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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learner-Centered Pedagogy in Elementary Education: A Qualitative Study of Grade 4 Classroom Practices at Planas Integrated School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has become a central approach in contemporary education as it promotes active participation, critical thinking, and meaningful learning experiences among students. In elementary education, the implementation of learner-centered teaching practices plays an essential role in supporting the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young learners. This study explored the learner-centered pedagogical practices employed by Grade 4 teachers and examined students' learning experiences at Planas Integrated School. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with students, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to classroom practices and student engagement. The findings revealed that teachers employed collaborative learning activities, inquiry-based tasks, contextualized instruction, and reflective discussions to foster learner participation. These practices enhanced students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during classroom instruction. However, teachers also encountered challenges such as limited instructional resources, time constraints, and diverse learner needs. The study highlights the importance of institutional support and continuous teacher professional development in sustaining learner-centered pedagogy in elementary classrooms.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, elementary education, qualitative research, student engagement, classroom practices

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INTRODUCTION

Education systems around the world have increasingly emphasized the importance of learner-centered pedagogy in improving teaching and learning processes. Learner-centered approaches shift the focus of instruction from teacher-directed lectures to interactive and participatory learning experiences that encourage students to actively construct knowledge. In elementary education, this approach is particularly important because young learners develop understanding through interaction, exploration, and reflection.

Learner-centered pedagogy promotes active engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking, enabling students to participate meaningfully in the learning process. Instead of viewing learners as passive recipients of information, this approach positions students as active participants who contribute to knowledge construction through dialogue, inquiry, and problem-solving activities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

The Philippine education system has also recognized the importance of learner-centered teaching practices, particularly within the K–12 curriculum framework. Teachers are encouraged to implement strategies that foster creativity, collaboration, and reflective thinking among students. However, implementing learner-centered pedagogy in real classroom settings can be challenging due to factors such as limited resources, large class sizes, and diverse learner needs.

In elementary classrooms, teachers play a critical role in facilitating meaningful learning experiences. Effective learner-centered instruction requires teachers to design activities that encourage student participation and connect lessons to real-life experiences. Strategies such as cooperative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and project-based learning have been shown to enhance students' engagement and understanding of academic concepts (Hattie, 2012).

Despite the recognized benefits of learner-centered pedagogy, there is still limited research exploring how teachers implement these practices in specific educational contexts. Understanding teachers' experiences and students' perspectives is essential in identifying effective instructional strategies and addressing challenges in classroom implementation.

This study aimed to explore the learner-centered pedagogical practices used by Grade 4 teachers at Planas Integrated School and examine how these practices influence students' learning experiences. The findings of the study contribute to the growing body of literature on learner-centered education and provide insights for improving teaching practices in elementary classrooms.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes the active involvement of students in the learning process. It encourages students to participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and engage in inquiry-based activities that promote deeper understanding of lesson content. Research suggests that learner-centered instruction improves student motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Teachers who adopt learner-centered approaches create classroom environments that support dialogue, reflection, and critical thinking. This shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction allows students to develop independence and confidence in their learning abilities.

Student Engagement in Elementary Classrooms

Student engagement is a key indicator of effective learning. According to Fredricks et al. (2019), engagement includes behavioral participation, emotional interest, and cognitive investment in learning activities. When students are actively engaged in classroom tasks, they are more likely

to develop deeper understanding of academic concepts.

Participatory learning strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and reflective activities have been found to enhance student engagement and promote meaningful learning experiences.

Challenges in Implementing Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Although learner-centered approaches offer numerous benefits, teachers often encounter challenges in implementing these strategies. Limited instructional resources, heavy curriculum requirements, and large class sizes may hinder the effective use of participatory teaching methods (OECD, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires institutional support and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on the principles of constructivist learning theory, which suggests that learners construct knowledge through interaction and active participation in the learning process. Learner-centered pedagogical practices such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and contextualized teaching serve as instructional mechanisms that influence students' engagement and learning experiences.

The framework assumes that teacher pedagogical practices influence student engagement, which in turn shapes students' understanding of lesson concepts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore learner-centered pedagogical practices in Grade 4 classrooms at Planas Integrated School. Qualitative research allows researchers to examine participants' perspectives and experiences within their natural educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The participants included Grade 4 teachers and selected students from Planas Integrated School. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct experience with learner-centered classroom practices.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with students, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans.

The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation of information and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded to identify recurring patterns related to pedagogical practices and student engagement. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that represented the major findings of the study.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the qualitative data generated several themes related to learner-centered pedagogical practices and student learning experiences.

Collaborative Learning Activities

Teachers frequently used group work and collaborative tasks to encourage students to share ideas and work together in solving problems. These activities promoted communication skills and peer learning among students.

Student participant:

“Mas natututo kami kapag nagtutulungan kami sa group activity.”

Research indicates that collaborative learning enhances student engagement and promotes deeper understanding of lesson concepts (Fredricks et al., 2019).

Inquiry-Based Learning

Teachers also encouraged students to ask questions and explore ideas through inquiry-based activities. This approach allowed students to investigate problems and develop critical thinking skills.

Teacher participant:

“Hinahayaan ko silang magtanong at mag-isip ng sariling sagot para mas maintindihan nila ang lesson.”

Inquiry-based instruction has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for promoting meaningful learning and intellectual curiosity among students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Contextualized Instruction

Teachers connected lessons to students’ daily experiences to make learning more meaningful. By relating academic concepts to real-life situations, teachers helped students understand the relevance of what they were learning.

Student participant:

“Mas naiintindihan namin ang lesson kapag may halimbawa na nangyayari sa totoong buhay.”

Contextualized learning supports the development of deeper understanding and application of knowledge (Gay, 2018).

Challenges in Implementing Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Despite the benefits of learner-centered teaching strategies, teachers reported several challenges including limited teaching materials, time constraints, and diverse learner abilities.

Teacher participant:

“Minsan mahirap gawin ang activity dahil kulang ang oras at materyales.”

These challenges highlight the need for stronger institutional support and professional development opportunities for teachers.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure research rigor, the study employed several strategies. Credibility was established through data triangulation using interviews, observations, and document analysis. Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of research procedures and data analysis. Confirmability was achieved by presenting verbatim responses from participants to support thematic findings. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into how learner-centered pedagogy is implemented in Grade 4 classrooms at Planas Integrated School and how these practices influence students’ learning experiences. The results indicate that teachers actively integrate collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, and contextualized instruction to promote meaningful participation among learners. These practices reflect the principles of learner-centered education,

which emphasize the active involvement of students in the learning process rather than passive reception of information.

One of the key findings of the study is the significant role of collaborative learning activities in enhancing student engagement. Teachers frequently organized group work and peer discussions that allowed students to exchange ideas and support one another in completing tasks. This approach enabled learners to develop communication skills and fostered a sense of shared responsibility for learning. The findings support the work of Fredricks et al. (2019), who argue that collaborative learning environments promote behavioral engagement by encouraging students to actively participate in classroom activities. Similarly, cooperative learning strategies have been shown to enhance students' academic achievement and social interaction in elementary classrooms.

Another important pedagogical practice observed in the study was the use of inquiry-based learning strategies. Teachers encouraged students to ask questions, explore ideas, and investigate problems rather than relying solely on teacher explanations. This approach allowed learners to develop critical thinking skills and deeper understanding of lesson concepts. Inquiry-based learning aligns with constructivist principles, which emphasize that knowledge is constructed through active exploration and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). When students are given opportunities to investigate problems and formulate their own explanations, they become more engaged in the learning process and develop stronger analytical skills.

The study also highlighted the importance of contextualized instruction in facilitating meaningful learning experiences. Teachers often related lesson concepts to students' everyday experiences and familiar situations within their communities. This approach enabled students to connect abstract concepts to real-life contexts, making learning more relevant and easier to understand. Contextualized teaching has been widely recognized as an effective instructional strategy because it helps learners apply knowledge in practical situations and strengthens their ability to transfer learning beyond the classroom (Gay, 2018). In the context of elementary education, connecting lessons to students' daily lives can significantly improve comprehension and retention of knowledge.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that learner-centered pedagogical practices contribute to different dimensions of student engagement, including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement was evident through students' active participation in group activities and classroom discussions. Emotional engagement was reflected in students' enthusiasm and interest during interactive lessons. Cognitive engagement was demonstrated by students' ability to analyze problems, generate ideas, and reflect on lesson concepts. These results align with the engagement framework proposed by Fredricks et al. (2019), which emphasizes the interconnected nature of these dimensions in supporting effective learning outcomes.

Despite the positive impact of learner-centered teaching practices, the study also identified several challenges in implementing these approaches. Teachers reported difficulties related to limited instructional materials, time constraints, and the need to address diverse learner abilities within the classroom. These challenges may hinder the consistent implementation of participatory teaching strategies. Similar challenges have been documented in previous studies, which indicate that teachers often struggle to balance curriculum requirements with the demands of interactive instructional approaches (OECD, 2020). Without sufficient institutional support and resources, it may be difficult for teachers to sustain learner-centered pedagogy over time.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of providing institutional support and professional development opportunities for teachers. Training programs that focus on innovative teaching strategies and classroom management techniques can help educators effectively implement learner-centered pedagogy. Additionally, access to instructional materials and supportive school policies can enable teachers to design more engaging learning activities that

cater to diverse student needs.

The study demonstrates that learner-centered pedagogy plays a crucial role in promoting active learning and meaningful classroom experiences in elementary education. By encouraging collaboration, inquiry, and contextualized instruction, teachers can create learning environments that empower students to become active participants in their own learning. Strengthening institutional support systems will further enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of learner-centered practices in elementary classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The research results show that learner-centered teaching methods improve student engagement and better educational results in elementary school classrooms. The implementation of active learning instructional methods by teachers leads to increased student motivation and participation and reflective learning among students. Collaborative learning and inquiry-based instruction and contextualized teaching methods enable students to interact with their classmates while they study various topics through practical knowledge application. Students who participate in collaborative learning activities develop their communication and teamwork abilities while they learn from their fellow students. Students learn to establish critical thinking abilities through the practice of inquiry-based instruction which requires them to create their own understanding of lesson concepts through their investigation of problems and their questioning of everything they learn. Teachers use contextualized teaching to connect academic material with students' daily life experiences which helps students learn better because they find the material easier to comprehend and remember. The learner-centered methods change the classroom environment which teachers control into a student-centered learning environment that enables students to take responsibility for their personal educational growth.

The application of learner-centered pedagogy creates different types of student engagement, which include three main engagement categories: behavioral engagement and emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. Students who participate actively in classroom activities through their involvement in classroom discussions and group projects and interactive learning tasks demonstrate their behavioral engagement. Students demonstrate emotional engagement through their enthusiastic response and their active curiosity and interest in all things related to classroom activities. Students demonstrate cognitive engagement through their ability to analyze problems and their capacity to reflect on lesson concepts and their ability to apply knowledge in different situations. The presence of these engagement dimensions creates a classroom environment which enables students to develop a deeper academic understanding while they retain the knowledge they acquire from their lessons.

The research demonstrates that institutional support functions as a vital requirement for implementing learner-centered pedagogy at educational institutions. Teachers face various challenges which include limited access to teaching materials and their need for interactive teaching time and their responsibility to support all learning requirements which their students bring to the classroom. Teachers lack the necessary resources and support systems which create difficulties for them in implementing innovative teaching methods throughout their educational practice. The implementation of learner-centered educational practices requires school administrators and educational policymakers to provide institutional support which creates an environment that supports their implementation. The required teaching materials should be provided to schools while the schools need to develop flexible instructional policies which should help teachers create professional learning communities to share their knowledge.

The sustainability of learner-centered teaching practices depends on teachers obtaining continuous professional development training throughout their careers. Training programs and workshops which focus on innovative teaching methods and classroom management methods

and assessment techniques can help teachers develop skills to implement learner-centered pedagogy. Professional development opportunities enable teachers to exchange best practices while they evaluate their teaching methods and they acquire knowledge from the teaching experiences of their fellow educators.

The educational support systems need development because they allow teachers to maintain their innovative teaching methods which enhance elementary education quality. The education system provides teachers with the right resources and training together with institutional backing which enables them to develop interactive learning spaces that promote student exploration and creativity and critical thinking ability development. The educational landscape changes when people engage in these activities because it improves academic results and helps students become lifelong learners who adapt to educational system changes.

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