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## Learner-Centered Teaching Practices and Classroom Engagement at Baluarte Elementary School: A Qualitative Institutional Study

**Christopher L. Granil**

Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines

### Abstract

**Keywords:** learner-centered pedagogy, classroom engagement, elementary education, qualitative study, teaching practices

Learner-centered pedagogy has gained prominence in basic education as an approach that promotes active participation, meaningful learning, and holistic learner development. While policy frameworks strongly advocate learner-centered teaching, empirical evidence documenting how such practices are enacted at the classroom level particularly in elementary school contexts remains limited. This qualitative institutional study explored learner-centered teaching practices and their influence on classroom engagement at Baluarte Elementary School. Using classroom observations, semi-structured teacher interviews, and focus group discussions with learners, the study examined how instructional strategies, classroom interactions, and learning environments shaped behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (1) active learning through participatory instructional strategies, (2) differentiated and contextualized instruction supporting learner engagement, (3) supportive classroom relationships fostering confidence and participation, and (4) contextual constraints shaping the enactment of learner-centered practices. Findings indicate that learner-centered teaching practices substantially enhanced learners' engagement by promoting autonomy, relevance, and social interaction. However, challenges related to class size, instructional resources, and teacher workload influenced consistency of implementation. The study underscores the importance of institutional support and professional development in sustaining learner-centered pedagogy in elementary education.

\*Corresponding author: Christopher L. Granil

## INTRODUCTION

Classroom engagement has become a central concern in contemporary elementary education, as research consistently links active learner participation to improved academic achievement, motivation, and socio-emotional development. Engagement in learning is particularly critical at the elementary level, where foundational attitudes toward school, learning, and self-efficacy are formed. In response, learner-centered teaching has been widely promoted as a pedagogical approach that positions learners as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

Learner-centered teaching emphasizes active learning, meaningful interaction, differentiation, and responsiveness to learners' interests, abilities, and experiences. Rather than relying on rigid, teacher-dominated instruction, learner-centered pedagogy encourages dialogue, collaboration, inquiry, and reflection. These practices align with constructivist learning theories, which assert that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction with content, peers, and learning contexts.

Despite strong policy support and theoretical grounding, the implementation of learner-centered teaching in elementary classrooms remains uneven. Many classrooms continue to be characterized by teacher-centered practices such as prolonged lectures, rote activities, and uniform tasks that limit learners' opportunities for meaningful engagement. Moreover, studies focusing on learner-centered pedagogy often emphasize outcomes such as achievement, with fewer investigations examining how classroom practices shape learners' engagement from the perspectives of both teachers and learners.

In the Philippine elementary school context, learner-centered approaches are embedded in curriculum frameworks and teaching standards. However, there is a need for context-specific qualitative research that documents how learner-centered teaching is enacted in everyday classroom practice and how it influences learners' engagement. This study addresses this gap by examining learner-centered teaching practices and classroom engagement at Baluarte Elementary School through an in-depth qualitative institutional lens.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Learner-Centered Teaching in Elementary Education**

Learner-centered teaching is grounded in constructivist and humanistic theories that emphasize learner agency, active participation, and meaningful learning experiences. In elementary education, learner-centered practices include interactive discussions, collaborative learning, problem-based activities, and opportunities for choice and self-expression. Research suggests that when learners are actively involved in constructing knowledge, they develop deeper understanding, greater motivation, and stronger self-regulation skills.

Studies in elementary classrooms indicate that learner-centered pedagogy enhances learners' sense of autonomy and ownership over learning. Teachers who adopt learner-centered approaches often act as facilitators, guiding learners through tasks while encouraging exploration and dialogue. Such instructional practices are associated with higher levels of engagement and positive attitudes toward learning.

### **Classroom Engagement as a Multidimensional Construct**

Classroom engagement is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' observable participation, effort, and persistence in learning activities. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging, while cognitive engagement involves strategic thinking, self-regulation, and willingness to invest effort in challenging tasks.

Research demonstrates that engagement is strongly influenced by instructional practices and classroom climate. Learner-centered classrooms, which promote interaction, relevance, and support, are more likely to foster

sustained engagement across all dimensions. In contrast, highly teacher-centered environments often lead to passive participation and surface-level learning.

### **Contextual Factors Affecting Learner-Centered Practice**

While learner-centered teaching offers clear benefits, its implementation is shaped by contextual factors such as class size, instructional resources, curriculum demands, and teacher preparation. Studies highlight that teachers' beliefs, professional training, and institutional support significantly influence their ability to enact learner-centered practices consistently. Understanding these contextual dynamics is essential for sustaining learner-centered pedagogy in real classroom settings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative institutional case study design to explore learner-centered teaching practices and classroom engagement at Baluarte Elementary School. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth examination of instructional practices, classroom interactions, and participants' lived experiences within their natural educational context.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted at Baluarte Elementary School, a public elementary institution. Participants included elementary teachers implementing learner-centered teaching practices and selected learners from their respective classes. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience in learner-centered instruction.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted to document teaching strategies, learner participation, and classroom interactions. Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored pedagogical beliefs, instructional decisions, and perceived challenges. Focus group discussions with learners examined their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of classroom activities.

### **Data Analysis**

All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from teachers and parents, and assent was obtained from learners. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data handling procedures.

## **FINDINGS**

The qualitative analysis of classroom observations, teacher interviews, and learner focus group discussions yielded four major themes that illustrate how learner-centered teaching practices shaped classroom engagement at Baluarte Elementary School. These themes highlight both enabling practices and contextual realities influencing the enactment of learner-centered pedagogy.

### **Theme 1: Active Learning through Participatory Instructional Strategies**

Findings revealed that teachers consistently employed participatory instructional strategies that actively involved learners in the teaching-learning process. These strategies included group discussions, collaborative

tasks, hands-on activities, guided questioning, and opportunities for learners to explain ideas in their own words. Classroom observations showed that lessons characterized by interaction and dialogue elicited higher levels of learner attentiveness, participation, and enthusiasm compared to sessions dominated by teacher talk. Learners were more willing to raise questions, share opinions, and engage with tasks when they were invited to become contributors rather than passive listeners.

Teachers described participatory strategies as essential for sustaining attention and interest among young learners. One teacher shared, "*Kapag pinagsasalita at pinapaliwanag ko ang mga bata, mas naiintindihan nila at mas nagiging aktibo sila sa klase.*" Similarly, learners expressed that they enjoyed lessons where they could actively participate, with one learner stating, "*Mas gusto ko po kapag may group work kasi nakakapag-share kami ng ideas.*" These responses suggest that participation enhanced both understanding and motivation.

This theme indicates that participatory instructional strategies promote behavioral engagement by encouraging active involvement in learning tasks. Consistent with constructivist learning theory, active learning allows learners to construct knowledge through interaction and dialogue rather than passive reception (Vygotsky, 1978). Prior studies have similarly found that participatory approaches increase learner engagement and attentiveness, particularly in elementary classrooms where interaction supports comprehension and interest (Fredricks et al., 2004). The findings affirm that learner-centered classrooms that emphasize participation create conditions conducive to sustained engagement.

## **Theme 2: Differentiated and Contextualized Instruction Supported Engagement**

Another prominent theme was the use of differentiated and contextualized instruction to accommodate diverse learner abilities and experiences. Teachers adapted tasks by varying levels of difficulty, providing alternative activities, and connecting lessons to learners' real-life contexts such as family experiences, community practices, and everyday situations. This flexibility enabled learners to engage with content at their own pace and level of understanding, reducing frustration and promoting confidence.

Teachers emphasized the importance of relevance in maintaining engagement. One teacher explained, "*Iba-iba ang kakayahan ng bata, kaya ina-adjust ko ang gawain at inuugnay ko sa buhay nila para mas maintindihan nila.*" Learners echoed this sentiment, noting that lessons felt easier and more meaningful when examples related to their daily lives. A learner shared, "*Mas naiintindihan ko po ang lesson kapag may example na ginagawa namin sa bahay.*"

Differentiated and contextualized instruction supported both emotional and cognitive engagement by making learning accessible and relevant. This aligns with learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes responsiveness to individual differences and the use of meaningful contexts to deepen understanding (Tomlinson, 2014). Research has shown that contextualized learning enhances engagement by helping learners see the relevance of academic content to their lived experiences, thereby increasing motivation and cognitive investment (Gay, 2018). The findings suggest that differentiation is a key mechanism through which learner-centered teaching promotes inclusive and engaging learning environments.

## **Theme 3: Supportive Classroom Relationships Fostered Confidence and Participation**

The data further revealed that supportive teacher–learner relationships and positive peer interactions played a critical role in fostering learner confidence and participation. Teachers demonstrated patience, encouragement, and sensitivity to learners' needs, creating a classroom climate characterized by trust and respect. Such environments allowed learners to express ideas without fear of ridicule or punishment, which was particularly important for shy or struggling learners.

Learners consistently highlighted the importance of feeling supported. One learner remarked, "*Hindi po ako natatakot sumagot kasi hindi po kami pinapagalitan kapag mali.*" Teachers also recognized the value of encouragement, with one noting, "*Kapag pinupuri at ginagabayan ang bata, mas nagiging confident sila na*

*sumali sa discussion.*” Observations confirmed that learners were more willing to participate when feedback was constructive and affirming.

This theme underscores the role of emotional safety in promoting engagement. Supportive relationships enhance emotional engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and psychological security, which in turn encourages behavioral and cognitive participation. These findings align with engagement research emphasizing that positive teacher–student relationships are foundational to sustained learner involvement (Wentzel, 2012). The results further support studies indicating that learner-centered classrooms thrive when relational practices complement instructional strategies (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

#### **Theme 4: Contextual Constraints Shaped Learner-Centered Practice**

Despite the positive impact of learner-centered teaching practices, teachers identified several contextual constraints that shaped their implementation. These included large class sizes, limited instructional materials, insufficient time for lesson preparation, and competing administrative responsibilities. Teachers noted that while they valued learner-centered pedagogy, such constraints made consistent implementation challenging.

One teacher explained, *"Gusto naming maging learner-centered ang klase, pero mahirap kapag marami ang bata at kulang ang materials."* Another shared that they often relied on improvisation and personal initiative to sustain learner-centered practices despite limited resources. Observations showed that teachers adapted by using locally available materials, modifying activities, and managing time creatively.

This theme highlights the influence of structural and institutional factors on pedagogical practice. While teachers demonstrated strong commitment to learner-centered principles, systemic constraints affected the depth and consistency of implementation. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that institutional support, resource availability, and manageable class sizes are critical for sustaining learner-centered instruction (Fullan, 2007). The results suggest that effective learner-centered pedagogy requires not only teacher competence and commitment but also supportive educational structures.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study demonstrate that learner-centered teaching practices significantly enhanced classroom engagement among pupils at Baluarte Elementary School. By shifting the instructional approach from traditional teacher-centered methods to participatory and interactive learning strategies, teachers were able to cultivate a more dynamic classroom environment that encouraged learners to actively participate in the learning process. Learner-centered strategies such as collaborative learning, guided discussions, and problem-based activities promoted behavioral engagement, as students became more involved in classroom tasks, participated in group activities, and contributed ideas during class discussions. These results align with previous studies which emphasize that active learning strategies increase students’ participation and responsibility in their own learning process (Fredricks et al., 2016; Prince, 2004).

Moreover, learner-centered pedagogy played a crucial role in strengthening emotional engagement among learners. Teachers who fostered supportive relationships and connected learning activities to learners’ personal experiences created an inclusive and motivating classroom atmosphere. When students feel respected, valued, and supported by their teachers, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning and exhibit greater enthusiasm during classroom activities. Research has consistently shown that positive teacher–student relationships and emotionally supportive learning environments contribute significantly to students’ motivation and engagement in school (Pianta et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

In addition, the findings revealed strong evidence of cognitive engagement among learners. Through inquiry-based tasks, reflective questioning, and collaborative problem-solving activities, students were encouraged to think critically, analyze information, and apply their knowledge to real-life contexts. Rather than relying solely on memorization, learners engaged in deeper levels of thinking and demonstrated reflective understanding of lesson concepts. This supports previous research indicating that learner-centered approaches stimulate higher-

order thinking skills and deeper conceptual understanding among students (Hattie, 2012; Kuh, 2009). Consistent with Engagement Theory, the findings highlight the interconnected nature of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), these three dimensions of engagement collectively influence students' learning outcomes and academic success. The learner-centered practices implemented at Baluarte Elementary School fostered an environment that valued learner voice, autonomy, collaboration, and meaningful interaction, all of which are essential elements in promoting holistic student engagement (Kuh, 2009).

However, the findings also revealed that several structural constraints influence the sustainability of learner-centered teaching practices. Factors such as large class sizes, limited teaching materials, heavy curriculum demands, and time constraints can limit teachers' ability to consistently implement participatory strategies. These challenges highlight the need for stronger institutional and administrative support to sustain learner-centered pedagogy in schools. Previous studies have emphasized that effective implementation of innovative teaching approaches requires supportive school leadership, professional development opportunities, and access to adequate instructional resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Overall, the findings suggest that learner-centered teaching practices can significantly enhance student engagement in multiple dimensions. However, for these practices to be sustained and maximized, schools must provide appropriate structural and institutional support systems that empower teachers to continuously adopt innovative and participatory instructional approaches.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This qualitative institutional study provides strong empirical evidence that learner-centered teaching practices play a crucial role in fostering classroom engagement in elementary education. The findings demonstrate that when instruction prioritizes learner participation, differentiated tasks, and supportive teacher-learner relationships, classrooms become spaces where learners are actively involved, emotionally invested, and cognitively engaged in the learning process. At Baluarte Elementary School, teachers' deliberate efforts to create inclusive, responsive, and interactive learning environments enabled learners to confidently express ideas, collaborate with peers, and sustain attention to learning tasks. These results highlight that learner-centered pedagogy functions not only as an instructional approach but also as a means of cultivating a positive classroom culture that supports meaningful and sustained engagement.

In terms of instructional practice, the study suggests that elementary teachers should intentionally integrate learner-centered strategies that promote interaction, relevance, and learner autonomy. Such strategies include the use of participatory activities, differentiated instruction, contextualized learning tasks, and formative feedback that responds to learners' diverse needs and abilities. When learners are provided opportunities to ask questions, make choices, and connect lessons to their everyday experiences, they develop a stronger sense of ownership over their learning. This sense of agency contributes to increased motivation, persistence, and deeper understanding, which are essential foundations for long-term academic success.

From a school leadership perspective, the findings underscore the importance of institutional support in sustaining learner-centered teaching practices. School leaders are encouraged to prioritize continuous

professional development that equips teachers with practical strategies for learner-centered pedagogy, classroom management, and assessment for learning. In addition, providing adequate instructional resources, time for collaborative lesson planning, and supportive policies can help teachers consistently implement active learning approaches despite contextual challenges. Effective leadership plays a critical role in creating school environments that encourage innovation, reflection, and learner-centered teaching.

Finally, this study points to important directions for future research. While the present findings offer valuable insights into the role of learner-centered teaching in enhancing classroom engagement, future studies may employ mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term effects of learner-centered pedagogy on learners' academic achievement, social development, and emotional well-being. Further research across varied educational contexts would also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how

learner-centered practices can be sustained and scaled to support holistic learner development in elementary education.

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