Empirical Evidence on the Relationship between Democratic Classroom and Social Skills Development of Students

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Abstract

The concept of democratic classroom is controversial for being vague and idealistic. It has been termed more rhetorical than a realistic. Despite of this, the role of democratic classroom in socialization of students has well recognized in every age. Therefore, a noticeable need exists to assess the degree and direction of relationship between democratic classroom and students' social skill development. Previous studies have reported that classroom environment is a good predictor of social development of students. However, little research has explored the perspectives of students about their social skill development in a classroom environment, particularly focusing the three social skills such as listening to others carefully, waiting for turn and raising hands to ask questions. The present study fills this gap in the current literature on the relationship between democracy and education. The aim of this paper is to examine the effect of democratic classroom environment on social skills development of students. Based on causal comparative design, the study used a self-developed questionnaire to examine the perceptions of 80 male and female students selected on random sampling basis from 20 secondary schools in one district of Khyber Pkahtunkwa, Pakistan. For data analysis, Chi-square test was applied. Results of the study showed that there was no significant difference in the perceptions of male versus female secondary school students regarding the effect of classroom environment on social skills of students. Both equally considered democratic classroom environment important for social skills development. The study concludes that democratic classroom has a positive effect on all the three social skills development of students.

Keywords: democratic classroom; social skills; listening to others; waiting for turns; raising hands to ask questions.

1. Introduction

A democratic society needs citizens who are active, participative and have strong sense of justice (Perliger, Canetti-Nisim, & Pedahzur, 2006; Soder, 1996). Educational institutions are the industries to produce such individuals for the society (Buchholz, 2013; Vinterek, 2010). Over the years, research has stressed on the need to use such approaches and pedagogies to help promote such students who could become active and participative citizens for tomorrow (Thornberg, 2010). One such active concept of education is democratic classroom environment. This study investigates into the role of democratic classroom on social skills development of students. The term democratic classroom has been used in a variety of disciplines since 20th century. But there remained little consensus among researchers on its meaning (Dobozy, 2007). The other aim of this paper is to provide a more operational definition of democratic classroom that may serve future researchers and practitioners effectively in understanding the relevancy and importance of the democracy as a way of life that can be taught in classroom (Pass, 2007; Perliger, et al., 2006).

There is a lack of quality empirical research on democratic classroom and its impact on student learning and development as well as their academic success in terms of social skills development. There are mixed perceptions regarding this phenomenon (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011). This paper collects and synthesizes different perspectives on democratic classroom that how it creates an effective and supportive learning environment in which students learn to become socially useful for the society. In this regard, current research is lacking context-specific information and does not provide clear perspectives on the application of democratic principles in classroom setting for promoting social skills of students (Hess, 2009; McTigue & Liew, 2011). There is more to teaching, learning and schooling than achieving high scores. The score does not fully reflect learning in a holistic way (Press, 2007). Basically, the aim of schooling is to enrich the lives of children in all respects such as intellectually as well as socially (Trafford,

2008). The concept of democratic classroom provides a richer and more comprehensive system of education on the whole. The environment that is provided in a democratic classroom can provide and enrich the lives of children in all respects (Buchholz, 2013; Pass, 2007).

Over the years, the democratic classrooms have been used for various purposes such as civic education, character education, group learning and moral development and so on (Tonga, 2014). However, little research exists on its use for the development of social skills among students (Spencer-Waterman, 2013). Currently, democracy in classroom is being used as a notion or an approach for reform and social organizations (Bryan & Hayes, 2010). Interestingly, the meaning of democratic classroom changes with changes in its purpose and way of practicing in a specific context in this technological age. This gives rise to many questions that what is democratic classroom, what are its purposes, how it develops students' social skills and what are its limitations and why democracy should be taught when it is not fully understood (Harris, 2009). Although this paper does not answer all these questions, the paper attempts to answer that how democratic classroom develops social skills of students. There is a wealth of literature on democratic classroom. However, the aim of this paper is to find out its specific role in developing secondary school students' social skills development.

2. Literature Review

The concept of democratic classroom emerges from the principles and practices of democracy and how it applies to classroom life. Basically, the aim is to inform the teaching and learning to create a diverse and equitable learning community in the classroom (Trafford, 2008). The educational community and society have differing views about the purpose and aim of education in a democracy society (Morcom & MacCallum, 2012). This research will provide some clarifications on the aim and role of democratic classroom and its effects of social skills development of students from the perspectives of male and female students. The practice of democracy in classroom differs from context to context. People have different beliefs and views about the democracy in education (Goldstein & Brooks, 2007). Some believe that democracy is associated with the notions of liberal freedom and liberty, while others equate democracy with equality of opportunity. Some argue that social change occurs through free market practices (Davis, 2010; Narvaez, 2010). Therefore, for understating the true meaning of democracy, it is essential to contextualize it. The concept of democracy is very broad and reaches beyond educational purpose (Peterson, 2012).

Research has established that democratic classroom can create effective citizens by providing the students an opportunity to understand and analyze the interplay of social development, education and democracy and develop skills and commitments for serving and improving the society (Epstein & Oyler, 2008). The interactions and experiences within a classroom environment lay the foundation for the development for socially useful citizens for future (Ponder & Lewis-Ferrell, 2009). Researchers argue that all students have the right to grow socially in a truly democratic classroom. They should not come just for learning. The original aim of education is to take the students beyond the classroom borders into the life and community as active citizens. They should find an opportunity to learn and practice along with an active exercise of culture, language and social ethics. This will help them to explore their own individual freedom and autonomy (Dimick, 2012). Classroom is a miniature society where learners find opportunities for wider interactions among themselves which lays the foundation for their social development (Edwards, 2010). Basically, classroom is a place where academic and social interaction takes place. It is a place where teacher and student interact and influence each other (Ahmad, et al., 2014). As a result, students get guidance and education. Most specifically, it is a place which is characterized by students who come from different social-economic backgrounds, cultures and geographical locations (Bryan & Hayes, 2010). This diversity creates an ample opportunity for them to share their own experiences as well as get knowledge about other different cultures, ways of life and people (Tammi, 2013).

Researchers argue that in classrooms, students participate in different academic activities and have interactions with their classmates during the classroom activities. These interactions have deeper and far reaching effect on their behaviors and attitudes in varying degrees. This provides a supportive ground for socialization. Consequently, they get new knowledge and develop social skills (Narvaez, 2010; Trafford, 2008). Writers say that for all this to happen, cooperative and supportive class environment is necessary. They argue that in such an environment, students learn cooperation, trust and observance of responsibility and democratic behaviours (Goodman, 2007). According to some writers, classroom is a forum where students and teacher interact and share their thoughts freely and openly. In view of some writers in such an environment, students become active learners. This type of environment also creates confidence and trust among them which leads to their better socialization (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). Some other writers report that in an open classroom atmosphere, students feel respected and cared. This feeling strengthens their self-esteem which is one of the basic principles for successful learning. In a democratic classroom, students can take part in the discussions

(Oakes & Lipton, 2002). They can take decisions and are responsible for their own learning. Research has found that in a democratic class environment students become self-directed learners. They know when to ask questions and give answers to others' questions (Furman & Starratt, 2002).

Studies have reported that in such as classroom teacher acts as guide and facilitator of the teaching and learning process rather than taking authoritative role. The teacher guides the students and does not dictate them rather monitors their activities (Neumann, Jones, & Webb, 2012). Some researchers have established that a friendly and supportive classroom environment positively shapes students' personality, because, in such a class, students get respect and care from the teachers and peers. On the contrary, in a non-supportive classroom students do not grow socially. They cannot easily share their views. Consequently, they become passive, inactive and quiet (Toth & Morrison, 2011).

2.1 Concept of democratic classroom

The concept of democratic classroom environment lies in controversy. There are many definitions given by scholars (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004). However, scholars are unanimous on one definition that democratic classroom is a place where students can openly share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences with their classmates (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004). In view of some researchers, democratic classroom is a safe and cooperative classroom environment where students find better opportunity to make choices, to speak and feel encouraged to participate in the discussions and to contribute (Pane, 2010). Basically, such type of classroom is called an engaged classroom. It provides a rich ground for the development of self-confident, self-directed, and contributory students. These ideas basically emphasize on a caring and cooperative classroom atmosphere (Acker-Hocevar & Schoorman, 2006).

The concept of democratic classroom environment is rooted in the philosophical thoughts of twentieth century progressive educational reformer John Dewey. He was a staunch supporter of freedom and democracy in education. He says that the basic aim of education is to produce, active, participative and contributory citizen leaders for the society. For the achievement of this goal, he advocated democracy in education (Louis, 2003). Today's' writers also support the views of John Dewey that for producing active and responsible citizens, it is necessary to adopt supportive and encouraging environment where students may find good opportunities for sharing their ideas, interacting with peers and taking decisions independently. This will add to their confidence and sense of self-efficacy. They will develop the belief that they are able to contribute towards the good of others (Finkel & Smith, 2011).

Researchers have highlighted that students' socialization is associated with teachers' instructional beliefs and practices. In the social learning theory, it is mentioned that students learn on the basis of modelling. Social learning theory provides the theoretical foundation for the concept of democratic classroom environment and students' social skills development (Pasek, Feldman, Romer, & Jamieson, 2008). Writers argue that for social skills development, students must be taught how to listen to others, wait for their turns to speak or to participate in a discussion. However, it has been found that students never practice such values in a typical traditional classroom, where the aim of learning is getting knowledge and information to become change agent for the society. For this, writers argue that students must be provided with opportunities to participate in various activities to apply the newly gained knowledge and to practice it (Collins, 2009; Schweisfurth, 2011). To achieve this aim, it is essential that teachers should adopt flexible and cooperative ways and means in their instructional methods. Some writers explain that conversely, in a non-democratic classroom environment, the main source of information for the students is only the textbook and the teacher. There are least interactive activities where the students could share their experiences through positive interaction (Watkins, 2005).

Writers have lamented that the process of teaching and learning in Pakistani school classrooms is traditional, bookish and boring. This leads to promotion of culture of silence in the class where students come and memorize the text. They do not find opportunities for vast and meaningful interactions (Putney & Broughton, 2011). Unfortunately, teachers do not create classroom environment where students are able to participate as active learners. In another study, it was found that in non-democratic classrooms, knowledge is transmitted to students through lectures and textbooks (Campbell & Sasnett, 2011). In Pakistani schools, textbook is considered as the main source of knowledge or instrument. Teachers do not create an enabling classroom environment where students could freely interact, cooperate and share their own experiences, rather, students are expected to rote learn the text and reproduce it in examination (Kaufer, Gunawardena, Tan, & Cheek, 2011). This academic environment in the schools has contributed to the socialization of obedient and passive citizens who lack critical thinking, questioning, decision-making and problem-solving skills (Crisp & Turner, 2011).

Literature reports that the aim of education is not to have students memorize information and reproduce it at the demand of teacher or system, rather, it s aim it to create socially active members for the society (Lewis & Burman, 2008). This goal can be achieved if schools provide learners with wider opportunities for socialization and development.

Therefore, writers have advised that teachers should create such a caring and supportive academic environment where students are able to express and apply their capabilities and demonstrate their creativities freely as active social members of the society (Edelstein, 2011).

2.2 Democratic classroom and social skills

Social skills are highly important to prepare young people for their future roles as responsible adults within their families, workplaces and communities (Brint, Contreras, & Matthews, 2001; Friedman, 2010). Writers have suggested for involving students in classroom as a community and guide them in their social lives along academic, personal and future professional responsibilities (Burk & Fry, 1997). Educators must know that learning is a social process (Bandura, 1986; Inhelder & Piaget, 2013). Actually they may learn something individually, but ultimately the basis of sustainable learning and social development is interaction. This concept highlights the importance of democratic education for social development (Soder, 1996; Trafford, 2008).

There is a close relationship between democratic classroom and students' social skills development (Angell, 1991). Writers argue that in a caring and democratic classroom environment, students grow socially, intellectually and morally (Collins, 2009; Schweisfurth, 2011). For social development it is essential that teachers must understand the classroom management skills. It is thus, a major point to discuss that how teachers can achieve this goal (Giroux & Penna, 1979). For this purpose, writers argue that though training and development, teachers may be educated on how democracy can be infused into students' minds (Ehman, 1969; Friedman, 2010). A research study on social study, students showed that engagement in a democratic classroom developed their social skills such as waiting for turn and listening to their peers, teachers and even parents at home (Colin & Heaney, 2001). Due to this, writers have urged on the educational institutions and especially teachers to set up such learning environment where students could learn how to interact, argue and work together. This is an important foundation for future citizenship (Hepburn, 1983; Kubow & Kinney, 2000).

The idea of democratic classroom existed since 19th century. Studies have shown that the socialization of young people is connected with the concept of social freedom and academic empowerment (Pasek, et al., 2008). Schools may provide the best practical ground for this purpose. There is a general belief that schools provide civic training to students where they find an opportunity for open discussion and participation in real educative activities (Pohan, 2003). An earlier study reported that when teachers encourage open discussion in the classroom, students learn many social skills such as respect, care, raising hands for permission to share views and even actively participate in all activities (McNeil, 1981). Democratic classroom interaction consists of active participation of students in their own learning, showing cooperation, respect and recognition of others contributions. Apart from providing active learning opportunities, democratic classroom also enhances civic knowledge and participation and citizenship (McLennan, 2009). The understanding of Dewey about the concept of democracy as a way of life in a classroom is essential to not only understands the role of democratic classroom but also of teachers in social skills development of students. Dewey further argues that teachers are social change agents. They can play a key role in shaping and reshaping the society on democratic grounds. Classroom can be seen as a microcosm of the wider society (Burk & Fry, 1997).

To achieve this goal, researchers highlighted the role of teacher to be very crucial in building a democratic class culture (Watson & Battistich, 2006). Students in democratic classroom become very much concerned for one another and help each others on various occasions (Parker, 2010). A democratic classroom culture is characterized by principles of democracy such as cooperation, tolerance and justice. This culture can be developed by active participation and engagement of students in real life activities during the class. If the students could keep open mind, they will positively respond to diversity and foster civic social engagement which is the foundation for socialization (Brint, et al., 2001). Researchers have further clarified that in a democratic class, students are more likely to respond to diversity, actively listen to others and consider each other' feelings (Harwood, 1992). The willingness to express one's thoughts is important for becoming active and participative citizens. In a democratic classroom, students are encouraged to share their views with others (Gniewosz & Noack, 2008; Larrivee, 2002). This promotes culture of communication which foster such an environment which reflects democratic principles in action (Cornett & Gaudelli, 2003). Studies have concluded that democratic classroom is a place where students' ultimate socialization takes place. It is also called a classroom of voices and ears where the teachers strongly believe in democratic ideals and ideas, freedom and compassion, respect and care and students take the responsibility for their own social actions and development (Pace & Hemmings, 2006).

3. Research Methodology

3.1   Objectives of the study

The main objectives of this study were to:
1. Examine the effect of democratic classroom on social skills development of students.
2. Compare the perceptions of students on the effect of democratic classroom on their social skills development.

3.2   Hypothesis

$H_{0.:}$ There is no significant difference in the perceptions of male versus female students regarding the effect of democratic classroom on their social skills related to (a) waiting for turn, (b) raising hands for asking questions and (c) listening to others carefully.

3.3   Conceptual framework

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for this study. The conceptual was developed based on literature on democratic classroom and education. The framework explains the effect of democratic classroom environment on social skill development of students such as waiting for their turn, listening to others carefully and raising hands for asking questions.
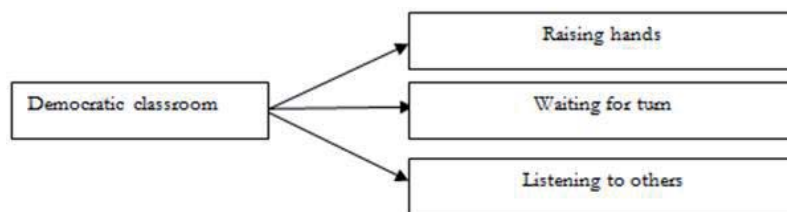

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

3.4   Participants

This quantitative study used causal comparative design. The reason is that the researchers were interested to find out the effects of the independent variable (democratic classroom environment) on the dependent variable (social skills enhancement). The population of this study includes all the male and female secondary school students of District Chitral. Eighty (80) students were randomly sampled from 20 secondary schools of the district. A properly selected sample enables the researchers to generalize the results and it is the representation of the whole population from which it is selected (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The schools were selected on the basis of geographical proximity. Since this was self-financed research work and it was difficult for the researchers to collect data from schools located in remote areas due to financial and time constraints.

3.5   Instrumentation

A self-administered questionnaire was designed to collect data. The researchers sought expert opinions of three Professors of Education to ensure the validity of the items. For reliability check, the questionnaire was piloted in ten schools. Pilot study is a worthwhile phase in the scientific research process (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). It helps in indicating the mistakes within the selected instruments by allowing testing on small number of people. As a result of the pilot study, errors were rectified and got refined (Gay, et al., 2009). The questionnaire used in this study had the informed consent of all the participants. In this way, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were fully ensured. The questionnaire was also coded to further ensure anonymity of the research participants. It was stated on the questionnaire to the participants.

3.6 Data analysis

Statistical analysis is a cyclical process. It normally focuses the events, participants or context and also describes the situation from the point of view of the research participants. For the data analysis, different tests of significance are used such as test of independent sample, non-independent sample, and Chi-square (X). Statistical analysis is a major step in research process. The correctness and authenticity of the study depends on the calculations taken from the responses of the sample. On the basis of this, it becomes clear whether the hypothesis is accepted or rejected at the required level of the significances. For this study, Chi-square was selected as the test of significance. It is two dimensional in nature and can clarify different categories. It was highly suitable for satisfactory analysis of nominal data that the researchers obtained from this study. It was found to be very convenient for data analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Description of demographic data

Table 1: Total male and female students and number of schools involved in the study

	Male School	Female School	Total
School	10	10	20
Student	40	40	80

Table 1 shows that there were 10 male secondary schools and 10 female secondary shools involved in this study. Each school was represented by 4 students. A total of 20 secondary schools and 80 secondary students participated in this study.

4.2 Test of hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant difference in the perceptions of male versus female students regarding the effect of democratic classroom environment on the social skills related to waiting for turn, listening to others carefully and raising hands for asking questions.

Table 2: The Chi Square test on perceptions regarding the effect of democratic classroom environment social skill

Category	High level of agreement 22--35	Low level of agreement 07----21	Row Total
Male	35	05	40
	87.5 %	12.5 %	100%
Female	34	6	40
	85 %	15 %	100%
Column Total	69	11	80
	86.25 %	13.75 %	100%
$\chi 2 = 0.105$ P<. 0.05 df =1			

Since the calculated value of Chi Square (.105) is less than the tabled value (3.841) at 0.05% level of significance and df=1, therefore, the null hypothesis woul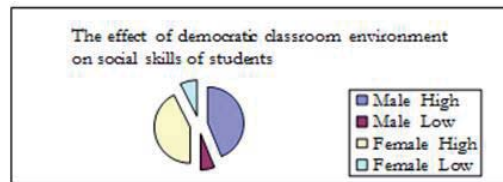d not be rejected, rather it is accepted. It is confirmed that there is no significance difference in the perceptions of male versus female students regarding the effect of democratic classroom environment on the social skills development related to (1) waiting for their turn, (2) listening to others carefully and (3) raising hands for asking questions.

Figure 2

Moreover, for further clarification, the results for each statement in the questionnaire contributing to the acceptance of the hypothesis are indicated in the tables 3a for male students and 3b for female students. In both the tables the agreements and disagreements among the male and female students have also been shown. The responses have also been ranked to show the level of agreement or disagreement among the students to any statement.

Table 3a. Responses of male students regarding the effect of democratic classroom environment on their social skills development

No	In democratic classroom students are	Rank	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
1	motivated to help each other in the class	3	31	07	02	40
			77.5%	17.5%	5%	100%
2	listen to others carefully	7	28	10	02	40
			70%	25 %	5%	100%
3	inactive in sharing classroom responsibilities. *	5.5	02	09	29	40
			5 %	22.5%	72.5%	100%
4	raise hands to ask questions	2	33	06	02	40
			82 %	15 %	5 %	100%
5	wait for their turn to share views	4	30	07	03	40
			75 %	17.5 %	7.5 %	100%
6	ready to listen to others opinions with attention.	1	34	05	01	40
			85%	12.5 %	2.5%	100%
7	unable to control their emotions. *	5.5	02	09	29	40
			5 %	22.5%	72.5 %	100%

Table 3b. Responses of female students regarding the effect of democratic classroom environment on their social skills development

No	In a democratic classroom students are	Rank	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Total
1	motivated to help each other in the class	1.5	33	05	03	40
			82.5%	12.5%	7.5 %	100%
2	listen to others carefully	4.5	31	07	02	40
			77.5 %	17.5 %	5 %	100%
3	inactive in sharing classroom responsibilities. *	6.5	02	07	30	40
			5 %	17.5%	75 %	100%
4	raise hands to ask questions	6.5	30	07	03	40
			75 %	17.5 %	7.5 %	100%
5	wait for their turn to share views	3	32	07	01	40
			80 %	17.5 %	2.5%	100%
6	ready to listen to others opinion with attention.	1.5	33	05	02	40
			82.5 %	12.5 %	5 %	100%
7	unable to control their emotions. *	4.5	02	07	31	40
			5 %	17.5 %	77.5 %	100%

Tables 3a and 3b show that there is a high level of agreement between male and female students regarding statement one which is a positive statement. A total of 82% female and 77% male students agree that in democratic classroom environment students help each other. In statement two there is a high level of agreement too between the perceptions because 70% male and only 77% female students have agreed that students listen to others carefully in a democratic

classroom. It shows a high significant agreement. In statement three, which is a negative statement, 72% male and 75% female students have disagreed that students are not inactive in sharing classroom responsibilities. To statement four, a total of 82% male and 75 % female students have agreed that in such a class students raise hands to ask questions. There is also much similarity in the opinions of teachers regarding statement five with 80% female and only 75 % male agreeing to the statement that students wait for their turn to ask questions in a democratic classroom. To statement seven which is a negative statement that students in a democratic classroom are inactive to share their responsibilities, 77% female and 72% male have shown strong disagreements. It shows that both female and male students perceive that democratic classroom environment plays a great role in the improvement of social skills development.

5.　Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effect of democratic classroom environment on communication skills development of students. The results show that there is no significance difference in the perceptions of male and female students regarding the effect of democratic classroom on their social skills development. In the analysis, both respondents, that is, male and female students show a high level of agreement towards the contribution of democratic classroom environment in enhancing their social skills in all the three areas such as waiting for turn, listing to others carefully and raising hands for asking questions. Considering the Chi-Square test, it appears that both male and female students strongly believe that a democratic classroom environment improves their social skills development. The paper concludes that democratic classroom is a strong predictor of social skills development of students. More specifically, in a democratic classroom, students wait for their turn to share their views, listen to others carefully and also raise their hands to ask questions.

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