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Learner Agency and Learners' Engagement in Learner-Centered Settings at Maluno Integrated School

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Abstract

Learner agency has emerged as a central construct in learner-centered education, emphasizing learners' capacity to make choices, influence learning processes, and take responsibility for their own learning. Closely linked to agency is learner engagement, a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning activities. While learner-centered pedagogy is widely promoted in basic education, empirical studies examining how learner agency operates in everyday classroom practice and how it shapes learners' engagement particularly in integrated school contexts remain limited. This qualitative case study investigated how learner agency was enacted in learner-centered classrooms at Maluno Integrated School and how it influenced learners' engagement. Data were collected through classroom observations, focus group discussions with learners, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes: (1) voice and choice as foundations of behavioral engagement, (2) ownership of learning as a source of emotional engagement, (3) collaborative decision-making as a structure for sustained engagement, and (4) teacher facilitation and scaffolding as enablers of agentic learning. Findings indicate that learner agency strengthened engagement when supported by clear structures and guidance. The study concludes with implications for instructional practice, school leadership, and future research on learner agency in basic education.

Keywords: learner agency; learner engagement; learner-centered pedagogy; qualitative case study; basic education

1. Introduction

Learner engagement has long been recognized as a critical factor in academic success, persistence, and meaningful learning. Engaged learners participate actively in classroom activities, demonstrate positive emotions toward learning, and invest cognitive effort in understanding complex ideas. In recent years, educational discourse has increasingly emphasized learner agency as a key driver of engagement, positioning learners not merely as participants but as active decision-makers who influence the direction and pace of their learning.

Learner-centered education foregrounds agency by encouraging learners to exercise voice, choice, and responsibility in the learning process. Rather than relying on teacher-directed instruction, learner-centered settings emphasize dialogue, autonomy, collaboration, and reflection. These principles are particularly relevant in integrated school contexts, where learners across grade levels and developmental stages must navigate diverse learning demands and social environments.

Despite growing recognition of learner agency in policy and theory, there remains a need for empirical research that examines how agency is enacted in real classrooms and how it shapes learners' engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Much of the existing literature focuses on engagement outcomes without closely examining the agentic processes that underpin them. This study addresses this gap by exploring learner agency and learners' engagement in learner-centered settings at Maluno Integrated School.

Research Questions

1. How is learner agency enacted in learner-centered classrooms at Maluno Integrated School?
2. How do learners experience agency in their learning processes?
3. In what ways does learner agency influence learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

2. Review of Related Literature

Learner agency in education refers to learners' capacity to act intentionally, make meaningful choices, and influence the direction of their own learning within structured educational environments. Rooted in sociocultural theory, agency is understood not as an individual trait but as a socially situated process shaped by interactions with teachers, peers, learning tools, and institutional norms (Vygotsky, 1978). Within learner-centered pedagogy, agency is enacted through opportunities for learner voice, choice, self-direction, and reflection, allowing learners to participate actively in decision-making and knowledge construction. Research consistently demonstrates that when learners perceive themselves as active agents in the learning process, they exhibit higher levels of motivation, persistence, self-efficacy, and responsibility for learning outcomes (Bandura, 2001; Reeve, 2013). Closely linked to learner agency is learner engagement, which is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement includes observable actions such as participation and on-task behavior, emotional engagement reflects learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging, and cognitive engagement involves effort, persistence, and strategic thinking. Empirical studies indicate that engagement is strongly influenced by instructional practices that promote autonomy, relevance, and interaction, with autonomy-supportive and participatory learning environments consistently associated with higher levels of learner engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 2012). Learner-centered pedagogy provides a critical framework for integrating agency and engagement by emphasizing dialogic teaching, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative problem-solving as core instructional practices. Weimer (2013) argues that learner-centered teaching redistributes responsibility for learning toward learners while maintaining purposeful guidance to support understanding and growth. However, research also cautions that learner agency must be carefully supported through clear structures, scaffolding, and instructional guidance to prevent confusion, uneven participation, or disengagement, particularly in diverse classroom contexts (Schweisfurth, 2013). Together, these perspectives underscore that learner agency and engagement are deeply interconnected and most effectively fostered within thoughtfully designed learner-centered learning environments.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore learner agency and engagement within a real-life learner-centered school context. The study was conducted at Maluno Integrated School, a public integrated school serving learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included seven teachers implementing learner-centered practices and thirty-two learners across upper elementary and junior secondary levels selected through purposive sampling to represent varied engagement profiles.

Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods. Classroom observations documented

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instructional practices, learner participation, and opportunities for agency. Focus group discussions with learners explored perceptions of choice, responsibility, and engagement. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined pedagogical intentions, facilitation strategies, and challenges in supporting learner agency. 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 secured, informed consent and learner assent were obtained, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

4. Results and Findings

Theme 1: Learner Voice and Choice as Foundations of Behavioral Engagement

Classroom observations revealed that learner-centered lessons consistently embedded opportunities for learner voice and choice as integral components of instruction. Teachers intentionally invited learners to express opinions, ask clarifying and exploratory questions, and make decisions related to learning tasks. These opportunities included suggesting examples relevant to their experiences, selecting topics for discussion or investigation, choosing methods for completing tasks, and determining how outputs would be presented. Such practices repositioned learners from passive recipients of instruction to active contributors in classroom activities.

As a result, learners were observed participating more frequently and with greater confidence. Behavioral indicators of engagement included increased hand-raising, spontaneous contributions to discussions, peer-to-peer questioning, and learner-initiated interactions with teachers. Participation was not limited to a small group of confident learners; rather, a wider range of learners became visibly involved over time as voice and choice were normalized within classroom routines. Learners themselves emphasized the importance of being heard. One learner stated, "*Mas ganado ako kapag may choice kami at puwede kaming magsalita,*" highlighting that opportunities for choice increased motivation to participate. Another learner noted, "*Mas aktibo ako kasi pakiramdam ko kasama ako sa desisyon,*" suggesting that involvement in decision-making fostered a sense of inclusion and responsibility. Teachers similarly observed changes in learner behavior, with one explaining, "*Kapag may choice ang bata, mas kusang gumagalaw at hindi kailangang pilitin.*" These responses suggest that learner agency enhanced behavioral engagement by transforming participation into a meaningful and voluntary act rather than an obligation imposed by the teacher. When learners perceived their contributions as valued, participation became more sustained and authentic.

Theme 2: Ownership of Learning as a Source of Emotional Engagement

Beyond observable participation, learner agency strongly influenced emotional engagement by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for learning. When learners were entrusted with decisions related to tasks, pacing, and outcomes, they developed a personal connection to their work. Observations showed learners expressing enthusiasm, pride, and persistence, particularly when completing tasks they had helped design or manage.

Learners articulated how ownership shaped their emotional responses. One learner shared, "*Mas masaya kapag alam kong ako ang may pananagutan sa ginagawa ko,*" reflecting enjoyment rooted in responsibility. Another stated, "*Hindi ako natatakot magkamali kasi alam kong parte iyon ng pagkatuto,*" indicating reduced anxiety and greater emotional safety. These responses suggest that agency reframed mistakes as learning opportunities rather than failures, which supported positive emotional engagement.

Teachers also recognized the emotional impact of learner agency. One teacher commented, "*Mas nagiging kumpiyansa ang bata kapag may tiwala sa kanila,*" noting that trust strengthened learners' self-belief. Teachers observed that learners who were previously hesitant or withdrawn became more expressive and willing to take risks when they felt ownership over their learning. These findings indicate that learner agency strengthened emotional engagement by promoting confidence, enjoyment, and a more positive relationship with learning, which in turn supported sustained participation and resilience in challenging tasks.

Theme 3: Collaborative Decision-Making Sustained Engagement

Collaborative learning emerged as a critical context in which learner agency was exercised collectively rather than individually. Group planning, peer discussion, and shared decision-making allowed learners to negotiate ideas, assign roles, and determine strategies for completing tasks. Observations indicated that engagement was sustained when learners worked together to make decisions, as collaboration distributed responsibility and created shared accountability.

Learners valued collaborative agency, with one noting, "*Mas nagiging madali kapag pinag-uusapan namin ang gagawin,*" emphasizing how shared planning reduced confusion and supported task completion. Another learner expressed that collaboration increased motivation, as working with peers made tasks more manageable and enjoyable. However, challenges related to uneven participation were also evident. Some learners remarked, "*May iba na hindi masyadong nakikibahagi,*" highlighting tensions when agency was not equitably exercised within groups.

Teachers addressed these challenges by assigning specific roles, monitoring group interactions, and prompting quieter learners to contribute. As one teacher explained, "*Kailangan may malinaw na papel ang bawat isa para lahat may ambag.*"

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These findings suggest that collaborative decision-making sustained engagement most effectively when supported by clear structures and accountability mechanisms. When collaboration was well-facilitated, it functioned as a powerful means of sustaining engagement through social interaction, mutual support, and shared ownership of learning.

Theme 4: Teacher Facilitation and Scaffolding as Enablers of Agentic Learning

Teacher facilitation and scaffolding emerged as essential enablers of learner agency. Rather than relinquishing control entirely, teachers played an active role in guiding learners' decision-making through questioning, modeling, feedback, and clarification of expectations. This facilitation ensured that agency was exercised productively and aligned with learning goals.

Learners acknowledged the importance of guidance in supporting their agency. One learner stated, "*Mas natututo ako kapag ginagabayan kami kahit kami ang nagdedesisyon,*" indicating that autonomy was most effective when accompanied by support. Teachers emphasized the need for balance, with one stating, "*Agency hindi ibig sabihin pabayaang kailangan may direksyon.*" This perspective reflects an understanding of learner agency as guided autonomy rather than complete independence.

Observations showed that scaffolding helped learners reflect on choices, evaluate outcomes, and adjust strategies. Teachers intervened strategically when learners encountered difficulties, offering prompts rather than solutions. These practices supported cognitive engagement by encouraging learners to think critically about their decisions and learning processes. The findings indicate that learner agency was most effective when supported by intentional teacher facilitation, aligning with research on agentic engagement that emphasizes the role of guided autonomy in sustaining meaningful learning (Reeve, 2013).

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner agency functions as a powerful driver of learner engagement in learner-centered settings by shaping how learners participate, feel, and think during the learning process. Opportunities for voice and choice enhanced behavioral engagement by encouraging learners to take part actively in classroom interactions, initiate contributions, and assume visible roles in learning activities. When learners were invited to express opinions, select approaches, or influence classroom decisions, participation became purposeful rather than compliance-driven. This aligns with evidence that agentic opportunities increase observable engagement by positioning learners as contributors to learning rather than passive recipients. Ownership of learning further fostered emotional involvement, as learners who perceived themselves as responsible for outcomes reported greater enjoyment, confidence, and willingness to persist. Feeling trusted to make decisions reduced fear of mistakes and strengthened learners' emotional connection to learning tasks, supporting research that links agency with intrinsic motivation and positive academic emotions.

Collaborative decision-making emerged as a key mechanism for sustaining engagement over time. When learners exercised agency collectively through group planning, shared problem-solving, and negotiated roles engagement was reinforced through social accountability and peer support. Collaboration enabled learners to remain involved during challenging tasks by distributing responsibility and encouraging dialogue, which helped maintain focus and effort. At the same time, instructional scaffolding played a crucial role in supporting cognitive engagement by guiding learners' reasoning, reflection, and strategy use. Teachers' facilitation ensured that agentic actions were productive, helping learners connect choices to learning goals and evaluate the consequences of decisions. Together, these patterns align closely with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework and extend it by illustrating that engagement is not merely an outcome of instructional design but is actively activated through agentic learning processes. Learner agency served as the mechanism through which behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of engagement were mutually reinforced.

At the same time, the findings highlight important tensions inherent in implementing learner agency. Challenges related to uneven participation within groups and variations in learner readiness underscored that agency does not automatically lead to engagement for all learners. Some learners required additional guidance to participate meaningfully, while others initially struggled with the responsibility that autonomy entails. These challenges emphasize the importance of structured support in learner-centered environments. Learner agency was most productive when autonomy was carefully balanced with clear expectations, scaffolding, and ongoing teacher facilitation. This balance echoes prior research emphasizing that learner-centered pedagogy must be contextualized and supported to be effective, particularly in diverse classrooms where learners differ in confidence, skills, and readiness (Schweisfurth, 2013). Overall, the findings suggest that learner agency enhances engagement most effectively when embedded within thoughtfully designed instructional structures that combine freedom with guidance.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study provides robust evidence that learner-centered settings at Maluno Integrated School foster meaningful learner engagement by deliberately cultivating learner agency within everyday classroom practice. The findings illustrate that when learners are positioned as active decision-makers able to exercise voice, make choices, and take responsibility for their learning engagement extends beyond surface participation toward deeper behavioral, emotional, and cognitive

involvement. Learners did not merely comply with tasks; instead, they demonstrated sustained participation, greater confidence, and reflective thinking, particularly when opportunities for agency were accompanied by purposeful teacher facilitation and instructional scaffolding. This balance ensured that learner agency functioned as an empowering force rather than a source of confusion, allowing engagement to become inclusive, sustained, and developmentally appropriate across diverse learner profiles.

The study also underscores important implications for classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to intentionally design learning experiences that embed opportunities for learner voice, choice, and responsibility within clearly structured activities. Promoting agency does not require relinquishing instructional guidance; rather, it involves thoughtful facilitation that supports learners in making informed decisions, reflecting on their learning, and collaborating meaningfully with peers. Structured autonomy where learners are guided but not controlled emerged as a key condition for sustaining engagement and supporting learners' sense of competence and ownership.

At the level of school leadership, the findings highlight the critical role of institutional support in sustaining learner-centered, agency-oriented practices. School leaders can strengthen learner engagement by prioritizing professional development that deepens teachers' understanding of learner agency, learner-centered pedagogy, and facilitation strategies. Providing time and space for collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and reflective dialogue enables teachers to refine their practices and align agency-focused strategies across classrooms and grade levels. Leadership commitment to learner-centered values is therefore essential in translating pedagogical principles into consistent and effective practice.

Directions for future research include examining the longitudinal effects of learner agency on academic achievement, motivation, and self-regulated learning to better understand how agentic practices influence learners over time. Further studies may also explore how learner agency operates across different school contexts, subject areas, and developmental stages, as well as how it intersects with cultural and contextual factors in diverse educational settings. Such research would contribute to a more nuanced and scalable understanding of learner agency as a foundation for sustained engagement and meaningful learning.

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