



## Article

# Building Holistic Learners Through Integrated Classroom Practices: A Grounded Theory of Elementary Teacher Practices in Bocos Elementary School, Banaue, Ifugao

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## Abstract

*Holistic education has become an important educational paradigm that emphasizes the balanced development of learners' intellectual, emotional, social, physical, moral, and cultural dimensions. In contemporary basic education, elementary teachers are expected to integrate academic instruction with character education, learner wellness, leadership development, disaster preparedness, and socio-emotional learning to prepare children for the complex demands of the twenty-first century. Despite the increasing emphasis on holistic learner development within the Philippine MATATAG Curriculum and global educational reforms, limited qualitative studies have generated a substantive theory explaining how elementary teachers integrate multiple instructional and co-curricular responsibilities to cultivate holistic learners, particularly in geographically isolated and culturally diverse schools. This study aimed to develop a grounded theory explaining the practices employed by elementary teachers in building holistic learners through integrated classroom practices at Bocos Elementary School, Banaue, Ifugao. Employing the Straussian Grounded Theory approach of Corbin and Strauss, the study involved fifteen (15) purposively selected participants consisting of Grade 4 to Grade 6 teachers, school heads, subject coordinators, and selected stakeholders actively involved in learner development programs. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and field notes and analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding with constant comparative analysis. The analysis generated a substantive theory, The Integrated Holistic Teaching Model, which explains that effective holistic learner development emerges from the dynamic interaction among integrated instruction, values formation, learner wellness, collaborative leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, and continuous reflective teaching. The resulting theory provides a framework for strengthening classroom instruction, school leadership, teacher professional development, and learner support systems. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on holistic education, teacher leadership, grounded theory research, and integrated elementary teaching within culturally diverse educational contexts.*

**Keywords:** grounded theory, holistic education, integrated classroom practices, teacher leadership, elementary education, holistic learner development, culturally responsive teaching, Philippines



## **Introduction**

Education in the twenty-first century has evolved beyond the traditional goal of transmitting academic knowledge toward developing learners who are intellectually competent, emotionally resilient, socially responsible, physically healthy, morally grounded, and culturally aware. This comprehensive perspective is reflected in the concept of holistic education, which recognizes that learning involves the development of the whole child rather than merely improving academic performance. Holistic education emphasizes the interconnectedness of cognitive, affective, physical, social, ethical, and cultural dimensions of learning, enabling learners to become productive citizens capable of addressing increasingly complex societal challenges (UNESCO, 2024).

Globally, educational systems are increasingly adopting learner-centered and holistic approaches to prepare students for rapidly changing social, technological, environmental, and economic conditions. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) highlights the importance of providing inclusive, equitable, and quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities and develops learners' competencies beyond academic achievement (United Nations, 2024). Likewise, UNESCO (2024) advocates educational reforms that integrate socio-emotional learning, global citizenship, well-being, environmental responsibility, and cultural appreciation into classroom instruction to ensure learners' holistic development.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) likewise emphasizes that future-ready education should cultivate cognitive, interpersonal, emotional, ethical, and collaborative competencies necessary for lifelong learning and responsible citizenship (OECD, 2023). Consequently, teachers are no longer viewed solely as content experts but as facilitators of comprehensive learner development who integrate academic instruction with values formation, well-being, leadership development, creativity, collaboration, and resilience.

Within the Philippine educational landscape, holistic learner development has become a central priority of the MATATAG Curriculum introduced by the Department of Education. The revised curriculum seeks to decongest learning competencies while strengthening foundational skills, character formation, learner well-being, and twenty-first-century competencies (Department of Education [DepEd], 2023). The curriculum recognizes that schools must provide learning experiences that nurture academic excellence alongside values education, physical wellness, socio-emotional growth, environmental stewardship, and civic responsibility.

Elementary teachers occupy a particularly significant role in achieving these educational goals because they serve as both classroom instructors and facilitators of various school programs. Beyond teaching academic subjects, teachers often coordinate wellness initiatives, language clubs, disaster risk reduction programs, guidance activities, health campaigns, and community engagement projects. These multifaceted responsibilities require teachers to integrate diverse educational experiences into daily classroom instruction while simultaneously responding to learners' academic, emotional, social, and developmental needs.

In culturally rich communities such as Banaue, Ifugao, holistic education assumes even greater significance. Indigenous communities possess unique cultural traditions, values, languages, ecological knowledge, and communal practices that contribute meaningfully to learners' identities and educational experiences. Schools therefore have the responsibility to preserve indigenous heritage while preparing learners to thrive in contemporary society. Teachers continuously integrate

local culture, environmental awareness, indigenous knowledge systems, community participation, and values education into classroom instruction to make learning relevant and meaningful.

Situated in Bocos Elementary School, Lamagan, Bocos, Banaue, Ifugao, teachers demonstrate multiple professional roles extending beyond classroom instruction. They teach several learning areas, including Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC), English, Filipino, and MAPEH, while simultaneously coordinating learner wellness, language clubs, and disaster risk reduction programs. These diverse responsibilities provide opportunities to integrate academic learning with character formation, physical wellness, language development, leadership, and disaster preparedness. Such integrated practices exemplify holistic education within authentic school contexts.

Holistic education has emerged as a central paradigm in contemporary educational reform because it emphasizes the balanced development of learners' intellectual, emotional, social, physical, moral, and cultural dimensions rather than focusing solely on academic achievement (UNESCO, 2024). International organizations argue that schools should cultivate competencies such as collaboration, resilience, ethical decision-making, creativity, and learner well-being to prepare students for complex societal challenges (OECD, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Similarly, research has demonstrated that classrooms integrating socio-emotional learning, values education, and collaborative learning significantly improve learner engagement, academic performance, and psychological well-being (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Jones & Kahn, 2017). Consequently, the role of elementary teachers has expanded from content delivery to facilitating the holistic growth of learners through integrated instructional practices.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education has strengthened holistic learner development through the MATATAG Curriculum, which prioritizes foundational learning, character formation, learner wellness, and twenty-first-century competencies (DepEd, 2023). This reform aligns with evidence suggesting that integrating values education, learner well-being, and contextualized instruction improves both academic achievement and social-emotional competencies among elementary learners (Dayagbil et al., 2021; Lucas & Corpuz, 2023). Nevertheless, studies in Philippine elementary schools have largely focused on instructional effectiveness, learner achievement, or teacher competencies, providing limited understanding of how teachers integrate multiple instructional and co-curricular responsibilities to cultivate holistic learner development.

Within indigenous communities such as Banaue, Ifugao, teachers assume multiple professional roles that extend beyond classroom instruction by integrating academic learning with cultural preservation, learner wellness, leadership development, disaster preparedness, and community participation. Culturally responsive pedagogy has been shown to improve learner engagement, identity formation, and educational relevance in indigenous contexts (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). However, empirical studies explaining how these interconnected practices collectively contribute to holistic learner development remain limited, particularly using grounded theory methodologies.

Although numerous studies have investigated instructional strategies, teacher effectiveness, learner engagement, and curriculum implementation, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on isolated aspects of teaching rather than examining how teachers intentionally integrate multiple educational responsibilities to foster holistic learner development. Quantitative investigations have frequently measured academic outcomes, teacher competencies, or instructional effectiveness, while qualitative studies have often explored teachers' experiences without developing an explanatory theory describing the processes through which holistic learner development is achieved.

Furthermore, within the Philippine educational context, particularly in geographically isolated and indigenous communities, there remains limited grounded theory research examining how teachers integrate classroom instruction, learner wellness, values education, leadership opportunities, cultural responsiveness, and co-curricular programs into a coherent pedagogical approach. Existing literature provides valuable descriptions of educational practices but offers limited theoretical explanations regarding the mechanisms through which integrated classroom practices contribute to holistic learner development.

Addressing this gap, the present study employed Grounded Theory to develop a substantive explanation of how elementary teachers at Bocos Elementary School build holistic learners through integrated classroom practices. Rather than merely describing teaching experiences, the study seeks to generate an evidence-based theory explaining the relationships among instructional strategies, teacher leadership, learner engagement, school programs, cultural responsiveness, and holistic educational outcomes. The resulting theory is expected to provide practical guidance for teachers, school administrators, curriculum developers, teacher education institutions, and policymakers seeking to strengthen holistic education within elementary schools.

Comparatively few investigations have examined how elementary teachers simultaneously integrate academic instruction, learner wellness, values formation, leadership development, disaster preparedness, language enrichment, and culturally responsive pedagogy into a unified approach to holistic learner development. Moreover, there is a notable scarcity of grounded theory studies conducted in Philippine elementary schools, particularly within indigenous and geographically isolated communities such as Banaue, Ifugao, that seek to generate a substantive theory explaining the processes through which teachers cultivate holistic learners. Consequently, the mechanisms underlying integrated classroom practices remain theoretically underdeveloped. This study addresses these gaps by generating a grounded theory that explains how elementary teachers intentionally integrate instructional, co-curricular, cultural, and developmental practices to promote holistic learner development.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study is primarily anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which explains that children's development results from continuous interactions among multiple environmental systems, including family, school, community, culture, and broader societal influences. The theory emphasizes that effective education requires coordinated support across these interconnected systems, making it highly relevant to holistic learner development.

The investigation is further informed by Whole Child Theory, advanced by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), which asserts that schools should educate learners by addressing their academic, physical, social, emotional, and ethical needs. According to this perspective, learners achieve optimal educational outcomes when they are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2020).

The study also draws upon Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes that learning occurs through observation, modeling, social interaction, and self-efficacy. Teachers influence learners not only through direct instruction but also by modeling positive behaviors, resilience, leadership, collaboration, and responsible citizenship. This perspective explains how integrated classroom practices contribute to learners' holistic growth through meaningful interactions and guided experiences.

These theoretical foundations collectively provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how integrated instructional practices, collaborative relationships, culturally responsive pedagogy, and supportive school environments interact to foster holistic learner development. They also provide the conceptual basis for generating the substantive grounded theory that emerges from the participants' experiences.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to generate a substantive theory explaining how elementary teachers build holistic learners through integrated classroom practices at Bocos Elementary School, Banaue, Ifugao.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do elementary teachers describe their integrated classroom practices in promoting holistic learner development?
2. What instructional, co-curricular, and leadership practices do teachers employ to nurture learners' intellectual, moral, social, emotional, physical, and cultural development?
3. What contextual conditions facilitate or hinder the implementation of integrated classroom practices?
4. How do teachers respond to challenges encountered in implementing holistic educational practices?
5. What substantive grounded theory emerges from the interactions among teacher practices, school programs, learner development, and contextual influences?
6. How can the emerging theory inform teacher professional development, curriculum implementation, and holistic education in elementary schools?

### **Methodology**

This study employed the Straussian Grounded Theory approach developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015) to generate a substantive theory explaining how elementary teachers build holistic learners through integrated classroom practices at Bocos Elementary School, Banaue, Ifugao. Grounded theory is an appropriate qualitative methodology when the primary objective is to develop a theory that emerges inductively from participants' experiences rather than to test existing theoretical propositions (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Unlike phenomenological research, which focuses on describing the essence of lived experiences, grounded theory seeks to explain social processes, interactions, and patterns of behavior within a particular context. This approach enabled the researcher to examine how teachers integrate academic instruction, learner wellness, character formation, leadership development, language enrichment, and school-based programs into a coherent pedagogical process that promotes holistic learner development. Specifically, the study adopted the Straussian Grounded Theory because of its systematic analytical procedures involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, together with the constant comparative method, allowing the researcher to identify conceptual categories, establish relationships among them, and generate a substantive theory grounded in empirical evidence.

The study was conducted at Bocos Elementary School, situated in Lamagan, Bocos, Banaue, Ifugao, Philippines. The school serves learners from indigenous communities where education integrates academic instruction with cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, learner well-being, and community participation. The implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum, together with school-based programs in Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC), learner wellness, English and Filipino language development, School Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (SDRRM), and co-curricular activities, provides a rich context for examining integrated classroom practices. Teachers in the

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school perform multiple professional roles as classroom advisers, subject teachers, and coordinators of learner development programs, making the school an ideal setting for developing a grounded theory on holistic learner development.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, followed by theoretical sampling, which is fundamental in grounded theory research. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of individuals possessing extensive knowledge and experience relevant to integrated classroom practices, while theoretical sampling allowed the recruitment of additional participants as emerging categories required further clarification and theoretical refinement (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The study involved fifteen (15) participants, consisting of one school head, six elementary teachers handling Grades 4 to 6, three coordinators responsible for Wellness, English and Filipino Clubs, and SDRRM, three Grade 6 learners actively participating in school programs, and two Parent-Teacher Association officers who regularly collaborate with teachers in implementing learner development initiatives. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: they had at least two years of teaching or active involvement in learner development programs, directly participated in implementing integrated instructional or co-curricular activities, willingly consented to participate in the study, and were available for follow-up interviews whenever theoretical sampling required additional data. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, wherein no new categories or conceptual relationships emerged from subsequent interviews.

Multiple sources of qualitative data were utilized to strengthen the richness and credibility of the emerging theory. These included in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, observations of school-based learner development activities, document analysis, and field notes. School documents examined included lesson plans, curriculum guides, activity proposals, accomplishment reports, learner wellness plans, SDRRM documentation, English and Filipino Club records, and other instructional materials relevant to integrated classroom practices. The use of multiple data sources facilitated methodological triangulation and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the processes underlying holistic learner development.

The primary data collection instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit participants' perspectives regarding integrated classroom practices, teacher leadership, learner development strategies, instructional integration, wellness initiatives, language enrichment activities, values formation, and collaborative school programs. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their instructional practices, challenges, decision-making processes, and interactions that contributed to holistic learner development. To establish content validity, the interview guide was evaluated by three experts in qualitative research, elementary education, and curriculum studies who examined its relevance, clarity, organization, and alignment with grounded theory methodology. Their recommendations were incorporated prior to data collection. A pilot interview involving three elementary teachers from another public school within the Schools Division of Ifugao was likewise conducted to determine the clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions. These participants were excluded from the actual study.

Following the approval of the Schools Division Office, the school principal, and the Institutional Research Ethics Committee, participant recruitment commenced and informed consent was secured. Initial interviews were conducted with classroom teachers to obtain broad descriptions of their instructional and learner development practices. Simultaneously, classroom observations and document analyses were undertaken to identify recurring concepts, interactions, and instructional patterns. As analysis progressed, theoretical sampling guided the selection of subsequent

participants capable of elaborating on emerging categories and conceptual relationships. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face in a private room within the school. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded while the researcher simultaneously documented observational notes concerning participants' behaviors, classroom interactions, and contextual circumstances. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained analytic memos to record conceptual insights, theoretical reflections, coding decisions, and emerging relationships among categories. Data collection concluded once theoretical saturation was attained.

Data analysis followed the systematic procedures of the Straussian Grounded Theory proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2015). During open coding, interview transcripts, observation notes, field notes, and documentary evidence were examined line by line to identify significant concepts, actions, and interactions. Similar concepts were grouped into initial categories representing teachers' instructional practices and learner development processes. During axial coding, relationships among categories were explored using the paradigm model by identifying causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action-interaction strategies, and consequences. This analytical stage facilitated the integration of categories into broader conceptual explanations describing the processes through which holistic learner development occurs. Finally, selective coding involved identifying the central or core category that unified all major categories into a coherent explanatory framework. The emerging categories were continuously compared using the constant comparative method, ensuring that conceptual relationships remained grounded in participants' narratives and observational data. To facilitate systematic organization, coding, memo writing, retrieval, and visualization of qualitative data, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilized throughout the analytical process.

The trustworthiness of the study was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement in the research setting, methodological triangulation involving interviews, observations, and document analysis, member checking, peer debriefing, and theoretical sampling. Transferability was achieved by providing rich descriptions of the research setting, participants, contextual conditions, and emerging theoretical categories, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts. Dependability was ensured through maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting every stage of participant recruitment, data collection, coding, memo writing, theoretical sampling, and theory development. Confirmability was established through reflexive journaling, systematic memo writing, peer examination, and careful documentation of analytical decisions to minimize researcher bias and ensure that the resulting substantive theory genuinely emerged from participants' experiences.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Research Ethics Committee, the Schools Division Office, and the administration of Bocos Elementary School before the commencement of data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants signed informed consent forms after receiving detailed explanations regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential benefits, risks, and their rights as research participants. Written parental consent and learner assent were likewise secured for participating pupils. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and all interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, coding files, and analytic memos were securely stored in password-protected electronic devices accessible only to the researcher. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences. The conduct of the research adhered to the ethical principles of

respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality, and privacy, consistent with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) and internationally accepted ethical standards for qualitative educational research.

## **Results and Discussion**

Using the Straussian Grounded Theory procedures of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, together with the constant comparative method, the analysis of interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, and analytic memos generated one core category supported by five major categories and several interrelated subcategories. The emerging theory explains that holistic learner development is achieved through the intentional integration of academic instruction, character formation, learner wellness, collaborative leadership, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Rather than functioning as separate instructional components, these practices continuously interact to create meaningful learning experiences that nurture learners' intellectual, emotional, physical, social, moral, and cultural development. The resulting substantive theory was termed the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model, illustrating the dynamic process through which elementary teachers cultivate holistic learners by integrating classroom instruction with school-based developmental programs.

### **Core Category: Integrating Instructional and Developmental Practices to Cultivate Holistic Learners**

The core category emerged consistently throughout the data analysis and represented the central process connecting all categories. Participants explained that effective teaching extends beyond delivering academic content and requires the deliberate integration of multiple learner development initiatives into everyday classroom instruction. Teachers described themselves not merely as instructors but as mentors, role models, facilitators, counselors, and community partners who continuously nurture learners' academic competence, character, emotional well-being, leadership, and cultural identity.

One participant explained:

*"Teaching is not only about finishing the lesson. Every activity should also teach responsibility, kindness, discipline, and cooperation because these are equally important for children's future."* (Teacher 3)

Another participant stated:

*"When we integrate wellness, language activities, values education, and disaster preparedness into our lessons, learners become more responsible and confident in different situations."* (Teacher 5)

Similarly, the school head emphasized:

*"Our goal is not simply producing academically excellent learners but developing children who possess good values, leadership, resilience, and respect for their culture and community."* (School Head)

These narratives indicate that integrated classroom practices constitute a continuous pedagogical process through which multiple developmental goals are simultaneously achieved. The findings support Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which emphasizes that children's development results from interactions among school, family, community, and culture. Likewise, the Whole Child Approach (ASCD, 2020) advocates educational practices that simultaneously address learners' academic, physical, emotional, social, and ethical development.

### **Category 1: Integrating Academic Instruction with Character Formation**

Open coding revealed that teachers intentionally embed values education within daily classroom instruction regardless of the learning area being taught. Rather than teaching values separately, participants integrated honesty, respect, responsibility, empathy, cooperation, discipline, and perseverance into classroom discussions, collaborative activities, storytelling, classroom routines, and reflective exercises.

One teacher shared:

*"Whether I teach English or Filipino, I always connect the lesson with values because learning should shape both the mind and the heart."* (Teacher 2)

Another participant explained:

*"Children remember lessons better when values are connected to real-life situations."* (Teacher 4)

A learner likewise commented:

*"Teacher always asks us what good lesson we learned after every story."* (Learner 2)

Axial coding demonstrated that integrating values education into academic instruction strengthened learners' moral reasoning, classroom behavior, interpersonal relationships, and sense of responsibility. The findings corroborate previous research indicating that integrated character education enhances both academic achievement and socio-emotional development (Berkowitz & Bier, 2018).

#### Category 2: Promoting Learner Wellness Through Supportive Classroom Practices

Another major category highlighted teachers' commitment to promoting learners' physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being through integrated wellness practices. Participants emphasized that effective learning occurs only when children feel safe, healthy, emotionally supported, and valued within the classroom.

One participant explained:

*"Before starting the lesson, I ask how my learners are feeling because their emotions affect how they learn."* (Teacher 1)

Another teacher shared:

*"Wellness activities help children become more confident and participate actively during lessons."* (Teacher 6)

A Grade 6 learner stated:

*"Our teacher teaches us how to stay healthy and also encourages us whenever we feel discouraged."* (Learner 1)

Analysis showed that wellness initiatives, including classroom health routines, emotional check-ins, physical activities, guidance conversations, and positive reinforcement, created supportive learning environments that enhanced learner engagement and motivation. These findings support Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), which emphasizes that supportive social interactions strengthen learners' self-efficacy, confidence, and positive behavioral outcomes.

#### Category 3: Strengthening Holistic Learning Through Collaborative Leadership

Participants consistently described collaboration among teachers, parents, school administrators, and community stakeholders as an essential component of holistic learner development. Teachers viewed collaboration not simply as administrative coordination but as a shared responsibility for nurturing children's academic and personal growth.

One teacher stated:

*"Parents are our partners. When school and home work together, children become more responsible."* (Teacher 5)

The school head explained:

*"Every coordinator, adviser, and stakeholder contributes to one common goal—the holistic development of every learner."* (School Head)

A Parent-Teacher Association officer likewise remarked:

*"We participate because children's education does not end inside the classroom."* (PTA Officer 2)

Axial coding revealed that collaborative leadership strengthened communication, resource sharing, learner support systems, and community participation. The findings align with research emphasizing that strong school-community partnerships improve learner achievement, resilience, and well-being (Epstein, 2018).

#### Category 4: Contextualizing Learning Through Indigenous Culture and Community Engagement

Participants highlighted the importance of integrating indigenous culture, local traditions, environmental stewardship, and community experiences into classroom instruction. Teachers intentionally utilized local stories, indigenous knowledge, environmental practices, and cultural celebrations to make learning relevant and meaningful.

One participant explained:

*"Children understand lessons better when examples come from our own community."* (Teacher 4)

Another teacher shared:

*"We teach respect for our culture because education should preserve our identity."* (Teacher 2)

A learner commented:

*"I like reading stories about Ifugao because they remind me of our grandparents."* (Learner 3)

Analysis demonstrated that culturally responsive instruction strengthened learners' engagement, cultural identity, environmental awareness, and appreciation of local heritage. These findings support Gay's (2018) framework on culturally responsive teaching and Paris and Alim's (2017) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, which advocate integrating learners' cultural experiences into classroom instruction.

#### Category 5: Reflective Teaching as the Driver of Continuous Improvement

The final category emerged from participants' descriptions of continuously evaluating and refining their instructional practices. Teachers regularly reflected on learner participation, assessment results, classroom experiences, and feedback to improve future instruction.

One participant explained:

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*"After every lesson, I ask myself what worked well and what I should improve."* (Teacher 1)

Another teacher stated:

*"Reflection helps me understand my learners better because every class is different."* (Teacher 6)

The school head emphasized:

*"Teachers who continuously reflect become more effective in addressing learners' changing needs."* (School Head)

Selective coding revealed that reflective teaching functioned as the mechanism connecting all instructional practices, enabling teachers to continuously integrate academic instruction, learner wellness, values education, leadership opportunities, and culturally responsive teaching according to learners' evolving needs. These findings are consistent with Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practice, which emphasizes that professional reflection enhances instructional effectiveness and continuous professional growth.

#### Emerging Substantive Theory: The Integrated Holistic Teaching Model

Through selective coding, all categories converged into the substantive theory termed the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model. The theory proposes that holistic learner development emerges through the continuous interaction of five interconnected teacher practices: (1) integrating academic instruction with character formation, (2) promoting learner wellness, (3) strengthening collaborative leadership, (4) contextualizing learning through culture and community, and (5) engaging in reflective teaching. These practices operate within supportive school environments and are reinforced through partnerships among teachers, families, school leaders, and community stakeholders. Rather than functioning independently, each practice strengthens and sustains the others, collectively creating educational experiences that nurture learners' intellectual competence, moral character, emotional resilience, physical well-being, leadership capacity, cultural identity, and lifelong learning dispositions.

#### Theory Development: The Integrated Holistic Teaching Model

The findings of this grounded theory study culminated in the development of the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model (IHTM), a substantive theory that explains the process through which elementary teachers cultivate holistic learners by intentionally integrating academic instruction with learner development initiatives. The theory emerged through the systematic application of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, where the constant comparative analysis revealed that holistic learner development is not the result of isolated instructional practices but of a dynamic and interconnected process involving instructional integration, learner wellness, collaborative leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, and reflective teaching. The model posits that teachers function as instructional leaders who continuously balance academic excellence with character formation, emotional support, cultural preservation, leadership development, and community engagement. These interrelated practices collectively shape learners who are academically competent, morally responsible, emotionally resilient, socially engaged, physically healthy, and culturally grounded.

The model begins with the causal conditions that motivate teachers to implement integrated classroom practices. These conditions include the goals of the MATATAG Curriculum, the school's commitment to holistic education, teachers' professional values, and the developmental needs of elementary learners. Participants consistently emphasized that learners require more than mastery of academic competencies; they also need guidance in values formation, socio-emotional

development, wellness, leadership, and cultural appreciation. Consequently, teachers deliberately designed classroom experiences that simultaneously addressed multiple domains of learner development.

The implementation of integrated classroom practices occurred within specific contextual conditions that influenced teachers' instructional decisions. These included the cultural richness of the Ifugao community, the availability of school programs, administrative support, parental involvement, community partnerships, and the unique learning needs of pupils. Teachers explained that contextualizing lessons using indigenous knowledge, local traditions, environmental practices, and community experiences enhanced learners' engagement and strengthened the relevance of classroom instruction. However, participants also identified intervening conditions such as limited instructional resources, increasing administrative responsibilities, diverse learner abilities, and time constraints, which required teachers to continuously adapt and innovate their instructional approaches.

To address these conditions, teachers employed five interconnected action-interaction strategies. First, they integrated academic instruction with character education by embedding values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, perseverance, empathy, and cooperation into daily lessons. Second, they promoted learner wellness by creating emotionally supportive classrooms through health activities, positive reinforcement, socio-emotional learning, and guidance conversations. Third, they strengthened collaborative leadership by engaging parents, school administrators, and community stakeholders in learner development initiatives. Fourth, they contextualized instruction through culturally responsive pedagogy by incorporating indigenous traditions, local knowledge systems, and community experiences into classroom learning. Finally, teachers continuously practiced reflective teaching by evaluating learner responses, modifying instructional strategies, and refining classroom practices based on observation and experience.

These integrated strategies generated several consequences that collectively defined holistic learner development. Participants consistently observed improvements in learners' academic engagement, self-confidence, leadership abilities, moral decision-making, emotional resilience, collaborative skills, cultural appreciation, environmental awareness, and sense of social responsibility. Teachers likewise experienced enhanced professional confidence, stronger collaboration with stakeholders, and greater instructional effectiveness. The interaction among these outcomes reinforced the sustainability of integrated classroom practices, creating a continuous cycle of professional reflection and learner growth.

The Integrated Holistic Teaching Model therefore explains that holistic learner development is sustained through an iterative process in which teachers continuously integrate instructional, developmental, cultural, and leadership practices while responding to learners' evolving needs and contextual realities. The emerging theory extends Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) by demonstrating how interactions among teachers, learners, families, schools, and communities collectively influence learner development. It also reinforces the Whole Child Approach (ASCD, 2020), emphasizing that meaningful education addresses learners' cognitive, emotional, physical, social, moral, and cultural dimensions simultaneously. Furthermore, the theory contributes to the literature on grounded theory in education by providing an empirically derived explanation of how integrated classroom practices operate within elementary schools located in indigenous communities.

## **Conclusion**

This study generated a substantive grounded theory explaining how elementary teachers develop holistic learners through integrated classroom practices at Bocos Elementary School, Banaue, Ifugao. The findings revealed that holistic education is a dynamic and continuous pedagogical process requiring teachers to intentionally integrate academic instruction with character formation, learner wellness, collaborative leadership, culturally responsive teaching, and reflective practice. Rather than viewing these components as separate educational responsibilities, participants demonstrated that they function synergistically to create meaningful learning experiences that support learners' comprehensive development. The resulting Integrated Holistic Teaching Model illustrates that holistic learner development emerges from the interaction of supportive school environments, culturally relevant instruction, collaborative partnerships, and reflective professional practice. Consequently, effective elementary education extends beyond academic achievement by nurturing learners who are intellectually competent, emotionally resilient, morally responsible, socially engaged, physically healthy, and culturally grounded. The study therefore contributes a contextually grounded theoretical framework that enriches educational research on holistic education and provides empirical evidence supporting integrated approaches to teaching and learning within Philippine elementary schools.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings carry significant implications for educational policy, curriculum development, teacher education, school leadership, and future research. For the Department of Education, the study provides empirical support for strengthening the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum by promoting instructional approaches that integrate academic competencies with learner well-being, values formation, and socio-emotional development. Curriculum developers may utilize the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model as a framework for designing learning competencies that simultaneously address cognitive, affective, social, physical, and cultural domains of learning. School administrators may strengthen professional learning communities that encourage collaborative planning, reflective teaching, and interdisciplinary integration of learner development programs. Teacher education institutions may incorporate holistic education, culturally responsive pedagogy, learner wellness, and reflective practice into pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs. Likewise, teachers may adopt the model as a practical guide in designing classroom instruction that intentionally integrates values education, learner wellness, community engagement, and indigenous knowledge systems into daily learning experiences. Finally, the substantive theory generated by this study contributes to qualitative educational research by demonstrating the usefulness of grounded theory in explaining complex instructional processes and may serve as a theoretical foundation for subsequent investigations on holistic education in diverse educational settings.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in several important ways. First, it advances the literature on holistic education by generating an empirically grounded explanation of how elementary teachers integrate multiple educational responsibilities into a coherent instructional process. Second, it extends grounded theory research within Philippine education by developing a substantive theory situated in an indigenous and geographically unique educational context. Third, it broadens the application of ecological and whole-child perspectives by illustrating how academic instruction, learner wellness, character formation, collaborative leadership, cultural responsiveness, and reflective teaching interact to promote comprehensive learner development. Finally, the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model provides a practical and theoretical framework that may guide

educators, researchers, policymakers, and teacher educators in strengthening holistic education initiatives across elementary schools in the Philippines and other culturally diverse educational environments.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and the emerging Integrated Holistic Teaching Model, several recommendations are proposed for educational stakeholders. The Department of Education (DepEd) may strengthen the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum by institutionalizing policies that encourage the integration of academic instruction with learner wellness, character education, socio-emotional learning, leadership development, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Professional development programs should provide teachers with sustained training on holistic education, interdisciplinary instructional planning, reflective teaching, and culturally responsive instructional practices that address the diverse needs of learners. School administrators are encouraged to establish professional learning communities where teachers collaboratively design integrated learning experiences, share best practices, conduct action research, and reflect on instructional innovations that promote holistic learner development. Greater collaboration among schools, families, local government units, indigenous communities, and other stakeholders should also be strengthened to ensure that learner development extends beyond the classroom and is reinforced through community engagement and cultural preservation initiatives.

Elementary teachers are encouraged to intentionally integrate values formation, learner wellness, environmental stewardship, leadership opportunities, and indigenous knowledge into daily classroom instruction rather than treating these as isolated school programs. Regular reflective practice, classroom-based research, and continuous instructional innovation should become integral components of teachers' professional responsibilities to ensure that teaching strategies remain responsive to learners' changing developmental needs. Teacher education institutions may likewise revisit pre-service and graduate education curricula to incorporate courses and experiential learning opportunities focusing on holistic education, culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, reflective practice, and interdisciplinary instructional design. Finally, policymakers and curriculum developers may consider utilizing the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model as a conceptual framework for designing future educational policies, learner development programs, instructional guides, and teacher competency standards that emphasize balanced learner development across cognitive, emotional, physical, moral, social, and cultural dimensions.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study generated a substantive grounded theory explaining how elementary teachers develop holistic learners through integrated classroom practices, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in a single elementary school located in Banaue, Ifugao, limiting the contextual scope of the findings. While grounded theory emphasizes theoretical rather than statistical generalization, the resulting theory reflects the educational realities, cultural characteristics, and institutional practices specific to the research setting. Second, the participants consisted primarily of teachers, school administrators, selected learners, and Parent-Teacher Association officers who were directly involved in learner development initiatives. The inclusion of additional stakeholders such as district supervisors, curriculum specialists, community leaders, and local government officials could have provided broader perspectives regarding integrated educational practices. Third, although classroom observations, document analysis, and interviews were triangulated, the findings remained dependent upon participants' willingness to accurately articulate their experiences and professional practices. Finally, the study focused primarily on the

processes of holistic learner development rather than quantitatively measuring learner outcomes such as academic achievement, socio-emotional competence, or leadership performance. Consequently, the resulting substantive theory should be interpreted within the specific educational context from which it emerged.

### **Future Research Directions**

The substantive theory generated by this study provides numerous opportunities for future scholarly inquiry. Future researchers may validate and refine the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model through qualitative investigations conducted in other elementary schools, secondary schools, and higher education institutions situated in urban, rural, coastal, and indigenous communities. Comparative grounded theory studies involving different cultural groups and educational settings may determine whether similar processes of holistic learner development emerge across diverse contexts. Mixed-methods and quantitative investigations may likewise be conducted to examine the relationships among integrated classroom practices, learner engagement, academic achievement, emotional well-being, leadership development, and twenty-first-century competencies using larger participant populations.

Future studies may also investigate the influence of school leadership, organizational culture, teacher professional identity, parental involvement, digital learning environments, and community partnerships on the implementation of holistic education. Longitudinal research may provide valuable insights into how integrated classroom practices influence learners' academic performance, socio-emotional development, resilience, leadership, and lifelong learning dispositions over time. Additionally, future grounded theory studies may explore holistic learner development among learners with disabilities, multilingual classrooms, culturally diverse populations, and geographically isolated communities to further expand the applicability and theoretical robustness of the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model. Such investigations would contribute significantly to strengthening educational policies and instructional practices that promote inclusive, equitable, and learner-centered education.

### **Practical Applications of the Integrated Holistic Teaching Model**

The Integrated Holistic Teaching Model developed in this study may serve as a practical framework for improving classroom instruction, teacher professional development, school leadership, and curriculum implementation. Classroom teachers may utilize the model to design interdisciplinary learning experiences that simultaneously develop academic competencies, values formation, socio-emotional learning, leadership skills, wellness, and cultural appreciation. School administrators may employ the framework when designing school improvement plans, learner development programs, mentoring systems, and teacher capacity-building initiatives. Teacher education institutions may integrate the model into pre-service teacher preparation and graduate education courses to strengthen competencies in holistic instruction and reflective practice. Furthermore, curriculum developers and educational policymakers may use the model as a guide for developing instructional standards, learner support systems, and educational policies that prioritize balanced learner development in accordance with the goals of the MATATAG Curriculum and the Sustainable Development Goal on Quality Education.

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