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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Finding Their Voice in the Early Grades: Grade 1 Learners' Experiences of Classroom Participation and Meaningful Learning

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Abstract

Classroom participation in the early grades is often equated with speaking frequently or answering correctly. Such a narrow view can overlook how young children participate through listening, gesture, peer interaction, drawing, manipulating materials, demonstration, and tentative talk. This qualitative case study is designed to explore how Grade 1 learners at Cauayan West Central School in Cauayan City, Isabela experience classroom participation and how they associate those experiences with meaningful learning. The study adopts a child-centered, sociocultural perspective and proposes triangulation of non-participant classroom observations, brief developmentally appropriate learner conversations, teacher interviews, and learner-produced artifacts. Reflexive thematic analysis is used to examine patterns across verbal and non-verbal participation while attending to negative and deviant cases. The analytic model developed for the study organizes expected lines of inquiry around familiarity and willingness to participate, teacher-created safety, peer interaction, multimodal participation, activity-based meaning making, and barriers such as fear of error, pace, vocabulary, and unequal opportunities to contribute. Importantly, the article does not treat talk frequency as a proxy for learning; meaningful learning is evidenced through connection, explanation, retention, application, and the learner's ability to make sense of classroom experience. The study offers a context-sensitive framework for making Grade 1 participation more inclusive and pedagogically meaningful. Empirical claims and verbatim quotations must be finalized from the actual dataset before journal submission.

Keywords: classroom participation; Grade 1 learners; meaningful learning; student voice; dialogic teaching; qualitative case study; early primary education

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1 Introduction

The first years of formal schooling are not only a period for acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy; they are also a period in which children learn what it means to be recognized as participants in a classroom community. Through classroom routines, questions, peer encounters, demonstrations, and shared tasks, young learners discover whether their ideas are welcomed, whether mistakes are safe, and whether participation belongs only to the quickest speakers or can take multiple forms. A child's willingness to contribute is therefore shaped by both individual confidence and the social conditions of classroom life.

Sociocultural theory positions learning as mediated through interaction, language, tools, and participation with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). Extending this tradition, Mercer and Howe (2012) argue that classroom dialogue is important because language functions as a cultural and psychological tool through which reasoning can be developed collectively. A broad review by Howe and Abedin (2013) likewise shows the enduring importance of classroom dialogue while emphasizing that productive interaction depends on how talk is organized, not merely on the quantity of speech.

This distinction is especially important in Grade 1. A child who speaks often may be socially confident without necessarily demonstrating deep understanding, while a quiet learner may be listening closely, following a demonstration, producing a thoughtful drawing, or successfully applying an idea. Participation should thus be understood as multimodal and situated. Engagement research similarly distinguishes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, cautioning against reducing engagement to a single observable behavior (Fredricks et al., 2004).

The concept of student voice strengthens this argument. Cook-Sather (2006) frames student voice as an issue of presence, participation, and power in educational research and reform. With young children, however, voice cannot responsibly be treated as adult-like verbal fluency. Child-centered inquiry must create developmentally appropriate ways for learners to show meanings through short conversations, drawings, choices, gestures, classroom actions, and artifacts. Lundy (2007) further reminds researchers that voice involves not only having something to say but also having a space in which views can be expressed and given appropriate attention.

Meaningful learning provides the second anchor of the study. Mayer (2002) distinguishes meaningful learning from rote learning by emphasizing both retention and transfer: learners need not only remember information but also use it to make sense of new situations. In the early grades, evidence of meaningful learning may appear when a child connects a lesson to home or community experience, explains an idea in simple language, uses a concept during an activity, revisits an idea later, or adapts what was learned to another task.

Against this background, the present study focuses on Grade 1 learners at Cauayan West Central School in Cauayan City, Isabela. Rather than asking only who talks most, it examines how children experience opportunities to participate, what helps or inhibits their expression, and how participation is connected in their accounts and classroom activity to experiences they perceive as meaningful. The local case can illuminate how inclusive participation is enacted in an actual early-grade classroom while resisting the assumption that one participation style fits every child.

2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to explore Grade 1 learners' experiences of classroom participation and the ways in which participation is associated with meaningful learning at Cauayan West Central School. It also seeks to identify classroom conditions, teacher practices, peer relationships, and participation modes that widen or restrict children's opportunities to contribute.

1. How do Grade 1 learners experience classroom participation at Cauayan West Central School?
2. What classroom conditions encourage or inhibit learners' participation?
3. How do learners connect participation with experiences they perceive as meaningful learning?
4. How do teacher practices and peer interactions shape learners' confidence and opportunities to participate?
5. What challenges do learners encounter when expressing themselves and engaging in classroom activities?

3 Review of Related Literature

3.1 Classroom Dialogue and Participation

Classroom participation is relational rather than purely individual. The turn-taking structures teachers establish, the kinds of questions posed, the time allowed for responses, and the treatment of partial or incorrect answers influence who is able to enter classroom dialogue. Mercer and Howe (2012) locate these processes within sociocultural theory, in which talk can make thinking available for joint examination. Howe and Abedin's (2013) systematic review demonstrates that classroom dialogue has been studied across diverse traditions and highlights the importance of interactional quality. These perspectives suggest that participation should be analyzed as an opportunity structure: learners require not only willingness but also accessible openings through which to contribute.

Engagement scholarship adds a multidimensional perspective. Fredricks et al. (2004) distinguish behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and note that these dimensions may overlap without being identical. For a Grade 1 learner, visible compliance or hand-raising is therefore insufficient as evidence of cognitive engagement. Observations need to attend to sustained attention, peer collaboration, use of materials, persistence, and evidence that the child is making sense of the task.

3.2 Student Voice in the Early Grades

Student voice literature challenges models of schooling in which learners are treated only as recipients of adult decisions. Cook-Sather (2006) argues for attention to students' presence and power, while Lundy (2007) conceptualizes voice through conditions of space, expression, audience, and influence. Applied to young children, these ideas require methodological humility: children may communicate meaning in brief, concrete, embodied, or visual ways. The researcher must therefore avoid interpreting limited verbal output as absence of a perspective.

A child-centered approach also changes how interviews are understood. Long, abstract interviews can privilege verbally confident children and may produce answers shaped by adult expectations. Short conversations anchored in a recent classroom event, a drawing, a learning artifact, or a simple visual prompt can reduce linguistic demand. Triangulation with direct observation is particularly important because children's descriptions of participation can then be interpreted alongside what they actually do in classroom settings.

3.3 Meaningful Learning

Mayer (2002) explains meaningful learning in terms of retention and transfer rather than memorization alone. This distinction is useful for early-grade qualitative inquiry because it provides observable and discussable indicators without reducing learning to a standardized score. When children relate a lesson to prior knowledge, explain why an answer makes sense, reuse an idea in a different activity, or remember an experience because they actively performed it, they offer evidence consistent with meaningful rather than merely rote learning.

Meaning is also socially mediated. From a Vygotskian perspective, learners can perform beyond what they accomplish independently when supported through prompts, modeling, tools, and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). The central analytic question is therefore not whether participation automatically causes learning, but how particular forms of participation create opportunities for sense-making, feedback, rehearsal, and connection.

3.4 Research Gap

Much of the literature on classroom dialogue and student voice has been developed across broad age groups and educational systems. Less visible in such literature are fine-grained accounts of how children in the earliest primary grade experience everyday participation in a specific Philippine public-school setting. A local qualitative case study can contribute by showing how participation is negotiated through teacher support, peer relations, familiar content, classroom routines, and non-verbal modes, while connecting these experiences to evidence of meaning making rather than to speech frequency alone.

4 Conceptual Framework

The study integrates sociocultural learning theory, student voice, and meaningful learning. Sociocultural theory explains learning as mediated participation in socially organized activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Student voice focuses attention on whether children have meaningful opportunities and safe spaces to express perspectives that are noticed by others (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lundy, 2007). Meaningful learning directs analysis toward connection, understanding, retention, and application instead of recall alone (Mayer, 2002).

Within this framework, supportive classroom conditions are expected to shape opportunities for participation. Participation may be oral, gestural, visual, written, manipulative, collaborative, or observational. These modes can open opportunities for interaction and sense making, which may in turn support connections with prior experience and growing confidence. The arrows implied by this framework are interpretive rather than causal: the qualitative design seeks to understand perceived and observed relationships, not to estimate effects.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design and Setting

A qualitative case study design is appropriate because the inquiry examines participation and learning within the bounded context of Grade 1 classroom life at Cauayan West Central School in Cauayan City, Isabela. Case study research is suited to investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-world contexts using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis is the classroom participation experience of Grade 1 learners as embedded in routine teaching and learning activities.

5.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants should be selected purposively from the Grade 1 class or classes included in the approved study. Sampling should seek variation in observable participation patterns, including learners who frequently volunteer, learners who participate mainly in small groups or through task performance, and learners who tend to be quiet in whole-class exchanges. The final manuscript must report the actual number, age range, relevant demographic characteristics, recruitment process, inclusion criteria, and any non-participation. A teacher participant may be included for contextual triangulation, but teacher interpretations should not substitute for children's own perspectives.

5.3 Data Generation

Data generation should combine several developmentally appropriate sources. First, non-participant classroom observations can document participation opportunities, wait time, teacher prompts, peer responses, use of materials, and verbal and non-verbal contributions. Second, brief learner conversations can be conducted soon after observed activities using concrete prompts such as "What were you doing here?", "What helped you answer?", or "What makes it hard to join?" Third, learner artifacts such as drawings, short written work, or activity products can be used as elicitation anchors. Fourth, a semi-structured teacher interview can provide contextual information about routines and participation strategies. Field notes should distinguish direct observation from researcher interpretation.

5.4 Ethical Safeguards for Young Children

Because the participants are young children, ethical safeguards require more than parental permission. Written informed consent should be obtained from parents or legal guardians, while each child should provide age-appropriate assent. Children should be told in simple language that joining is voluntary, that they may stop at any time, and that participation will not affect grades or teacher treatment. Pseudonyms or participant codes should be used in records and reporting. Interviews should be brief, non-leading, and conducted in a setting that protects comfort and privacy. Researchers should avoid publicly labeling children as "shy," "weak," or "inactive," and should treat non-response as a valid choice rather than something to overcome.

5.5 Data Analysis

Data can be analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedures: familiarization, initial coding, construction of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and analytic writing. Coding should include both semantic content, such as a learner saying that an activity was fun, and contextual meaning, such as the conditions under which the child began participating. Observation records, child conversations, artifacts, and teacher data should first be examined within source and then compared across sources. Negative and deviant cases should be retained because they can refine overly simple interpretations.

5.6 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility can be strengthened through triangulation across observations, learner conversations, artifacts, and teacher accounts; repeated observation across different lesson types; an audit trail documenting analytic decisions; and thick description of classroom conditions. Reflexive notes should record how the researcher's role, expectations, adult status, and relationship with the school may influence what children say or how participation is interpreted. Rather than claiming that triangulation discovers a single objective truth, the study should use convergence and divergence across sources to develop a more defensible account of the case.

6 Findings and Discussion

Theme 1 I Raise My Hand When I Know Familiarity as a Gateway to Participation

A first analytic pattern to examine is whether children participate more readily when lesson content feels familiar. Familiar examples can lower the interpretive distance between a classroom question and the learner's existing experience. A child who recognizes a situation from home, school routines, play, or the local community may have both something to say and a language for saying it.

> *"I raise my hand when I know the answer because I want Teacher to call me." (Learner 03)*

> *"Sometimes I do not raise my hand because I do not know the word yet." (Learner 08)*

These paired accounts illustrate why non-participation should not immediately be interpreted as lack of interest. The positive account links familiarity with willingness to volunteer; the contrasting account locates silence in uncertainty about vocabulary. The negative case therefore qualifies, rather than disproves, the theme: access to content and language can condition whether a learner feels able to enter the interaction. From a sociocultural perspective, teachers can build bridges between everyday experience and curricular language through concrete examples, objects, pictures, modeling, and revoicing (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

Theme 2 It Is Okay Even If I Am Wrong Teacher Support Creates Safety to Speak

A second theme concerns the emotional and interactional safety surrounding answers. Young learners may understand that a classroom question invites participation yet still calculate the social risk of being wrong. Teacher responses to tentative answers, correction, waiting, and effort can therefore influence whether uncertainty becomes silence or an opportunity to try.

> *"When Teacher says, "Try lang," I answer even if I am not sure." (Illustrative Learner 05)*

> *"I know it sometimes, but I am shy because maybe they will laugh if it is wrong." (Illustrative Learner 11)*

The second quotation is analytically important because it prevents a romantic account of classroom voice. A learner may possess an answer yet withhold it because the anticipated cost of error is social embarrassment. The theme would be supported if observations show greater participation after non-punitive prompts, adequate wait time, or teacher uptake of partial responses. Howe and Abedin (2013) emphasize the organization and quality of classroom dialogue, while student-voice scholarship draws attention to the conditions under which learners have genuine space for expression (Cook-Sather, 2006; Lundy, 2007). Thus, supportive participation is not simply praise; it includes routines that make tentative thinking legitimate.

Theme 3 Learning With Friends Peer Interaction Can Open and Close Participation

Peer interaction can create a lower-risk space in which children rehearse an answer, ask for help, or jointly perform a task before speaking to the whole class. For some learners, participation may first become visible beside a trusted seatmate rather than in public recitation.

"I like working with my seatmate because we help each other and then I know what to do." (Illustrative Learner 02)

"In our group, they answer fast. I just wait because they already say it." (Illustrative Learner 09)

These contrasting accounts justify treating peer work as conditional rather than automatically inclusive. Collaboration can scaffold participation, but dominant or faster peers can also occupy the available conversational space. A meaningful analysis should therefore examine group composition, turn-taking, assigned roles, and whether quieter children gain opportunities to explain or manipulate materials. This interpretation is consistent with sociocultural accounts of joint activity (Vygotsky, 1978) and with research treating engagement as more than visible compliance (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Theme 4 : Do Not Always Talk Participation Is More Than Speaking

The fourth theme broadens the meaning of voice. In Grade 1, participation can be expressed through pointing, arranging materials, demonstrating a process, drawing, writing a short response, following a peer's explanation, showing a card, or sustaining attention during a shared task. These forms are particularly important for learners who are hesitant speakers or still developing the language needed for extended oral responses.

"I do not always talk, but I listen and do my work." (e Learner 07)

"I like when I can show it with the blocks because I cannot explain it fast." (Learner 12)

The interpretation here is not that all quietness equals engagement. Silence can indicate concentration, uncertainty, withdrawal, fatigue, fear, or simple preference; the meaning must be established from converging evidence. The analytic justification is therefore multimodal: the researcher should connect what the learner says with observed attention, task action, artifact quality, and opportunities provided. Fredricks et al. (2004) support this multidimensional view of engagement, while Cook-Sather (2006) cautions against forms of schooling that recognize only institutionally preferred ways of being heard.

Theme 5. Remember It Because We Did It : Participation as a Route to Meaning Making

A fifth theme examines how children themselves associate active involvement with understanding and remembering. Hands-on tasks, demonstrations, stories connected to experience, and chances to explain can give learners more than an answer to reproduce; they can provide a structure through which knowledge is organized and used.

"I remember it because we did the activity, not only read it." (Learner 04)

"I can say the answer, but when Teacher asks why, I do not know yet." (Learner 10)

The contrasting quotation is crucial. Correct recall is not sufficient evidence of meaningful learning. A learner may reproduce a response without being able to explain or use the underlying idea. Mayer's (2002) distinction between rote and meaningful learning therefore supports looking for retention together with transfer, explanation, connection, or application. The study should use cautious language: participatory experiences may be associated with meaningful learning in children's accounts and observed performances, but a qualitative case study does not establish that participation caused learning.

Theme 6. The Quiet Edges of the Classroom Barriers and Developing Confidence

The final theme gathers the barriers that can push learners to the edges of participation: fear of mistakes, unfamiliar vocabulary, fast lesson pace, public correction, difficulty understanding instructions, teasing, unequal group roles, and a preference for observing before speaking. These constraints may accumulate. A child who needs additional processing time, for example, can appear consistently "quiet" in a rapid whole-class question-

and-answer routine even when that same child participates confidently during a slower hands-on activity.

"Sometimes Teacher is already calling someone when I am still thinking." (Learner 06)

"Before I was scared to answer. Now I try because Teacher waits for me." (Learner 01)

The negative and developmental cases reveal participation as dynamic rather than a fixed personality trait. "Shy" should not become a permanent label attached to a child; hesitation can reflect an interaction between task demand, timing, peer climate, language, and previous experiences of success or embarrassment. If authentic data show movement from observation to small-group contribution and later to whole-class talk, that trajectory can be interpreted as developing participatory confidence. Such an interpretation aligns with the sociocultural view that competence emerges through supported activity and with Lundy's (2007) emphasis on providing a space in which voice can be expressed and heard.

6.1 Cross Theme Synthesis

Taken together, the six themes propose a view of Grade 1 participation as access to meaningful contribution rather than simple talk frequency. Familiar content can give children an entry point; supportive teacher moves can reduce the perceived risk of error; peer interaction can provide rehearsal but can also silence; multimodal activity can make otherwise hidden participation visible; and active participation can create opportunities for meaning making when children connect, explain, remember, or apply ideas. Barriers at the quiet edges of the classroom show why participation patterns should be interpreted contextually rather than attributed solely to temperament or ability.

The synthesis also offers a necessary caution. Participation and meaningful learning overlap but are not interchangeable. The child who eagerly answers every question is not automatically the child who understands most deeply, and the child who rarely volunteers is not automatically disengaged. Evidence for meaningful learning should be sought in what learners can do with ideas, not only in whether they speak. This interpretation is consistent with Mayer's (2002) retention-and-transfer distinction and the multidimensional engagement framework of Fredricks et al. (2004).

7. Implications for Early Grade Pedagogy

For Grade 1 teaching, the strongest implication is to widen the legitimate forms of participation. Whole-class recitation can remain useful, but it should be complemented by think time, turn-and-talk, pointing or response cards, drawing, manipulation of concrete materials, demonstration, brief partner explanation, and opportunities to revise an answer. This distributes participation opportunities across learners with different confidence, language, and processing profiles.

Teachers can also make familiar experience a deliberate bridge to curricular ideas. Beginning with recognizable objects, routines, family or community situations, and concrete problems can activate prior knowledge before more abstract vocabulary is introduced. Scaffolding should then move learners toward disciplinary language rather than leaving understanding only at the everyday level. Such practice reflects the mediational role of language and tools described in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer & Howe, 2012).

Finally, error climate deserves explicit attention. A classroom in which partial answers can be explored, wait time is protected, and peers are taught how to respond respectfully can reduce the social risk of participation. Teachers should monitor who repeatedly receives turns, who handles materials, who explains group answers, and who is routinely spoken for by others. Inclusion is better evaluated through the distribution and quality of opportunities than through the noise level of the room.

8 Conclusion

Finding a voice in Grade 1 should not be understood as becoming a frequent public speaker. For young learners, voice is the growing capacity to participate meaningfully in classroom life through words, actions, artifacts, questions, attention, and collaboration. A child-centered qualitative case study at Cauayan West Central School can make visible the conditions under which these forms of participation flourish or contract.

The proposed analytic framework suggests that familiarity, psychological safety, peer relations, multimodal

participation, active sense making, and adequate time are likely to be important dimensions for investigation. At the same time, the framework deliberately protects against two overclaims: silence is not automatically disengagement, and speech is not automatically learning. Meaningful learning is more defensibly recognized when learners can connect ideas with experience, explain them in their own way, retain them, or use them in another context. Final conclusions, however, must be grounded in the school's actual observation records, learner accounts, and artifacts.

9 Recommendations

1. Provide multiple participation routes in every lesson, including oral, visual, gestural, written, manipulative, and peer-supported options.
2. Use adequate wait time and non-punitive responses to partial or incorrect answers so that uncertainty can become part of learning rather than a reason for silence.
3. Structure pair and group work with rotating roles and observable opportunities for each child to contribute.
4. Connect new content with familiar home, school, and community experiences while explicitly bridging toward new academic vocabulary.
5. Assess meaningful learning through explanation, application, connection, artifacts, and transfer in addition to recall and recitation.
6. For the research study, conduct repeated observations across different subjects and activity formats and triangulate these with brief child-friendly conversations and artifacts.
7. Before publication, replace all illustrative quotations with exact, consented transcript excerpts and revise the proposed themes through systematic analysis of the actual dataset.

10 Limitations

A single-school qualitative case study is intended to provide contextual depth rather than statistical generalization. Children's accounts may vary with language development, memory, adult-child power relations, and the immediate classroom event being discussed. Observation can also influence classroom behavior, and the researcher's interpretations may privilege some forms of participation over others. These limitations should be addressed through repeated observation, developmentally appropriate elicitation, reflexivity, transparent coding, and triangulation. If the empirical study uses only one class or one teacher, the final article should state that boundary explicitly.

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