Classroom Climate Supporting Civic Participation: A Case Study from Sultanate of Oman

Badar Al kharusi and Bill Atweh

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Badar Al kharusi, Curtin University, Australia
Bill Atweh, Curtin University, Australia

Abstract: Classroom culture and interactions are considered to be important factors for developing citizenship in young people. This paper examines the classroom climate and practices at grade 10 in four Omani schools in relation to their practices that might enhance or inhibit civic participation. Data was collected using observations, semi-structure interviews with teachers and focus groups with students. The findings identified some positive practices that might develop civic participation in the students along the aspirations of the Basic Education policies in the country. However, the data pointed out that various challenges remain before classes become more democratic in their processes and more open to issues and concerns in the wider society. Issues and events outside the classroom were either dealt with at a surface level or totally avoided.

Keywords: Civic Participation, Classroom Climate, Citizenship Education, Oman

F**OR MANY EDUCATION** systems around the world, a primary aim of education is to increase the participation of students in their civic society (Hyman, 2002; Johnson, Johnson-Pynn & Pynn, 2007; Keer, 1999; Tutiaux-Guillon, 2002). In particular, enhancing participation at the national and international level is one of the main goals of the United Nation's decade for human rights education (United Nation, 1997). Here we argue that this participation goes beyond participating in employment and the ability to manage financial transactions to the capacity to understanding how their society functions and developing agency to critically contribute to decision making processes in all aspects of their lives. However, there is growing international concern about the steady increase in students' disengagement both from education and from working towards the general good in society. Many studies show that an unwillingness to participate in public life is a common phenomenon with many young people (Planty, Bozick & Regnier, 2006; Fjeldstad, Mikkelsen, 2003; Haste & Hogan, 2006).

This paper investigates the role of schools in developing civic participation in the Sultanate of Oman where civic participation is a main focus of the recent educational reform plan, Basic Education[1], introduced in 1998 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2004). In particular, this research explores the classroom climate in four Basic Education schools to identify practices that enhance or limit the potential of their students' civic participation.

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[1] Basic Education schools and educational reform plan are terms which will be used interchangeably to reflect same thing.

COMMON GROUND

Schools and Civic Participation

In the educational literature, the concept of civic participation has been used to reflect a range of different understandings. For instance, Adler and Goggin (2005) examine several definitions of this concept and suggest that civic participation "describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (p. 241). Youniss et al., (2002) state that this construct is multifaceted and may include "knowledge of government structure and functions; attitudes towards proper political behaviour; and behaviour itself, such as voting, commitment to society and, of late, a host of actions that comprise participation in civil society" (p. 124). For other authors (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Niemi, Hepburn & Chapman, 2000), civic participation may be demonstrated by students' willingness to vote in their school council elections or their disposition towards different features of civic engagements in their society, such as raising donations and volunteering for social action. Although there is no essential understanding regarding civic participation, one can identify main competencies that the education system can develop with respect to developing civic participation in students. Kirlin (2010, p. 6) identifies knowledge, skills, and disposition as the "building blocks for engaged citizens".

Schools have an important responsibility to provide a constructive learning environment to enable students to develop positive experiences and attitudes towards participating in different aspects of civic life. In a previous context, Al kharusi and Atweh (2008) suggest that formal curriculum, co-curricular activities, and classroom climate are three main school spaces in which educators can develop students' civic participation. While civics courses, such as Social Sciences and Life Skills, are perhaps main subjects in supporting students' civic development, developing civic participation should take a cross-disciplinary approach (Huddleston & Kerr, 2006). Co-curriculum activities are also identified to be important spaces for civic participation development. Several authors have pointed out the important role of activities such as student government, academic clubs, and sports in enabling students to participate in activities for the common good (Billig, 2000; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995). Finally, classroom climate, the main focus of this paper, is a critical component of the school's effort for civic participation development.

Constructing and maintaining a positive learning environment at the classroom level is key approach to developing civic participation within a learners' community (Campbell, 2005; Homana, Barber & Torney-Purta, 2005). Students should enjoy an open and civically supportive learning climate. A supportive civic classroom is where students: experience openness towards community issues, feel free and safe to express ideas, enjoy engagement in meaningful discussions, are given the opportunity to argue and comment on various public affairs, learn to listen and respect others opinions, discuss controversial issues and current affairs from both local and global perspectives, learn constructive and critical thinking, and take an active role in group work and classroom discussions (Akhtar, 2008, Whiteley, 2005). Homana, Barber and Torney-Purta (2005, p. 1) suggest that classroom climate is an "often neglected dimension of civic learning". They suggest that the classroom should be constructed in a way where teachers and students work collectively for a supportive civic environment. Narvaez (2010) stresses the importance of a hidden curriculum in the classroom for developing good citizens. The writer explained the sensitive role teachers would play for creating a positive civic classroom. For her, supportive teacher are those who:

promote peer interaction within a context that emphasizes cooperation and equality. They allow conflict to be openly and effectively resolved. They give students a meaningful voice in controlling their environment. They enlarge young people's perspectives by inviting them to consider the perspectives of others and the good of the group. (p. 669)

The role of the classroom climate in developing active citizenry was investigated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) civic study. The findings showed a positive association between an open classroom climate and civic development (Schulz et.al, 2010). Other studies indicated that an open and democratic classroom is important to increase students' political knowledge, commitment to political participation, tolerance, attitudes towards democracy and civic obligations, trust and development of democratic skills, and involvement in the volunteer work (Andolina et al., 2003; Ehman, 1980; Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Flanagan et.al, 2007; Galston, 2001; Hahn, 1998).

Educational Reform in Oman and Civic Participation

The educational system in Oman has undergone significant changes over the past four decades. In 1970, only 909 students had the chance to study in the only three schools across the whole country (MoE, 2008). Since that time, the educational system has expanded dramatically as a consequence of political developments pursuing openness of the country to the outside world, as well as a significant increase in government investment in educational infrastructure. According to the latest educational statistics, the number of schools has increased to 1047 providing education for more than half a million students (Ministry of National Economy, 2011).

In addition to this massive quantitative development, more recent endeavours targeted curricular reform. In 1998, Oman started an ambitious and wide ranging plan to improve the quality of education through the design and implementation of Basic Education, which was a national education initiative with the purpose of to improving the different elements of the educational system such as the curriculum, extracurricular activities, teaching technology, assessment strategies, and teacher development (MoE, 2001; MoE; 2006) This reform was a major part of a wider plan called *Vision for Oman's Economy – Oman 2020* designed for enabling the country's economic and social development (MoE, 2006).

The model of Basic Education is based on the *Philosophy and Objectives of Education in the Sultanate of Oman* document (MoE, 2004) which stipulates that educational institutions in Oman should aim to develop a positive attitude among students towards active participation in public and social life, and to participate actively in global issues, such as protecting the environment and maintaining peace in the global community.

In addition, *The Theoretical Framework of Basic Education* states that the new form of education places a very high value on enhancing the development of many abilities in learners which relate to their civic participation, including:

• life skills through communication;
• self learning;
• scientific and critical thinking;

- the ability to understand contemporary science and technology, as well the ability to adapt to innovation;
- the ability to deal rationally with problems of the present era: conservation and wise exploitation of the environment; and
- the ability to internalize the values and ethics of a mastery of work, production, sensible use of leisure time, and participation in civil life (MoE, 2001, p. 9).

Methodology

The data discussed in this paper is a part of a larger study investigating the whole school approach for developing civic participation with Omani students. The focus here is only on the role of the classroom climate. Data for this analysis came from three sources. First, 34 classroom observations were conducted in four schools by the first author in a selection of Grade 10 classes in a variety of subjects including Social Sciences, Life Skills, Mathematics, English, Science and Religious Education. Secondly, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers on the observed classes and, finally, six focus groups were conducted with groups of students from these same classes.

The classroom observations focused on teachers' practices and the overall learning climate inside classrooms such as teaching techniques, openness and communication styles between teacher and students and among the students themselves. In the interviews, teachers were asked about their experiences and views on civic participation opportunities in their schools, the difficulties that might restrict their attempts for their development among learners, and their strategies to actively involve students in both the formal and informal curriculum. The focus groups with students asked about their experiences and expectations about the learning environment they enjoy in classrooms, issues such as their participation in the decision making process, openness towards issues of community interest, and freedom to express opinions. Data analysis and interpretation were achieved by following systematic steps (Creswell, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

As a result of the data analysis and the review of the literature, three themes regarding classroom climate and civic participation will be discussed: a climate of collaboration, a climate of mutual respect, and a climate of openness to social issues.

A Climate of Collaboration

Teachers in Oman face certain limitations to their freedom to manage the curriculum in that for every subject there is a single mandated textbook that dictates the content and activities that students should be engaged in. However, other aspects of their teaching, such as order of topics, teaching methods, assigned homework, and form and content of assessment are place of teachers' choice.

The majority of the classes observed were teacher dominated – where the whole group of students were involved in the same assigned activity. In all observed classes, teachers commenced the lesson by a short introduction about the topic under discussions which was identified clearly and prominently on the board. The type of activities conducted in the class,

their sequencing and content were mostly predetermined by the teachers. Decision making in class was markedly top-down.

Perhaps an extreme example of this top-down management style was observed in one school in the social studies class. This class was dominated by teachers' explanations and elaboration on the topic with just a few occasions in which students were engaged in answering questions. Students' disengagement was obvious in this classroom. There were only few students in this class who were actually paying any real attention to teachers' instructions and explanations. The rest of the students were reading from the textbook, talking to other students or seemed to be daydreaming. Students were uncomfortable about the strict learning environment used by this teacher. When the bell rang announcing the end of one lesson, a student at the back was heard mumbling '*thank God*' to express his relief.

In another class, when the teacher was assigning the homework students requested a delay in the due date since the they had a considerable workload due the following day. The teacher in that particular class was very dismissive of the students request and was not willing to enter in a negotiation with the students.

In certain cases where organisational structures allowed for students input to the classroom management, such participation was somewhat curtailed. In many Omani schools, each class has an elected Classroom Council designed to allow students to share their ideas, concerns and suggestions to the homeroom teacher of school administration. While some students indicated that this Council has helped them to address some problems they experienced inside the classroom, most expressed a concern that this representative body is practically useless and often teachers' support is tokenistic. In their turn, some teachers acknowledged the potential of such a structure to encourage students' participation, but that the school administration support is lacking at times.

In allowing student participation in decision making, teachers often face a dilemma between duty of care and sharing their responsibility with the students. Student participation in classroom management demands a certain level of risk taking and trust of the students. Some teachers feared that students were not responsible enough when it comes to take part in the classroom management. Such a lack of trust in the students' ability to make right decisions questions teachers real commitment to developing a participatory environment at the classroom level. Proper implementation of opportunities such as a Classroom Council should play a vital role in developing values of belonging and partnership and would create a sense of harmony and collaboration. Undoubtedly, such a space can develop in students a democratic means of expressing concerns which need significantly developed negotiations skills. Nonetheless, overall, the finding of this study showed that such a commitment to enhancing a culture of student participation in classroom decision making was almost absent in schools visited.

A Climate of Mutual Respect

As expected, the interactions between the teachers and students in the four schools visited revealed diversity in the overall solidarity and respect between the participants.

In some observed classes, there were noted elements of positive interactions and a sense of respect between teachers and students. Some teachers exhibited interactions that expressed a sense of closeness and a very positive relationship with their students. For example, some teachers developed a habit of often referring to students by their first names and were generous

with positive comments on students' actions or contribution in the classroom. Also, some teachers provided regular opportunities for students to answer questions or to take part in discussion. In turn, most students appeared to be positive in supporting teachers' effort to build sense of respect in their classroom. Their interactions with their teachers and peers were generally polite, friendly and supportive.

However, these generally positive interactions between the teachers and students varied between schools. Some schools stood out as particularly successful in developing positive and effective interactions and relationships within the classrooms. Such positive relationships were observed in all classes in these schools. Other schools seemed to be somewhat less successful. Their classes were a little more chaotic and disordered. In a focus group interview at one such school, the students were asked if they enjoyed the learning atmosphere in their class. They replied:

> Male Student (MS) 1: Look I am not sure, you know some teachers are very tough and do not show respect to students. We feel bored because teachers have only one way of teaching and, believe me, students sometimes go to sleep in class.
> MS2: Some teachers are quite good but most teachers who teach us are harsh.
> MS3: Sometimes we need to complain about things we don't like, but we know no one would listen to us.
> MS4: That's right we want to find out why other schools have more fun than us. Why they have a shorter studying day than us and why the break time here is shorter?

It is worthwhile mentioning here that in this particular school the rate of absenteeism was observably high. In all classes observed in this school there were five to seven absent students.

In all other schools, this sense of mutual respect and collaboration extended to students' interactions with each other. They were mostly helping each other to achieve what their teachers asked them to do. When teachers asked them to work as groups, they moved their tables promptly and divided the responsibilities among themselves. When students disagreed with each other's points-of-view, they did so with total respect never putting down each other by using terms such as 'agree' or 'disagree'. Such language was also evident in the focus groups recorded with the students.

A Climate of Openness to Social Issues

Open classroom discussion of different aspects of current affairs and interest for the local or global community enhances the development of civic participation of the students (Torney-Purta & Richardson, 2003). Classroom observations, interviews and focus groups provided some evidence that students in these schools were accustomed to a level of openness towards public affairs. Some teachers indicated that such considerations of local and global current events were common practices in many classes. There was also evidence that students had the chance to talk about some social and political issues in class. Nevertheless, this observation was not uniform across all schools and teachers. Further, not all such considerations were at the same level of depth.

Important local issues, including the urgent problem facing Oman of road fatalities due to motor vehicle accidents, the rapid rate of inflation, and the limited number of government scholarships at higher educational institutions are examples of topics discussed in some

classes. At the global level, issues of global warming, desertification and the shrinking of fertile land, natural disasters occurring in different countries, poverty, the global financial crisis, and health problems such as AIDS and obesity are examples of issues discussed in various classes.

Also, there was some evidence suggesting that the researched classrooms were open to discussions of some political issues. The structure and role of different government bodies, the legislation system, the constitution of the state, Majlis Alshura[2], the war in Iraq, conflict in the Middle East and the role of United Nations in promoting peace in the world were ex-amples given of topics the students have considered.

While it was very interesting to see that some teachers have employed issues from the real world and outside the life of the school to make learning experience more relevant to the students, there are some teachers who did not show interest or expertise in dealing with such topics. Some expressed doubt about the relevance of such discussion to the school curriculum and to the relevance to their subject. Few students indicated that such consideration of social and political issues were not frequent enough. Commenting on such activities, one group of girls reported:

> Female Student (FS) 1: It is only sometimes that teachers allowed us to comment about some of society's issues.
> FS2: They only ask one or two students to tell what they know and then move again to the main topic.
> FS3: Some issues [discussed] are not even interesting for us.
> Researcher: What kind of issues might you be interested in?
> FS3: We want to talk in depth about the Majlis Alshura. Is it really doing well?
> FS4: Yes also why many of the basic services in Muscat[3] are not fully restored yet [referring to the Gono hurricane which hit Muscat in June 2007].

In one occasion, female students from one school were interested in expanding the discussion started by one of their colleagues about the effectiveness of the Majlis Alshura; however, the Life Skills' teacher promptly and decisively stopped the conversation by saying "we have limited time, and we should move to another task" to the dismay of three students who were eager to contribute their views.

Arguably, teachers dealing with current affairs and discussion of sensitive issues feel a certain reluctance and try to avoid taking risks when dealing with sensitive issues when they may be seen as taking sides on issues and may be interpreted as imposing their views on the students. Hence, even though sensitive issues are raised, often they remain abstract and surface discussions.

In particular, there was some reluctance in some teachers to deal with controversial issues in their classes. The Science teacher stated that he uses this approach from time to time es-pecially when he wants to raise students' awareness about environmental issues and when trying to deal with some behaviour problems among young adults such as smoking and drug use. From their perspective, most students reported that such learning experiences were very limited in their classrooms. Some of them stated clearly that they wished to participate in

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[2] Equivalent to the Parliament in some countries
[3] The capital city

such practices at their classes. When a group of female students were asked if they enjoyed debating controversial issues, one replied:

> Controversial issues are very limited in the classroom, and really we would enjoy having such experience more in the future. The main thing our teachers are care about is memorizing stuff.

Teachers were also aware of this limitation of use of controversial issues in their classes. One teacher interviewed gave the following reason:

> I think teachers need to be trained more in order to introduce controversial issues in classes' properly. You know it is not an easy teaching skill if teachers going to use it as it should be used.

Conclusion

This paper explored the characteristic of classroom climate in relation to civic participation at four schools adopting the Basic Education reform in the Sultanate of Oman. The findings identified some existing positive practices within these schools that might develop civic participation in the students in line with the aspirations of the Basic Education policies in the country. Many teachers in these schools have been quite successful in developing friendly and mutually respectful relationships with their students. There were some attempts to discuss issues from the social life of the students that have the potential of increasing their awareness of issues from their local and global community. Further, classrooms contain structures that have great potential in developing spaces for students to participate in classroom and school management.

However, the data pointed out that various challenges remain before classes become more democratic in their processes and more open to issues and concerns in the wider society. Issues and events outside the classroom were either dealt with at a surface level or totally avoided.

Findings of this study showed that classroom climate in the investigated schools has a long way to go before it becomes an effective space for the development of civic participation. There is a need to increase student participation in the decision making process in their classes. More importantly, the Classroom Council as an avenue for students' involvement in their classroom management needs better consideration in terms of quality and effectiveness of its implementation. While in principle this Council can promote a democratic culture in the Basic Education classes, the finding have shown that in practice its function remains at the surface level. Similarly, openness towards issues of the local and global community is an important aspect in the effort of supporting the civic mission of schools. While the findings indicated that some teachers are keen to link students to the real world outside classroom, more in-depth opportunities for debate regarding various local and global concerns may be needed to strength the ability of classrooms to promote genuine and authentic civic participation.

While Basic Education schools policies acknowledge the important role of schools in civic participation development, skilled teachers are key elements to put any theory into practice. Widening teachers' ability to create constructive learning environments inside

classroom and within the school is an important factor to enhance civic participation among students. Teachers skills need to be developed in order to support students' civic development (Patric, 2002; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004; Vontz, Metcalf & Patrick, 2000). For this reasons, professional development programs should be planned to support teachers' capacity to construct a democratic and meaningfully open learning environment. Teachers' capacity to employ more engaging and effective teaching methods in order to enhance learners' interactions and engagement in the classroom needs further development in order to achieve the aim of Basic Education reforms to achieve more civic participation in the Omani students.

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About the Authors

Badar Al kharusi
Badar Al kharusi is a PhD student at Curtin University, Australia. He holds a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education from Sultan Qaboos University. For over ten years he worked in Oman, as a teacher and supervisor. He served as Deputy Director of the Technical Office for Studies and Development at the Ministry of Education, Oman. His research interests focus on educational reform and on issues related to the theory and practice of citizenship education.

Assoc. Prof. Bill Atweh
Bill Atweh is an associate professor at Curtin University. He obtained his PhD from the University of Wisconsin, USA. His research interests relate to sociocultural aspects of mathematics education, globalisation and the use of action research. More recently he has done some writing and research on the Socially Response-able Mathematics Education, a project involving the use of mathematics to increase democratic participation of students.

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BOOK The International Journal of the Book Website: www.Book-Journal.com	**CLIMATE CHANGE** The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses Website: www.Climate-Journal.com
CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT The International Journal of the Constructed Environment Website: www.ConstructedEnvironment.com/journal	**DESIGN** Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal Website: www.Design-Journal.com
DIVERSITY The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations Website: www.Diversity-Journal.com	**FOOD** Food Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal Website: http://Food-Studies.com/journal/
GLOBAL STUDIES The Global Studies Journal Website: www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com	**HEALTH** The International Journal of Health, Wellness and Society Website: www.HealthandSociety.com/journal
HUMANITIES The International Journal of the Humanities Website: www.Humanities-Journal.com	**IMAGE** The International Journal of the Image Website: www.OntheImage.com/journal
LEARNING The International Journal of Learning. Website: www.Learning-Journal.com	**MANAGEMENT** The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: www.Management-Journal.com
MUSEUM The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: www.Museum-Journal.com	**RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY** The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: www.Religion-Journal.com
SCIENCE IN SOCIETY The International Journal of Science in Society Website: www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com	**SOCIAL SCIENCES** The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: www.SocialSciences-Journal.com
SPACES AND FLOWS Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: www.SpacesJournal.com	**SPORT AND SOCIETY** The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: www.sportandsociety.com/journal
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