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From Teaching Practices to Engagement: Learner-Centered Pedagogy at Jacmal Primary School

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ABSTRACT: Learner-centered pedagogy has been widely advocated as a means of transforming classroom practices and enhancing learners' engagement, particularly in elementary education. While existing studies highlight the effectiveness of learner-centered strategies, fewer investigations examine how these practices are enacted in everyday classroom settings and how learners themselves experience engagement. This qualitative case study explored how learner-centered teaching practices at Jacmal Primary School shaped pupils' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Data were collected through classroom observations, focus group discussions with pupils, and semi-structured interviews with teachers, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that dialogic instruction, learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and instructional scaffolding collectively fostered meaningful engagement. Learners' voices underscored the importance of being heard, trusted, and supported in the learning process. The study concludes that learner-centered pedagogy effectively translates teaching practices into sustained engagement when thoughtfully implemented, and it offers implications for classroom practice, school leadership, and future research.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy; classroom engagement; elementary education; qualitative case study; student voice



I. Introduction

Classroom engagement is a central concern in elementary education because early learning experiences play a decisive role in shaping pupils' motivation, participation patterns, and long-term academic trajectories. Research consistently shows that pupils who are actively engaged in their early years are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning, sustain effort in challenging tasks, and achieve better academic outcomes over time (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wentzel, 2012). In contrast, traditional teacher-centered approaches characterized by lecture-dominated instruction, rigid pacing, and uniform learning tasks often restrict pupils' opportunities to participate actively, express ideas, and connect learning to their lived experiences. Such approaches may lead to passive compliance rather than meaningful involvement, particularly among pupils whose learning needs and interests are not aligned with standardized instructional formats (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Learner-centered pedagogy offers an alternative framework that seeks to reposition pupils as active participants in the learning process by valuing learner voice, prior knowledge, and individual differences. Grounded in constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, learner-centered approaches emphasize interaction, dialogue, autonomy, and relevance as core instructional principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Weimer, 2013). In primary education, where pupils vary widely in developmental readiness, interests, and learning preferences, these approaches are especially relevant. Empirical studies indicate that instructional practices that promote discussion, collaborative learning, and choice enhance engagement and support deeper conceptual understanding by making learning more meaningful and personally relevant (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Prince, 2004). Moreover, autonomy-supportive classrooms have been shown to foster emotional engagement and intrinsic motivation, while structured interaction supports persistence and cognitive investment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2013).

Despite strong theoretical and empirical support, much of the existing literature on learner-centered pedagogy relies heavily on policy analysis, large-scale surveys, or quantitative indicators of engagement. Fewer studies closely examine how learner-centered practices are enacted in everyday classroom interactions and how pupils themselves experience engagement within these environments, particularly in public elementary schools (Schweisfurth, 2013). This gap is especially evident in developing education systems, where contextual factors such as class size, curriculum demands, and resource constraints shape instructional practice.

In the Philippine public school context, recent educational reforms explicitly encourage learner-centered, inclusive, and differentiated teaching to address learner diversity and improve educational quality. However, empirical research examining how these pedagogical principles translate into actual classroom practices and how they shape pupils' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement at the elementary level remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining learner-centered pedagogy at Jacmal Primary School, focusing on how specific teaching practices are enacted and how they translate into pupils' engagement across multiple dimensions. By foregrounding classroom practices and pupils' perspectives, the study contributes contextually grounded insights into the relationship between learner-centered pedagogy and engagement in elementary education.



Research Questions

1. What learner-centered teaching practices are implemented at Jacmal Primary School?
2. How do pupils experience classroom engagement in learner-centered lessons?
3. How do learner-centered practices influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement?

II. Review of Related Literature

Learner-centered pedagogy is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories that conceptualize learning as an active and socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Weimer (2013) describes learner-centered teaching as an approach that redistributes responsibility for learning toward learners while maintaining purposeful instructional guidance. Empirical studies show that strategies such as dialogic teaching, inquiry, and collaborative learning enhance motivation and participation, particularly in elementary classrooms (Prince, 2004).

Classroom engagement is widely understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement includes observable participation and on-task behavior; emotional engagement refers to interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging; and cognitive engagement involves effort, persistence, and strategic thinking. Research indicates that instructional practices promoting autonomy, interaction, and relevance are associated with higher engagement levels (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 2012).

Teacher-learner relationships and instructional scaffolding further shape engagement by fostering emotional safety and intellectual challenge (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Together, these studies suggest that learner-centered pedagogy has strong potential to enhance engagement when implemented thoughtfully in elementary classrooms.

III. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine learner-centered pedagogy and classroom engagement within a real-life primary school context, allowing for an in-depth and holistic exploration of teaching practices and learner experiences as they naturally occurred in everyday classroom settings (Yin, 2018). The research was conducted at Jacmal Primary School, a public elementary school serving learners from varied socio-economic backgrounds. Participants included six elementary teachers who regularly implemented learner-centered instructional strategies and thirty pupils from Grades 4 to 6, selected through purposive sampling to represent a range of participation levels, learning needs, and academic performance. Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation of perspectives. Classroom observations were conducted to document teaching strategies, interaction patterns, and pupils' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during lessons. Focus group discussions with pupils explored their perceptions of classroom activities, opportunities for participation, and experiences of engagement in learner-centered lessons. Semi-structured interviews with teachers examined pedagogical intentions, instructional decision-making processes, and challenges encountered in



implementing learner-centered practices. All data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, enabling the identification and refinement of recurring patterns and themes. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking to validate interpretations. Ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, informed consent and learner assent were obtained, and pseudonyms were used throughout the study to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities.

IV. Results and Findings

Theme 1: Dialogic Instruction as a Catalyst for Behavioral Engagement

Classroom observations revealed that dialogic instruction was a consistent feature of learner-centered lessons. Teachers frequently employed open-ended questioning, guided discussions, think-alouds, and storytelling to invite pupils to articulate ideas, ask clarifying questions, and relate lesson content to their own experiences. Rather than relying on recitation or single-answer questioning, teachers encouraged multiple responses and follow-up explanations, creating an interactive classroom climate. As a result, pupils were observed participating more actively, volunteering answers without being prompted, responding to peers' ideas, and sustaining attention throughout lessons. Behavioral engagement was evident through increased hand-raising, verbal participation, and on-task behavior even during extended discussions.

Pupils expressed strong appreciation for being given opportunities to speak and be heard. One pupil shared, "*Mas ganado ako kapag tinatanong kami at pinapakinggan ang sagot namin,*" indicating that being listened to motivated active participation. Another noted, "*Mas nagiging alerto ako kasi puwede kaming magtanong,*" suggesting that dialogue helped maintain focus. Teachers similarly observed changes in pupil behavior over time. One teacher explained, "*Sa una nahihiya sila, pero kapag nasanay sa tanungan, mas nagiging aktibo ang mga bata.*"

These findings indicate that dialogic instruction enhanced behavioral engagement by normalizing participation and reducing pupils' fear of making mistakes. From a sociocultural perspective, dialogue functions as a primary mechanism for learning by situating knowledge construction within social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Research on dialogic teaching demonstrates that open classroom discourse increases participation and attention by positioning learners as contributors rather than passive listeners (Alexander, 2008). Similarly, Mercer and Howe (2012) found that exploratory talk promotes sustained engagement by encouraging pupils to reason aloud and respond to others' ideas. The findings of the present study suggest that dialogic practices translate directly into observable behavioral engagement when classroom norms value pupil voice and shared meaning-making.

Theme 2: Learner Autonomy Fostering Emotional Engagement

Learner autonomy emerged as a key feature of learner-centered lessons, particularly in shaping pupils' emotional engagement. Teachers provided pupils with choices in learning activities, examples, group roles, and output formats, allowing them to exercise control over aspects of their learning. Autonomy-supportive practices included letting pupils select problem-solving strategies, choose presentation formats, or decide how to organize group tasks. Observations showed that pupils



displayed greater enthusiasm, confidence, and willingness to participate when they perceived that their choices mattered.

Pupils consistently associated autonomy with positive emotions. One pupil stated, *"Mas masaya kapag may choice kami,"* reflecting enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Another explained, *"Mas kampante ako kapag ako ang pumipili kasi alam kong kaya ko,"* suggesting that autonomy reduced anxiety and fear of failure. However, some pupils expressed uncertainty when choices were too open-ended, with one admitting, *"Nalilito ako kapag hindi malinaw ang pagpipilian."* Teachers were aware of this tension, emphasizing the need for balance. As one teacher noted, *"Maganda ang may choice, pero kailangan malinaw ang options para hindi sila malito."*

These findings suggest that learner autonomy fostered emotional engagement by enhancing pupils' enjoyment, confidence, and sense of ownership, but only when supported by clear structure. This aligns with self-determination theory, which posits that autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that promotes intrinsic motivation and positive emotional involvement when learners feel both free and supported (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Reeve (2013) further emphasizes that autonomy-supportive teaching enhances emotional engagement by communicating trust and respect for learners' capabilities. However, excessive or unstructured choice can lead to uncertainty, echoing findings by Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008), who argue that autonomy is most effective when choices are meaningful and manageable. The present study reinforces the importance of structured autonomy in sustaining emotional engagement in elementary classrooms.

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning Sustaining Participation

Collaborative learning was a central feature of learner-centered instruction and served as a key structure for sustaining participation. Teachers frequently organized pupils into small groups for discussions, cooperative problem-solving, and shared tasks. Observations indicated that pupils remained engaged for longer periods when working collaboratively, particularly during complex or challenging activities. Group interactions encouraged pupils to explain ideas, ask questions, and support one another, which reduced individual hesitation and sustained collective focus.

Pupils highlighted the benefits of peer interaction. One pupil shared, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may kausap,"* emphasizing how peer explanations supported comprehension. Another pupil stated, *"Mas confident ako kapag may kasama,"* indicating that collaboration reduced anxiety. At the same time, some pupils expressed frustration regarding unequal participation, with one noting, *"May groupmate na hindi masyadong tumutulong."* Teachers addressed these issues by assigning roles and monitoring group processes. One teacher explained, *"Kapag may role ang bawat isa, mas nagiging responsable sila."*

These findings indicate that collaborative learning sustained engagement by distributing responsibility and fostering social support, but required intentional structure to be effective. Social interdependence theory suggests that well-designed cooperative learning environments promote engagement through shared goals and mutual accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Research by Gillies (2016) further shows that structured group roles enhance participation and reduce social loafing in cooperative tasks. The present study supports these findings by demonstrating that collaboration sustains participation when learners are guided to work interdependently rather than independently within groups.



Theme 4: Instructional Scaffolding Supporting Cognitive Engagement

Instructional scaffolding emerged as a critical factor in promoting pupils' cognitive engagement. Teachers used probing questions, modeling, guided practice, and formative feedback to support pupils' thinking and problem-solving processes. Rather than providing immediate answers, teachers encouraged pupils to reflect on errors, explain reasoning, and revise strategies. Observations showed that pupils persisted longer on challenging tasks and engaged more deeply with content when scaffolding was present.

Pupils emphasized the value of guidance in understanding difficult concepts. One pupil stated, *"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag sinasabi kung saan ako nagkamali,"* highlighting the role of feedback in learning. Another noted, *"Mas natututo ako kapag pinapakita kung paano,"* emphasizing the importance of modeling. Teachers stressed the need to balance support and independence, with one explaining, *"Hindi agad ibinibigay ang sagot para matuto silang mag-isip."* These findings suggest that scaffolding strengthened cognitive engagement by supporting reflection, persistence, and strategic thinking. Guided learning theories emphasize that cognitive engagement is enhanced when learners receive timely support that gradually fades as competence increases (Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical studies on formative feedback show that feedback focused on process and improvement promotes deeper learning and self-regulation (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Similarly, Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, and Chinn (2007) argue that scaffolding in learner-centered environments is essential for maintaining cognitive demand while preventing frustration. The present study reinforces the idea that cognitive engagement is maximized when learner-centered practices are paired with intentional instructional guidance.

V. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogy effectively translates everyday teaching practices into multidimensional classroom engagement by activating behavioral, emotional, and cognitive processes in complementary ways. Dialogic instruction supported behavioral participation by creating regular opportunities for pupils to speak, question, and respond, thereby normalizing active involvement rather than passive listening. This aligns with evidence that classroom discourse and open questioning increase on-task behavior and attentiveness by positioning learners as contributors to knowledge construction (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Learner autonomy, expressed through choice and shared decision-making, fostered emotional involvement by enhancing pupils' enjoyment, confidence, and sense of ownership over learning. Consistent with self-determination theory, autonomy-supportive environments were associated with greater intrinsic motivation and positive academic emotions when learners felt trusted and respected (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2013). Collaborative learning further sustained engagement by distributing responsibility among peers and providing social support, which helped learners persist during challenging tasks. Research on cooperative learning similarly shows that structured collaboration promotes sustained participation and effort through shared goals and mutual accountability (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). Finally, instructional scaffolding promoted cognitive investment by guiding pupils' reasoning, encouraging reflection, and supporting strategy development without reducing cognitive demand. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that guided questioning and formative feedback enhance deeper learning and self-regulation in learner-centered classrooms (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Taken together, these patterns



closely align with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework and extend it by illustrating how engagement emerges through the intentional alignment of learner-centered practices in elementary classrooms.

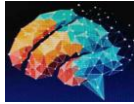
At the same time, the findings highlight important implementation challenges that temper the effectiveness of learner-centered pedagogy. Time constraints associated with discussion-based lessons, managing group work, and providing individualized scaffolding sometimes limited the depth and consistency of engagement. Uneven participation within collaborative tasks also posed challenges, as some pupils required additional support to participate meaningfully. These tensions underscore that learner-centered pedagogy is not inherently effective by virtue of its principles alone but depends on thoughtful instructional design and contextual adaptation. Consistent with Schweisfurth (2013), the study shows that learner-centered approaches are most effective when flexibility is balanced with clear structure, explicit expectations, and ongoing teacher guidance. Without such balance, autonomy and collaboration may lead to confusion, superficial participation, or inequitable engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that learner-centered pedagogy realizes its full potential when teachers strategically integrate dialogue, autonomy, collaboration, and scaffolding within well-managed instructional frameworks that are responsive to learners' developmental and contextual needs.

VI. Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates that learner-centered teaching practices at Jacmal Primary School foster meaningful classroom engagement by intentionally positioning pupils as active participants, informed decision-makers, and reflective thinkers in the learning process. Engagement was most evident when dialogic instruction, learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and instructional scaffolding were deliberately aligned rather than implemented in isolation. Dialogue encouraged pupils to participate behaviorally by normalizing questioning and idea-sharing; autonomy nurtured emotional engagement by fostering confidence, enjoyment, and a sense of ownership; collaboration sustained participation through peer support and shared responsibility; and scaffolding promoted cognitive engagement by guiding pupils toward deeper understanding and self-regulation. Together, these practices created learning environments where engagement was not merely reactive but sustained, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate.

The findings carry important implications for classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to design lessons that amplify learner voice through purposeful questioning and discussion, structure collaboration with clear roles and accountability, and provide formative feedback that supports reflection and persistence rather than simple correctness. Learner-centered pedagogy, as shown in this study, is most effective when it combines flexibility with intentional structure, ensuring that all pupils not only the most confident can engage meaningfully. For school leadership, the results highlight the need to support learner-centered teaching through ongoing professional development, collaborative planning time, and a school culture that values reflective teaching and pedagogical experimentation. Creating conditions where teachers can share practices, reflect on challenges, and refine strategies is essential for sustaining engagement-oriented instruction.

Finally, the study points to several directions for future research. Longitudinal studies may examine how sustained exposure to learner-centered pedagogy influences pupils' academic



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achievement, motivation, and self-regulated learning over time. Further research across diverse primary school contexts could also explore how contextual factors such as class size, resources, and learner diversity shape the enactment and impact of learner-centered practices. By extending inquiry beyond short-term engagement outcomes, future studies can deepen understanding of how learner-centered pedagogy contributes to enduring educational growth and equity in primary education.

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