



International Journal of Early Childhood, Special and Inclusive Education

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

OPEN ACCESS

Article Info

Received: 02/5/2026
Accepted: 4-/25/2026
Published: 6/18/2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ADAPTIVE LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN RURAL ELEMENTARY EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

¹ Eleonor M. Wanas

Abungo Primary School

Correspondence: eleonor.wanas@deped.gov.ph

² Dr. Rosemelita V. Bastian

Correspondence: rosemelita.v.bastian@isu.edu.ph

Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has increasingly become an important educational approach in addressing diverse learner needs, particularly in rural and geographically challenged contexts. This qualitative case study explored the adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices employed in a rural elementary school in Mountain Province, Philippines. Specifically, the study investigated how teachers implement learner-centered approaches, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they utilize to sustain meaningful learning engagement among Grades 4–6 learners. The study was conducted at Abungo Primary School in Tadian, Mountain Province, involving one key teacher participant teaching multigrade elementary learners. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was utilized to analyze the data. Findings revealed that adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices were characterized by contextualized instruction, differentiated learning activities, collaborative and experiential learning approaches, and the integration of localized and culturally responsive teaching strategies. The teacher emphasized flexibility in instruction by adjusting lessons according to learners' abilities, interests, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the findings highlighted the significance of relational teaching, emotional support, and learner participation in sustaining classroom engagement. However, challenges such as limited instructional resources, multigrade teaching demands, inadequate technological infrastructure, and varying learner readiness affected instructional delivery. Despite these constraints, innovative coping mechanisms including improvised learning materials, peer-assisted learning, and contextualized classroom activities enabled the continuation of inclusive and participatory learning experiences. The study underscores the importance of adaptive and learner-centered pedagogy in enhancing educational responsiveness in rural contexts. It further suggests the need for strengthened institutional support, teacher professional development, and resource provision to sustain effective learner-centered practices in geographically isolated schools. The findings contribute to the growing discourse on inclusive, contextualized, and culturally responsive education in rural elementary settings.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, adaptive teaching, rural education, qualitative case study, culturally responsive teaching, elementary education

*Corresponding author: eleonor.wanas@depedl.gov.ph

Introduction

The evolving landscape of education continuously calls for pedagogical approaches that recognize learner diversity, contextual realities, and inclusive participation. Among these approaches, learner-centered pedagogy has emerged as a transformative framework emphasizing active learner engagement, collaboration, contextualized learning, and individualized instruction (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Unlike traditional teacher-centered approaches, learner-centered pedagogy positions learners as active participants in constructing knowledge while teachers serve as facilitators of meaningful educational experiences.

In rural educational settings, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy becomes both essential and challenging. Rural schools often experience resource scarcity, limited access to technology, multigrade teaching conditions, and socio-economic constraints that affect instructional delivery and learner participation (OECD, 2019). In the Philippine educational context, these challenges are more evident in mountainous and remote communities where teachers must navigate diverse learner needs amidst limited institutional support.

The Department of Education in the Philippines advocates inclusive, contextualized, and learner-responsive education through the K–12 curriculum framework and policies on inclusive education. Contextualization and localization of instruction are emphasized to make learning more meaningful and culturally relevant to learners' lived experiences (DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016). In rural areas such as Mountain Province, culturally responsive and adaptive teaching practices become critical in ensuring equitable learning opportunities among elementary learners.

Adaptive learner-centered pedagogy involves modifying instructional strategies, materials, classroom activities, and assessments according to learners' needs, interests, abilities, and environmental contexts. Teachers in rural schools often demonstrate flexibility and creativity in managing multigrade classrooms and addressing varied learning capacities. Such practices contribute to improved learner participation, motivation, and classroom engagement despite structural and contextual limitations.

Existing literature highlights that learner-centered approaches enhance learners' critical thinking, collaboration, and autonomy (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 1984). However, limited qualitative studies have explored how rural elementary teachers in mountainous Philippine contexts operationalize adaptive learner-centered pedagogy in everyday classroom settings. Most studies focus on urban educational settings or quantitative evaluations of instructional outcomes, leaving a gap in understanding the lived pedagogical experiences of teachers in rural multigrade schools.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices employed in a rural elementary school in Mountain Province, Philippines. Specifically, it seeks to understand how teachers adapt instruction to learner needs, the challenges encountered, and the coping mechanisms developed to sustain meaningful learning engagement. The findings of this study may contribute to improving pedagogical support systems, informing teacher professional development initiatives, and strengthening inclusive educational practices in rural schools.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How are adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices implemented in rural elementary education?
2. What learner-centered strategies are utilized to promote engagement and participation among learners?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing adaptive learner-centered pedagogy in rural classrooms?
4. How do teachers address the instructional and contextual challenges encountered in learner-centered teaching?

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Constructivist Theory by Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction, collaboration, and meaningful engagement within learners' socio-cultural environments. The theory supports learner-centered approaches where teachers scaffold learning experiences according to learners' developmental levels.

The study also drew from Culturally Responsive Teaching Theory by Geneva Gay, which emphasizes integrating learners' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and community contexts into classroom instruction. In rural and indigenous settings, culturally responsive pedagogy strengthens learner identity, participation, and inclusivity. Additionally, Inclusive Pedagogy Theory by Lani Florian guided the study by emphasizing instructional adaptability and participation for all learners regardless of ability or context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices in a rural elementary school context. The case study design enabled an in-depth understanding of instructional experiences, classroom interactions, and contextual realities influencing pedagogical practices.

Research Locale and Participants

The study was conducted at Abungo Primary School located in Bantey, Tadian, Mountain Province, Philippines. The participant was an elementary teacher handling Grades 4–6 learners and performing coordinatorship roles in ICT, LIS, and School Reading Program.

Purposive sampling was utilized in selecting the participant based on teaching experience, multigrade teaching exposure, and involvement in learner-centered instructional practices.

Data Gathering Procedures

Data were collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Classroom observations
- Document analysis of lesson plans and instructional materials

Interviews focused on instructional practices, classroom experiences, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The process included familiarization, coding, categorization, theme generation, review, and interpretation.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility was established through member checking and triangulation. Dependability was ensured through audit trails and documentation of coding processes. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling, while transferability was achieved through thick descriptions of the research context.

Results/Findings

Theme 1: Contextualized and Flexible Instructional Practices

The findings revealed that adaptive learner-centered pedagogy in the rural classroom was primarily manifested through contextualized and flexible instructional practices. The participant emphasized the importance of aligning lessons with learners' comprehension levels, lived experiences, interests, and socio-cultural realities to make learning more meaningful and understandable. Considering that learners in rural communities possess varied academic readiness and exposure, the teacher intentionally modified instructional delivery to ensure inclusivity and active participation among all learners.

The participant shared:

"Kailangan iayon mo talaga ang lesson sa buhay ng mga bata para mas maintindihan nila."

This response demonstrates the teacher's conscious effort to contextualize instruction according to learners' everyday experiences within the community. Classroom observations further revealed that lessons frequently incorporated examples related to farming activities, household responsibilities, local traditions, and community

practices familiar to learners. Instead of relying solely on textbook-based instruction, the teacher facilitated flexible classroom discussions that encouraged learners to connect academic concepts with their personal experiences.

The participant also emphasized that flexibility in teaching was necessary because learners differed significantly in terms of comprehension speed, confidence, and participation levels. Learners who struggled academically were provided additional explanations and simplified activities, while advanced learners were encouraged to assist peers and engage in enrichment tasks. Such adaptability reflected differentiated instruction that accommodated learner diversity within the multigrade classroom setting.

Furthermore, contextualized teaching enabled learners to become more engaged and responsive during classroom interactions. Learners appeared more motivated when lessons reflected situations they could easily relate to, thereby enhancing comprehension and participation. The use of local language during discussions also strengthened communication and minimized learner hesitation, particularly among shy learners.

These findings strongly support the work of Geneva Gay (2018), who argued that culturally responsive teaching enhances learner engagement by connecting instruction to learners' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Similarly, the Philippine K-12 curriculum framework emphasizes contextualization and localization of instruction as mechanisms for promoting relevant and meaningful learning experiences among diverse learners. The findings suggest that contextualized and flexible instructional practices are essential in sustaining inclusive and learner-centered education within geographically isolated schools.

Theme 2: Collaborative and Experiential Learning Engagement

Another significant theme that emerged from the study was the use of collaborative and experiential learning strategies to sustain learner engagement and participation. The participant consistently integrated activities that encouraged learners to interact, cooperate, and actively participate in the learning process rather than merely receiving information passively.

The participant explained:

“Mas natututo sila kapag sila mismo ang gumagawa at nagtutulungan.”

This statement highlights the teacher's belief that meaningful learning occurs when learners become active participants in constructing knowledge. Classroom observations revealed that collaborative activities such as peer tutoring, small-group discussions, storytelling sessions, cooperative problem-solving, and role-playing were frequently utilized. Learners were encouraged to share ideas, assist classmates, and collectively accomplish classroom tasks.

Peer-assisted learning became particularly valuable in the multigrade classroom setting where learners possessed varying levels of academic ability. Advanced learners often guided struggling classmates during activities, thereby promoting cooperation and reducing learner anxiety. Such interactions not only improved academic understanding but also strengthened social relationships among learners.

Experiential learning activities were likewise integrated to make lessons more interactive and engaging. The teacher utilized hands-on demonstrations, outdoor observations, localized games, and real-life problem-solving activities to deepen learner understanding. Learners became more enthusiastic when they were allowed to explore concepts through direct participation and practical application rather than through lecture-based instruction alone. The findings further revealed that collaborative activities enhanced learner confidence and communication skills. Learners who were initially hesitant to participate gradually became more expressive and involved during group activities. The supportive classroom environment encouraged learners to ask questions, share opinions, and participate without fear of criticism.

These findings align with the Constructivist Theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978), which emphasizes that learning occurs

through social interaction and collaborative engagement. Vygotsky highlighted the importance of scaffolding and peer interaction in facilitating cognitive development. Similarly, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that learners acquire deeper understanding through direct experiences, reflection, and active participation. The findings indicate that collaborative and experiential strategies significantly contribute to learner-centered instruction by fostering engagement, participation, and meaningful knowledge construction.

Theme 3: Adaptive Strategies Amid Resource Constraints

The study further revealed that adaptive learner-centered pedagogy in rural schools requires substantial creativity and innovation due to limited instructional resources and inadequate technological infrastructure. Despite these challenges, the participant demonstrated resilience and adaptability in sustaining meaningful classroom instruction.

The participant shared:

“Kapag kulang ang materials, gumagawa na lang kami ng improvised materials gamit ang available sa community.”

This response reflects the teacher's resourcefulness in addressing instructional limitations through improvisation and contextualization. Classroom observations showed that improvised visual aids, recycled materials, locally available objects, and handmade instructional tools were frequently utilized during lessons. Instead of relying heavily on commercially produced materials, the teacher maximized accessible community resources to facilitate classroom learning.

The participant also highlighted the challenges posed by limited internet connectivity and insufficient technological devices in the school. Although technology integration was recognized as beneficial, infrastructural limitations hindered consistent ICT-based instruction. Consequently, the teacher adapted by using low-cost and non-digital instructional strategies that remained interactive and learner-centered.

Moreover, the participant emphasized that adaptability extended beyond instructional materials to classroom management and lesson delivery. Since multigrade learners possessed varied learning capacities and educational needs, the teacher continuously modified activities and assessments according to learner readiness and classroom realities. Flexible scheduling, differentiated activities, and individualized support became necessary to maintain learner engagement despite limited resources.

The findings demonstrate that innovation and adaptability are crucial competencies among rural educators. Rather than allowing resource scarcity to compromise instructional quality, the teacher transformed constraints into opportunities for creativity and contextualized learning. Such practices strengthened learner participation and sustained educational continuity within the rural setting.

These findings resonate with the report of the OECD (2019), which emphasized that educators in rural and disadvantaged communities frequently depend on innovation, improvisation, and adaptability to address educational resource limitations. The findings further underscore the need for institutional support mechanisms that provide rural schools with adequate instructional materials, technological resources, and professional development opportunities to strengthen learner-centered education.

Theme 4: Relational and Inclusive Classroom Practices

The findings also revealed that relational and inclusive classroom practices formed an essential component of adaptive learner-centered pedagogy. The participant highlighted the importance of establishing supportive teacher-learner relationships that foster emotional security, participation, and learner confidence.

The participant stated:

“Importante na maramdaman nila na may nakakaintindi at sumusuporta sa kanila.”

This statement underscores the teacher's recognition that emotional support significantly influences learners'

motivation and willingness to participate in classroom activities. Classroom observations indicated that the teacher intentionally created a welcoming and supportive learning environment where learners felt respected, valued, and encouraged to express themselves freely.

The teacher demonstrated patience and empathy, particularly toward learners experiencing academic difficulties or low confidence. Positive reinforcement, encouragement, and individualized attention were frequently observed during classroom interactions. Learners were allowed to ask questions openly and participate without fear of embarrassment or punishment.

The findings further revealed that inclusive classroom practices were evident through differentiated instruction and flexible learner accommodations. The teacher adjusted classroom activities according to learner capacities, ensuring that struggling learners were not excluded from participation. Learners with varying comprehension levels were given opportunities to succeed through modified tasks and scaffolded support.

Relational teaching practices also contributed to improved classroom behavior and learner cooperation. Learners appeared more motivated and engaged when they perceived the classroom as emotionally safe and supportive. The nurturing teacher-learner relationship strengthened trust, participation, and collaborative interaction among learners.

These findings support Inclusive Pedagogy Theory proposed by Lani Florian, which emphasizes participation, belongingness, and instructional responsiveness for all learners regardless of ability or background. The findings further affirm that emotionally supportive and inclusive classroom environments are essential in promoting learner-centered education, particularly within rural and multigrade educational settings.

Theme 5: Challenges in Multigrade and Rural Teaching Contexts

Despite the positive implementation of adaptive learner-centered practices, the study revealed several significant challenges affecting instructional delivery in the rural multigrade classroom context. The participant identified multigrade teaching demands, varied learner readiness, inadequate instructional materials, and limited technological infrastructure as major barriers to effective learner-centered instruction.

The participant expressed:

“Mahirap pagsabayin ang iba’t ibang level ng bata lalo na kapag kulang ang oras at resources.”

Managing multiple grade levels simultaneously required extensive lesson preparation, instructional adjustment, and classroom management strategies. The teacher had to divide attention among learners with different competencies, learning needs, and curriculum requirements. Such conditions increased workload and instructional complexity, particularly when addressing the needs of struggling learners while maintaining engagement among advanced learners.

The participant further explained that limited classroom resources and insufficient technological access constrained the implementation of innovative instructional activities. Internet connectivity issues and lack of digital devices hindered technology-enhanced learning opportunities. Consequently, the teacher relied heavily on improvised materials and manual instructional methods.

Another challenge identified was learner absenteeism caused by household responsibilities, difficult geographical conditions, and socio-economic factors affecting learner attendance and participation. Inconsistent attendance disrupted learning continuity and required repeated lesson adjustments to accommodate absent learners.

Furthermore, the teacher acknowledged experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion due to the multiple instructional and coordinatorship responsibilities assigned within the school. Balancing teaching duties, administrative tasks, and learner support responsibilities became demanding, particularly within a resource-

constrained educational environment.

These findings highlight the structural inequalities and systemic challenges affecting rural education in geographically isolated communities. The results underscore the urgent need for strengthened institutional support, improved educational infrastructure, increased resource allocation, and sustained teacher professional development programs targeting multigrade and rural educators. Addressing these systemic concerns is essential in sustaining adaptive learner-centered pedagogy and ensuring equitable educational opportunities for rural learners.

Conclusions

Adaptive learner-centered pedagogical practices play a vital role in sustaining meaningful and inclusive learning experiences in rural elementary education. The findings revealed that contextualized instruction, collaborative learning, instructional flexibility, and relational teaching significantly contribute to learner engagement and participation among elementary learners in geographically isolated contexts.

Despite challenges related to multigrade teaching, limited resources, and infrastructural constraints, teachers demonstrate resilience, creativity, and commitment in implementing learner-centered practices. Their ability to adapt instruction according to learners' needs reflects the importance of pedagogical responsiveness in rural educational settings.

The study concludes that strengthening institutional support systems, enhancing teacher professional development, and improving access to instructional resources are essential in sustaining effective learner-centered pedagogy in rural schools. Educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize context-sensitive interventions that empower rural teachers and promote equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

Recommendations

1. Schools and educational institutions should strengthen professional development programs focusing on adaptive learner-centered pedagogy and contextualized instruction.
2. Greater institutional support should be provided to rural schools through improved instructional resources, technological access, and classroom facilities.
3. Future studies may explore learner perspectives and comparative analyses of learner-centered practices across multiple rural schools.
4. Community-based educational partnerships should be strengthened to support localized and culturally responsive learning initiatives.

References

- Virginia Braun, V., & Victoria Clarke (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Department of Education. (2016). *Policy guidelines on the national assessment of student learning for the K to 12 basic education program*. DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2016.
- Lani Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828.
- Geneva Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- David Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- OECD. (2019). *Educating 21st century children: Emotional well-being in the digital age*. OECD Publishing.
- International Journal of Early Childhood, Special and Inclusive Education*

Lev Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.