

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENTS IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM: PERCEPTIONS FROM FOUR JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KGATLENG REGION OF BOTSWANA

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Abstract

This study aimed at assessing the extent to which democratic practices are entrenched in the Social Studies classrooms and factors that hinder democratic classroom practices in the teaching of Social Studies in public Junior Secondary Schools in the Kgatleng region of Education in Botswana. A case is made that although democratic education is treasured as a pedagogical approach to education, the reality on the ground is that teachers of Social Studies find it difficult to educate learners through a democratic approach because of daunting challenges such as huge class sizes, lack of resources, linguistic barriers etc. which compel teachers to teach for assessment without nurturing deliberative democracy. Data of this study was gathered from four (n=4) Junior Secondary Schools in the Kgatleng region and the results show that practicing democratic education in Social Studies classrooms is yet to become a reality in Botswana schools.

Keywords: democratic education, Social Studies, exploratory teaching, Kgatleng, reconstructionist paradigm, classroom democracy

1.0 Introduction

The concept of classroom democracy stems from the broader concept of democratic and emancipatory education. Democratic education is a product of pragmatism that suggests that the process of teaching should produce critical thinkers through exploratory teaching than explanatory teaching. It connotes a number of factors that include processes of curriculum design and the actual implementation at school and within the classroom. Apart from the design and curriculum content makeup, democratic education is concerned with the degree to which instructional pedagogy employed by the educator is seen to be empowering and living up to democratic expectations. Direct correlation between education and democracy cannot be disputed. As such, schools should be seen to be promoting democracy from grassroots especially in subject areas such as Social Studies which is mandated to produce proactive and democratically conscious citizens. Davies (1999, quoted in Jotia & Morapedi, 2011, p.13) notes that attempts to democratize schools should embrace strategies such as developing processes of decision-making where students and teachers can constantly come together on the basis of school mission to set rules, code of conduct and any other school governing policy. This could be done through vibrant bodies such as the Student Representative Council (SRC) which would work well in secondary schools but could prove to be a challenge at primary schools where children are still very young to be trusted with authentic critical decision-making regarding leadership selection.

The relationship between education and democracy is premised on the reconstructionist paradigm which regards schools as platforms for participatory democracy. Democratic education entails the quality of education that aims at instilling in the learner the skills and knowledge necessary to function effectively in democratic processes within his/her society. Democratic practices are those that aim at the development of a critical mind and the will to partake in the democratic practices within the learners' communities, the nation and, ultimately, globally. The products of democratic education should therefore develop a strong democratic consciousness and possess the agility to react and challenge the status quo should there be need. Jotia (2010, p. 113) maintains that "in order for education to be deemed effective it has to be seen to be producing democratically conscious citizens".

In education, as Dewey (cited in Portelli, 2008) observes, democracy is more than just a government or political form; instead, it is a way of life. It should not be seen to exist within a particular confinement but should be existing and necessary at every level of human interaction. The extent to which a nation-state can boast of its democratic character needs to be determined by the prevalence of democratic engagements within its social, economic and political institutions. Education should prove its relevance to society for which it is designed by empowering its products with such skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to actively and effectively participate and contribute meaningfully to the development of their socio-economic and political dispositions. As such, democracy in schools is really about the empowerment and emancipation of the learner by nurturing their critical intellectual virtues.

2.0 Botswana's treasure for democracy in education

Botswana is a pluralistic multicultural democratic nation-state. After attaining independence from Britain in 1966, the country prioritized the revamping of the education system. In 1977, Botswana's National Commission on Education (NCE) proposed fundamental principles which would drive the education system and one of these principles was democracy. The rationale behind such an approach was that if Botswana has to develop successfully as a democracy, its education system should be seen to be nurturing democracy in schools in general and within the classroom in particular. Despite the emphasized requirement on educators to employ democratic classroom practices during instruction, democratic education in schools in Botswana is still void and leaves much to be desired. Jotia (2007) opines that there are still instances where learners are not meaningfully involved in the running of schools and that platforms for democratic engagement in school are non-existent. He further laments that most of the methods used in schools are teacher-centred and learners are relegated to being passive recipients of knowledge. The school environment generally, and even management styles, is hostile to the processes and functions of democracy—especially that those in positions of power appear to be more possessed with imposing authority than nurturing spheres that could support the sprouting of a democratic culture. Englund (2000) argues that schools should be centres for deliberative legitimacy where communicative rationality is promoted.

This study therefore examines the extent to which Social Studies teachers employ democratic classroom practices in their engagement with learners. It further interrogates factors that hinder democratic practices in the classrooms. The research sought the perceptions of the Junior Secondary School teachers on the issue of democratic classrooms in their daily classroom encounters with pupils.

The major focus here is on the practice of democratic principles within the classroom setup, looking particularly at the instructional pedagogy, student engagement and freedom of expression as well as the teacher's reaction or response towards learner activities. In order to build better democratic communities, it is important that the link between democracy and education is examined from a practical pragmatic angle. In our pluralistic societies, schools, more than families and churches, should be platforms where issues to do with democracy are acknowledged and critically examined (Green, 1999). The study used Social Studies as a reference point since it is tasked with a vital role of providing citizenship education (Republic of Botswana, 1977). The Social Studies (History, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Civics, etc.) are relevant if taught through critical pedagogy to intellectually empower learners to play a vital role of radically confronting social injustice in society (Deleon, 2010). Education should be used to make it possible for the citizens to realize greater justice by empowering students to become agents of change by engaging in the deliberative democratic process which addresses human rights and people's struggles (Osler, 2016).

3.0 Statement of the problem

The issue of democratic classroom continues to gain momentum among several educational philosophers who cherish democratic education. The emphasis is on the need to turn learning rooms into democratic spaces where learners will attain the skills that will enable them to function within the democratic societies. The problem pursued by this study is the examination of democratic practices within the classrooms in the schools. It has been observed that prevailing classroom practices ultimately translate into democratic disengagements by citizens especially in the socio-political climate of Botswana as evidenced by voter apathy particularly among the youth. Tabulawa (1997, 2009) avers that although learner-centred pedagogy in Botswana schools is officially mandated because of its democratic pretensions, the reality on the ground is that teacher-centred pedagogies reign supreme, thus suppressing learner-centred pedagogy. Freire (2006) refers such an approach to education as oppressive and necrophilic in nature since it suppresses the intellect and consciousness of the learner where they ultimately become 'objects' in the teaching and learning process. Tabulawa (2013, quoted in Jotia and Sithole, 2016) contends further that democratic pedagogies challenge us to deconstruct relationships in the process and move to a situation where teachers and students shift from banking education pedagogical style to more robust and productive learner-centred pedagogies which repel the oppressive and irrelevant technicist approach to issues related to curriculum and pedagogy. Such kind of pedagogical approach is lacking generally in Botswana's education system especially in Social Studies, a subject which should be seen to be pursuing the goal of transformative and emancipatory education that empowers the learner to become a conscious, critical and authentic thinker. Over the years, lack of participation and voter apathy has been a mountain issue in Botswana's democracy for quite some time.

Jotia (2010) contends that despite Botswana's positioning as Africa's shining example of democracy, the relationship between democracy and education in this country leaves much to be desired. The fact that Botswana is a 'proud' democracy raises expectations that her pursuance of democratic education should be more pronounced. Miller (2007) contends that when individuals are bound by limitations, expectations or rules that they had no part in establishing, they cannot be said to live in a democratic environment.

4.0 Theoretical orientation

4.1 Classroom Democracy

This study is informed by the theory of Classroom Democracy as embedded within the theory of Democratic Education. Wilmer (2011) observes that democracy in the classroom has diverse meanings but in his argument, it means creating a learning environment in which students are participants, where all positions are equally respected without necessarily being equally valued, and where the evaluation of varying positions takes place through critical, informed and knowledgeable dialogue. The democratic theory manifests itself within the classroom and or socio-economic and political discourse when the learners/citizens come out of their bunkers and start talking critically in an anti-oppressive democratic space (Gray, 1995; Darder et al., 2009; Duze, 2011).

Wagner (2012) indicates that democratic classroom is the focus on student autonomy, voice and shared decision making within a learning environment. The proponents of this theory such as Green (1999) and Morrison (2008) are of the view that democratic practices within the classroom are the basis for future democratic participation by learners in their adult life. Wagner (2012) further contends that the advantages of a democratic classroom include helping learners to develop as citizens. The democratic theory within the academic milieu promotes critical theories amongst learners to also critique oppressive ideologies and educational practices mired in domination of others which consequently perpetuates injustice (Darder et al., 2009).

Green (1999, p. 4) insists that democracy encourages students to actively participate and play a meaningful role in public life, “questioning, challenging, making real decisions and solving problems collectively.” McHaney (2004) further argues that democratic classrooms allow for shared power, where every voice is heard instead of authority being concentrated in the hands of one person (the teacher). Morrison (2008) acknowledges that democratic classroom foster the development of people who value diversity, who are not only autonomous but are aware of others’ needs and rights, and who are open-minded. Classroom democracy makes people to become conscious of their rights (Dundar, 2012). The democratic theory in education treasures deconstruction of the so-called mainstream ideas and affords the learner the opportunity to rethink ‘reality’ within their own intellectual understanding. Buroway and Holdt (2012) argue that Freire saw education as a process which is supposed to usher in a rational alternative pedagogy through empowerment of the learner rather than it promoting a culture of learner subjugation. As such, this study embraces the theoretical orientation of Classroom Democracy to examine democratic engagements in Social Studies classrooms.

5.0 Significance of the study

It is hoped that the findings of this study would influence policy formulation as well as curriculum design and pedagogical practices in the teaching of Social Studies which has a vital role in promoting a good and democratic citizenry. It is further hoped that this essential study would contribute in promoting democratic practices in the teaching environment and bring about a change of mind-set among the teachers to lean towards the use of learner-centred pedagogies in Social Studies.

6.0 The purpose of the study

Social Studies is supposed to educate for civic participation rather than a totalizing narrative in a coercive and intellectually domesticating curriculum (Deleon, 2010). The purpose of this study therefore is to assess the extent to which pedagogical democratic practices are entrenched within the teaching of Social Studies at Junior Secondary Schools in the Kgatleng region of Botswana. The study is guided by the following objectives. To:

- a) examine the extent to which democratic engagement in the teaching of Social Studies is entrenched in the Kgatleng region of Botswana
- b) Study the degree of influence of democratic practices within Social Studies classrooms on students' academic performance
- c) investigate factors that are a hindrance to effective democratic engagements within Social Studies classrooms.

7.0 Research questions

The following research questions were central to the study:

- a) To what extent is democratic engagement entrenched in the teaching of Social Studies in the Kgatleng region of Botswana?
- b) What is the degree of influence of democratic practices within Social Studies classrooms on students' academic performance?
- c) What factors are hindrances to effective democratic engagements within Social Studies classrooms?

8.0 Understanding democratic education

The concept of democracy in education “is operationally defined as a classroom culture that depicts the students' democratic right to participate actively in making decisions on the teaching/learning process in the classroom without fear or molestation by either teachers or peers, especially as it pertains to rules and regulations in the class” (Duze, 2011, p. 290). He finds the argument that education should be democratic in a democratic state as axiomatic since it should be undisputable for everyone living in a democratic state. Duze affirms that democracy in education is seen as a classroom culture concerned about academic freedom, learner-centred pedagogy and learners' rights. In a democratic education, schools are made democratic by giving the heads of schools, teachers, supportive staff, students and other stakeholders a voice in the running of their institutions. Woods (2016, p.1) observes that democracy seeks to enable people to be co-creators of their social environment and, through this, make the most of their innate capacity to learn and to develop their highest capabilities and ethical sensibilities.

Ben-Porath (2012) observes that the diversity of contemporary democratic societies is a challenge to scholars and educators to develop forms of education that would both recognize the difference and develop a shared foundation for a functioning democracy. Further advancing his argument, he points out

that schools in democratic societies have to respond to the multiplicity of affiliations, preferences, ideologies, languages, values and memberships. In other words, education in a pluralistic democratic nation-state should be seen to be catering for the existent diversity within its society. Sanda (1992), Munzah (2000), Agih and Egumu (2007), all cited in Duze (2011), maintain that teachers' freedom in the classroom is the learners' freedom in learning. They argue that if teachers cannot exercise freedom of teaching, the learners cannot learn freely. If learners cannot be robustly involved in the shaping of their lives in school, chances are they will grow to become passive and docile people in society.

According to Tabulawa (2003), the learner-centred approach regards knowledge as a product of social interaction, a product of social processes and not solely an individual construction. The learner-centered pedagogy embodies the principle of democracy because the learner's academic interests are recognized and given express attention (Duze, 2011; Joubert, 2007; Moswela, 2010). Within that same score, an argument could be advanced that democratic education shares the ideal that within the teaching-learning atmosphere, relations should be such that there is a harmonious social discourse between the students and their counterparts as well as between students and teachers. If democratic education is supposed to sustain democracy, then it has to be democratic itself (Abdi & Richardson, 2008).

9.0 Classrooms as spheres of democracy and freedom

Green (1999, p.14) makes a case that "a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young people to go in search of their own". Classrooms in which learners are accorded the freedom for exploration and discovery, where learners are searchers and developers of knowledge, are spheres of democracy and freedom. Mhlauli (2012) (citing Salia-Bao, 1991), shares that Dewey believed that the most effective and natural education occurs when problem solving was applied in the classroom as it encourages critical thinking. In pursuit of Dewey's principle of democratic education, it was believed that such a method encouraged participation among learners by engaging them in cooperative adventures that would turn the classroom into a microcosm of democracy and thereby allowing the child to acquire skills and values of democracy.

Chatterjee (2005) maintains that in democratic environments, democratic education is an essential component to education at all levels of education and is the foundation to democracy. He describes democratic classrooms as characterized by respect for students by the teachers who in turn earn respect from the students, tolerance by teachers on their students for their differences in all areas such as culture, economic background and learning styles. Democratic classrooms prepare students for engagement in society (Edwards, 2010). There is also nurturing of students by male and female teachers without being overly affectionate or permissive. Although schools in Botswana claim to be pursuing their day to day business within the confines of democratic principles, and further encouraging the democratization of teaching and learning through involvement of the students' interests as well as uninhibited participation in the learning activity, the practical evidence of such claim is lacking on the ground (Jotia, 2007).

10.0 The Social Studies curriculum at Junior Secondary Schools

Social Studies is a core subject within the Junior Certificate curriculum in Botswana. It was first introduced in Botswana in 1982 into the primary school program, and in 1986 it was included into the junior secondary school curriculum as a core subject (Ministry of Education, 2008). The introduction of Social Studies into the national curriculum at both primary and secondary school levels was in response to the 1968 Mombasa Conference in Kenya where African countries agreed to set up the African Social Studies Program (ASSP) now referred to as the African Social Studies and Environmental Studies Program (ASSESP) (Adeyemi, 2008, cited in Mhlauli, 2012). The general essence of introducing Social Studies in African curricula was that it was supposed to contribute towards the development and empowerment of democratically active citizens through the use of critical pedagogy.

According to Ajiboye (2009), Adler and Sim (2008), Ross (2006) and Hahn, (2001), all quoted in Mhlauli (2012), there is consensus in the Social Studies literature that the major goal of the subject is citizenship education. Ajiboye further mentions that it also develops a sense of cultural identity in students in accordance with the national philosophy of *kagisano* (social harmony). Mhlauli (2010) indicates that, the world over, Social Studies has been identified as the subject within the school curriculum that is used as a vehicle for equipping students with the requisite knowledge, skills and values, attitudes and dispositions relevant for producing functional and effective citizens in the socio-economic and political arena. Carr and Thesee (2012) charge that the use of critical pedagogy in teaching of citizens produces a sense of autonomy amongst learners which will in turn prepare them to be conscious and be able to read the world and make critical decisions. Social Studies was therefore introduced to serve that critical role of enhancing critical liberatory thought amongst participants in the democratic project.

11.0 Pedagogical practices in Social Studies: Locating democratic engagement

While the Social Studies curriculum prescribes learner-centred approach as preferred pedagogy, the situation on the ground proves otherwise. Mhlauli (2010) reports a contradiction within this philosophy. She argues that the reality is that teachers believe in learner-centred pedagogy but practice teacher-centred approaches. Learner-centred pedagogy is a democratic teaching-learning pedagogy and an ideal means of achieving democracy in the classroom. Griggs (2010) charges that curricula are now packaged and delivered without any form of student contribution. He queries that education systems treat the student as an object and not as a subject.

Social Studies has a predetermined teaching curriculum with clearly stipulated specific objectives and prescribed period of completion that culminates into a standardized national examination (Ministry of Education, 2008). Botswana's education system is such that the emphasis on teaching and learning is examination oriented. Teachers have to make sure that they teach to complete the syllabi within the prescribed period in preparation for the examinations. At the expense of democratic engagement, teachers basically teach to test.

12.0 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design primarily because the issue being investigated is based on individual perceptions and opinions of students, teachers and school management, and certain arguments needed to be qualified or justified by the participants. It was therefore mainly through a systematic empirical inquiry that this could be achieved. Therefore qualitative research method was found to be most suitable for this research. In-depth interviews, semi-structured questionnaires and observations were employed to gather data. Qualitative research in this regard became effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of the target population (Mark et al., 2005).

13.0 Instruments for data collection

Data collection instruments used in this study included interviews with individual participants, participant observation, official documents analysis and questionnaires. The questionnaire is a convenient way of gathering data in that the researcher may not necessarily need to be there at the time the participants respond to the questions. Taylor & Francis (2004) suggest that questionnaires are advantageous in that a large amount of information can be collected from a large number of people in a short time. Uys and Potgieter (2005) observe that questionnaires are more effective in data gathering in that they limit interviewer bias and are less intrusive than other methods such as face-to-face interview.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) state that interviews are widely used in qualitative research mainly due to their flexible nature, especially if they are less structured. Interviews involve direct or face-to-face encounter with participants and gives them a platform to share their understanding or interpretation of the subject being researched (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Document analysis is a form of qualitative research where documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around the topic of research. It includes, among others, public records that contain official information, mission statements, annual reports, policy manuals, strategic plans and syllabi (Bowen, 2009). In case of this study, documents such as the syllabi, tests, assignments and examination papers, exercise books, lesson plans and academic meeting minutes were reviewed.

Participant-observation is regarded as one way of measuring behaviour that involves watching people, events, situations or phenomena and obtaining information relating to particular aspects of those people, events and situations (Jekayinfa, 2007). Participant-observation technique accords the researcher an opportunity to understand the physical, social, cultural and economic contexts in which study participants live. In this study, observations were made in the Social Studies lessons since Social Studies is the main subject of interest.

14.0 Research site

This was a case study of four (4) Junior Secondary Schools with the pseudonyms of Lefika, Itekeng, Kgakala and Gaetsho in the Kgatlang education region. Pseudonyms were used to protect the integrity of the schools as well as for ethical reasons since some of the findings could raise alarm to the

powers that be—a situation which could consequently jeopardize the professions of the concerned educators/administrators as well as students. The region is one of the smallest regions with about 80% of its schools found in the capital, Mochudi. This gives the region an advantage in terms of teachers collaborating on subject matters as well as engaging education officers within the region for support. At 44 Km, this region is also very close to the capital city, Gaborone.

15.0 Sampling techniques

Purposive or judgmental sampling was used in the selection of unique sites and participants because of their qualities pertaining to the study. The Social Studies teachers and senior school management officials were deemed relevant in the study since they are on the ground and have first-hand information regarding challenges on democratic classroom practices in the classroom.

16.0 The study population

In general, the study population is that group, usually of people, about whom the researcher wants to gain information and make conclusions from (Babbie, 2007). For the purpose of this study the population comprised of the following.

- a) Junior Secondary School teachers from four schools in the Kgatleng region of education. Given that the largest schools (eighteen stream schools) have a maximum of four (N=4) Social Studies teachers, a total of twelve (N=12) teachers were involved in this study with three (N=3) Social Studies teachers participating per school.
- b) Four (N=4) members of the school management team per school, three of which were not classroom practitioners and one being a Senior Teacher for Humanities and also a classroom (subject) teacher.
- c) Practicing teachers who have practical classroom experience and directly affected by the situation on the ground.

The three members of the school management were deemed important as supervisors to give more light on the challenges experienced by their supervisees.

17.0 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research entails the minimization of harm to participants or any actions that could compromise their dignity in one way or the other. In a sense, the researcher has to explicitly respect and consider the needs and concerns of those being studied so that the appropriate oversight for the conduct of research takes place, and that the basis for trust is established between the researchers and the study participants (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). In this study, a communiqué was given to the participants outlining the essence of the study as well as explaining that they had the right to choose to participate or

refuse to embark on the study. The participants' consent was sought and they were informed that they were under no obligation to divulge any information outside their intellectual comfort zone.

18.0 Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings and analysis of the study. These are findings from interviews, participant-observations and document analysis—in particular learners' exercise books and lesson plans—carried out among the teachers.

18.1 Teachers' understanding of the concept of democratic classrooms

When the interviewees were asked to state what they understood about democratic classrooms, all the sixteen (N=16) participants gave common descriptions such as allowing the learners the freedom to talk and participate in class, or where students are given chance to participate in learning and allowed to express their own views or allowed to express their point of view. General responses from the fourteen (N=14) participants centred on democratic classrooms as a way of giving learners opportunity to participate in class and freedom to express their views. In addition to the emphasis on allowing students to participate in class, one participant added the dimension that students should be involved in decision making.

A member of the Senior Management Team (SMT) of Itekeng Junior Secondary School (JSS) declared that she was not quite certain about what democratic classroom entailed but believed that it is about the ability of teachers to understand that their presence in class is for the benefit of learners and whatever takes place there should be learner-centred. The majority of participants showed a fairly good understanding of what democratic classrooms entail. This became evident during discussions with definitions such as giving learners the opportunity to participate during learning activities, giving them the chance to explore concepts, being able to participate and being allowed to freely express their views being fairly common.

This is in consonance with Harber and Mncube (2012) who aver that democratic classroom entail variety in teaching and learning methods where learners are actively engaged in the learning processes. It is an approach where learners are active participants in the learning process and not meek recipients of ready-made knowledge from the teacher (Tabulawa, 2003).

The study further revealed that although teachers are aware of the importance of democratic classrooms and are able to identify various ways of ensuring prevalence of democracy in the classroom, they rarely use this approach. In instances where they attempt to employ some democratic techniques such as cooperative group discussions and presentations, these are not adequately exploited and fall short of being effective. The general practice in the schools is the mass teaching technique, also known as the conference address approach or the processing of students en masse, where learners are dealt with as a single collective (Everhart (1983), quoted in Tabulawa, 1998). According to Feldman (cited in Jotia, 2007), democratic educators need to find ways of assisting learners to develop democratic understanding such as giving learners control in the learning that involves challenging them to think critically.

18.2 *The impact of Democratic Classrooms on student learning*

When asked if they think democratic classrooms are effective in facilitating learning, all participants (both teachers and Senior Management Team (SMT) members) concurred. They stated that a democratic classroom environment gives learners the opportunity to express their views, helps them explore information on their own and develop the learners' research skills and endows them with confidence to speak.

Participants also pointed out the challenges they encounter which hinder efforts to employ democratic approach during classroom engagements. A participant from Lefika JSS said:

Thata, kana ga gontse jalo bana ba kgona go researcher ba ipatlela information (very much so, if it is like that learners are able to research and find information on their own). They can research and *ga gontse jalo bana* they learn how to express their views (They can research, and through the democratic approach, the kids learn how to express their views).

A member of the Senior Management Team (SMT) at Radikgomo JSS said:

Yes the approach is effective, it can be effective in a way, but the problem is the calibre of students we have. They tend to be too dependent on the teachers... they are mostly academically challenged and become too dependent on what the teachers offer.

Participants generally indicated that democracy in the classroom is an effective way of facilitating learning. They explained that democratic classrooms are an effective way of developing confidence and communication skills in the learners. They further stated that students learn better through active interaction with each other and with the teacher.

However, all school Deputies interviewed felt that teachers were not using principles of democratic classrooms. This was also indicated by other respondents.

During observations, it became clear that teachers do not adhere to principles of democratic classroom; they dominate the learning activities during instruction. The most prevalent technique they use is the question-and-answer and group discussions. Where group discussions are used, they are either too many or too big to enable effective discussion/learning.

Social Studies teachers who participated in this research strongly believe that democratic classrooms are effective in the process of teaching and learning and that it is the best way to enhance pupil performance and promote good classroom behaviour. Chatterjee (2005) indicates that, in democratic classrooms, students are taught to use the skills which contribute to the classroom's level of mutual respect and tolerance. Democratic classroom practices are on their own a measure of maintaining discipline and desirable behaviour. Tafa (2002) opines that many so-called discipline problems are partly a result of lack of variation of learning styles and in particular the predominance of authoritarian teaching methods.

Harber & Mncube (2012) maintain that genuine education cannot take place through directing and controlling what pupils think but rather through involvement in a learning environment where skills, values and behaviour of democracy can be learnt through participation in cooperative deliberations, shared enquiry and collective decision making. Jotia (2007, p. 116) charges that “denying students’ democratic participation in schools affects their active and effective citizenship.”

18.3 Learners’ reaction towards democratic practices in the classrooms

When asked about students’ reaction towards democratic classrooms, all the participants expressed that most learners like it and are normally enthusiastic when given the opportunity to participate. Some participants said that even the academically challenged learners make an effort as they interact with their colleagues. One participant indicated that learners like it very much but warned that there is need for good classroom management because learners can sometimes abuse such opportunity.

During observations in all the classes where pupils were given group tasks to work on their own, there was some obvious enthusiasm on the part of the learners to be practically engaged. Although not all the learners participated during discussions, there was life in the discussion groups regardless. Some learners within the groups were not significantly participating and remained quiet most of the time. This was observed in all the four schools and in all the cases there was no apparent effort from either the teacher or student colleagues to encourage the quiet students to participate. As a result they were marginalised/left out during these activities. During class observation for one participant at Gaetsho JSS, the teacher indicated that she was aware that some learners were not participating. Holding her mouth, she said:

Mm, I’m aware gore (that) they were not participating. Bana ba teng baa palelwa tota and le ga ore wa ba leka go tshwana fela. (These children are really academically challenged and no matter how much you try it just doesn’t help). Trying to get them involved can’t work really because it will delay other members of the group. We do not have enough time since we are focusing on finishing the syllabus so that they can be ready for examinations.

So some of the students were basically left out during group discussions and such an approach to teaching is at variance with democratic rules of engagement in the classroom.

18.4 The pragmatic implementation of democratic classrooms by Social Studies teachers: challenges

This study has established that there is very little practice of democratic classroom among the Social Studies teachers in the selected Junior Secondary Schools. Teaching in the classrooms is still didactic and authoritarian (Freire, 2006). The sitting arrangement in the classroom is also the traditional one with the teachers standing upfront and children in their usual rows facing the teacher. The arrangement changes temporarily if learners work in groups. Phorano (1989) posits that this sitting arrangement on its own is undemocratic as it positions the teacher as a superior and learners as inferiors. He contends that this defeats the desired democratic nature of a classroom.

The participants were asked to explain if it was easy to exercise democracy during engagement with learners and whether the Social Studies curriculum, given the nature of the syllabus, promotes

democratic practices in the classroom. The participants indicated that classroom democracy was impeded by several factors such as lack of support resources like core textbooks and functional school libraries, the latter of which makes it difficult to assign learners group or individual assignments to research on their own. They also cited lack of subject base rooms, English as a communication barrier, poor infrastructure as well as the calibre of learners which they regarded as poor.

Teachers also talked of large teacher-pupil ratio of about 1:40 per class on average which they said it was too big even for classrooms and was a constraint on activities like group work and presentations due to inadequate space. They indicated that they are forced to put many learners in one group for class discussions, a situation which affects the quality of discussions as it makes it difficult to give each learner an opportunity to take part. Participants complained that the Social Studies syllabus was too congested, containing thirty-eight (n=38) topics and one hundred and seventy-six (n=176) specific objectives of which one hundred and thirty-two (n=132) of the specific objectives are on application. This makes it difficult to finish the syllabus on time. The focus is on teaching for tests and examinations, and teachers resort to lecture technique as it helps them to make progress faster.

Participants further stated that the national examinations are based on the syllabus and not on whether the teacher employed democratic exercise with the learners; and therefore it is risky for them not to finish the syllabus. On this issue, a participant from Kgakala JSS said:

Heish, no! Using democratic classroom techniques is not easy. There are a number of things that make it difficult for me to employ democratic practices when teaching. Jaaka (like) issue of resources. We have serious shortage of text books. Library ya rona le yone ga se library ke mathata fela. (Our library also is mal-functional and it is a real problem). Bana le bonne ba tladiwa mo diklaseng and tichara a le mongwe o ruta so many classes. (There are too many pupils per class and one teacher is also required to take many classes).

Some participants said the use of English as a medium of instruction is a serious barrier to democratic learning in the school set up. They indicated that some learners, particularly the academically challenged ones, are not able to fully participate in class activities because of language problem, and they end up frustrated when they are required or expected to take part. Some of the participants said that Botswana's education system itself is undemocratic and this impacts negatively on democratic classrooms. The use of English as the sole medium of instruction over mother tongue was cited as an example, and a congested syllabus that is rigidly taught at a pace that is only suitable to high fliers.

The greatest challenge facing the democratic classroom approach, however, is the side-lining of teachers in curriculum planning. According to Maruatona (quoted in Tabulawa, 1998), The Curriculum Development Division in the Ministry of Education & Skills Development is responsible for developing the curriculum and teaching techniques. It does this with very little or no input at all from teachers. Teachers are only expected to receive the curriculum as it is and implement as per instruction. This 'top down' or 'centre-periphery' model disregards the role of other organs of the system and in the process teachers either resist the changes or disown the curriculum because it is non-representative to them.

19.0 Conclusion

This research sought to assess the extent to which democratic practices are entrenched within the teaching of Social Studies in government schools and to further investigate factors hindering democratic practices in the classrooms. This study was influenced by the pragmatist idea of democratic education in which there is more emphasis on freedom of learning, exploratory or problem posing type of education that aims at developing critical thinking skills and democratically effective citizens.

The study confirms that there is an insignificant practice of classroom democracy in the teaching of Social Studies within the Junior Secondary public schools in Botswana. Despite the fact that Social Studies teachers have shown good understanding of what democratic classrooms entail, in all the four schools, effort to employ democratic practices is minimal and most of the teachers engaged the learners through traditional knowledge-transmission method. Such a scenario is not a healthy indication if at all schools are supposed to produce active, vibrant, critical and democratic thinkers. Democratic thinkers cannot emerge from vacuum-schools since platforms for civic engagement should nourish the flourishing of democracy by advancing democratic principles within pedagogy.

A number of factors hindering effective democratic practices in the Social Studies classroom were established. They include large teacher-pupil ratio of about 1:40 per class or 1:240 per teacher per School, insufficient learning and teaching resources, a voluminous Social Studies syllabus of thirty-eight (n=38) topics and One hundred and seventy-six (n=176) specific objectives of which one hundred and thirty-two (n=132) of the specific objectives are on application, language barrier due to a number of learners struggling to comprehend Social Studies concepts in English and thus restricting their ability to effectively partake in participatory learning activities.

The teaching and learning environment in terms of classroom accommodation, furniture, including notice boards, is not conducive for effective democratic learning. School libraries in all these schools are not effectively maintained. Library personnel are only one full time subject teacher per school, and they are also inadequately trained. The findings of this research send a disturbing signal that democratic education remains a far-fetched dream in Botswana's Social Studies classrooms, at least at the Junior Secondary Schools selected for this study. There is need for paradigm shift in the manner in which Social Studies is taught if at all it is to raise critical consciousness in the learners so that they could positively and proactively contribute towards finding a solution to contemporary socio-economic and political challenges in the country.

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