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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Questions to Participation: Inquiry-Based Social Science Instruction and Learners' Student Engagement in Gappal Elementary School

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Abstract

Inquiry-based instruction has been widely recognized as a pedagogical approach that promotes active learning and meaningful engagement by positioning learners as investigators of social realities rather than passive recipients of information. This qualitative case study examined how inquiry-based Social Science instruction influenced learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement at Gappal Elementary School. Using classroom observations, focus group discussions with learners, and semi-structured interviews with teachers, the study explored how questioning, investigation, dialogue, and reflection shaped classroom engagement. Thematic analysis revealed four interconnected themes: inquiry questioning as a catalyst for behavioral participation, learner curiosity and voice as drivers of emotional engagement, collaborative inquiry as a structure for sustained participation, and teacher scaffolding as support for cognitive engagement. Findings indicate that inquiry-based Social Science instruction fosters multidimensional learner engagement when inquiry tasks are structured, contextually relevant, and supported through facilitation and feedback. The study offers implications for instructional practice, school leadership, and future research in elementary Social Science education.

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INTRODUCTION

Learner engagement is a central concern in elementary education, particularly in Social Science classrooms where abstract concepts, historical narratives, and social issues can be challenging for young learners to grasp. Traditional teacher-centered approaches characterized by lecture, textbook reliance, and recall-based questioning often limit learners' opportunities to inquire, discuss, and connect lessons to their lived experiences. Such practices may result in surface learning, reduced participation, and declining interest in Social Science subjects.

Inquiry-based instruction has emerged as a powerful alternative that emphasizes questioning, investigation, dialogue, and reflection. Rooted in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, inquiry-based pedagogy positions learners as active constructors of knowledge who explore social phenomena through guided questioning and collaborative sense-making. In Social Science education, inquiry-based approaches are particularly valuable because they encourage learners to examine social issues, interpret evidence, and develop critical perspectives on community, culture, and citizenship.

Within the Philippine elementary school context, curriculum reforms encourage learner-centered and inquiry-based teaching practices. However, empirical studies documenting how inquiry-based Social Science instruction is enacted in classrooms and how it shapes learners' engagement remain limited, especially in rural and public elementary schools. This study addresses this gap by examining inquiry-based Social Science instruction at Gappal Elementary School and exploring how inquiry practices influence learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inquiry-Based Instruction in Social Science Education

Inquiry-based learning is grounded in the principle that learners develop understanding through questioning, investigation, and reflection rather than passive reception of information (Dewey, 1938). In Social Science education, inquiry involves examining social issues, historical events, and civic concerns through evidence-based questioning and interpretation (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). Research shows that inquiry-based instruction enhances motivation, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking by making learning relevant and participatory (Levstik & Barton, 2015).

Learner Engagement

Learner engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement includes observable actions such as participation and effort; emotional engagement refers to interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement involves deep thinking, persistence, and self-regulation. Inquiry-based instruction has been shown to activate all three dimensions by encouraging learners to ask questions, collaborate, and reflect on learning processes (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Inquiry and Elementary Learners

Elementary learners benefit from inquiry-based approaches when inquiry is appropriately scaffolded and contextually grounded. Studies emphasize that young learners require structured guidance, modeling, and feedback to engage meaningfully in inquiry tasks (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007). In Social Science, inquiry grounded in local contexts and learners' experiences has been shown to enhance engagement and understanding (Grant, Lee, & Swan, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine inquiry-based Social Science instruction and learner engagement within a real-life elementary school context. The case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of instructional practices and learner experiences as they naturally occurred (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at Gappal Elementary School, a public elementary school serving learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included five elementary Social Science teachers implementing inquiry-based strategies and twenty-eight learners from Grades 4 to 6 selected through purposive sampling to represent varied participation levels and academic performance.

Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods. Classroom observations documented inquiry practices, questioning patterns, learner interactions, and participation. Focus group discussions with learners explored their experiences of inquiry activities, questioning, and classroom involvement. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined instructional intentions, inquiry design, and challenges encountered.

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 learner assent were secured, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

FINDINGS

Analysis of classroom observations, learner focus group discussions, and teacher interviews yielded four major, interrelated themes illustrating how inquiry-based Social Science instruction shaped learners' engagement at Gappal Elementary School. Across themes, engagement emerged as a dynamic and multidimensional process influenced by questioning, learner voice, collaboration, and instructional scaffolding.

Theme 1: Inquiry Questioning as a Catalyst for Behavioral Engagement

Classroom observations revealed that inquiry-based lessons consistently began with open-ended, problem-oriented questions anchored in social issues, historical events, or aspects of learners' community life. Rather than presenting information immediately, teachers posed questions that required learners to think, predict, and recall prior knowledge. Learners were encouraged to generate their own questions, share assumptions, and articulate initial ideas before engaging with texts, visuals, or other learning resources. This inquiry-oriented entry point set an active tone for lessons and positioned participation as an expected and valued behavior.
As a result, learners demonstrated increased behavioral engagement, evidenced by frequent hand-raising, voluntary responses, peer-to-peer interaction, and sustained attention during discussions. Learners themselves articulated that questioning made lessons more engaging and interactive. One learner shared, *"Mas gusto ko kapag nagtatanong ang guro kasi naiisip ko agad ang sagot,"* highlighting how inquiry questions prompted immediate cognitive and behavioral involvement. Another noted, *"Hindi boring kasi may tanong at sagutan,"* suggesting that questioning helped prevent passivity and disengagement. Teachers observed that inquiry questioning encouraged participation even among typically quiet learners, as questions were framed in ways that allowed multiple perspectives rather than single correct answers. These findings indicate that inquiry questioning strengthened behavioral engagement by transforming learners from passive listeners into active contributors.

Theme 2: Curiosity and Learner Voice Strengthening Emotional Engagement

Inquiry-based instruction fostered emotional engagement by intentionally valuing learners' ideas, experiences, and perspectives. Teachers invited learners to connect inquiry questions to their own community practices, family experiences, and everyday observations, thereby situating Social Science concepts within familiar and meaningful contexts. This emphasis on learner voice created a classroom climate in which learners felt that their opinions mattered and that learning was relevant to their lives.
Learners reported positive emotional responses to this approach. One learner stated, *"Mas masaya ang lesson kapag puwede kaming magbigay ng opinion,"* reflecting increased enjoyment and interest when personal perspectives were acknowledged. Another learner shared that inquiry reduced fear of making mistakes, explaining, *"Hindi ako natatakot kasi puwede magkamali,"* which suggests that inquiry-based instruction fostered a supportive emotional environment. Teachers noted that when learners were encouraged to express

ideas freely, they appeared more confident, motivated, and willing to participate. These findings suggest that inquiry-based instruction strengthened emotional engagement by promoting curiosity, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for sustained involvement in learning.

Theme 3: Collaborative Inquiry Sustaining Participation

Collaborative inquiry activities emerged as a central feature of inquiry-based Social Science instruction. Teachers organized learners into small groups for discussion, source analysis, role-playing, and shared presentations. These collaborative structures enabled learners to exchange ideas, clarify misunderstandings, and jointly construct explanations. Observations showed that learners remained engaged for extended periods during collaborative tasks, particularly when activities required negotiation of meaning and collective decision-making. Learners consistently valued collaboration as a support for understanding and persistence. One learner stated, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may kausap at nagtutulungan kami,"* emphasizing the role of peer interaction in learning. Collaboration also appeared to reduce anxiety, as learners felt supported by group members when tackling challenging questions. However, some learners noted unequal participation within groups, with certain members contributing less. Teachers addressed these challenges by assigning specific roles, setting clear expectations, and monitoring group processes. These findings indicate that collaborative inquiry sustained learner participation by leveraging social interaction, but its effectiveness depended on intentional structuring and active facilitation.

Theme 4: Teacher Scaffolding Supporting Cognitive Engagement

Teachers played a crucial role in supporting cognitive engagement through instructional scaffolding. Rather than providing direct answers, teachers guided learners' inquiry through probing questions, modeling analytical processes, and offering formative feedback. Teachers prompted learners to justify ideas, examine evidence, and reflect on conclusions, thereby encouraging deeper thinking and reasoning. This approach helped learners engage with content at a conceptual level rather than focusing solely on factual recall.
Learners emphasized the importance of guidance in supporting understanding. One learner stated, *"Mas natututo ako kapag tinatanong kung bakit,"* indicating that reflective questioning helped clarify reasoning. Teachers highlighted the need to balance guidance and independence, noting that scaffolding enabled learners to think deeply without becoming overwhelmed by the demands of inquiry. These practices strengthened cognitive engagement by fostering reflection, evidence-based reasoning, and metacognitive awareness, allowing learners to persist through complex tasks and develop deeper understanding of Social Science concepts.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that inquiry-based Social Science instruction effectively fosters multidimensional learner engagement by activating learners' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in complementary ways. Inquiry questioning served as a powerful catalyst for behavioral engagement by prompting learners to participate actively through responding to open-ended questions, generating ideas, and engaging in dialogue. When lessons began with problem-oriented questions connected to social issues or community life, learners were positioned as contributors rather than passive listeners, consistent with research showing that inquiry questioning increases participation and on-task behavior in elementary classrooms (Grant, Lee, & Swan, 2017; Levstik & Barton, 2015). Such practices encouraged learners to take part in discussions early in the lesson, setting an interactive tone that sustained behavioral involvement throughout learning activities.

Learner voice and curiosity further strengthened emotional engagement by fostering interest, enjoyment, and a sense of relevance. Valuing learners' perspectives and inviting them to relate inquiry questions to their own experiences enhanced feelings of ownership and belonging, which are critical components of emotional engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Studies in Social Science education indicate that when learners perceive lessons as meaningful and connected to their lives, they are more motivated and willing to engage emotionally with content (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wentzel, 2012). Inquiry-based instruction thus created emotionally supportive environments where learners felt safe to express ideas, ask questions, and make mistakes, contributing to sustained interest and positive attitudes toward learning.

Collaborative inquiry sustained engagement through social interaction, enabling learners to negotiate meaning, clarify understanding, and support one another during complex tasks. Group discussions, shared investigations, and collaborative presentations allowed learners to remain involved for longer periods, particularly when inquiry tasks required explanation and collective decision-making.

This finding aligns with social constructivist perspectives emphasizing learning as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978) and with empirical studies demonstrating that collaborative learning enhances engagement and persistence by leveraging peer support (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). When structured effectively, collaborative inquiry not only sustained participation but also reduced anxiety and promoted shared responsibility for learning.

Teacher scaffolding played a crucial role in supporting cognitive engagement by guiding learners' reasoning and reflection during inquiry. Through probing questions, modeling, and formative feedback, teachers helped learners examine evidence, justify conclusions, and reflect on their thinking processes. These scaffolding practices encouraged deeper processing, metacognitive awareness, and persistence in problem-solving, consistent with research on guided inquiry and formative assessment (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). By balancing challenge with support, teachers enabled learners to engage cognitively without becoming overwhelmed, thereby strengthening higher-order thinking in Social Science learning.

Together, these patterns align with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) engagement framework and extend it by illustrating how inquiry-based pedagogy operationalizes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in elementary Social Science classrooms. At the same time, the findings highlight challenges such as uneven participation within groups and time constraints associated with inquiry activities. These constraints underscore the importance of structured inquiry and active teacher facilitation, reinforcing prior research emphasizing that inquiry-based instruction is most effective when openness is balanced with clear guidance, scaffolding, and intentional classroom management (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Schweisfurth, 2013). Overall, the study affirms that inquiry-based Social Science instruction holds strong potential for enhancing learner engagement, provided that inquiry processes are thoughtfully designed and supported within classroom practice.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study provides compelling evidence that inquiry-based Social Science instruction at Gappal Elementary School enhances learner engagement by transforming classrooms into dynamic spaces of questioning, dialogue, and reflection rather than sites of passive content transmission. When learners were encouraged to pose questions, examine social issues, and articulate interpretations grounded in their own experiences, engagement became more sustained and meaningful across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Learners were most actively involved when inquiry tasks were contextually relevant to their community and everyday lives, collaboratively explored with peers, and carefully supported through teacher scaffolding. These conditions enabled learners to participate confidently, express curiosity, and engage in deeper reasoning about social concepts, thereby strengthening both understanding and motivation.

The findings offer important implications for classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to design inquiry questions that draw on learners' lived experiences and local contexts, as such relevance fosters interest and ownership of learning. Collaborative inquiry should be intentionally structured with clear roles and expectations to ensure equitable participation and productive dialogue. In addition, formative feedback that emphasizes reasoning, evidence use, and reflection rather than correctness alone can further support learners' cognitive engagement and critical thinking.

At the level of school leadership, the study underscores the need to support sustained professional development focused on inquiry-based pedagogy, including opportunities for teachers to collaboratively design inquiry tasks, share instructional strategies, and reflect on classroom practice. Providing dedicated time for collaborative planning and peer learning is essential for the effective and consistent implementation of inquiry-based instruction.

Finally, future research may explore the longitudinal effects of inquiry-based Social Science instruction on learners' civic understanding, critical thinking skills, and motivation to engage with social issues over time. Comparative studies across diverse elementary school contexts may also deepen understanding of how inquiry-based approaches can be adapted to different learning environments and learner populations, thereby strengthening the evidence base for inquiry-oriented Social Science education.

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