

Between Ideal and Institutional: Prospective Teachers' Conceptions of Discussion-Based Citizenship Pedagogy in Pakistani Elementary Schools



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Abstract: *The provision of citizenship education in Pakistan's elementary schools is still very much teacher-centric and does not afford space for learning active citizenship in a dialogic and participatory manner. In the context of Pakistan, the potential for pedagogical change lies primarily within the prospective teachers; however, the conceptions of teachers regarding 'pedagogy of discussion' as well as the structural conditions influencing such conceptions are underexamined. The study presents the Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the semi-structured interviews of ten final-year BS Education students from a public university in Punjab, Pakistan, who were all required to do compulsory teaching practice in elementary schools. Four themes emerged in the analysis: discussion as social meaning-making; democratic competence as a result of structured dialogue; institutional constraints as systemic problems; and scaffolded facilitation as a practitioner's response. The participants had a coherent understanding of discussion pedagogy, and they tied it into students' voice and critical thinking skills and democratic competence. Furthermore, they found 'systemic conditions', which are overcrowded classrooms, inflexible learning programmes, and limited lesson time, which continuously hinder the implementation of such ideals in school contexts. It is not some teachers who are lacking the pedagogical orientation, but rather this is a structural problem that needs to be addressed at the level of policy. Results have implications for the design of teacher preparation programmes, policy concerning practicum, and reform in the elementary curriculum in Pakistan.*

Keywords: Citizenship Education, Discussion-Based Pedagogy, Elementary Education Citizenship Education, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Pakistan, Theory–Practice Gap

Introduction

Citizenship education has become a site of policy conflict in global education. In democratic societies, civic education has gained increasing importance as the institutions of democracy are increasingly under pressure and social cohesion within

multiple societies is increasingly challenged (Banks & Banks, 2019). Especially at the elementary level, this preparation focuses on forming dispositions to participation, equality, and public life (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). However, research in several countries has found that dialogue-based

pedagogies that focus on discussion engender greater civic learning outcomes than pedagogies that focus on transmission (Rapanta et al., 2021). These include improvements in critical thinking, perspective taking, inclination to engage in civil discourse, and alignment with democratic processes (Hess & McAvoy, 2014).

Discussion methods, defined as structured or semi-structured dialogical practices, where students discuss, defend, and challenge their own and other perspectives in relation to civic issues, align with the democratic aims of citizenship education (Parker & Hess, 2001). Students learn to take part in reasoned conversations with others, gaining the skills the practice of democracy requires: questioning, listening carefully, articulating opinions and ideas, appreciating others' perspectives, and successfully negotiating technicalities and reaching reasoned agreement through civic negotiation. According to the theory of deliberative democratic education, it is not an accidental byproduct, but is part and parcel of how citizenship is developed in the classroom (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

However, in Pakistan, citizenship education has been predominantly transmission-based, where children have learnt only textbook content, and teachers have provided one-way communication teaching where students are taught to memorise and regurgitate information from textbooks (Muhammad & Brett, 2017; Naseem, 2010). In the national curriculum, factual knowledge of civic structures is prioritised, and the dispositions and competencies to be an active citizen are not. Despite the positive results from transmission-based instruction, its use in both public and private schools remains limited, and the teaching method is still mainly dominated by transmission-

based instruction (Halai & Durrani, 2017). In this context, it is clear that the beliefs and conceptions of prospective teachers are especially important, as they are where the intended and enacted curriculum converge, and are the starting point, if there is one, for any pedagogical change.

A significant amount of literature exists on discussion-based citizenship education, both nationally and internationally, although literature focusing on the conceptions of Pakistani prospective teachers on the discussion-based approach to teaching citizenship is scarce (Muhammad & Brett, 2017, 2019). Studies pertaining to citizenship education in Pakistan have focused on the content of the curriculum, ideology presented in the textbooks, and teachers-in-service, with little attention to pre-service teachers' beliefs prior to entering classrooms (Halai & Durrani, 2017; Muhammad & Brett, 2019). It is important, as teacher beliefs are among the most significant factors in determining how teachers teach, what teachers do and do not do, more than even formal training or the prescription of the curriculum (Pajares, 1992).

There is also a lack of consideration for the conditions of the structure in which future teachers in Pakistan expect to function, and there is a lack of understanding of these conditions in which future teachers in Pakistan expect to function. Findings show a theory-practice disjunction in that pre-service programmes are effective in building progressive pedagogical orientations, and in practice, when teaching at overcrowded schools with content-driven curricula, the teachers are overwhelmed (Ghafor et al., 2026; Rasheed et al., 2025; Shamim et al., 2026). This similarity has not been systematically investigated to determine whether it applies to Pakistani BS in

Education graduates' understanding of discussion-based citizenship pedagogy and which structures are the most likely to be at play.

A further gap concerns the elementary level specifically. Consistent with the majority of the research on discussion pedagogy in citizenship education, research has focused on deliberation at the secondary level (Hess & McAvoy, 2014), where the communicative and conceptual resources required for structured deliberation are more likely to exist. Elementary classrooms have some unique issues, such as having children of a wide developmental range, a lack of previous background in structured dialogue, and a higher need for teacher prompts. Pre-service teachers' conceptions for managing these problems in elementary citizenship lessons on this subject have been less explored.

This study aims to address the gaps identified above by examining the understanding of the prospective teachers of Pakistan about discussion-based citizenship pedagogy, the benefits and barriers they perceive in it, and their suggestions for facilitation strategies they would like to implement in their elementary school classrooms. It presents the results of a qualitative study based on Reflexive Thematic Analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten final-year BS Education students of a public university, who had participated in mandatory practice in elementary schools. (2) What are the relationships of prospective teachers' concepts of discussion methods with their models and characteristics of elementary citizenship education? How are the concepts of discussion methods related to the models and characteristics of elementary citizenship education as conceptualised by prospective teachers? (2) What aspects of a discussion

pedagogy do future teachers see as positive/negative? (3) What are the planned teachers' suggestions on how to facilitate elementary citizenship discussions?

The paper is organised as follows: first, an overview of the literature via a thematic literature review; then a section on methodology, the Reflexive TA approach; followed by a section on the findings - four themes; then a section on the discussion linking the findings to existing theory and research; and then a conclusion relating to implications and future directions.

Literature Review

Democratic Education and the Role of Dialogue

A key assumption of democratic citizenship education is that schools are not just responsible for imparting knowledge of democratic systems, they also need to shape the mindsets, abilities, and dispositions necessary for democratic citizenship (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). As theorised by Habermas and realised in the context of education by Gutmann and Thompson, the practice of deliberative democracy involves reasoning through differences in what people want to see happen among citizens. Classrooms, in this narration, are not just a preparatory stage for democracy; instead, they are the site of practising and learning democracy in discourse. Accordingly, discussion-based pedagogy is the most pedagogically suitable form that can be used to teach deliberative democracy; Discussion-based pedagogy is the most suitable vehicle for deliberative democratic education. They view students as active civic meaning makers, instead of passive consumers of civic meaning.

The influential model of three conceptions of the good citizen - personally responsible citizen who follows the law and fulfils obligations, participatory citizen who engages in civic processes, and the justice-oriented citizen who inquires, investigates, and challenges inequitable structures (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) - helps in understanding the current state of citizenship education. These are associated with three different pedagogies. While transmission-based instruction would likely result in the production of personally responsible citizens who are aware of their duties, the requirements of discussion-based learning, on the other hand, lead to the creation of conditions for participative and just citizenship as it involves inviting learners to formulate questions that need to be resolved, to bring in contrasting points of view, and, in general, to acquire the communication skills necessary for social inclusion. This typology places the current research, which explores prospective teachers' conceptions of discussion, in an interpretive framework: if prospective teachers see discussion as the teacher accepting students' views, the type of citizenship their conceptions aim to develop becomes analytically significant.

Constructivist Foundations of Discussion Pedagogy

Epistemologically, the theory of sociocultural learning can be a theoretical basis for a discussion-based learning model (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). On this view, learning does not involve the passive receiving of knowledge that has already been formed elsewhere; instead, it is the result of a process of socialisation and sense construction that occurs through interaction, dialogue, and concerted meaning-making. Structured classroom dialogue is intended to activate the developmental space between

what a learner is able to do on their own and what they can accomplish with the interaction of a higher-capable peer or teacher - called the zone of proximal development. This suggests that in civic education, knowledge of what it means to be a good citizen is not conveyed from teacher to student, but rather is co-constructed among students via facilitated dialogue.

Research on cooperative learning and structured academic discussion has been richly developed along the lines of constructivist ideas (Parker & Hess, 2001). It has been consistently found that students instructed in structured discussions have a higher level of conceptual retention, more sophisticated reasoning, and higher civic attitudes than if they were instructed using lecture-based instruction. Shulman's pedagogical content knowledge framework is directly applicable to discussion-based citizenship teaching, as it can be used to describe a kind of knowledge that teachers need, not only to be knowledgeable about the subject matter of their teaching, but also to "translate and transform those aspects of content into teachable form" (Shulman, 1987). Even if teachers can master and know civic information, discussion pedagogy requires teachers to understand how to ask questions, manage conflicting opinions, facilitate students' participation, and keep the discussion going across developmental differences. This knowledge is complex and difficult, and it is not guaranteed that undergraduate courses from professional education programmes will be well developed.

Challenges to Implementation in Developing-Country Contexts

Studies in South Asian and other developing contexts reveal that there is still a disconnect between the pedagogical perspectives

instilled by teacher training programmes and the pedagogical approaches of pre-service teachers and early-stage teachers that are implemented in classrooms (Halai & Durrani, 2017). This is not predominantly an issue of individual teachers' shortcomings. It is a reflection of the structural situations, namely large classes, content and examination-oriented curricula, a lack of resources, and institutional cultures that tie to compliance rather than participation.

Specific to Pakistan, studies have shown that typical elementary schools have classes of 40 and more children, have a national curriculum geared more towards covering the syllabus than towards quality pedagogy, and have a culture of teaching built around the ability to deliver talks (Halai & Durrani, 2017). Pre-service and in-service educators with progressive and learner-centred viewpoints experienced such situations in the context of practicum and were prone to fall back to the transmission-oriented approaches to teaching. Although the issue is observed that there is a structural gap that the Pakistani elementary school system has with democratic pedagogical ideals, very little is undertaken in terms of studying this area in detail from the perspective of prospective teachers. This is the area that is tackled in the current study.

Teacher Beliefs and Pre-Service Preparation

Teacher beliefs are a set of often unspoken, deeply held convictions about teaching and learning and content that serve as screens through which formal training is “filtered” and, at the same time, “recoded” (Pajares, 1992). As pre-service teachers enter teacher education courses, their belief systems have been built up through years of work as learners in their former schools, and Lortie's idea of the ‘apprenticeship of observation’ refers to the strong impact of this former

schooling on pre-service teachers' intuitive beliefs about good teachers and good teaching. Such prior beliefs are not easily ‘unlearned’ through ‘textbook’ training and can only be challenged, problematised, and reworked when there is a clear opportunity within teacher education programmes to consider the beliefs in the first place.

Overall, teacher preparation and research on discussion pedagogy reveal that pre-service educators always do in principle; they always claim that they want to implement discussion-based, but they do not know how to do it, especially with younger students, in less desirable classroom environments (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). One of the challenges they endure is that they do not necessarily have the procedural fluency and their practical, hands-on ability with specific facilitation moves to make endorsement happen into competent practice. Teachers in teacher education courses that focus on conceptual theory but do not include specific avenues for supervised practice in facilitating discussion tend to think that they should be talking, but are not able to do it consistently. This contrast between the conceptual support and proficiency in processes seems particularly prevalent in Pakistan, as the practice of pre-service programmes has always been to focus on subject matter and curricular planning rather than on developing the skills of the facilitation process (Halai & Durrani, 2017).

Methodology

Research Design

The main qualitative data analytical method used in this study was the Reflexive Thematic Analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The use of Reflexive TA stemmed from the aim of the study, which was to offer an interpretation of

prospective teachers' conceptions about discussion pedagogy both theoretically and empirically, and not to perform a frequency description or a mapping of conceptions. As far as the epistemological commitments of this research, the theoretical flexibility of Reflexive TA and the emphasis on the researcher's construction of themes as a response to the data fit well. The strategy concretises the values of 'big Q' in its qualitative nature through the construction of knowledge as contextual, positionally located by the researcher, and interpretation/making of meaning, as opposed to representation and verification of knowledge.

Philosophical Paradigm

The research is based on constructionist ontology: social reality is not 'given' or unique and central, but is created out of the meanings that participants create in their specific social and historical context. The epistemic position is "contextualist," which believes that knowledge should not be separated from that which it is produced by, and should not be removed from the conditions (power relations, institutional structures, etc., and cultural norms) in which it is developed. It is a qualified form of representational theory of language: The language of the participants is not seen as a 'pure', 'direct' representation of reality, but rather as an expression of their orientations and experiences, and is supposedly meaningful for the purposes of this study. The analysis is mainly experiential in nature, involved in establishing an account of the prospective teachers' discourses on discussion pedagogy, but it also has a critical dimension that looks towards the structural and institutional influences on the constructions of discussion pedagogy contextually established.

Analytic Approach

The orientation or approach to the data was inductive; that is, codes and themes emerged from the data, and nothing was a priori in relation to the coded material, although the research literature inevitably influenced the researcher's awareness of the patterns. The meaning focus was both explicit (latent) and implicit (semantic): It was to target what participants actually said as well as what they implicitly assumed, oriented to, and contradicted in their accounts. In this study, such a double engagement proved fruitful, since the tension between the democratic ideals and structural realism, which proved to be the most analytically pertinent, manifested itself at both these levels.

Participants and Sampling

To obtain a sample of members that would provide information-rich or related discourses to the research questions, purposive criterion sampling method was used (Patton, 2015). The governing factors encompassed the final-year of BS Education (Four-Year) students (inclusion criteria), who have travelled as required under a compulsory teaching practice to the elementary school and have learnt the contents regarding the curriculum in the social science lessons/citizenship education lessons (Creswell & Poth, 2023). All the women who participated were recruited from a public university, and they fit all the above criteria. The subjects were ten final-year BS Education students, all of whom happened to be female, in line with the enrolment ratio in the programme in the institution. To ensure confidentiality, participants in this study have been given pseudonyms (Participant 01 – Participant 10). Information power was used to determine sample size – homogeneity of the sample, specificity of the research questions,

and in-depthness (semi-structured interviews) gave sufficient information power to warrant a credible and theoretically meaningful analysis (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data Collection

Data were collected using individual in-depth or semi-structured interviews, which took approximately 45–60 minutes for each interview. Through the development of an interview protocol that asked specific questions related to the three research questions, participants were asked about their understandings of discussion approaches, their experiences of practica in relation to citizenship content, and their beliefs about the benefits, difficulties, and strategies involved with using discussion-based teaching. The protocol questions were open-ended, aimed at eliciting the most elaborated response in the form of a narrative. Data were collected in both languages (Urdu and English) based on the preference of the participants and audio-recorded with their consent and later transcribed verbatim. Language editing for readability was done in the transcripts, but with no significance to the meaning.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was conducted using the six steps of Reflexive TA, which were outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2022). All ten transcripts were read several times in Phase 1 to gain deep familiarity with the data and to make initial observations for analysis. In the second phase of this work, the entire dataset was systematically coded to create a complete set of codes that were found to be relevant to the analysis of participants' accounts. Coding was done in two phases. In Phase 3, coding of data extracts and various forms of collated data were examined to find

candidate themes that capture pattern(s) of meaning within the data set. Phase 4 was a process of comparing the candidate themes with the whole coded data, in order to evaluate how 'refined' they were, whether they were 'distinct' enough, and whether they had adequate 'analytic purchase'. This entailed the dropping of some themes, the refinement of others, and the synthesis of others. At Phase 5, more detailed descriptions of each theme were written, a central organising concept for each theme was identified, and a scope for each theme was set, along with evocative, precise names for each theme. Phase 6 included writing the analytic narrative, now that interpretation and meaningful extracts of the data were woven into this account to produce a story that was persuasive and based on the data set. Analysis was conducted throughout, and movement in between phases was allowed for as the interpretive account was formed.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team consisted of three final-year BS Education students who were in the same programme and from the same institution as the respondents, supervised by a faculty member who was knowledgeable about qualitative research methodology. The positioning resulted in constructive "insider" insights along with specific "reflexive" demands. This was because of theory from the researchers related to institutional context, pedagogical training, and the researchers' rapport with the students' experiences of Practicum Engagement. To circumscribe the tendency to overly embellish the narratives of the participants, the research team used disconfirming evidence, searching for qualifications, exceptions, and contradictions in the data, which were interpreted as being analytically relevant rather than as "noise" in the data. The

endorsements of the discussion procedures provided by the participants did not simply get accepted, but the preparatory conditions and boundaries on which such endorsements were taking place, were explored as well. Documenting the analytic process through reflective notes resulted in an audit trail of the analytic process decisions made.

Trustworthiness and Quality

The credibility of this study is based on rationality, clarity, and self-reflection and is supported by concrete data illustrations. All the analytical sections are based on the same theoretical framework. The statements made are not simply descriptive but create an interpretive view that tries to develop a theoretically driven explanation of what the participants' stories mean in response to the questions asked in this study, as well as in other studies. Changes incorporate and discuss disconfirming evidence. Direct data extracts from the participants to support analytic claims are placed next to the analytic claim. Member-checking was used, in which a description of the initial results was sent to each of two members for verification of interpretation, and they also represented some nuances that were added to the explanation of the final results.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the purposes of the research study, how it was to be conducted, and that they could drop out of the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. The participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. All audio records/transcripts are housed in an institutional server that is password-protected and available only to the research team and supervisor. Before data collection,

an institution's approval of the research from the Department of Education, GC Women University Sialkot, was obtained.

Findings

The ten interview transcripts were analysed and resulted in four themes. These themes are analytically interdependent: Theme 1 and Theme 2 develop what prospective teachers "believe" discussion pedagogy is and "should" be; Theme 3 identifies the structural conditions that prevent what they believe discussion pedagogy is and demonstrates what it should be from realisation in practice; and Theme 4 provides prospective teachers' adaptive strategies in response. In conjunction, they develop a coherent storyline about the theory-practice gap in the context of Pakistan's prospective teachers.

Theme 1: Dialogue as Social Meaning-Making

The key organising idea of this theme is the change from the teacher-learning relationship from a transmission to an exchange. At the forefront of everyone's thinking was the interaction and reciprocity of discussion, a norm that was explicit in the definition provided by all ten participants and that was clearly different from the less interactive discussion level of instruction they had received when they were students, and also observed in practicum. This distinction did not just describe but indexed a different approach towards the theory of the construction of citizenship understanding.

1a. Discussion as Two-Way Communication

The participants expressed the sense of reciprocity in conversation in a clear and

unambiguous manner. Participant 09 explained that she preferred the discussion technique because there is interaction between two people; participants of the technique explain and discuss with each other, whereas in the traditional teaching method, the interaction of the students is less because only the instructor delivers the explanation, discussion, or lectures. Participant 08 said that in the technique of discussion, learners concentrated on each other's thoughts and views without paying attention to the lecture. These accounts do not see discussion as a type of instruction, but as a qualitatively different way of constructing knowledge, consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural view of learning as social and dialogic.

1b. Discussion as Civic Meaning-Making

The word 'discussion' was also used to express the way abstract notions of citizenship are connected to lived issues and experiences of the elementary students. Participant 05 clarified that when students tried to input ideas about civic topics, they developed a deeper understanding of civic concepts, and thus this entails the learners appreciating "what we say and what we are supposed to do as citizens." Participant 04 shared about her adapting civic content in practicum by discussing rights/duties in light of what can be seen happening in the school, and whether students have the same expectations from school as they do from home in terms of cleanliness. Participant 06 explained that an ongoing discussion with the students on the importance of tidiness in the classroom led to the civic action of cleaning off the classroom, not just civic knowledge. The citizenship education is shaped as a conversation, a dialogue, and a process of meaning-making in these accounts, rather than as the delivery of content.

Theme 2: Democratic Competence as Outcome

Rather than treating participation as a prerequisite, the central organising concept of the theme is the results and outcomes that the discussion brings about: confidence, critical thinking, and democratic engagement. The implication of this distinction is very important: the method of discussion will be the means by which democratic competence is created and not simply an arena for the manifestation of existing democratic competence.

2a. Confidence Through Participation

In every instance, the participants expressed confidence as something constructed through participation, as a result of discussion. Participant 10 said, "Whenever participants have an opportunity to speak in class, they are no longer afraid to speak; the reason is that they speak openly, which helps increase their thinking ability, and the ability to think is generated." Participant 01 stated, "There is no such thing as passive listeners as in traditional class teaching, thus increasing the confidence of students to understand." One of the most analytically significant claims in this dataset is that confidence is created by participation and not the other way around. It is a new spin on the democratic idea of the promise of discussion: not just for the more outgoing students, but the necessary means by which more introverted students can gain the necessary communicative confidence for civic participation.

2b. Critical Thinking and Respectful Dialogue

The participants conceived critical thinking as a relational achievement, the achievement of a relationship between thought and other

people, and not only as an achievement made in solitude. Participant 07 reported that discussion “helps students realise other points of view, improves students’ critical thinking, and helps to develop students’ communication skills.” Participant 05 elaborated:

The discussion method involves the development of critical thinking in children, reveals their abilities, and fosters various opinions. Children listen to others’ points of view to analyse. They exchange and communicate in a respectful manner. While someone else is talking, children need not interrupt and cut him/her off; this is the respectful child and listener to other opinions. (Participant 05)

Participant 03 talked about the effect of discussion as a mechanism that brings about a participatory process: “No, if a child hears them, ideas are created inside of his mind, then, when the ideas are created, he shares the ideas with his colleagues.” These accounts frame respectful listening in a dual way as both a “cognitive act” and a “civic act.”

2c. Democratic Engagement and Plural Voice

Participants clearly related their discussion to the process of cementing democratic culture in the classroom. Participant 02 said, “This is a setting where all students are equal, and all students are heard.” Participant 07 believed that conversation is important for students to practice democratic values: equality, respect, participation, etc. in a classroom environment. Participant 09 stated: “Children share their ideas and are respectful of others’ differences and join in. This is an excellent attribute of a good citizen” (Participant 09).

Furthermore, Participant 03 expanded this thought to cultural plurality in Pakistani classrooms: “People who come from different territories, their culture is different as well, but if they disseminate their knowledge, then their cultures are also disseminated.” One important qualification that surfaced was: Participant 08 observed that in practicum, “students feel shy and not confident in discussion,” a direct result of the majority of the positive descriptions. This exception recognises structural challenges in Theme 3 and the contingencies of discussion skills as a democratic competency.

Theme 3: Institutional Constraints as Systemic Barriers

In this organising concept from the centre we are treating the structuring of contradiction between the ends of democratic pedagogy and the means of Pakistani elementary schools. The participants identified barriers on three levels; student-level, classroom management, and structure of the school. These barriers are not isolated issues, but a systemic barrier.

3a. Student-Level Barriers

Some of the participants reported that one of the challenges they faced in effective discussions was shyness, passiveness and lack of general developmental experience of the constituents. Participant 01 said that “Some students do not take part as they are shy to do that.” Participant 10 mentioned individual differences of the elementary students: “Not all students are like that, there are some who are mischievous, some are very talkative, and some pupils are afraid to speak. A conceptual concern was raised by participant 07, “Some younger students may not have a total understanding of complex

citizenship concepts.” As these accounts show, the democratic promise of universal participation must be actively fulfilled with conscious scaffolding if it is to be realised.

3b. Institutional Constraints

The main obstacles for discussion pedagogy were found to be class size, time limits in lessons, and curriculum pressure. Participant 05 said, “Difficulty arose because the class was large. If it were a small class, I am not sure. I think I would have to face the same difficulty.” Participant 02 talked about the time aspect:

With larger classes, we have less time! However, the children do not get an opportunity to speak at the same time. Some children ask a question or two; half of the children are left with something else. Thus, there is a lack of time management. (Participant 02)

“There is pressure to cover the lesson and the topic, but these factors may hinder our discussion because time must be taken for our discussion, and flexibility is needed,” commented participant 09. Participant 04 said that a combination of a large class size and limited time made the combination of managing students and curriculum impossible. Such claims are unanimous and ascribe low performance almost entirely to the structural situation and not necessarily due to individual poor lesson planning and teaching ability (Halai & Durrani, 2017).

Theme 4: Scaffolded Facilitation as Practitioner Response

Practitioner agency, working effectively in a structural context, is the central organising concept of this theme. The participants did not just identify barriers; they also suggested concrete facilitation strategies for which

they showed a high level of awareness of how to create the conditions to make democratic discussion in the classroom possible with a diversity of pedagogically consistent methods.

4a. Graduated Group Structures

The majority of participants advocated for small-group discussion approaches as an alternative to whole-class discussion in large elementary classrooms. They explained a gradual scaffolding from paired exchange to small-group discussion to whole-class sharing, as these sequences increase the social load of the task of public speaking. Several participants suggested think-pair-share as an effective way of initiating reticent students’ engagement. It is a graduated way of thinking, an intuitive recognition that small-group conditions support meaningful exchange and are able to maintain a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

4b. Contextually Relevant Content

Participants suggested using students’ lived experiences as a basis for citizenship discussion rather than abstract civic concepts. Participant 03 commented that connecting concepts to daily life makes them accessible: “The lesson must be explained in a captivating manner, and it must reference the student’s surroundings and experiences if the student is not to be disengaged from the lesson” (Participant 10).

Participant 06 recommended employing pictures and visual supports to help guide open discussions, especially with students who do not like talking about or theorising. It is clear that these strategies demonstrate the sense of establishing a more concrete understanding of the social reality of the

student's environment, so it can be carried out in the dialogue in a meaningful way.

4c. Deliberate Inclusion of Reticent Voices

All participants stressed the importance of inclusive participation and that teachers need to make a deliberate effort, as inclusive participation does not occur spontaneously. Participant 07 commented that “a positive and encouraging environment can work to reduce hesitations and anxiety in reticent students.” Participant 09 suggested doing this in groups with a smaller number of students on purpose so that quieter students have a safe space where they can voice their opinions prior to being called on in larger groups. Participant 01 stressed the need for a “critical, creative, and supportive environment where every learner can express himself/herself and is confident. These approaches all have a common theme in that voice for kids at the elementary level is scaffolded, and there is no equal opportunity for voice assumed.”

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The four themes present a logically connected and theory-laden picture of prospective teachers' understanding of discussion-based citizenship pedagogy through these findings. The participants do not see discussion as one of the possible modes of delivery to be chosen, but rather as an epistemological structure – a different way of operating with knowledge. Theoretically, the orientation is sophisticated, giving recognition to the learning theories in the fields of sociocultural and deliberative democratic education without participants necessarily stating these theories. Based on the results of the analysis, the researcher can conclude

that the BS Education programmes in Pakistan have successfully nurtured the conceptual level of pedagogical orientations in a constructivist manner.

However, the most analytically significant finding is the conflict between this orientation and the structural conditions participants experienced during practicum. The tension is not a side effect; it is not random, and it is not coincidental. It is the central research problem that if the prospective teachers are to embody that the teacher understands that “talk is the central process of social meaning-making and democracy,” then that is not what the classroom model provides for or values. The classroom and system constraints, class sizes (40 plus), pre-autonomy curriculum, and scarcity of time are not minor annoyances but the conditions within which prospective teachers have to work, and by which the pedagogy they are being schooled to appreciate is being thwarted.

Connection to Existing Literature

The participants' idea of a discussion as a form of two-way social meaning-making validates and adds to the deliberative pedagogy description given by Parker and Hess (2001). Their conclusion that confidence is a consequence of discussion and not a prerequisite is in keeping with the research presented in structured academic discussion and civic apprenticeship (Hess & McAvoy, 2014), which posits that repeated instances of low-stakes, public speaking opportunities, in small increments, support students' preparation for civic engagement. To find this in the situation of Pakistan, where hierarchical norms limit the voice of students, the discussion classroom could have a particularly strong interpretive importance: It can be interpreted as a socially legitimated context that allows

students to practice public speaking, which the other context (social environment) may not offer them.

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology for civic use of discussion is directly related to participants' explanations. The participatory and justice-oriented citizenship types seem to be best suited by the participants' description of the building of equal voice, critical thinking, and respect for cultural differences, whereas the personally responsible citizenship type is less fitting. This indicates that the pre-service teachers of the study had a democratic rather than compliance-based view of citizenship education; they view civic learning as a learning process that will prepare them to be active citizens, and not simply compliant citizens.

The structural barriers mentioned by participants in this study fit into the pattern outlined by Halai and Durrani (2017), in the context of educating children and adolescents in Pakistan, as it indicates that the theory-practice gap is not simply the result of poor performance by individual teachers, but is a systemic product of institutional settings that are not designed to maintain progressive dialogic pedagogy. There was a consensus among participants regarding the factors of failure in implementation, such as class size, curriculum load, and lesson time, but this was not related to the lack of competency or confidence of the participants. This is important for the debate in the field of teacher education policy in two ways: (1) it conceives and conceptualises the issues as structural issues instead of as issues on the individual teacher level; and (2) it suggests that addressing it would imply a policy level action in addition to a problem of better training of teachers in pre-service education.

Implications

The theoretical implication of the research finding is that the theory-practice gap in discussion-based citizenship education in Pakistan needs to be theorised as a structural contradiction between democratic citizenship pedagogical ideals and institutional conditions geared towards schooling based on the mass transmission model. If pre-service orientation is to become a reality in classroom practice, it is necessary that the structure of classes (class size, flexibility of curriculum, and length of classes) is also changed; individual teacher capacity is still a necessary but not sufficient condition.

In terms of teacher education, there is a need to introduce discussion in a step-by-step manner with specific provided ways of rehearsing. While participants shared powerful, theoretically informed views of what constitutes discussion practice, their experiences in the practicum suggested that the know how of how to make certain classroom moves was less consistently formed. The practicum components should consist of actual and supervised discussion teaching with feedback, rather than 'to be placed' in the classroom.

A consistent obstacle—mentioned by women everywhere—is curriculum pressure, which suggests that curriculum time needs to be set aside for discussing citizenship. Democratic citizenship's pedagogical practices will continue to be crowded out if these practices are not explicitly allocated, while curriculum coverage pressure will be the main hindrance to the integration of democratic citizenship into the curricula.

Limitations

The authors draw the conclusions on the basis of a one-site/one-programme sample. All the participants were final-year BS Education students at one institution in the Punjab province; the transferability of the findings to other provinces, other types of institutions, or male enrolled students is not known. The conceptions and experiences of practicum of the participants are presented, and not the observed classroom practice, and further empirical studies will be needed to identify a connection between the conceptions and the practices. The research also cannot determine if the orientations observed among the participants continue to the extent of sustained full-time teaching, where institutional pressures are fully experienced.

Future Research Directions

First, a longitudinal study of students who sought the BS Education degree and tracked their endeavours in classroom practice for the next three years would determine whether and in what form such BS Education graduates' democratic pedagogical orientations are sustained in classroom practice. Second, a comparative study of citizenship discussion practices in the classrooms with different structural conditions, by comparing the class sizes and curriculum flexibility, would provide empirical evidence for the policy implications that emerge from participants' perceptions of their classrooms in this study. Third, there is a need for studies on how cooperating teachers and school-based mentors shape pedagogical orientations during practicum on pedagogical orientations developed in pre-service programmes.

Conclusion

In this study, the nature of discussion-based citizenship pedagogy, its perceived benefits and barriers, and the way it is facilitated in elementary classrooms were investigated by asking ten final-year BS Education students how they think, feel, and perceive it in Pakistan. The analysis resulted in four themes: discussion as a social process of meaning-making; democratic competence as a result of structured dialogue; institutional constraints as systemic barriers; and scaffolded facilitation as a practitioners' response. It was found that the participants had a coherent understanding of discussion pedagogy that they could relate to the development of student voice, critical thinking, and democratic competence. They also clearly pointed out the structural factors that hinder such understanding from becoming reality: class sizes of 40 plus; content-centred curricula; and time limitations in lessons.

This study has two contributions. Empirically, it offers a theoretically underpinned account of prospective Pakistani teachers' conceptions of discussion-based citizenship teaching, since there has been limited attention to pre-service teachers' beliefs and experiences in this regard in the literature. In theory, it reveals that the gap between theory and practice in democratic education in Pakistan is not just the problem of individual teachers, but it is an institutional-level issue that needs to be addressed at this level as well as at the policy-level. The study rejects deficit explanations of the lack of sustaining of discussion pedagogy in the elementary classrooms of the Pakistani context. The participants highlighted aspects of democratic pedagogy which they understood; they experienced conditions which made it unworkable. Teacher preparation to believe in democratic education is necessary but not sufficient.

The institutional conditions need to be altered as well.

Future studies should consider the following questions: Do the orientations identified here make their way into classroom practice; what structures and situations are most conducive to sustaining the orientations; and how practicum settings and cooperating teachers' demonstrations of pedagogical practice either strengthen or weaken the potential for sustaining the kinds of democratic orientations that teacher education programmes hope to foster?. Discussion-based citizenship education in Pakistan's elementary schools has a rich theoretical and empirical foundation. Whereas what is still needed is the institutional setting for this case, that is, for it not only to be believed, but practised.

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