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Contextualized Teaching Practices and Learner Engagement in Elementary Education: A Qualitative Study in a Rural Philippine School

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the contextualized teaching practices and learner engagement experiences in elementary education within a rural Philippine school setting. Conducted at Malapagay Elementary School, Sto. Tomas, Isabela, the study aimed to examine how teachers contextualize instruction and how such practices influence learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving elementary teachers and selected learners. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework revealed four major themes: (1) localized and culturally responsive instructional practices, (2) experiential and collaborative learning engagement, (3) relational and inclusive classroom interactions, and (4) challenges in sustaining contextualized instruction in rural settings. Findings revealed that contextualized teaching significantly enhanced learner participation, comprehension, confidence, and classroom interaction. Teachers utilized community-based examples, local language integration, collaborative activities, and flexible instructional strategies to make learning meaningful and relevant to learners' lived experiences. However, inadequate instructional materials, limited technological resources, and multi-grade classroom demands affected instructional delivery. The study concludes that contextualized teaching practices strengthen learner engagement and contribute to more inclusive and responsive elementary education in rural schools. Institutional support, teacher professional development, and resource augmentation are recommended to sustain contextualized pedagogical innovations in geographically challenged learning environments.

Keywords: contextualized teaching practices, learner engagement, pedagogical innovations

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Introduction

Learner engagement remains one of the most essential elements in achieving meaningful educational outcomes, particularly in elementary education where foundational learning experiences are developed. In rural schools, learner engagement is often influenced by socio-cultural realities, economic limitations, linguistic diversity, and resource availability. In response to these educational challenges, contextualized teaching practices have emerged as an effective pedagogical approach that connects classroom instruction to learners' lived experiences, local culture, and community realities.

In the Philippine educational system, contextualization has been strongly encouraged through the K-12 curriculum framework of the Department of Education. Contextualized teaching enables teachers to adapt lessons according to learners' backgrounds, local experiences, and cultural environments, thereby making instruction more relevant and meaningful. This pedagogical practice aligns with culturally responsive teaching frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, learner participation, and authentic learning experiences.

Rural schools face unique educational conditions that require adaptive instructional practices. Teachers in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas often experience limited access to instructional resources, technological support, and professional development opportunities. Despite these constraints, teachers continuously develop innovative and flexible instructional strategies to engage learners effectively. Learner engagement in such contexts involves behavioral participation, emotional connection to learning, and cognitive investment in classroom activities.

Previous studies have shown that contextualized instruction enhances learners' motivation, comprehension, and participation. However, limited qualitative investigations have explored how elementary teachers in rural Philippine schools implement contextualized teaching practices and how learners experience engagement within these instructional environments. This study therefore sought to examine the contextualized teaching practices employed at Malapagay Elementary School in Sto. Tomas, Isabela, and to explore how these practices shape learner engagement in elementary education.

Specifically, this study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What contextualized teaching practices are utilized by elementary teachers in a rural Philippine school setting?
2. How do learners experience engagement in contextualized classroom instruction?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing contextualized teaching practices?
4. What implications may be derived for improving learner engagement and instructional practices in rural elementary schools?

The study contributes to the growing literature on contextualized pedagogy and rural education by providing qualitative insights into localized teaching experiences and learner engagement practices in elementary education.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Contextualized Teaching in Elementary Education

Contextualized teaching refers to instructional approaches that connect academic content with learners' real-life experiences and socio-cultural contexts. According to Lev Vygotsky, learning becomes meaningful when social interaction and cultural experiences are integrated into educational processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Contextualized instruction allows learners to relate classroom concepts to familiar situations, thereby increasing understanding, retention, and active participation in learning activities (Bernardo, 2019).

In the Philippine educational context, contextualization is embedded within the K-12 curriculum as part of learner-centered and culture-based education reforms implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd, 2022). Teachers are encouraged to localize content and utilize indigenous, environmental, and community resources to enhance instruction and learner comprehension (Balgos & Dela Cruz, 2021). Studies revealed that contextualized learning improves learners' participation, academic performance, and motivation, particularly in rural and marginalized communities where learners strongly relate to localized instructional materials and culturally familiar examples (Orale & Antonio, 2022; Reyes, 2020).

Furthermore, contextualized teaching supports meaningful learning experiences because learners become more engaged when lessons reflect their lived realities and local culture. Research conducted in rural Philippine schools found that learners demonstrated higher classroom participation and improved conceptual understanding when teachers utilized contextualized examples and community-based instructional strategies (Sarmiento & Flores, 2021).

Learner Engagement in Elementary Classrooms

Learner engagement refers to the degree of learners' active participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement includes attendance, participation, and task completion, while emotional engagement involves interest, enjoyment, and positive teacher-learner relationships. Cognitive engagement refers to critical thinking, problem-solving, and meaningful learning involvement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Research indicates that engaged learners demonstrate improved academic achievement, stronger classroom participation, and more positive learning attitudes (Christenson et al., 2012). Contextualized instruction supports learner engagement by making lessons relevant, interactive, and connected to learners' personal experiences (Llego, 2021). Collaborative activities, experiential learning, and localized examples promote active participation and meaningful classroom experiences among elementary learners (Kolb, 1984).

Studies in elementary education revealed that learners become more motivated and participative when instructional activities include cooperative learning, storytelling, role-playing, and hands-on experiences connected to community realities (Garcia & Villanueva, 2020). In rural school contexts, learner engagement is strengthened when teachers create supportive classroom environments that encourage interaction, collaboration, and culturally responsive learning experiences (Alegado, 2021).

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the recognition of learners' cultural identities, languages, and experiences in classroom instruction. Geneva Gay emphasized that culturally responsive pedagogy strengthens learner participation and academic achievement through culturally meaningful teaching practices (Gay, 2018). Such approaches help learners feel valued and respected within the classroom environment, thereby improving engagement and academic confidence.

Inclusive pedagogy likewise supports flexible instructional approaches that accommodate diverse learner needs and abilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teachers in inclusive classrooms adapt strategies according to learners' backgrounds, interests, and learning styles to ensure meaningful participation for all learners. According to Ainscow (2020), inclusive teaching practices contribute to equitable educational opportunities and improved learner engagement.

In rural schools, contextualized and inclusive teaching practices become essential in addressing diverse educational realities and socio-economic challenges. Teachers often utilize differentiated instruction, localized examples, peer collaboration, and mother tongue integration to make learning more accessible and inclusive for learners (Mendoza & Aquino, 2022). Studies also revealed that culturally responsive instruction promotes positive teacher-learner relationships and strengthens learners' emotional connection to schooling (Lucas & Villegas, 2019).

Challenges in Rural Education

Rural schools often encounter challenges such as inadequate learning materials, limited technology access, teacher workload, and infrastructural limitations (OECD, 2019). Multi-grade teaching assignments and insufficient instructional support affect instructional effectiveness and teacher preparation in geographically isolated schools (Malipot, 2021). These educational conditions create barriers to sustaining innovative and contextualized instructional practices.

Despite these challenges, rural teachers frequently demonstrate resilience and creativity in adapting lessons to local realities and maximizing available resources (Dela Peña, 2020). Teachers develop improvised instructional materials, localized activities, and community-based examples to maintain learner engagement despite resource limitations. However, inadequate institutional support and limited professional development opportunities continue to affect the sustainability of contextualized teaching practices in rural education settings (Torres & Ramos, 2021).

The reviewed literature highlights the importance of contextualized teaching and learner engagement in elementary education while emphasizing the need for further qualitative exploration within rural Philippine school contexts. Existing studies suggest that culturally responsive and contextualized instructional practices contribute significantly to meaningful learning experiences, particularly in underserved rural communities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to explore contextualized teaching practices and learner engagement experiences in elementary education within a rural Philippine school setting. Qualitative research is appropriate for studies that seek to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and instructional realities within natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gather detailed narratives and insights regarding how teachers implement contextualized teaching practices and how learners experience engagement in classroom instruction.

The study focused on understanding the meanings, interactions, and instructional experiences of participants rather than measuring variables quantitatively. Through qualitative inquiry, the researcher was able to capture the richness and complexity of classroom practices, teacher-learner interactions, and contextualized instructional approaches implemented in the rural educational setting. The design also allowed flexibility in exploring emerging themes related to learner engagement, inclusive pedagogy, and contextualized teaching practices.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Malapagay Elementary School located in Malapagay, Sto. Tomas, Isabela, Philippines. The school serves learners from rural farming communities and reflects the realities of elementary education in geographically challenged and resource-limited settings. Most learners come from agricultural families whose daily experiences significantly influence classroom learning and participation.

Malapagay Elementary School was selected because it provides an appropriate setting for examining contextualized teaching practices within a rural educational environment. Teachers in the school frequently adapt instructional strategies according to community realities, local culture, and learners' socio-economic backgrounds. The school context allowed the researcher to explore how contextualized instruction and learner engagement are experienced within an authentic rural Philippine classroom setting.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study included six elementary teachers and ten selected learners from different grade levels at Malapagay Elementary School. The teacher participants were directly involved in classroom instruction and had

experiences implementing contextualized teaching practices in their respective classes. The learner participants were selected based on their active participation in classroom activities and their ability to describe their learning experiences during interviews.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which is commonly utilized in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess relevant experiences and knowledge related to the research problem (Patton, 2015). The sampling procedure ensured that participants could provide rich and meaningful information regarding contextualized teaching practices and learner engagement experiences.

The inclusion of both teachers and learners enabled the study to gather multiple perspectives regarding classroom instruction, learner participation, and contextualized educational practices. This approach strengthened the depth and credibility of the qualitative findings.

Data Gathering Procedures

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure comprehensive exploration and triangulation of findings. The researcher utilized semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis throughout the conduct of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher and learner participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding contextualized teaching and learner engagement. Interview questions focused on instructional strategies, classroom participation, learner interaction, and challenges encountered in the teaching-learning process. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for participants to elaborate on their responses and share meaningful experiences related to the study.

Classroom observations were conducted to examine actual instructional practices, teacher-learner interaction, learner participation, and engagement behaviors during classroom instruction. Observation notes focused on how teachers contextualized lessons, facilitated collaborative activities, and encouraged learner participation within the classroom environment.

Document analysis was also employed to examine lesson plans, instructional materials, classroom activities, and contextualized learning resources used by teachers. These documents provided supporting evidence regarding instructional practices and contextualization strategies implemented in classroom instruction.

The researcher secured permission from school authorities prior to conducting the study. Data gathering activities were scheduled according to participants' availability to minimize disruption to regular classroom instruction.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

The analysis process involved several stages. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents through repeated reading and review of collected data. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful participant responses related to contextualized teaching and learner engagement.

Third, similar codes were grouped together to develop broader themes and subthemes that reflected participants' experiences and perceptions. Fourth, the identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, consistency, and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were interpreted and discussed in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to contextualized teaching, learner engagement, and inclusive pedagogy.

Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically organize qualitative data and generate meaningful interpretations regarding the instructional realities and learner experiences within the rural school setting.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, the researcher observed the qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Credibility was established through member checking and triangulation of interview, observation, and document analysis data. Participants were given opportunities to review and validate the accuracy of their responses and interpretations. Triangulation strengthened the consistency and reliability of findings by comparing multiple sources of evidence.

Dependability was ensured through maintaining detailed audit trails documenting the research procedures, data collection activities, coding processes, and thematic analysis. The researcher maintained organized records to ensure transparency and consistency throughout the conduct of the study.

Confirmability was strengthened through reflective journaling and careful documentation of interpretations to minimize researcher bias. Findings were grounded on participants' actual responses, classroom observations, and documentary evidence.

Transferability was enhanced through thick descriptions of the research context, participants, procedures, and findings, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the study to similar educational settings and contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Prior to data gathering, permission was secured from the school administration and informed consent was obtained from all participants. For learner participants, parental consent and participant assent were also secured to ensure ethical participation.

Participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and ensuring that participant identities were not disclosed in any part of the study.

The researcher also ensured that all collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes. Respect, sensitivity, and professionalism were observed throughout interviews, classroom observations, and data analysis procedures to protect participants' welfare and dignity.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Localized and Culturally Responsive Instructional Practices

Teachers emphasized the importance of connecting lessons to learners' daily experiences and community realities to make learning more meaningful and understandable. Participants highlighted that learners demonstrated greater comprehension and participation when instructional examples reflected their lived experiences within the rural community.

One participant stated:

“Mas naiintindihan ng mga bata kapag iniuugnay namin ang lesson sa buhay nila sa bukid at sa komunidad.”

Teachers frequently integrated local examples, farming activities, environmental situations, and familiar community experiences into classroom discussions. The use of local language and culturally familiar situations enabled learners to participate more actively and confidently during classroom interaction. Teachers explained that contextualized instruction helped learners relate abstract concepts to practical experiences encountered in their homes and communities.

Classroom observations further revealed that learners became more engaged and responsive when examples reflected their own experiences. Teachers utilized localized storytelling, community-based scenarios, indigenous examples, and experiential activities to simplify difficult concepts and make classroom instruction more relevant.

Learners demonstrated increased participation during discussions when topics involved agricultural practices, family experiences, and local environmental situations familiar to them.

The findings suggest that contextualized instruction strengthens behavioral and cognitive learner engagement by connecting academic lessons to authentic socio-cultural experiences. Such practices encourage learners to become active participants in classroom learning rather than passive recipients of information. The integration of culturally familiar instructional approaches also fostered learners' confidence and willingness to express their ideas openly during class activities.

These findings support the argument of Geneva Gay that culturally responsive teaching enhances learner engagement and comprehension by connecting instruction to learners' socio-cultural realities (Gay, 2018). Similarly, contextualized instruction aligns with the sociocultural learning theory of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes meaningful learning through social interaction and cultural experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). The findings also corroborate the study of Orale and Antonio (2022), which found that localized teaching practices significantly improve learner participation and classroom interaction in Philippine public schools.

Theme 2: Experiential and Collaborative Learning Engagement

Teachers highlighted the importance of active participation and collaborative classroom activities in sustaining learner engagement and meaningful learning experiences. Participants explained that learners became more interested and motivated when they were directly involved in hands-on and group-based activities.

One teacher shared:

“Kapag group activities at actual experiences ang ginagamit, mas excited silang matuto.”

Learners demonstrated increased participation during peer collaboration, storytelling activities, role-playing, cooperative learning tasks, and hands-on classroom exercises. Teachers observed that learners became more expressive, interactive, and motivated when they actively participated in learning activities rather than simply listening to lectures. Learners were more willing to share ideas, answer questions, and participate in discussions when collaborative activities were incorporated into lessons.

Behavioral engagement was evident through improved classroom participation, attendance, attentiveness, and task completion. Emotional engagement emerged through learners' enjoyment, confidence, and enthusiasm during collaborative classroom activities. Cognitive engagement was observed through improved comprehension, critical thinking, and problem-solving during experiential learning tasks and practical classroom applications.

Classroom observations further showed that learners learned more effectively when they interacted with peers and participated in experiential activities connected to their daily experiences. Teachers utilized games, storytelling, dramatization, group reporting, and community-based examples to maintain learner attention and participation throughout classroom discussions.

The findings indicate that experiential and collaborative learning strategies contribute significantly to learner engagement by promoting meaningful interaction and active knowledge construction. These strategies create learner-centered classroom environments that encourage cooperation, participation, and reflective learning.

The findings support experiential learning theory proposed by David Kolb, which emphasizes learning through concrete experiences, reflection, and active participation (Kolb, 1984). The results are likewise consistent with the findings of Garcia and Villanueva (2020), who emphasized that collaborative and experiential learning activities improve learner motivation, participation, and classroom engagement in elementary education.

Theme 3: Relational and Inclusive Classroom Interaction

Positive teacher-learner relationships emerged as an essential factor influencing learner engagement and classroom participation. Teachers emphasized that learners participate more actively when they feel emotionally safe, respected, and supported within the classroom environment.

A participant explained:

“Importante na komportable sila sa teacher para hindi sila matakot magtanong.”

Teachers fostered supportive classroom environments by encouraging participation, recognizing learner differences, and providing emotional support during classroom interaction. Participants emphasized the importance of patience, understanding, and encouragement in helping learners build confidence and motivation to participate in learning activities.

Learners expressed greater willingness to ask questions and share ideas when teachers created welcoming and inclusive classroom atmospheres. Teachers also adapted instructional strategies according to learners' comprehension levels, interests, and individual learning needs. Such practices promoted inclusivity and strengthened learner confidence during classroom engagement.

Observations showed that inclusive classroom interaction enhanced learners' confidence, emotional security, and classroom involvement. Teachers frequently provided positive reinforcement, individualized guidance, and peer support opportunities to ensure that all learners participated meaningfully in classroom activities. Learners who were initially shy or hesitant gradually became more participative due to supportive teacher interaction and collaborative classroom culture.

The findings suggest that relational and inclusive pedagogical practices strengthen emotional and behavioral learner engagement. Teacher support and positive classroom relationships contribute significantly to learners' motivation, self-confidence, and active participation in learning experiences.

These findings align with inclusive pedagogy frameworks emphasizing learner-centered and responsive instructional approaches (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Similarly, Ainscow (2020) emphasized that inclusive educational practices promote equitable participation and meaningful learner engagement. The findings further support the study of Lucas and Villegas (2019), which highlighted the importance of culturally responsive and relational teaching practices in creating positive classroom learning environments.

Theme 4: Challenges in Sustaining Contextualized Instruction

Despite positive instructional practices, teachers encountered several challenges in implementing contextualized teaching consistently within the rural school setting. Participants identified limitations related to instructional resources, classroom demands, and institutional support.

Participants identified the following challenges:

- Limited instructional materials
- Insufficient technological resources
- Multi-grade classroom demands
- Time constraints in lesson preparation
- Lack of contextualized learning resources

One participant noted:

“Mahirap minsan gumawa ng localized materials lalo na kapag kulang sa resources.”

Teachers explained that preparing contextualized instructional materials required significant time, creativity, and effort, particularly in classrooms with limited resources. Multi-grade teaching assignments and large workloads also affected teachers' ability to consistently develop localized instructional activities and learning materials.

Participants further shared that insufficient access to technological resources and updated learning materials limited opportunities for innovative and interactive instruction. Teachers often improvised materials using locally available resources to ensure that lessons remained meaningful and relevant despite resource constraints.

Classroom observations confirmed that teachers demonstrated resilience and creativity in adapting instructional approaches according to available resources and community realities. However, infrastructural limitations and lack of institutional support continued to affect instructional sustainability and teaching effectiveness in rural education settings.

The findings indicate that while contextualized teaching enhances learner engagement, sustaining such practices requires stronger institutional support, adequate instructional resources, and continuous teacher development programs. Rural educational realities significantly affect teachers' capacity to maintain innovative and learner-centered instructional practices.

These findings support studies indicating that rural schools frequently encounter infrastructural and instructional limitations that affect teaching effectiveness and innovation (OECD, 2019). Similarly, Dela Peña (2020) found that rural teachers often experience challenges related to instructional materials, technological limitations, and workload demands, yet continue to demonstrate adaptability and commitment in delivering quality education.

Conclusions

This study concludes that contextualized teaching practices significantly enhance learner engagement in elementary education within rural Philippine school settings. Teachers at Malapagay Elementary School demonstrated adaptive, culturally responsive, and learner-centered instructional approaches that connected lessons to learners' lived experiences and community realities.

Learner engagement was strengthened through collaborative activities, experiential learning, localized examples, and positive classroom relationships. Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement became evident through increased participation, confidence, and meaningful classroom interaction.

However, sustaining contextualized instruction remains challenging due to limited instructional resources, technological constraints, and multi-grade classroom demands. Despite these limitations, teachers exhibited commitment, resilience, and creativity in delivering meaningful instruction.

The study highlights the importance of contextualized and inclusive pedagogical practices in improving learner engagement and educational experiences in rural elementary schools.

Implications of the Study

The findings imply that contextualized teaching should be continuously strengthened in elementary education, particularly in rural learning environments. Educational institutions and policymakers may develop stronger support systems for localized instructional material development and teacher professional training.

School administrators may encourage collaborative learning communities among teachers to promote sharing of contextualized teaching practices and instructional innovations. Professional development programs focusing on culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive education, and contextualized instruction may further enhance teaching effectiveness.

The study also suggests the need for improved resource allocation, technological support, and community partnerships to sustain meaningful learning experiences in rural schools.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies in other rural educational contexts or utilize mixed-methods approaches to further examine the relationship between contextualized instruction and learner outcomes.

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