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Learner-Centered Pedagogical Practices and Learners' Classroom Engagement at Bacarri National Trade-Agricultural School

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Abstract

Learner engagement is a critical determinant of effective teaching and meaningful learning, particularly in vocational and agricultural secondary schools where instruction integrates theory and practice. This study examined how learner-centered pedagogical practices influence learners' classroom engagement at Bacarri National Trade-Agricultural School. Guided by constructivist and learner-centered learning frameworks, the study employed a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analysis of instructional materials. Findings revealed that learner-centered practices—such as hands-on activities, collaborative tasks, contextualized instruction, and formative feedback enhanced learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Despite contextual challenges related to resources and learner diversity, teacher adaptability and reflective practice sustained engagement and instructional effectiveness. The study highlights the pedagogical value of learner-centered instruction in trade and agricultural education and offers implications for teaching practice, school leadership, and future research.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, classroom engagement, vocational education, agricultural education, qualitative case study

Introduction

Classroom engagement has been widely recognized as a foundational element of effective teaching and learning, with strong and consistent links to learners' academic achievement, motivation, persistence, and long-term educational success. Engagement is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engaged learners demonstrate active participation, sustained attention, and a willingness to invest effort in challenging tasks behaviors that are essential for meaningful and durable learning. Research across educational levels shows that higher engagement predicts improved academic performance, lower dropout rates, and more positive classroom behavior (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2013). In secondary schools offering trade and agricultural programs, engagement is particularly critical because learning requires the integration of theoretical concepts with hands-on skill development, practical application, and real-world problem-solving. Without sustained engagement, learners may struggle to connect abstract concepts to technical and vocational competencies necessary for workplace readiness (Kolb, 2015).

Learner-centered pedagogy has gained prominence as an instructional approach that promotes engagement by positioning learners as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of information. Grounded in constructivist and social learning theories, learner-centered teaching emphasizes interaction, collaboration, inquiry, autonomy, and responsiveness to learners' needs and interests (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1970). Empirical studies demonstrate that learner-centered strategies such as cooperative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and problem-based learning significantly enhance learner engagement, motivation, and depth of understanding (Prince, 2004; Prince & Felder, 2006). In vocational and agricultural education, learner-centered practices align closely with experiential learning, as students learn most effectively through doing, reflecting, and applying knowledge in authentic contexts (Kolb, 2015). Research in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) settings further indicates that experiential and learner-centered instruction improves engagement by making learning relevant to learners' future careers and livelihood opportunities (Raelin, 2008; Billett, 2011).

Despite strong theoretical and empirical support for learner-centered pedagogy, its implementation and impact in trade and agricultural secondary schools remain underexplored, particularly in developing-country contexts. In the Philippine basic education system, curriculum reforms and policy frameworks emphasize learner-centered, contextualized, and skills-oriented instruction. However, existing research has largely focused on general academic subjects or urban school settings, leaving a gap in empirical studies that examine how learner-centered practices influence classroom engagement in trade and agricultural schools. Such contexts present unique challenges, including diverse learner backgrounds, varying skill levels, limited instructional resources, and the need to balance academic content with practical training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Bacarri National Trade-Agricultural School provides a relevant context for exploring the relationship between learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement. As a skills-oriented secondary school, it requires instructional approaches that actively engage learners in both conceptual understanding and practical application. Teachers in this setting manage diverse learners while delivering instruction that prepares students for agricultural work, technical skills, and further education. Examining learner-centered practices in this context contributes context-specific evidence to the literature on engagement, vocational education, and learner-centered pedagogy. By documenting how learner-centered instruction shapes engagement in a trade-agricultural school, this study responds to calls for more localized and practice-based research and offers insights that can inform instructional improvement, school leadership, and policy implementation in vocational and agricultural education.

Review of Related Literature

Classroom engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' participation and on-task behavior; emotional engagement involves interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement includes effort, persistence, and strategic thinking (Fredricks et al., 2004). High levels of engagement across these dimensions are consistently associated with improved learning outcomes and positive classroom behavior.

Learner-centered pedagogy is rooted in constructivist learning theories that view learning as an active and socially mediated process. Instructional strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, differentiated instruction, and formative feedback are central to learner-centered teaching. Research indicates that these strategies enhance engagement and motivation by allowing learners to interact, make choices, and apply knowledge

in meaningful contexts (Prince & Felder, 2006).

In vocational and agricultural education, learner-centered approaches are particularly effective because they support experiential learning and skills development. Studies suggest that hands-on activities, contextualized tasks, and authentic problem-solving enhance learner engagement by connecting instruction to real-world applications and future employment contexts (Kolb, 2015).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement within a real-life school context. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of instructional strategies, learner responses, and pedagogical decision-making as they naturally occurred. The study was conducted at Bacarri National Trade-Agricultural School, a public secondary school offering trade and agricultural programs. Participants included selected teachers handling vocational and academic subjects and their respective classes. Teachers were purposively selected based on their use of interactive and learner-centered instructional strategies.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on learner participation, interaction patterns, and engagement during learner-centered activities. Interviews explored teachers' pedagogical beliefs, instructional challenges, and reflections on practice. Lesson plans and instructional materials were analyzed to examine alignment with learner-centered principles. Data were analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents were coded to identify recurring patterns related to learner-centered practices and engagement. Triangulation across data sources enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Results and Findings

Analysis of the data generated three major themes describing learner-centered pedagogical practices and their influence on learners' classroom engagement.

Theme 1: Active Participation through Hands-On and Collaborative Learning

Findings indicate that learner-centered practices promoted behavioral engagement by encouraging active participation in hands-on and collaborative tasks. Practical activities such as farm-based exercises, tool operation, and group projects required learners to work together and apply skills in real contexts. One teacher noted, *"Mas nagiging aktibo ang mga mag-aaral kapag may aktuwal na gawain at sama-samang ginagawa"* (P1). Another shared, *"Kahit ang mahiyain ay nakikilahok kapag may grupong gawain"* (P2). A third participant stated, *"Mas buhay ang klase kapag ang mga mag-aaral ang gumagawa at hindi lang nakikinig"* (P3).

Interpretively, hands-on and collaborative learning supported learner engagement by enabling students to take ownership of learning tasks and actively construct understanding through direct experience. When learners were involved in performing tasks, solving problems, and working with peers, they became more invested in the learning process, demonstrating greater participation, persistence, and confidence. Hands-on activities allowed learners to experiment, make mistakes, and refine their understanding through practice, while collaborative learning fostered peer interaction, shared responsibility, and mutual support. Together, these experiences strengthened both behavioral and cognitive engagement by positioning learners as active agents in their own learning rather than passive recipients of instruction.

This finding aligns with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs most effectively through concrete experience followed by reflection and conceptualization (Kolb, 2015). It also supports research indicating that active learning strategies, including cooperative and problem-based approaches, enhance learner participation, comprehension, and retention of knowledge (Prince & Felder, 2006). By engaging learners in meaningful tasks that require collaboration and reflection, hands-on learning environments create conditions that promote deeper understanding and sustained engagement, particularly in educational contexts where practical application and skill development are central to learning outcomes.

Theme 2: Increased Interest through Contextualized and Skills-Oriented Instruction

The second theme highlights the role of contextualized instruction in enhancing learners' emotional and cognitive engagement. Lessons were connected to real-life agricultural practices, livelihood skills, and community contexts. One participant explained, "*Mas interesado ang mga bata kapag nakikita nila ang gamit ng aralin sa tunay na buhay*" (P1). Another remarked, "*Kapag may kaugnayan sa kanilang kinagisnan, mas mabilis nilang naiintindihan*" (P2). A third stated, "*Mas may gana silang matuto kapag alam nilang magagamit nila ito sa trabaho*" (P3).

Analytically, contextualized instruction fostered meaning-making by enabling learners to recognize the relevance of academic content to their own lives, experiences, and future applications. When lessons were anchored in familiar contexts, real-life situations, and authentic tasks, learners were better able to interpret concepts, connect new information with prior knowledge, and apply learning in practical ways. This relevance promoted deeper cognitive engagement, as learners moved beyond surface-level understanding toward active construction of meaning. Contextualized instruction also supported emotional engagement by helping learners perceive academic tasks as purposeful rather than abstract, thereby increasing interest and motivation to participate.

This analysis supports studies emphasizing that authentic and context-rich instruction enhances both engagement and comprehension. Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) argue that learning becomes more engaging when academic work is intellectually challenging, meaningful, and connected to real-world contexts. Related research further suggests that contextualized and authentic instruction encourages sustained effort and deeper understanding by situating learning within meaningful social and practical frameworks, particularly in settings where learners benefit from seeing the direct relevance of schooling to their everyday lives and future aspirations.

Theme 3: Teacher Adaptability and Supportive Classroom Climate

The third theme underscores the importance of teacher adaptability and reflective practice in sustaining engagement. Teachers adjusted strategies based on learners' abilities, available resources, and classroom dynamics. One teacher shared, "*Kapag nahhirapan ang klase, binabago ko ang paraan ng pagtuturo*" (P1). Another stated, "*Mahalaga ang pag-encourage para hindi sila matakot magkamali*" (P2). A third participant noted, "*Ang mabuting relasyon sa mag-aaral ay susi sa kanilang pakikilahok*" (P3).

Interpretation of this theme indicates that teacher agency and positive teacher–learner relationships were central to maintaining a supportive classroom climate that sustained learner engagement. Teacher agency was reflected in educators' ability to exercise professional judgment, make informed instructional decisions, and adjust teaching strategies in response to learners' needs, abilities, and classroom dynamics. When teachers demonstrated flexibility in pacing, differentiated tasks, and provided timely feedback and encouragement, learners were more likely to feel supported and confident in participating in classroom activities. Positive teacher–learner relationships, characterized by trust, respect, and open communication, further contributed to a classroom environment where learners felt safe to express ideas, ask questions, and take academic risks without fear of embarrassment or failure.

This interpretation is strongly supported by research emphasizing the role of adaptive teaching and relational support in sustaining learner engagement, particularly in diverse and resource-constrained settings. Tomlinson (2014) highlights that responsive instruction enables teachers to address learner variability while maintaining high expectations, thereby fostering both engagement and academic growth. Studies on classroom climate and motivation similarly indicate that when learners perceive their teachers as supportive and responsive, they demonstrate higher levels of engagement, persistence, and positive learning behaviors (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In contexts where material resources may be limited, the quality of teacher–learner relationships and teachers' capacity for reflective and adaptive practice become even more critical, serving as key enablers of inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogical practices effectively enhance classroom engagement by fostering active participation, instructional relevance, and supportive learning environments. When learners are positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients of information, they are more likely to demonstrate sustained attention, motivation, and persistence in learning tasks. Research consistently shows that learner-centered strategies such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based instruction, and problem-solving activities promote higher levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement by encouraging learners to interact, share ideas, and take ownership of their learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Prince & Felder, 2006). In vocational and agricultural education, where learning outcomes are closely tied to practical competence, these approaches are

particularly effective because they align instructional activities with authentic, real-world applications that learners perceive as meaningful and relevant (Kolb, 2015).

Consistent with constructivist frameworks, engagement in this study was strengthened when learners were actively involved in hands-on, collaborative, and contextualized activities. Constructivist theorists argue that learning is most effective when learners build new knowledge upon prior experiences through social interaction and meaningful tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical studies support this view, indicating that experiential and cooperative learning environments enhance understanding and retention by allowing learners to apply concepts in realistic contexts (Newmann et al., 1992; Kolb, 2015). In agricultural and trade-oriented classrooms, contextualized instruction that mirrors workplace practices and community-based activities has been shown to increase learner interest and deepen conceptual understanding, as students are able to see the direct applicability of what they are learning (Prince, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Teacher adaptability emerged as a key factor in sustaining learner engagement, underscoring the importance of reflective and responsive instruction in vocational and agricultural education. Teachers who continuously assess learner responses and adjust instructional strategies—such as modifying tasks, pacing, or grouping are better able to address learner diversity and maintain engagement across varying skill levels. Research highlights that reflective teaching and adaptive expertise enable educators to create inclusive and supportive classroom climates that encourage participation and reduce learner disengagement (Schön, 1983; Tomlinson, 2014). In resource-constrained and practice-oriented settings, such as trade-agricultural schools, teacher agency and responsiveness are especially critical, as they help bridge gaps in resources while sustaining learner motivation and engagement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Together, these findings reinforce existing literature emphasizing that effective learner-centered pedagogy depends not only on instructional strategies but also on teachers' capacity for reflection, flexibility, and responsive decision-making.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence that learner-centered pedagogy significantly enhances classroom engagement at Bacarri National Trade-Agricultural School by fostering active involvement, relevance, and meaningful learning experiences among learners. The findings indicate that when instruction is organized around hands-on learning activities, contextualized lessons, and supportive teaching practices, learners demonstrate higher levels of participation, sustained interest, and greater effort in completing both academic and skills-based tasks. Practical activities such as collaborative projects, real-world problem-solving, and experiential exercises enabled learners to connect theoretical concepts with actual trade and agricultural applications, thereby strengthening behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These outcomes highlight the effectiveness of learner-centered pedagogy in vocational and agricultural education settings where learning is closely tied to practical competence and real-life relevance.

The findings have important implications for instructional practice in trade-agricultural secondary schools. Teachers are encouraged to adopt learner-centered strategies that integrate experiential and skills-based learning, including project-based activities, cooperative learning, and inquiry-oriented tasks that mirror authentic workplace situations. Such approaches not only enhance engagement but also support the development of technical skills, critical thinking, and collaboration competencies essential for learners' future employment and livelihood opportunities. By positioning learners as active participants in the learning process, teachers can create more inclusive and motivating classroom environments that address diverse learner needs and interests.

Implications for school leadership underscore the critical role of institutional support in sustaining learner-centered and experiential pedagogy. School leaders are encouraged to prioritize professional development programs that focus on learner-centered instructional design, experiential learning methods, and reflective teaching practices. Providing opportunities for collaborative lesson planning, mentoring, and classroom-based learning communities can further strengthen teachers' capacity to implement learner-centered approaches effectively. Additionally, leadership support in terms of resource allocation, scheduling, and curriculum flexibility can enhance the consistent integration of experiential learning across subject areas.

Finally, this study suggests several directions for future research. Subsequent studies may involve multiple trade-agricultural schools to compare instructional practices and learner engagement across different contexts, thereby improving the generalizability of findings. Employing mixed-methods designs could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how learner-centered pedagogy influences not only classroom engagement but also academic

achievement, skill mastery, and post-school readiness. Longitudinal research may further examine the sustained impact of learner-centered practices on learners' educational and career outcomes, contributing to the broader evidence base on effective pedagogy in vocational and agricultural education.

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