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Learner Voice and Local Culture: Examining Learner-Centered Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Engagement at Balliao Integrated School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has been widely promoted for improving engagement by positioning learners as active contributors to classroom learning. In culturally diverse school settings, the integration of learner voice and local culture may further strengthen engagement by validating learners' identities and making learning more meaningful. This study examined how learner-centered pedagogical practices that foreground learner voice and local culture influenced classroom engagement at Balliao Integrated School. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with learners. Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated patterns: (1) engagement increased when lessons were organized around learner voice through dialogic talk moves and participatory routines; (2) cultural grounding enhanced emotional engagement and belonging by validating learners' identities; (3) contextualized tasks and community-linked examples strengthened cognitive engagement through meaning-making and relevance; and (4) supportive teacher-learner relationships sustained engagement by reducing fear of error and encouraging risk-taking in discussions. Findings highlight that engagement was not produced by "activity" alone, but by instructional conditions that made participation safer, learning more relevant, and thinking more purposeful. Implications are offered for classroom practice, instructional leadership, and curriculum development.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, learner voice, local culture, classroom engagement, culturally responsive teaching, qualitative case study

Introduction

Classroom engagement is a core condition for meaningful learning and academic success, particularly in basic education where learners' attitudes toward school and learning habits are still forming. Engagement is commonly conceptualized as multidimensional, including behavioral engagement (participation and effort), emotional engagement (interest, belonging, and value), and cognitive engagement (strategic thinking, self-regulation, and depth of processing) (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). In many school contexts, however, classroom participation is frequently shaped by teacher-dominated recitation, narrow questioning, and compliance-oriented routines. Such conditions can create the appearance of on-task behavior while masking limited emotional investment and shallow cognitive processing (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015).

Learner-centered pedagogy is increasingly recognized as an alternative that can strengthen engagement by treating learners as active meaning-makers and contributors to classroom discourse. Learner-centered classrooms prioritize dialogue, collaboration, inquiry, and scaffolding, with teachers designing tasks and interactions that support learners' agency and competence. Yet, learner-centered pedagogy is not culturally neutral. In culturally diverse settings, engagement is shaped by whether instruction reflects learners' identities, community knowledge, and language practices. When curriculum and pedagogy disconnect from learners' lived realities, learners may experience reduced belonging and weakened motivation, particularly those whose cultural experiences are underrepresented in school texts and examples (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Balliao Integrated School provides a relevant context for examining how learner voice and local culture interact in learner-centered teaching. While many schools endorse learner-centered approaches, there remains a need for school-based qualitative evidence describing how these practices are enacted in everyday instruction and how learners experience them. This study therefore examined learner-centered pedagogical practices that foreground learner voice and local culture and investigated how these practices relate to learners' classroom engagement. Rather than treating learner-centered pedagogy as a general "style," the study focused on concrete and observable practices (e.g., dialogic talk moves, cooperative routines, contextualization strategies, scaffolding and feedback patterns, and relationship-building behaviors) and documented their connection to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Review of Related Literature

Learner Voice as Participation and Agency

Learner voice refers to learners' opportunities to express ideas, contribute to decisions about learning, and participate meaningfully in classroom dialogue. Research suggests that when learners' perspectives are recognized and incorporated into classroom processes, learners develop stronger agency and ownership, which in turn supports engagement (Mitra, 2004). Learner voice is not simply "letting students talk," but involves structured participation routines and teacher facilitation moves that invite reasoning, build on learner contributions, and treat learners' ideas as worthy of exploration (Alexander, 2018).

Local Culture and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes integrating learners' cultural knowledge, experiences, and communication patterns into teaching to make learning relevant and affirming (Gay, 2018). Culturally relevant pedagogy further highlights academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness as key outcomes of culturally grounded teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In diverse communities, local culture functions as a resource for connecting concepts to lived experience, strengthening belonging, and increasing engagement by reducing cultural mismatch between home and school.

Engagement as Multidimensional and Context-Sensitive

Engagement research emphasizes that engagement is malleable and shaped by classroom structures and relationships. Learners can appear behaviorally compliant yet emotionally disengaged or cognitively shallow, highlighting the importance of examining participation, affect, and thinking together (Fredricks et al., 2004; Sinatra et al., 2015). Classroom engagement is strengthened when teachers design meaningful tasks, distribute participation, provide supportive feedback, and cultivate relational trust.

Integrating Learner-Centered Practices, Culture, and Relationships

The integration of learner-centered pedagogy with local culture supports engagement by aligning tasks and discourse with learners' identities and experiences. However, studies caution that learner-centered approaches require careful scaffolding to avoid inequitable participation where only confident learners dominate discussions. Effective implementation therefore requires purposeful design: structured cooperation, inclusive talk routines, formative feedback, and norms that make participation psychologically safe (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wentzel, 2010).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement at Balliao Integrated School. A case study approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth analysis of teaching and engagement processes in a real-life school context and captured how learner voice and local culture were enacted in everyday classroom interaction. The research site was purposively selected because teachers were implementing learner-centered strategies and were known to contextualize lessons using local community references.

Participants included classroom teachers and learners who directly experienced learner-centered instruction. Teachers were selected based on their instructional role and experience implementing learner-centered practices, while learners were selected to represent varied participation levels to capture diverse engagement experiences. Data were collected through classroom observations focusing on participation structures, teacher talk moves, task design, and cultural references; semi-structured interviews with teachers exploring instructional intentions, challenges, and perceptions of engagement; and focus group discussions with learners eliciting experiences of voice, relevance, belonging, and participation during lessons. Relevant instructional artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, activity sheets, contextualized tasks) were reviewed to triangulate observed practices.

Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis. Field notes and transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization, coded inductively, and organized into themes representing recurring patterns in learner-centered practices and engagement outcomes. Themes were refined through constant comparison across observation and interview data to ensure coherence and credibility. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across sources, member checking with selected participants to verify interpretations, and peer debriefing to strengthen analytic rigor. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms.

Findings and Results

Four themes explain how learner-centered practices integrating learner voice and local culture influenced classroom engagement at Balliao Integrated School.

Theme 1: Behavioral Engagement Increased When Learner Voice Was Structured Through Dialogic Routines

Learner-centered instruction increased participation when teachers used structured talk routines such as “think-pair-share,” small-group reporting, and prompt-based discussion circles. Teachers employed dialogic talk moves follow-up questions, requests for clarification, and prompts for evidence that kept learners accountable to ideas rather than short answers. Participation was also broadened through mechanisms that redistributed talk time, including turn-taking norms, group roles, and rotating spokespersons.

Participant Responses

Teachers described that participation widened when learners were invited to speak in low-risk formats before whole-class sharing. One teacher stated, “*Kapag pinapausap muna sa pares o grupo, mas marami ang naglalakalob magsabi ng sagot.*” Learners shared that they participated more when teachers asked open questions and allowed them to explain. One learner noted, “*Mas gusto ko kapag tinatanong kami ng ‘bakit’ kasi puwede naming ipaliwanag at hindi lang one word.*”

These findings indicate that learner voice strengthened behavioral engagement when it was intentionally designed rather than left to spontaneous volunteering. Structured dialogic routines created equitable opportunities for participation, reduced domination by a few confident learners, and supported broader involvement. Behavioral engagement improved because learners had predictable ways to contribute and were positioned as legitimate

speakers in the classroom community.

Theme 2: Emotional Engagement Was Strengthened Through Local Culture and Identity Affirmation

Teachers enhanced engagement by integrating local culture, community narratives, and familiar practices into examples, discussion prompts, and learning tasks. Lessons were connected to local livelihoods, community celebrations, and everyday experiences, allowing learners to see their identities and community knowledge represented in classroom learning. Teachers also affirmed learners' cultural contributions by treating local knowledge as valuable and worthy of academic discussion.

Participant Responses

Teachers observed heightened interest when lessons drew from local experiences. One teacher shared, *"Kapag halimbawa ay galing sa lugar natin, mas interesado sila kasi parang tungkol sa buhay nila."* Learners expressed pride when their community was used as a reference point, stating, *"Mas nakakaengganyo kapag nababanggit ang kultura namin kasi parang importante kami."* These accounts suggest that culturally grounded teaching strengthened emotional engagement by fostering belonging and affirmation. When learners felt recognized and valued, they displayed greater enthusiasm, attentiveness, and willingness to participate. Emotional engagement increased not only through interest but through identity-based motivation: learners participated because the classroom became a space where their experiences mattered.

Theme 3: Cognitive Engagement Deepened When Tasks Were Contextualized and Required Sense-Making

Contextualized tasks prompted learners to analyze concepts through familiar community-based scenarios rather than abstract exercises. Teachers used guiding questions and reflection prompts that encouraged learners to connect ideas to lived experiences, compare perspectives, and justify reasoning. Activities often required learners to interpret situations, propose solutions, and defend viewpoints using evidence from texts, discussions, or real-life observations.

Participant Responses

Learners reported that contextual examples helped them think more deeply. One learner stated, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag naiugnay sa nangyayari sa amin kasi mas napapaisip ako."* Teachers noted that learners' responses became more elaborated over time, observing that contextualized tasks led to more "why" and "how" explanations rather than memorized statements. These findings indicate that cognitive engagement was strengthened when contextualization was paired with higher-order questioning and reflective sense-making. Local contexts served as cognitive bridges that supported conceptual understanding and sustained effortful thinking. Rather than simplifying learning, contextualized tasks increased cognitive demand by inviting learners to interpret, reason, and apply ideas to meaningful situations.

Theme 4: Engagement Was Sustained Through Supportive Teacher-Learner Relationships and Psychological Safety

Teachers cultivated classroom climates characterized by respect, empathy, and encouragement. Errors were normalized as part of learning, and learners were invited to revise answers through probing questions rather than being corrected publicly. Teachers monitored participation patterns and intentionally invited quieter learners to contribute using supportive language and low-risk entry points.

Participant Responses

Learners emphasized that they were more willing to speak when teachers were supportive. One learner shared, *"Hindi ako natatakot magkamali kasi tinutulungan kami ng teacher at pinapaliwanag."* Teachers similarly stressed that trust and respect were foundational for learner voice, noting that discussion-based lessons required learners to feel emotionally safe.

These findings highlight relational trust as a cross-cutting mechanism that sustained behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Psychological safety enabled learners to take intellectual risks, persist through difficulty, and engage in dialogue without fear of embarrassment. Supportive relationships therefore functioned as the foundation that allowed learner voice and cultural grounding to translate into sustained engagement.

Discussion

The results show that engagement at Balliao Integrated School was strengthened when learner-centered pedagogy foregrounded learner voice and local culture through intentional participation structures, culturally affirming contexts, and supportive relationships. Mapping these findings to multidimensional engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004), the study demonstrates that behavioral engagement increased when talk routines broadened participation, emotional engagement deepened when local culture validated identity and belonging, and cognitive engagement strengthened when contextualized tasks demanded reasoning and reflection.

Culturally responsive pedagogy frameworks explain why cultural grounding mattered: instruction became more meaningful and affirming when it drew on learners' community knowledge and experiences (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Learner voice functioned as an engagement mechanism when teachers used dialogic teaching practices that treated learners' contributions as ideas to explore, not answers to evaluate (Alexander, 2018). Finally, supportive teacher-learner relationships were essential enabling conditions that made participation psychologically safe and sustained engagement across tasks, consistent with evidence that learner-centered relationships support positive academic and affective outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wentzel, 2010).

Implications

The findings suggest that teachers should design learner voice intentionally using structured dialogic routines, equitable turn-taking, and group roles to broaden participation. Teachers are encouraged to integrate local culture not as decorative examples but as instructional resources that validate identity and connect learning to lived realities. To deepen cognitive engagement, contextualized tasks should include higher-order questions and reflection prompts that require explanation and justification.

Instructional leaders should support professional development focused on dialogic facilitation, culturally responsive task design, and formative assessment of engagement (e.g., participation distribution, quality of reasoning, relevance cues). Providing time for collaborative planning and peer coaching can strengthen teachers' capacity to create culturally grounded learner-centered lessons. Curriculum developers may embed local-context exemplars, inquiry prompts, and culturally sustaining activities within learning materials to support inclusive and engaging instruction across classrooms.

Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative case study, findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. Future studies may adopt mixed-methods designs linking observation-based engagement measures with learner performance data, or include multiple schools to compare how local culture shapes learner-centered practices across contexts. Longitudinal research may also examine whether culturally grounded learner voice practices contribute to sustained engagement and improved learning outcomes over time.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that learner voice and local culture when enacted through learner-centered pedagogical practices can significantly enhance classroom engagement at Balliao Integrated School. Engagement increased not simply because learners were "active," but because participation was structured, cultural identity was affirmed, and learning tasks were connected to meaningful contexts while supported by trusting teacher-learner relationships. Strengthening culturally grounded learner-centered teaching through professional development, leadership support, and curriculum alignment may contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and engaging classroom environments.

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