



International Journal of Education, Literacies, and Curriculum Studies

ISSN: 3116-2991

Volume 2 Issue 3- 2026

<https://ijelcs.minduraresearch.com/journal/index>

Reframing Classroom Engagement through Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Evidence from an Elementary School Context

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ABSTRACT

Classroom engagement is widely acknowledged as a necessary condition for meaningful learning in elementary education, yet engagement is often reduced to visible compliance rather than sustained behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive effort. Learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) offers a promising pathway for reframing engagement as a co-constructed outcome of classroom structures, relationships, and task designs. This qualitative case study examined how learner-centered pedagogical practices influenced classroom engagement in an elementary school context. Data were generated through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with learners. Reflexive thematic analysis produced four interrelated themes: (1) structured participation routines broadened behavioral engagement; (2) contextualized instruction strengthened emotional engagement through relevance and belonging; (3) scaffolding and feedback deepened cognitive engagement by supporting strategic thinking; and (4) supportive teacher-learner relationships sustained engagement by creating psychological safety for participation and error-making. Findings suggest that engagement increased not merely because learners were “active,” but because instruction intentionally made participation safer, tasks more meaningful, and success more attainable. Implications highlight the need for professional development focused on observable learner-centered competencies and leadership support for sustained implementation.

Keywords: learner-centered pedagogy, classroom engagement, elementary education, qualitative case study, contextualization, scaffolding

Received: 05-10-2026

Revised: 06-14-2026

Accepted: 07-28- 2026

Published: 08-30-2026

ISSN:3116-2991





1. Introduction

Classroom engagement has long been regarded as a cornerstone of effective learning and a predictor of academic outcomes. In elementary education, engagement is especially consequential because early experiences with participation, belonging, and competence shape learners' long-term dispositions toward schooling. However, classroom engagement is often misinterpreted in practice as quiet compliance—staying seated, completing worksheets, and following directions without attention to whether learners are emotionally invested or cognitively challenged. Research cautions that learners may appear “on-task” behaviorally while remaining emotionally detached or cognitively shallow, highlighting the importance of multidimensional engagement frameworks that account for behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement simultaneously (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015).

Learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) provides a powerful lens for reframing engagement as a socially produced and instructionally shaped phenomenon rather than a fixed learner trait. Grounded in constructivist and sociocultural views, LCP positions learners as active meaning-makers and emphasizes dialogue, collaboration, relevance, and scaffolding in learning. In this approach, teachers do not simply “deliver” content; they design participation structures, tasks, and interactions that enable learners to contribute, make sense of ideas, and experience growth. Consequently, engagement is conceptualized as a co-constructed outcome of classroom design, relational climate, and task meaning rather than an individual learner disposition (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Despite the theoretical promise of LCP, many elementary classrooms continue to lean toward teacher-dominated recitation and procedural seatwork that restrict learner voice, collaborative sense-making, and authentic participation. Even when learner-centered practices are endorsed in policy, the translation of LCP principles into concrete classroom routines can be uneven due to time constraints, curricular pressures, limited resources, and insufficient professional support. There remains a need for empirically grounded studies that describe how learner-centered practices operate in everyday instruction and how these practices shape learners' engagement in elementary classrooms.

This study addresses this gap by examining how learner-centered pedagogy reframes classroom engagement in an elementary school context. Rather than treating LCP as a general “teaching style,” the study focuses on observable practices structured participation routines, contextualization strategies, scaffolding and feedback, and relational supports and documents how these practices shape behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement during lessons.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Engagement as Multidimensional and Context-Sensitive

Engagement is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct involving behavioral engagement (effort, participation, persistence), emotional engagement (interest, enjoyment, belonging), and cognitive engagement (strategic thinking, self-regulation, deep processing) (Fredricks et al., 2004). Contemporary research emphasizes that engagement is malleable and responsive to classroom context rather than solely an individual trait. Instructional practices, classroom norms, and teacher–learner relationships function as key levers shaping engagement trajectories (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In elementary classrooms, engagement is particularly sensitive to whether participation feels safe, tasks feel meaningful, and learners believe success is attainable.



2.2 Learner-Centered Pedagogy as a Social Learning Environment

Learner-centered pedagogy draws from constructivist and sociocultural perspectives in which learning is constructed through active meaning-making and interaction. Teachers support learning by designing tasks that connect to learners' prior knowledge, facilitating dialogue that surfaces thinking, and scaffolding participation toward greater independence. Sociocultural accounts emphasize that learning develops through guided participation in shared activity, where language and interaction mediate understanding (Rogoff, 2003). From this lens, engagement is not simply a learner's attitude but an emergent property of how classrooms organize tasks, roles, and interaction.

2.3 Autonomy Support, Structure, and Relationships

Motivational theories suggest that learners' engagement is strengthened when learning environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teacher practices that provide meaningful choices, acknowledge learner perspectives, and explain rationales support autonomy, while clear expectations, scaffolding, and feedback support competence. Relatedness is strengthened through supportive teacher-learner relationships that foster belonging and trust (Wentzel, 2010). Meta-analytic work shows that learner-centered teacher-student relationships are associated with positive academic and affective outcomes, suggesting that relational support is not peripheral but central to engagement (Cornelius-White, 2007).

2.4 Participation Structures and Equitable Engagement

Participation in elementary classrooms is not distributed naturally; it is shaped by routines, norms, and task design. Dialogic teaching and structured collaboration can broaden participation by reducing overreliance on volunteer responses and enabling more learners to contribute through low-risk entry points (Alexander, 2018). In learner-centered classrooms, participation structures such as think-pair-share, group roles, and structured reporting—function as engagement technologies that distribute talk, normalize help-seeking, and sustain attention through interaction.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how learner-centered pedagogy reframes classroom engagement within an elementary school context. A case study approach was suitable because it enabled in-depth examination of instructional practices and learner experiences in natural classroom settings and supported analysis of engagement as it unfolded in real time. The research site was purposively selected based on its active implementation of learner-centered practices in selected grade levels.

Participants included classroom teachers and elementary learners who directly experienced learner-centered instruction. Teachers were selected due to their roles in implementing learner-centered strategies, while learners were selected to represent varied participation levels, ensuring that findings captured diverse engagement experiences rather than only high-performing voices. Data were generated through (a) classroom observations focusing on participation structures, task design, teacher talk moves, scaffolding, and learner responses; (b) semi-structured teacher interviews examining pedagogical intentions, perceived learner engagement, and implementation challenges; and (c) focus group discussions with learners to elicit perceptions of participation, interest, safety, and thinking during lessons. Relevant instructional artifacts (e.g., activity sheets, task prompts, teacher-made materials) were also examined to triangulate observed practices.



Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Observation field notes and transcripts were read repeatedly, coded inductively, and organized into themes capturing patterns in learner-centered teaching practices and engagement responses. Themes were refined through constant comparison across teacher and learner accounts to strengthen analytic coherence. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across data sources, member checking of emerging interpretations with selected participants, and peer debriefing to challenge assumptions and improve interpretive rigor. Ethical safeguards included informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms.

4. Findings and Results

Theme 1: Structured Participation Routines Broadened Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement increased when teachers designed participation intentionally through structured routines rather than relying on whole-class volunteering. Teachers used think-pair-share, small-group collaboration with assigned roles (e.g., recorder, reporter, materials manager), and rotation-based reporting to ensure that all learners had opportunities to contribute. Participation routines were paired with clear expectations and time markers, making engagement visible and manageable. Learners were more consistently on-task because tasks required contribution and provided predictable steps for participation.

Participant Responses

Teachers reported that structured routines reduced silence and increased distributed participation. One teacher noted, "*Kapag may roles at malinaw ang gagawin ng bawat isa, mas marami ang nakikilahok hindi lang yung matatapang magsalita.*" Learners shared that they participated more when they first discussed in pairs or groups before speaking in front of the class: "*Mas kaya kong sumagot kapag napag-usapan muna namin sa katabi ko.*"

These accounts indicate that behavioral engagement strengthened when participation was designed as a routine rather than as a spontaneous act. Structured participation reduced barriers for quieter learners and increased equitable involvement by providing low-risk entry points. Engagement rose because learners were not merely asked to "participate," but were supported through predictable routines that distributed opportunities and responsibilities.

Theme 2: Contextualized Instruction Strengthened Emotional Engagement through Relevance and Belonging

Emotional engagement was strengthened when teachers connected lessons to learners' everyday experiences, community realities, and familiar examples. Teachers contextualized concepts through stories, local situations, and practical applications that made tasks meaningful. Contextualization also signaled respect for learners' lives and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging. Learners expressed greater interest when lessons felt connected to their world rather than distant or purely abstract.



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Volume 2 Issue 3- 2026

<https://ijelcs.minduraresearch.com/journal/index>

Participant Responses

Teachers observed increased attentiveness and enthusiasm when contexts were familiar: *“Kapag halimbawa ay galing sa karanasan nila, mas interesado sila at mas gusto nilang magbahagi.”* Learners echoed this, sharing that they enjoyed lessons more when they could relate: *“Mas naiintindihan at mas gusto ko kapag may halimbawa na parang sa bahay o sa lugar namin.”*

These findings suggest that contextualization increased emotional engagement by enhancing relevance and identity affirmation. When learners experienced lessons as meaningful and connected to their lives, they demonstrated more enthusiasm, openness, and willingness to participate. Emotional engagement therefore appeared to function as a bridge: relevance supported interest, and interest supported sustained effort during tasks.

Theme 3: Scaffolding and Feedback Deepened Cognitive Engagement by Supporting Strategic Thinking

Cognitive engagement was most evident when teachers paired learner autonomy with instructional structure through scaffolding and formative feedback. Teachers broke complex tasks into manageable steps, modeled thinking processes, and used guiding questions that prompted learners to explain reasoning. Feedback was provided during work time—not only after tasks were completed helping learners revise strategies, correct misconceptions, and articulate understanding. Learners were encouraged to justify answers, compare methods, and reflect on why solutions worked.

Participant Responses

Teachers highlighted the importance of guidance: *“Kapag may gabay na tanong, mas napapaisip sila at hindi lang naghuhula.”* Learners shared that step-by-step support helped them think harder and not give up: *“Kapag tinatanong kami ng teacher kung paano namin nakuha, napipilitan akong mag-isip at ipaliwanag.”*

These results indicate that cognitive engagement was strengthened when learners were challenged within supportive structures. Scaffolding functioned as a bridge between confusion and competence, enabling learners to sustain strategic thinking and persistence. Engagement deepened not because tasks were easier, but because learners experienced the task as achievable with guidance, supporting deeper reasoning and reflective learning.

Theme 4: Supportive Teacher–Learner Relationships Sustained Engagement through Psychological Safety

Across classrooms, engagement was sustained when teachers cultivated psychological safety an environment where learners felt comfortable asking questions, making mistakes, and trying again. Teachers used supportive language, normalized errors as part of learning, and validated effort. They also monitored participation patterns, intentionally inviting quieter learners to contribute through encouragement and non-threatening prompts. This relational climate reduced fear of embarrassment and supported sustained participation.



Participant Responses

Learners emphasized that they were more willing to speak when they felt respected: *“Hindi ako natatakot magkamali kasi hindi ako pinapahiya; tinutulungan akong maitama.”* Teachers similarly emphasized the role of care and trust: *“Kapag alam nilang safe sila, mas lumalabas ang boses nila at mas nagsisikap.”*

These findings highlight relationships as a cross-cutting mechanism that enabled behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Psychological safety allowed learners to take intellectual risks, sustain effort, and participate in dialogue. In this sense, supportive relationships were not separate from instruction; they were a condition that made learner-centered participation possible and sustainable.

5. Discussion

The findings reframe classroom engagement as an outcome of learner-centered pedagogical design rather than a fixed learner characteristic. Consistent with multidimensional engagement frameworks, the study demonstrates that engagement strengthened when teaching practices intentionally addressed behavioral participation, emotional relevance, and cognitive effort together (Fredricks et al., 2004). Structured participation routines functioned as “engagement infrastructures” that redistributed talk and responsibility, supporting behavioral engagement by expanding opportunities for contribution. Contextualized instruction strengthened emotional engagement by linking learning to learners’ lives, thereby increasing relevance and belonging two conditions repeatedly associated with sustained engagement (Wentzel, 2010). Scaffolding and feedback deepened cognitive engagement by enabling learners to persist in reasoning and strategic thinking, supporting claims that engagement grows when learners experience challenge within supportive structures (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

The findings also highlight that learner-centered pedagogy shifts classroom dynamics from information delivery to collaborative sense-making. When teachers used dialogic routines, learners became contributors to knowledge construction rather than receivers of content. This aligns with dialogic teaching perspectives that emphasize learning through talk, questioning, and cumulative discussion (Alexander, 2018). Importantly, the role of supportive relationships suggests that engagement is sustained not only through tasks but through classroom culture. Consistent with meta-analytic evidence on learner-centered teacher–student relationships (Cornelius-White, 2007), relational trust enabled learners to take intellectual risks and persist through difficulty, indicating that psychological safety is foundational for learner-centered engagement.

6. Implications

For classroom practice, the findings suggest that teachers should design participation intentionally using structured routines (e.g., think–pair–share, group roles, rotation reporting) to broaden engagement beyond confident volunteers. Teachers should contextualize content using familiar experiences and examples to strengthen relevance and belonging, while ensuring that contextualization supports conceptual understanding rather than superficial “real-life” decoration. Teachers should pair autonomy with structure by using scaffolding, guiding questions, and formative feedback that supports strategic thinking and encourages learners to explain reasoning.



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<https://ijelcs.minduraresearch.com/journal/index>

For instructional leadership, professional development should prioritize observable learner-centered competencies: designing participation routines, facilitating dialogic talk moves, developing contextualized tasks, and implementing formative feedback cycles. Coaching and learning walks may use simple engagement-evidence indicators (e.g., learner talk time, distribution of participation, quality of questioning, evidence of scaffolding and feedback, relevance cues) to support reflective improvement. School leaders should also provide time for collaborative planning, enabling teachers to design coherent learner-centered lessons and share effective engagement strategies.

For curriculum development, learning materials may embed structured participation prompts, contextualized examples, and reflection tasks that support higher-order thinking in elementary settings. Curriculum resources should include guidance for teachers on how to scaffold learner talk, support equitable participation, and create psychologically safe environments that normalize mistakes as part of learning.

7. Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative case study, findings are context-specific and are not intended for statistical generalization. Future research may employ mixed-methods designs that combine observation-based engagement measures with learner achievement data to examine how learner-centered practices relate to learning outcomes. Studies across multiple elementary schools can explore how variations in school culture, resource availability, and leadership support shape the quality and sustainability of learner-centered engagement. Longitudinal research may also examine whether early exposure to learner-centered engagement practices contributes to sustained motivation and improved learning trajectories over time.

8. Conclusion

This study provides evidence that learner-centered pedagogy reframes classroom engagement by making participation safer, learning more meaningful, and thinking more attainable. Engagement increased not simply because learners were more “active,” but because teaching practices intentionally structured participation, connected learning to lived experience, scaffolded reasoning, and cultivated psychological safety through supportive relationships. Strengthening learner-centered practices through targeted professional development, leadership support, and curriculum alignment may help elementary schools cultivate more inclusive and engaging learning environments and promote improved learner outcomes.

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International Journal of Education, Literacies, and Curriculum Studies

ISSN: 3116-2991

Volume 2 Issue 3- 2026

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International Journal of Education, Literacies, and Curriculum Studies

ISSN: 3116-2991

Volume 2 Issue 3- 2026

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