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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teaching Styles, Learner Agency, and Classroom Engagement in Learner-Centered Classrooms at Maluno Integrated School

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Abstract

Learner-centered pedagogy has been widely promoted as a means of fostering learner agency and classroom engagement, yet limited qualitative research has examined how teaching styles shape these outcomes in everyday classroom practice, particularly in basic education contexts in developing countries. This qualitative case study explored how teaching styles influence learner agency and classroom engagement in learner-centered classrooms at Maluno Integrated School. Drawing on classroom observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, the study examined lived instructional experiences and interactional practices that enabled or constrained participation. Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes: (1) facilitative teaching styles as enablers of learner agency, (2) dialogic classrooms as spaces for engagement, (3) negotiated authority and shared responsibility for learning, and (4) structural and contextual constraints on learner-centered enactment. Findings indicate that teaching styles characterized by autonomy support, dialogue, and relational sensitivity fostered students' sense of agency and sustained behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. However, institutional and classroom constraints moderated the depth of learner-centered practice. The study contributes qualitative evidence to the understanding of how learner-centered pedagogy operates in practice and highlights the central role of teaching styles in translating learner-centered ideals into meaningful classroom engagement.

Keywords: teaching styles, learner agency, classroom engagement, learner-centered pedagogy, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Across educational systems worldwide, the gradual shift from teacher-centered instruction toward learner-centered pedagogy has been widely framed as a necessary response to the demands of complex, uncertain, and knowledge-rich societies. Contemporary educational discourse emphasizes that learners must develop not only content knowledge but also the capacity to think critically, collaborate with others, regulate their own learning, and adapt to rapidly changing contexts. Learner-centered approaches respond to these demands by foregrounding learner agency, participation, and meaning-making, positioning students as active contributors to the learning process rather than passive recipients of information. Within such pedagogical orientations, learning is understood as an interactive and socially mediated process in which students engage with ideas, peers, and teachers to construct understanding. Empirical research supports this view, indicating that learner-centered environments are strongly associated with higher levels of classroom engagement, intrinsic motivation, and deeper learning outcomes, as students are more likely to invest behavioral effort, emotional commitment, and cognitive resources when they experience autonomy and relevance in learning activities (Kahu, 2013; Reeve, 2012).

Despite the broad endorsement of learner-centered pedagogy in policy documents and curricular frameworks, actual classroom practices frequently remain dominated by teacher control, content coverage, and efficiency-driven instruction, particularly in basic education settings. Studies have shown that even in contexts where learner-centered approaches are formally mandated, teachers often revert to lecture-based and directive methods due to time pressures, curricular demands, and assessment expectations. In this regard, teaching styles defined as relatively stable patterns of instructional interaction, classroom authority, and pedagogical decision-making emerge as a critical factor in determining whether learner-centered principles are meaningfully enacted. Teaching styles that emphasize autonomy support, dialogue, responsiveness, and shared responsibility tend to create conditions that enable learner agency and sustained engagement. Conversely, highly directive or controlling teaching styles may limit opportunities for student voice, choice, and participation, thereby constraining engagement even within classrooms that are nominally described as learner-centered. This tension highlights that learner-centered pedagogy is not realized through labels or lesson formats alone but through everyday instructional relationships and interactional practices.

Within the Philippine basic education context, integrated schools such as Maluno Integrated School offer a particularly relevant setting for examining these pedagogical dynamics. Integrated schools serve learners across multiple grade levels and often accommodate diverse learning needs, backgrounds, and developmental stages, creating both pedagogical opportunities and structural constraints for learner-centered instruction. Teachers in such contexts are required to balance policy expectations for learner-centeredness with practical realities such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and varied learner readiness. As a result, the enactment of learner-centered pedagogy is shaped not only by curricular intent but also by teachers' teaching styles and professional judgments. Against this backdrop, the present study sought to move beyond abstract claims about learner-centered pedagogy by examining how teaching styles shape learner agency and classroom engagement in practice. By focusing on the lived experiences of teachers and students at Maluno Integrated School, the study aimed to illuminate how learner-centered ideals are negotiated, enacted, and sometimes constrained within everyday classroom life.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in constructivist and self-determination perspectives on learning and engagement. Constructivist theory posits that learning emerges through interaction, dialogue, and social negotiation, emphasizing the importance of instructional practices that invite participation and co-construction of meaning (Kahu, 2013). Complementing this view, self-determination theory highlights learner agency as a function of autonomy support, competence affirmation, and relatedness within learning environments (Reeve, 2012). From these perspectives, teaching styles are not neutral delivery mechanisms but relational practices that shape the conditions under which learners can exercise agency and engage meaningfully. Classroom engagement manifested behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively is thus understood as an emergent outcome of teacher–student interactions rather than a fixed learner disposition (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative case study research design to examine how teaching styles shape learner agency and classroom engagement within a clearly bounded educational context. A qualitative case study was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth and holistic exploration of complex instructional practices and social interactions as they naturally occur in real-life classroom settings. Rather than seeking to generalize findings statistically, the design enabled a rich, contextualized understanding of how learner-centered pedagogy is enacted, negotiated, and experienced by teachers and students. This approach was particularly suited to capturing the nuanced ways in which teaching styles influence participation, autonomy, and engagement in everyday classroom life.

The research was conducted at Maluno Integrated School, a public integrated school implementing learner-centered instructional approaches across grade levels. The site was selected due to its relevance as a setting where diverse learners and instructional demands intersect within a single institution. Participants included selected classroom teachers and students from classes identified as employing learner-centered strategies. Teachers were chosen through purposive sampling, focusing on those who were actively involved in the planning and delivery of learner-centered instruction and who could provide rich insights into pedagogical decision-making. Student participants were selected to represent a range of learning experiences, participation levels, and perspectives, ensuring that the study captured both highly engaged learners and those who participated less frequently in classroom activities.

Data were gathered using multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure depth, richness, and triangulation. Classroom observations were conducted to examine teaching styles in practice, with particular attention to instructional strategies, teacher–student interaction patterns, opportunities for learner choice, and visible manifestations of engagement such as participation, collaboration, and persistence in tasks. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their instructional intentions, beliefs about learner-centered pedagogy, and perceived challenges in fostering learner agency and engagement. Student interviews provided a complementary perspective by capturing learners' experiences of autonomy, participation, motivation, and interaction within the classroom. The combination of observations and interviews enabled the study to connect teachers' stated intentions with students' lived experiences of instruction.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, involving iterative cycles of coding, categorization, and theme development. Observation notes and interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and relationships across data sources. A constant comparison process was employed to refine emerging themes and ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, methodological triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple data sources, while prolonged engagement in the research site allowed for deeper contextual understanding. Peer debriefing was also employed to challenge assumptions, refine analytic decisions, and strengthen the credibility and rigor of the interpretations.

4. Results and Findings

Theme 1: Facilitative Teaching Styles as Enablers of Learner Agency

Findings indicate that facilitative teaching styles where teachers guide learning rather than dictate it played a central role in enabling learner agency. Teachers who intentionally reduced direct control and instead scaffolded learning through prompts, feedback, and flexible task structures created spaces where students could exercise choice and initiative. In these classrooms, learners were encouraged to decide how to approach tasks, collaborate with peers, and explore multiple solution pathways. One teacher explained, "*Hindi ko na sinasabi agad ang sagot. Hinahayaan kong mag-isip sila at pumili ng paraan kung paano nila gagawin ang gawain*" (I no longer give the answers right away. I let them think and choose how they will do the task). Students, in turn, described a growing sense of responsibility for their learning, with one learner noting, "*Kapag kami ang pinapapili ng paraan, parang mas obligado kang tapusin at intindihin ang ginagawa mo*" (When we are allowed to choose how to do the task, you feel more responsible to finish and understand it).

Interpreted through a learner agency lens, these practices illustrate how autonomy-supportive teaching nurtures students' capacity to act intentionally within the learning process. This finding is consistent with research showing that facilitative and autonomy-supportive teaching styles enhance learner agency, motivation, and self-regulation by allowing students to experience control and ownership over learning activities (Reeve, 2012; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Rather than diminishing teacher authority, facilitative teaching redistributed it in ways that empowered learners to take an active role in constructing knowledge.

Theme 2: Dialogic Classrooms as Spaces for Engagement

Another prominent theme was the role of dialogue and discussion in fostering classroom engagement. Classrooms that normalized questioning, peer exchange, and open-ended discussion were described by students as more inclusive and less intimidating. Learners reported increased confidence in expressing ideas when classroom talk was framed as exploratory rather than evaluative. One student shared, "*Hindi ka natatakot magkamali kasi discussion lang at may pakikinig*" (You're not afraid to make mistakes because it's a discussion and people listen). Teachers similarly observed that dialogic activities sustained students' attention and persistence, noting that "*Mas tumatagal ang focus ng mga bata kapag may palitan ng ideya, hindi lang pakikinig*" (Students' focus lasts longer when there is an exchange of ideas, not just listening).

From an interpretive standpoint, dialogic teaching functioned as a mechanism for both behavioral and cognitive engagement. Students were not only more willing to participate but also more inclined to elaborate, justify, and reflect on ideas. This finding aligns with higher-impact engagement studies which demonstrate that dialogic and interactive classrooms promote deeper learning and sustained engagement by positioning learners as co-participants in meaning-making (Kahu, 2013; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Dialogue thus emerged not simply as a teaching strategy but as a relational practice that legitimized student voice and fostered engagement.

Theme 3: Negotiated Authority and Shared Responsibility for Learning

The findings further revealed that learner-centered teaching styles led to a negotiation of classroom authority, where responsibility for learning was shared between teachers and students. Rather than unilaterally controlling classroom processes, teachers invited learners to contribute to decision-making, problem-solving, and rule-setting during learning activities. One teacher explained, "*Kapag kasama sila sa pagpapasya, mas sinusunod nila at mas seryoso sila sa gawain*" (When they are included in decision-making, they follow through more and take tasks seriously). Students echoed this perception, with one stating, "*Pakiramdam ko may boses kami sa klase, hindi lang sunod-sunod*" (I feel that we have a voice in class, not just following orders).

This redistribution of authority strengthened students' emotional connection to learning and increased their sense of ownership. Learners perceived themselves as partners in the learning process rather than passive recipients, which contributed to heightened emotional engagement and persistence. These findings are consistent with studies emphasizing that shared authority and participatory classroom structures enhance learner agency and engagement by fostering a sense of belonging and competence (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). In this sense, learner-centered pedagogy reshaped classroom power relations in ways that supported both engagement and agency.

Theme 4: Structural Constraints on Learner-Centered Enactment

Despite the positive impact of learner-centered teaching styles, participants consistently identified structural and contextual constraints that limited their sustained enactment. Teachers cited large class sizes, limited instructional time, and heavy curricular requirements as barriers to implementing dialogic and facilitative practices consistently. One teacher remarked, "*Gusto ko sana ng mas maraming discussion, pero kulang ang oras at marami ang estudyante*" (I would like more discussion, but time is limited and there are many students). Students also noted that opportunities for dialogue and feedback were sometimes reduced during periods of assessment pressure.

These constraints highlight the tension between learner-centered ideals and instructional efficiency demands in real classroom contexts. Interpreted within the broader literature, such challenges reflect systemic issues rather than individual teacher shortcomings. Research has repeatedly shown that without institutional support such as manageable class sizes, flexible curricula, and assessment alignment—learner-centered practices are difficult to sustain and risk becoming episodic rather than transformative (Trowler, 2010; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). The findings suggest that while teaching styles are critical enablers of agency and engagement, their impact is mediated by structural conditions that shape what is pedagogically possible.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that teaching styles operate as a central mediating mechanism through which learner-centered pedagogy translates into learner agency and classroom engagement. Rather than functioning as neutral delivery modes, teaching styles shaped the relational and interactional conditions under which students were able to participate, make decisions, and assume responsibility for their learning. Facilitative and dialogic teaching styles, in particular, created instructional spaces where students were encouraged to think independently, articulate ideas, and collaborate with peers. These styles enabled learners to perceive themselves as active agents in the learning process, a finding that aligns with research demonstrating that autonomy-supportive teaching enhances motivation, persistence, and engagement by satisfying learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Reeve, 2012). In this study, engagement did not arise simply from the presence of group work or interactive tasks; rather, it emerged from **relational teaching practices** that validated student voice, normalized participation, and fostered a climate of trust. Such practices allowed learners to take intellectual risks, express uncertainty, and contribute meaningfully to classroom discourse, thereby deepening both emotional and cognitive engagement.

At the same time, the findings highlight that the effectiveness of learner-centered teaching styles is **contingent upon broader structural and institutional conditions**. Teachers' efforts to sustain facilitative and dialogic practices were often moderated by constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, and rigid curricular and assessment demands. These constraints echo broader critiques in the literature that learner-centered pedagogy, while pedagogically sound, cannot be sustained through individual teacher effort alone (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Without institutional alignment—manifested in supportive policies, manageable workloads, and assessment systems that value participation and deep learning learner-centered teaching risks remaining episodic and situational rather than embedded as a systemic practice. Consequently, the findings suggest that realizing the full potential of learner-centered pedagogy requires not only shifts in teaching style but also coordinated institutional support that bridges the gap between pedagogical ideals and everyday classroom realities.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative case study concludes that teaching styles are a decisive factor in translating learner-centered pedagogy from an abstract instructional ideal into lived and observable classroom engagement. The findings demonstrate that teaching styles shape how learner-centered principles are experienced by students in daily classroom interactions, influencing whether learners participate actively, assume responsibility for their learning, and sustain emotional and cognitive investment in academic tasks. Teaching styles characterized by facilitation, dialogue, responsiveness, and shared authority created learning environments where students were encouraged to exercise choice, voice ideas, and engage collaboratively. In these contexts, learner agency emerged as a practical outcome of instruction, as students perceived themselves as capable contributors to the learning process rather than passive recipients of information. Such environments fostered sustained classroom engagement, reflected in learners' willingness to participate, persist in challenging tasks, and invest effort in understanding content.

Conversely, the study found that teaching styles oriented toward control, efficiency, and content transmission tended to limit opportunities for learner agency and participation, even within classrooms that were nominally described as learner-centered. When instruction prioritized coverage, compliance, and teacher dominance, students' engagement was often reduced to surface-level participation, with limited opportunities for dialogue, decision-making, or meaningful interaction. These findings suggest that learner-centered pedagogy cannot be realized solely through curricular labels, lesson formats, or policy mandates; rather, it is enacted through the relational and interactional dimensions of teaching that define how authority, responsibility, and voice are negotiated in the classroom. Importantly, the study highlights that meaningful learner-centered education is situated at the intersection of pedagogical practice and institutional context. While teaching styles play a central role in fostering agency-oriented learning, their effectiveness is mediated by structural conditions such as class size, time allocation, curricular demands, and assessment practices. The findings indicate that even committed teachers may struggle to sustain facilitative and dialogic approaches in the absence of institutional support. Thus, learner-centered pedagogy should be understood not only as a set of teaching strategies but as a systemic practice that requires alignment among instructional relationships, school structures, and policy expectations. Ultimately, this study affirms that cultivating learner agency and sustained engagement in basic education depends on both the everyday enactment of supportive teaching styles and the institutional conditions that enable such practices to flourish.

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