

Conference Paper

Democratic Learning in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate democratic learning in elementary schools. It focused on: (1) students' participation in learning, (2) rights and obligations in learning, (3) empowering students in learning, (4) the interaction between teachers and students, and (5) learning management. This was qualitative research, which employed a case study approach. The data were collected through observations and interviews with school principals, teachers, and students at elementary schools in Yogyakarta. The data were analyzed using the interaction model of Miles and Huberman. The results showed that most of the elementary schools in Yogyakarta have implemented democratic learning, including through different modes of student participation in learning, rights and obligations in learning, empowering students in learning, the interaction between teachers and students, and in learning management.

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1. Introduction

Students alternatively stated as learning participants are learning subjects rather than objects. As learning subjects, this means that they are individuals who are ready to grow and develop based on their individual differences. To perform both tasks, educators need to provide the necessary services and facilities to address their needs and characteristics. They need to be treated appropriately in learning activities, namely as learning parties and not those who are forced to learn.

This demand has even been increasing when it is associated with the challenges of lives in the era of the fourth industrial revolution that expects every individual to master various 21st-century skills which later lead to the demands of active and independent learning. This situation will merely happen if students are not conditioned from an early age, one of which through democratic learning.

The idea of democratic learning is based on a simple consideration, namely increasing students' participation in learning, not just participating in learning, but "actively"

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participating in every learning activity. Engaging students in the learning process does not only give them chances to determine learning activities that they will do together with their teacher, but also encourage and provide opportunities for them to actively take part by getting involved in the decision making, empowering their intelligence and independence. Contrastly, in undemocratic learning tends to cause students to accept social reality uncritically [1].

Democratic learning is a learning model that provides students with opportunities to actively participate from the start to the end of the learning activities. Students have even been invited to participate in the formulation of learning outcomes. Hence, this model requires interaction between the teacher and students at the same level as it effectively works by virtue of tolerance, compassion, and mutual respect. Education shall equip the pupils with knowledge and skills and, in partnership with their homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible individuals and citizens. All activities in schools shall be designed in keeping with basic democratic values [2].

In regard to this, democratic learning opens up spaces for interaction and cooperation among students so as to provide the possibility for opportunities to find ideas. In student-student interaction, efforts to complement each other's opinions and ideas would be demonstrated, so that their line of thinking can develop to their full potential [2].

As democratic learning can be undertaken through learning that facilitates or gives students the opportunity to actively participate in every learning activity in a learning episode, creating the intended learning conditions cannot be indubitably separated from the applied learning model. This is due to the fact that a learning model is a conceptual framework that provides a reference for teachers in preparing and implementing a lesson. Therefore, when teachers have determined to put into practice democratic learning, they are required to apply a learning model that makes possible students' proactive engagement in learning.

In view of this, it is asserted that a learning model can be either fixed or situational depending on the students' immediate reactions. In another context, she suggests the use of learning models that involve social interaction or learning with other people, so that students feel cared for [4]. IT is claimed that "students in today's classroom pose a wide range of diverse learning needs that teacher must be prepared to address. Part of this process is learning how to understand and reach out to children who have a wide range of life experiences, behaviors, and beliefs about themselves and what school means to them". Therefore, the implementation of democratic learning definitely requires profound understanding of learners' needs and characteristics [5].

It should be clearly understood that democratic learning is different from learning democracy. The former, democratic learning, emphasizes the aspects of learning activities based on democratic values, while the latter highlights the aspects or dimensions of democracy as the object of study. This difference needs to be emphasized because the goals and targets discussed in both areas would not be the same. Democracy and democratic education were different to that of other early twentieth century progressives such as Edmond Holmes and Harriet Finlay-Johnson [6].

Democratic learning can be realized if, first, a democratic classroom is workable. One of the reasons for this is because learning activities occur in the classroom and involve all of the class members. Without any class - the place and the individuals in it - the learning activities would not run optimally. Words of "a democratic classroom allows students to choose what and how they will learn. Meetings and discussions help students and teachers agree on classroom policies and procedures. Behavior and education issues are also resolved through the process of meetings and discussion. Because classroom policy is determined by the students and teachers of individual classrooms, every democratic classroom is unique" [7].

However, democratic learning in reality has not yet manifested itself as a spirit or culture at school. Teachers often organize learning activities that impose their will on students during the learning process. Schools are likely less conducive for organizing learning that prioritizes democratic learning for their students. Then, the next question would be why democratic learning cannot optimally run-in educational institutions, especially in elementary schools. This study believes that one reason for this would possibly be the teacher's ability in organizing learning, which tends to be outcome-oriented rather than process-oriented.

It should be realized that actualizing a democratic classroom is not an easy task. The democratic classroom is a prerequisite for the realization of democratic learning. It can be established by structuring and managing the classroom that allows students to carry out learning activities conforming to their needs (what and how they learn) comfortably.

On grounds of the above description, an investigation on the students' democratic learning in schools needs to be carried out with some focuses on (1) how the students participate in every learning activity at school, (2) how their rights and obligations in learning at school are established, (3) how students should be empowered in learning, (4) how teachers interact with students in learning, and (5) how the classroom management in learning is run.

2. Related Works/Literature Review

2.1. Democratic Learning

Learning in schools today is actually different from learning in the past. In the past, learning in schools took place in the same direction, where educators were the center of learning activities. But now learning is more directed to active interaction between educators and students. Basically, liberating education is democratic education. An educational process that regulates the relationship between teachers and students in a balanced manner so that they can share their opinions and thoughts. Democratic learning is often interpreted as unlimited freedom, which is untrue. Democratic learning is more as a freedom that respects and understands the freedom of others. As it is stated that “a democratic education therefore implies opportunities ‘to receive and to take from others’ and ‘a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences.’ There is a much more implication to the school learning where the task of educators is now also included to control the meaning of democracy that is instilled in students. It is time for schools to provide liberating learning, namely democratic learning to students. However, it is also necessary to anticipate that students should not be released just like that, they must also be guided and guarded so that the freedom given is not misinterpreted [14].

Additionally, clearly denoted that schools should respect the students’ rights. He stated that “To be democratic, the learning that takes place at school needs to be based on real power sharing between the learner and the teacher. The views that children and young people hold need to be accorded respect by staff and learning seen as something students own and have essential influence over.” As a consequence, democracy truly needs to be set properly where it is best learned in a real democratic setting and students as active subjects are fully encouraged, have significant freedom to express their thoughts openly and discussed widely. By those means, there will be freedom of expression involved within school learning as a part of culture both for students and teachers, including fairness and justice [13].

2.2. Democratic Learning Community at Schools

Redefining the meaning of participatory democracy and assessing the status of citizen in today’s increasingly complex and diverse community has become necessary and significant, including a new understanding requirement towards the students’ rights and responsibilities as a citizen. Moreover, we desperately need a pragmatic approach that prevent students from overburdening lessons which full of merely theoretical

framework and knowledge about democracy. In addition, learning will be able to develop a democratic attitude if the teacher in the learning process is democratic, the atmosphere is not tense but pleasant, provides opportunities for students, provides rewards, does not take sides or corners certain groups, so that the teacher acts as a facilitator, mediator, motivator and evaluator. This defines that the democratic attitudes of classrooms teachers are important for improving people's democratic behaviors.

On the other hand, it is said that in an effort to improve democratic culture and values, aspects of schools and educational programs greatly influence democratic attitudes. Inevitably, in order to gain democratic life culture and democratic values, it is urgently need to consider the important aspects of schools and education programs. Furthermore, the development of democratic life culture depends on the democratic education systems. This means that the development of a democratic living culture depends on the democratic education system applied in the educational environment and schools' community. Consequently, some problems arose and need to be answered more importantly on how schools and community as a strategic partner can be a good catalyst to develop and grow the democratic values and blossom them in all aspects of citizens' lives.

As it is further argued that democracy as a way of living is associated with social involvement and social responsibility and a feeling of belonging which implies that democracy means giving high priority to the social dimensions of the everyday life of a school. He also clearly stated that the learning environment of the school, namely the 'outer learning environment', shapes the learner's capacity to develop as a person (individual). Additionally, it is believed that there is a strong connection that the inner learning environment – mind, thoughts and knowledge – is shaped by the pattern in the outer learning environment/community – the climate of the classroom, social relationships and the degree to which students are able to exercise personal influence [15].

3. Material & Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study method to thoroughly investigate the implementation of democratic learning in elementary schools (ESs) in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, specifically in terms of what is implemented and why it is applied. The selected ESs having shared characteristics in the researched area include Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, Public Elementary School SDN Kepu-tran A, and Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman. While the research

subjects contributing to this study consisted of principals, teachers, and students from the three ESs in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. Data were collected through observation and interview. The data, then were analyzed using interaction model of Miles and Huberman with activities; data reduction, data display, and conclusion.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

This section describes some statements from the respondents about students' democratic learning in elementary schools, including (a) learners' participation in every school learning activity, (b) rights and obligations of students in learning at school, (c) strategies for empowering students in learning, (d) teacher – students interactions in learning, and (e) classroom management. The data were obtained from the thematic teachers from three ESs through interviews as presented based on the following aspects of students' democratic learning.

4.1.1. Students' active participation in the learning activities at school

Students' participation in learning activities at school varies in terms of forms and scopes of actions. However, in general, students have participated in every learning activity held at school. The revelations of such participation carried out by students can be described as follows.

1. In Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, some teachers explained that the organization of learning activities and materials are still determined by the teacher but if the students propose new materials, the teacher would adjust them to the structure despite the previously existing material initiated by the teacher.
2. In Public Elementary School SDN Keputran A, students are involved in learning by applying certain learning methods. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic in which face-to-face meetings have become impossible, learning has been carried out through the broadcasts of the state-owned television station TVRI and via WhatsApp messenger (WA) by monitoring students' development.
3. In Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman, Students' involvement in teaching and learning activities is quite high and greatly varies. For example, they can add learning materials in various ways. Various brainstorming activities carried

out at the beginning of the class session include motivating the students, reflecting on what has been learned in the previous meeting, and explaining the learning objectives to achieve on that day.

Based on the above statements from respondents in the three ESs, it can be said that elementary school students have been involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning. However, kinds of students' participation in the learning activities vary. Some schools always pay more attention to the learning wants and needs of their students. In addition, some other ESs always strengthen their students' enthusiasm for learning, so that this courage throughout the class sessions would be increasing rather than vanished.

4.1.2. Students' rights and obligations in learning

Every student has their rights and performs obligations in learning. However, Schools may have their preferences in appreciating them. Several forms of activities related to the rights and obligations of students in learning that took place in several schools as depicted during the observation are as follows.

1. In Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, students are given the independence to determine to carry out learning activities according to their learning styles and interests.
2. In Public Elementary School SDN Keputran A, the teacher does not limit students' ideas, and they propose both new materials and learning strategies.
3. In Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman, during the brainstorming activities carried out at the beginning of the class session, the teacher encourages the students to express their feelings, their perception toward the materials in the previous meeting, and propose how they would achieve the learning objectives.

Based on the findings as described above, it can be understood that students have the right to participate in and determine learning activities to be carried out. In addition, students are required to perform their obligation, to carry out learning activities according to the provisions applicable at school.

Students' rights and obligations in learning may vary according to the policies set by each school. This diversity seems to be an endeavor to realize educational policies in accordance with school vision and missions.

4.1.3. c. Student empowerment in learning

In general, students in the participating schools have been empowered in learning activities. In detail, the patterns of student empowerment in each school are described as follows.

1. In Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, students usually have to be stimulated so that they can take the initiative through questions, videos, songs. These can make them relaxed and enjoy carrying out learning activities. Teachers make use of excitement as they believe that children can better learn if stimulated first. Some students might be excited and ask what subjects they are going to learn, and sometimes the initiation comes from them.
2. In Public Elementary School SDN Keputran A, students are invited to a discussion by first, equipping them with materials that will be discussed in the next meeting. The grade 6 teacher explained that the focus of learning has been directed at motivating students the importance of values for pursuing their study in the most desired junior high school of their choice. The material for the discussion is delivered through lecturing.
3. In Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman, to ensure whether students can express their desires, teachers often provide stimulation as a means to identify student passions.

Based on the phenomena that occur in several schools, it is evident that the method often used to empower students in learning is to provide learning stimulation and motivation. Motivation becomes a driving variable for students to keep learning and learning when the learning process takes place and that would be the point where the process of empowering students in learning occurs.

4.1.4. Interactions between teachers and students in learning

Each school in this study seems to exhibit different patterns of teacher-student interactions in learning. These dissimilar patterns of interaction exist in a continuum from teacher- to student-initiated exchange, and those that occur in the researched schools are described as follows.

1. In Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, the learning process in the lower grades is more dominated by the teacher, while that in higher levels, students are more

dominant. Modes of learning and final semester exams are mostly done online through WhatsApp Groups for those who are familiar with the technology.

2. In Public Elementary School SDN Keputran A, the assignments are usually determined by the teacher or without considering students' initiative, so that students do not have any choice of types of assignments on their preferences because there is no "offer" from the teacher.
3. In Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman, most of the student assignments are delivered via WhatsApp for easy reasons. According to the teachers, other platforms, such as YouTube, Google Forms, etc. are more difficult to operate and they have not mastered them.

Based on the above explanation, it is clear that interactions between teachers and students in learning are mostly initiated by the teachers and then gradually students are allowed to carry out learning activities according to the needs and wants, or interests of the students. It appears that these young students need to be encouraged or motivated at the beginning of learning activities, and after they are interested in, only students can dominate the learning activities.

4.1.5. Classroom management

Students' democratic learning can be realized through mutually respecting classroom management that allows students to carry out the agreed learning activities according to their opportunities and needs optimally. The results of the observation on the patterns of classroom management carried out by the teachers in the ESs under the study show that each school has its classroom management strategies that enable the students to learn consistent with their wishes and needs, but these patterns are different. These identified differences can be described as follows.

1. In Islamic Elementary School MI Giriloyo, some teachers stated that the learning activities were carried out outdoors or in the library. Some other teachers explained that students should be informed about class rules, so that class agreement on the learning process is committed by either students or teachers. The rewards given to students usually are in the form of stars (especially for those in grade 5) or gifts.
2. In Public Elementary School SDN Keputran A, some teachers stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, all competencies were not yet able or difficult to teach to the students due to various limitations. The strategies taken by the teachers include

to work by utilizing such media as TVRI, one set of assignments representing all themes, Google Classroom, assignments via Google Form, and assigning a task that includes all or some of the competencies on the Basic Competency (KD) mandated.

3. In Public Elementary School SDN Margoagung Sleman, there is an agreement made, including class rules and the imposed sanctions if they violate the class rules that have been mutually agreed upon. The purpose of this agreement, according to the grade 5 teacher, is to train students' discipline, although many of them ever break the rules.

Based on the explanation above, it is undeniably clear that the classroom management patterns that occur in the participating ESs are different, but they have one goal, namely to facilitate and support students' learning based on their great learning opportunities and preferences. To establish their discipline in learning, therefore, sometimes schools may impose their students who commit violations in learning on the agreed penalties. In addition to this, another strategy to manage learning has been carried out through the use of various learning media to facilitate students when experiencing difficulties in learning.

4.2. Discussion

Based on the research findings as described in the previous section, this study reveals that most schools and teachers have carried out a series of activities to actualize students' democratic learning in ESs. These efforts include inviting students to participate in learning, realizing student rights and obligations in learning, empowering students in learning, maintaining harmonious interaction between teachers and students, and managing a conducive classroom to facilitate students in carrying out learning activities.

This study also believes that ES teachers have involved students in planning, implementing, and evaluating learning. However, the students' participation in learning activities may vary. There are some schools that always pay attention to their students' learning wants and needs, and other ESs always strengthen the learners' enthusiasm for learning so that their spirit does not diminish but continues throughout the learning episode. From these phenomena, it seems that ES teachers no longer consider students as learning objects but learning subjects. In addition, teachers have developed the culture of "needs-based learning" in which students' learning needs are set as the bases for developing learning activities and materials.

With regard to student participation in learning, inviting students to actively engage in every learning activity is remarkably beneficial for the learners as they are offered to determine their own learning materials and activities which can respond to their needs. Conversely, if students are not involved in determining and selecting materials and activities for their own learning, this means neglecting students' independence and freedom of learning. In this context, it is asserted "if there are no perceived benefits for the participant, the latter may engage negatively in process, with similar implications for the organization" [8].

Besides, the present study also found that students are respected for their right in determining their preferred learning activities. On the other hand, students are required or obliged to carry out learning activities according to the provisions applicable in schools. In fact, respect for rights and fulfillment of obligations in learning have been stipulated in the school regulations and they are required to comply. Each person should be given time to convey his or her thoughts and feelings. The facilitator can draw on the reflection to make comparisons with the process of action learning.

The forms of students' rights and obligations in learning in each school may vary according to the policies set by the school officials. This diversity likely acts as an endeavor to manifest educational policies in accordance with the school vision and missions. It is undeniable that policy implementation deals not only with the mechanism for elaborating political decisions in routine procedures through bureaucratic channels, but also with matters of conflict, decisions, and related parties who benefit from the policy [9].

Concerning the third research focus, students have been empowered with all of their potential to grow optimally through various learning activities. Based on the findings the method often employed to empower students in learning is to provide learning stimulation and motivation. Motivation likely becomes a driving variable for students to always stay active during the learning process and this is the point where the process of empowering students in learning occurs.

What ES teachers have done to fully develop students' potential by motivating them to optimally learn can be considered as the right actions. "There are many teachers who even today rely heavily on rote repetition and reward systems to build up factual knowledge in their students ...many people dispute the idea that students should engage in large amounts of fact learning when they are in school" [10].

In terms of interaction, teacher-student interactions seem to run dynamically. teacher-student interaction in learning is generally often initiated by the teacher and then gradually students are given the opportunity to carry out learning activities according

to their needs and wants, or interests. This study found that students need to be encouraged or motivated at the beginning of learning, but after they get interested in or engrossed in the proposed activities, only do students dominate the learning activities.

Identified forms of teacher-student interaction that inspires students' courage to express ideas and actions in learning actually need to be maintained and developed. This is suggesting that "we organize students into homeroom advisories in which the homeroom teacher is their advocate. The homeroom groups further divide into a smaller 'listening group' that meets every other week with their teachers to share concerns and acknowledge success." [11]

Whilst concerning the classroom management patterns, what occurs in the researched ESs has been somewhat dissimilar, but focuses on a shared goal, namely to facilitate and make it easier for students to learn in conformity with their opportunities and preferences. Sometimes schools need to impose sanctions for those who commit violations in learning. In addition, other schools have harnessed various learning media to support their students and handle the learning difficulties at hand.

It seems that different classroom management patterns in each school should not be anything to worry about or contend for. Whatever the learning management pattern established in each school is, the more important thing is that classroom management can help the development of students' democratic learning since each school certainly has different classroom management styles for address their educators' needs and the abilities. "The overall school climate influences learning; students need an environment that is safe, orderly, and learning focused. The classroom climate, in general, should emphasize a task orientation and high expectations for all students and convey sufficient emotional warmth to make students feel known and valued." [9]

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, this study has successfully revealed that students' democratic learning in elementary schools situated in Yogyakarta has been manifested through various modes or patterns. The aspects of democratic learning in this context can be seen from the students' active participation in learning, their rights and obligations in learning, teacher-student interactions, student empowerment, and the applicable classroom management patterns. Nonetheless, these results must be interpreted with caution and a number of limitations should be borne in mind. The first is the limited number of schools involved, and the next concerns with the education level

which is merely constrained to the elementary school level. Hence, further investigations can consider the greater geographical scope and collaborate with various education levels.

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