



Azal Arts and Humanities

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2026 | <https://azalpub.com/index.php/AAH>

OPEN ACCESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Article Info

Received: 1/5/2026

Accepted: 3/25/2026

Published: 3/31/2026

Understanding Pupils' Learning Styles in Learner-Centered Elementary Classrooms at Sta. Cruz Elementary School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes responsiveness to learners' differences, including how pupils prefer to engage with and process information. In elementary education, understanding pupils' learning styles can play a critical role in designing instruction that promotes meaningful participation and sustained engagement. However, empirical studies examining how learning styles are recognized and addressed within learner-centered classrooms particularly in public elementary schools remain limited. This qualitative case study explored pupils' learning styles in learner-centered classrooms at Sta. Cruz Elementary School and examined how instructional practices aligned with these preferences influenced pupils' academic engagement. Data were collected through classroom observations, focus group discussions with pupils, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: (1) multimodal instruction supporting behavioral engagement, (2) learner choice and differentiation fostering emotional engagement, (3) collaborative learning reflecting social learning preferences, and (4) scaffolding across learning styles enhancing cognitive engagement. Findings indicate that learner-centered instruction that is responsive to diverse learning styles strengthens pupils' participation, motivation, and understanding. The study concludes with implications for instructional practice, school leadership, and future research in elementary education.

Keywords: *learning styles; learner-centered pedagogy; elementary education; academic engagement; qualitative case study*

Introduction

Elementary classrooms are characterized by learner diversity not only in ability levels but also in how pupils engage with, process, and respond to learning experiences. Pupils differ in their preferences for visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and social modes of learning, and these preferences shape how they participate in classroom activities and construct understanding. In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, such differences are often overlooked, leading to disengagement among pupils whose learning preferences are not adequately addressed.

Learner-centered pedagogy offers a promising framework for responding to these differences by emphasizing flexible instruction, learner voice, and active participation. By aligning instructional practices with pupils' learning styles, learner-centered classrooms may foster higher levels of engagement and deeper learning. However, while learning styles are frequently discussed in educational discourse, empirical research that examines how teachers recognize and respond to pupils' learning styles in authentic learner-centered elementary classrooms remains limited, particularly in public school contexts.

In the Philippine elementary education setting, policies encourage differentiated and learner-centered instruction to address diverse learner needs. Yet, little is known about how these principles are enacted at the classroom level and how pupils themselves experience instruction aligned with their learning styles. This study addresses this gap by examining pupils' learning styles in learner-centered classrooms at Sta. Cruz Elementary School and exploring how instructional practices influenced pupils' engagement and learning experiences.

Research Questions

1. What learning styles are evident among pupils in learner-centered elementary classrooms at Sta. Cruz Elementary School?
2. How do teachers implement learner-centered instructional practices responsive to pupils' learning styles?
3. How do pupils experience engagement when instruction aligns with their learning preferences?

Review of Related Literature

Learning styles refer to learners' preferred ways of engaging with and processing information, often described in terms of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and social preferences. While scholars caution against rigid classification of learning styles, research acknowledges that pupils differ in how they respond to instructional modalities and classroom activities (Pashler et al., 2008). Differentiated and multimodal instruction has been shown to increase participation and comprehension by offering multiple pathways to learning (Tomlinson, 2014).

Learner-centered pedagogy is rooted in constructivist and sociocultural theories that emphasize active knowledge construction through interaction and experience (Vygotsky, 1978). In elementary education, learner-centered instruction encourages teachers to design flexible learning environments that accommodate diverse learner needs and preferences (Weimer, 2013). Research suggests that when instruction is responsive to learners' preferences, pupils demonstrate higher motivation, engagement, and persistence (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Academic engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Instructional practices that support autonomy, interaction, and relevance key features of learner-centered pedagogy are associated with higher levels of engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 2012). Together, these studies suggest that understanding pupils' learning styles within learner-centered classrooms may play a critical role in fostering engagement and meaningful learning.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore pupils' learning styles and their experiences in learner-centered elementary classrooms. A case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, context-sensitive examination of instructional practices and pupil experiences as they naturally occurred. The study was conducted at Sta. Cruz Elementary School, a public elementary school serving pupils from varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants included five elementary teachers implementing learner-centered strategies and twenty-eight pupils from Grades 4 to 6 selected through purposive sampling to represent varied learning preferences, participation levels, and academic performance. Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods. Classroom observations documented instructional strategies, learning modalities, and pupil participation patterns. Focus group discussions with pupils explored perceptions of learning activities, preferred learning modes, and classroom experiences. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined instructional intentions, differentiation strategies, and challenges in addressing diverse learning styles.

All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Ethical approval was obtained, informed consent and pupil assent were secured, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

Results and Findings

Theme 1: Multimodal Instruction Supporting Behavioral Engagement

Classroom observations indicated that learner-centered instruction was consistently characterized by the intentional use of multimodal instructional strategies, including visual aids, storytelling, hands-on activities, manipulatives, movement-based tasks, and oral interaction. Teachers deliberately varied instructional modes within a single lesson to address pupils' diverse learning preferences and to sustain attention across different phases of instruction. For instance, abstract concepts were often introduced through short stories, pictures, or diagrams before pupils were asked to draw representations, act out scenarios, manipulate objects, or participate in guided activities. This sequencing allowed pupils to encounter content through multiple sensory channels, increasing accessibility and maintaining interest.

As a result, pupils were observed participating more actively, remaining on task for longer periods, and responding enthusiastically to lesson prompts. Behavioral engagement was evident through frequent hand-raising, spontaneous oral responses, peer interaction, and physical involvement in activities such as role-playing, using learning materials, or moving around designated learning stations. Teachers noted that pupils who were previously quiet or inattentive became more visibly involved when lessons incorporated varied modalities. One teacher remarked, "*Kapag may galaw at visual, mas maraming bata ang sumasabay at nakikinig.*"

Pupils consistently associated varied instructional modes with improved focus and participation. One pupil explained, "*Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may ginagawa at may nakikita,*" emphasizing the importance of combining visual and kinesthetic experiences. Another shared, "*Hindi ako agad nabobored kasi iba-iba ang ginagawa,*" suggesting that variation in activities helped prevent disengagement. However, some pupils also pointed out challenges related to rapid transitions between activities, with one stating, "*Minsan nalilito ako kapag palit-palit ang gawain.*" Teachers acknowledged this concern, emphasizing the importance of giving clear instructions and transition cues. As one teacher explained, "*Kailangan malinaw ang direksyon bago lumipat ng gawain para hindi sila malito.*" Overall, the findings suggest that multimodal instruction effectively supports behavioral engagement when instructional flow is well paced and pupils are carefully guided through transitions.

Theme 2: Learner Choice and Differentiation Fostering Emotional Engagement

Learner choice and differentiation emerged as central features of learner-centered classrooms, particularly in supporting pupils' emotional engagement. Teachers provided pupils with options in learning tasks, materials, and output formats, such as choosing between drawing, writing, oral presentation, role-play, or group demonstration. These choices enabled pupils to align learning activities with their strengths, interests, and comfort levels, fostering a sense of control and personal relevance. Observations revealed that when pupils were given choices, they appeared more enthusiastic, confident, and willing to take risks in their learning.

Pupils articulated strong emotional responses to having choices. One pupil stated, "*Mas masaya kapag kami ang pumipili kung paano gagawin,*" reflecting increased enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Another pupil shared that choice reduced anxiety, explaining, "*Mas kampante ako kapag alam kong kaya kong piliin ang gagawin ko.*" Several pupils also expressed pride in their work when they were able to decide how to present their learning, noting that choice made tasks feel more meaningful and less intimidating.

At the same time, some pupils expressed uncertainty when choices were too open-ended. One pupil admitted, *"Minsan nahihirapan akong pumili kung ano ang gagawin,"* indicating decision fatigue or lack of confidence. Teachers were aware of this tension and emphasized the importance of structured choice, where options are limited and clearly explained. One teacher noted, *"Hindi puwedeng basta choice langkailangan may gabay para hindi sila malito."* These findings highlight that learner choice enhances emotional engagement most effectively when autonomy is supported by clear expectations, scaffolding, and alignment with learning goals.

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning Reflecting Social Learning Preferences

Collaborative learning emerged as a prominent instructional strategy for addressing pupils' social learning preferences and sustaining engagement. Teachers frequently organized pupils into small groups for discussions, peer tutoring, cooperative problem-solving, and project-based activities. Observations showed that pupils remained engaged for longer periods when working collaboratively, particularly during tasks that required explanation, negotiation of ideas, or shared responsibility. Social interaction enabled pupils to verbalize thinking, ask questions, and co-construct understanding through dialogue.

Pupils strongly valued peer interaction. One pupil shared, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may nagpapaliwanag sa akin,"* highlighting the role of peer explanations in clarifying difficult concepts. Another pupil expressed increased confidence in group settings, stating, *"Hindi ako masyadong nahihya kasi may kasama ako."* Pupils also appreciated shared responsibility, noting that group work made challenging tasks feel more manageable and less stressful.

However, some pupils expressed frustration with unequal participation within groups. One pupil remarked, *"May kagrupo na hindi masyadong gumagawa,"* indicating concerns about fairness and workload distribution. Teachers addressed these issues by assigning specific roles, monitoring group dynamics, and setting clear expectations for participation. As one teacher explained, *"Kapag may role ang bawat isa, mas nagiging responsable ang mga bata."* These findings suggest that collaborative learning effectively reflects social learning preferences and sustains engagement when group work is intentionally structured, monitored, and supported by accountability mechanisms.

Theme 4: Scaffolding Across Learning Styles Enhancing Cognitive Engagement

Instructional scaffolding emerged as a critical mechanism for supporting **cognitive engagement** across diverse learning styles. Teachers employed probing questions, step-by-step modeling, demonstrations, guided practice, and formative feedback to support pupils' thinking and problem-solving processes. Visual learners benefited from demonstrations, charts, and visual cues, while verbal learners engaged more deeply through explanation, questioning, and discussion. Teachers intentionally avoided providing immediate answers, instead prompting pupils to reflect on errors, revise strategies, and articulate reasoning.

Pupils emphasized the importance of guidance in supporting understanding and persistence. One pupil stated, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag pinapakita kung paano,"* while another shared, *"Mas natututo ako kapag sinasabi kung saan ako nagkamali."* Pupils also noted that feedback helped them improve rather than feel discouraged. Teachers highlighted the need to balance support and independence, with one explaining, *"Ginagabayan pero hindi spoon-feeding kailangan mag-isip pa rin sila."*

This scaffolding approach encouraged pupils to persist through challenging tasks, reflect on their learning, and develop deeper conceptual understanding. By gradually releasing responsibility, teachers enabled pupils with different learning styles to access complex tasks while building independence, confidence, and self-regulation. Overall, the findings indicate that scaffolding plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive engagement when it is responsive to learners' needs and learning preferences.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered instruction enhances academic engagement by aligning teaching practices with pupils' diverse learning styles. Multimodal instruction supported behavioral engagement, differentiation and choice fostered emotional involvement, collaboration sustained participation, and scaffolding promoted cognitive investment. These patterns align with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework and extend it by illustrating how engagement is shaped through responsiveness to learning preferences in elementary classrooms.

At the same time, challenges such as task overload, uneven participation, and decision fatigue highlight the need for intentional design and structured support. These findings echo prior research cautioning that learner-centered approaches require careful planning to balance flexibility with clarity (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Conclusions and Implications

This study provides evidence that understanding pupils' learning styles within learner-centered classrooms at Sta. Cruz Elementary School strengthens academic engagement by making instruction more inclusive and responsive. Engagement was strongest when multimodal instruction, learner choice, collaboration, and scaffolding were intentionally aligned.

Implications for practice include designing differentiated, multimodal lessons and providing structured autonomy to support diverse learning preferences. **Implications for school leadership** emphasize supporting professional development on learner-centered and differentiated instruction. **Future research** may explore longitudinal effects of aligning pedagogy with learning preferences on pupils' achievement, motivation, and self-regulated learning.

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