

Making Learning Relevant: Precepts of 21st Century Teachers

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Abstract: This study explored how 21st-century teachers perceive the idea of making learning meaningful and relevant for their students. The teachers' narratives highlighted both the strategies they use and the challenges they encounter in creating a positive classroom environment. Ten elementary teachers from the Tugbok District, Division of Davao City, participated in the research. Data were gathered through a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews conducted via virtual meetings and limited face-to-face sessions, all carried out under strict health protocols. Through thematic analysis, teachers described making learning relevant by incorporating games and hands-on activities. However, they also pointed out major obstacles, such as excessive workloads and insufficient funds. Despite these challenges, teachers still tried to employ strategies that engaged learners, though the lack of resources and heavy responsibilities often hindered their efforts.

From these findings, the study suggests two key insights: the need to reduce teacher workload and the importance of providing schools with adequate funding. Overall, the research aimed to shed light on how teachers strive to keep learning relevant and meaningful for students, offering valuable knowledge that can support the continued improvement of educational practices in schools.

Keywords: *Making Learning, Relevant, Percepts, 21st Century Teachers.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the central goals of effective teaching is to make learning relevant for students. According to Llego (2022), relevance plays a vital role because it allows learners to recognize the value of what they are studying. When students see meaning in their lessons, they are more likely to stay motivated and engaged—two critical factors for meaningful learning. To achieve this, teachers must first understand what relevance looks like for their particular learners. They must then foster a classroom culture that encourages curiosity and relevance-seeking behavior, while also creating opportunities for students to connect academic content with real-life experiences. When learning is perceived as relevant, students not only engage more deeply but are also more likely to retain knowledge, which can nurture a lifelong sense of curiosity and exploration.

Briggs (2014) similarly emphasizes that traditional “drill-and-kill” methods are neurologically ineffective. Instead, learning becomes more powerful when students participate in meaningful and emotionally engaging activities that link new

concepts to prior knowledge and strengthen long-term memory. In this sense, making learning relevant is not just a teaching strategy but a fundamental principle that drives effective and lasting learning experiences.

Prinski et al. (2017) describe making learning relevant as the creation of meaningful connections between teachers and students. At the core of this definition is the idea of personal meaningfulness in the teaching and learning process. Relevance, therefore, is not simply about objective connections, as often implied by dictionary definitions, but about the learner's own subjective perception of how a stimulus, such as a topic, activity, or object, relates personally to them. In this sense, relevance is deeply individual and tied to personal engagement.

Similarly, the OECD (2017) emphasizes that teaching practices aligned with classroom learning and student outcomes are essential for effectiveness. Practices such as close monitoring, appropriate pacing, classroom management, and clarity in presentation, along with well-structured lessons and constructive feedback—are key features of direct instruction. Research shows that these elements consistently contribute to

improved student achievement, highlighting the importance of intentional and structured teaching in making learning experiences meaningful and impactful

Klieme et al. (2006) identified three fundamental dimensions of instructional quality that contribute to making learning relevant. These include: (1) clear and well-structured classroom management, which incorporates the essential elements of direct instruction; (2) student orientation, which emphasizes a supportive learning climate and individualized approaches; and (3) cognitive activation, which involves the use of challenging content, higher-order thinking tasks, and other intellectually demanding activities. These dimensions are considered “latent” factors, closely related to but distinct from specific instructional practices, that underpin effective teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, Albrecht and Karabenick (2018) note that one of the major contextual challenges in making learning relevant is the growing diversity in classrooms. Since beliefs about the purpose of education vary greatly among students, efforts to ensure relevance often require highly individualized instruction. However, this can be overwhelming for teachers, who must balance such expectations with numerous other responsibilities. It is not always feasible to connect deeply with every learner in order to identify their unique experiences, aspirations, and interests.

In line with this, Bridgeland et al. (2009) emphasize that scholars in education and psychology view it as essential to connect schooling with students’ lives, interests, and cultural backgrounds. Yet this imperative also highlights the difficulty faced by many teachers, who often feel challenged, even intimidated, by the task of making lessons relevant in classrooms characterized by increasing diversity

The call to make education more relevant continues to gain strong support, as instruction that connects meaningfully to students’ lives is more likely to sustain their interest and engagement. Without such relevance, teachers in the twenty-first century risk limited interaction with learners and less effective outcomes. In response to this concern, the present phenomenological inquiry seeks to explore the perspectives of 21st-century teachers on how learning can be made meaningful and relevant in the classroom.

II. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to generate the data needed to address the research questions. In-depth interviews provided participants with the opportunity to speak openly and candidly about their experiences. The study followed a descriptive-explanatory approach, which, as Hatch (2002) explains, is rooted in naturalistic inquiry. Naturalistic researchers emphasize that knowledge is best gained from lived experiences, which

provide a deeper understanding of an issue compared to the objectivity often associated with quantitative approaches.

The participants of the study were ten elementary school teachers from the Tugbok District, Division of Davao City. They were selected to serve as sample informants, each with at least three years of teaching experience at the primary grade level. While random selection was used initially, the study also applied purposive sampling, which, according to Palinkas (2015), is widely recognized in qualitative research for identifying information-rich cases relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach ensured that the participants could provide meaningful insights based on their professional backgrounds and experiences.

Given that the study involved teachers from within the researcher’s own school, it was anticipated that some participants might hesitate to share information fully out of fear or apprehension. To address this, safeguards were put in place to foster trust and minimize such concerns. The study strictly adhered to ethical principles outlined by Mack et al. (2005), including respect for persons, beneficence, justice, informed consent, and confidentiality.

The researcher played a central role in ensuring the credibility of the study. Responsibilities included facilitating interviews and discussions, guiding conversations with research questions and probing statements, and gathering participants’ feelings, observations, and perceptions. While interviews were not transcribed verbatim, care was taken to capture the essence of participants’ responses accurately. Each transcription was returned to participants for validation to ensure reliability. The researcher personally transcribed all interviews and conducted the data analysis. Thematic analysis was employed, in which categories, codes, and themes were developed from the transcriptions. These themes were carefully interpreted to shed light on the central inquiry of the study.

In analyzing the data, I conducted a thorough qualitative examination of the teachers’ interviews. Following the fundamental techniques of analysis outlined by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002), reading, thinking, and writing; followed by rereading, rethinking, and rewriting, I was able to categorize, organize, and summarize the large volume of information gathered in this study in a systematic and credible manner. To develop the findings, the study employed Thematic Content Analysis, which Anderson (2007) describes as a descriptive way of presenting qualitative data. Such data often consist of interview transcripts or other textual sources that capture participants’ lived experiences and reflections on the research topic.

In guiding the process, I drew on the recommendations of Rossman and Rallis (2003), who emphasize that analysis involves remaining connected to the overall framing of the study, asking analytic questions throughout, and engaging in continuous writing. This included recording hunches,

impressions, and insights, writing descriptive and analytic memos, and sharing ideas within a community of practice that included discussions with participants. The process also required ongoing engagement with existing literature, the use of creative tools such as metaphors, images, and concept maps, and a reflective approach that allowed the themes to emerge naturally from the data.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Guided by the framework of the study and the interview matrix, this research explored the perspectives of 21st-century teachers on making learning relevant. From the information gathered, several themes emerged regarding how teachers make classroom learning meaningful for their students.

➤ *Incorporating Games.*

Participants highlighted that integrating games into lessons makes learning more enjoyable and meaningful for students. They observed that games not only add an element of fun but also foster active engagement in the learning process. This observation aligns with the findings of Williams (2015), who emphasized that games provide students with opportunities to demonstrate acquired skills in a safe environment. Games encourage critical thinking, strategic planning, and quick decision-making. Furthermore, they motivate students by making learning enjoyable, promote teamwork by highlighting each member's strengths, and encourage exploration of new ideas. Similarly, Mliixl (2022) suggests that incorporating game-based learning into the curriculum can increase participation and reduce learning-related stress. When meaningfully integrated into classroom instruction, games have the potential to sustain students' curiosity, motivation, and engagement.

➤ *Hands-on Activities*

The teacher-participants emphasized that hands-on activities are vital in the teaching and learning process. Martin (2020) explains that such activities support diverse learning styles by giving equal importance to visual, auditory, and reading/writing preferences, while also highlighting kinesthetic learning, which is often overlooked. Hands-on learning allows students to actively engage with lessons beyond passive listening or reading, creating opportunities for deeper understanding. Similarly, Lizardi (2023) encourages teachers to give students the freedom to think creatively and express themselves in multiple ways, noting that this approach fosters pride and ownership in the learning process. Unlike traditional instruction, hands-on activities shift the teacher's role from directing every step to facilitating exploration and discovery, allowing learners to construct knowledge in meaningful ways.

Meanwhile, while participants employed various approaches and strategies to ensure lessons remained engaging and meaningful, they also encountered significant challenges. These difficulties, drawn from the interviews, highlight the constraints teachers face in sustaining relevance in classroom

learning. The emerging themes on these challenges are presented in the following section:

➤ *Excessive Workload*

One of the major challenges identified by the participants was the excessive workload that prevented them from making learning more relevant for students. Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2008) argue that quality teaching is inherently student-centered, requiring a focus on teachers' pedagogical skills and the creation of learning environments that respond to students' needs. However, beyond classroom instruction, teachers are also burdened with numerous explicit and implicit tasks that must be completed within limited timeframes. As Tancinco (2016) notes, these responsibilities often extend beyond school hours, compelling many teachers to bring their work home. Such demands—both teaching and non-teaching related—leave educators preoccupied, overextended, and with reduced capacity to innovate in their classrooms.

➤ *Lack of Funds.*

Another significant challenge reported by the participants was the lack of financial resources to support meaningful instruction. The School of Education (2020) highlights that funding issues are directly tied to student achievement, as schools with smaller budgets typically struggle to provide smaller class sizes, enriched programs, and adequate instructional materials. Similarly, Galvez (2022) reports that the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) acknowledged the insufficiency of funds in the proposed 2023 national budget to address the country's classroom shortage. These financial constraints limit teachers' ability to implement relevant and engaging strategies despite their best intentions.

Beyond identifying strategies and challenges, this study also sought to draw insights that could help teachers address these difficulties. Two key propositions emerged from the participants' experiences: (1) the need to reduce teacher workload and (2) the provision of sufficient school funds. These insights are grounded in the realities faced by teachers and highlight the importance of systemic support in enabling educators to sustain relevance in their teaching practices.

Overall, the study revealed that the primary strategies used by 21st-century teachers to make learning relevant were the incorporation of games and the use of hands-on activities. Both strategies proved effective in enhancing students' knowledge and skills in enjoyable and meaningful ways, a finding supported by existing literature. However, teachers also encountered significant barriers, particularly excessive workload and lack of funds, which hindered their ability to fully achieve these goals. These challenges further limit the capacity of teachers to meet the diverse needs of students, including those requiring special support. The study concludes that if the propositions of reducing teacher workload and increasing school funding are acted upon, the gaps between teachers' strategies and their desired outcomes could be effectively addressed, ultimately improving the relevance of classroom

learning for students.

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