

Integrating Local Culture in Learner-Centered Teaching: Effects on Pupils' Classroom Engagement at Ngileb Elementary School

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Publication Date: 5/7/2026

ABSTRACT

Learner engagement is a critical factor in improving learning outcomes in elementary education, particularly in culturally diverse and rural contexts. This study examined how integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching influences pupils' classroom engagement at Ngileb Elementary School. Guided by constructivist and culturally responsive pedagogy frameworks, the study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analysis of instructional materials. Findings revealed that the integration of local cultural elements such as community narratives, indigenous practices, and familiar social contexts enhanced pupils' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Learner-centered strategies grounded in local culture fostered active participation, meaningful learning, and a supportive classroom climate. Despite contextual constraints, teacher adaptability and reflective practice sustained engagement. The study underscores the pedagogical value of culturally grounded, learner-centered instruction and offers implications for teaching practice, school leadership, and future research in elementary education.

Keywords: learner-centered teaching, local culture, classroom engagement, culturally responsive pedagogy, elementary education

I. INTRODUCTION

Classroom engagement is widely recognized as a foundational element of effective teaching and learning, particularly in the elementary years when learners' attitudes toward school, learning habits, and self-concepts as students are still developing. Engagement is commonly described as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities, and higher engagement is consistently linked to stronger academic performance, better classroom behavior, and improved motivation over time (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner et al., 2008). When pupils participate actively, show interest and enjoyment, and persist through difficulty, they are more likely to develop self-regulation and positive learner identities outcomes that are especially important in the early grades where learning trajectories are shaped early (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In this regard, engagement is not merely a learner trait; it is also an outcome that teachers can influence by designing instruction that builds belonging, relevance, autonomy, and appropriate challenge (Jang et al., 2010).

In recent years, learner-centered pedagogy has gained prominence as an instructional approach that strengthens engagement by positioning learners as active participants in the learning process. Rooted in constructivist and social learning traditions, learner-centered teaching emphasizes interaction, inquiry, collaboration, and guided meaning-making, consistent with the view that learners construct knowledge through experience and social mediation (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). Studies indicate that classrooms using active and cooperative learning structures tend to produce higher participation and deeper understanding compared with purely lecture-driven approaches (Prince, 2004). Moreover, research on autonomy-supportive teaching suggests that when teachers provide meaningful choices, rationale, and supportive feedback, learners demonstrate greater engagement, persistence, and conceptual learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2006; Jang et al., 2010). These findings support the argument that learner-centered pedagogy enhances engagement by increasing learners' sense of ownership, competence, and connection.

Received: 1/3/2026

Revised: 2/8/2026

Accepted: 4/9/2026

Published: 5/7/2026



In culturally diverse and rural school contexts, learner-centered teaching becomes more meaningful when instruction is grounded in learners' local culture. Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes that students engage more strongly when classroom instruction affirms their cultural identities, connects learning to community life, and uses cultural knowledge as a resource for academic meaning-making (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Evidence from "funds of knowledge" research likewise shows that integrating learners' household and community practices into instruction can strengthen relevance, participation, and comprehension (Moll et al., 1992). More recent work on culturally sustaining pedagogy argues that schools should not only "include" culture but also sustain learners' linguistic and cultural repertoires as part of equitable learning (Paris & Alim, 2014). In rural settings, place-based and community-connected teaching has also been associated with increased engagement because it anchors lessons in local contexts, issues, and experiences that are meaningful to learners (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2004).

Ngileb Elementary School represents a rural learning environment where local culture shapes pupils' everyday experiences and ways of understanding the world. Given the strong link between relevance and engagement, culturally grounded learner-centered instruction offers a compelling pathway for strengthening participation and motivation in such contexts (Gay, 2018; Moll et al., 1992). However, empirical work that documents how integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching influences engagement in rural elementary classrooms particularly within specific Philippine school settings remains relatively limited in the published literature. This study therefore explores how integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching affects pupils' classroom engagement at Ngileb Elementary School, contributing context-specific evidence to scholarship on engagement, culturally responsive instruction, and learner-centered pedagogy (Fredricks et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014).

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Classroom engagement is widely understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components that together shape meaningful learning experiences. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' active participation in classroom activities, including attentiveness, effort, and on-task behavior. Emotional engagement involves learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging within the classroom environment, while cognitive engagement reflects the degree to which learners invest effort, persist in challenging tasks, and employ strategic thinking to understand content (Fredricks et al., 2004). A substantial body of research demonstrates that learners who are engaged across these dimensions tend to achieve better academic outcomes and display more positive classroom behavior, underscoring engagement as a key indicator of instructional effectiveness, particularly in elementary education.

Learner-centered pedagogy is rooted in constructivist learning theories that view learning as an active and socially mediated process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction and experience rather than passive reception. This approach emphasizes instructional strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, differentiated instruction, and formative feedback, all of which position learners as active participants in their own learning. Research indicates that learner-centered teaching enhances motivation and engagement by providing learners with opportunities to interact with peers, make choices, and apply knowledge in meaningful and authentic contexts (Prince & Felder, 2006). By fostering autonomy, relevance, and interaction, learner-centered pedagogy supports deeper understanding and sustained engagement.

Culturally responsive teaching further strengthens learner-centered pedagogy by integrating learners' cultural backgrounds, values, and lived experiences into instruction to promote equity and inclusion. Studies suggest that culturally grounded teaching enhances learner participation, comprehension, and identity affirmation, particularly in indigenous and rural contexts where learners' cultural knowledge is central to meaning-making (Gay, 2018). Incorporating local culture into learner-centered teaching allows educators to connect academic content with learners' everyday realities, making learning more relevant and engaging. Through culturally responsive and learner-centered approaches, classrooms become inclusive spaces that validate learners' identities, foster a sense of belonging, and support deeper and more sustained classroom engagement.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the effects of integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching on pupils' classroom engagement. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of instructional practices and learner responses within a real-life classroom context. The study was conducted at Ngileb Elementary School, a rural public elementary school serving pupils from culturally rooted community backgrounds.

Participants included selected elementary teachers implementing learner-centered and culturally integrated strategies and their respective classes. Teachers were purposively selected based on teaching experience and use of localized instructional practices. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on pupil participation, interaction patterns, and engagement during culturally integrated lessons. Interviews explored teachers' pedagogical beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of learner engagement. Instructional materials and lesson plans were analyzed to examine how local culture was integrated into learner-centered activities. Data analysis followed a thematic, inductive approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to cultural integration, learner-centered strategies, and engagement. Triangulation across data sources enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

IV. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Analysis of the data generated three major themes describing the effects of integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching on pupils' classroom engagement.

Theme 1: Enhanced Participation through Culturally Familiar Learning Tasks

Findings revealed that pupils demonstrated increased behavioral engagement when lessons incorporated culturally familiar examples, stories, and activities. One teacher shared, "*Kapag ang aralin ay may kaugnayan sa kanilang kultura, mas nagiging aktibo ang mga bata sa pagsagot*" (P6). Another noted, "*Mas maraming bata ang gustong makilahok kapag ang gawain ay pamilyar sa kanilang karanasan*" (P2). A third participant stated, "*Nakikita ko na mas handa silang magbahagi kapag naiintindihan nila ang konteksto ng aralin*" (P1). These responses indicate that cultural familiarity encouraged participation and reduced learners' hesitation.

Interpretively, culturally familiar tasks supported classroom engagement by enabling pupils to connect new academic concepts with their prior knowledge, everyday experiences, and cultural understandings. When instructional activities draw from learners' familiar cultural practices, language, and community contexts, pupils are better able to make sense of new information because it resonates with what they already know. This connection reduces cognitive distance between the learner and the content, allowing pupils to participate more confidently, ask questions, and contribute ideas based on their lived experiences. As learners recognize their own culture reflected in classroom tasks, they also experience a stronger sense of relevance and belonging, which further enhances emotional and behavioral engagement.

This finding is consistent with constructivist perspectives that emphasize learning as an active process of meaning-making grounded in social interaction and prior experience. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights that learning occurs most effectively when instruction is mediated through culturally meaningful tools and interactions within learners' zones of proximal development. Similarly, Gay (2018) argues that culturally responsive teaching strengthens learning by using students' cultural knowledge as a foundation for academic instruction rather than treating it as peripheral. Related studies on culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy further suggest that when classroom tasks align with learners' cultural schemas, students demonstrate higher engagement, deeper comprehension, and stronger identity affirmation (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). Thus, culturally familiar tasks not only support cognitive understanding but also promote inclusive and engaging learning environments that validate pupils' identities and encourage sustained participation.

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

The second theme highlights how integrating local culture enhanced pupils' emotional and cognitive engagement. Teachers reported that pupils showed greater interest and understanding when lessons were contextualized using local practices and community narratives. One participant explained, "*Mas interesado ang mga bata kapag nakikita nila ang sarili nilang buhay sa aralin*" (P7). Another shared, "*Mas naiintindihan nila ang konsepto kapag may kaugnayan sa kanilang komunidad*" (P10). A third noted, "*Nagiging mas makabuluhan ang pagkatuto kapag may saysay ang aralin sa kanilang araw-araw na buhay*" (P1).

Analytically, contextualized instruction fostered meaning-making by enabling learners to recognize the relevance of academic content to their own lives, experiences, and community realities. When lessons were framed within familiar social practices, local narratives, and everyday situations, learners were better able to interpret concepts, relate new information to existing knowledge, and apply learning in meaningful ways. This relevance encouraged deeper cognitive engagement, as learners were not merely memorizing information but actively constructing understanding based on contexts they could readily comprehend. Contextualized instruction also strengthened emotional engagement by affirming learners' identities and experiences, which, in turn, motivated sustained participation and interest in classroom activities.

This finding supports studies that emphasize the role of culturally responsive teaching in enhancing both engagement

and comprehension by situating learning within learners' sociocultural contexts. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy promotes academic success by using students' cultural backgrounds as assets for learning rather than barriers. Similarly, Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) highlight that authentic and context-rich instruction increases learner engagement by making academic work meaningful and intellectually challenging. Together, these studies reinforce the view that contextualized instruction is not merely an instructional strategy but a pedagogical approach that deepens understanding, supports learner engagement, and fosters meaningful learning experiences, particularly in culturally diverse and rural educational settings.

Theme 3: Teacher Adaptability and Supportive Classroom Climate

The third theme underscores the role of teacher adaptability in sustaining engagement during culturally integrated learner-centered instruction. Teachers adjusted strategies based on learners' responses, available resources, and cultural appropriateness. One teacher remarked, "*Kapag hindi epektibo ang gawain, binabago ko ito ayon sa kakayahan ng mga bata*" (P9). Another stated, "*Mahalaga ang pag-encourage sa mga bata para maging komportable sila sa pagkatuto*" (P5). A third participant emphasized, "*Ang positibong pakikitungo ay mahalaga upang manatiling interesado ang mga mag-aaral*" (P3).

Interpretation of this theme indicates that teacher agency and reflective practice were crucial in maintaining a supportive classroom climate that sustained learner engagement. Teachers who exercised professional judgment and continuously reflected on their instructional choices were able to adjust strategies in response to learners' needs, interests, and classroom dynamics. Such adaptability allowed teachers to provide appropriate scaffolding, modify tasks, and offer timely encouragement, creating an environment where learners felt safe to participate, make mistakes, and express ideas. A supportive classroom climate grounded in trust and respect strengthened both emotional and behavioral engagement, as pupils were more willing to take academic risks and remain involved in learning activities. This finding is supported by research emphasizing that adaptive teaching and positive teacher–learner relationships are central to sustaining engagement, particularly in culturally diverse and resource-constrained settings. Tomlinson (2014) highlights that responsive instruction, including differentiation and flexible teaching practices, enables teachers to address learner variability while maintaining high expectations. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argue that reflective practice and strong relational teaching help create inclusive learning environments that promote engagement and resilience among learners. Together, these studies affirm that teacher agency expressed through reflective decision-making, responsiveness, and supportive relationships is a critical factor in fostering sustained engagement and positive classroom climates.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that integrating local culture into learner-centered teaching significantly enhances pupils' classroom engagement by fostering active participation, sustained interest, and meaningful learning experiences. When lessons are grounded in learners' cultural practices, community narratives, and everyday realities, pupils are more inclined to participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, and invest effort in learning tasks. This outcome is consistent with constructivist perspectives, which posit that learning is most effective when new knowledge is connected to learners' prior experiences and socially mediated interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally responsive frameworks further emphasize that valuing learners' cultural identities within instruction promotes relevance and belonging, thereby strengthening emotional and cognitive engagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2018). By encouraging interaction, collaboration, and cultural connection, learner-centered pedagogy transforms classrooms into spaces where knowledge is co-constructed and learning becomes personally meaningful.

Teacher adaptability emerged as a critical factor in sustaining engagement within culturally grounded, learner-centered classrooms. Teachers who engaged in reflective practice were able to adjust instructional strategies, differentiate tasks, and provide appropriate scaffolding in response to learners' diverse needs and classroom dynamics. Research indicates that such adaptive expertise is essential for maintaining supportive classroom climates, particularly in elementary and resource-constrained settings where learner variability is pronounced (Tomlinson, 2014). Moreover, positive teacher–learner relationships characterized by encouragement, responsiveness, and trust have been shown to reinforce engagement by creating environments where pupils feel safe to participate and take academic risks (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Together, these findings underscore the importance of reflective and responsive instruction in elementary education, suggesting that culturally integrated learner-centered teaching is most effective when supported by strong teacher agency and ongoing professional reflection.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides empirical evidence that culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy plays a significant role in enhancing classroom engagement in elementary education. The findings show that when local culture is intentionally integrated into collaborative and contextualized learning activities, pupils at Ngileb Elementary School exhibited higher levels of participation, sustained interest, and greater effort in completing classroom tasks. Learning activities that reflected pupils' cultural practices, community experiences, and familiar contexts enabled learners to relate more easily to academic content, thereby fostering meaningful learning and active involvement. These results affirm that engagement is strengthened when instruction validates learners' identities and positions their cultural knowledge as a resource for learning rather than as peripheral content.

The findings carry important implications for classroom practice. Elementary teachers are encouraged to contextualize lessons by drawing from local stories, traditions, daily practices, and community realities while employing learner-centered strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based tasks, and differentiated instruction. Such approaches allow pupils to become active participants in the learning process, support inclusive classrooms, and address learner diversity more effectively. By valuing pupils' experiences and cultural backgrounds, teachers can create learning environments that promote confidence, motivation, and sustained engagement, particularly in rural and culturally rich contexts.

Implications for school leadership underscore the critical role of institutional support in sustaining culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy. School leaders are encouraged to prioritize professional development programs that focus on culturally responsive teaching, contextualization, and learner-centered instructional design. Providing opportunities for collaborative planning, mentoring, and reflective practice can further empower teachers to integrate local culture meaningfully into instruction. In addition, leadership support in terms of resource allocation and curriculum flexibility can strengthen the implementation of culturally responsive practices across grade levels.

Finally, this study suggests several directions for future research. Subsequent studies may involve multiple elementary schools across different cultural and geographic contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings. Employing mixed-methods designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how culturally integrated learner-centered pedagogy influences not only classroom engagement but also academic achievement, motivation, and socio-emotional development over time. Longitudinal research may further examine the sustained effects of culturally grounded instruction on learners' educational trajectories, contributing to a deeper understanding of its long-term impact on learner development.

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