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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learner-Centered Pedagogical Practices and Academic Engagement Among Grade 5 Learners in a Rural Philippine Integrated School Context

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has become an essential instructional approach in promoting active participation, meaningful learning experiences, and academic engagement among elementary learners. This qualitative study explored the learner-centered pedagogical practices and academic engagement experiences among Grade 5 learners in a rural Philippine integrated school context at San Mariano. Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative research design, the study examined how teachers implement learner-centered instruction and how these practices influence learners' classroom participation, motivation, interaction, and engagement in learning activities. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis involving twelve Grade 5 teachers and selected learners from the integrated school. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework was employed in analyzing the collected data. Findings revealed five major themes: (1) Active Participation Through Collaborative and Interactive Learning; (2) Contextualized and Experiential Teaching Practices; (3) Learner Motivation and Confidence in Supportive Classroom Environments; (4) Instructional Challenges and Diverse Learner Needs in Rural Education; and (5) Teacher Adaptability, Encouragement, and Commitment to Learner Development. Participants emphasized that learner-centered pedagogies strengthened classroom participation, communication skills, learner confidence, and academic engagement. Teachers utilized collaborative activities, contextualized lessons, differentiated instruction, and experiential learning approaches to make classroom instruction more meaningful and participatory. However, participants also encountered challenges related to limited instructional resources, varying learner abilities, absenteeism, and classroom management concerns. Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrated adaptability and commitment in sustaining engaging and inclusive learning environments. The study concludes that learner-centered pedagogical practices significantly enhance academic engagement and meaningful learning experiences among rural elementary learners. Findings provide implications for instructional practices, teacher professional development, learner engagement initiatives, and educational policy implementation in rural integrated schools.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, academic engagement, elementary education, rural education, classroom participation, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a crucial role in shaping learners' intellectual growth, social development, critical thinking skills, and lifelong learning capacities. In elementary education, instructional practices significantly influence learners' academic engagement, classroom participation, motivation, and learning experiences. Among contemporary educational approaches, learner-centered pedagogy has emerged as an important framework that promotes active participation, collaborative learning, critical thinking, and meaningful learner engagement.

Learner-centered teaching shifts the focus of instruction from teacher-directed delivery toward participatory, interactive, and experiential learning experiences where learners actively construct knowledge through collaboration, inquiry, reflection, and contextualized activities. Such pedagogical practices encourage learners to become active participants in their own learning processes rather than passive recipients of information.

Academic engagement refers to learners' behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment in classroom learning activities. Engaged learners demonstrate curiosity, motivation, classroom interaction, persistence, and active involvement in educational tasks. Research suggests that learner-centered instructional environments positively influence learners' confidence, participation, classroom interaction, and overall academic performance.

In rural Philippine integrated schools, learner-centered pedagogical practices become particularly important because learners often come from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Teachers in rural schools frequently encounter instructional realities involving limited educational resources, varying learner abilities, absenteeism concerns, and contextual classroom challenges that require flexible and adaptive teaching approaches.

San Mariano presents a unique rural educational context characterized by geographically dispersed communities, diverse learner experiences, and integrated school arrangements. Teachers in this setting navigate the complexities of rural education while attempting to sustain meaningful learner participation and engagement within classroom instruction.

Although learner-centered pedagogy has been widely discussed in educational literature, limited qualitative studies have explored teachers' and learners' lived experiences regarding learner-centered instructional practices and academic engagement within rural integrated school settings in the Philippines. Existing studies often focus on quantitative achievement outcomes rather than classroom experiences and engagement realities among elementary learners.

Thus, this study explored learner-centered pedagogical practices and academic engagement among Grade 5 learners in a rural Philippine integrated school context at San Mariano. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers describe their learner-centered pedagogical practices in Grade 5 instruction?
2. How do learners experience academic engagement within learner-centered classroom environments?
3. What instructional strategies promote active learner participation and classroom interaction?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing learner-centered pedagogy in rural classrooms?
5. How do teachers address learner diversity and engagement difficulties within classroom instruction?

The findings of the study may contribute to improving learner-centered instructional practices, strengthening learner engagement initiatives, enhancing teacher professional development, and informing educational policies related to rural elementary education.

Review of Related Literature

Learner-Centered Pedagogy in Elementary Education

Learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes active participation, collaborative learning, inquiry, and meaningful engagement in classroom instruction. According to Weimer (2019), learner-centered teaching promotes learner autonomy, participation, reflection, and responsibility for learning. Teachers facilitate learning experiences that encourage interaction, exploration, and critical thinking.

In elementary education, learner-centered approaches strengthen learners' confidence, communication skills, collaboration, and conceptual understanding by actively involving them in classroom activities and decision-making processes.

Academic Engagement and Classroom Participation

Academic engagement refers to learners' active involvement, emotional connection, and cognitive investment in educational activities. According to Fredricks et al. (2019), engaged learners demonstrate behavioral participation, emotional interest, and cognitive effort during classroom learning experiences.

Positive classroom engagement is associated with improved academic achievement, motivation, classroom behavior, and social interaction. Learner-centered environments encourage participation through collaborative activities, experiential learning, and supportive teacher-learner relationships.

Contextualized and Experiential Learning

Contextualized instruction connects learning content to learners' lived experiences, local realities, and community contexts. According to Johnson (2019), contextualized teaching strengthens comprehension and learner participation by making learning meaningful and relevant.

Experiential learning further emphasizes learning through active experience, reflection, and practical application. According to David Kolb, experiential learning promotes deeper understanding and sustained learner engagement through meaningful educational experiences.

Challenges in Rural Elementary Education

Teachers in rural educational settings frequently encounter challenges related to limited instructional materials, learner absenteeism, socio-economic difficulties, varying academic readiness, and limited technological resources. These contextual realities affect classroom engagement and instructional effectiveness.

According to OECD (2020), rural schools often experience inequalities in educational access and instructional support systems, requiring adaptive and context-sensitive teaching approaches.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction, collaboration, and meaningful experiences. The study also utilized Experiential Learning Theory developed by David Kolb, emphasizing active participation, reflection, and contextualized learning experiences.

These theories guided the interpretation of learner-centered pedagogical practices, learner participation, and academic engagement experiences in rural elementary education.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences, instructional practices, and academic engagement experiences of Grade 5 learners and teachers within learner-centered classroom environments. Phenomenology was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gain deeper understanding of participants' classroom experiences, instructional interaction, and engagement realities in rural educational settings.

The study was conducted at San Mariano, specifically at San Mariano II Central Integrated School located in Purok 04, Minanga, San Mariano, Isabela. The locale was selected because of its rural integrated school context and active implementation of learner-centered instructional practices.

The participants consisted of twelve Grade 5 teachers and selected Grade 5 learners chosen through purposive sampling. Teacher participants met the following criteria: currently teaching Grade 5 learners, possessing at least three years of teaching experience, actively implementing learner-centered pedagogical practices, and willing to participate in interviews and classroom observations. Learner participants were selected based on active classroom participation and willingness to share learning experiences.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans, activity sheets, and learner outputs. The interview guide focused on learner-centered teaching practices, classroom participation, learner engagement experiences, instructional challenges, and pedagogical reflections regarding Grade 5 instruction.

Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' perspectives were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and instructional documents were coded and categorized to identify recurring themes and patterns related to learner-centered pedagogy and academic engagement. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and prolonged engagement within the research setting.

Results and Findings

Theme 1: Active Participation Through Collaborative and Interactive Learning

Participants emphasized that collaborative and interactive classroom activities significantly strengthened learners' participation and engagement in classroom instruction.

One participant shared:

"Mas active ang learners kapag group activities at collaborative tasks ang ginagamit."

Another teacher stated:

"Kapag participative ang lesson, mas confident silang mag-share ng ideas."

Classroom observations revealed active learner participation during group discussions, collaborative projects, role-playing activities, and peer-assisted learning sessions.

These findings align with Fredricks et al. (2019), who emphasized that collaborative and participatory classroom environments strengthen learners' behavioral and emotional engagement.

Theme 2: Contextualized and Experiential Teaching Practices

Teachers highlighted the importance of contextualized instruction and experiential learning in making classroom lessons

meaningful and relatable for learners.

One participant explained:

“Mas naiintindihan ng learners ang lesson kapag konektado ito sa kanilang daily experiences.”

Another participant remarked:

“Ginagamit namin ang local examples at actual experiences para maging engaging ang lessons.”

Teachers integrated local community experiences, practical activities, environmental observations, and hands-on tasks into classroom instruction to strengthen learner understanding and participation.

These findings support Johnson (2019), who emphasized that contextualized teaching enhances learner comprehension and classroom engagement.

Theme 3: Learner Motivation and Confidence in Supportive Classroom Environments

Participants described supportive classroom environments as important factors influencing learners' confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate.

One participant shared:

“Kapag supportive at encouraging ang teacher, mas willing silang magparticipate.”

Another participant stated:

“Importante ang positive classroom atmosphere para maging confident ang learners.”

Teachers utilized encouragement, positive reinforcement, and emotionally supportive communication to strengthen learners' classroom interaction and self-confidence.

These findings align with Vygotsky's constructivist principles emphasizing supportive social interaction in learning development.

Theme 4: Instructional Challenges and Diverse Learner Needs in Rural Education

Participants encountered challenges related to limited instructional materials, learner absenteeism, varying academic abilities, and classroom management concerns.

One participant explained:

“Mahirap minsan dahil iba-iba ang learning abilities ng learners.”

Another teacher shared:

“May challenges din sa attendance at kakulangan ng resources.”

Teachers described difficulties in maintaining consistent learner participation and addressing diverse learning needs within limited-resource classroom environments.

These findings reflect the continuing instructional realities experienced by teachers in rural Philippine schools.

Theme 5: Teacher Adaptability, Encouragement, and Commitment to Learner Development

Despite instructional challenges, participants demonstrated adaptability, creativity, and professional commitment in sustaining learner engagement and meaningful classroom interaction.

One participant stated:

“Kahit mahirap minsan, ginagawa namin ang best para maging engaging ang lessons.”

Another participant remarked:

“Kailangan talagang flexible at patient sa pagtuturo sa rural schools.”

Teachers improvised instructional materials, utilized differentiated instruction, and adapted classroom strategies to support learners' academic participation and development.

These findings demonstrate the significant role of teacher commitment and adaptability in promoting learner engagement within rural educational settings.

Discussion

The findings revealed that learner-centered pedagogical practices significantly strengthen academic engagement, classroom participation, learner confidence, and meaningful learning experiences among Grade 5 learners in rural integrated school settings.

Teachers effectively utilized collaborative learning, contextualized instruction, experiential activities, and emotionally supportive classroom practices to promote active learner participation and engagement. Consistent with constructivist and experiential learning theories, meaningful learning occurs when learners actively participate in socially interactive and contextually relevant educational experiences.

The study also highlighted the instructional challenges experienced by teachers in rural educational settings, including resource limitations, learner diversity, absenteeism, and classroom management difficulties. These realities require adaptive pedagogical strategies and sustained teacher commitment in maintaining learner engagement.

Despite these contextual challenges, teachers demonstrated creativity, resilience, and professional dedication in implementing learner-centered instruction and fostering positive classroom environments conducive to learner development and participation.

Conclusion

The study revealed that learner-centered pedagogical practices significantly enhance academic engagement, classroom participation, learner motivation, and confidence among Grade 5 learners in a rural Philippine integrated school context. Teachers implemented collaborative learning activities, contextualized instruction, experiential tasks, and supportive classroom interaction to create meaningful and participatory educational experiences for learners. However, instructional challenges related to limited resources, learner diversity, absenteeism, and classroom management continue to affect classroom instruction in rural schools.

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated adaptability, creativity, and strong professional commitment in sustaining learner-centered and engaging educational environments. The findings further suggest that effective learner-centered instruction requires contextualized pedagogies, supportive classroom relationships, and strengthened instructional support systems in rural education.

Implications of the Study

The findings imply the need for strengthened teacher professional development programs focusing on learner-centered pedagogy, differentiated instruction, contextualized teaching, and learner engagement strategies in rural elementary education.

Educational institutions and policymakers may also improve instructional support systems by providing contextualized learning materials, technological resources, and learner engagement initiatives for rural schools.

School administrators may encourage collaborative instructional planning, mentoring systems, and teacher support mechanisms that strengthen participatory and learner-centered classroom practices.

Future studies may further explore learners' perspectives, classroom interaction patterns, and comparative learner engagement experiences across diverse rural educational settings.

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