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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN STRUCTURED AND NON-STRUCTURED CLASSROOMS

Melodina S. Dela Rosa[a] ,Gregg O. Siat[b]

[a]MAED Elementary Teaching, Biliran Province State University, Naval, Biliran, Philippines
[b]School of Teacher Education, Biliran Province State University, Biliran, 6543, Philippines

A B S T R A C T :

Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge—it is the cultivation of curiosity, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. At the heart of this process lies learner engagement, a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive involvement. In recent years, educators and researchers alike have turned their attention to the classroom environment as a key determinant of engagement. This study employed a qualitative descriptive-comparative research design. The results in Perceptual Engagement are that cleanliness, simplicity, and clarity of rules strongly influence how engaged students feel. In emotional engagement, the results are Interest, teacher support, and instructional clarity foster positive emotions, while unclear tasks create confusion or anxiety. In Behavioral Engagement, the result is that Students behave and participate more consistently in structured environments. In Cognitive Engagement, the result is that Mental effort increases when tasks are interesting, and environments are quiet and organized. And lastly, the result in Structured vs. Non-Structured is that both environments support engagement differently; structured classrooms strengthen productivity while non-structured settings enhance focus for some learners.

Keywords: Perceptual Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Behavioural Engagement, Cognitive Engagement, Structured and Non-Structured

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is not merely the transmission of knowledge—it is the cultivation of curiosity, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. At the heart of this process lies learner engagement, a multidimensional construct that encompasses behavioral participation, emotional investment, and cognitive involvement. In recent years, educators and researchers alike have turned their attention to the classroom environment as a key determinant of engagement. As pedagogical models evolve, a pressing question emerges: how do different classroom structures influence the way students connect with their learning? Structured classrooms are traditionally characterized by teacher-led instruction, standardized curricula, and clearly defined rules and routines (Pianta, Hamre, and Allen, 2012). These environments prioritize order, predictability, and measurable outcomes, often aligning with behaviorist and cognitivist theories of learning. Students in structured settings are expected to follow a linear path, with limited flexibility in how content is delivered or explored. While this model offers consistency and control, it may also constrain creativity and autonomy—two factors increasingly recognized as vital to deep learning.

In contrast, non-structured classrooms embrace a more fluid and student-centered approach. Rooted in constructivist and socio-cultural theories, these environments encourage inquiry, collaboration, and personalized learning experiences. Teachers act as facilitators rather than directors, allowing students to co-create knowledge through exploration and dialogue. Non-structured classrooms often integrate project-based learning, thematic units, and flexible pacing, which can foster intrinsic motivation and emotional connection to the material. However, the lack of a rigid structure may pose challenges in maintaining discipline and ensuring coverage of essential content.

The debate between structured and non-structured learning environments is not merely academic—it has real implications for student outcomes, especially in terms of engagement. Learner engagement is widely acknowledged as a predictor of academic achievement, retention, and overall well-being. Engaged students are more likely to persist through challenges, participate actively in class, and develop a lifelong love of learning. Yet, engagement is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon; it is shaped by individual differences, cultural contexts, and the nature of the learning environment itself.

In the Philippine educational landscape, where classrooms vary widely in terms of resources, teaching styles, and institutional philosophies, understanding the impact of classroom structure on engagement is particularly relevant. As schools strive to adapt to 21st-century demands—balancing tradition with innovation—there is a need for empirical evidence to guide decision-making. This study aims to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of learner engagement in structured and non-structured classrooms among Grade 6 students in Leyte Central School.

By examining the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learner engagement through semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to uncover meaningful patterns and insights that can inform teaching practices and educational policy. Rather than aiming to determine which classroom model—structured or non-structured—is superior, the research focuses on understanding how each environment fosters different aspects of student engagement.

Through the voices of learners themselves, the study highlights the nuanced ways in which instructional formats shape participation, motivation, and learning strategies. Ultimately, the goal is to provide educators with evidence-based perspectives that support the creation of more inclusive, responsive, and empowering learning spaces.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

This study aims to compare learner engagement in structured and non-structured classrooms. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among students in structured classrooms?
2. What is the level of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement among students in non-structured classrooms?
3. Is there a significant difference in learner engagement between structured and non-structured classroom environments?

1.2. Framework of the Study

This part presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study.

Theoretical framework: This study is anchored on the theory of Social Constructivism developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978). Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction, cultural context, and collaborative learning in the development of knowledge. According to Vygotsky, learning is not an isolated activity but a socially mediated process where individuals construct meaning through dialogue, shared experiences, and active participation. This theory highlights the role of the teacher as a facilitator and the learner as an active contributor to their own understanding.
In the context of classroom engagement, social constructivism supports the idea that students are more likely to be emotionally and cognitively involved when they are given opportunities to interact, explore, and co-construct knowledge. Non-structured classrooms, which promote inquiry-based learning, peer collaboration, and student autonomy, align closely with this theoretical perspective. These environments encourage learners to take ownership of their learning, engage in meaningful discussions, and connect academic content to their personal experiences.
On the other hand, structured classrooms often reflect principles of Behaviorism, where learning is shaped by reinforcement, repetition, and teacher-directed instruction. While structured environments provide consistency and discipline, they may limit the depth of engagement by focusing primarily on observable behaviors rather than internal motivation or emotional connection.

1.3. Importance of the Study

This study will benefit the following groups:
Educators. By offering insights into how classroom structure affects student engagement, teachers can adapt their strategies to better meet learners' needs.
School Administrators. Findings may inform policy decisions and curriculum design that promote inclusive and effective learning environments.
Students. Understanding engagement dynamics can help improve their learning experiences and outcomes.
Future Researchers. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on classroom design and learner engagement in the Philippine context.

1.4. Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study focuses on Grade 6 students enrolled at Leyte Central School during the School Year 2021–2022. It aims to compare learner engagement in structured and non-structured classroom environments by examining students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement through semi-structured interviews. The scope is limited to capturing students' subjective experiences and perceptions of engagement as defined within the study's conceptual framework.
The research does not extend to other grade levels, subject-specific engagement, or longitudinal academic performance. It also excludes quantitative measures such as standardized test scores or attendance records. The findings are based solely on the responses of Grade 6 students and are intended to provide qualitative insights into how different instructional formats influence learner engagement within the specified school and academic year.

1.5. Definition of Terms

The unfamiliar terms are often used in this study will be defined to avoid confusion.
Learner Engagement. Refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, and passion that students show in the learning process. It includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components.
Structured Classroom. A learning environment characterized by teacher-led instruction, fixed schedules, and clearly defined rules and expectations.
Non-Structured Classroom. A flexible, student-centered learning environment that encourages exploration, collaboration, and autonomy.
Behavioral Engagement. Observable actions such as participation, attendance, and task completion.
Emotional Engagement. Students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, and connection to the learning experience.
Cognitive Engagement. The mental effort and strategies students use to understand and master academic content.

1.6. Review of Related Literature and Studies

Understanding learner engagement requires a multidimensional lens that considers both psychological theories and classroom realities. This study is grounded in two foundational learning theories: Constructivism and Behaviorism. Constructivism, as articulated by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky,

emphasizes the learner's active role in constructing knowledge through experience, reflection, and social interaction. It supports the principles of non-structured classrooms, where students are encouraged to explore, collaborate, and take ownership of their learning. In contrast, Behaviorism, associated with B.F. Skinner focuses on observable behaviors shaped by reinforcement and external stimuli. Structured classrooms often reflect this model, relying on teacher-led instruction, fixed routines, and standardized assessments to guide student behavior and academic outcomes.

The conceptual framework of this study defines learner engagement as a construct composed of three interrelated dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation in academic tasks, such as attending classes and completing assignments. Emotional engagement involves feelings of interest, enjoyment, and belonging within the learning environment. Cognitive engagement reflects the mental effort and strategies students use to understand and master academic content. These dimensions serve as the basis for comparing engagement levels in structured and non-structured classrooms.

Several foreign and local studies have explored the dynamics of learner engagement and classroom structure. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) provided a foundational understanding of engagement by categorizing it into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. Their work emphasized that engagement is context-dependent and influenced by instructional practices. Kahu (2013) expanded this view by proposing a framework that links engagement to institutional, personal, and structural factors, highlighting the role of classroom design in shaping student motivation. Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory further supports the value of autonomy in learning, suggesting that environments promoting student choice—such as non-structured classrooms—enhance intrinsic motivation and engagement. Reeve (2006) reinforced this by demonstrating that autonomy-supportive teaching leads to higher levels of student interest and persistence. Similarly, Skinner and Belmont (1993) found that positive teacher-student relationships in flexible classrooms significantly boost emotional engagement.

Local studies offer valuable insights into the Philippine educational context. Bernardo (2004) examined Filipino students' learning preferences and found that engagement improves when teaching methods align with cultural values and personal interests. David and Dizon (2017) explored classroom management strategies in high schools and concluded that structured environments help maintain discipline but may restrict student expression. Luna and Garcia (2019) conducted a comparative study of traditional and progressive classrooms in Cebu, revealing that students in progressive settings reported higher levels of enjoyment and participation. Torres and Mendoza (2021) investigated engagement in modular versus inquiry-based learning and found that inquiry-based approaches foster deeper cognitive engagement. Santos (2022) focused on emotional engagement among senior high school students and identified teacher empathy and classroom flexibility as strong predictors of student interest and connection.

Despite these contributions, a clear research gap remains. Most existing studies examine either engagement or classroom structure in isolation, and few offer a direct comparison between structured and non-structured environments within the Philippine secondary school context.

While much of the existing local research tends to emphasize academic performance, this study seeks to address a critical gap by focusing on the holistic dimensions of learner engagement. Specifically, it examines the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engagement among Grade 6 students at Leyte Central School.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the study adopts a qualitative approach to gain deeper insight into how classroom structure—whether structured or non-structured—influences student participation, motivation, and learning strategies. Rather than aiming to determine which instructional format is superior, the research intends to provide a nuanced understanding of how different environments support various facets of engagement. The findings are expected to offer practical recommendations for educators seeking to foster inclusive, responsive, and empowering learning experiences.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research procedures used to investigate the differences in learner engagement between structured and non-structured classrooms. It describes the research design, locale, population and sampling methods, instruments used for data collection, the data gathering process, and the techniques employed for data analysis.

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-comparative research design. It focused on exploring and describing students' experiences and perceptions rather than measuring engagement numerically. The research used interviews and classroom observations to gain an in-depth understanding of how learners engage in different classroom settings.

2.2. Research Locale

The study will be conducted at Leyte Central School, which implements both structured and non-structured classroom approaches. This location was chosen to provide a meaningful contrast of environments while maintaining consistency in school culture and resources.

2.3. Population and Sampling

The participants of the study consisted of twelve (12) Grade 6 students from Leyte Central School—six (6) from structured classrooms and six (6) from non-structured classrooms. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to identify students who could provide rich and relevant insights about their learning experiences. The researcher ensured diversity in academic performance and gender among participants.

2.4. Research Instruments

This study employed a semi-structured interview guide as the sole qualitative instrument to gather data on learner engagement in structured and non-structured classrooms. This tool was selected to capture students' subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections across different instructional formats. By focusing on open-ended, thematic questions, the interview guide allowed for rich, detailed insights into emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of engagement.

The instrument was adapted from validated tools used in prior research (Skidmore & Thompson, 2019; Javaid et al., 2024) and tailored to the comparative nature of this study. It was reviewed by education experts to ensure content validity and piloted with a small sample to refine clarity and relevance.

2.5. Data Gathering Procedure

The data for this study were collected through a semi-structured interview guide, which served as the sole research instrument. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from both structured and non-structured classroom settings. Prior to the interviews, each participant was briefed on the purpose of the study and invited to participate voluntarily. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the students and conducted in a quiet, private setting to promote comfort and openness. The researcher facilitated each session using the prepared interview guide, allowing for follow-up questions when necessary to clarify or deepen responses. With the consent of each participant, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and prepared for thematic analysis.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants through a written consent form that outlined the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participation was strictly voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

To protect participant privacy, all identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts, and data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the institution's ethics committee prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

2.7. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data gathered through the semi-structured interviews. The researcher began by thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews to become familiar with the content. Initial coding was conducted by identifying key phrases and ideas related to the study's focus on learner engagement. These codes were then organized into broader themes corresponding to emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and perceptual dimensions of engagement. A comparative analysis was performed to examine differences and similarities in student responses between structured and non-structured classroom settings. The final interpretation of the data was guided by the research questions and supported by relevant literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of learner engagement across instructional formats.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored students' perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and cognitive processes related to engagement in structured and non-structured classroom environments. Using thematic analysis, four major themes emerged from the interview data: (1) Emotional Engagement, (2) Behavioral Engagement, (3) Cognitive Engagement, and (4) Perceptual Engagement. These themes highlight how classroom structure, environment, teacher behavior, and instructional clarity shape students' overall engagement. A comparative analysis between structured and non-structured settings further revealed key differences in how students focus, participate, and regulate emotions during learning.

Theme 1: Perceptual Engagement — Clarity, Cleanliness, and Classroom Atmosphere

Students consistently emphasized that their perception of the physical and instructional environment influenced their engagement. Cleanliness, orderliness, and the absence of distractions were recurring factors that contributed to positive engagement, especially in non-structured or less decorated classrooms.

Several students shared that a clean and distraction-free environment helped them focus:

- "The classroom feels non-distracted if the classroom is clean."
- "I feel engaged if the classroom is clean and comfy."

Interestingly, some students associated structured classrooms with clarity and productivity:

- "I feel more engaged if the classroom is structured because it makes me productive."

In contrast, visually stimulating structured rooms were sometimes seen as distracting:

- "Structured is very distracting because students catch their attention, while non-structured is boring but you can focus to the teacher very well."

Discussion:

This contrast aligns with Skidmore & Thompson (2019), who noted that environmental cues significantly influence learner attention. Students who

prefer minimalist environments tend to focus better without excess visual stimuli. Those who prefer structure value routines, rules, and organized spaces as indicators of academic expectations.

Theme 2: Emotional Engagement — Feelings of Calmness, Confusion, Excitement, and Anxiety

Students' emotional states differed between structured and non-structured environments. Many stated that they feel calm, focused, or excited when lessons are organized or interesting:

- "I feel calm and focused."
- "During Math time… I feel very excited."
- "I feel excited and curious

Some participants felt confused or anxious when instructions lacked clarity:

- "I feel anxious during activities with no clear instructions."
- "I feel confused and having no motivation."

Several students also linked emotions to teacher behavior:

- "I feel emotionally engaged… because the teacher is kind and approachable."
- "I feel acknowledged and important."

Discussion:

These emotional responses illustrate Javaid et al. (2024), who found that emotional safety and clarity activate students' willingness to engage. When classroom routines or instructions are unclear, emotions such as confusion and anxiety weaken engagement regardless of the environment.

Theme 3: Behavioral Engagement — Participation, Listening, and Adherence to Rules

Behavioral engagement emerged strongly in responses about listening, participating, and following directions. Students identified clear improvements in behavior in structured classrooms:

- "I always focus and listen to the teacher."
- "In structured classrooms I am more productive."

Students noted disengagement in the presence of distractions:

- "I usually don't participate… I don't like being bothered when I am listening."
- "I feel behaviorally disengaged when I choose not to participate and misbehave."

Others described structured environments as helping them behave better because rules guide actions:

- "Classroom feels structured if there are clear rules."

Discussion:

Behavioral patterns demonstrate that structure encourages consistency, while non-structured environments amplify student independence. Consistent with the literature, predictable classroom routines increase active participation and reduce off-task behavior.

Theme 4: Cognitive Engagement — Focus, Interest, Higher-Order Thinking

Cognitive engagement surfaced when students described mental effort, interest, and their ability to think deeply about lessons. Many indicated they are more cognitively engaged when:

- Lessons are interesting
- The environment is quiet
- Tasks are clear and organized

Examples include:

- "Just focus on the task and do it if there's no obstacles."
- "I feel cognitively engaged when I think harder."
- "I feel cleared in my mind in a fun way."

Students also reported that structured classrooms allow easier mental processing:

- "When the lesson was interesting and easy to follow, the classroom was quiet and organized."

However, some students favored non-structured formats for creativity:

- "I prefer outdoor activities… I prefer visual aids."

Discussion:

These findings align with the idea that cognitive engagement depends on relevance and cognitive challenge. While structured classrooms support organization and clarity, non-structured settings promote creativity and exploration for certain learners.

Comparative Analysis: Structured vs. Non-Structured Classrooms

Structured Classroom

The structured classroom was described by students as organized, rule-guided, quiet, and clear in expectations. The perceived benefits included increased productivity, emotional calmness, better behavior, easier comprehension, and more confidence.

Non-Structured Classroom

The non-structured classroom was described by students as cleaner or simpler, less visually overwhelming, and more comfortable for focusing. The perceived benefits included fewer distractions, better focus for some learners, and more freedom and creativity.

However, students reported boredom or lack of motivation without structure, and some felt anxious due to unclear expectations.

Overall Interpretation:

Both environments support engagement but in different ways. Structured classrooms promote clarity, rule-following, and productivity, while non-structured classrooms support freedom, focus, and comfort for visually sensitive learners. Engagement is highest when classroom structure matches students' learning preferences and emotional needs.

Summary of Findings

1. Perceptual Engagement: Cleanliness, simplicity, and clarity of rules strongly influence how engaged students feel.
2. Emotional Engagement: Interest, teacher support, and instructional clarity foster positive emotions, while unclear tasks create confusion or anxiety.
3. Behavioral Engagement: Students behave and participate more consistently in structured environments.
4. Cognitive Engagement: Mental effort increases when tasks are interesting and environments are quiet and organized.
5. Structured vs. Non-Structured: Both environments support engagement differently; structured classrooms strengthen productivity while non-structured settings enhance focus for some learners.

4. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Summary of Findings

This study explored students' perceptions, emotions, behaviors, and cognitive processes related to their engagement in structured and non-structured classroom environments using semi-structured interviews adapted from Skidmore & Thompson (2019) and Javaid et al. (2024). Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: Perceptual Engagement, Emotional Engagement, Behavioral Engagement, and Cognitive Engagement.

1. Perceptual Engagement

Students reported that cleanliness, clarity, and the overall atmosphere of the classroom significantly shaped their level of engagement. Several learners were more focused in non-structured environments because they were "clean," "simple," and "less distracting," while others preferred structured settings because clear rules and order made them "productive" and attentive.

2. Emotional Engagement

Students expressed feelings ranging from excitement, calmness, and comfort to confusion and anxiety. Positive emotions emerged when lessons were organized, interesting, and supported by kind or approachable teachers. Negative emotions typically arose in unclear, noisy, or unstructured environments.

3. Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral patterns reflected active participation, listening, and rule-following. Structured settings encouraged productivity and on-task behavior, while non-structured rooms sometimes led to disengagement due to distractions or lack of routine.

4. Cognitive Engagement

Learners demonstrated deeper engagement when lessons were interesting, organized, and quiet. They were able to focus, think critically, and process content more thoroughly. Some preferred creative and visual learning experiences available in less structured environments.

Comparative Insight

Both classroom types foster engagement, but in different ways:

- Structured classrooms support productivity, clarity, and emotional stability.
- Non-structured classrooms promote focus, minimal distraction, and creativity.

Engagement depended largely on individual learning preferences and the emotional and behavioral climate created by the teacher.

4.2. Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Classroom environment significantly affects engagement.
   Clean, organized, and distraction-free spaces reinforce attentiveness and comfort, regardless of classroom type.
2. Emotional responses strongly shape engagement levels.
   Interest, excitement, comfort, and teacher support enhance engagement, while confusion, boredom, and anxiety reduce it.
3. Structured classrooms promote consistent behavioral engagement.
   Clear routines and rules help learners stay productive and focused.
4. Non-structured environments benefit learners who prefer simplicity.
   Students who are sensitive to visual distractions perform better in minimalist settings.
5. Engagement is multi-dimensional. Effective instructional design must balance emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and perceptual factors to maximize student participation and learning.

4.3. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, this study recommends the following:

For Teachers

- Adopt flexible classroom management that balances structure with freedom.
- Use clear instructions, especially during activities to reduce confusion and anxiety.
- Maintain a clean, organized, and visually balanced classroom environment.
- Integrate fun, interesting, and varied instructional methods to sustain cognitive and emotional engagement.

For Schools

- Provide teachers with training on differentiated instruction, classroom design, and learner-centered practices.
- Encourage a combination of structured routines and spaces for creativity and exploration depending on the lesson.

For Students

- Practice self-regulation strategies such as focusing techniques and goal-setting.
- Communicate needs and learning preferences to teachers to improve the learning experience.

For Future Researchers

- Expand the sample size to compare different grade levels or school environments.
- Use classroom observations to validate students' self-reported engagement.
- Explore how digital or hybrid classrooms influence learner engagement.

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