How Teacher Moderates the Relationship between Democratic Classroom Environment and Student Engagement

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement and its three dimensions: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement and behavioral engagement. Previous research has extensively reported about the positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement. However, these studies have evaluated only the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement neglecting the three dimensions. This study contributes to this gap by examining the three dimensions as well. Thus, the paper had two aims: First to investigate the relationship between democratic classroom and the three dimensions of classroom engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement and second, to examine the moderating role of teacher between democratic classroom and student engagement. A survey questionnaire was utilized to collect data from secondary school teachers. Since the study was based on correlation method, therefore, regression analysis were conducted to test the hypotheses of the study and to analyze the relationship between the variables. The findings of the study showed that there is a strong positive correlation between democratic classroom environment and student engagement and its three dimensions: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. The study also discovered that teacher moderates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement. On the basis of the results, the paper concludes that teacher plays an important role in the behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement of students in the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: democratic classroom environment, role of teacher, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement

1. Introduction

In the present democratic age, schools should prepare young people for democratic living. To achieve this, schools should not only transmit knowledge to students about democratic life but, they should also be provided with such a learning environment where they can learn and practice democracy. For this purpose, students can be better engaged for learning in a democratic classroom which is characterized by encouragement, support, guidance and trust (Patrick, 2004). Classroom is a miniature community of learners (Khurram, 2003). It is the epicenter where the future citizens are prepared. The nature and structure of classroom environment decides the quality of learning environment. Researchers have suggested that for students' citizenship development, teachers must try to engage students in learning opportunities in such a way, where they can learn and practice their newly gained knowledge and skills. This aim can be achieved by creating an open, democratic and engaging classroom environment where students are able to learn and practice citizenship. Teachers may help the students to reconstruct their learning by being engaged in learning experiences (Johnson & McClure, 2004).

Schools of today are laboratories of democracy where students receive training for their future life and responsibilities.   It is one of the essential roles of teachers to transfer democratic values to the future citizens. For this purpose, they may create democratic learning environment where students may interact openly and learn from each other (Patrick, 2004). Democratic classroom education environment is a place which is characterized by tolerance, cooperation, and participation. These values could only be transferred in friendly and supportive learning environment that allows students to acquire new knowledge through critical investigation, reflection and cooperation (Imran, 2006). This diversity provides practical opportunities for students to socialize and grow. In a democratic classroom, there is a formal and informal interaction among the students during the learning process.

Students learn cooperation and trust through working and learning together. Lipton and Oakes (2003) argue that democratic classroom environment provides wider space for students' social, moral and academic development. Thus, democratic classroom is a place where instruction is characterized by freedom and cooperation. The notion of democratic classroom comes from progressive education. This theory places an emphasis on a teaching a learning environment where students are able to critically think on the activities, and learn to practice their skills. Such a teaching and learning atmosphere develops their problem solving and leadership skills. This philosophy of learning increases the self-confidence of students and enables them to take part in the learning activities actively (Aitkins, Bierman & Parker, 2005).

The concept of democratic classroom is rooted in the educational philosophy of Dewey. The philosophy stresses on the educational institutions to create such a learning environment where students could participate actively. In view of Dewey education is a social process. One of the roles of schools is to develop social skills of students to enable them to become responsible and useful member of the society (Shannon, 1991). The trend of democracy in education flourished in America in the last few decades more ardently than anywhere else. This change was mainly propelled by the educational thoughts of Dewey. However, in the last two decades, it has spread to other parts of the world. Schools are preaching their staff to avoid physical punishment and other disciplinarian tools to ensure effective academic development of students (Graham, 2004; Patrick, 2004; Bano, 2005). Democratic classroom is defined as a learning environment where students find freedom and care. They can participate in the learning process actively. The role of teacher in such a learning environment is that of a facilitator and guide (Tse, 2000).

Democratic classroom is a forum where students not only share their experiences with fellow classmates and with the teacher openly as well (Majeed, 2005a). The classroom structure is disciplined by certain rules created by mutual understanding and consent of the teacher and students. Students feel empowered by sharing their view and choices. Thus, democratic classroom has far reaching effects upon the personality development of students (Faiq, 2005). In another study, Bafile (2005) argues that in supportive classroom environment students find better opportunities to make free choices, to speak openly and to feel encouraged to participate in the learning experiences. Effective classroom engagement provides a rich ground for social development of students. The twentieth century progressive educational reformer John Dewey also advocated democracy in education. He argued that creating a classroom environment where students find wider opportunities for sharing their ideas, interacting with class fellows and taking decisions independently adds to their confidence and self-efficacy (Noddings, 1998; Wamba, 2005; Webb, 2004). For socialization of students, it is essential that classroom environment should be based on the principle of diversity. Students must be provided with learning activities through which they should not only learn new knowledge but also use it (Beck, 2001; Khurram, 2003; Stuen, 1995).

There are evidences that teaching and learning in Pakistani schools is traditional and boring. Teachers prefer to transmit textbook knowledge to students than creating an engaging and supportive learning environment where students can find an opportunity to share their experiences. Engaging classroom environment enables the students to reconstruct knowledge based on their new experiences (Majeed, 2005b). However research shows that in Pakistani schools, students are silent. They are encouraged to rote learn the course material just to pass examination. Students cannot easily communicate or critically think. The process of teaching and learning is controlled by the teacher and students are supposed to be obedient (Dean, 2005). In the schools, textbook and teacher are considered as the main sources of knowledge. Teachers hardly create an enabling environment where students are able to participate. Rather, students are expected to memorize the bookish information and reproduce it on the demand of the teacher. This type of classroom environment in the schools has contributed to the socialization of obedient and passive citizens who lack in critical thinking, questioning, decision making and problem-solving skills (Metzger, 2004; Dean, 2005).

Mehmet (2006) maintains that the aim of education is to prepare active and socialized citizens for the society. This goal can be achieved if schools provide learners with wider opportunities for socialization. For this purpose, teachers may create caring and supportive academic environment where students are able to demonstrate their creativities and choices. A caring and democratic classroom allows students to grow socially, intellectually and morally. In such classrooms students actively participate in the process of teaching and learning. Research has further indicated that democratic classroom environment helps develop social skills of students such as cooperation, accommodation and tolerance (Pryor, 2004). Studies support the view that teaching and learning is an interactive process. It demands the active involvement of the students. When students actively participate, they learn to reconstruct new knowledge on the basis of their previous knowledge by applying their skills in real life situations (Fisher, 1994; Kunwar, 2001). To achieve this aim, teachers may create a learning environment

characterized by open interaction, discussion and cooperation (Feinberg & Toress, 2001). In a democratic classroom, teachers encourage the students to share their ideas freely. The teacher during this process acts as a moderator. In this way the learners construct knowledge by themselves.

Classroom learning environment is defined as a social-psychological context where learning takes place and where the personality of the learner is constructed. Classroom is a learning environment or a social atmosphere where learning takes place. It also called educational environment or classroom climate. It is closely related to how teaching is conducted. The process of teaching and learning is essentially manipulated by the teacher (Kubow & Kinney, 2000). Teachers play a key role in student classroom engagement. For this purpose, teachers pay major attention towards the orientation, quality and quantity of interactions and intercommunications in the classroom (Allodi, 2002). Different studies have investigated the factors influencing the learning environment of students, their perceptions towards classroom interactions and the relationship between classroom environment and their learning outcomes (Parsons, 2002). But majority of these studies have been conducted in the developed world (Beck, 2001). Some studies have already indicated about the positive effects of democratic processes on students' classroom engagement and social development. For example, in the "The Eight Year Study" in the United States (Morgenstern & Keeves, 1997) found that teachers' personality and the classroom climate has a major say in the personality and civic development of students. In another study, Sylvester (2003) studied the differences between urban and rural environment and their perceptions regarding learning environment. This study also found that friendly classroom environment developed confident and progressive minded individuals. Earlier, Gutherie and Cox (2001) studied school and classroom context and students' reading engagement. In their study, they explored that students studying in a open and cooperative learning classroom environment developed more positive attitude towards the school, community and the peer relations. They also showed a highly keen interest in trying to solve problem of the communities around them. In another study, Kubow and Kinney (2000) have presented eight characteristics for a democratic classroom which fosters students' engagement. These characteristics are (a) active participation, (b) avoidance of text book oriented instruction, (c) reflective thinking, (d) student decision-making and problem solving, (e) controversial issues, (f) individual responsibilities, (g) recognition of human dignity, and (f) relevance. These characteristics are the constituent elements of open, active and engaging classroom learning.

Classroom is a community of learners (Imran, 2006). Selwyn (2003) argued that in creating a democratic classroom environment teacher plays a key role. Basically, the interaction between teacher and students determines the level of classroom engagement and its effectiveness for students' academic development. Therefore, researchers have suggested that the relationship between the teacher and students must be based on mutual care, and shared responsibility (Hall, 2000; Dash, 2004). Others have also suggested that teachers should create caring atmosphere in classroom. This helps build the confidence of students to share their ideas. In this way students will actively participate in the instruction process. Such opportunities help students to become a contributing member of the classroom community (Leenders & Veugelers, 2006). Research studies have indicated that classroom should be a place to which learners have a strong sense of belongingness. The students should be able to identify themselves with the class culture and feel safe in expressing their feelings (Abbas, 2002). Students can learn better in an open classroom atmosphere, where open discussions are encouraged (Bafile, 2005). In a democratic classroom, the teacher should act as a facilitator rather than a dictator. Students should be encouraged to share their views openly. To achieve this aim, schools need to promote a culture of sharing and caring (Imran, 2006). Democratic classroom is a place where students find care and respect. The role of democracy in the socialization has been accepted by many researchers including Dewey. According to Dewey, real education is one which develops all faculties in students with the help of which they become effective contributing members of the society. Despite of this, however, few schools around the world associate the role of freedom and liberty with democratic education (Crawford, 2003). However, this belief has been challenged in the recent past. It is believed that school culture and concept of student's discipline has a variety of factors. These factors affect students' behavior and attitudes from time to time. One such important factor is teacher. Teacher occupies a central position in the whole process of teaching and learning (Moos, 1979; Feinberg & Toress, 2001).

Studies have elaborated that students' socialization is not confined to merely home environment or outside society. School classroom is also an ideal place to nourish many good habits among students such as showing respect towards others, speaking in low tone, inviting for others to participate in discussion and collaboration in collective as well as individual performance (Cushman, 1994). Other studies have indicated that classroom is a place where the personality of the child is shaped and reshaped (Hall & Barrett, 2000; Crawford, 2003). This process of reconstruction of personality happens through interaction with others such as teachers, peers, and

visitors. This interaction provides students opportunities to critically study the behaviors and attitudes of colleagues who come from different social and cultural backgrounds and having various perspectives (Quinn, Challahan, & Switzer, 1999). Researchers have suggested that for promoting students' social skills there are many strategies that teachers may adopt during the classroom instruction, for example, debates, demonstrations, discussions and assignment presentations. This will provide students with live opportunities for wider interaction with peers and teachers. They can openly share views and exchange experiences. This experience of working together expands the horizons of social development of students (Oakes & Lipton, 2003).

Studies have also found that supportive classroom creates active and participative individuals (Feinberg & Toress, 2001). According to Dewey, the main aim of education is preparation of active and democratic individuals (Haynes & Chaltain, 2004). Unfortunately, studies have revealed that schools in Pakistan are characterized by traditional mode of teaching and learning where students listen and teachers speak (Dean, 2005). In traditional classrooms, teachers give lectures and students listen. In this way, students hardly find an opportunity to participate in the learning process as the classroom environment is designed on the premise and philosophy that teacher is a sage on the stage. This monolithic practice of solo performance of teacher has produced graduates who lack some necessary social skills such as communication skills, tolerance, and caring attitude (Siddiqi, 2002). On the other hand, literature has indicated that in a democratic classroom students find better opportunity for learning and meaningful engagement. This interaction provides them with an opportunity to exchange new experiences and knowledge with their colleagues and teacher. Teacher manipulates the process and creates meaningful learning experiences for students (Mulji, 2004). This experience lays the foundation for behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement of students. Progressive educationists such as Dewey and Rousseau have also supported the idea of democratic education for developing social, emotional and intellectual individuals for the society (Haynes & Chaltain, 2004). Other studies have suggested that teachers should create a classroom environment where students are able to learn and practice cooperation and trust. For this purpose, different cooperative learning activities can be deigned where students will participate and work as teams. This will develop in them the skills of leadership and decision-making and effective communication (Shannon, 1991; Gutherie & Cox, 2001). This will also promote their cognitive and emotional growth (Siddiqi, 2002). Research has further documented that one of the goals of education is to prepare useful, participative and thinking citizens. To achieve this aim, students may be exposed to a classroom environment where they find care, respect and encouragement (Shahid, 2000; Siddiqi, 2003).

1.1 Research Framework

Based on the above literature review, the researchers have developed the following model for this study. This research model explains the relationships between the independent variable (democratic classroom environment) and dependent variable student engagement and its three dimensions such as behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement.
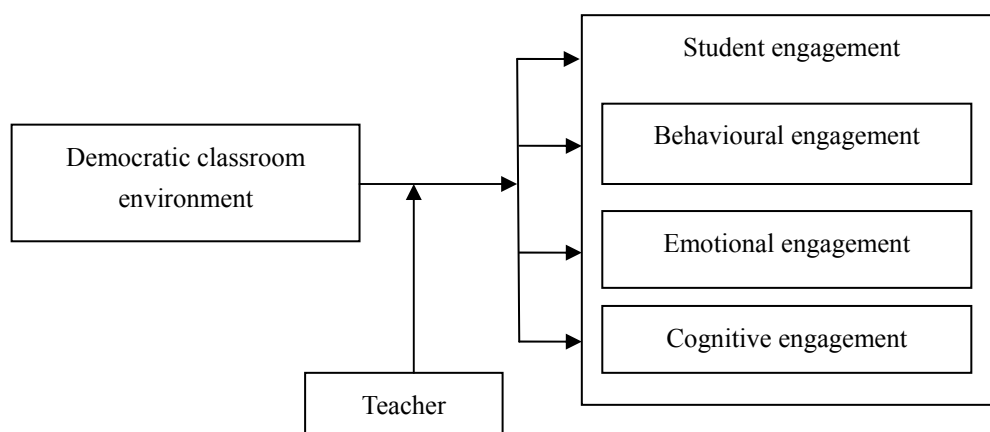

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1) To examine the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement.

2) To investigate the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student behavioral engagement.

3) To assess the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student emotional engagement.

4) To examine the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement.

5) To determine the moderating effect of teacher on the relationship between democratic classroom and student engagement and all its three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioral.

1.3 Research Questions

1) What is the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement?

2) What is the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student emotional engagement?

3) What is the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student behavioral engagement?

4) What is the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement?

5) Does teacher moderate the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement and its three dimensions?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H_1 There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student behavioral engagement.

H_2 There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student emotional engagement.

H_3 There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement.

H_4 Teacher moderates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement and its three dimensions (behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement).

2. Methodology

This is a descriptive research study. The study is based on correlation design. Data were collected using the cross-sectional survey method. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling method, the study selected 291 secondary school teachers from the overall population of 1200 teachers in 55 government schools in district Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The participants were randomly sampled to ensure equal representation of the sample. A randomly selected sample helps in effective generalization of the results of the study (Gay, 1992; Kumar, 1996). The schools were selected on the basis of geographical proximity. Majority of the schools could not be covered due to lack of resources and time and terrorist activities.

2.1 Instruments for Measurement

The study adapted the following scales for measuring the perceptions of the research subjects. To measure democratic classroom environment construct, the Democratic Climate of Civic Education Classroom (DCCEC) scale was used. This scale was developed by Kubow and Kinney (2000). The scale originally contained seven dimensions. This scale has been used in numerous research studies. The instrument consists of 33 items on a Likert four-point scale (0= never, 1= rarely, 2= sometimes, 3=often). To measure the student engagement construct, the Student Engagement Measure (SEM) was originally developed and used by Fredricks, McColskey, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse, and Mooney (2011) to measure the dependent variable, that is, classroom engagement and its three dimensions such as behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. This instrument has also been used in a number of studies to measure classroom engagement. The three dimensions were measured using a 19 items Likert four-point scale (0= never, 1= rarely, 2= sometimes, 3=often).

To measure the moderating role of teacher, School Social Behavior Scale (SSBS) developed and used by Merrell (2002) was used. This is a teacher rating scale which examines the perceptions on the role of teacher in the teaching and learning process. This instrument contains 65 items having two parts. Part 1 consists of Social Competence and has 32 items. Part 2 consists of Antisocial Behavior and has 33 items ranging from never to frequently. Internal consistency reliability for the SSBS is .91-.98. The test retest reliability is .76-.83 for Social Competence score and .60-.73 for the Anti-Behavior score.

3. Results

3.1 Analysis of Data

Analysis of the data is presented in the below tables.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 1. Correlation Analysis of independent and dependent variables

No	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Democratic classroom environment	1				
2	Behavioral engagement	0.783*	1			
3	Emotional engagement	0. 67*	0.741*	1		
4	Cognitive engagement	0.574*	0. 69*	0.72*	1	
5	Moderating role of teacher	0.665*	0.68*	0.74*	0.73*	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 shows that democratic classroom environment is significantly correlated with moderating role of teacher and significant at p>value of 0.01. Democratic classroom environment has also a significant relationship with behavioral engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement through Pearson correlation values and significant at p > value of 0.01.

3.3 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was measured by testing the research hypotheses. The results for each variable are discussed as under.

H_1: There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student behavioral engagement.

Table 2. Analysis of democratic classroom and student behavioral engagement

Variable	R-square	t-value	Coefficient	F-value	P-value
Democratic classroom environment	0.686	14.33	0.75	278.0	0.00

Table 2 shows the value of coefficient beta is calculated as 0.75 which shows a highly positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and behavioral engagement. The value of R-square is calculated as 0.686 showing 68.6% variation in the dependent variable (behavioral engagement) is explained by independent variable (democratic classroom environment). The model's goodness of fit is shown by F-value that is 278.0. Hence, H_1 is accepted that democratic classroom environment is positively correlated with behavioral engagement.

H_2: There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student emotional engagement.

Table 3. Analysis of democratic classroom and student emotional engagement

Variable	R-square	t-value	Coefficient	F-value	P-value
Democratic classroom environment	0. 672	17.43	0. 77	276.1	0.00

Table 3 shows the value of coefficient beta is measured as 0.77 which shows a highly positive relationship between teacher democratic classroom environment and student emotional engagement. The value of R-square is calculated as 0.672 showing 67.2% variation in the dependent variable (democratic classroom environment) is explained by independent variable (emotional engagement). The model's goodness of fit is shown by F-value that is 276.1. Therefore, H_2 is supported that democratic classroom environment is positively correlated with student emotional engagement.

H_3: There is a positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement.

Table 4. Analysis of democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement

Variables	R-square	t-value	Coefficient	F-value	P-value
Democratic classroom environment	0. 665	16.43	0. 79	288.0	0.00

Table 4 shows the value of co-efficient beta is calculated as 0.79 which shows a highly positive relationship between democratic classroom environment and student cognitive engagement. The value of R-square is 0.665 showing a 66.5% variation in the dependent variable (democratic classroom environment) is explained by independent variable (cognitive engagement). The model's goodness of fit is shown by F-value that is 288. Therefore, H_3 is supported that democratic classroom environment is positively correlated with student cognitive engagement.

3.4 Descriptive Analysis

Table 5 shows correlation analysis and descriptive statistics for the three variables. The correlation coefficients values are less than 0.90 which show that the data is not affected by serious co-linearity problem.

H_4: Teacher moderates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement.

Table 5. Moderating effect of teacher on the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement

No	Variables	N= 291	Max	Mini	Mean	S.D	Variance
1	Democratic classroom environment	291	4.33	2.28	3.53	0.464	0.230
2	Student engagement	291	4.65	1.87	3.6	0.645	0.397
3	Moderating role teacher	291	4.66	1.85	3.5	0.635	0.398

Table 5 shows that the interaction of teacher is significantly associated with democratic classroom and classroom engagement. To test the moderating variable on the relationship between democratic classroom environment and the student engagement, we first created interaction terms by multiplying democratic classroom with teacher. The analysis shows that teacher positively moderates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement.

4. Discussion

The paper examined the effect of democratic classroom environment on student engagement and its three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioral. The results of the study found a very positive correlation between all the variables. Besides, the results also support the findings of earlier studies. For example, Johnson and McClure (2004) had found that classroom environment positively influenced classroom engagement of students. Earlier, several studies had examined the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student academic achievements, but this study, particularly tested the given hypothesis to answer the question whether or not democratic classroom environment affected classroom engagement of students.

The results indicated a high positive correlation between democratic classroom and all the three dimensions of student engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional enjoyment and cognitive engagement of students. This

result supported the findings of Lipton and Oakes (2003) that democratic classroom promotes students behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement. The study further revealed that teacher positively moderated the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement. Teachers need to create a classroom environment where students are able to participate and learn to practice cooperation and trust (Siddiqi, 2002).

Previous research stated that one of the goals of education was preparing student for their future roles as active and engaged citizens. Writers were of the view that this goal could be easily achieved by preparing democratic minded and active citizens (Faiq, 2005). For this purpose, they suggested to provide the students a democratic learning environment where they find, learn and practice care, respect and contribution. Previous research had also suggested that for effective classroom engagement of students, teachers must create supportive and caring environment in classroom (Haynes & Chaltain, 2004). This type of supportive learning environment will contribute toward producing democratic minded and useful citizens for the society. The findings of this study are also in line with the previous studies that one of the main goals of education is to prepare young people for their future as active and contributing individuals.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that democratic classroom environment is a predictor of effective student engagement. In an open and supportive classroom students can easily share their ideas and also take part in discussion. This increases their level of motivation. The study further concludes that democratic classroom environment is a good predictor of student behavioral engagement, emotional engagement as well as cognitive engagement. The study concludes that teacher is a key factor in the process of teaching and learning. The study also found that teacher positively moderates the relationship between democratic classroom environment and student engagement. It means that teacher plays a key role in students' classroom engagement in the process of teaching and learning.

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