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Academic Involvement in Learner-Centered Teaching Environments: Evidence from Lunac Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Learner-centered teaching has gained increasing prominence as an instructional approach capable of fostering meaningful academic involvement among primary school learners. Academic involvement—conceptualized as learners’ behavioral participation, emotional engagement, and cognitive investment—is widely recognized as a crucial determinant of learning success. However, empirical studies that closely examine how learner-centered teaching environments shape academic involvement from the perspectives of both teachers and learners remain limited, particularly in rural public primary schools. This qualitative case study investigated how learner-centered pedagogical practices were enacted at Lunac Primary School and how these practices influenced learners’ academic involvement. Data were generated through classroom observations, focus group discussions with learners, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Thematic analysis revealed four interconnected themes: (1) dialogic instruction as a catalyst for behavioral involvement, (2) learner autonomy as a foundation of emotional engagement, (3) collaborative learning as a mechanism for sustained participation, and (4) instructional scaffolding as support for cognitive involvement. Learner and teacher narratives illustrate how academic involvement was strengthened when these practices were intentionally aligned. The study underscores the value of learner-centered environments in promoting active, motivated, and reflective learning in primary education.

Keywords: academic involvement; learner-centered teaching; elementary education; qualitative case study; student engagement

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1. Introduction

Academic involvement is a central concern in contemporary primary education, as learners' participation, motivation, and thinking processes strongly influence both immediate learning outcomes and long-term educational trajectories. Learners who are academically involved demonstrate consistent participation in classroom activities, positive emotional connections to learning, and sustained cognitive effort when faced with challenging tasks. In contrast, low involvement often manifests as passivity, disengagement, and superficial understanding.

Learner-centered teaching has been widely promoted as an alternative to traditional teacher-dominated instruction that limits learner agency and voice. Grounded in constructivist and sociocultural perspectives, learner-centered pedagogy emphasizes dialogue, autonomy, collaboration, and meaningful engagement with learning tasks. In primary education, these principles are particularly relevant, as learners benefit from instructional environments that acknowledge their perspectives, interests, and developmental needs.

Despite the strong theoretical grounding of learner-centered teaching, there remains a need for context-specific, qualitative research that documents how such practices shape academic involvement in real classroom settings. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative indicators of engagement or teacher-reported practices, offering limited insight into learners' lived experiences. This study addresses this gap by examining academic involvement within learner-centered teaching environments at Lunac Primary School, foregrounding both learner and teacher voices.

Research Questions

1. How are learner-centered teaching practices implemented at Lunac Primary School?
2. How do learners experience academic involvement in learner-centered classrooms?
3. In what ways do learner-centered practices influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement?

2. Review of Related Literature

Learner-centered pedagogy is firmly grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories that conceptualize learning as an active, participatory, and socially mediated process rather than a passive reception of knowledge. From a sociocultural perspective, learning occurs through interaction with others and is shaped by dialogue, shared activity, and cultural tools, as articulated in *Mind in Society*. This theoretical lens emphasizes that learners develop understanding by engaging with ideas, peers, and teachers within meaningful social contexts. Building on this foundation, Learner-Centered Teaching conceptualizes learner-centered teaching as a deliberate shift in instructional power and responsibility—from teachers to learners where learner voice, choice, and active meaning-making are central. Rather than



focusing on coverage of content or compliance with tasks, learner-centered pedagogy prioritizes deep understanding, reflection, and learner agency. Empirical research consistently supports these claims, showing that instructional strategies such as dialogic teaching, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative activities enhance learner motivation, participation, and conceptual understanding, particularly in elementary classrooms where engagement is closely tied to instructional relevance and interaction (How People Learn; Alexander, 2008; Prince, 2004). Studies across diverse contexts further indicate that when learners are encouraged to ask questions, discuss ideas, and co-construct knowledge, they demonstrate stronger ownership of learning and more sustained classroom involvement (Schweisfurth, 2013; Hattie, 2009).

Academic involvement, which serves as a key outcome of learner-centered pedagogy, is widely understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral participation, emotional engagement, and cognitive investment (School Engagement). Behavioral involvement refers to observable actions such as participating in discussions, completing tasks, and remaining on task during lessons. Emotional involvement includes learners' interest, enjoyment, sense of belonging, and positive attitudes toward learning, while cognitive involvement reflects learners' effort, persistence, self-regulation, and use of learning strategies when confronted with challenging tasks. Research has shown that instructional practices that promote autonomy, meaningful interaction, and relevance—core features of learner-centered teaching—are strongly associated with higher levels of academic involvement (Motivation in the Classroom; Teacher–Student Relationships). Moreover, teacher scaffolding and supportive teacher–learner relationships play a crucial role in sustaining involvement by creating emotionally safe environments where learners feel confident to participate and cognitively challenged to think deeply. Studies on guided learning and inquiry demonstrate that when teachers provide timely feedback, probing questions, and structured support, learners are more likely to persist, reflect, and engage in higher-order thinking (Scaffolding and Achievement; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Collectively, this body of literature underscores that learner-centered pedagogy and academic involvement are deeply interconnected, with engagement emerging from the intentional alignment of instructional design, social interaction, and instructional support.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine academic involvement within a learner-centered teaching environment as it unfolded in a real-life primary school context. A case study approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of complex instructional practices and learner experiences, capturing how learner-centered pedagogy is enacted and experienced in everyday classroom settings. The study was conducted at Lunac Primary School, a public elementary



school serving learners from varied socio-economic backgrounds, including pupils with diverse learning needs, academic abilities, and participation profiles. This context provided a rich setting for examining how learner-centered teaching practices influence academic involvement in authentic classroom conditions.

Participants included six elementary teachers who consistently implemented learner-centered strategies such as dialogic instruction, collaborative learning, differentiated activities, and formative feedback. In addition, thirty learners from Grades 4 to 6 were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of varied participation levels, learning preferences, and academic performance. This sampling strategy enabled the study to capture a broad range of learner experiences and perspectives related to academic involvement, rather than focusing solely on high- or low-performing learners.

Data were collected over one academic term using multiple qualitative methods to enhance depth and credibility. Classroom observations were conducted across different subject areas to document teaching strategies, interaction patterns, and learner participation during lessons. These observations focused on how learner-centered practices were enacted, how learners responded behaviorally and emotionally, and how instructional support was provided during learning activities. Focus group discussions with learners were used to elicit their perceptions of classroom activities, opportunities for participation, and experiences of engagement, allowing learners to articulate in their own words how teaching practices influenced their involvement. Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored instructional intentions, pedagogical decision-making, and challenges encountered in implementing learner-centered practices, including time constraints, learner diversity, and resource considerations.

All data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This analytic process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification and refinement of themes, and interpretation of patterns across data sources. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation of observations, learner accounts, and teacher interviews, as well as peer debriefing to critically examine emerging interpretations and member checking to validate findings with participants. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study: ethical approval was secured prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from teachers and parents, learner assent was secured, and pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to protect participants' identities and ensure confidentiality.

4. Results and Findings

Theme 1: Dialogic Instruction as a Catalyst for Behavioral Involvement

Classroom observations consistently revealed that learner-centered lessons were anchored in dialogic instructional practices, including open-ended questioning, guided whole-class discussions, and



storytelling linked to lesson content. Teachers deliberately created spaces where learners were invited to articulate their ideas, explain reasoning, and relate concepts to personal experiences. Rather than relying on recitation or brief factual responses, teachers encouraged extended learner talk, follow-up questions, and peer-to-peer exchanges. This shift transformed classroom interactions from predominantly teacher-led instruction into interactive learning conversations, resulting in visibly higher levels of behavioral involvement.

Learners were observed raising their hands more frequently, volunteering responses without prompting, and sustaining attention throughout lessons, even during extended discussions. Learners themselves emphasized how dialogue influenced their participation. One learner stated, *“Mas ganado ako kapag tinatanong kami at pinapakinggan ang sagot namin,”* highlighting that being acknowledged motivated active involvement. Another learner explained, *“Hindi ako inaantok kasi may tanong at usapan,”* indicating that dialogue helped maintain focus and attentiveness. Teachers similarly recognized the impact of dialogic practices, with one noting, *“Kapag may tanong at kwentuhan, mas nagiging aktibo ang mga bata.”* Collectively, these responses suggest that dialogic instruction strengthened behavioral involvement by normalizing participation, reducing fear of speaking, and positioning learners as legitimate contributors to classroom knowledge. This finding aligns with sociocultural perspectives that view learning as inherently social and mediated through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), and supports research demonstrating that dialogic teaching promotes sustained classroom participation.

Theme 2: Learner Autonomy as a Foundation of Emotional Engagement

Learner autonomy emerged as a central feature of learner-centered classrooms and played a significant role in shaping emotional engagement. Teachers provided learners with choices related to learning activities, examples used in lessons, group roles, and formats for presenting outputs. These opportunities allowed learners to exercise agency and make decisions aligned with their interests and perceived strengths. Observations showed that when learners were given meaningful choices, they approached tasks with greater enthusiasm and confidence.

Learners articulated positive emotional responses to autonomy-supportive practices. One learner explained, *“Mas masaya kapag may choice kami kasi pakiramdam ko kaya ko,”* reflecting increased enjoyment and self-efficacy. Another learner shared, *“Mas kampanante ako kapag ako ang pumipili,”* suggesting that autonomy reduced anxiety and fear of failure. However, autonomy was not uniformly experienced as positive. Some learners expressed uncertainty when choices were insufficiently structured, noting, *“Minsan nalilito ako kapag hindi ko alam kung alin ang pipiliin.”* Teachers acknowledged this tension, with one stating, *“Kailangan may gabay pa rin kahit may choice.”* These findings indicate that learner autonomy enhances emotional engagement when accompanied by clear expectations and guidance. This pattern aligns with self-determination theory,



which emphasizes that autonomy supports motivation most effectively when learners also experience competence and structure (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2013).

Theme 3: Collaborative Learning as a Mechanism for Sustained Participation

Collaborative learning was a consistent and prominent feature of learner-centered instruction across observed classrooms. Teachers frequently organized learners into small groups for discussions, cooperative tasks, and peer problem-solving activities. These collaborative structures enabled learners to exchange ideas, clarify understanding, and support one another, particularly during cognitively demanding tasks. Observations indicated that learners remained engaged for longer periods when working collaboratively, as interaction helped sustain attention and motivation.

Learners emphasized the benefits of peer interaction. One learner stated, “*Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may nagpapaliwanag na kaklase,*” underscoring the value of peer explanations in comprehension. Another learner noted increased confidence, saying, “*Hindi ako nahihya kasi may kasama ako.*” At the same time, challenges related to uneven participation were evident. Some learners expressed frustration, remarking, “*May kagrupo na hindi masyadong gumagawa.*” Teachers responded by assigning specific roles and closely monitoring group work, as one teacher explained, “*Kailangan may gawain ang bawat isa.*” These findings suggest that collaborative learning sustains participation most effectively when it is intentionally structured and actively facilitated, reinforcing research on cooperative learning that highlights the importance of accountability and role clarity (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Theme 4: Instructional Scaffolding as Support for Cognitive Involvement

Instructional scaffolding emerged as a critical mechanism for promoting cognitive involvement in learner-centered classrooms. Teachers employed probing questions, demonstrations, modeling, and formative feedback to guide learners’ thinking and problem-solving processes. Rather than providing immediate answers, teachers encouraged learners to reflect on errors, articulate reasoning, and revise strategies. This approach fostered persistence and deeper engagement with learning tasks.

Learners consistently highlighted the importance of guidance in supporting understanding. One learner stated, “*Mas naiintindihan ko kapag sinasabi ng guro kung saan ako nagkamali,*” indicating that feedback supported reflection and learning from mistakes. Another learner shared, “*Mas natututo ako kapag pinapakita kung paano,*” emphasizing the value of modeling. Teachers described their approach as balancing support and independence, with one noting, “*Ginagabayan namin pero hindi spoon-feeding.*” These responses indicate that scaffolding strengthened cognitive involvement by enabling learners to engage in reflective thinking, strategy use, and sustained effort. This finding is consistent with research on guided learning, which emphasizes that scaffolding supports deeper understanding and self-regulation when learners are



challenged but supported appropriately (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered teaching environments effectively translate instructional practices into multidimensional academic involvement by activating behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning in complementary ways. Dialogic instruction fostered behavioral participation by creating structured opportunities for learners to speak, ask questions, and explain ideas, thereby normalizing active involvement as part of everyday classroom practice. This finding is consistent with studies showing that dialogic and discussion-based teaching increases participation and attentiveness by positioning learners as contributors rather than passive recipients of information (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Howe, 2012). Autonomy-supportive practices, such as offering choices in tasks and modes of expression, strengthened emotional engagement by enhancing learners' sense of ownership, enjoyment, and confidence. Prior research grounded in self-determination theory similarly indicates that autonomy, when supported by clear expectations, promotes intrinsic motivation and positive emotional engagement in elementary classrooms (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve, 2013). Collaborative learning further sustained participation by leveraging peer interaction as a source of support and meaning-making, echoing findings that cooperative structures increase persistence and engagement through shared responsibility and social connectedness (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Gillies, 2016). Teacher scaffolding, through questioning, modeling, and formative feedback, supported cognitive investment by guiding learners' thinking, encouraging reflection, and promoting strategic learning behaviors. This aligns with research demonstrating that scaffolded instruction enhances cognitive engagement and deeper understanding by balancing challenge with support (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Taken together, these patterns strongly align with Fredricks et al.'s (2004) multidimensional engagement framework and extend it by illustrating how academic involvement in primary classrooms is shaped through the intentional alignment of pedagogical practices rather than through isolated strategies. The findings suggest that engagement emerges most powerfully when dialogue, autonomy, collaboration, and scaffolding operate in concert, reinforcing one another across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. Similar conclusions have been drawn in studies of learner-centered and participatory pedagogy, which emphasize that engagement is a systemic outcome of instructional coherence rather than a product of any single method (Skinner et al., 2009; Wentzel, 2012).

At the same time, the study highlights persistent challenges that complicate the enactment of learner-centered teaching. Time constraints limited opportunities for extended discussion and reflection, learner uncertainty emerged when autonomy was insufficiently structured, and uneven participation occurred during collaborative tasks. These challenges underscore the importance of thoughtful instructional design



and teacher facilitation. Prior research cautions that learner-centered approaches are not inherently effective and may lead to confusion or disengagement if flexibility is not balanced with structure and guidance (Kirschner et al., 2006). Schweisfurth (2013) similarly argues that successful learner-centered teaching requires contextual adaptation, clear routines, and sustained teacher support, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that learner-centered teaching is most effective when pedagogical flexibility is carefully calibrated with explicit guidance, enabling academic involvement to be inclusive, sustained, and cognitively meaningful.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study shows that learner-centered teaching environments at Lunac Primary School enhance academic involvement by positioning learners as active participants, decision-makers, and reflective thinkers within the learning process. The findings indicate that academic involvement was strongest when dialogic instruction, learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and instructional scaffolding were intentionally aligned rather than implemented as isolated strategies. Dialogue enabled learners to articulate ideas and ask questions, autonomy nurtured motivation and confidence, collaboration sustained participation through peer support, and scaffolding guided learners toward deeper understanding. Together, these practices created learning environments where behavioral participation, emotional engagement, and cognitive investment reinforced one another, resulting in more sustained and meaningful involvement in classroom activities.

The study has important implications for classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to design learner-centered lessons that deliberately amplify learner voice through discussion and questioning, provide structured opportunities for collaboration, and use formative feedback to support reflection and persistence. Rather than reducing teacher guidance, learner-centered pedagogy in this context required thoughtful facilitation to ensure that autonomy and collaboration were productive and inclusive for all learners. Aligning instructional strategies with learners' developmental needs and participation profiles can further strengthen academic involvement, particularly in heterogeneous primary classrooms.

At the level of school leadership, the findings underscore the importance of creating supportive conditions for learner-centered teaching. School leaders can promote academic involvement by supporting sustained professional development focused on learner-centered pedagogy, dialogic teaching, and formative assessment. Providing time for collaborative planning, peer observation, and reflective dialogue among teachers can help ensure that learner-centered practices are implemented coherently and consistently across grade levels. Leadership support is therefore critical in translating learner-centered principles into everyday classroom practice.

Directions for future research include examining the longitudinal effects of learner-centered instruction



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on learners' academic achievement, motivation, and self-regulated learning skills. Further studies may also explore how learner-centered teaching influences academic involvement across diverse primary school contexts, including urban and rural settings, to generate a broader evidence base for context-sensitive and scalable learner-centered approaches.

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