

Teaching Practices Anchored in Learner-Centered Pedagogy and Their Impact on Classroom Engagement at Maluno Integrated School

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ABSTRACT

Learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) is widely associated with improved classroom engagement, yet evidence from school-based, practice-focused studies remains uneven across contexts. This study examined how teaching practices anchored in LCP shaped learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement at Maluno Integrated School. Using a qualitative case study design, data were generated through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders, and focus group discussions with learners. Thematic analysis guided the interpretation of patterns linking instructional moves to engagement outcomes. Findings indicate that engagement strengthened when teachers (1) organized cooperative learning with clear roles and accountability, (2) contextualized lessons using learners' community experiences, (3) scaffolded tasks with autonomy-supportive structure, and (4) sustained a caring, responsive classroom climate. These practices increased learners' participation, interest, persistence, and strategic thinking during tasks. The study highlights actionable implications for professional development and instructional leadership, emphasizing coaching on autonomy support, collaborative task design, and culturally responsive contextualization. Future research may test these relationships using mixed-methods or multi-site designs to connect observed teaching practices with achievement and longer-term engagement trajectories.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, classroom engagement, autonomy support, cooperative learning, contextualized instruction, qualitative case study

I. INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learners' involvement in academic activities. Behavioral engagement refers to observable participation, persistence, and effort during learning tasks; emotional engagement reflects learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging in the classroom; while cognitive engagement involves strategic thinking, self-regulation, and sustained investment in understanding complex ideas (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). Importantly, engagement is not a fixed learner characteristic but a malleable and context-dependent phenomenon that responds dynamically to instructional practices, classroom structures, and teacher-learner interactions. As such, instruction functions as a primary lever through which schools can influence learners' engagement and learning trajectories (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

In basic education settings, a growing body of research demonstrates that learner-centered pedagogy is particularly effective in fostering engagement by positioning learners as active participants in the construction of knowledge. Learner-centered classrooms emphasize interaction, relevance, and supportive facilitation, enabling learners to connect new content to prior knowledge and lived experiences while participating in dialogue and collaborative problem-solving (Bransford et al., 2000; OECD, 2016). Instructional approaches grounded in learner-centered principles

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prioritize meaningful and authentic tasks, shared classroom discourse, learner voice, and scaffolding practices that support competence development without diminishing autonomy. These features have been shown to enhance not only behavioral participation but also learners' emotional connection to learning and their willingness to invest cognitively in challenging tasks (Hospel & Galand, 2016; Wentzel, 2010).

Despite this evidence, classroom practice in many school contexts continues to be characterized by teacher-dominated recitation and transmission-oriented instruction. Such practices often limit opportunities for collaboration, authentic participation, and learner agency, resulting in superficial compliance rather than deep engagement (Alexander, 2018; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). When learners are positioned primarily as passive recipients of information, their opportunities to exercise choice, articulate understanding, and engage in higher-order thinking are constrained, weakening the motivational and cognitive foundations of engagement.

The present study responds to this persistent gap between theory and practice by examining how learner-centered pedagogy is enacted through concrete, observable teaching practices in everyday instruction at Maluno Integrated School. Rather than conceptualizing learner-centered pedagogy as a generalized instructional orientation or teaching "style," this study focuses on specific pedagogical practices such as structured cooperative learning, contextualized instruction, instructional scaffolding, formative feedback, and autonomy-supportive teacher behaviors and investigates how these practices shape learners' behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment during lessons. By grounding the analysis in classroom-level practices and learner experiences, the study contributes empirical evidence on how learner-centered pedagogy operates in practice and how it can be leveraged to strengthen classroom engagement in basic education contexts.

Research questions

1. What learner-centered teaching practices are enacted in classrooms at Maluno Integrated School?
2. How do these practices shape learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during instruction?
3. What contextual enablers and constraints affect teachers' enactment of learner-centered pedagogy?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Learner-Centered Pedagogy as a Motivational and Social Learning Environment

Learner-centered pedagogy is grounded in the view that learning occurs through active participation, dialogue, and socially mediated meaning-making rather than passive reception of information. Educational theorists argue that learners construct knowledge by engaging with tasks, peers, and teachers within structured learning environments that provide guidance and support (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). From a sociocultural perspective, learning is inherently social and shaped by interaction, language, and cultural tools, with teachers playing a critical role in scaffolding learners' understanding as they move toward greater independence (Rogoff, 2003). Within this framework, learner engagement is not conceptualized as an individual learner attribute but as an emergent outcome of classroom organization, instructional relationships, and task design. Learner-centered classrooms therefore function as social systems in which motivation and engagement are jointly produced through meaningful activities, shared responsibility, and supportive instructional practices (OECD, 2016).

2.2 Engagement as Multidimensional and Context-Sensitive

Engagement in learning has been widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement involves observable participation, persistence, and effort, while emotional engagement refers to learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging in learning activities. Cognitive engagement reflects learners' investment in understanding, use of learning strategies, and willingness to engage in complex thinking (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Research cautions against equating compliance with engagement, as learners may appear behaviorally on-task while remaining emotionally disconnected or cognitively unchallenged (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). This multidimensional and context-sensitive nature of engagement is particularly relevant in learner-centered classrooms, where collaborative and performance-based activities require sustained emotional commitment and higher-order cognitive processing. Consequently, engagement is best understood as a dynamic response to instructional practices and classroom climate rather than a fixed learner disposition (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

2.3 Autonomy Support, Structure, and Caring Relationships

Motivational research emphasizes that learners' engagement is strongly influenced by the degree to which classroom environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Instructional environments that encourage learner voice, acknowledge perspectives, and provide meaningful choices foster a sense of autonomy, which is associated with higher motivation and engagement (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). At the same time, effective learner-centered teaching provides clear structure through explicit expectations, modeling, scaffolding, and timely feedback, enabling learners to experience competence and reduce uncertainty during learning tasks (Hospel & Galand, 2016). These practices are most effective when embedded within caring teacher–learner relationships characterized by trust, respect, and emotional support. Empirical studies demonstrate that learners who perceive their teachers as supportive and responsive are more likely to participate actively, persist in challenging tasks, and demonstrate positive academic attitudes (Wentzel, 2010). Thus, learner-centered pedagogy relies on the integration of autonomy support, instructional structure, and relational care to sustain meaningful engagement.

2.4 Cooperative Learning and Participation Structures

Cooperative learning has long been recognized as an effective learner-centered strategy for enhancing engagement and participation. Research shows that well-structured cooperative learning environments promote active involvement by encouraging learners to explain ideas, negotiate meaning, and support one another's learning (Slavin, 2014). Unlike unstructured group work, cooperative learning requires intentional design, including clearly defined goals, individual accountability, and opportunities for positive peer interaction. These structures function as participation frameworks that distribute classroom talk and responsibility, allowing a wider range of learners to remain engaged throughout the lesson. Studies indicate that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement but also enhances learners' motivation, persistence, and sense of belonging, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms (Kyndt et al., 2013). In learner-centered classrooms, cooperative routines therefore serve as mechanisms for sustaining behavioral and cognitive engagement while normalizing help-seeking and collaboration.

2.5 Contextualized and Culturally Responsive Teaching

Contextualized instruction emphasizes linking academic content to learners' everyday experiences, social realities, and community contexts in order to enhance relevance and understanding. Research suggests that when learning tasks reflect learners' lived experiences, engagement increases as learners are better able to connect new concepts to familiar situations (Perkins, Salomon, & Globerson, 1988). Culturally responsive teaching extends this principle by positioning learners' cultural knowledge, language practices, and identities as central resources for learning rather than peripheral considerations (Banks & Banks, 2019). In diverse school settings, contextualized and culturally responsive instruction has been shown to reduce abstraction barriers, strengthen emotional engagement, and foster a stronger sense of belonging and academic confidence (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). By affirming learners' identities and experiences, such approaches contribute to more inclusive and engaging learning environments.

Conceptual Framing of the Study

Drawing from these bodies of literature, the present study is conceptually framed by the interaction of three key elements: multidimensional engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), motivational support through autonomy, structure, and relational care, and instructional practices that emphasize cooperative learning and contextualized teaching. Learner-centered pedagogy is viewed as a set of observable classroom practices that shape participation patterns, learning relationships, and task relevance, thereby influencing how learners engage with instruction. This integrated framework guided the analysis of teaching practices at Maluno Integrated School and informed the interpretation of how learner-centered approaches contributed to enhanced classroom engagement.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine teaching practices anchored in learner-centered pedagogy and their impact on classroom engagement at Maluno Integrated School. The case study approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of instructional practices and learner engagement within a real-life school context. The research focused on understanding how learner-centered strategies were enacted in everyday classroom interactions and how learners responded to these practices in terms of participation, interest, and cognitive involvement.

The study site, Maluno Integrated School, was purposively selected due to its active implementation of learner-centered instructional approaches across selected grade levels. Participants included elementary teachers who regularly facilitated classroom instruction, school leaders involved in instructional supervision, and learners who directly experienced the teaching practices under investigation. Teachers and administrators were selected based on their instructional roles, while learners were chosen through teacher recommendation to represent varied levels of classroom participation.

Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders, and focus group discussions with learners. Classroom observations focused on instructional strategies, learner participation patterns, teacher–learner interactions, and task structures that reflected learner-centered pedagogy. Interviews explored teachers’ pedagogical intentions, perceptions of learner engagement, and contextual factors influencing instructional decisions, while learner focus group discussions elicited perspectives on interest, participation, and learning experiences during lessons. Instructional documents such as lesson plans and activity sheets were also reviewed to triangulate observed practices.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. Transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to ensure familiarization, after which initial codes were generated and grouped into broader themes reflecting teaching practices and engagement outcomes. Themes were refined through constant comparison across data sources to ensure coherence and depth. Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation, member checking with selected participants, and peer debriefing to validate interpretations. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Four interrelated themes explain how learner-centered practices shaped classroom engagement at Maluno Integrated School.

Theme 1: Enhanced Learner Participation through Collaborative Learning Structures

Explanation

Teachers consistently implemented collaborative learning strategies such as small-group discussions, shared problem-solving tasks, and role-based group activities. These structures were intentionally designed to provide learners with opportunities to interact, exchange ideas, and collectively complete learning tasks. By organizing lessons around cooperation rather than individual recitation, teachers redistributed classroom participation and encouraged learners to take active roles in the learning process.

Participant Responses

Teachers observed that learners who were previously hesitant to recite became more active when working in groups. One teacher shared, *“Mas nagiging bukas ang mga bata kapag may kagrupa sila. Kahit mahina sa recitation, nakikilahok kapag may kasama.”* Learners likewise expressed that group work made learning more enjoyable and less intimidating, with one learner stating, *“Mas gusto ko ang group activity kasi puwede kaming magtulungan at magtanong sa isa’t isa.”*

These accounts indicate that collaborative learning served as a participation structure that reduced anxiety and increased behavioral engagement. By shifting interaction from teacher-centered recitation to peer-supported learning, learners were able to participate more consistently and confidently. This finding supports existing literature that cooperative learning enhances engagement by promoting shared responsibility and social interaction, thereby sustaining learners’ effort and involvement throughout the lesson.

Theme 2: Increased Interest and Meaning-Making through Contextualized Instruction

Teachers deliberately connected lesson content to learners’ real-life experiences, community practices, and familiar situations. Examples, problem scenarios, and discussion prompts were contextualized using local references and everyday experiences, allowing learners to relate abstract concepts to their own lives. This practice aimed to make lessons more meaningful and accessible.

Participant Responses

Teachers noted that learners became more attentive and responsive when lessons were contextualized. One teacher remarked, *“Kapag halimbawa ay galing sa buhay nila, mas mabilis nilang naiintindihan at mas marami ang gustong sumagot.”* Learners echoed this sentiment, with one stating, *“Mas madali ang aralin kapag tungkol sa amin o sa ginagawa namin sa bahay.”*

Contextualized instruction strengthened learners’ emotional and cognitive engagement by fostering relevance and personal connection to the lesson. When learners recognized the applicability of classroom content to their own

experiences, their interest increased and comprehension deepened. This finding aligns with constructivist and culturally responsive teaching perspectives, which emphasize the role of prior knowledge and lived experience in sustaining engagement and facilitating understanding.

Theme 3: Sustained Engagement through Supportive and Autonomy-Supportive Teaching Practices

Teachers demonstrated supportive teaching practices by providing clear instructions, scaffolding difficult tasks, offering constructive feedback, and encouraging learner voice. Learners were given opportunities to ask questions, explain their thinking, and make choices within structured activities. These practices balanced guidance with autonomy, allowing learners to work independently while feeling supported.

Participant Responses

Teachers described how encouragement and guidance helped learners persist in tasks. One teacher explained, “*Kapag sinasabi naming okay lang magkamali at tinutulungan namin sila, mas nagtatangka silang tapusin ang gawain.*”

Learners similarly reported feeling more confident, with one learner stating, “*Hindi ako natatakot magkamali kasi tinutulungan kami ng teacher.*”

Supportive and autonomy-oriented practices created a positive classroom climate that sustained engagement across learning activities. Learners’ willingness to exert effort and persist despite difficulty reflects both emotional safety and cognitive investment. These findings reinforce self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy support and competence-building feedback enhance intrinsic motivation and engagement.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that learner-centered pedagogy influenced engagement through *complementary mechanisms*: participation structures (cooperative learning), meaning-making (contextualization), motivational support (autonomy-supportive structure), and relational safety (teacher caring). These mechanisms align with multidimensional engagement theory, which frames engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive and highly responsive to classroom context.

First, cooperative learning functioned as a design feature that redistributed participation from a few “fast responders” to many learners, increasing behavioral engagement and enabling cognitive engagement via explanation and peer coaching. This is consistent with cooperative learning literature emphasizing positive interdependence and accountability as drivers of both social and academic outcomes.

Second, contextualization strengthened emotional engagement by making tasks feel relevant and culturally resonant. This supports culturally responsive teaching principles that improve access and motivation when instruction honors learners’ experiences and community knowledge.

Third, autonomy-supportive structure helped explain why learner-centered classrooms in this case did not become “noisy but shallow.” Teachers provided clear goals, scaffolded pathways to competence, and meaningful choices, reflecting the synergy of autonomy support and structure documented in the SDT literature. When learners experienced competence support (scaffolds, feedback) and autonomy support (choice, rationale, perspective-taking), their engagement became more agentic learners initiated questions, proposed strategies, and sustained effort. This pattern resonates with engagement research showing reciprocal links between engagement and motivation over time.

Finally, teacher responsiveness and caring appeared to be the “enabling condition” that allowed participation to expand. When learners perceive classrooms as psychologically safe, they take more learning risks answering, revising, and persisting. This aligns with evidence on the effectiveness of learner-centered teacher–student relationships.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study underscore the importance of intentional instructional design in fostering classroom engagement through learner-centered pedagogy. Teachers are encouraged to design participation deliberately by employing structured cooperative learning strategies rather than relying on unplanned groupings. Assigning clear roles, ensuring individual accountability, and explicitly teaching teamwork skills can help distribute participation more equitably and sustain learners’ involvement throughout classroom tasks. Such intentional structures allow learners to

contribute meaningfully while reducing anxiety and off-task behavior.

Additionally, contextualizing instruction emerged as a critical practice for enhancing engagement. Teachers are encouraged to plan lessons that connect curriculum concepts to learners' community experiences, everyday realities, and familiar contexts. By grounding instruction in relevant and accessible examples, teachers can strengthen learners' interest, comprehension, and emotional connection to the learning process, particularly in diverse and integrated school settings.

The study also highlights the value of pairing learner autonomy with clear instructional structure. Providing learners with meaningful choices, opportunities to express ideas, and clear rationales for tasks—while maintaining explicit expectations and consistent feedback—supports both autonomy and competence. This balance enables learners to take ownership of their learning without experiencing confusion or loss of direction. Furthermore, building relational safety within the classroom is essential for sustaining engagement. Normalizing errors as part of the learning process, validating learners' efforts, and using supportive language can create a psychologically safe environment where learners are more willing to participate, persist in challenging tasks, and engage in higher-order thinking.

At the level of instructional leadership, the findings suggest a need for sustained and focused professional development that centers on observable learner-centered teaching competencies. School leaders are encouraged to support training initiatives that emphasize the design of cooperative learning tasks, effective scaffolding and formative feedback routines, autonomy-supportive teacher discourse, and strategies for contextualizing instruction. Such targeted professional development can strengthen teachers' capacity to translate learner-centered principles into daily classroom practice.

Moreover, coaching and instructional monitoring processes may be enhanced through the use of reflective tools such as an “engagement evidence” checklist. Learning walks and coaching conversations that attend to indicators such as learner talk time, distribution of participation, quality of questioning, scaffolding practices, and relevance cues can help teachers reflect on the impact of their instructional choices. When used formatively rather than evaluatively, these practices can foster continuous improvement cycles that support the sustained implementation of learner-centered pedagogy across classrooms.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a single-site qualitative case study, findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. The study prioritizes depth of practice description and engagement mechanisms rather than causal measurement. Future studies may (a) include multiple schools to compare how context shapes LCP enactment, (b) use mixed methods linking observation ratings of learner-centered practice to engagement scales and achievement indicators, and (c) examine longitudinal effects of sustained autonomy-supportive teaching on motivation and engagement trajectories.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that learner-centered pedagogy, when translated into deliberate and well-structured classroom practices, plays a critical role in enhancing learner engagement at Maluno Integrated School. The findings demonstrate that engagement was most pronounced when instruction incorporated structured cooperative learning, contextualized lesson design, autonomy-supportive scaffolding, and caring teacher-learner relationships. These practices functioned together to create learning environments in which learners were not only physically active but also emotionally invested and cognitively engaged in the learning process.

Importantly, the results suggest that engagement did not emerge simply from increased activity or interaction, but from instructional conditions that made participation psychologically safe, learning tasks meaningful, and success realistically attainable. Structured cooperation reduced anxiety by distributing responsibility among peers, while contextualized instruction strengthened relevance by linking academic content to learners' lived experiences. Autonomy-supportive scaffolding further enabled learners to exercise agency within clear instructional boundaries, fostering confidence, persistence, and strategic engagement. Meanwhile, caring and responsive teacher-learner relationships served as a foundational condition that encouraged risk-taking, dialogue and sustained effort.

Taken together, these findings reinforce theoretical perspectives that view engagement as a multidimensional and context-dependent construct shaped by instructional design, social interaction, and motivational support. The study highlights the importance of moving beyond abstract endorsements of learner-centered pedagogy toward the systematic enactment of observable teaching practices that directly influence how learners participate, feel, and think during instruction. In this regard, learner-centered pedagogy emerges not as a single method, but as a coherent set of interrelated practices that collectively shape the quality of classroom engagement.

The study also underscores the pivotal role of instructional leadership in sustaining learner-centered practices. Targeted professional development, reflective coaching, and supportive school structures are essential for enabling teachers to refine cooperative learning routines, deepen contextualization strategies, and balance autonomy with instructional structure. When these supports are consistently in place, schools are better positioned to cultivate classrooms that promote meaningful engagement and improved learning outcomes. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of research demonstrating that learner-centered pedagogy, when thoughtfully implemented, offers a viable pathway toward more inclusive, responsive and engaging elementary education environments.

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