Managing Rural-Urban Divide Inside University Classrooms: A Way Forward to Promote Positive Classroom Climate

Dr. Shumaila Aijaz Memon
Dr. Faraz Bughio
Saima Murtaza Pandhiani

Abstract

A positive classroom climate is as an integral part in motivating students to engage in meaningful learning. It is a strong contributor of students' academic achievement. One of the important parts of classroom climate is students within a class. A teacher has to manage the classroom in such a way that it may encourage students of all backgrounds to freely express themselves. Owing to such importance of classroom climate, the present study aimed to explore the relationship in terms of how do they get along in university as class fellows between rural and urban learners. In total, 24 students (rural=13, urban=11) were interviewed. The data from interviews was analysed using constant comparative method. The major findings show that the rural and urban learners find themselves different than each other. In particular, rural learners feel more challenges in adjusting in the university curriculum, in university life and to settle relationship with their urban counterparts. The present study suggests teachers to be sensitive about the cultural and educational backgrounds of the learners. These findings offer implications for any public sector university where learners of different backgrounds study together. It may inform teacher education as well by informing them about the need of addressing the issue of creating harmonious relationship between all learners.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Positive Classroom climate, Rural and Urban divide, Cultural background of students, University learners.

Introduction

A properly managed classroom can help deliver quality education in a stimulating environment. Due to such importance, understanding how to establish and maintain a positive classroom climate has received much importance in educational management research (Freiberg, 1999). The importance of the concept of classroom climate lies in its being significant predictor of school improvement, student engagement, behaviour, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999). Some studies have found strong correlation between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction, and less disorganization and conflict (Adelman and Taylor 2005). More importantly, some studies also report that classroom climate puts strongest impact particularly on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against (Adelman and Taylor 2005). Thus, an integral part of classroom climate depends upon an atmosphere that promotes learning for each learner.

Teachers have to manage a climate of respect and safety inside classrooms. In practice, classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year. Therefore, each classroom presents its own unique challenge for its teacher to address as every classroom climate relies heavily on the variables

within it. One of the important variables is its students. Therefore, a teacher's main concern in managing a positive climate is to make students feel that they are in a safe and respectful environment so that they may express themselves freely.

In this context, classrooms at public sector universities offer students with a mixed range of personalities who come from varied social backgrounds. For example, students at university of Sindh come from both rural and urban backgrounds. How far students from different backgrounds positive relationships with each other and what role a teacher can play in creating supportive climate in the class are important questions to explore as well since a healthy peer learning assistance depends on it.

Literature Review

In this regard, the following section shall review literature in two main domains:
- Classroom climate
- Rural and urban learners

Classroom Climate

It is a perceived quality of the setting. A number of environmental variables influence on it which may range from physical, material, organizational, operational to social variables. An institution's underlying values and belief system, norms, ideologies, rituals and traditions define a classroom climate also (Adelman and Taylor 2005). In addition to these inside factors, outer political, social, cultural and economic backgrounds of an institution's surrounding also shape it. In this context, researchers have come up with a number of main concepts related to understanding classroom climate. For example,

(a) social system organization
(b) social attitudes
(c) staff and student morale
(d) power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures
(e) curricular and instructional practices
(f) communicated expectations
(g) efficacy
(h) accountability demands
(i) cohesion
(j) competition
(k) the "Fit" between key learner and classroom variables
(l) system maintenance, growth, and change
(m) orderliness
(n) safety

Rudolph Moos (1979) groups such concepts into three major dimensions for classifying human environments and has used them to develop measures of school and classroom climate. Moos's (1979) three dimensions are:

- **Relationship:** the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment-, the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other.

- **Personal development:** basic directions along which personal growth and self enhancement tend to occur.

- **System maintenance and change:** the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change.

The present study used Moos's (1979) division as criteria to define what a classroom climate consist of. As the scope of the present study was small so it focuses only on the first element 'relationship'. The relationship dimension addresses student involvement in the classroom, as well as feelings of friendship between students, and teachers' support of students (Fredrick et al 2014). However, the present study uses Moos's (1979) concept of *relationship* in a different light. As stated earlier, outer environment including social and cultural background influences on making up a classroom climate, taking on board the social background, the present study combines it with Moss's (1979) component '*relationship*'.

The term social background is also an umbrella term. It may consist upon multi dimensions ranging from the economical, cultural, home, social life to the rural and urban background. For the scope of the present study, it was narrowed down to the rural and urban background only. It sets out to explore how students from different socio-cultural background of rural and urban organise relationship with each other and what sort of challenges it sets forth for a teacher to manage a positive class climate for everyone.

Rural and Urban Learners
A growing body of educational research has investigated the differences in performances of students from rural and urban backgrounds. The findings so far have remained inconsistent. While some studies have failed to find any statistically significant difference (Memon 2014, Edington and Koehler, 1987; Haller et al., 1993) others have reported urban students having a significant advantage over rural students (Young, 1998). In other studies, however, students from rural schools were found better than their urban counterparts (Alspaugh and Harting, 1995). Although, these studies together do not present a decisive picture, they do suggest that there are differences between rural and urban.

Young (1998) pointed to the general impression among researchers, educators, legislators, and general public, that urban schools are well resourced and as compared to rural schools in terms of quality of instruction, teachers' training, and schooling conditions. Moreover, the concern about differences in performance of rural and urban students has been recognized as a global issue. Many studies exhibit such concerns in different contexts such as; US (Fan and Chen,1999; Khattri et al., 1997), Canada (Alasia, 2003; Cartwright and Allen, 2002), Australia (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1992), India (Singh and Varma, 1995), and Peru (Stevenson et al., 1990).

The presents study is based in Sindh. Both rural and urban parts are found very different from each other in terms of resources, social life style, income, education, job opportunities, health care, information communication technology and almost in all aspects (Memon 2014). The rural and urban gaps are noticed in public and official records too. According to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey 2012-13, overall literacy rate in rural areas of the Sindh province is 42 percent only compared to 77 per cent in urban areas. Many of Sindhi rural people do not get through sequential education in English language and are not surrounded by a stimulating environment and reading resources. This results in their low literacy levels. And even if they get into university somehow, they face double troubles in settling in academic as well social life style. With little academic and social skills, they have to struggle hard in various aspects including settling healthy relationship with more resourceful urban peers. Such rural learners come to university and normally occupy the back benches. Usually, they are not given much attention by the teachers and are taken as slow learners who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are less able to learn (Memon 2014).

The present study sets out to explore that what sort of relationships- in terms of how do they get along as class fellows- they form with their peers who come from privileged

urban background than them. Having given the general view about the disparities between rural and urban learners, next section briefly gives a glance of the target situation.

Research Methodology

Research Questions
Based on this literature review, this study takes up following research questions. As the current study is based on Moos's (1979) idea of relationship so, keeping in view that, following three questions were framed.

> RQ1: What is the level of students' interest and attention in class?
> RQ2: What is students' feel level of friendship towards other students in class?
> RQ3: What is the level of t support teachers offer towards students in class?

Instrumentation
This section deals with how classroom climate can be measured effectively. The concept of classroom concept is a social psychological construct. The perception of classroom climate may vary from one observer to another. Some of the prevailing approaches to measure classroom climate are:

- teacher and student perceptions
- external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and
- naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative assessment techniques
  (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999).

For the purpose of the present study, I have used teachers' and students' perception. It is chosen because students are known as the most important variable in creating a positive classroom climate. So, their perceptions will help in getting the actual picture and will also facilitate teachers to device the ways to create a positive climate.

The present study used semi-structured interviews. The interview centred on the definition of relationship given by Mosse (1989). Following questions were asked in the interviews and appropriate probing was done too wherever necessary.

- Involvement in class: Do you feel interested and attentive in class?
  PROBE: participation in discussions, completing work on their own
- Level of friendship students feel toward each other: Do you show friendly attitudes to your classmates?/Do your classmates show friendly attitudes towards you?
  PROBE: peer assistance, working together
- The support the teacher displays toward students: Does your teacher show friendly attitudes towards students?
  PROBE: Giving equal opportunity for class participation to everyone, listening to the major issues and giving solution, encouraging,

Participants
Generally, the sample size in qualitative studies is small. In order to decide on exactly how many, one has to take into consideration matters such as data collection method, resources available, research purpose, and sampling criteria (Ritchie et al, 2003). As a rule of thumb, qualitative researchers agree that samples for qualitative interviews can, or perhaps even

should, be below 50 (Bryman, 2012; Ritchie et al, 2003) so that the prime focal point remains on in-depth insights in the qualitative interviews. A researcher should continue interviewing participants until one reaches a point of saturation when additional data does not seem to develop the concepts any further, but simply repeats what previous informants have already revealed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Dorneyi, 2007). Following this, interviews of participants were done until the point of saturation. I interviewed 13 rural participants and 11 urban participants.

Sampling
As the nature of my study required the participation of both rural and urban students, I used a stratified sampling technique to divide first-year participants into two cohorts: rural and urban.

Data analysis procedure
For analysing semi-structured interviews the methodology I adopted is based on Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) constant comparative method, as depicted in figure 1. These researchers drew this method from Glaser and Strauss' work (1967) as well as Lincoln and Guba's work (1985: 334-344). The constant comparative method of analysing qualitative data combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994: 134).
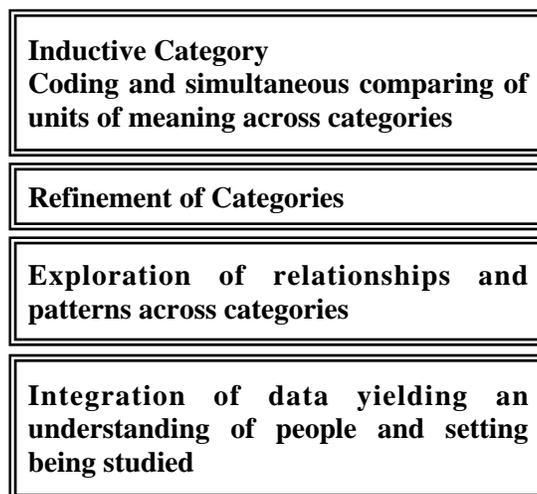
> **Inductive Category**
> **Coding and simultaneous comparing of units of meaning across categories**

> **Refinement of Categories**

> **Exploration of relationships and patterns across categories**

> **Integration of data yielding an understanding of people and setting being studied**

Figure 1: Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) Constant Comparative Method

This method involves breaking down the data into discrete 'incidents' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or 'units' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and coding them as specific categories. The process of analysis involves a constant movement back and forth, which means that each new incident/unit of meaning selected for analysis from the interview transcripts is compared to all other units of meaning and grouped with them. If that unit does not match any existing category then a new category is formed.

Following the above procedure, data was analysed. The next section presents the findings.

Results

Research Question 1: Involvement in class: Do you feel interested and attentive in class?

New and strange world

Some of the participants viewed the class environment as new and strange. Majority of them were rural. They gave following reasons for finding it so:

> 'Most of the pupils I studied with did not join university. Some of them are studying privately, others left and some others stared doing jobs. So, it is like knowing new people here. And of course, no one knows me and I do not know anyone'.
>
> Rural Participant 3

> 'It is a new place and it is like catching up with new life vibes. Making new friends at this stage seems difficult. I am so different from others. People seems to have altogether a different life style and thinking'.
>
> Rural Participant 5

On the other hand, urban participants' views did not express strangeness and viewed class environment in a positive light:

> 'It is good experience. Normally i hang around with my own friends from   college or school but it is good to study with a variety of people'.
>
> Urban Participant 1

Left out

In Sindh University, we have large classes. A usual class comprises of 100 or above students. In such big classes, it is difficult for teachers to remember the names of students (Bughio 2012). Thus, students remain anonymous to the instructor and to each other in large classes (McKeachie, 1999). Even students cannot get chance to participate in the group activities properly. Due to such effects, some participants talked about a feeling of lack of connectedness with the class fellows, and classroom activities.

> 'I do not know whatever happens in the class, I do not feel like I am part of it. I often want to say something but I can never make it out. So, now i feel I nobody knows me in class and I am outsider and I come to observe classrooms'.
>
> Urban Participant 2

> Teachers often take back benchers as less competent and therefore they come ready to see us sitting silent or not participating. I often sit in the back bench. That saves me from being highlighted in the front seats and also from being asked any question. But this also makes me feel that I do not exist in class.
>
> Rural Participant 6

Another theme related to this, which came out of the probing of this aspect was related the class being dominated by a few voices. In a usual class at Sindh University, class

remains handled in the old traditional teacher centred approach. For example, some believed that class is dominated by a few. Some of them considered girls getting more time to share. While others believed that urban learners are more vocal and they readily response and thus the chance for participating for rural ones is left only little. One of the representative comments is as below,

> Urban students share more in the class. Of course, their education is far better than that of ours. They have been there and know a lot about world. I have just come here and i think I have to learn a lot to be able to compete them.
>
> Rural Participant 10

Gender consciousness

Parents in rural Sindh are guided by religion, and therefore they make it mandatory for their girls not to be exposed to males right from their childhood. The Government has provided separate schools for the genders. Boys go to school and study with male teachers and girls go to school and study with female teachers. Some participants discussed the impact of this on their later life at university; they feel hesitant and shy in front of the opposite gender. They do not feel confident in sharing their thoughts in class. One of the female students expressed it as follows:

> The moment I want to say aloud things, my thought move around the male students. In past, I have not been talking much in front of them. So, I often have to deal with the battle to express my thoughts or not to.
>
> Rural Participant 7

On the other hand, urban learners did not mention such concern.

So, how do these findings help us to answer research question no 1. As can be seen, the comments have shown a clear contrast between urban learners as 'have been here' and rural learners as 'just come here'. Following major differences can be summarised:

- Rural learners find settling in university classroom generally and in classroom particularly challenging and a new phenomenon. On the other hand, urban learners find it comparatively easy. This difference in classroom might be because the presents study focused on part –I students in university who had only recently shifted to city to acquire education. This poses a question for teachers to be aware of this sensitive issue. While urban learners may be settling to studies, the rural learners may be settling to life generally.

Level of friendship students feel towards each other

Since the participants were in the first semester of the university so this question generated themes majorly centred around making new relationships. There was a clear contrast between what rural and urban learners said about these relationships. Majority of rural learners talked about adjusting to new relationships and they expressed their views regarding how inside class division occurred related to groups.

Inside class division

> I feel there are different groups of learners in class. It is hard to get bonding or be a part of urban students. They seem to have

already friends from school and colleges. I have met majority
of them first time in my life'.

<div align="right">Rural Participant no 5</div>

I believe we come from different worldviews. I do not share
my life style with my urban peers. I even talk differently than
my urban classmates. It will take time to adopt life here. At the
moment everything is different here.

<div align="right">Rural Participant no 9</div>

Gender segregated and mixed groups

As can be seen in 'Gender consciousness', the rural participants took the presence of opposite gender as a barrier to express. Contrary to that, the urban learners found class divided due to gender segregation.

I heard at university level, we study in co education but to be
honest, I still see things way different than this. Many of girls
have formed their own groups and boys have their own. I see
this more in our rural side classmates. They interact with all but
majorly roam around with their other rural friends. May be
because they live together and they understand each other
more.

<div align="right">Urban Participant no11</div>

On the other hand, urban learners expressed that class seems to run according to the plans of rural students. Since, rural students live in hostels and whenever there is an occasion of public holidays then classes get suspended one or two days more so that they can live longer at their homes. In the words of one of the participants,

See, the class representative (CR) is very important person. He
usually carries our concerns to the teachers and coordinates
between many students. Somehow, it is always a rural learner
who gets nominated as CR.

<div align="right">Urban Participant 06</div>

Global v/s local:

Unlike their counterparts, urban learners are exposed to a more advanced and modern lifestyle and resources. The rural Sindh lack these basic necessities so let alone modern advancements. In the interviews, some rural learners expressed the impact of this lack on their personalities.

In the village, I was considered as intelligent and hardworking
student. Every one regarded me as a bright student. I enjoyed
this feeling until I came here. I find urban classmates way
forward than me. They seem to be part of global world. I
perceive myself a little man of a little town now.

<div align="right">Rural Participant 01</div>

The use of '*little man of a little town'* suggests the negative impact on the personalities of students.

<div align="center">124</div>

Having given these findings, we can answer the research question 2 in the following way:

It seems that students in first year of their university life still hold their own identities from where do they come from. We can see in the above comments that how rural learners feel comfortable in hanging around other rural learners outside classes and inside classrooms even they seem to sitting in groups. Similarly, urban learners have their own groups. Of course, this does not facilitate in bridging gaps and making new relationships. It sets out a challenge for teachers to manage class in a way which reduces such gaps and creates opportunity for interacting.

Research Question 3: *The support teachers displays towards students*
There were mixed views about the role of university teachers. The contact between teachers and students has been only of a few months so some participants expressed struggling relationship between themselves and their teachers. The major themes came out as;

Lack of awareness about cultural/educational background sensitivity
Some rural participants expressed that some teachers expect too much from them and they expect class to go in one speed where everyone knows everything. They expected teachers to be culturally sensitive and should be aware of their educational background. One of the students interestingly called this approach in the following words,

> See, one shoe does not fit every one. Does it? Sadly, our teachers assume that all students have enjoyed the quality educational backgrounds and have grown up in stimulating cultures which promote human development. They do not realise that there are students in class who have been through ghost schools or have never received quality life and education.
>
> Rural Participant 03

> Teachers often teach to those whose level of understanding and knowledge is higher and who occupy the front seats. We are ignored who take time to understand sometimes as we have been through such a poor educational background. We get snubbed sometimes if we ask something. Once a teacher told me not to ask unnecessary questions as it disturbs the pace of her lecture. She suggested that I should have covered these basics before joining university.
>
> Rural Participant 09

Personal interest in promoting student development
However, some participants also gave positive feedback about the teachers' role in the classroom management. They called it '*vibrant*' (Urban Participant 01), '*encouraging*' (Urban participant 03).

Based on the above findings, research question 03 can be answered as students had mixed views about teachers. Rural learners expect teachers to be more considerate of their humble backgrounds which did not prepare them enough to face the new challenges. They wanted to be given more importance so that they can build up confidence to pursue studies.

Conclusion

This study majorly focused on the perceptions of rural and urban learners about the relationship they form in the first year of their university life. The findings suggested that there lies a gap between the learners of both backgrounds. Due to differing background context, students do not seem to get along well with other each other. This sets a challenge for teachers to address such divide so as to build a healthy classroom climate. These findings can be applicable in the context of any other public sector university where learners of mixed backgrounds learners study together.

Some of the ways this gap can be bridged are as follows:

- Firstly, randomness should be norm in sitting arrangement in class: Students form their own groups of friends. Although, at university level, there is not any formal requirement to sit in the same seat everyday, but students are usually seen to be sitting with the same group of friends. In the large classes at public sector universities, it might not be practical idea to reshuffle students as it might take time. But a teacher may encourage sitting in class randomly. Those who sit randomly may be appreciated.

- Secondly, positive talks about a sense of togetherness: Teachers may inculcate in students a feeling of togetherness by giving them positive talks about being one and taking class image collectively.

- Thirdly, students may be engaged in peer evaluation on random basis.

- Lastly, use of technology can also help in connecting students with students and teachers such as social websites facebook.

This study also offers some implications. It poses questions related to classroom management such as;

a. How do we make each student feel a part of the class?
b. How do we maximise student participation in class?
c. How do swap/switch rural and urban learners to mix up in and outside class?

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