

The Impacts of Democratic Classroom on Students' Personal Growth

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Abstract: - *This qualitative study examines the impact of democratic classroom on students' self-growth. By choosing case study as the research design, the interview was conducted on six participants who have experienced the democratic classroom approach in their teaching and learning. Data from the interviews had been analysed using the thematic analysis. There are two major themes that had been drawn from the interview of the participants. The findings of the study show that when students were having the democratic classroom approach in their teaching and learning, they felt appreciated, and their confidence level and sense of belonging were enhanced. Therefore, the study suggests that educators need to know how to develop students' self-growth, which also indicates the betterment of students' well-being during the teaching and learning process.*

Keywords: - *Democratic classroom, Self-growth enhancement, students' well-being.*

1. Introduction

The learning environment in the classroom ought to be one of the important aspects in the students' academic life. It is because, the classroom does not only focus on students gaining knowledge, but it also contributes to students' self-development in the aspect of cognitive, social and moral. Feinberg and Toress (2001) stated that in the classroom, teacher is the person who is responsible in establishing good learning environment including the elements of caring and supporting each other in the classroom community. Basically, there is a huge difference between students-centered and teacher-centered learning environment. In teacher-centered learning, students normally sit still and listen to the lesson given by the teacher in the classroom. Unlike teacher-centered, student-centered environment encourages students to participate in the lesson as a knowledge giver and decision maker which makes the classroom environment lively and active during the teaching and learning process? Thus, students who are exposed to the democratic classroom approach may experience student-centered learning environment where they are welcome to discuss, argue, give opinions on the issues discussed in the

Classroom, which consequently liberates themselves during the lesson in the classroom. When students are encouraged to liberate themselves during the lesson, they become brave and confident, know how to debate with a good manner and it helps in developing their self-growth as well.

John Dewey, a well-known key person in progressive education agreed that educational curriculum ought to emphasize on students' different abilities and interests. Furthermore, when teachers recognize the difference in students' abilities and interests, teacher can establish the classroom environment accordingly where students can obtain essentials skills, for instance cooperating in a harmonious way, learning to trust and respect their classmates, and tolerate disagreements among themselves (Haynes and Chaltain, 2004). Thus, students ought to exhibit what they have learnt in their daily lives.

Students need to experience classroom environment that helps their development, particularly personality development. This can be a reality if they can create a classroom environment where they are engaged

during the teaching and learning process. Apart from this, the educational institution should not be the place where students only receive knowledge, rather it ought to be a place where it is a learning environment that makes students feel accepted and supported to practice their knowledge accordingly.

Since students have diverse abilities, skills and interest which indicates in classroom, students need to know and learn on how to have a proper interaction with each other. This is where they can learn to have a sense of belonging with each other and to develop trust among themselves. They also can learn to enhance their self-growth with the diversity that they have in their classroom. Democratic classroom is a place where they can do these things with their classmates. It is because the students can be active learners and they also are encouraged to decide on their own. Not only that, they are also taught to be responsible of their decision and their own learning. The teacher acts as a facilitator who monitors students' learning activities. This kind of learning environment helps to develop students' personality because students feel they are respected and cared by the classroom community who are their peers and teacher (Lipton & Oakes, 2003). In contrast, the traditional learning environment does not promote students to be active in the classroom where the students are passively listening to the teacher's lesson without any argument or discussion. Therefore, according to Bafile (2005) students love to be given the chance to make their own decisions and to share their own thoughts through discussion in a safe and cooperative classroom environment.

A democratic classroom encourages and gives chance to students to have self-growth. It is because the classroom environment also gives space for the teacher to establish supportive and thoughtful learning environment where students feel safe and comfortable to share their abilities. Students also can show their own creativity freely without any hesitation (Hall & Barrett, 2000; Pryor, 2004). In addition, Fisher (1994) mentioned that in the process of teaching and learning, there ought to be construct on the discussion, cooperation and dialogue. Thus, it

is important for students and teacher to have mutual love, respect and shared responsibility towards each other (Mulji, 2004). It is the responsibility of the teacher to establish the learning environment for student to build their own self esteem through discussion of their own ideas. This is where the students become active learners and help each other in the classroom.

Therefore, classroom ought to be a medium where the students are able to develop a sense of belonging with their own classmates. Students also need to be conscious with the norms of the classroom and feel at ease and comfortable in sharing their own feelings and thoughts. In addition, students also can obtain knowledge in a better way when there are discussions in the classroom. In a democratic classroom, the teacher acts as facilitator to assist student in their learning. Therefore, this kind of learning environment will benefit students a lot in terms of developing their self-growth (Imran, 2006; Bafile, 2005; Abbas, 2002).

2. Research Objectives:

The objective of this paper are as follows:

- To examine how democratic classroom gives impact on Malaysian undergraduate students' self-growth
- To explore to what extend democratic classroom helps Malaysian undergraduate students enhance their confidence level.

3. Methodology

This study employed the qualitative approach and case study as a research design. Yin (2003) claimed that case study approach is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p.16) which is in line with what the researcher really wants to know in depth about the phenomenon in the real context. Six students volunteered to be interviewed by the researcher. These six students experienced was interviewed using the semi-structured interview. All participants were studying for their bachelor's degree in education (Guidance and counseling). The criteria for the selection of the participants was they

experienced the democratic classroom approach in one of their courses, Methods of Teaching Moral Education. The interviews were audio recorded. To ensure the ethical consideration, the participants were briefed about the study and they gave their informed consent to be involved in it. They were also assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. After the interviews, the audio was transcribed. The transcription of the interview was analyzed using thematic analysis.

4. Findings and Discussion

Three themes were generated from the participants' interviews. The themes are 1) feeling appreciated, 2) confidence level enhanced and 3) sense of belonging.

Theme 1. Feeling appreciated

One of the main themes is regarding the impact of a democratic classroom towards their self-growth of feeling appreciated. During the interview, the participants agreed that when they experienced the democratic classroom approach, they felt that they were appreciated. When their classmates listened and accepted their opinions, they felt that they were acknowledged. This makes the students felt appreciated and valued themselves much better. One of the participants commented:

"Ahh...i felt welcomed or in other words like being appreciated." (Elmyra, DU 116).

"Although my point of view might not sound logic for others, but when I talked and being appreciated so much so that it is a huge benefit for me." (Elmyra, DU 118).

Democratic classroom approach did make Elmyra felt herself more valuable. When she spoke her mind during the learning session, and everyone paid attention to her, she felt that her words were being heard and appreciated. This gave her the courage to become a better person in terms of improving her self-growth.

Theme 2: Confidence level enhanced

The other themes that had been obtained is the enhancement of students' confidence level. Most of the participants admitted that their confidence level had been enhanced when they experienced the

democratic classroom in their teaching and learning. They enjoyed it very much when the instructor encouraged them to be active in the classroom, and it made them brave to speak up. One of them said that, the other classroom environment is passive and they did not feel confident to speak up because they were afraid of being wrong. But in the democratic classroom approach, everyone in the classroom was happy to participate because the instructor never said that the students were wrong when they spoke their mind. Instead, the instructor allowed them to comment or discuss the points that other students has raised. They also felt confident because there is no wrong or right when giving their opinions.

As Sarah said in her interview:

"I felt more confidence. (Sarah, DU 78). Because of what? Because the lecturer listened to everyone's views without stopping me and others from speaking up. Therefore, I feel so confident to speak up". (DU 322).

Theme 3: Sense of belonging

The last theme drew from the interview is, having a better sense of belonging among themselves. Democratic classroom approach makes them feel a sense of belonging during their teaching and learning session. They were all satisfied with the instructor who did not play favouritism in the classroom community. Furthermore, students also did not engage in favouritism among themselves.

Abu shared that he felt a sense of belonging in the classroom where everyone's seats are of the same level. As he commented

"The classroom arrangement makes us feel like we are all the same" (Abu, DU 37).

This was supported by Ahmad who felt the same way, and that they were close to each other. His excerpt is as follows:

"The way teacher sat and the way others sat makes me feel like we are close." (Ahmad, DU 101).

Thus, all the participants enjoyed so much by having a good sense of belonging in the classroom through the democratic classroom approach.

From the evidences, it can be said that the learning environment of a democratic classroom approach has helped to enhance students' self-growth because they felt more appreciated their confidence level was also enhanced as they were allowed to express their views in the discussion, and that they have more sense of belonging as they treated each other better in the democratic classroom approach. Kesici (2008) further supported that for a classroom to be a democratic, students ought to be given a chance to express themselves particularly their idea freely. This means that it is important to ensure that the classroom environment is safe for students to be 'free' in their discourse. Being 'free' makes the students feel safe and comfortable to give their opinions. When they can express themselves freely, their self-growth will be enhanced as well.

5. Recommendation

This study recommends that the educator ought to ensure that the learning environment gives impact towards student's development. The development of self-growth is very important as it is closely related with the emotional and spiritual aspects of human being. Therefore, it is important to identify a good teaching approach that will benefit students to grow positively. As democratic classroom is one of the examples of a good teaching approach that allows students to grow positively, thus, the educator may consider that a democratic classroom approach can be applied in the teaching and learning process. Secondly, the study recommends that the educator ought to provide a safe and comfortable learning environment as students will feel comfortable to be active in the classroom, which leads to their self-growth. This could be achieved where the educator demonstrates the good application of democratic classroom the teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to explore how democratic classroom approach gives an impact on Malaysian undergraduate students' self-growth. The findings showed that three themes were found which are feeling appreciated, confidence level enhanced and better sense of belonging. Thus, it is concluded

that the democratic classroom approach helps students to develop their own self-growth.

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