Potentiality of Democratic Competencies for an Inclusive Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the democratic competencies embedded in student-centric classroom practices, argues for the potentiality of student-centric classroom activities in catering to an inclusive classroom environment, and concludes that students' participation in classroom activities that facilitate democratic competencies may contribute to inclusive classroom practices. Literature suggests that democratic education upholds the principles of inclusion in classroom practices by addressing any means of oppression since democratic values ensure free and active participation of students. Bangladeshi classroom scenario demonstrates a disparate attitude on the part of the students where a significant portion of the students remain silent during classroom activities. For this research, data was retrieved from secondary school students to fathom whether student-centric classroom activities (that reflect democratic competencies) add value to the idea of inclusive classroom practices. The study found that democratic competencies are practiced in Bangladeshi classrooms and students hold a positive attitude, hence, there is a scope for promoting inclusion through such practices. One key implication of this study is that more research is needed to operationalize the democratic competencies for the Bangladeshi classroom context for an inclusive classroom.

Keywords: Bangladeshi secondary education, democratic competences, democratic values and skills, inclusive classroom, student-centric activities.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion in the classroom aims to ensure equal opportunity, promote equity, uphold human rights, and embrace diversity, all while enhancing the social and academic involvement of every student in the school, and simultaneously reducing exclusion (e.g. [8], [40]). To implement an inclusive classroom, democratic education can be an effective way since it upholds the principles of inclusion in classroom components by ensuring the free and active participation of all students regardless of any oppression (e.g. [15], [16], [19], [42],[50]). Hence, democratic practices can facilitate the necessary conditions for opportunities and possibilities of inclusion in classrooms [42]. Furthermore, inclusion and democratic education share an interrelated relationship [40]. As argued in Biesta [5], the point of democracy is the inclusion of everyone, while inclusion remains the core value of democracy. Democracy establishes the conditions that guarantee inclusion in terms of ensuring opportunities and possibilities for everyone [42]. The relationship between democratic education and inclusion is more visible, and more apparent when the increase of intractable issues in our society requires democratic education if it is to promote inclusion in society [24].

Therefore, the interrelated relationship between democratic practices and inclusion indicates an opportunity

to incorporate democratic values through education to promote inclusion. This need has led scholars to look for ways of instilling democratic values through formal schooling. For instance, Jacobs & Power [28] introduced a widely acclaimed student-centric learning model that includes seven key elements that integrate democratic principles into the teaching-learning process. Due to its promising feature of catering to democratic values, different countries across the globe have incorporated and contextualized to implement this approach (e.g.[49]). Besides that, democratic values, attitudes, and skills have been identified differently in different contexts (e.g.[13],[32]). All these approaches seem to share similar democratic practices, some of which supposedly uphold the principle of classroom inclusion.

Since democratic classroom practices come with a positive notion, and reflect the promotion of classroom inclusion [40], this paper is set forth to explore the potentiality of ensuring classroom inclusion through democratic practices. Subsequently, this paper puts forward the idea that the success of implementing these practices in a classroom requires a changing role of the teachers [51]) as well as students' perceptions and practices.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

A fundamental aspect of Bangladesh's identity lies in its democratic commitment to providing equal opportunities to all citizens, regardless of class or creed [11]. This, combined with a deep-rooted sense of patriotism and the challenges faced during the liberation war, positions democracy as a cornerstone in Bangladesh's education, albeit with limited practical implementation. Moreover, the chronicle of the region where Bangladesh is situated includes philosophers advocating for democratic education. Ghosh [21] affirms Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy is deeply rooted in democratic ideals, prioritizing the decolonization of minds, global unity, and freedom.

Another issue arises with subjects like English, contradicting democratic principles, as Islam [27] discusses how English learning classrooms perpetuate classism, asserting that rather than being democratic, education as a whole, and English learning specifically, mirrors the socio-economic circumstances of individuals and schools. This dynamic establishes and maintains a social gap among them. Islam[27] spotlights the importance of tackling this issue, worrying that students tend to attend schools that align with their socioeconomic status, leading to an unequal and undemocratic educational experience. Given these circumstances, it becomes challenging to anticipate the elimination of social and economic inequality through education.

Khondker et al. [33] reveal that despite notable accomplishments and economic advancements in Bangladesh, the country has confronted largely self-imposed challenges. They claim that the shift towards an export-oriented neoliberal growth model has deviated from its initial democratic and secular aspirations, with a waning influence of socialist principles. While Bangladesh maintains relative peace, there are indications of an intolerant political culture impacting both governance and economic stability. Sultana's[50] study found that amidst Bangladesh's democratic challenges, there is a pressing need to integrate democratic ideals into the education system during the ongoing modernization. The research highlighted the impact of political instability on democratic rights, emphasizing the crucial role of a shift in education policy to nurture critically conscious citizens. Despite the 2010 National Education Policy aiming for a more democratic perspective, Sultana's [50] findings in three secondary Dhaka schools revealed challenges in meeting policy requirements and emphasized the necessity for a deeper understanding of democratic values.

While current educational practices denote the significance of inclusive classroom practices, not that they facilitate democratic values only, prevalent student centric classroom activities can potentially demonstrate the scope of teaching democratic values and skills along the side with making the class inclusive. This study, thus, engaged in investigating students' perceptions and practices regarding democratic practices that

uphold principles of inclusion. The findings of the study might direct the policy to adapt student-centric pedagogy to actualize an inclusive classroom through democratic practices. Under this reality, the study has framed a research question to reach its goal, as stated below-

1. What are the Bangladeshi Secondary school students' reported practices and perceptions towards democratic practices that promote inclusion in a classroom?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To explore Bangladeshi school teachers' practices of facilitating core values of democracy (freedom, justice, and tolerance), Sultana [50] conducted a study involving 9 school teachers and 18 students. The findings reveal that teachers' practices of student participation are engaged in ensuring inclusive classrooms through equal attention and caring attitudes. Teachers' practices also include student engaging classroom activities such as group work to promote collaboration. In Alam's [2] study, teachers' belief and their practices regarding citizenship education were considered. Data was collected from 5 teachers and 14 students through observation, interviews, FGDs, and document analysis. The study found teachers to be insufficient to create an appropriate climate to engage students in critical questioning and freedom of active participation.

Hoque [26] conducted a research study to identify the determinant factors that result in low student participation in classrooms by collecting data through FGDs and observations involving 10 teachers and 10 students. The participant students of the study failed to identify themselves as involved in active classroom participation. The study also revealed some key obstacles that impede effective student participation, including teachers' limited awareness, inadequate advance preparation, lack of teachers' continuous support, insufficient time for classroom discussions, and improper teaching methods. Previously, Gomes [23]conducted a study to investigate how democratic values are practiced by Bangladeshi teachers, involving interview sessions with 7 teachers. The participant teachers reported teacher-initiated tools like group work and classroom representative election to ensure the development of moral and civic values among students.

Sayem [46]conducted a mixed-methods study involving students from various Bangladeshi educational levels (primary, secondary, and higher secondary), as well as principals, headteachers, teachers, and parents. The findings reveal a limited implementation of democratic norms, values, and behavior within classrooms. In contrast to these findings, Jahan et al. [29] research, conducted in Bangladeshi secondary schools, shows that teachers and students hold a positive mindset toward the requirements of democratic skills. Students appear keen to acquire those democratic skills, and teachers, though eager to help students, lack confidence about the actual practices. Their findings are also suggestive of some external and internal factors as impediments to the seamless facilitation of democratic skills to the students.

In a study conducted by Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac [18], Social Interdependence Theory was utilized to examine the inclusive and collaborative dynamics among students in group work, analyzing the teacher's role in either facilitating or hindering these interactions. The observational data employed were collected by video recording group works using Black-Hawkins's ([6], [7]) framework of participation. This study discloses that students' active participation in the group work structures their analytical discussions in groups, under teachers' feedback, are instances of prerequisites for inclusion through group work. Similarly, Oktariyati & Suyatno [41] conducted a research study to describe the management and implementation of tolerance aspect cultivation in schools. This qualitative study involved the school principal, teachers, and students. The study reveals that respect, acceptance, and appreciation of otherness can be a strategy for growing tolerance among students. And growing the sense of tolerance implies growing inclusive classrooms. In addition, Law ther [36] (2015) found in her study that, as a strategy for promoting inclusion in classrooms, cooperative learning has both social and academic impacts on students, contributing to

increased self-esteem and academic achievement. The inclusive instructional strategies within cooperative learning create opportunities for students to feel a sense of community, where their voices are heard and represented.

METHODOLOGY

Since democracy ensures everyone's participation in a classroom, the core idea of this research was to gauge whether student-centric classroom activities and democratic practices may contribute to establishing an inclusive classroom. In doing so, focus group discussion (FGD) seems to be best suited for this study as it is used mainly to garner an in-depth understanding of participants' discussions, opinions, and perspectives from personal experiences(e.g. [39],[43]). Additionally, FGD provides a deeper understanding of the discussion issue([25],[44]) in which participants are engaged in giving contrasting views, re-evaluating, reconsidering, and justifying their understanding([34],[35]).

The FGD questionnaire revolves around the dispositions presented by the Council of Europe[13], Jacobs & Power[28] and Jónsson & Rodriguez[32] on the ideas of student-centric activities and democratic practices. For instance, the FGD questionnaire included the issue of discussing the impacts and feasibilities of group tasks since these activities uphold the ideas of democratic practices and inclusive education by ensuring the participation of all students in the class(e.g. [1], [47],[48]). Similarly, aspects of cooperation and empathy towards others have been added to the FGD since these practices ensure inclusiveness and democracy as well in the classroom(e.g. [13], [18], [28],[32],[38]).

A total number of 10 students from rural and urban secondary schools in Bangladesh took part in the FGD. The FGD was carried out in Bangla, and was audio recorded, and later transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. Considering the ethical issues relating to the research and maintaining the anonymity of the participants, they have been deidentified in terms of their names and gender. For the ethical issues, the ethical guidelines suggested by the British Educational Research Association (BERA)[10], as well as the ethics checklists introduced by Braun & Clarke [9]have been followed. Since this is a qualitative study, it requires interpretive data analysis, so it followed data transcribing, coding, and interpreting data for the analysis procedure, as suggested by Dörnyei [17]. This study also followed thematic analysis, introduced by Braun & Clarke [9], for data analysis. The data were first classified according to the literature review, as suggested by Cohen et al. [12].

FINDINGS

The data analysis of the study reveals some key practices, e.g., group work, cooperation in learning, embracing diversity and tolerance, respect for otherness, autonomous learning, etc. These practices appear to be not only parts of democratic competencies but also conducive to an inclusive classroom. For instance, the participant students were asked to tell their teachers' teaching practices. Among the participants, *S8* reported that "*They teach dividing us into groups and pairs*". This is a typical response for almost all the participants, which seems to align with what Gomes [23] found in her study. Such group participations possess the notion of democracy, and upholds the ideas of an inclusive classroom as well since group work ensures the participation of all students in a group (e.g. [1], [47], [48]). The analyzed data set also provides a glimpse of the participants' reported roles in accomplishing group tasks. For instance, *S1* reported that, One of us will write, one will give ideas, and one will check books. Again, one has the responsibility to listen to what is being discussed back and forth to get some unique ideas from them. Finally, one or two will go and present it in front of the whole class.

This statement indicates a positive interdependence among the students while accomplishing group tasks, having found an alignment with the study of Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac [18]. Such

interdependence leads them towards another core democratic competency, which is cooperation in learning (e.g. [13], [28],[32]). This type of learning is recognized as an effective strategy for fostering inclusion since it ensures the active participation of students (e.g. [18], [47], [48]). In addition, the participants of this study seem to embrace the diversity in the class [28] by showing tolerance, respect, and openness to other beliefs and views [13]. For instance, *S2* stated that,

If we respect others, we will get respect in return. If we don't respect other people's opinions and make mistakes later on, they might react in the same way. But in this case, it has to be done from the beginning (early age). If it is done suddenly after an age then it will not have that much effect.

For fostering inclusion, students holding such attitudes reported in the statement is very crucial since it reflects a core value of inclusion, which is accepting and embracing diversity in the classroom ([24], [45]). In addition, the participants of this study not only held tolerant and respectful attitudes toward different views but also expressed empathy for inclusion in a subtle way. For instance, *S10* stated that,

Those who are too shy to speak and don't want to speak in public will suffer a lot in class. He will not want to talk anymore. He who tried once, but others did not listen to him, will not have the enthusiasm to speak again.

This statement indicates an empathy towards those who are backward [4] and thus, upholds the sense of inclusion ([38], [53]). Besides that, the data set reveals that such democratic activities as group work and peer learning are beneficial to their learning. For instance, *S1* stated that,

Matters are better understood through self-discussion than textbooks. I understand the problem if I ask my friend next to me it is much easier for me. Because he is my age, I can call him easy. Then it is always remembered.

This statement alludes to another democratic norm, autonomous learning since it involves students learning from their peer learners [37]. This student-centric activity develops democratic attitude and skills by involving learners to help each other in learning (e.g. [13], [28], [32]) but also helps increase inclusion through participation (e.g. [22], [30], [36]). Such interaction also leads the students to acquire social skills including listening and observing to peer learners as well as engaging in dialogues with peers which ensures democratic practices as well as inclusion ([13], [30], [32]). The data set suggests that the participants hold a positive attitude towards these skills. For instance,

…if the whole class does not discuss and decide, the program will not be done. Many will not feel integrated because their opinion is not taken, so they will not care about the program. Moreover, there will be various other problems. So, it is important to discuss it. **[S2]**

If someone says something wrong, we can point it out. For that, you have to listen first. When one says something, others can also learn from listening to it. **[S9]**

These statements appear to reflect the participants' positive attitude towards engaging in dialogue as well as listening and observing others. As the participants stated, they not only listen and observe others' opinions and views with patience and respect but also learn from them. These attitudes appear to uphold students' democratic competencies as well as positiveness towards inclusion [30]. Moreover, they see listening to others' views with patience as beneficial to their real life. For instance, *S4* stated that,

We will not be in school for the rest of our lives. It will still help us that we listen to others. If we practice that in the class, patience will be built in us gradually. And when that patience is built, we will have the patience of listening to others.

Moreover, these practices appear to be positive and fun for students. For instance, *S3* stated that *"it's in a very fun way (to learn). (Learning) alone is boring. But it's fun when everyone talks"*.

In essence, all these findings indicate that the participants practice such democratic practices which might be beneficial in promoting the principles of inclusion in classrooms. However, there are some instances that they uttered some challenges and lacking in this regard. For instance, *S9* stated that,

There are many teachers who come to the class and don't care about the interactions with students. We should also be allowed to speak in class. Teachers should interact with the students, and allow students to speak. Students' problems should be heard and discussed.

This statement indicates the participant's desire and a lack of teacher-student interaction which is considered an important student-centric practice that ensures democratic practices [28]. It indicates a lack of interaction and feedback from the teachers in students' democratic practices, indicating an alignment with the findings of Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac [18]. Such teaching stances may impose a power imbalance since the voices of students remain unheard in the class ([19], [20]) and thus, impede the implementation of a successful inclusive classroom [18].

DISCUSSION

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are based on the ideas of democratic competencies and student-centric learning activities proposed by different forums (e.g. [13], [28], [32]). These ideas come up with democratic competencies and student-centric activities such as cooperative and collaborative learning, group work, peer work, tolerance, accepting diversity, etc. that appear to uphold the principle of inclusion. The data sets indicate that the participants reported their participation in group work which helps foster democratic values through the participation of all students [23]. The data set also indicates the participant students' roles of sharing responsibility that helps improve social collaboration in the group ([18], [52]). Thus, these group work activities lead the students toward forming a positive interdependence that ensures classroom inclusion (e.g. [18], [47], [48]). Such interdependence leads them towards cooperation in learning which in turn ensures both democracy and inclusion in the class through the active participation of all students (e.g. [13],[28],[32],[47],[48]).

Incorporating such cooperation in learning has many benefits. Since it engages students in learning with their peers and endures their ability to work with others, it increases inclusion in the classroom as well as democratic attitudes (e.g. [13], [31], [32],[36]). Moreover, such cooperation engages students to adept the mentality to learn from their peers and help each other [22]. This notion indicates the idea of autonomous learning [37]. This democratic competency is not only beneficial to students' learning outcomes [30] but also increases the inclusive climate of the classroom [36]. Moreover, cooperation through autonomous learning enhances the inclusivity of the classroom by offering students opportunities to support each other in succeeding, fostering an environment where all students feel integrated and equal (e.g. [14], [18], [36]).

In addition, cooperation in learning also enables students to learn social skills like listening to others [30]. This particular skill is not only important as a determiner for inclusive classrooms but also one of the key democratic competencies (e.g. [13],[32],[36]). Similarly, the ability and respect to listen to others are supposed to be a result of their tolerance and ability to accept diversity, two of the key democratic competencies ([13], [32]). These competencies are marked as the necessary conditions for an inclusive classroom [53]. Acceptance of diversity, in particular, has a larger implication since it is necessary for ensuring inclusive classroom, and raising someone as an informed citizen in the democratic society as well ([3], [45]). This ability of tolerance has nowadays become more relevant due to the increasing and intractable problems our society encountering [24], therefore, should be considered with a view to

promoting inclusive culture in the classroom [53]. Gladly, the data set of this study indicates the participants of the study not only practice tolerance and acceptance of diversity but also hold a positive attitude towards these competencies.

However, some instances in the data set indicate some challenges and lack. The participant students reported their desire for teacher-student interaction, which appears to be one of the key student-centric activities [28]. Such desire can be compared to their positive attitude towards democratic competencies. The reported teaching, however, lacks such interactive communication. Thus, it indicates an urge to put light on the teaching activities of Bangladeshi teachers to understand the extent to which they are facilitating democratic competencies and inclusive classrooms. Apart from this, the participants of the study appear to embrace democratic practices, hold a positive attitude towards these, and practice these competencies as well. Thus, it indicates the possibility of promoting classroom inclusion through fostering democratic competencies and student-centric activities in Bangladeshi secondary classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to conceptualize the potential of implementing an inclusive classroom through practicing democratic competencies in the classrooms based on the assumption that both these two notions share an interrelated relationship. Hence, the study explored classroom activities to conceptualize whether these activities are student-centric and promote democratic competencies. The data was retrieved from 10 Bangladeshi secondary students using FGDs. The findings of this study reveal that the participant students hold a positive attitude towards democratic competencies as well as practice. Some of these democratic practices emerged as important indicators of an inclusive classroom. Hence, this study found that democratic competencies and student-centric activities hold the potential to promote inclusion in the classroom to a significant extent. However, the findings of the study reveal that the teachers lack effective teacher-student interaction and feedback despite the desire of the students.

One key implication of the findings is that it is possible to adopt democratic competencies as an effective strategy to ensure an inclusive classroom. Therefore, student-centric learning activities as well as democratic practices should be integrated into the school curriculum so that teachers can initiate more democratic practices and engage students with these to promote inclusion. However, this study acknowledges its limitations. The study is engaged in exploring classroom practices that require investigating both teacher and students' reported perspectives, while, this study only engaged students' perspectives. However, these limitation opens up scopes for further studies considering teachers' perspectives and classroom observations to conceptualize this phenomenon. In addition, more research studies should be conducted in this comparatively less explored area to operationalize the democratic competencies for the Bangladeshi classroom context for an inclusive classroom.

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