic and behavioral development.

Epstein (2018) emphasized that strong school-family partnerships contribute significantly to learner achievement and positive behavioral outcomes. Similarly, Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that parental involvement positively influences academic performance, attendance, motivation, and social development.

The findings demonstrate that holistic learner development requires collaborative efforts among teachers, families, and the broader school community.

Conclusion

This study explored the holistic teaching practices employed by Grade 3 teachers in Kayan East Elementary School to develop core academic competencies and positive values among learners. Findings revealed that teachers utilize contextualized learning, experiential activities, collaborative learning strategies, intentional values integration, supportive teacher-learner relationships, and family involvement to promote balanced learner development.

The study demonstrates that academic competence and values formation are interconnected dimensions of education that can be effectively developed through holistic teaching approaches. Teachers play a critical role not only in facilitating academic learning but also in shaping learners' character, attitudes, and social behaviors. By creating meaningful, engaging, and supportive learning experiences, teachers contribute to the development of well-rounded learners prepared for future educational challenges and responsible citizenship.

The findings affirm that holistic education remains essential in elementary schools, particularly in fostering learners who are academically competent, morally grounded, socially responsible, and motivated to engage in lifelong learning.

Implications of the Study

Instructional Practice

Teachers should continue implementing holistic teaching approaches that integrate academic learning with values formation. Lessons should be designed to connect cognitive development with social, emotional, and moral growth.

Curriculum Development

Curriculum planners may strengthen the integration of values education across learning areas while maintaining strong emphasis on literacy, numeracy, scientific thinking, and communication skills.

Teacher Professional Development

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Professional development programs should focus on holistic education, contextualized instruction, experiential learning, character education, and learner-centered pedagogies.

School Leadership

School administrators should promote learning environments that support holistic learner development through collaborative cultures, family engagement initiatives, and continuous teacher support.

Educational Policy

Educational policymakers may consider strengthening frameworks that explicitly integrate academic competencies and values formation within elementary education programs.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen contextualized and culturally responsive teaching practices across elementary grade levels.
2. Increase the use of experiential and hands-on learning activities that promote active engagement.
3. Expand collaborative learning opportunities to develop both academic and social competencies.
4. Integrate values education consistently across all subject areas.
5. Enhance teacher training programs focusing on holistic learner development.
6. Strengthen school-family partnerships through regular communication and collaborative initiatives.
7. Conduct future studies involving learners, parents, and school administrators to gain broader perspectives on holistic education.
8. Undertake comparative studies across different schools and regions to examine contextual variations in holistic teaching practices.

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