

Assessing the quality of classroom deliberations in social studies teaching using the discourse quality index

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This research is part of an ongoing study entitled '*The role of public education in nurturing active and deliberative democratic citizenship in Malawi*'. Prior studies argue that despite the democratization of Malawi in 1994, its citizens continue to be politically passive. According to literature, democracy thrives when citizens are active participants in the governance of their societies; consequently, lack of active participation poses a significant threat to the sustainability of any democracy. Passive citizenship in Malawi is often attributed to the legacy of its past political systems, which were authoritarian in nature and denied citizens meaningful opportunities to participate in the governance of their society. However, the extent to which this assertion can conclusively explain passive citizenship in present-day Malawi is questionable given the limited availability of research concerning the factors contributing to citizenship attitudes in the Malawian context. Therefore, this study examines education's contribution to the promotion of active citizenship and considers whether Malawian social studies classroom practices provide sufficient opportunities for learners to develop the values and skills necessary for meaningful democratic deliberation.

Data was collected from secondary schools in Malawi's South East Education Division through lesson observations, utilizing an observation schedule based on parameters set forth in the discourse quality index (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli & Steiner, 2003). The study found that teachers made significant efforts to encourage student participation by integrating learner-centered methodologies into their lessons. Class and group discussions were found to be the most common strategies utilized by social studies teachers. However, in either case the level of discussion was limited to information exchanges between students and teachers rather than serious debate concerning the issues raised, although such debate is a key factor in promoting the skills and values required for democratic engagement. Similarly, discourse was limited to *proto-discourse* and *conventional-discourses* according to the discourse quality index, which are inherently low-level patterns for any serious engagement, opinion formation, or debate to occur. Furthermore, the study found that among the several ideals for quality deliberation, participation equality based on gender and respect were the key elements observed. The study concludes that current classroom practices exhibit limited deliberative potential, suggesting limited opportunities for nurturing students' deliberative values and skills. However, to contextualize the results there is a need to examine the possible constraints to serious classroom deliberations that might facilitate the development of significant skills and attitudes for democratic deliberation.



Fig. 1: Students engaged in a group discussion



Fig. 2: A teacher explaining a concept to students



Fig. 3: Students socializing outside of a classroom



Fig. 4: One of the schools observed in this study