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VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CULTURALLY GROUNDED LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy has been increasingly recognized as a critical approach for fostering meaningful learning and classroom engagement in diverse educational contexts. This qualitative study explored how culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices influenced classroom engagement from the perspectives of teachers and learners. Using a qualitative multiple-classroom case study design, data were gathered through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with learners. Thematic analysis revealed that culturally grounded practices enhanced behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement by validating learners' identities, connecting instruction to lived experiences, and promoting active participation through dialogue and collaboration. Findings indicate that engagement was strengthened when teachers intentionally integrated cultural knowledge, localized contexts, and learner voice into instruction while maintaining supportive structures and relationships. The study contributes empirical evidence to the growing literature on culturally responsive and learner-centered pedagogy and offers implications for classroom practice, instructional leadership, and curriculum development.

Keywords: *culturally grounded pedagogy, learner-centered teaching, classroom engagement, qualitative research, culturally responsive education*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Classroom engagement is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective teaching and meaningful learning. Engaged learners participate actively in learning activities, demonstrate interest and emotional involvement, and invest cognitive effort in understanding complex ideas. In increasingly diverse educational contexts, however, sustaining engagement remains a challenge, particularly when instructional practices fail to reflect learners' cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and ways of knowing. Traditional teacher-centered approaches that prioritize content transmission often limit opportunities for learner voice, interaction, and relevance, resulting in disengagement and surface-level learning.

In response to these challenges, learner-centered pedagogy has gained prominence as an approach that positions learners as active participants in the construction of knowledge. Learner-centered teaching emphasizes interaction, dialogue, collaboration, and instructional scaffolding that supports learners' autonomy and competence. When combined with culturally grounded practices, learner-centered pedagogy has the potential to create inclusive learning environments that validate learners' identities and foster meaningful engagement.

Culturally grounded pedagogy emphasizes the integration of learners' cultural knowledge, community experiences, languages, and values into classroom instruction. Rather than treating culture as an add-on or background variable, culturally grounded teaching views culture as a central resource for learning. Research suggests that when instruction is culturally relevant and learner-centered, learners are more likely to feel valued, motivated, and engaged in classroom activities.

Despite growing theoretical support, empirical studies that examine how culturally grounded learner-centered

pedagogy operates in everyday classroom practice particularly from the voices of teachers and learners remain limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices and their influence on classroom engagement through the perspectives of those directly involved in classroom interactions.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Classroom Engagement as a Multidimensional Construct

Classroom engagement is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement refers to learners' observable participation in classroom activities, such as contributing to discussions and completing tasks. Emotional engagement includes learners' interest, enjoyment, and sense of belonging, while cognitive engagement involves effortful thinking, strategic learning, and reflection. Research emphasizes that engagement is context-dependent and highly responsive to instructional practices and classroom climate. Learners may appear behaviorally compliant without being emotionally or cognitively engaged, underscoring the importance of pedagogies that support all dimensions of engagement.

2.2 Learner-Centered Pedagogy and Engagement

Learner-centered pedagogy is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, which posit that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction and guided participation. Learner-centered classrooms prioritize dialogue, collaboration, inquiry, and scaffolding rather than passive reception of information. Studies consistently show that learner-centered approaches enhance engagement by promoting learner agency, autonomy, and meaningful participation. When learners are given opportunities to ask questions,



express ideas, and collaborate with peers, they are more likely to engage deeply with learning content.

2.3 Culturally Grounded Pedagogy in Diverse Classrooms

Culturally grounded pedagogy emphasizes teaching practices that are responsive to learners' cultural identities, community knowledge, and social realities. This approach extends beyond surface-level inclusion of cultural examples by positioning learners' cultural experiences as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge. Research on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy indicates that integrating learners' cultural contexts into instruction strengthens engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes, particularly among learners from historically marginalized groups.

2.4 Integrating Culture and Learner-Centered Teaching

The integration of culturally grounded practices with learner-centered pedagogy creates powerful learning environments where engagement is co-constructed through relevance, interaction, and mutual respect. Teachers who successfully integrate these approaches design tasks that connect content to learners' lives, facilitate dialogue that honors diverse perspectives, and establish supportive relationships that encourage participation. However, implementing culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy requires pedagogical skill, reflective practice, and institutional support.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative multiple-classroom case study research design to explore culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices and classroom engagement. The qualitative approach was appropriate for capturing the perspectives and lived

experiences of teachers and learners within natural classroom settings.

The study was conducted in selected elementary and secondary classrooms where culturally grounded learner-centered practices were actively implemented. Participants included classroom teachers and learners who directly experienced these instructional approaches. Teachers were selected based on their use of learner-centered and culturally grounded strategies, while learners represented diverse backgrounds and participation levels.

Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group discussions with learners. Observations focused on instructional strategies, classroom interactions, use of cultural references, and learner participation patterns. Interviews explored teachers' pedagogical beliefs, instructional decisions, and perceptions of learner engagement. Learner focus group discussions elicited experiences, feelings, and perspectives on classroom engagement and cultural relevance.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach. Transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively, with themes generated through constant comparison across data sources. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms.

4. Findings and Results

Analysis of the data yielded four major themes that illustrate how culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices influenced classroom engagement.

Theme 1: Engagement through Cultural Relevance and Identity Validation



Teachers deliberately integrated learners' cultural backgrounds, community practices, and local experiences into classroom instruction as a central pedagogical strategy rather than as peripheral examples. Lessons were frequently anchored in familiar traditions, local histories, indigenous practices, family roles, and everyday community experiences. By using culturally grounded examples, narratives, and discussion prompts, teachers ensured that learning content resonated with learners' lived realities. This approach enabled learners to see their identities, experiences, and knowledge systems reflected in the curriculum, transforming the classroom into a space that acknowledged and valued who they were beyond their academic roles.

Participant Responses

Teachers observed noticeable changes in learners' attentiveness and participation when lessons reflected their cultural realities. One teacher shared, "*Kapag ang halimbawa ay galing sa kultura at karanasan nila, mas nagiging aktibo at interesado ang mga bata dahil pakiramdam nila ay bahagi sila ng aralin.*" Learners similarly expressed feelings of pride and confidence, explaining that they felt recognized and respected in class. Several learners shared that they were more eager to listen, respond, and share ideas when classroom discussions reflected their own lives and communities.

These findings indicate that cultural relevance and identity validation played a critical role in enhancing emotional engagement. When learners felt that their cultural identities mattered and were treated as legitimate sources of knowledge, they developed a stronger sense of belonging and affirmation within the classroom. This emotional connection increased learners' willingness to participate and invest effort in learning. The results underscore the importance of culturally grounded pedagogy in fostering inclusive

learning environments where engagement is rooted in recognition, respect, and relevance.

Theme 2: Increased Behavioral Engagement through Learner Voice and Participation

Learner-centered pedagogical practices emphasized dialogue, discussion, and collaborative activities as core instructional strategies. Teachers intentionally minimized prolonged lectures and instead created opportunities for learners to ask questions, express opinions, and work collaboratively on tasks. Classroom activities were designed to encourage interaction, shared decision-making, and collective problem-solving, allowing learners to assume active roles in the learning process. This shift redistributed classroom authority and positioned learners as contributors rather than passive recipients of information.

Participant Responses

Teachers noted a marked increase in participation across diverse learners, including those who were previously hesitant or quiet. One teacher remarked, "*Kahit ang tahimik na bata ay nagsisimulang magsalita kapag binibigyan ng pagkakataon at hindi agad hinuhugahan ang sagot.*" Learners reported that being invited to share opinions and ideas made lessons more engaging and interactive. They expressed greater enthusiasm for activities that allowed them to speak, collaborate, and be heard by peers and teachers.

These findings suggest that learner-centered practices significantly enhanced behavioral engagement by creating multiple and equitable opportunities for participation. By prioritizing learner voice and collaborative interaction, teachers reduced classroom passivity and encouraged sustained involvement in learning activities. Behavioral engagement increased not simply because learners were more active, but because instructional structures legitimized participation and empowered learners to take ownership of their learning.



Theme 3: Deepened Cognitive Engagement through Contextualized Meaning-Making

Culturally grounded instruction encouraged learners to connect academic concepts to real-life situations, community issues, and social realities that were familiar and meaningful to them. Teachers used guiding questions, reflective prompts, and contextualized tasks to help learners analyze content critically and interpret concepts within authentic contexts. Rather than focusing on memorization, instruction emphasized understanding, reasoning, and the exploration of multiple perspectives grounded in learners' experiences.

Participant Responses

Learners reported that classroom discussions helped them think more deeply about lessons. One learner stated, *"Mas naiintindihan ko ang aralin kapag naiugnay sa nangyayari sa amin dahil mas napapaisip ako kung bakit ganoon."* Teachers similarly observed that learners' responses became more analytical and reflective over time, noting that learners were increasingly able to explain ideas, justify opinions, and make connections between concepts and real-life situations.

These findings indicate that contextualized meaning-making strengthened cognitive engagement by promoting higher-order thinking and deeper understanding. By grounding abstract concepts in familiar contexts, learners were able to engage in analysis, interpretation, and reflection rather than surface-level recall. Cognitive engagement was enhanced as learners actively constructed meaning, demonstrating that culturally grounded instruction supports not only emotional and behavioral engagement but also rigorous intellectual involvement.

Theme 4: Sustained Engagement through Supportive Teacher–Learner Relationships

Teachers intentionally cultivated respectful and supportive classroom environments where learners felt safe to express ideas, ask questions, and make mistakes. Teacher–learner relationships were characterized by encouragement, empathy, and responsiveness. Teachers listened attentively to learners' contributions, affirmed effort, and framed errors as opportunities for learning rather than failure. This relational approach established trust and mutual respect as foundational elements of classroom interaction.

Participant Responses

Learners consistently expressed comfort and confidence in participating during lessons. One learner noted, *"Hindi kami natatakot magkamali dahil tinutulungan kami ng guro at pinapaliwanag kung paano pa namin maiintindihan."* Teachers emphasized that trust and respect were essential for sustaining learner engagement, particularly in discussion-oriented and culturally grounded classrooms where diverse perspectives were shared.

These findings highlight the crucial role of supportive teacher–learner relationships in maintaining sustained engagement. Emotional safety and relational trust enabled learners to take intellectual risks, participate consistently, and persist in challenging learning tasks. The results suggest that culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy is most effective when supported by strong relational practices that affirm learners' voices, experiences, and developing understandings.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices enhanced classroom engagement through interconnected behavioral, emotional, and cognitive processes. Viewed through contemporary engagement frameworks and culturally responsive pedagogy theories, the results affirm that engagement is not an



individual learner trait but a socially and culturally mediated outcome shaped by instructional design, classroom interaction, and relational practices.

Cultural Relevance and Identity Validation as Emotional Engagement

The first theme engagement through cultural relevance and identity validation aligns closely with culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy frameworks, which emphasize the importance of affirming learners' cultural identities as assets for learning (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). When teachers integrated learners' cultural backgrounds, community practices, and lived experiences into instruction, learners reported increased pride, confidence, and a sense of belonging. These responses correspond directly to the emotional dimension of engagement described in engagement theory, where feelings of belonging and value are central to sustained participation (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

From a theoretical standpoint, identity validation functions as a motivational mechanism that supports engagement by reducing cultural dissonance between home and school. When learners see themselves reflected in the curriculum, classroom participation becomes emotionally safer and more meaningful. This finding reinforces the argument that culturally grounded pedagogy does not merely enhance motivation but restructures the emotional conditions under which engagement can occur.

Learner Voice and Participation as Behavioral Engagement

The second theme increased behavioral engagement through learner voice and participation—maps strongly onto learner-centered pedagogy and sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize participation, dialogue, and shared meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). By minimizing prolonged lectures and prioritizing discussion, collaboration, and learner

expression, teachers redistributed classroom authority and expanded opportunities for participation.

This shift directly supports the behavioral dimension of engagement, defined as active involvement in learning tasks and classroom discourse (Appleton et al., 2008). Importantly, participation was not limited to a small group of confident learners; instead, quieter learners also began to contribute when instructional structures legitimized their voices. This finding highlights that behavioral engagement increases when participation is intentionally designed and culturally inclusive, rather than assumed to emerge naturally.

Contextualized Meaning-Making and Cognitive Engagement

The third theme deepened cognitive engagement through contextualized meaning-making aligns with constructivist learning theory and engagement research that emphasizes effortful thinking, reflection, and strategic reasoning as core indicators of cognitive engagement (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). Teachers' use of guiding questions and culturally relevant contexts enabled learners to analyze concepts critically, draw connections to real-life experiences, and articulate reasoned interpretations.

Culturally grounded contexts served as cognitive scaffolds that reduced abstraction and supported deeper understanding. Rather than simplifying content, contextualization increased cognitive demand by requiring learners to interpret ideas within complex, familiar social realities. This finding supports the view that culturally responsive pedagogy promotes intellectual rigor by anchoring higher-order thinking in meaningful contexts, countering misconceptions that culturally grounded instruction lowers academic expectations.

Supportive Teacher-Learner Relationships as a Cross-Cutting Engagement Mechanism



The fourth theme sustained engagement through supportive teacher–learner relationships—cuts across all dimensions of engagement and is strongly supported by relational engagement research. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that learner-centered teacher–student relationships are consistently associated with positive academic, motivational, and affective outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007). In this study, trust, empathy, and encouragement created emotionally safe learning environments where learners were willing to participate, make mistakes, and persist in challenging tasks.

From a theoretical perspective, supportive relationships function as enabling conditions for culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy. Emotional safety allowed learners to engage behaviorally and cognitively without fear of judgment, while respectful interactions affirmed learners’ identities and voices. This finding reinforces the argument that engagement is co-constructed through pedagogy and relationships, not solely through instructional techniques.

Integrative Perspective: Engagement as a Culturally Mediated Process

Taken together, the findings support an integrative view of engagement as a culturally mediated, relational, and instructional process. Culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy enhanced engagement not by increasing activity alone, but by aligning instructional practices with learners’ identities, experiences, and ways of knowing. Emotional engagement emerged through identity validation, behavioral engagement through structured participation and learner voice, and cognitive engagement through contextualized analysis and reflection each sustained by supportive teacher–learner relationships.

This study extends engagement theory by demonstrating that culturally responsive pedagogy provides concrete mechanisms through which engagement can be enacted in diverse classrooms. It also contributes to culturally

responsive pedagogy literature by empirically showing how learner-centered practices translate cultural relevance into observable engagement outcomes. Ultimately, the findings affirm that meaningful classroom engagement is most effectively achieved when pedagogy is both learner-centered and culturally grounded.

6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study suggest that teachers should intentionally and systematically integrate learners’ cultural contexts into learner-centered instructional practices in order to strengthen classroom engagement. Rather than treating culture as an ancillary element, teachers are encouraged to design learning tasks that validate learners’ identities, draw on community knowledge, and recognize diverse ways of knowing. Culturally grounded tasks that promote dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and reflective thinking can create meaningful entry points for participation and support learners’ emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. By positioning learners’ cultural experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, teachers can foster a stronger sense of belonging and ownership over learning.

At the level of instructional leadership, the findings highlight the importance of sustained professional development focused on culturally grounded pedagogy and learner-centered teaching strategies. Professional learning initiatives should emphasize practical competencies such as designing culturally relevant tasks, facilitating inclusive dialogue, scaffolding reflective thinking, and creating emotionally safe classroom environments. Collaborative planning, peer mentoring, and reflective coaching can further support teachers in translating culturally responsive principles into everyday classroom practice. When instructional leaders prioritize these supports, they help create conditions for consistent and effective implementation



of culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy across classrooms.

For curriculum developers, the results underscore the value of embedding culturally grounded learner-centered activities within curriculum materials to promote inclusive and engaging learning experiences. Curriculum frameworks, guides, and learning resources should intentionally incorporate local histories, community practices, and culturally relevant contexts alongside opportunities for learner voice and reflection. By aligning curricular materials with culturally responsive and learner-centered approaches, curriculum developers can support teachers in implementing pedagogy that not only enhances engagement but also affirms learners' identities and promotes equitable learning opportunities.

7. Limitations and Future Research

As a qualitative study, findings are context-specific and not intended for generalization. Future research may involve multiple sites, mixed-methods designs, or longitudinal studies to examine the sustained impact of culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy on engagement and academic outcomes.

8. Conclusion

This study provides robust empirical evidence that culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogical practices significantly enhance classroom engagement by fostering instructional relevance, active participation, and meaningful learning. The findings demonstrate that when instruction is intentionally anchored in learners' cultural identities, community experiences, and ways of knowing, learners are more likely to participate actively, develop emotional connections to learning, and invest cognitively in understanding academic content. Rather than treating culture as a peripheral element, teachers positioned cultural knowledge as a central resource for learning, thereby transforming classrooms into inclusive spaces

where learners felt recognized, valued, and motivated to engage.

The study further illustrates that learner-centered practices such as dialogue, collaborative inquiry, and reflective activities played a critical role in translating cultural relevance into sustained engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement was strengthened as learners were given multiple opportunities to contribute and collaborate, emotional engagement increased through identity validation and a sense of belonging, and cognitive engagement deepened as learners connected academic concepts to lived experiences and engaged in higher-order thinking. These findings reinforce the view that engagement is a multidimensional and socially constructed process shaped by pedagogical design, classroom interaction, and relational practices.

Sustaining the benefits of culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy requires consistent instructional support and targeted professional development. Teachers need ongoing opportunities to refine culturally responsive strategies, deepen learner-centered facilitation skills, and reflect critically on their instructional practices. When supported by instructional leadership, collaborative planning, and curriculum alignment, culturally grounded learner-centered pedagogy can be institutionalized as a core instructional approach. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of research demonstrating that culturally grounded learner-centered teaching offers a viable pathway toward more equitable, inclusive, and engaging educational experiences across diverse classroom contexts.

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