International Journal of Education, Literacies, and Curriculum Studies
ISSN: 3116-2991
Volume 2 Issue 4- 2026
https://ijelcs.minduraresearch.com/journal/index

Engaging Learners Across the Curriculum: A Phenomenological Exploration of Student Engagement in Grade 5 Multisubject Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Student engagement is a critical component of meaningful learning, particularly in elementary classrooms where teachers facilitate instruction across multiple subject areas. This phenomenological study explored how Grade 5 teachers experienced and interpreted student engagement in multisubject classrooms involving English, Mathematics, Science, EPP, GMRC, Araling Panlipunan, Filipino, and MAPEH. The study focused on the ways teachers recognized engagement, the challenges they encountered in sustaining learner participation, and the instructional strategies they used to respond to varying levels of interest, motivation, and involvement across subjects. Participants were purposively selected Grade 5 elementary school teachers with experience in teaching multiple learning areas. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Six major themes emerged: (1) engagement changes across subjects, (2) active participation grows through interactive learning, (3) familiar and contextualized lessons increase learner interest, (4) learner diversity creates uneven engagement, (5) teacher flexibility sustains classroom participation, and (6) relationships and encouragement strengthen learner involvement. Findings revealed both positive and negative dimensions of student engagement. While learners demonstrated enthusiasm in collaborative, practical, and relatable activities, teachers also reported disengagement during difficult, lengthy, or highly abstract lessons. The study highlights the importance of flexible pedagogy, differentiated instruction, contextualized learning, positive teacher–student relationships, and balanced multisubject planning in sustaining engagement among Grade 5 learners.

Keywords: student engagement, Grade 5, multisubject teaching, phenomenology, elementary education, learner participation, adaptive teaching

Received: 09-03-2026 **Revised**: 09-30-2026 **Accepted**: 11-01-2016 **Published**: 11-15-2026

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1. Introduction

Student engagement plays a central role in the learning process because meaningful learning is more likely to occur when learners actively participate, demonstrate interest, sustain attention, and invest effort in classroom activities. In elementary education, student engagement becomes particularly complex because teachers often handle several learning areas within the same class. A Grade 5 teacher may move from English and Mathematics to Science, Filipino, Araling Panlipunan, GMRC, EPP, and MAPEH within a single school day. Each subject requires different forms of thinking, participation, communication, and performance, resulting in varying levels of student interest and involvement.

Student engagement is generally understood as a multidimensional concept that includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' participation, attention, effort, and involvement in classroom activities. Emotional engagement includes interest, enjoyment, belonging, and learners' reactions toward teachers, classmates, and learning tasks. Cognitive engagement refers to learners' willingness to think deeply, persist in difficult tasks, and use strategies to understand new concepts. These dimensions interact continuously during classroom instruction.

In a multisubject classroom, engagement may not remain constant throughout the day. A learner who actively participates in MAPEH may become quiet during Mathematics, while a student who enjoys English reading activities may display less enthusiasm in Science or EPP. These differences may arise from learner preferences, prior knowledge, academic confidence, instructional strategies, task difficulty, social interaction, or the relevance of the lesson to everyday experiences.

Grade 5 learners are also at a stage in which peer interaction, curiosity, autonomy, and feelings of competence increasingly influence classroom participation. Teachers must therefore use varied instructional strategies to maintain attention and encourage participation across subjects. Interactive activities, collaborative learning, practical tasks, contextualized examples, games, discussions, and differentiated activities may contribute to stronger engagement.

However, sustaining engagement across several subjects can be difficult. Teachers must respond to varying learner abilities, limited instructional time, competing competencies, classroom behavior, differences in motivation, and the need to prepare materials for multiple learning areas. Understanding teachers' lived experiences can provide deeper insight into how engagement is actually observed and supported in everyday multisubject classrooms.

This phenomenological study therefore explored the experiences of Grade 5 teachers in promoting student engagement across multiple learning areas. Specifically, it examined the positive and negative experiences associated with learner participation and the strategies teachers employed to sustain engagement across the curriculum.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Grade 5 teachers describe their experiences of student engagement in multisubject classrooms?
2. What positive forms of student engagement do teachers observe across different learning areas?
3. What challenges contribute to disengagement among Grade 5 learners?
4. What teaching strategies are used to sustain student engagement across multiple subjects?
5. How do teacher–student relationships influence classroom engagement?

2. Review of Related Literature

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

2.1 Student Engagement in Elementary Education

Student engagement is widely regarded as a significant factor in academic learning, classroom participation, and learner development. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) conceptualized engagement through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement involves participation and effort, emotional engagement concerns students' feelings and attitudes toward learning, and cognitive engagement reflects investment in understanding and mastery.

These dimensions are particularly relevant in elementary classrooms because students often demonstrate engagement through observable behaviors such as answering questions, participating in group work, volunteering for activities, completing tasks, and asking questions. However, visible participation alone does not always indicate deep cognitive engagement. Learners may appear quiet while concentrating intensely, whereas highly active participation may sometimes occur without meaningful learning.

2.2 Engagement Across Learning Areas

Learners may respond differently depending on the subject matter and instructional approach. Subjects involving experimentation, physical movement, art, collaborative work, or practical application may produce immediate enthusiasm, while abstract concepts may demand greater teacher support.

Engagement is therefore influenced not simply by the subject itself but by how the subject is taught. Contextualized instruction can help learners connect academic ideas with experiences from home, school, community, and everyday life. When students recognize the relevance of a lesson, they may be more willing to participate and persist.

2.3 Interactive and Learner-Centered Instruction

Learner-centered teaching approaches encourage students to become active participants rather than passive recipients of information. Collaborative activities, classroom discussions, problem-solving tasks, experiments, games, role-playing, projects, and inquiry-based learning can increase opportunities for interaction.

Student engagement may also improve when learners are given meaningful choices and opportunities to demonstrate learning in different ways. Such approaches recognize differences in learner ability, confidence, interests, and preferred modes of participation.

2.4 Teacher–Student Relationships and Engagement

Positive relationships between teachers and learners can create classroom environments in which students feel safe asking questions, making mistakes, and contributing ideas. Teacher encouragement, recognition, fairness, patience, and responsiveness can influence learners' willingness to participate.

Conversely, fear of embarrassment, repeated academic failure, classroom anxiety, or negative peer reactions may reduce participation. Teachers therefore play an important role not only in delivering content but also in establishing emotional conditions that support engagement.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 5 teachers in sustaining student engagement across multisubject classrooms. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the study focused on how teachers experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to learner participation, interest, motivation, and disengagement during instruction in English, Mathematics, Science, EPP, GMRC, Araling Panlipunan, Filipino, and MAPEH. Participants were purposively selected elementary school teachers who were currently teaching Grade 5, had experience handling multiple learning areas, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that explored how teachers recognized engagement, which subjects or classroom situations generated stronger or weaker participation, difficulties encountered in sustaining

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attention and motivation, strategies used to encourage learners, and the influence of teacher–student relationships on participation. Follow-up questions were used to obtain detailed descriptions of significant experiences. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed through repeated reading, identification of significant statements, coding, clustering related meanings, developing thematic categories, and synthesizing the findings into themes representing the shared experience of promoting engagement in a multisubject classroom. Phenomenological procedures such as bracketing, horizontalization, textural description, structural description, and synthesis of the essence of the experience may also be employed. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer examination of emerging themes, maintenance of an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, participant identities were protected through codes such as P1, P2, and P3, and all data were treated confidentially.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed six major themes that represented teachers' experiences of student engagement across Grade 5 learning areas. The findings demonstrated both positive experiences that promoted participation and negative experiences that reduced attention, motivation, and involvement.

Theme 1: Engagement Changes Across Subjects

Teachers observed that student engagement differed considerably depending on the learning area, topic, task, and learners' perceived ability.

Positive Experiences

Participants reported that learners tended to become more enthusiastic when lessons involved movement, experimentation, creativity, competition, or practical activities.

P1 stated: "When the activity is hands-on, especially in Science, EPP, or MAPEH, almost everyone wants to participate. They become excited because they are doing something."

Similarly, P4 explained: "Some learners who are quiet in Math become very active in MAPEH. You can really see that every child has a subject where they feel confident."

These responses suggest that student engagement is influenced by individual interests and perceived strengths. Teaching multiple subjects allows teachers to observe learners in different academic and performance contexts.

Negative Experiences

Teachers also observed reduced engagement in subjects that students considered difficult.

P2 shared:

"When we start a difficult Math lesson, there are learners who immediately become quiet because they are afraid that they might give the wrong answer."

P5 similarly stated:

"There are lessons with many concepts or long readings. Sometimes the students lose attention before we finish."

This theme reveals that student engagement is dynamic rather than fixed. Learners who appear disengaged in one learning area may demonstrate strong participation in another. This highlights the importance of understanding engagement across the whole curriculum instead of judging learners according to performance in only one subject.

Theme 2: Active Participation Grows Through Interactive Learning

Teachers consistently associated higher student engagement with interactive instructional approaches.

Positive Experiences

Activities such as games, group work, experiments, role-playing, competitions, and hands-on tasks encouraged participation.

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P3 explained: "When I turn the lesson into a game, even the learners who usually do not volunteer become interested because they want to join their group."
P6 stated: "Group activities help shy learners because they can first share their ideas with classmates before speaking in front."
Interactive activities therefore appeared to reduce anxiety and encourage social participation.

Negative Experiences

Teachers noted that engagement decreased when lessons relied too heavily on teacher explanation.
P1 said:
"If I talk for too long, I notice some of them already looking outside or talking with their seatmates."
P7 added: "When the lesson is only discussion and writing, they get tired faster."
The experiences suggest that Grade 5 learners benefit from active participation. Engagement becomes stronger when learners have opportunities to speak, move, collaborate, investigate, create, and solve problems rather than listen passively for extended periods.

Theme 3: Familiar and Contextualized Lessons Increase Learner Interest

Teachers found that lessons connected to everyday experiences were easier for learners to understand and discuss.

Positive Experiences

Participants intentionally related concepts to familiar situations.
P2 stated: "In Math, I use examples about buying food or receiving change. They understand faster because they experience it in real life."
Another participant explained:
"In Araling Panlipunan and Science, I connect the topic to what they see in the community. They have more things to say because they know the situation." - **P5**

Negative Experiences

Teachers described weaker participation when lessons contained unfamiliar examples or abstract language.
P4 stated: "Sometimes the example in the material is unfamiliar to them. They become quiet because they cannot relate to it."
Contextualization appears to bridge academic content and lived experience. When learners recognize something familiar in the lesson, they become more confident in contributing ideas. However, abstract or culturally distant examples can reduce participation because learners lack prior knowledge with which to connect new concepts.

Theme 4: Learner Diversity Creates Uneven Engagement

Teachers identified differences in ability, confidence, language proficiency, personality, and learning pace as important factors influencing engagement.

Positive Experiences

Teachers appreciated how diverse strengths emerged in different learning areas.
P6 explained: "One child may struggle in English but can solve Math problems quickly. Another learner may not speak often but is very creative in arts."
Such observations encouraged teachers to recognize multiple forms of competence.

Negative Experiences

The same diversity created instructional challenges.
P3 stated: "Some learners finish quickly while others still need me to explain the instruction again. It is difficult to keep everyone engaged at the same time."
P8 added: "There are children who know the answer but are too shy to participate. Sometimes the active students are always the ones answering."

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Student engagement is affected by differences in readiness and confidence. Uniform instruction may benefit some learners while leaving others bored, overwhelmed, or reluctant to participate. Differentiation is therefore essential in multisubject classrooms.

Theme 5: Teacher Flexibility Sustains Classroom Participation
Teachers described constantly adjusting their lessons according to learners' reactions.
Positive Experiences
Participants changed strategies when they observed declining attention.
P1 explained: "If I notice that they are already losing interest, I change the activity. Sometimes I ask them to stand, work with a partner, or answer through a game."
P5 similarly shared: "Sometimes my planned activity does not work, so I simplify it or give another example."
These responses show that teachers actively monitor engagement and adapt instruction during the lesson.
Negative Experiences
Constant adjustment, however, could be demanding.
P7 stated: "You always have to think of another strategy. What works in one subject may not work in another."
Adaptive teaching is central to student engagement. Effective instruction requires teachers to interpret learner responses and modify their methods. However, this creates additional planning and cognitive demands for teachers responsible for several learning areas.

Theme 6: Relationships and Encouragement Strengthen Learner Involvement
The final theme emphasized the social and emotional dimension of engagement.
Positive Experiences
Teachers reported that students became more willing to participate when they felt accepted and encouraged.
P4 stated: "I tell them that it is okay to make mistakes. When they know I will not embarrass them, they become more willing to answer."
P8 explained: "Even simple praise makes a difference. When I say, 'Good try,' they usually want to participate again."
Teachers also believed that spending substantial time with the same learners across several subjects helped them understand students better.
Negative Experiences
Fear of mistakes could limit participation.
P2 stated: "Some learners know the answer, but they are afraid their classmates might laugh if they are wrong."
Engagement is shaped not only by instructional techniques but also by classroom relationships. Psychological safety, encouragement, and respectful peer interaction can increase willingness to participate, particularly among hesitant learners.

5. Discussion
The findings demonstrate that student engagement in Grade 5 multisubject classrooms is fluid, contextual, and multidimensional. Learners' participation changes according to subject matter, instructional strategy, task difficulty, confidence, peer interaction, and perceived relevance of the lesson.
The first theme demonstrates that engagement cannot be understood as a stable characteristic of a student. A learner who appears passive in Mathematics may participate actively in Science, MAPEH, Filipino, or EPP. This supports the multidimensional view of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004), wherein behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement may vary across learning environments.

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Interactive learning emerged as a major contributor to engagement. Participants consistently observed stronger involvement when learners performed experiments, played educational games, participated in group work, engaged in role-playing, or completed practical activities. Such activities provide opportunities for learners to interact with ideas rather than simply receive information.
Contextualized instruction also strengthened engagement. Teachers found that students responded more actively when classroom examples reflected familiar experiences. This indicates that engagement increases when learners can connect academic concepts with meaningful personal or community contexts.
Learner diversity presented both opportunities and difficulties. Multisubject teaching allowed teachers to identify strengths that might remain hidden in more specialized academic contexts. However, differences in readiness, confidence, and learning pace created challenges in sustaining whole-class participation. Differentiated instruction may therefore be particularly valuable in Grade 5 classrooms.
Teacher adaptability emerged as another central feature of engagement. Teachers monitored students' behavior and adjusted lesson pacing, examples, grouping, and activities accordingly. Engagement was therefore not treated as something entirely controlled by learners; rather, it was viewed as something that teachers could influence through responsive pedagogy.
Finally, positive teacher–student relationships appeared to support emotional engagement. Learners were more willing to speak, ask questions, and attempt difficult tasks when mistakes were treated as part of learning rather than a source of embarrassment. This suggests that academic engagement is strongly connected to emotional safety.

6. Essence of the Phenomenon

The essence of student engagement in a Grade 5 multisubject classroom can be described as a continuous movement between interest and disengagement that teachers navigate through adaptation, interaction, contextualization, and relationships.
Engagement is not equally sustained across all subjects or learners. Instead, it rises when learners experience competence, relevance, enjoyment, belonging, and meaningful participation, and declines when they encounter excessive difficulty, passivity, unfamiliarity, fear, or fatigue.
The experience of promoting engagement therefore involves more than making lessons entertaining. It requires teachers to continuously interpret learners' needs and create conditions in which students feel able, interested, supported, and willing to participate.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that student engagement in Grade 5 multisubject classrooms is influenced by the interaction of instructional strategies, subject characteristics, learner diversity, contextual relevance, and teacher–student relationships. Six themes emerged from teachers' experiences: engagement changes across subjects, interactive learning strengthens participation, contextualized lessons increase interest, learner diversity produces uneven engagement, teacher flexibility sustains participation, and supportive relationships encourage involvement.
Positive engagement was evident when learners participated actively in hands-on, collaborative, contextualized, and meaningful learning experiences. Negative engagement appeared when learners experienced difficult concepts, lengthy passive instruction, unfamiliar content, fear of mistakes, or activities that did not match their readiness.
The findings further suggest that student disengagement should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of motivation. In many cases, disengagement may reflect difficulty, low confidence, inappropriate instructional pacing, lack of relevance, or fear of negative peer reactions.
Teachers therefore play a central role in creating responsive learning environments that recognize different learner strengths and provide multiple opportunities for participation.

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8. Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that Grade 5 teachers should incorporate varied instructional approaches across the curriculum, including group activities, games, inquiry tasks, practical exercises, role-playing, discussion, and performance-based activities. Lessons should also be contextualized using experiences, objects, events, and situations familiar to learners.

Differentiated activities may be used to accommodate differences in readiness and learning pace. Teachers may provide varying levels of support while ensuring that learners experience meaningful success.

Classroom environments should promote psychological safety by emphasizing that mistakes are a natural part of learning. Teachers can strengthen participation by providing constructive encouragement and preventing ridicule among classmates.

School leaders may also support student engagement by providing teachers with instructional resources, professional development on learner-centered teaching, and opportunities to collaborate on multisubject lesson planning.

9. Recommendations

Future research may investigate student engagement from the perspectives of the learners themselves and compare those experiences with teachers' perceptions. Studies may also explore engagement across specific learning areas to determine why certain subjects generate stronger participation than others.

Quantitative studies may examine relationships among student engagement, academic performance, self-efficacy, classroom climate, and teaching strategies. Mixed-methods research could combine engagement scales, classroom observations, and interviews to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Comparative studies involving rural and urban schools, different grade levels, or different school contexts may also identify variations in engagement patterns.

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