

Demystifying the Underpinning Role of Civics and Ethical Education on Freshman Students' Engagement in Democratic Principles: The Case of Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to ascertain the extent to which the teaching of Civic and Ethical Education enables students to engage in key democratic principles of Ethiopia. To this purpose, the study adopted descriptive survey design. The target population for this study was freshman students taking Civics and Ethical Education (CEE) course in Dire Dawa University in 2016/2017 academic year. A sample of 113 freshman students who took CEE course were selected from total of 872 freshman students using simple random sampling method. Students' disposition towards democratic principles was examined using ten items and the reliability of items was found to be Cronbach's alpha of 0.872. Likewise, items used to examine students' experience in struggling against violation of democratic principles had reliability coefficient alpha of 0.863. One-sample t-test analysis was made using SPSS 20. Freshman university students have had good disposition to democratic principles and good experience of struggling against violation of these principles. However, students' had low participation in the election of regional and national representatives and in community meetings. These findings suggest that freshman students do not exercise their democratic right of voting, and fail to participate in community meetings.

Keywords: Civic learning, democratic principles, equality, civic disposition

Introduction

Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) program is a flagship to echo democratic principles. Hence, in this era, CEE shoulders paramount responsibility of shaping citizens in accordance with democratic principles. The central purpose of school-based civics and ethical education programs is to lay the groundwork for responsible democratic citizenship by educating children and young adults about the types of behaviors and attitudes they will need to function effectively in a democratic society (USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2002).

As contended by USAID Office of Democracy and Governance (2002), for a democracy to survive and flourish, a critical mass of its citizens must possess the skills, embody the values, and manifest the behaviors that accord with democracy. To strengthen its democracy a country should invest in quality civic and ethical learning. To this regard, researchers have showed that the students who received high-quality civic learning are more likely than their counterparts to preserve democratic practices (Levinson, 2011). Moreover, USAID Office of Democracy and Governance underscored that citizens must know enough about the basic features of a democratic system to be able to access it when their interests are at stake, and they must believe in the importance of certain key democratic values, such as tolerance for divergent viewpoints and support for the rule of law.

Researchers have recognized that Civic Education is an important component of education that cultivates citizens to participate in the public life of a democracy, to use their rights and to discharge their responsibilities with the necessary knowledge and skills (Branson, 1998). Thus, in most mature democracies, citizens have had the opportunity to absorb democratic beliefs and practices over a lifetime. As they participate in family and neighborhood life, join local organizations, move through the educational system, and are exposed to a free and independent media, citizens have the opportunity to absorb and practice the basic norms of a democratic culture (USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2002).

Undoubtedly Civic Education programs are designed to address fundamental weaknesses in a nation's democratic system. These can include differential access to justice, marginalization of certain groups such as women or ethnic minorities, low levels of citizen participation in the policy making process, and lack of knowledge and/or voter apathy preceding elections (USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2002). For example, civic education may be useful in helping people prepare for an upcoming event, such as an election, but may have little effect on longer-term democracy building efforts. Likewise, Yamada (2011) contends that, in Ethiopia, the subject of Civic and Ethical Education has been regarded as an important means to inculcate the ideas of democracy among citizens all over the country so that a democratic representative system is properly maintained, instead of relying on military means to express self-interest.

CEE underscores the need for maintaining and developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of our young people as they become informed, concerned, citizens with a sense of self-efficacy in democratic governance (Kidwell, 2005) or it is an important component of education that cultivates citizens to participate in

the public life of a democracy, to use their rights and to discharge their responsibilities with the necessary knowledge and skills (Branson, 1998).

Most countries recognize that their formal political institutions will not function well or last long unless their citizens have democratic skills and values, that such skills and values must be cultivated deliberately; and that universal public education provides an opportunity to do so (Cohen et al, 2010). In view of building democracy, the Ethiopian government has also introduced the new Educational and Training Policy with a goal to ensuring democratic values such as equality, liberty, justice truth and respect for human rights (Seyoum, 1996). In this regard, FDRE Ministry of Education has developed Civics and Ethical education as common course to all departments in the in the country so as to build democracy and enhance prosperity (MOE, 2005). Moreover, in the Ethiopian CEE textbooks, the concept of democracy is explained in close relationship with the control of power and tolerance. Such a definition of democracy is uniquely rooted in Ethiopian diversity in culture, history, social life, and the memories of past regimes (Yamada, 2011).

It is clear that schools need to focus on intentionally promoting the civic skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for an engaged and effective citizenry in a democratic society. Hence, these days, CEE has become a generic subject in Ethiopian National curriculum of all educational levels. Since the new constitution was adopted and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was officially established, civics and ethical education has been broadly seen as integral to the purposes of public schools and universities. In Ethiopia, which consists of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, the maintenance of unity as a country is an issue of serious concern (Yamada, 2011).

Accordingly, CEE is considered as an important means to ensure the rule of a fragile-based government, which emerged after a long period of monarchy and dictatorship in the multiethnic society (Yamada, 2011). However, in countries emerging from long periods of authoritarian rule, this preparatory experience is largely missing. While many informal democratic practices may exist at the community level, citizens are unlikely to have much knowledge about formal democratic structures and processes and may be unaware of the opportunities that exist for advancing their interests at the local, regional, or national levels. Without values such as political tolerance, trust in democratic institutions, and respect for the rule of law, this more competitive aspect of the democratic process can be severely destabilizing, particularly if it ignites or exacerbates economic, ethnic, religious, or regional tensions (USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2002). Furthermore, CEE is inculcating and emphasizing the interconnectedness of the core values, social and cross-cultural skills that are critical for character and citizenship development of the students as well as aimed to produce rational and ethical citizens who participate in affairs of their community in particular and nation in general (Gosa and Desta, 2014). Thus, investigating the perceived contribution of CEE to University students' disposition towards democratic principles has paramount importance to maintain equality of culture, gender, religion, nations, nationalities and people in Ethiopia.

Statement of the problem

Citizen's disposition towards democratic principles cannot be realized overnight through short term orientation or training. Because of this fact, incorporating CEE as integral component of national curriculum has paramount importance to establish solid foundation in building democratic society. In light to this, Murphy (2004) asserts that Civics and Ethical Education produces ideal citizens, who respects basic human rights, understands democratic principle and exercise their right freely, accept their civic responsibility and discharges them to the best of their capacity. It is also important to enable citizens to be equipped with values of democracy, human right, and patriotism and apply these values in their life (Schulz et al., 2008).

In this regard, Civics and Ethical Education is included in Ethiopian school curriculum to play a great role in producing good citizens, who understand properly the problem of their country, understand the citizenry obligation to make personal contribution equipped with good ethical and democratic culture (Seyoum, 1996).

The overall aim of teaching Civics and Ethical Education is generating political consciousness in the students and inculcate democratic outlook in the souls of the students. For young democracy, a study of Civics and Ethical Education can help a lot to develop proper attitudes in students, which can ultimately strengthen democracy (USAID Office of Democracy and Governance, 2002). Besides, it also enforces the students so as to develop culture of hardworking due to the fact that it discusses issues titled patriotism, responsibility, industriousness and self-reliance. These issues are more closely related with character development and moral education (Yamada, 2011).

Moreover, it aimed at producing informed, effective and responsible citizen by equipping them with civic knowledge, civic skill and civic dispositions so that they can effectively participate in the political, economic and social affair of their society (Branson.1998). Therefore, the role of Civics and Ethical Education is a critical factor in establishing and maintaining high level of democracy and good governance in Ethiopia today.

Much of the previous studies focused on identifying perception and attitude of teachers towards civic and ethical education (Dawit, 2006; Lo,W., 2009), while others called for the role of civic and ethical education in

shaping students attitude (Birhanu, 2012; Gosa and Desta, 2014) and peace building (UNICEF, 2015) as well as on the benefit of civic education to increase equality and narrow civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2011).

However, a study by Birhanu (2012) found that, even though they have been taught Civics and Ethical Education starting from primary level, secondary and preparatory school students lack sense of responsibility, disregard rules, disrespect their teachers, lack commitment to work hard as well they are unethical. Furthermore, Birhanu found that secondary school students have showed a tendency of the students to over protect their rights without respecting the common goods of the society and neglecting their responsibilities. These findings are against the national objectives that Civics and Ethical Education is expected to ensure. This may further question the quality of Civics and Ethical Education.

Likewise, USAID Office of Democracy and Governance's (2002) asserted that civic education programs appear to have little effect on changing democratic values, such as political tolerance, and in fact, appear to have a negative impact on some values, such as trust in political institutions. In spite of heavy investment by USAID and other international donors, relatively little is known about the impact of civic education programs on democratic behaviors and attitudes, particularly in developing countries.

After all the aforementioned studies, the perceived contribution of Civics and Ethical Education in promoting University students' civic disposition to democratic principles, namely the rule of law, equality of languages, equality of cultures, gender equality, human right, freedom of religion and tolerance of diversity and their experience in struggling against violation of these principles is found to be unaddressed affair. Thus, the uniqueness of this study shifted the focus to the role of CEE in enabling students to exercise democratic principles and enforcing them to struggle against violation of these principles. Furthermore, the need to better understand how and under what conditions CEE contributes to the development of a more active and informed democratic citizenry initiated this study. Accordingly, this study sought to answer the following basic question.

- What dispositions to democratic principles do freshman students demonstrate because of learning Civics and Ethical Education?
- To what extent do freshman students engage in struggling against violation of democratic principles?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to ascertain the extent to which the teaching of Civic and Ethical Education enable University students to dispose to key democratic principles of Ethiopia. Specifically, this study had the following objectives:

- To examine students civic disposition towards the principle of rule of law, equality of languages, equality of culture of nation, nationalities and people, equality of all nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia, gender equality, human right, freedom of religion and tolerance of diversity.
- To explore the degree to which University students struggle against violation of these democratic principles of Ethiopia.
- To assess the extent to which students participate in electoral process of Ethiopia and in community meetings.

Method and Materials

The study adopted descriptive survey design to assess students' engagement in democratic principles and their struggle against violation of these principles.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was freshman students taking Civics and Ethical Education (CEE) course in Dire Dawa University in 2016/2017 academic year. A sample of 113 freshman students (Male=64, Female=49) who took Civics and Ethical Education course were selected from total of 872 freshman students using simple random sampling method.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire consisted of close-ended items was employed to collect data. To assess students' disposition towards democratic principles ten items were developed and the reliability of items was found to be Cronbach's alpha of 0.872. Likewise, to examine students' experience in struggling against violation of democratic principles eight items were developed and the reliability of items was found to be Cronbach's alpha of 0.863. Thus, the instruments used were highly reliable. Scores were assigned to each point on the frequency scales as follows: Almost Always= 4, Usually= 3, Sometimes= 2, Rarely = 1 and Never=0.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data two-sided one sample t-test was employed. To maintain validity of results the missed values were cleaned listwise. One-sample t-test analysis was made using SPSS 20.

Table 1: One-sample t-test for civic disposition to democratic principles and experience in struggling against violation of these principles (N=113, df=112, Exp. Mean=2)

	M	SD	Std. Error Mean	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Acting according to the principle of rule of law	2.42	1.321	.124	3.347	.001
Struggling to correct violations of rule of law in your organization/country	2.36	1.181	.111	3.267	.001
Behaving according to the principle of equality of languages	2.59	1.314	.124	4.798	.000
Struggling to correct violation of principle of equality of languages in Ethiopia	2.63	1.357	.128	4.920	.000
Acting based on principle of equality of culture of nation, nationalities and people	2.52	1.370	.129	4.051	.000
Struggling against violation of the principle of cultural equality	2.34	1.300	.122	2.750	.007
Acting based on principle of equality of all nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia	2.54	1.350	.127	4.251	.000
Struggling against violation of the principle of equality of all nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia	2.28	1.392	.131	2.163	.033
Acting based on the principle gender equality	2.57	1.329	.125	4.531	.000
Struggle against violation of the principle of gender equality	2.63	1.290	.121	5.177	.000
Acting based on the principle of human right	2.51	1.337	.126	4.081	.000
Struggling against violation of the principle of human right	2.48	1.337	.126	3.800	.000
Acting based on the principle of freedom of religion	2.56	1.388	.131	4.269	.000
Struggling against violation of the principle of freedom of religion	2.50	1.421	.134	3.707	.000
Participating whenever there is an election	1.88	1.440	.135	-.915	.362
Attending community meetings	1.99	1.264	.119	-.074	.941
Acting according to the principle of tolerance of diversity	2.39	1.213	.114	3.412	.001
Struggling against violation of tolerance of diversity	2.50	1.254	.118	4.274	.000

Results and Discussion

As depicted in the table above, one sample t-test revealed students asserted that they act according to the principle of rule of law. This implies that students' civic disposition in relation to the principle of rule of law is statistically significant ($t= 3.347$, $M=2.42$, $SD=1.321$, $p=.001$). Struggling against violation of rule of law is expected from students that have civic awareness. Likewise, equality of language is a principle of democracy that citizens should practice in their everyday activity. In this regard, University students who took civic and ethical education course affirmed that they behave based the principle of equality of language ($t=4.798$, $M=2.59$, $SD=1.314$). This finding was statistically significant at $p<.001$. Hence, CEE is aimed at promoting foundation of democracy and democratic values to reduce conflict among students with different backgrounds and interests (Gosa and Desta, 2014). Moreover, Yamada (2011) contends that CEE does celebrate and appreciate multiculturalism and the existence of peoples who have different languages, ethnicities, religions or any other elements.

One-sample t-test result also revealed that University students are acting based on the principle of equality of culture of nation, nationalities and people ($t=4.051$, $M=2.52$, $SD=1.370$) and based on the principle of equality of all nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia ($t= 4.251$, $M=2.34$, $SD=1.300$). The results were statistically significant at $p<0.001$. Similarly, Gosa and Desta (2014) found that CEE course is developing and promoting civic skills, knowledge and disposition in Mekelle University to affirm both changes in behavior and attitude of the learners

As indicated in the above table, University students have showed that they dispose democratic principle of equality of culture of nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia ($t=4.051$, $M=2.52$, $SD= 1.370$, $p<.001$) and struggle against violation of this democratic principle ($t=2.750$, $M= 2.34$, $SD=1.300$, $p=.007$). The mean score was statistically and significantly higher than the hypothetical population mean ($\mu=2$). Consistently, university students are expected to involve in democratic and development processes at both local and national levels and thereby higher education has the highest lion share in producing active citizens in a democratic society, personal development, and the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base (McIlrath, Lyons, and Munck, 2012, cited in Gosa and Desta, 2014). However, a study by USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance (2002) found that civic education programs appear to have little effect on changing democratic values, such as political tolerance, and in fact, appear to have a negative impact on some values, such as trust in

political institutions. These contradicting results might suggest the need for further investigation regarding the effectiveness of CEE programs.

On the other hand, nowadays, human right, gender equality, freedom of religion and tolerance of diversity are found to be key elements of democracy. As underscored by USAID Office of Democracy and Governance (2002:7): “The central purpose of school-based CEE program remains to instill an ethic of democracy in teachers, administrators, and students, and, through this process, lay the groundwork for creating more effective and informed democratic citizens in the future.” Accordingly, one-sample t-test result revealed significantly higher disposition of students to gender equality ($t=4.531$, $M=2.75$, $SD=1.329$, $p<.001$), human rights ($t=4.081$, $M=2.51$, $SD=1.337$, $p<.001$), freedom of religion ($t=4.269$, $M=2.56$, $SD=1.388$, $p<.001$) and tolerance of diversity ($t=3.412$, $M=2.39$, $SD=1.213$, $p=.001$). Thus, the calculated means were statistically and significantly higher than the expected hypothetical mean ($\mu=2$). Concomitant to this result, Gosa and Desta (2014) claim that Civics and Ethical Education curriculum developed and harmonized at national level has a societal responsibility to produce good and responsible citizens, who understand, respect the constitution, democratic values and human rights; develop a sense of citizenship to participate in and contribute to the development of the community and the country.

To exercise democratic principles struggling against violation of these principles has paramount importance. Hence, the present study tempted to investigate the extent to which University students struggle against violation of key principles and elements of democracy. Accordingly, as portrayed in the table above, University students found to have statistically significant and good experience with regard to struggling to correct violations of: rule of law ($t=3.267$, $M=2.36$, $SD=1.181$, $p=.001$), principle of equality of languages in Ethiopia ($t=4.920$, $M=2.63$, $SD=1.357$, $p<.001$), principle of cultural equality ($t=2.750$, $M=2.34$, $SD=1.300$, $p=.007$) and equality of all nation, nationalities and people of Ethiopia ($t=2.163$, $M=2.28$, $SD=1.392$, $p=.033$). Similarly, University students have showed significantly higher disposition to democratic principles through struggling against violation of gender equality ($t=5.177$, $M=2.63$, $SD=1.290$, $p<.001$), human right ($t=3.800$, $M=2.48$, $SD=1.337$, $p<.001$), freedom of religion ($t=3.707$, $M=2.50$, $SD=1.421$, $p<.001$) and tolerance of diversity ($t=4.274$, $M=2.50$, $SD=1.254$, $p<.001$). In connection to these findings, Gosa and Desta(2014) affirmed that CEE promotes cohesion and harmony among learners in the university in the sense that it create conducive environment to co-exist with other socio-cultural groups and have a culture of respect for one another’s view. Besides, it also enforces the students so as to develop culture of hardworking due to the fact that it discusses issues titled patriotism, responsibility, industriousness and self-reliance.

Election is key element through which a citizen can exercise democratic principles. Despite this fact, one-sample t-test revealed that University students have showed low participation in election undertaken in Ethiopia ($t=-.915$, $M=1.88$, $SD=1.440$, $p=.362$). To the contrary, Dawit (2006) found that 57.9% of preparatory school students have participated in the election of national and regional representatives. Similarly, University students have had no significant experience in attending community meetings that are great platforms to dispose democratic principles ($t=-.074$, $M=1.99$, $SD=1.264$, $p=.941$). This finding is in line with Dawit’s (2006) study which found that sizeable number of students (74.6%) failed to participate in public meetings. However, USAID Office of Democracy and Governance (2002) claims that citizens must be willing and able to participate in local and national politics, and they must believe that their participation is important to the continued viability of the democratic political system.

Conclusion

Civic and Ethical Education (CEE) has benefited freshman university students to act based on democratic principles underscored by Ethiopian constitution. Freshman students have good disposition to rule of law, equality of language, equality of culture of nation, nationalities and people, gender equality, human rights, tolerance of diversity and freedom of religion. Acting based on democratic principles cannot guarantee cultivation of democratic society. Hence, struggling against violation of key democratic principles is worthy too. Accordingly, freshman students have had good experience in struggling against violation of democratic principles. However, students have low participation in electoral process and community meetings which considered as enabling platforms to exercise citizenry democratic rights. To this end, in order to build democratic society CEE should give special attention for activities that foster dialogues and public discussions.

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