Exploring Democratic Principles in Social Studies Education: A Student Perspective in Higher Education

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the perception of PGSD students regarding the application of democratic principles in social studies courses in higher education. The study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews, involving 15 students from Nugroho Doctoral University. The findings show that most students feel empowered and engage more actively in democracy-based learning. The open discussion spaces allow them to express their opinions and collaborate on learning topics. However, challenges such as the dominance of lecturers in discussions, lack of student confidence to speak up, and inefficient time management in discussions were identified. These challenges hinder the full potential of democratic learning. The implications of these findings emphasize the need for a balance of roles between lecturers and students, reducing lecturer dominance, and improving discussion time management to ensure efficient and directed learning. This research contributes to the development of more participatory and inclusive learning models, enhancing the quality of education in higher education, especially in social studies courses. Furthermore, the study provides insights into the challenges and benefits of democratic principles in education and suggests strategies for improving student participation and lecturer facilitation, contributing to the broader discourse on participatory pedagogy.

Keywords
Democratic Learning, Higher Education, Social Studies Courses, Student participation

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has a very strategic role in shaping the character and quality of human resources (Siswanto et al., 2023). One of the very important aspects of higher education is the application of democratic principles in learning (Levine, 2024). Democracy in the context of education leads to providing space for each individual to

actively participate in the learning process, both as teachers and as students. Democracy in learning focuses on recognizing students' right to express their opinions, be involved in decision-making, and strengthen the values of justice and togetherness (Kinol et al., 2023). In the context of Social Sciences (IPS) courses, the application of democratic principles is expected to enrich students' learning experiences and increase their understanding of social issues in society.

The application of democratic principles in learning in higher education, especially in the social studies course of the Elementary School Teacher Education (PGSD) study program, provides opportunities for students to develop a critical and reflective attitude (Busey et al., 2023). In this process, students are not only recipients of information, but also active agents of change. Students can interact with lecturers and fellow students in an open discussion room, where their ideas and perspectives are valued (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). This process is very important to enrich the learning experience of PGSD students, because they will be deployed into the world of basic education that requires the ability to manage diversity of opinions and build mutual agreement in a teaching and learning process.

However, the application of democracy in learning does not always run smoothly. Various obstacles, both from the lecturer and the student themselves, often arise in their application (Heid et al., 2023). Lecturers who are more dominant in providing material, as well as students who tend to be passive in participating in learning, are real challenges in implementing a democratic approach. Therefore, it is important to research how PGSD students perceive the application of democratic principles in social studies learning. Do they feel empowered in the teaching and learning process? How do they interpret their involvement in learning as part of democratic learning? These questions are important to answer so that the educational process in higher education, especially in the field of PGSD, can be more directed and effective.

The state of the art in research related to the application of democratic principles in learning in higher education has been carried out in various courses. Several studies highlight how democracy in learning can improve student participation and learning quality (Heid et al., 2023; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). However, most of these studies focus more on the perspective of lecturers or at the primary and secondary education levels (Abricot et al., 2022; Diacopoulos & Crompton, 2020; Donbavand & Hoskins, 2021).

Research that specifically examines the application of democracy in social studies courses for PGSD students in higher education is still very limited. In addition, research that explores students' perceptions of their involvement in the democratic process in learning has also not been widely conducted, especially in the context of higher education in Indonesia.

The gap in this study lies in the lack of in-depth exploration of the application of democratic principles in social studies learning in higher education, especially in the PGSD study program. Previous research tends to lack space to explore students' perspectives as key subjects in democratic learning, as well as how they feel involved in the participatory learning process. The novelty of this study lies in its approach that incorporates the perspectives of PGSD students directly through in-depth interviews, which provides a clearer picture of their experiences and perceptions in participating in democratic learning. This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on how PGSD students view the application of democracy in social studies courses.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with in-depth interview techniques to explore PGSD students' perceptions of the application of democratic principles in social studies courses in higher education. This approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences, views, and feelings towards democracy-based learning. Interviews as a data collection technique are used to obtain subjective information that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods, aiming to provide a detailed description of students' perspectives on democracy in higher education learning.

This research was conducted at Nugroho Doctoral University, a university located in the Yogyakarta region, Indonesia. This university was chosen because it has a PGSD study program that has implemented various learning methods, including a democratic approach, in its lecture process. This study involved 15 PGSD students who were selected through purposive sampling techniques, which are the selection of participants based on certain criteria that are relevant to the research topic. The criteria for selecting participants are

students who are taking social studies courses in the even semester of 2025/2026, who have direct experience with the application of democratic principles in classroom learning.

The number of participants involved in this study was 15 people, with the aim of obtaining a variety of views from students with different backgrounds and experiences. The selection of the number of participants is based on the principle of data saturation, where interviews will continue to be conducted until the information obtained no longer provides new data that is relevant for analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with students as participants. Interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner, using pre-prepared interview guidelines, but with the flexibility for researchers to dig deeper if needed. The interview guide consists of several open-ended questions designed to explore students' views on the application of democratic principles in social studies learning, the challenges they face, and the perceived impact on their involvement in learning.

The interview process is carried out individually, to ensure that each student can express his or her opinion freely and without influence from other participants. Each interview lasts between 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the responses and explanations provided by the participants. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants to ensure that the data obtained could be analyzed appropriately and accurately.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained from the interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, which involved several stages. First, the researcher transcribed all the interview recordings to obtain data in text form. Next, the researcher reads and examines the transcripts to identify key themes related to the application of democratic principles in learning. This process involves encoding the data, i.e. labeling the parts of text that are relevant to the theme that appears. The themes found are then grouped based on the similarities and relationships between one theme and another.

After the main themes are identified, the researcher will interpret the data to draw conclusions about PGSD students' perceptions of democracy in social studies learning. The

results of this analysis are expected to provide a clear picture of the application of democratic principles in the context of higher education and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and participatory learning model.

RESULT

This research aims to explore the perception of PGSD students regarding the application of democratic principles in learning social studies courses in universities. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 students, the data obtained shows a variety of views on the application of democracy in the classroom, the challenges faced, and the impact felt by students on their participation in learning. These findings are categorized into several sub-chapters that include student perceptions, challenges in the implementation of democratic learning, and the impact of their implementation on student engagement in learning.

Student Perception of the Application of Democracy in Learning

Most PGSD students have a positive view of the application of democratic principles in learning social studies courses. They feel that democratic principles give them the opportunity to be more active in discussing and expressing opinions. One of the students revealed that the open discussion space allowed them to better understand the material and improve their critical thinking skills.

> *"With the principle of democracy, I feel that my opinions are more valued, not just following what the lecturer says. We can talk more openly and participate in determining the topics to be discussed in class."* (Student A)

This statement shows that students feel empowered when given the opportunity to speak and determine the direction of learning. This is in accordance with the principles of democracy which emphasizes the active participation of each individual in the decision-making process. Students feel more engaged and more responsible for the material being taught because they have a role in determining the topics covered.

> *"Democratic learning gives us the opportunity to explore different points of view. I feel that every opinion is valued and that makes the discussion richer."* (Student B)

Student B underlined that democratic learning allows for a variety of perspectives to emerge, which can enrich their understanding of the material. This reflects the importance of diversity of opinion in a democratic discussion, where each individual feels valued and has a voice in the learning process.

However, although many students appreciate the application of democracy, some of them also feel that this process sometimes does not go optimally. They revealed that despite being given the opportunity to speak, not all students feel comfortable speaking out due to several factors, such as lack of confidence or imbalance in participation.

> *"Sometimes I feel afraid to express my opinion because I am worried that it is wrong or irrelevant to the topic. Sometimes, my more dominant friends make me feel marginalized."* (Student C)

This statement shows that there are psychological obstacles in democratic discussion. Some students feel anxious and afraid if their opinions are considered irrelevant or wrong, which can limit their participation. This indicates that even if democratic principles are applied, psychological and social factors such as insecurity or lack of confidence can hinder student engagement to the fullest.

Challenges in the Implementation of Democratic Learning

Despite the appreciation for democratic learning, many students identify the challenges faced in its implementation. One of the main challenges is the dominance of lecturers in the learning process. Although it is expected that students have an active role in the discussion, some students feel that lecturers still take a dominant role in directing the course of learning.

> *"Even though there is an opportunity to speak, lecturers often direct more discussions and give lengthy explanations. This makes us feel like we don't have many opportunities to express our opinions."* (Student D)

This statement illustrates one of the biggest challenges in the application of democratic principles, namely the dominance of lecturers which can limit the active role of students in learning. Even though the discussion space is open, the influence of lecturers who are too large in controlling learning can make students feel less empowered to express their opinions. In addition, students also mentioned the challenges in managing discussion time, which is often too open and not well structured.

"Sometimes open discussions even make learning time inefficient. Material that should have been completed in one meeting was hampered by too long discussions." (Student E)

Overly open discussions can indeed lead to wasted time, which in turn interferes with more structured learning objectives. This creates a dilemma in the application of democratic principles where the importance of student participation must be balanced with efficient time management to ensure learning objectives are achieved.

The Impact of the Implementation of Democracy on Student Engagement

The application of democratic principles in social studies course learning has a positive impact on student engagement. Most students feel more motivated to learn and understand the material better because they participate in the learning process.

"I feel more motivated to learn because learning is not only centered on lecturers. We were also given the opportunity to find out and discuss. This is very helpful in understanding the material." (Student F)

F students showed that democratic learning increased their motivation to be more active in the learning process. When students feel responsible for their learning, they are more motivated to engage and deepen their understanding of the material being studied. However, although many students feel motivated, some still feel an imbalance in terms of participation. Some students speak more often in discussions, while others feel less involved.

"While there is room for discussion, I feel that some of my more dominant friends often take over the conversation. I hope there is a way to ensure that all students can contribute." (Student G)

This quote shows that even though the discussion space is open, there is an imbalance in participation that can affect the student learning experience. This indicates the need for a better discussion management strategy to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to speak and contribute to discussions.

The following table summarizes the main findings from interviews conducted with PGSD students regarding the application of democratic principles in social studies course learning.

Table 1. Key Findings from the Interview

Aspects	Findings
Student Perceptions	Students feel empowered and more actively participate in discussions
Key Challenges	Lecturer dominance, lack of opportunities to express opinions, limited discussion time
Positive Impact	Increased student involvement in materials and discussions
Engagement Challenges	Participation imbalance between active and passive students

Based on the interviews conducted, some of the main themes that emerged related to the application of democracy in learning were perceptions of democracy, challenges in implementation, and impacts on student engagement. Students in general appreciate the existence of democratic principles that provide space for them to speak and be more actively involved in the learning process. However, they also recognize the challenges in its implementation, especially related to the management of discussions that are sometimes not well structured.

The implementation of democratic principles in social studies learning also demonstrates multidimensional impacts across students' learning domains. Cognitively, students show improved analytical skills and deeper conceptual understanding as active participation in discussions encourages critical thinking and the evaluation of diverse perspectives. Affectively, democratic learning fosters stronger motivation, confidence, and a sense of ownership toward the learning process, as students feel their voices are acknowledged and respected. Psychomotorally, the learning process supports active engagement through collaborative discussion, argument articulation, and group interaction, which enhance communication and cooperative skills. However, the persistence of participation imbalance indicates that without structured facilitation, these learning gains may not be evenly distributed among students, highlighting the need for intentional instructional strategies to optimize learning outcomes across all domains.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the application of democratic principles in the learning of social studies courses in universities, especially in the PGSD study program, has a positive impact on student involvement. The majority of students felt an increase in active participation during the learning process, both in discussions and decision-making related to the material discussed. Democratic learning provides a space for students to express their opinions and engage in open discussions (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023). This is

in line with the concept of democracy in education, which emphasizes the importance of active participation and respect for every voice in learning (Rossouw & Frick, 2023). The application of this principle can encourage students to be more responsible for their learning process, which has implications for increasing their understanding and interest in the material being taught.

However, although many students appreciate the opportunity to be actively involved in learning, the main challenge faced is the dominance of lecturers in the discussion process. Most students revealed that even though they were given the opportunity to speak, lecturers often directed the learning more and controlled the course of the discussion. This indicates an imbalance in the roles between lecturers and students, where students who should be more active in discussions become more passive due to the dominance of lecturer teaching (Levine, 2024; Smith & Seal, 2021). In this context, understanding democracy in education lies not only in providing space for student participation, but also in creating a balance between the role of lecturers as facilitators and students as active actors in learning (Berchin et al., 2021; Saleh & Mujahiddin, 2020).

In addition, this study also found that there are psychological barriers faced by students in participating in class discussions. Some college students feel anxious and lack the confidence to express their opinions, especially when they feel their opinions are irrelevant or not accepted by their peers. This reflects the importance of creating a climate that supports the engagement of all students, where every opinion is valued and well received, without any fear or worry of being ostracized (Keo et al., 2025). Openness and inclusiveness from lecturers and fellow students are essential to reduce these psychological barriers and ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to speak up (Culp, 2023).

Discussions that are too open and not well structured are also a challenge faced by most students. Some students feel that discussions often lead to irrelevant and time-consuming topics, thus interfering with the smooth learning process. This shows that although open discussion spaces are important for implementing democratic principles, the management of time and the direction of discussion are also very important factors (Gutiérrez-Ujaque, 2024; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025). Lecturers as facilitators need to organize discussions to stay focused on learning objectives, while ensuring that all students have the opportunity to express their opinions without sacrificing the quality of learning (Leal Filho et al., 2023).

However, despite these challenges, this study also shows that democratic learning has a significant impact on student engagement. Many students feel more motivated and more interested in the material being taught because they have the opportunity to actively participate in learning (Nind & Katramadou, 2023; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025). Greater participation in discussions and decision-making related to the material makes them feel more responsible for their learning process. This is in line with constructivist learning theory which emphasizes the importance of active participation and social interaction in building knowledge (Heid et al., 2023; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). When students are actively involved in the learning process, they not only gain knowledge, but also develop social skills and critical thinking skills.

In the context of Indonesian academic culture, the implementation of democratic learning faces unique challenges and opportunities. Indonesia's traditional hierarchical educational structure, where lecturers are often viewed as the primary authority figures, may contribute to the dominance of lecturers in discussions (Nur Rizkia et al., 2025). This cultural context can hinder the full implementation of democratic principles, where students' voices are expected to be more actively involved. However, the positive impact of democratic learning on student engagement, as shown in this study, highlights the potential for reform within Indonesian higher education. There is a need to create an academic culture that encourages a balance between lecturer authority and student agency. This would require not only changes in pedagogical practices but also a shift in mindset among both lecturers and students. Moving towards a more inclusive and participatory academic environment can significantly enhance the quality of education in Indonesia, fostering a generation of students who are not only knowledgeable but also socially responsible and critically engaged (Arditya Prayogi & Riki Nasrullah, 2025). Future research could explore how these shifts in academic culture can be more systematically integrated into Indonesian universities to promote the development of democratic learning practices across disciplines.

CONCLUSION

The application of democratic principles in the learning of social studies courses in higher education, especially in the PGSD study program, has been proven to have a positive impact on student involvement in the learning process. Students feel more

empowered, actively participate in discussions, and have a greater sense of responsibility for the material studied. However, the main challenges faced are the dominance of lecturers in managing discussions, psychological obstacles felt by students, and less effective time management in discussions. The implications of these findings are that it is important for lecturers to manage learning more evenly, provide enough space for students to express their opinions, and create an inclusive and open climate. Universities need to pay more attention to the balance of the roles of lecturers and students in democratic learning, as well as develop strategies to increase active student participation, so that learning can take place more effectively and deeply. This research also contributes to the development of a more participatory and inclusive learning model in higher education. Furthermore, the study suggests the importance of fostering an academic culture that values student agency and promotes equal participation. It highlights the need for universities to implement professional development programs for lecturers to enhance their facilitation skills in democratic classrooms. Additionally, the findings encourage future research to explore how democratic principles can be further integrated into other disciplines and educational contexts, especially in culturally diverse environments like Indonesia.

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