

THE MEANING OF LEARNING FOR STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS: A QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract. This study aims to explore the meaning of learning as experienced and constructed by students living in rural areas through a qualitative narrative approach. Learning is not merely an academic process, but a lived experience shaped by social, cultural, and economic contexts. Despite the growing attention to educational issues in rural settings, limited research has focused on how students themselves interpret the meaning of learning from their own perspectives. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding students' narratives as the primary source of understanding. A qualitative narrative inquiry design was employed to capture students' lived experiences through in-depth narrative interviews and contextual observations. The research was conducted in schools located in rural areas characterized by limited educational resources, restricted access to technology, and constrained economic opportunities. Participants were selected purposively to represent diverse rural backgrounds. Data were analyzed using narrative-thematic analysis to identify recurring meanings embedded in students' stories. The findings reveal that learning is constructed as a multidimensional experience. For rural students, learning is perceived as a pathway to socio-economic mobility, a moral responsibility toward family and community, a site of tension between aspiration and structural limitation, and a process of identity formation. Students associate learning with hopes of improving their families' economic conditions, fulfilling parental expectations, and building a better future. At the same time, they face significant challenges, such as limited facilities and competing domestic responsibilities, which shape their learning experiences and require resilience and adaptation. This study contributes to educational research by providing a contextual and humanistic understanding of learning in rural settings. Practically, the findings suggest that educational practices and policies should be more sensitive to students' lived realities and local contexts, positioning learning not only as curriculum delivery but as a meaningful process of social transformation.

Keywords: Meaning of Learning; Rural Students; Narrative inquiry

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the primary instruments in the development of a nation. Through the educational process, individuals not only acquire knowledge and skills, but also develop values, attitudes, and character that serve as essential capital for both personal and social life. Within the context of formal education, the learning process experienced by students becomes a central focus, as it determines the extent to which students are able to understand, apply, and interpret their learning experiences. The meaning of learning is not merely related to the mastery of academic content; rather, it also encompasses students' subjective interpretations of learning as a meaningful process in their lives. The way learning is interpreted may vary among students, as it is influenced by diverse factors such as socio-cultural background, living environment, family economic conditions, and everyday life experiences. According to Dewey and Vygotsky, learning experiences cannot be separated from the social context and lived experiences of individuals. Learning is viewed as a reflective process in which individuals connect new experiences with prior ones and construct meaning through social and contextual interactions [1,2]. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions of the meaning of learning cannot be detached from their life experiences and backgrounds.

The context of life in rural areas has distinctive characteristics compared to urban settings. Rural areas generally face limitations in access to educational services, learning support facilities, information technology infrastructure, and economic opportunities. These conditions influence students' experiences in fulfilling their roles as learners. At the same time, education in rural areas often represents a major hope for families and communities to create better life opportunities. However, such expectations are not always easily realized, as rural students frequently encounter complex and multidimensional realities. Several previous studies indicate that students in rural areas possess distinctive perspectives on the learning process. For example, research by Hidi and Renninger [3] demonstrates that motivation and the meaning of learning are strongly influenced by students' social contexts and personal goals. In rural contexts, students often associate learning with hopes of improving their families' economic conditions or securing better employment opportunities in the future. This suggests that learning is not merely understood as an academic obligation, but also as a strategy for socio-economic improvement.

In addition, a study by Nurhayati [4] on the learning experiences of elementary school students in rural areas found that students perceive learning as highly dependent on family support and the surrounding community environment. Students tend to interpret the meaning of learning as part of their family responsibilities in supporting daily life, as well as an activity closely related to social and cultural values within their communities. This study emphasizes that the meaning of learning for rural students does not solely focus on academic aspects, but also includes social and practical dimensions in everyday life. Meanwhile, research conducted by Wahyuni [5] on learning barriers among rural students reveals that limited educational infrastructure and restricted access to learning resources encourage students to develop a pragmatic understanding of learning. Students view learning as something that must be adapted to the realities of their lives, such as contributing to family income, adjusting to work demands, or directly supporting household needs. This indicates that the meaning of learning is no longer oriented solely toward academic achievement, but also toward social and economic functions in students' lives.

In a comparative study conducted by Hammersley and Atkinson [6], it is emphasized that qualitative approaches are crucial for understanding how individuals interpret their own experiences. Such approaches do not merely focus on measuring variables, but seek to comprehend the subjective meanings embedded in students' lived experiences. Accordingly, a qualitative narrative approach is highly relevant for understanding the meaning of learning among rural students, as it positions students as subjects who narrate their life experiences holistically.

The qualitative narrative approach focuses on how individuals construct stories about meaningful life experiences. Riessman [7] states that narratives are the means through which individuals organize their life experiences into coherent sequences that carry personal and social meaning. Narrative studies allow researchers to explore students' stories in depth, capturing emotional, cultural, and personal meanings that cannot be adequately addressed through quantitative approaches. In the context of rural education, students' narratives can reveal how they position learning experiences within their daily lives, which are shaped by social, cultural, and economic demands. The relevance of this research is further supported by findings from Susilowati [8], who examined narratives of students' learning experiences in remote rural areas. The study found that students associate learning with the hopes of their families and communities to escape cycles of poverty and improve their living standards. Students perceive school as a space where they can access new opportunities, even though they also experience internal conflicts between school demands and social

responsibilities at home. Furthermore, several other studies emphasize the importance of understanding local contexts in the learning process. For instance, Coffield [9] highlights that an understanding of students' socio-cultural contexts plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of learning processes. Local context is not merely a background factor, but an integral part of how students construct meaning from their learning experiences. In rural settings, this becomes increasingly important, as social and cultural realities often differ significantly from the generic assumptions underlying national curriculum design.

Based on the above discussion, it can be understood that the meaning of learning for students in rural areas is neither simple nor uniform. This meaning is shaped through the interaction of personal experiences, social values, family economic conditions, and students' future aspirations. For rural students, learning is not solely focused on achieving grades or academic performance, but also on how learning can open opportunities for a better life. Nevertheless, despite the growing number of studies on rural students' learning experiences, there remains a lack of research that specifically employs a qualitative narrative approach to explore the meaning of learning from students' own perspectives in depth. Many previous studies have primarily emphasized learning motivation, learning barriers, or instructional quality, without closely examining how students themselves construct meaning from their learning experiences.

Therefore, this study has a strong sense of urgency. By employing a qualitative narrative approach, the study seeks to position students as active subjects who narrate their learning experiences, allowing the resulting meanings of learning to authentically reflect their lived experiences. The findings of this study are expected to provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how rural students interpret the learning process and its implications for educational practices in local contexts. Practically, the findings of this study may serve as valuable considerations for teachers, school principals, and educational policymakers in formulating learning strategies that are more contextual, responsive to students' needs, and sensitive to local socio-cultural conditions. In this way, education in rural areas can be implemented not merely as a curricular formality, but as a meaningful process of social transformation for students and their communities.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design [10]. The qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of learning as experienced, perceived, and constructed by students within the context of their lives in rural areas [11]. The narrative approach was used to explore students' lived experiences through personal stories that represent the relationship between learning processes, socio-cultural contexts, and everyday life realities [12]. The narrative approach enables researchers to understand learning not merely as an academic activity, but as a lived experience imbued with values, emotions, aspirations, and social conflicts encountered by students. Accordingly, the meaning of learning is understood as a subjective construction shaped through personal experiences and social interactions [13].

This study was conducted in schools located in rural areas, which are characterized by limited access to educational facilities, learning technologies, and economic opportunities. The research site was selected purposively by considering social, cultural, and economic contexts that represent rural conditions. The local context is a crucial aspect of this study, as students' learning experiences cannot be separated from the environments in which they grow and interact, including school, family, and community settings. The research was conducted in schools located in rural areas that represent the socioeconomic conditions and educational environment of rural areas.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Findings

This study aimed to explore the meaning of learning as experienced and constructed by students living in rural areas through a qualitative narrative approach. The findings are derived from in-depth narrative interviews, contextual observations, and supporting documentation. Through narrative-thematic analysis, students' stories revealed that learning is not merely understood as an academic process, but as a lived experience closely intertwined with family responsibilities, socio-economic realities, cultural values, and future aspirations. The results indicate that the meaning of learning among rural students is multi-dimensional and context-dependent. Learning is constructed as (1) a pathway for socio-economic mobility, (2) a moral responsibility toward family and community, (3) a space of tension between aspiration and structural

limitation, and (4) a process of identity formation shaped by local context. These themes demonstrate that students' learning experiences are deeply embedded in their everyday lives and social environments.

Learning as a Pathway for Socio-Economic Mobility

One of the most dominant themes emerging from students' narratives is the perception of learning as a pathway toward improving future socio-economic conditions. Many participants explicitly associated schooling with hopes of securing better employment, supporting their families financially, and breaking cycles of poverty. For these students, learning is not an abstract intellectual pursuit but a strategic investment in future survival and social mobility. Several students described their motivation to learn as being driven by their parents' expectations and economic hardships. One participant stated:

"I study because I don't want to live the same life as my parents. School is my only chance to get a better job."

This finding aligns with previous studies indicating that rural students often frame education as a means of socio-economic advancement rather than purely academic achievement. In contexts where economic opportunities are limited, education becomes symbolically and practically associated with hope, upward mobility, and life transformation.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports the notion that learning is socially situated and purpose-driven. The meaning of learning is constructed through students' interpretations of their socio-economic realities. Learning is valued not for immediate academic success, but for its perceived long-term utility. This pragmatic orientation toward learning reflects how structural inequalities shape students' educational aspirations and motivations. However, while learning is seen as a pathway to a better future, students also expressed uncertainty about whether education alone would be sufficient to change their life trajectories. This ambivalence suggests that learning is simultaneously imbued with hope and doubt, shaped by lived experiences of limited opportunities in rural contexts.

Learning as Moral Responsibility Toward Family and Community

Another prominent theme is the construction of learning as a moral and social responsibility. Many students narrated learning as a form of obligation not imposed solely by school rules, but by family expectations and community norms. Learning is perceived as a way to "repay" parents' sacrifices and to bring pride to the family. One student reflected:

"My parents work very hard. If I don't study seriously, I feel like I disappoint them."

This moral framing of learning reveals that students' educational engagement is deeply relational. Learning is not solely an individual endeavor but a collective responsibility embedded within family and community structures. In rural contexts, where social ties are strong and interdependence is high, students' learning behaviors are closely monitored and morally evaluated by their social environment.

This finding reinforces the argument that learning is a culturally mediated process. Students internalize social values that position education as a moral duty. Such internalization influences how students perceive success and failure. Academic failure is not merely a personal setback but a moral shortcoming that may affect family honor. At the same time, this moral pressure can have ambivalent effects. While it can strengthen students' motivation and persistence, it may also generate emotional stress and anxiety. Some students reported feeling overwhelmed by expectations, especially when they struggled academically. This suggests that the moralization of learning, while supportive in some cases, can also intensify psychological burdens for rural students.

Learning Amid Structural Limitations and Everyday Challenges

Students' narratives also highlighted significant tensions between educational aspirations and structural constraints. Limited access to learning resources, inadequate school facilities, long commuting distances, and family economic responsibilities were frequently mentioned as barriers to effective learning. One participant explained:

"Sometimes I want to study, but after school I have to help my parents. I'm already tired when I open my books."

This theme underscores the reality that learning in rural contexts is often negotiated alongside competing demands. Students must balance schoolwork with domestic labor, agricultural activities, or informal employment. As a result, learning is not always experienced as a focused academic process but as fragmented and constrained by everyday survival needs.

These findings demonstrate that students' meanings of learning are shaped not only by personal motivation but also by structural conditions beyond their control. Learning is constructed as an effortful and sometimes exhausting activity that requires resilience. This reinforces the idea that educational inequality is not merely a matter of individual capability, but of unequal learning conditions. Importantly, students did not frame these challenges as reasons to abandon learning altogether. Instead, many described adapting their learning strategies, such as studying late at night or prioritizing certain subjects. This adaptive behavior reflects agency within constraint, showing that rural students actively negotiate their learning despite limitations.

Learning as Identity Formation and Self-Positioning

Beyond instrumental and moral meanings, learning also emerged as a key element in students' identity construction. Through their narratives, students positioned themselves as "hope bearers" for their families, as responsible children, or as individuals striving to transcend local limitations. One student stated:

"I want to prove that even children from villages can succeed."

This statement reflects how learning becomes a medium through which students construct their self-identity and self-worth. Education provides a language through which students define who they are and who they aspire to become. Learning is intertwined with dignity, recognition, and self-respect. This finding resonates with narrative theory, which views identity as constructed through storytelling. By narrating their learning experiences, students articulate identities shaped by struggle, perseverance, and hope. Their stories challenge deficit-based views of rural students as passive or disadvantaged learners, instead highlighting their agency and resilience.

However, identity construction through learning is also vulnerable to failure. Students who experience repeated academic difficulties reported feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. This indicates that when learning is closely tied to identity, academic struggles may have deeper emotional consequences.

Discussion

Learning as a Lived and Contextual Experience

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate that learning for rural students is a lived experience embedded within social, cultural, and economic contexts [14]. Learning is not merely about curriculum mastery but about navigating life realities, fulfilling moral obligations, and constructing meaningful futures [15]. Consistent with experiential learning theory, students' narratives confirm that learning is shaped through reflection on lived experiences. Students do not separate school learning from everyday life; instead, they integrate academic learning with family responsibilities, community values, and future aspirations.

The narrative approach proved effective in capturing the complexity of students' learning experiences. Through storytelling, students were able to articulate meanings that might not surface through standardized surveys or achievement data. This supports arguments that qualitative narrative inquiry is essential for understanding educational phenomena in marginalized or underrepresented contexts. Moreover, the findings highlight the limitations of one-size-fits-all educational policies. When learning is designed without sensitivity to local contexts, it risks misaligning with students' lived realities. Rural students' narratives suggest a need for more contextualized pedagogical approaches that acknowledge students' responsibilities outside school and leverage local knowledge and values.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice and policy. Teachers in rural schools should recognize that students' learning motivations are deeply tied to family and community contexts [16]. Pedagogical strategies that connect learning content to students' real-life experiences may enhance engagement and relevance [17]. Schools may also consider providing flexible learning arrangements or additional academic support for students who face heavy domestic responsibilities. Recognizing students' non-academic burdens is essential for fostering equitable learning environments. At the policy level, the findings call for greater attention to structural inequalities affecting rural education. Improving infrastructure, learning resources, and access to technology is critical, but equally important is designing curricula and assessment systems that are sensitive to students' lived contexts.

Contribution to Research

This study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on rural education by foregrounding students' voices and lived experiences. By employing a narrative inquiry approach, the study extends existing literature that often focuses on learning outcomes rather than meaning-making processes. The study also

demonstrates the value of narrative methods in uncovering the emotional, moral, and identity-related dimensions of learning. These dimensions are often overlooked in policy-oriented research but are crucial for understanding how students engage with education in real-world contexts.

In conclusion, the results of this study reveal that the meaning of learning for students in rural areas is complex, relational, and deeply contextual. Learning is simultaneously understood as a pathway to socio-economic mobility, a moral responsibility, a site of struggle amid structural constraints, and a process of identity formation. These meanings are constructed through students' lived experiences and narrated through personal stories that reflect both hope and hardship. By centering students' narratives, this study underscores the importance of listening to learners' voices in designing more inclusive and contextually responsive educational practices. Understanding learning as a lived experience provides a more holistic foundation for addressing educational inequality and supporting meaningful learning in rural contexts.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of learning as experienced and constructed by students in rural areas through a qualitative narrative approach. Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that learning for rural students is not understood merely as an academic activity oriented toward grades or formal certification, but rather as a lived experience integrated with their social, cultural, and economic realities, as well as their aspirations for the future. The findings indicate that students perceive learning as a pathway to social mobility, representing an effort to overcome the structural limitations they face in rural contexts. Learning is viewed as a means to improve family economic conditions, secure more decent employment opportunities, and achieve a life perceived as "better" than that of previous generations. In this sense, the meaning of learning is instrumental in nature while remaining deeply embedded in moral values and social responsibility, particularly toward parents and family. Furthermore, learning is also interpreted as a process of identity formation and the development of resilience. Rural students encounter various constraints, including limited educational facilities, restricted access to learning technologies, and social expectations to contribute to family livelihoods. Nevertheless, through their learning experiences, they cultivate perseverance, discipline, and adaptive capacities. This indicates that learning functions as a space for character formation rather than merely a process of knowledge transmission. This study also reveals that the meaning of learning is strongly influenced by the social relationships students build with teachers, family members, and the broader community. Teachers who are perceived as caring and understanding of students' circumstances play a crucial role in fostering meaningful learning motivation. Likewise, moral support from families and social recognition from the surrounding environment reinforce students' beliefs that learning holds significant value in their lives. Thus, the meaning of learning is not solely an individual construct but is continuously shaped through sustained social interactions. The narrative approach employed in this study successfully uncovers that rural students' learning experiences are often characterized by tensions between aspirations and reality. On the one hand, students hold high educational aspirations; on the other, they are confronted with structural constraints that frequently weaken the sustainability of their learning motivation. These tensions give rise to complex learning narratives in which learning becomes a space of struggle, negotiation, and hope. From a theoretical perspective, this study affirms that the meaning of learning is a subjective and contextual construction that cannot be separated from students' socio-cultural backgrounds. These findings enrich educational scholarship by offering a more humanistic and contextual perspective, particularly in understanding education in rural settings. The study also strengthens the argument that qualitative narrative approaches are relevant and effective for exploring dimensions of learning experiences that are often inaccessible through quantitative methods. Practically, the findings of this study carry important implications for educators, schools, and policymakers. Education in rural areas should be designed with careful consideration of students' lived experiences, aspirations, and the real challenges they face. Teachers should function not only as instructors but also as facilitators of meaning who are able to connect learning content with students' life contexts. Educational policies likewise need to be more sensitive to local conditions so that education genuinely serves as a means of empowerment rather than merely fulfilling administrative standards. In conclusion, learning for students in rural areas constitutes a process that is meaningful both personally and socially, reflecting struggle, hope, and efforts to build a better future. Understanding the meaning of learning from students' perspectives is a crucial step toward realizing education that is more equitable, contextual, and human-centered.

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