



## Pupils' Classroom Engagement and Learning Experiences in Culturally Responsive Primary School Classrooms in Tanzania

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examined pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences in culturally responsive primary school classrooms in Nghambaku Ward, Chamwino District, Tanzania. The study was motivated by concerns regarding learner participation and inclusive learning in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Specifically, it explored how culturally responsive teaching practices influence pupils' participation, confidence, motivation, collaboration, and classroom interaction. A mixed-methods case study design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered to 120 Class Three pupils, while qualitative data were gathered through interviews with six teachers and three head teachers, focus group discussions with 36 Class Six pupils, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings revealed that culturally responsive teaching practices enhanced learner participation, confidence, collaboration, and motivation. Pupils reported that storytelling, familiar language use, and opportunities to share home experiences made learning more meaningful and participatory. Classroom observations showed that interactive and culturally relevant lessons promoted greater engagement than teacher-centred approaches. However, overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time affected consistent implementation. The study concludes that culturally responsive teaching significantly promotes inclusive learner engagement and meaningful classroom participation in diverse primary school settings.

**KEY WORDS:** Learner engagement, classroom participation, culturally responsive teaching, inclusive learning, storytelling pedagogy.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Learner engagement is widely recognized as an important factor influencing educational achievement, classroom participation, motivation, and inclusive learning outcomes. In primary school classrooms, pupils' active involvement in learning activities contributes significantly to academic understanding, confidence development, social interaction, and meaningful participation in classroom processes (Fredricks et al., 2021). However, learner engagement is often influenced by multiple contextual factors, including language, culture, teaching approaches, classroom climate, and teacher-learner relationships.

In culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, learners may experience varying levels of participation and inclusion depending on whether classroom instruction reflects their social realities and lived experiences. According to Gay (2020), learners are more likely to participate actively when teaching practices recognize their cultural identities, prior experiences, and linguistic backgrounds. Culturally responsive teaching therefore plays an important role in creating inclusive classroom environments that support learner confidence, motivation, and equitable participation.

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Ladson-Billings (2021) explains that culturally responsive pedagogy strengthens learner engagement by connecting classroom instruction with learners' home experiences and community contexts. Such approaches enable learners to see themselves reflected within the learning process, thereby improving classroom interaction and participation. Similarly, Villegas and Lucas (2020) maintain that inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms promote collaboration, mutual respect, and meaningful learner engagement.

In African educational contexts, multilingualism and cultural diversity continue to shape classroom interaction and learner participation. Studies conducted in East African countries indicate that learners participate more confidently when teachers use familiar language, collaborative learning approaches, and culturally meaningful examples during instruction (Ituma, 2025). However, many primary school classrooms still rely heavily on teacher-centred instructional methods that provide limited opportunities for learner interaction and participation.

In Tanzania, inclusive education policies emphasize learner-centred pedagogy and equitable participation for all learners. Nevertheless, classroom practices in some schools may not fully accommodate pupils' cultural and linguistic diversity. Research conducted by Mrema (2024) found that collaborative and inclusive instructional approaches improve learner participation and interaction in diverse classrooms. Similarly, Mgaiwa and Amani (2024) reported that culturally responsive practices contribute positively to classroom participation and learner confidence in Tanzanian schools.

Despite these findings, limited empirical studies have examined pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences within culturally responsive classroom environments in rural Tanzanian primary schools. Existing studies have largely focused on inclusive education broadly rather than specifically exploring how culturally responsive teaching influences learner participation, motivation, and interaction. The present study therefore sought to examine pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences in culturally responsive primary school classrooms in Nghambaku Ward, Chamwino District, Tanzania.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Learner Engagement in Classroom Learning**

Learner engagement refers to the degree of attention, participation, emotional involvement, and commitment that learners demonstrate during classroom learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2021). Engaged learners actively participate in discussions, collaborate with peers, ask questions, and demonstrate interest in learning tasks. Learner engagement is often categorized into behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

Behavioural engagement involves learners' participation in classroom activities and adherence to classroom expectations. Emotional engagement refers to learners' feelings of belonging, interest, and enjoyment during learning. Cognitive engagement relates to learners' willingness to invest effort in understanding concepts and solving academic problems (Skinner & Pitzer, 2022). Research indicates that learner engagement contributes significantly to academic success, classroom interaction, and inclusive participation. According to Christenson et al. (2021), learners who actively participate in classroom activities are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning and achieve better educational outcomes.

### **2.2 Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learner Participation**

Culturally responsive teaching promotes learner participation by connecting classroom instruction with learners' social and cultural experiences. Gay (2020) explains that culturally responsive instructional approaches encourage learners to participate confidently because classroom activities reflect familiar experiences and communication styles.

Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2021) argues that culturally responsive teaching empowers learners by validating their identities and creating opportunities for meaningful participation. Learners become more engaged when teachers acknowledge their home experiences, encourage storytelling, and support collaborative interaction.

Research further suggests that culturally responsive learning environments strengthen learners' confidence and sense of belonging. According to Naz et al. (2024), respectful classroom interaction and inclusive communication enhance learners' emotional engagement and classroom participation.

### **2.3 Storytelling and Experiential Learning in Primary Education**

Storytelling is widely recognized as an important instructional strategy for promoting learner participation and meaningful learning in primary education. Through storytelling, learners connect classroom concepts with familiar experiences, family practices, and community knowledge (Bruner, 2020). Storytelling activities encourage creativity, communication, and collaborative learning while simultaneously strengthening learners' confidence and classroom interaction.

Experiential learning approaches similarly emphasize the importance of connecting learning with real-life experiences. Kolb (2021) argues that learners understand concepts more effectively when instructional activities involve reflection on familiar situations and active participation in learning tasks.

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## **2.4 Empirical Studies in African and Tanzanian Contexts**

Several studies conducted in African educational contexts demonstrate the positive influence of culturally responsive teaching on learner engagement and participation. Ituma (2025), in a study conducted in Kenya, found that learners participated more actively when teachers used familiar examples and flexible instructional approaches in multilingual classrooms. Studies conducted in Uganda and Rwanda similarly revealed that culturally responsive classroom practices improved learners' confidence, participation, and classroom interaction.

In Tanzania, Mrema (2024) found that collaborative learning and differentiated instruction improved learner interaction and classroom participation in multicultural primary schools. Mgaiwa and Amani (2024) further reported that culturally familiar instructional examples enhanced learners' classroom confidence and participation in pre-primary education settings.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into inclusive pedagogy and learner participation, limited empirical research has specifically examined pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences within culturally responsive classroom environments in rural Tanzanian primary schools. This study therefore contributes to addressing this contextual gap.

## **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study was guided by Social Constructivist Theory and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Social Constructivist Theory, developed by Vygotsky, emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and collaborative engagement within meaningful cultural contexts. Learners construct knowledge more effectively when classroom activities involve communication, participation, and interaction with peers and teachers.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, proposed by Ladson-Billings (2021), emphasizes that effective teaching should recognize learners' cultural identities, social experiences, and community knowledge. The theory argues that learners participate more actively and confidently when instructional practices affirm their cultural backgrounds and lived realities.

These theories were considered appropriate because they explain how culturally responsive instructional practices influence learner participation, interaction, confidence, and classroom engagement.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 Research Approach and Design**

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach within a case study design. The mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to integrate quantitative and qualitative data in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences.

### **4.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Nghambaku Ward, Chamwino District, Dodoma Region, Tanzania. The area was selected because of its culturally and linguistically diverse primary school population.

### **4.3 Participants and Sampling Procedures**

The study involved 120 Class Three pupils who participated in questionnaires, six Class Three teachers, three head teachers, and 36 Class Six pupils who participated in focus group discussions. Simple random sampling was used to select pupils for questionnaires, while purposive sampling was used to select teachers, head teachers, and focus group discussion participants.

### **4.4 Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. Questionnaires gathered quantitative data regarding pupils' participation, confidence, and classroom experiences. Interviews explored teachers' perceptions and instructional practices, while focus group discussions provided in-depth insights into pupils' learning experiences. Classroom observations documented learner participation, interaction, and instructional approaches.

### **4.5 Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Qualitative data were analysed thematically through coding, categorization, and interpretation of emerging themes.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Learner Participation through Storytelling and Experience Sharing**

The findings revealed that culturally responsive classroom practices encouraged learner participation through storytelling and sharing of home experiences. Approximately 35% of pupils strongly agreed and 33.3% agreed that teachers allowed them to share stories and experiences from home during lessons. The mean score of 3.70 indicated moderate implementation of this participatory instructional practice.

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The findings suggest that storytelling activities enabled pupils to connect classroom learning with familiar experiences from home and community life. Learners reported that sharing stories about farming activities, cooking, family responsibilities, and community traditions made classroom learning more enjoyable and meaningful.

One teacher explained:

“Pupils are encouraged to share experiences related to farming activities, family practices, and community life in order to connect classroom lessons with real-life situations.”

Similarly, a head teacher reported:

“Teachers are encouraged to create opportunities for pupils to share personal and community experiences because such activities improve learner engagement and provide culturally relevant ways of assessing understanding.”

Focus group discussions further revealed that pupils enjoyed storytelling activities because they encouraged interaction and collaboration among classmates. These findings support Bruner (2020), who argues that storytelling strengthens learners' communication, understanding, and participation in classroom learning activities. However, some pupils indicated that not all learners were given equal opportunities to participate during lessons. Teachers reported that overcrowded classrooms and limited instructional time sometimes affected the consistency of participatory activities.

### **5.2 Learner Confidence and Sense of Belonging**

The study further revealed that culturally responsive teaching practices strengthened pupils' confidence and sense of belonging within classroom environments. Pupils reported feeling more comfortable participating in lessons when teachers respected their cultural backgrounds and encouraged inclusive interaction.

Classroom observations showed that learners participated more confidently during interactive lessons in which teachers used familiar language, culturally meaningful examples, and collaborative activities. Pupils explained that they were less afraid of making mistakes when teachers created supportive and respectful classroom environments.

One pupil explained during a focus group discussion:

“When teachers allow us to explain ideas using examples from our homes or villages, we understand better and feel happy to speak during lessons.”

These findings are consistent with Naz et al. (2024), who found that respectful and inclusive classroom relationships strengthen learners' emotional engagement and participation. The findings further suggest that culturally responsive teaching contributes to learners' emotional wellbeing by promoting acceptance, inclusion, and recognition of diverse identities within classroom settings.

### **5.3 Collaborative Learning and Classroom Interaction**

The findings also demonstrated that collaborative learning activities promoted learner engagement and classroom interaction. Teachers frequently organized group discussions, peer-learning activities, and collaborative problem-solving tasks during lessons. Classroom observations revealed that learners interacted more actively during group-based activities than during teacher-centred instructional sessions. Pupils explained that group discussions allowed them to exchange ideas, support one another, and participate more comfortably.

One teacher noted:

“Group activities help learners from different backgrounds cooperate and learn from one another. Pupils become more active when they work together and discuss familiar experiences.”

The findings indicate that collaborative learning strengthens culturally responsive teaching by creating opportunities for learners to interact meaningfully and contribute diverse perspectives during classroom activities. These findings support Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning in knowledge construction.

### **5.4 Language Adaptation and Learner Engagement**

The study found that teachers' use of understandable language significantly enhanced learner engagement and participation. Approximately 38.3% of pupils strongly agreed and 37.5% agreed that teachers used language forms they understood well during lessons.

Teachers explained that they frequently simplified explanations and occasionally incorporated familiar local expressions to improve comprehension. Pupils similarly reported that the use of simple Kiswahili and familiar examples made classroom learning easier to understand.

One pupil explained:

“Our teacher explains things in simple Kiswahili and sometimes uses words from our local languages. This helps everyone understand lessons and participate.”

These findings support UNESCO (2021), which emphasizes that multilingual and culturally responsive instructional approaches strengthen participation and educational inclusion.

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### 5.5 Challenges Affecting Learner Engagement

Despite the positive contributions of culturally responsive teaching practices, the study identified several challenges affecting learner engagement and participation. Teachers reported overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, inadequate teaching resources, and insufficient professional training as major barriers to implementing participatory and culturally responsive instructional practices consistently.

Classroom observations further revealed that some lessons remained teacher-centred due to time constraints and large pupil populations. Consequently, not all learners received equal opportunities to participate during classroom activities. These findings suggest that institutional and structural challenges continue to affect the implementation of inclusive and culturally responsive teaching practices in rural primary schools.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study examined pupils' classroom engagement and learning experiences within culturally responsive primary school classrooms in Nghambaku Ward, Tanzania. The findings revealed that culturally responsive instructional practices enhanced learner participation, confidence, collaboration, motivation, and classroom interaction. Storytelling activities, collaborative learning approaches, familiar language use, and opportunities to share home experiences contributed positively to meaningful learner engagement and inclusive participation.

The study further established that culturally responsive teaching strengthens learners' sense of belonging and confidence by creating supportive classroom environments that recognize and respect diverse cultural identities. However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, and insufficient teacher training affected the consistent implementation of participatory and culturally responsive instructional approaches. In general, the study concludes that culturally responsive teaching plays a significant role in promoting inclusive learner engagement and meaningful classroom participation in diverse primary school settings.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

- i. Teachers should adopt more participatory instructional approaches that encourage equitable learner participation and classroom interaction.
- ii. Schools should integrate storytelling and experiential learning activities regularly across subjects to strengthen learner engagement.
- iii. Teacher education programmes should strengthen training in culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive communication, and multilingual instructional strategies.
- iv. Educational policymakers should provide adequate instructional resources and institutional support for culturally responsive and learner-centred teaching practices.
- v. Further studies should examine culturally responsive learner engagement practices in urban and secondary school contexts in Tanzania.

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