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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pedagogical Practices and Learner Participation in Learner-Centered Primary Classrooms at Dipaluda Primary School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has been widely promoted in primary education as a means of fostering active learner participation, agency, and meaningful engagement. However, empirical studies that examine how learner-centered pedagogical practices are enacted in everyday classroom contexts, particularly in rural and public primary schools, remain limited. This study examined pedagogical practices and learner participation in learner-centered primary classrooms at Dipaluda Primary School. Anchored in constructivist and learner-centered learning frameworks, the study employed a qualitative case study design involving classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and pupils. Findings revealed that pedagogical practices emphasizing facilitation, dialogue, collaborative activities, and contextualized tasks encouraged active learner participation and responsibility for learning. Conversely, structural constraints such as large class sizes, time limitations, and curriculum demands moderated the consistency of learner-centered enactment. The study concludes that learner participation in primary classrooms is shaped not only by instructional strategies but also by teacher–learner relationships and institutional conditions. Implications for primary teaching practice, school leadership, and policy support are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education plays a critical role in shaping learners' foundational literacy and numeracy, self-regulation, and long-term attitudes toward schooling, because early classroom experiences influence how children come to view learning as either meaningful participation or mere compliance. Over the past decades, educational reforms across many systems have increasingly promoted a shift from teacher-centered instruction toward learner-centered pedagogy, emphasizing active participation, inquiry, and sense-making as essential features of effective learning especially in the early years when learners are developing confidence and identity as students. Learner-centered approaches position pupils as active constructors of understanding who interact with ideas, peers and teachers through questioning, discussion, exploration and collaborative problem-solving rather than receiving knowledge passively through recitation and rote tasks. This orientation is consistent with evidence that learner-centered teacher–student relationships and responsive instruction are associated with stronger academic and affective outcomes, including greater motivation and improved achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). In primary classrooms, learner participation is particularly significant because engagement is not only a pathway to learning but also a developmental condition that nurtures persistence, self-efficacy, and willingness to take intellectual risks. Engagement research conceptualizes participation as multidimensional behavioral, emotional, and cognitive and shows that these dimensions are shaped by classroom structures and teacher practices rather than being fixed learner traits (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). When pupils are encouraged to ask questions, share explanations, collaborate with peers, and reflect on their thinking, they tend to develop stronger cognitive and socio-emotional competencies that support sustained learning, including deeper conceptual understanding and more positive school-related motivation (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). Autonomy-supportive teaching, in particular, has been linked to higher engagement and stronger motivational outcomes because it supports learners' sense of competence and ownership of learning (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). However, despite the documented value of participatory, learner-centered pedagogy, many primary classrooms still rely heavily on traditional practices characterized by teacher dominance, repetitive drills, and evaluative recitation, which can narrow opportunities for meaningful learner talk and shared problem-solving especially under pressures of time, large classes, and content coverage demands (Trowler, 2010; Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). Within this landscape, Dipaluda Primary School as a public primary school implementing learner-centered approaches offers a relevant context for examining how pedagogical practices shape learner participation in the realities of everyday teaching. By documenting how teachers enact learner-centered pedagogy and how pupils respond through participation, confidence, and engagement, the present study aims to generate practice-relevant insights that can strengthen instructional quality and make learner-centered reforms more authentic and sustainable in primary education settings.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical practices characterize learner-centered primary classrooms at Dipaluda Primary School?
2. How do these pedagogical practices influence learner participation in classroom activities?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in sustaining learner-centered practices in primary classrooms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner-Centered Pedagogy in Primary Education

Learner-centered pedagogy in primary education is deeply rooted in constructivist learning theory, which conceptualizes learning as an active, experiential, and socially mediated process through which learners construct meaning based on prior knowledge, interaction, and reflection. In this view, pupils are not passive recipients of information but active participants who make sense of concepts through exploration, dialogue, and engagement with authentic tasks. In primary classrooms, learner-centered pedagogy is commonly enacted

through practices such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, contextualized instruction, and formative assessment, all of which are designed to align with children's developmental stages and natural curiosity. These practices emphasize learning as a process rather than a product, encouraging pupils to ask questions, test ideas, and learn through trial and error.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that learner-centered approaches in primary education are associated with higher levels of pupil participation, intrinsic motivation, and conceptual understanding. For example, Cornelius-White (2007) found that learner-centered teacher–pupil relationships have strong positive effects on student engagement and achievement, particularly in early schooling. Similarly, Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) showed that autonomy-supportive teaching combined with clear instructional structure enhances pupils' engagement and persistence in learning tasks. Teachers who adopt facilitative roles guiding, scaffolding, and responding to learners' ideas rather than directing every step create classroom environments where pupils feel emotionally safe to explore ideas, ask questions, and learn from mistakes. Such environments are especially critical in primary education, where early learning experiences shape children's confidence and long-term attitudes toward schooling.

Learner Participation as an Educational Outcome

Learner participation is widely regarded as a central outcome and indicator of instructional quality in primary education. It refers to pupils' active involvement in classroom life, including verbal contributions during discussions, collaboration with peers, participation in decision-making, and sustained behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in learning tasks. Participation is not limited to observable behaviors such as raising hands or answering questions; it also encompasses learners' emotional investment, sense of belonging, and willingness to persist in challenging activities. Because participation reflects how learners experience instruction, it is increasingly used as a lens for evaluating the effectiveness and inclusiveness of pedagogical practices.

Research suggests that learner participation is shaped by a combination of instructional strategies, classroom climate, and the quality of teacher–pupil relationships. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) conceptualize engagement and by extension participation as a multidimensional construct that is highly responsive to classroom practices rather than a fixed learner trait. Studies in primary classrooms indicate that when teachers encourage dialogue, provide meaningful choices, and recognize pupil contributions, learners are more likely to participate actively and sustain engagement over time (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Learner-centered pedagogical practices enhance participation by creating opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and shared responsibility, enabling pupils to see themselves as valued contributors to classroom learning rather than passive followers of instructions.

Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Context

Although learner-centered pedagogy is widely promoted in policy and research, its implementation in primary schools is strongly influenced by classroom and institutional contexts. Factors such as class size, curriculum demands, time constraints, and availability of learning resources shape how teachers enact participatory practices in everyday teaching. Research has shown that large class sizes and tightly prescribed curricula can limit opportunities for dialogue, individualized feedback, and collaborative learning, even when teachers are committed to learner-centered ideals (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). As a result, learner-centered pedagogy is often enacted unevenly, with teachers alternating between facilitative and directive approaches depending on situational demands.

Teachers in primary education frequently balance learner-centered aspirations with practical considerations related to classroom management and instructional efficiency. This balancing act leads to varied enactments of participatory teaching, where learner-centered practices may be implemented selectively or adapted to fit contextual realities. Understanding these contextual influences is therefore essential for interpreting how learner-centered pedagogy functions in practice and why learner participation may vary across classrooms. Rather than viewing inconsistencies as failures of implementation, recent studies emphasize the importance of examining how teachers negotiate pedagogical ideals within real-world constraints to better support sustainable

and context-sensitive learner-centered instruction (Trowler, 2010; Mercer & Howe, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design to examine pedagogical practices and learner participation within a clearly bounded educational context. The use of a case study approach was appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth, holistic exploration of how learner-centered pedagogy is enacted in everyday classroom life and how pupils experience participation within real instructional settings. Rather than seeking to generalize findings statistically, the design emphasized contextual understanding, enabling the study to capture the complexity, interactions, and meanings embedded in naturally occurring teaching–learning processes in primary classrooms.

The research was conducted at Dipaluda Primary School, a public primary school that has adopted learner-centered instructional approaches as part of its teaching framework. Participants consisted of selected primary teachers handling learner-centered classes and pupils enrolled in those classrooms. Teachers were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on those actively engaged in implementing learner-centered strategies and capable of providing rich insights into pedagogical decision-making. Pupil participants were selected to reflect a range of participation levels, learning experiences, and classroom roles, ensuring that the study represented diverse perspectives on learner participation rather than only those of highly active learners.

Data were gathered through multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure depth, richness, and triangulation of findings. Classroom observations were conducted to document pedagogical practices in action, with particular attention to teacher–pupil interactions, instructional strategies, and visible indicators of learner participation such as questioning, collaboration, discussion, and sustained engagement in learning tasks. In addition, semi-structured interviews with teachers explored their instructional strategies, beliefs about learner-centered pedagogy, and perceived challenges in promoting participation. Complementary interviews with pupils focused on their experiences of participation, confidence, motivation, and engagement during classroom activities. The combination of observational and interview data allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of both instructional intentions and learner experiences.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, involving iterative cycles of coding, categorization, and theme development. Observation notes and interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes related to pedagogical practices and learner participation. A process of constant comparison was employed to refine and validate themes across different data sources. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, while prolonged engagement in the research site supported deeper contextual understanding. Peer debriefing was also utilized to examine emerging interpretations and strengthen the credibility and rigor of the analytical process.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Theme 1: Facilitative Teaching Practices as Catalysts for Active Participation

Findings revealed that facilitative teaching practices played a crucial role in promoting active learner participation in primary classrooms. Teachers who positioned themselves as guides rather than sole authorities encouraged pupils to ask questions, work collaboratively, and explore ideas independently. Instead of providing immediate answers, these teachers used prompts, probing questions, and scaffolding strategies to support pupils' thinking. One teacher shared, "*Mas natututo sila kapag hinahayaan mong mag-isip muna bago ka tumulong*" (They learn more when you let them think first before helping). Pupils described feeling more engaged and willing to participate when they were given opportunities to try, make mistakes, and learn from

peers. A pupil explained, *"Mas gusto kong sumagot kapag hindi agad sinasabi kung mali o tama"* (I like answering more when the teacher does not immediately say if it's right or wrong).

From an interpretive perspective, these facilitative practices enabled pupils to experience learning as an active and participatory process. Participation was not limited to recitation but included collaborative problem-solving and exploratory talk. This suggests that facilitative teaching fosters a classroom climate where pupils feel safe

to engage cognitively and socially, supporting the development of agency and sustained participation.

Theme 2: Dialogic Interaction and the Development of Learner Confidence

The analysis also highlighted the importance of dialogic interaction in strengthening learner confidence and participation. Classrooms that emphasized discussion, open-ended questioning, and peer exchange created spaces where pupils felt comfortable expressing ideas and responding to others. Teachers intentionally normalized dialogue by valuing multiple answers and encouraging pupils to explain their thinking. One teacher noted, *"Kapag discussion, kahit tahimik dati, nagsisimula nang magsalita"* (During discussions, even those who were previously quiet begin to speak). Pupils echoed this experience, with one stating, *"Hindi ako natatakot magsalita kasi may nakikinig"* (I'm not afraid to speak because someone listens).

Interpretively, dialogic interaction functioned as a mechanism for both emotional and cognitive engagement. As pupils gained confidence in sharing ideas, they became more willing to participate in discussions and collaborative tasks. Dialogue transformed participation from a performance for the teacher into a shared meaning-making process, reinforcing pupils' sense of belonging and competence within the classroom.

Theme 3: Shared Responsibility for Learning and Ownership of Tasks

Another key theme that emerged was the redistribution of responsibility for learning in learner-centered classrooms. Teachers deliberately involved pupils in decision-making related to tasks, group roles, and classroom routines, thereby encouraging ownership and accountability. One teacher explained, *"Kapag may papel sila sa gawain, mas seryoso sila"* (When they have a role in the task, they take it more seriously). Pupils similarly expressed that being entrusted with responsibilities motivated them to participate actively. A pupil remarked, *"Kapag kami ang in-charge, kailangan naming gawin nang maayos"* (When we are in charge, we need to do it properly).

From an analytical standpoint, shared responsibility fostered a sense of ownership that extended beyond individual tasks to overall classroom participation. Pupils viewed themselves as contributors to the learning process rather than mere followers of instructions. This redistribution of authority strengthened emotional engagement and promoted self-regulation, as pupils became more invested in completing tasks and supporting peers.

Theme 4: Structural Constraints on Sustaining Learner-Centered Practice

Despite the positive impact of learner-centered practices, participants consistently identified structural constraints that limited their sustained implementation. Teachers cited large class sizes, limited instructional time, and pressure to complete curriculum requirements as major challenges. One teacher expressed, *"Gusto kong mas maraming discussion pero kulang ang oras"* (I want more discussion, but time is limited). Pupils also observed that participatory activities were sometimes shortened or omitted during periods of assessment or tight schedules.

These constraints highlight the tension between learner-centered ideals and the practical realities of classroom teaching. Interpretively, the findings suggest that while individual teachers may be committed to participatory pedagogy, systemic conditions shape what is feasible in daily practice. Without institutional support such as manageable class sizes and flexible pacing learner-centered practices risk becoming occasional rather than consistent.

Taken together, the themes illustrate that learner participation in primary classrooms emerges from the interaction between pedagogical practices and contextual conditions. Facilitative teaching, dialogic interaction, and shared responsibility created environments that encouraged active participation and learner confidence. However, structural constraints moderated the extent to which these practices could be sustained. The findings underscore that learner-centered pedagogy is not solely a matter of instructional strategy but a relational and systemic practice that requires both pedagogical commitment and supportive institutional conditions.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that pedagogical practices are central in shaping learner participation in learner-centered primary classrooms because they determine how often and how safely pupils are invited to speak, collaborate, inquire, and take ownership of learning tasks. In Dipaluda Primary School, facilitative teaching practices (e.g., scaffolding, prompting, allowing multiple solution pathways) and dialogic routines (e.g., open-ended questioning, discussion, peer explanation) enabled pupils to participate as active meaning-makers rather than mere responders. This pattern is consistent with constructivist perspectives that position learning as a process of social interaction and co-construction of understanding, where classroom talk functions as a key pathway to conceptual development (Mercer & Howe, 2012). It also aligns with engagement research showing that participation is multidimensional behavioral, emotional, and cognitive and is strongly shaped by classroom experiences and teacher practices rather than being a fixed learner attribute (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Moreover, learner-centered teacher–pupil relationships have been associated with stronger participation and achievement outcomes, suggesting that pupils engage more deeply when they perceive teachers as supportive facilitators rather than controllers of learning (Cornelius-White, 2007). In this study, pupils' increased willingness to contribute, collaborate, and persist in tasks reflects how facilitative and dialogic pedagogy can strengthen both cognitive engagement (sense-making, explanation, persistence) and socio-emotional engagement (confidence, belonging, motivation), particularly when pupils experience autonomy-support and clear structure during learning activities (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

At the same time, the study highlights that learner-centered pedagogy is mediated by contextual constraints that can dilute participatory practices even when teachers value learner-centered principles. Teachers' efforts to promote participation were tempered by structural conditions such as large class sizes, limited time for discussion, and curriculum pacing demands constraints that have been shown to shape teacher-pupil interaction quality and the feasibility of sustained participatory learning in primary settings (Blatchford, Bassett, & Brown, 2011). This helps explain why learner-centered participation sometimes appeared uneven across lessons: the enactment of dialogue, feedback, and shared responsibility often required time, flexible pacing, and manageable group dynamics. Importantly, the findings suggest that learner participation does not emerge from instructional techniques alone (e.g., "doing group work"), but from relational practices and classroom conditions that legitimize pupil voice, make errors safe, and position participation as meaningful rather than performative. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that student engagement and participation are reciprocally shaped by teacher behavior and classroom climate over time (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), and with feedback scholarship emphasizing that learning participation strengthens when classroom routines support guidance, responsiveness, and learner confidence (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Overall, the results imply that sustaining learner-centered participation requires not only skilled pedagogy at the classroom level but also enabling institutional conditions such as realistic pacing expectations and class-size support that allow facilitative, dialogic, and relationship-rich teaching to be practiced consistently.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This qualitative case study concludes that learner participation in primary classrooms is strongly influenced by pedagogical practices that emphasize facilitation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Learner-centered pedagogy, when meaningfully enacted, fosters active participation and positive learning experiences among primary pupils. However, sustaining such practices requires supportive institutional conditions that address structural constraints.

Implications for Practice. Primary teachers are encouraged to adopt facilitative and dialogic strategies that promote pupil participation and agency.

Implications for School Leadership. School leaders should provide instructional support and professional development focused on learner-centered pedagogy.

Directions for Future Research. Future studies may examine learner participation across multiple primary schools or explore longitudinal impacts of learner-centered practices on learning outcomes.

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