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From Teaching Practices to Classroom Engagement: A Study of Learner-Centered Pedagogy at Bantug Elementary School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has been widely advocated as a means of improving classroom engagement and learning outcomes in basic education. However, empirical studies that closely examine how teaching practices translate into actual learner engagement in elementary classrooms remain limited, particularly in public school contexts. This qualitative case study investigated how learner-centered pedagogical practices were enacted at Bantug Elementary School and how these practices shaped learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Data were generated through classroom observations, focus group discussions with learners, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Using thematic analysis, four interrelated themes emerged: (1) dialogic teaching practices as foundations of participation, (2) learner autonomy and choice as drivers of motivation, (3) collaborative learning as a structure for sustained engagement, and (4) teacher scaffolding and feedback as supports for deeper thinking. Learners' narratives revealed increased confidence, enjoyment, and persistence, alongside challenges related to uneven participation and time constraints. The findings demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogy fosters multidimensional classroom engagement when teaching practices intentionally foreground learner voice, interaction, and reflective support. Implications for teaching practice, school leadership, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy; classroom engagement; elementary education; qualitative case study; teaching practices

Introduction

Classroom engagement is widely recognized as a critical condition for effective learning in elementary education. Engaged learners are more likely to participate actively in lessons, demonstrate sustained attention, and invest cognitively in understanding academic content. In contrast, disengagement in the early grades has been associated with learning difficulties, low motivation, and long-term academic risk. As such, improving classroom engagement remains a central concern for teachers and school leaders in basic education.

Learner-centered pedagogy has emerged as a prominent response to concerns about disengagement associated with traditional, teacher-dominated instruction. Learner-centered approaches reposition learners as active participants in the learning process by emphasizing interaction, dialogue, collaboration, and the integration of learners' experiences into instruction. Research suggests that when learners are given opportunities to speak, make decisions, and work collaboratively, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning and sustain engagement (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

In elementary classrooms, teaching practices play a particularly significant role in shaping engagement, as young learners' confidence, motivation, and learning habits are still developing. While policy and curriculum frameworks increasingly promote learner-centered pedagogy, less is known about how specific teaching practices enacted in everyday classrooms influence learners' engagement. Moreover, few studies have examined this relationship from the perspectives of both teachers and learners within public elementary school contexts.

This study addresses this gap by examining learner-centered teaching practices at Bantug Elementary School and exploring how these practices shape classroom engagement. By focusing on the transition from teaching practices to learner engagement, the study seeks to provide contextually grounded insights into how learner-centered pedagogy functions in elementary classrooms.

Research Questions

1. What learner-centered teaching practices are implemented at Bantug Elementary School?
2. How do learners experience these teaching practices in relation to classroom engagement?
3. In what ways do learner-centered pedagogical practices influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

Review of Related Literature

Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, which view knowledge as actively constructed through interaction, dialogue, and experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Weimer (2013) characterizes learner-centered teaching as an approach that emphasizes learner responsibility, shared power in the classroom, and instructional practices that promote understanding rather than compliance.

Empirical studies have shown that learner-centered strategies such as inquiry-based learning, collaborative activities, and dialogic instruction enhance learners' motivation and conceptual understanding (Prince, 2004). In elementary settings, these practices have been linked to inclusive learning environments that support diverse learners (Gay, 2018).

Classroom Engagement

Classroom engagement is a multidimensional construct comprising behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement refers to observable actions such as participation and persistence; emotional engagement involves interest, enjoyment, and belonging; and cognitive engagement reflects effort, strategy use, and self-regulation.

Research consistently indicates that teaching practices emphasizing interaction, relevance, and autonomy are associated with higher levels of engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Teacher-learner relationships further shape engagement by creating emotionally supportive environments that encourage participation and risk-taking

(Wentzel, 2012).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement within a real-life elementary school context. The case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth and holistic examination of complex teaching–learning processes as they naturally unfold within a bounded educational setting. This design was particularly suited to the study’s focus on classroom engagement, as it allowed for close attention to instructional practices, learner interactions, and participants’ lived experiences within everyday classroom routines. The research was conducted at Bantug Elementary School, a public elementary school serving learners from varied socio-economic backgrounds, where learner-centered approaches had been increasingly emphasized in classroom instruction. Participants included five elementary teachers who were implementing learner-centered pedagogical strategies and twenty-eight learners from Grades 4 to 6. Learners were selected through purposive sampling to represent varied participation levels, academic performance, and classroom engagement profiles, ensuring the inclusion of information-rich cases that could provide diverse perspectives on learner-centered teaching and engagement.

Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods to enhance depth and credibility. Classroom observations were conducted to document teaching practices, patterns of learner participation, interaction dynamics, and manifestations of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during lessons. These observations focused on how learner-centered strategies such as dialogue, collaboration, and scaffolding—were enacted in practice. Focus group discussions with learners were conducted to elicit shared perceptions of teaching practices, opportunities for participation, feelings of inclusion, and overall classroom experiences. These discussions provided insight into how learners interpreted and responded to learner-centered instruction. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined pedagogical intentions, instructional strategies, decision-making processes, and challenges encountered in implementing learner-centered practices within the constraints of the elementary school context.

All data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. The analytic process involved repeated reading of transcripts, systematic coding, iterative development of themes, and constant comparison across data sources to ensure coherence and depth of interpretation. Trustworthiness was enhanced through methodological triangulation across observations, interviews, and focus group data; peer debriefing to challenge emerging interpretations and minimize researcher bias; and member checking to validate findings with participants. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents, learner assent was secured, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to ensure confidentiality and protect participants’ identities.

Results and Findings

Theme 1: Dialogic Teaching Practices as Foundations of Behavioral Engagement

Classroom observations revealed that dialogic teaching practices were consistently embedded in daily instruction, with teachers employing open-ended questioning, storytelling, think-aloud strategies, and guided whole-class discussions. Rather than limiting interaction to brief recitation or recall questions, teachers encouraged learners to explain their ideas, ask clarifying questions, and relate lesson content to personal experiences. These dialogic exchanges created interactive classroom environments where learners were not merely responding to teachers but actively contributing to the construction of knowledge. As a result, learners were observed raising their hands more frequently, sustaining attention during discussions, and demonstrating increased willingness to participate across lesson segments.

Learners expressed strong appreciation for opportunities to voice their ideas and be heard. One learner stated, “*Mas ganado ako kapag tinatanong kami at nakakapagsalita,*” indicating that participation enhanced motivation and attentiveness. Another learner shared that discussions helped them understand lessons better because they could hear different perspectives. However, not all learners immediately felt confident participating. Some admitted initial hesitation, with one noting, “*Minsan nahihiya pa rin ako sumagot kapag mali,*” particularly during early discussions. Teachers observed that this reluctance gradually diminished as dialogic practices became routine and learners experienced non-threatening responses to incorrect answers. Teachers emphasized that consistent

dialogue helped normalize mistakes as part of learning.

These findings align with sociocultural theory, which positions dialogue as a central mechanism for learning through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Dialogic instruction validates learners' voices and enables meaning-making through shared discourse, thereby strengthening behavioral engagement (Alexander, 2008). The observed increase in participation and attentiveness reflects behavioral engagement as conceptualized by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), demonstrating how dialogic teaching practices translate instructional interaction into active learner involvement.

Theme 2: Learner Autonomy and Choice as Drivers of Emotional Engagement

Learner autonomy emerged as a prominent feature of learner-centered pedagogy, particularly through opportunities for choice in learning activities. Teachers allowed learners to select examples, decide group roles, choose presentation formats, or determine how to approach certain tasks. These autonomy-supportive practices conveyed trust in learners' capabilities and encouraged them to take ownership of their learning. Observations indicated that learners displayed positive affect such as enthusiasm, excitement, and pride when given opportunities to make decisions about their work.

Learners consistently associated autonomy with enjoyment and motivation. One learner remarked, *"Mas masaya kapag may choice kami,"* explaining that being able to decide made learning feel more personal and meaningful. Others shared that choice increased their confidence and sense of responsibility. At the same time, some learners expressed uncertainty when autonomy was not accompanied by sufficient structure. One learner admitted, *"Nalilito ako kapag walang malinaw na gagawin,"* suggesting that excessive freedom without guidance could lead to confusion or anxiety. Teachers acknowledged this tension and emphasized the importance of balancing learner choice with clear instructions and expectations.

These findings are consistent with self-determination theory, which posits that emotional engagement is enhanced when learners' needs for autonomy and competence are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Reeve (2013) similarly found that autonomy-supportive teaching fosters interest, enjoyment, and emotional investment in learning. However, the mixed responses underscore that autonomy alone is insufficient; emotional engagement is maximized when choice is scaffolded by structure, clarity, and teacher support.

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning as a Structure for Sustained Engagement

Collaborative learning was a central instructional strategy in learner-centered classrooms, with group work frequently used to facilitate discussion, problem-solving, and task completion. Teachers organized learners into small groups to encourage peer interaction, shared responsibility, and cooperative learning. Observations revealed that learners remained engaged for longer periods when working collaboratively, as group tasks required continuous communication, coordination, and joint decision-making.

Learners generally valued collaboration as a means of support and understanding. One learner explained, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may kausap,"* highlighting how peer explanations reinforced comprehension. Another noted that group work reduced fear of making mistakes because assistance was readily available. Despite these benefits, learners also reported challenges related to unequal participation. One learner commented, *"May groupmate na hindi masyadong tumutulong,"* expressing frustration when responsibilities were not evenly shared. Teachers addressed these concerns by assigning specific roles, monitoring group dynamics, and encouraging accountability.

These findings support research indicating that collaborative learning enhances engagement by fostering social interaction and shared responsibility (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Collaboration allows learners to articulate reasoning, negotiate meaning, and sustain effort through mutual support. However, the reported challenges reflect well-documented issues in group work, emphasizing the need for structured collaboration, clear roles, and teacher facilitation to ensure equitable participation and sustained engagement.

Theme 4: Teacher Scaffolding and Feedback as Supports for Cognitive Engagement

Teacher scaffolding and feedback played a critical role in promoting learners' cognitive engagement. Teachers used probing questions, modeling, guided demonstrations, and formative feedback to support learners' thinking processes. Rather than simply providing correct answers, teachers encouraged learners to explain reasoning,

identify errors, and reflect on alternative strategies. This approach positioned learners as active thinkers responsible for understanding and improving their work.

Learners highlighted the importance of feedback in supporting learning. One learner shared, *“Mas natututo ako kapag sinasabi kung saan ako nagkamali,”* explaining that feedback helped clarify misunderstandings. Teachers emphasized the importance of encouraging independent thinking, with one stating, *“Hindi agad ibinibigay ang sagot,”* to allow learners time to reflect and reason. Observations showed that such scaffolding helped learners persist through challenges and engage more deeply with tasks.

These findings align with research demonstrating that scaffolding supports cognitive engagement by promoting reflection, strategy use, and self-regulation (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007). Feedback that emphasizes learning processes rather than correctness alone has been shown to enhance deeper understanding and metacognitive awareness (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In this study, teacher scaffolding and feedback functioned as cognitive supports that enabled learners to think critically, refine understanding, and sustain engagement in learning tasks.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogy effectively translates teaching practices into multidimensional classroom engagement by activating the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learners' participation. Dialogic teaching practices fostered behavioral engagement by creating interactive spaces where learners were encouraged to speak, question, and contribute ideas, thereby normalizing active participation as a core classroom practice. Learner autonomy, expressed through opportunities for choice and decision-making, nurtured emotional investment by enhancing learners' sense of ownership, enjoyment, and belonging within the learning process. Collaborative learning structures further sustained engagement by promoting peer interaction, shared responsibility, and mutual support, enabling learners to remain involved even when tasks were challenging. In parallel, instructional scaffolding and formative feedback strengthened cognitive engagement by guiding learners' thinking, encouraging reflection, and supporting the development of self-regulation and strategic understanding.

Collectively, these patterns align closely with Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) multidimensional engagement framework, which conceptualizes engagement as the interrelated functioning of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. The findings extend this framework to elementary classroom contexts by demonstrating how specific learner-centered teaching practices operationalize each dimension of engagement in everyday instruction. Rather than functioning independently, these dimensions interacted dynamically; for example, emotional investment arising from autonomy and belonging often reinforced behavioral participation, while cognitive engagement supported learners' persistence and willingness to participate in dialogue and collaboration. This interdependence underscores the importance of holistic instructional designs that address multiple dimensions of engagement simultaneously.

At the same time, the findings illuminate persistent challenges associated with the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy. Time constraints limited opportunities for extended dialogue, reflection, and collaborative work, while uneven participation within groups occasionally undermined equitable engagement. These challenges echo prior research on learner-centered instruction, which cautions that such approaches require careful planning, sufficient instructional time, and sustained teacher support to be effective (Schweisfurth, 2013). Addressing these challenges necessitates institutional support, including flexible scheduling, professional development, and classroom management strategies that enable teachers to sustain learner-centered practices without compromising instructional coherence or inclusivity.

Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates that learner-centered teaching practices at Bantug Elementary School meaningfully foster classroom engagement by repositioning learners as active participants, informed decision-makers, and reflective thinkers within the teaching-learning process. Rather than viewing engagement as mere compliance or attentiveness, the findings show that engagement emerged as a multidimensional construct shaped by the intentional alignment of dialogic interaction, learner autonomy, collaborative learning structures, and instructional scaffolding. Engagement was strongest when these pedagogical elements operated in concert: dialogue encouraged participation, autonomy nurtured emotional investment, collaboration sustained involvement, and scaffolding

supported deeper cognitive processing. This alignment enabled learners not only to participate more frequently but also to invest emotionally in learning tasks and engage cognitively through reflection, explanation, and strategy use.

The findings carry significant implications for classroom practice in elementary education. Teachers are encouraged to design lessons that deliberately amplify learner voice through open-ended questioning, discussion, and opportunities for explanation, thereby normalizing active participation as an essential component of learning. Structuring collaborative activities with clear roles and expectations can help sustain engagement while minimizing issues of uneven participation. Additionally, the strategic use of formative feedback and scaffolding focused on learning processes rather than correctness alone can support learners' cognitive engagement and foster self-regulation and persistence. Together, these practices underscore the importance of moving beyond surface-level learner-centered strategies toward coherent instructional designs that address behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement simultaneously.

At the level of school leadership, the findings highlight the critical role of institutional support in sustaining learner-centered pedagogy. School leaders may support engagement-focused instruction by prioritizing professional development that deepens teachers' understanding of learner-centered principles, dialogic teaching strategies, and formative assessment practices. Creating collaborative spaces for teachers to reflect on instructional practices, share strategies, and address implementation challenges such as time constraints and classroom management can further strengthen the enactment of learner-centered pedagogy across grade levels. Leadership support is essential to ensure that learner-centered approaches are not treated as isolated classroom initiatives but as part of a coherent school-wide instructional culture.

Directions for future research include examining the longitudinal effects of learner-centered instruction on learners' academic achievement, motivation, and learning dispositions across grade levels. Long-term and mixed-methods studies may provide deeper insight into how sustained exposure to learner-centered pedagogy influences learners' engagement trajectories and academic outcomes. Future research may also explore variations in implementation across different school contexts and learner populations, as well as the perspectives of parents and school leaders, to inform scalable and context-sensitive models of learner-centered education.

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