

Theoretically Prepared, Structurally Unsupported: Prospective Teachers' Conceptions of Inquiry-Based Citizenship Education in Pakistan

¹Mehak Ejaz Ahmed

²Hina Habibullah

³Momina Islam

⁴Dr. Yaar Muhammad

¹BS Education Student, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot

²BS Education Student, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot

³BS Education Student, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot

⁴Associate Professor, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot

mehakejaz156@gmail.com Habibullah98h@gmail.com mominaislamoo1@gmail.com

yaar.muhammad@gcwus.edu.pk

Abstract

National curricula in Pakistan emphasise the need to promote active, inquiry-based citizenship education; however, classrooms are still spaces of memorisation, teacher-centred, and rote-bound teaching. Prospective teachers hold a role in any change process of this kind of practice; however, there is limited documentation on Pakistan's elementary level about prospective teachers' conceptions of the inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach for citizenship education. More specifically, this study investigated the prospective teachers' conceptions of IBL and citizenship education, their conceptions of citizenship competencies IBL entailed, and the strategies and challenges they foresaw in the implementation process. Semi-structured interviews were used for data generation, which were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Reflexive TA). Four themes emerged: conceptual (mis)alignment without institutional support; IBL as preparation for citizenship skills; IBL classroom as a democratic rehearsal space; and structural barriers as systemic limitations. Findings indicate that conceptions of IBL and citizenship education are significant and theoretically coherent, and are a product of their individual construction and lack an explicit structure. We argue that bridging the divide between policy and the classroom is not about producing more informed teachers, but rather that the overall teacher preparation system, resource provision, and institutional support need to be reconfigured.

Keywords: IBL, Citizenship Education, Prospective Teachers, Pre-Service Teacher Education, Pakistan, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Democratic Pedagogy

Article Details:

Received on 25 Feb, 2026

Accepted on 20 March, 2026

Published on 28 March, 2026

Corresponding Authors*

Introduction

Citizenship education plays a fundamental role in educating young people to become citizens. In different countries, researchers have suggested that citizenship education should foster active, critical, and participatory citizenship (Banks, 2008). Compared with traditional, formal programming, this requirement at the elementary level becomes more important as it shapes the “democratic imagination” of future generations (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). IBL has been an ongoing subject of scholarly and policy interest worldwide as a pedagogy that can help realise this vision. IBL can be viewed as a method that engages students as active knowledge-builders by encouraging them to question, investigate, and make meaning together, as compared to instruction, where students are expected to be “filled” with knowledge (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2010). Evaluation of IBL’s pedagogical aims and the civic functions of citizenship education suggests that the two are theoretically aligned, as both highlight the importance of student voice, student discussion, and real-world issues.

This is a matter of great importance in Pakistan. The National Curriculum and the National Education Policy (GoP, 2009) both point to the importance of citizen formation in a democratic and active, student-centred manner. Millions of young learners in the formative stage of civic development in Pakistan’s elementary schools are still treated with a traditional teacher-centred, exam-centred approach to learning (Windschitl, 2002). The disconnect or divide between the policy and classroom realities is well reported in the Pakistan education literature. In the context of Pakistan, citizenship education has always been combined with students’ moral and religious education, resulting in a passive citizenship grounded in compliance and subservience to authority (Banks, 2008) instead of critical citizenship. This situation is exacerbated by aspects of school structure, such as overcrowded classes, poorly resourced schools, and examination-based curricula, which further limit the scope for an approach that focuses on enquiry.

The focus in IBL research and scholarship so far has been mainly on science and mathematics education (Crawford, 2014), and there has been limited research on IBL in the field of citizenship education. Research on citizenship education in Pakistan has mostly been oriented toward analysing citizenship education in the curricula and reforming it, while the voice of the prospective teachers remains underexplored (Muhammad & Brett, 2020; Rauf & Muhammad, 2026). The influence of teachers’ beliefs and conceptions on classroom practice is well established - teachers do not teach what the curriculum prescribes, but what they know (or think they know) and how they value (Pajares, 1992). Given that prospective teachers enter classrooms with a notion of “IBL as theory,” they are more likely to turn policy intent into “civic education in practice” through a theoretically coherent conception of IBL. However, when conceptions remain underdeveloped or are not taken up by institutions, there is greater policy-practice disconnect. Studies regarding pre-service teachers’ conceptions of IBL in the context of citizenship education, in particular in the Pakistani elementary context, remain a gap in the literature.

This paper is an attempt to fill this gap. It is based on a qualitative study with Reflexive TA, which explored the views of pre-service teachers from a teacher education programme in Pakistan about IBL as a pedagogy for teaching citizenship. The study started with three research questions: (1) How do prospective teachers perceive IBL and citizenship education? (2) Which citizenship skills do prospective teachers see as being related to IBL? (3) What potential strategies, benefits, and barriers are identified by prospective teachers when it comes to citizenship education through IBL?

The paper first conducts a thematic literature review, followed by a detailed methodology, the construction of four themes, a discussion contextualising the existing literature, and finally a conclusion with implications for policy, practice, and further research.

Literature Review

Citizenship Education and Democratic Pedagogy

Citizenship education has been taught from various angles, ranging from the transmission of civic knowledge to the participatory models of democracy to the models of critical thinking on the theme of justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). According to Westheimer and Kahne's basic typology, there are three conceptions of the 'good citizen' - the 'personally responsible citizen', the 'participatory citizen' and the 'justice-oriented citizen.' This typology is useful to expose the political options that inform seemingly neutral civic curricula, as they have fundamentally different curricular and pedagogical orientations. Substantial changes are needed in how the concept of citizenship education has been defined and taught in the South Asian context, where the focus has historically been on personal responsibility, national identity, and moral behaviour, which do not necessarily include participatory or critical civic capacities (Banks, 2008). Banks argues that educating citizens in plural societies means instilling in them the ability to question social norms and to fight for democratic participation, rather than just internalising national norms. The conceptual landscape is complex in Pakistan, where citizenship education has been defined by nationalism from the era of independence, Islamic civic ethics, and various policy changes over the last few years (Muhammad & Brett, 2015a, 2015b, 2019).

Epistemologically, IBL as a civic pedagogy is grounded in the constructivist tradition (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development is of particular interest, where learning takes place as the learner can function beyond their personal independent capabilities due to interactions and scaffolding from others. On the citizenship education front, this principle suggests that civic understanding should be deepened, not by lecturing, but by having students engage in some way with civic questions, engage in dialogue with their fellow citizens, and engage with facilitators (Windschitl, 2002). The classroom is a community of knowledge in constructivist pedagogy, where it connects directly to the dialogic, participative, and democratic citizenship values (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2010).

IBL in Citizenship and Social Studies Education

IBL is an approach to learning and instruction in which students build their understanding based on investigation, questioning, reflection, and reasoning from evidence (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Because of its potential to promote civic thinking, empathy, and deliberative ability, it is used in citizenship and social studies learning. In the new field of history and social studies education, Barton and Levstik (2004) contend that the development of students' ability to make moral or civic judgements should take place by means of disciplinary inquiry rather than as the delivery of approved narratives. Parker (2010) makes this argument in particular to democratic education, arguing that classroom deliberation is a practice space for civic life; a platform for students to exercise reasoning and communicative abilities required for democracy.

Research to date validate the importance of IBL in civic learning. Studies show that inquiry pedagogies result in stronger conceptual understandings, increased student involvement, and sustained intellectual inquiry than is the case in pedagogies based on the lecture setting (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2010). These gains have a civic dimension: students engaged in continuous, sustained investigation with questions of a social and civic nature acquire knowledge, political efficacy, and positive civic dispositions. However, most of

this literature has focused on secondary or higher education settings and was mainly produced in North American and European settings. However, the context that influences the impact of IBL, such as teacher preparation, institutional support, and curricula alignment, varies significantly from one country to another; therefore, it cannot be directly transferred to Pakistan's elementary context.

Teacher Beliefs and Pre-Service Preparation

Teachers' beliefs are closely linked to their own classroom practices (Pajares, 1992). Teachers interpret, select, and respond to curriculum prescriptions based on their own experiences, conceptualisations, understanding, and values. As part of his work with pre-service and in-service school mathematics teachers, Crawford (2007) found that pre-service teachers with a narrow conception of IBL view the activity as loosely structured and not a systematic process in which teachers engage in epistemic work, resulting in shallow and inconsistent implementation of the method in practice pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) can help further analyse these observed instances; to be effective, a teacher should not only know their subject matter but also possess an understanding that is integrated with how they would make the content accessible, meaningful, and engaging for specific learners in specific contexts. For citizenship education, that means that educators need to be familiar with what citizenship means, but also with how one can craft an inquiry-based civic education experience for elementary students.

Pre-service teacher preparation is an important venue where conceptions and competencies for IBL-based citizenship education can develop. An international problem is the mismatch between the knowledge that teachers acquire during the university course and the knowledge that they have the opportunity to show in their field placements (Zeichner, 2010). In teacher education programmes where less explicit attention is given to citizenship, future teachers' constructs of citizenship education result from their own educational experiences and observations of the classroom. The resulting conceptions are sometimes flexible and highly unstable, and not supported by institutions, which makes them vulnerable to erosion under classroom pressures.

Structural Barriers to IBL Implementation in Pakistan

Structural factors in teaching are a major obstacle to the implementation of IBL in Pakistan's primary schools. The availability of inquiry-based pedagogy is limited by large class sizes, physical space, lack of curricular resources, exam-based accountability structures, and lack of teaching professional development structures (Windschitl, 2002). Both the National Education Policy and National Curriculum advocate active learning, but integration is not planned; there is no resource allocation or professional development investment to support systematic implementation. For new prospective teachers, these are far from theoretical; they are rather encountered first-hand during their practicum teaching experiences and are expected in the classroom. It is, therefore, important that prospective teachers' views on and interpretations of these barriers are understood in order to develop pre-service courses which prepare prospective teachers for the contexts in which they will teach.

Methodology

Research Design

The methodological framework in this study was qualitative research based on the methodological approach of Reflexive TA developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Reflexive TA can be used for research that explores issues relating to meaning, experience, and conception, and can provide theoretical flexibility to support a constructionist inquiry focused on how participants make sense of their social and professional worlds. The theoretical flexibility of

Reflexive TA corresponds with the purpose of the study, which examines conceptions rather than the measurement of outcomes, and has a focus on the researchers' analytical involvement as a generative resource, which positions depth of analysis at the centre of the methodology. This study does not aim to present a final or definitive study of prospective teachers' conceptions; rather, it attempts to create a theoretically informed, researcher-produced analysis of the patterns of meaning in the dataset.

Philosophical Paradigm

The study conducted was in line with the relativist ontological position, which suggests that both IBL and citizenship education are constructed socially and contextually, instead of being a representation of reality as such. Epistemologically, it is a constructionist approach, which considers knowledge co-constructed during the interaction between the researcher and the participant, which develops within cultural, institutional, and biographical contexts. Language does not necessarily serve as a lens through which inner thoughts or feelings are revealed, but rather as a practice that serves to produce and express professionals' pedagogical dispositions and identities. The study is experiential; that is, it is an exploration of what participants say, and it takes the subjective nature of their statements into account.

Analytic Approach

An inductive analytic approach was used as themes emerged from the data, rather than applying a coding framework. The analysis focused on two levels of meaning: semantic meaning and latent meaning in addition to what participants told us, what did 'participants' tell us (in terms of their professional knowledge, democratic imagination, and institutional positioning)? This bi-directional orientation allowed us to identify and bring to the surface conceptual gaps and insights not explicitly expressed by the participants but nevertheless tending to remain implicit in their conceptions.

Participants and Sampling

The selection of participants was done by purposive sampling, which involved individuals who could provide information relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). To participate, students had to be in the last year of a BS Education degree programme and had completed at least one teaching practicum in an elementary school with some subject-matter experience in citizenship or social studies-related fields. The study included ten final-year BS Education students of a public university in Sialkot, Pakistan. Saturation was not used to determine sample size, but rather the study was based on information power, that is, when the accounts of the participants provided the requisite conceptual depth and diversity for the creation of analytically robust themes (Malterud et al., 2016). All participants were female and reflected the profile of the participating university, meaning that they had completed practicum in both government and private elementary schools in their placement district. Each participant is coded in the text (Participant 01... Participant 10) to protect their anonymity.

Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews to generate data were conducted from September to November 2025. Based on the research questions and literature review, an interview protocol was developed and structured into five thematic parts: (1) background perspective of interviewees; (2) understanding of IBL and citizenship education; (3) relationship between IBL and citizenship competencies; (4) perceived benefits of IBL; and (5) strategies and obstacles for the implementation of IBL. The interview protocol was checked for alignment with the supervisor's academic standards. Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were conducted in a separate room at the university and were audio-recorded with consent. All surrounding observations and participants' communicative cues were documented in the field notes. The

interviews were conducted in the language of the participants' programme (English), and they were transcribed verbatim by the student researchers.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was performed using the six steps of Reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). During Phase 1, the student researchers read and re-read all transcripts and wrote analytic memos to document initial impressions and questions. Phase 2 involved systematically coding the complete dataset at both the semantic and latent levels, which resulted in some codes representing explicit statements within the data and others representing covert/latent assumptions. In Phase 3, codes were categorised according to the themes of "commonalities." Phase 4 involved reviewing the candidate themes, including testing for conceptual coherence and distinctiveness, against the full dataset. Phase 5 led to the themes being refined, defined, and renamed, according to the central idea around which they were organised, and not their topic content. Themes were incorporated into an analytic narrative in Phase 6, explaining the meanings of themes in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Researcher Reflexivity

The research team adopted an insider research perspective, as all researchers were participants in the same BS Education programme in the same institution. This allowed for first-hand experiences with the institutional context, curriculum, and practicum experiences as known by participants. It also created the risk of imposing the researchers' own interpretations, which can be heavily tinted with Western academic orientations. This risk was most apparent when Theme 1 was analysed for the first time, as participants' representations of citizenship were perceived as being underdeveloped in terms of theory. Re-engagement with the data led to the understanding that the conceptions formed a system of strong, culturally grounded ideas connected with Islamic civic values and Pakistan's social norms. Throughout, reflexivity was engaged as a resource, with the analytic memos clearly marking assumptions and the team discussing ideas of interpretation, and the analytic narrative emphasising researcher construction rather than an attempt to uncover truths that may exist in the data.

Trustworthiness and Quality

In this study, quality is judged by the features relevant to quality in Big Q qualitative research: conceptual coherence, reflexive engagement, transparency, and depth of interpretation, based on rich empirical data. Quotes from participants are used systematically throughout the analytic narrative; the researchers' interpretations or roles are clearly identified throughout the analysis; the theoretical concept is well used with nuance; and limitations are discussed in an appropriate manner. The study is not statistically representative, but relies on careful and context-sensitive reading by the reader to judge the extent of transferability to his or her research context (s).

Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, approval was obtained from the institution (Department of Education, GC Women University Sialkot). All participants provided written informed consent after being fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, as well as the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Recordings and transcripts were kept in a secure manner and were only accessible to the research team. The anonymity of the participants was respected in all study outputs through participant codes.

Findings

Four themes were created from the data, namely (1) Conceptual Alignment Without Institutional Grounding; (2) IBL as a Pathway to Citizenship Competencies; (3) The IBL Classroom as Democratic Rehearsal Space; and (4) Structural Barriers as Systemic Constraints.

Subordinate themes identify each theme, and participant quotations are used to illustrate the different themes.

Theme 1: Conceptual Alignment Without Institutional Grounding

This theme encapsulates the main tension reported by all participants, a coherent and educationally rewarding conceptualisation of IBL and citizenship education that emerged through non-institutional development. Ten participants described IBL as an approach that is focused on students' questions and in contrast to passive, transmission-based pedagogy. Participant 05 explained: "IBL is an approach where the learner plays an important role in the learning process. With IBL, the role of the instructor does not end with giving knowledge, but extends to asking questions, and how the learner can explore." Participant 04 explained further: "Learners not only listen to our lesson, but they also respond to a question we ask. When a learning activity that we design is group work, they pose questions and exchange their ideas with each other and learn/understand each other."

Sub-theme 1.1: Citizenship as values, responsibility, and community membership

Citizenship education has always been conceived as a moral and civic formation process, with values, rights, and responsibilities towards others at the heart of citizenship education. Participant 01 explained, "It implies that learners need to be made aware of their social responsibilities, individual rights, and values for one another, and they need to be ready to assume responsibility in the community." Participant 06 added a moral dimension that saw citizenship as shaping learners' morals, educating them to value others, not just their parents and teachers, but also anyone that they come into contact with as part of a community.

Sub-theme 1.2: Conceptions constructed without formal preparation.

None of the participants mentioned getting any coursework or training in IBL pedagogy for citizenship education. They developed their conceptions through their generic BS Education coursework, practicum observation, and personal reflection. In a sense, analytically, this is important: It means that sound theoretical understandings are developed on their own and not with institutional support. A recognition of the need for rights-claiming/civic advocacy was identified by one participant but was sidelined. The majority of conceptions were those of personally responsible citizenship, focusing on norms, respect, and law-abiding behaviour, rather than participatory or justice-oriented conceptions defined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004).

Theme 2: IBL as a Pathway to Citizenship Competencies

This theme explores participants' understandings and links between IBL and civic skills that should be developed by elementary school students. The primary competency that emerged was critical thinking, and the secondary competencies were collaboration, communication, problem solving, and civic responsibility.

Sub-theme 2.1: Critical thinking as civic competence

All participants identified the ability to think critically as the central skill developed by IBL for citizenship-related purposes. Participant 09 said, "When they give a new problem to the students, the students think critically related to the problem; they will create something new if they see what determines them now; this is improving their critical thinking skills." Participant 01 made a close connection between critical thinking and civic responsibility: "When learners are given questions, they should take the time to evaluate the sources, and it should come from their own perspective; in that way, they can build reflective thinking, which is very important for citizens." These accounts place critical thinking at the heart of the experience of citizenship in democratic terms.

Sub-theme 2.2: Collaboration, communication, and the 4Cs

Many of the participants structured their activities around the four Cs: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Additionally, Participant o6 spoke about growing awareness and appreciation of working collaboratively, being creative, communicating, and critical thinking, as well as civic responsibility and initiative, especially when working in groups. Participant o8 spoke about interrelated skill sets: “Learning through the approach of Inquiry-Based citizenship education produces investigative skills, collaborative competence, leadership skills, civic responsibilities, and critical thinking.” It should be acknowledged from these accounts that there was an awareness of a contemporary view of skills; however, the civic implications of these skills remained underexplored: The participants tended to equate the skills with learning outcomes rather than as democratic capacities that have a specific civic role.

Sub-theme 2.3: Problem-solving as applied civic capacity

Another key element of the discussions was to link IBL to problem-solving activities in a civic rather than academic language, as participants did. Participant o2 said, “IBL helps to solve community issues and life situations.” Participant o7 spoke about civic autonomy, that given that the student is aware of an issue, he or she should be “sufficiently autonomous that you can resolve your problem, your personal issues” for themselves. The framing connects the individual’s ability to problem-solve with the ability to act as a citizen and positions IBL as more than just intellectual achievement but as a means of engagement in independent citizenship.

Theme 3: The IBL Classroom as Democratic Rehearsal Space

Theme 3 explores the IBL classroom as a democratic rehearsal space. This theme captures the participants’ experiences with the use of IBL and its value in the civic development of the students. The participants viewed IBL as providing opportunities for active participation, real-world involvement, and democratic discussion, and consistently opposed passive and rote-learning pedagogy.

Sub-theme 3.1: IBL versus passive, rote-centred pedagogy

A common pattern emerged as participants described a dichotomy: IBL vs traditional teaching. Participant o8 said: “I think the Inquiry-Based Method promotes more understanding and active participation than passive and teacher-directed learning. Participant o2 explained, “What the difference is, is that with the (more traditional method) students just “sit back and think of it as something they read in a book, whereas with the Inquiry-Based Method, students are active, they take part, caring about what they are learning and what is going on in the world.” The binary framing frames an understanding of the civic value of IBL in opposition to a well-known, undesirable pedagogical norm, with which the participants had personal experience as learners.

Sub-theme 3.2: Real-life connections and meaningful civic engagement

Several participants pointed to increased engagement resulting from links between IBL and students’ lived social experiences. Participant o6 noted that IBL builds confidence in learners: They feel powerful when they are working on problems significant to their community, such as community planning tasks, and using the learning they have gained in class to address community challenges. Participant o8 said: “Real-life issues engage participants and motivate them; when a real issue is related to the learners, like fairness, learning has become meaningful for them. Participants saw IBL as making citizenship education real. Participants interpreted IBL as a move from abstract civic content towards relevant civic experiences.

Sub-theme 3.3: Questioning as the foundation of democratic participation

All participants linked students' questioning to democratic participation. Participant o8 said that questioning is essential in a democracy. When learners learn to ask questions, they express their opinions and listen to others with respect, and they then develop the skills to actively participate in democracy. Participant o7 elaborated:

People in a democracy talk about and respect others' ideas. They evaluate ideas and values, consider, and solve problems. This can be used to help improve participation if implemented in the classroom.

As these accounts show, there is an intuitive understanding of the conditions that deliberative democracy requires (Castro & Knowles, 2015) - indeed, the classroom IBL operates in is where the democratic norm, dialogue, and mutual respect are practised before being enacted in the civic realm.

Theme 4: Structural Barriers as Systemic Constraints

The theme here concerns the barriers participants anticipated to the implementation of the concept of IBL. Participants identified barriers at several levels: structural barriers tied to the organisation of schooling in Pakistan, pedagogical barriers related to shortcomings in teacher preparation and students' readiness, and resource and technology barriers related to shortcomings of technological equipment.

Sub-theme 4.1: Structural constraints: time, class size, and resources

The majority of the participants mentioned that the lack of teaching time, crowded class sizes, and lack of resources were major obstacles. Participant o5 said, "Lack of time is the main concern, as well as lack of resources and lack of learners' motivation to learn. In addition, given the large class sizes, it is difficult to know which method to apply when teaching citizenship education in class." Participant o6 continued: "Time constraints are also important as there should be enough time to cover citizenship topics; other challenges also include enrolment, space, and lack of materials to use for role plays. The accounts frame structural constraints as routine material conditions of Pakistani elementary schools, rather than exceptional problems.

Sub-theme 4.2: Pedagogical constraints: student confidence and teacher preparedness

Some of the pedagogical obstacles cited by the participants were related to students' lack of confidence, fear of speaking up, and low self-assurance, as well as their own lack of self-confidence as teachers. Participant o2 commented: "Engaging and capturing students' attention is difficult as many students are not confident in their ability to participate, and there is a challenge to increase students' confidence in their ability to ask questions. Participant o9 believed that strong pedagogical preparation and mentoring were important aspects, and Participant o8 highlighted the need for structured teaching and learning with a provision of materials and support from the administration. The gap in preparedness was seen as a lack of an organised system of support, rather than a personal shortcoming.

Sub-theme 4.3: Resources and technology needs

Participants also found a particular need for certain resources, such as digital, physical, and administrative support. Participant o2 described the support system needed: "The support of families, staff, students, and the school community is a key factor, as is involvement from other members of the community and role models, which also encourages students." This account positions IBL implementation as a multi-level institutional effort and not solely the responsibility of the individual teacher, which must be supported by both the school and family and/or community.

5. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

These findings suggest that prospective teachers in Pakistan have a theoretically sound, coherent, and educationally significant perspective on IBL for CE. This is an important finding, as the participants did not receive formal instruction in either of these fields; instead, their understandings were developed individually. The central analytic claim of this study is that the difference between policy aspirations in terms of citizenship education through IBL and classroom realities in Pakistan does not lie in the lack of teachers' knowledge of IBL. It is an institutional breakdown. Participants understand the meaning and civic value of IBL, but they do not have the institutional setting to implement it. Theoretically, this is closely aligned with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, assumptions that are also applicable in the realm of academic knowledge, that knowledge or understanding in the domain of the profession can only be translated into sustained practice with the help of scaffolded support (Vygotsky, 1978). While theoretical conceptions about teaching and learning are important, they cannot function pedagogically unless there are organised mentoring activities, collaborative planning, professional development opportunities, and enabled learning spaces.

Connection to Existing Literature

This result, which shows that pre-service teachers' conceptions were positive but with a functionally oriented view of IBL, is supported by international studies (Crawford, 2007) that show that pre-service teachers were inclined to view IBL as a loosely structured activity rather than a systematic process of inquiry. While this study confirms this, it suggests that this functional framing is stronger in the civic dimension because participants talk about IBL skills with ease and have not integrated these skills with a democratic purpose in a systematic manner. Conceptions are located mainly within the personally responsible citizenship model of Westheimer and Kahne (2004), with only a limited shift toward participatory and justice-oriented conceptions. This is not an issue of individuals' reasoning, but of the reflective nature of the democratic education they received that tended toward civic compliance, not agency, and was not corrected in pre-service teacher education.

The identification of structural barriers that are systemic instead of logistical is a direct extension of Barron and Darling-Hammond's (2010) global analysis of IBL obstacles. In the high-income context, those authors identified teacher confidence, resources, and institutional support as the key enablers, while in this study, these are acute structural deficits in elementary schools in Pakistan. The policy seems in mismatch with the institutional provision: The relationship between participants' views and curriculum reform remains unresolved.

In the IBL classroom, the theme of democratic rehearsal space points toward a deliberative democratic perspective as developed by Parker (2010). Participants, without having been directly exposed to deliberative theory, expressed the view that questioning and conversation between students are a civic practice rather than just a learning strategy. This is an important discovery that connects to the lived observation of pedagogy and an intuitive conception of democracy. It proposes that prospective teachers in Pakistan have an intuitive, informal sense of democracy in their classes, as it develops through lived experiences in the classes. If this intuition can be linked with the deliberative democratic theory in teacher education, it can significantly enhance the civic enactment in classrooms in Pakistan.

Implications

On the theoretical front, the study offers an evidence-based analysis of the deficit images of Pakistani teachers within education reform discourse. It is not teachers who are responsible for the lack of democratic pedagogy, but institutional conditions. The study design has practical

implications for the curriculum design of BS Education: The importance of introducing citizenship education and the IBL pedagogical approach should be established as two required subjects, which do not need to be integrated into the general method courses. In methodological terms, it shows how Reflexive TA could be used to explore conceptions of pre-service teachers in contexts where the insider/researcher role is difficult, problematic, and, on occasion, challenges the research, but is also a resource, and therefore must be managed.

Limitations

The study included 10 participants, and it was carried out in only one institution; therefore, there was a limited contextual breadth. Gender composition is one of the institutional features reflected across all participants (all women), and this is one of the limitations encountered in terms of the representativeness of the findings across genders. There are possible social desirability effects in self-reported interview data, and interviewees might have presented more coherent conceptions than those they would have when faced with the pressure of the classroom. The study does not attempt to make generalisations about all pre-service teacher education in Pakistan.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should consider different pre-service contexts in Pakistan and extend to other regions of Pakistan to determine whether the structural-support thesis is reflected in the conceptions of female and male prospective teachers. Longitudinal studies of participants that could follow them into their first years of teaching would shed light on how the theoretically coherent conceptions identified here are sustained or eroded in practice. A focus on elementary students' experiences of doing citizenship in IBL classrooms (with participatory approaches) would fill a void in a field that focuses primarily on teachers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand conceptions of IBL in elementary level citizenship education among 10 final-year students with a BS (Education) degree from Pakistan. The conceptions of the participants were theoretically coherent and important to the educational mission: citizenship education and IBL. These conceptions were formulated on an individual rather than an institutional level, indicating a gap in Pakistan's democratic vision and pre-service teacher preparation. Four themes arose from the use of Reflexive TA, and showed participants conceptualising IBL as a pedagogy focused on student questioning; as a pedagogy connected to civic skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving; intuitively seeing the IBL classroom as a space where students practice democratic involvement; and identifying systemic structural issues that are out of the reach of any one teacher to address.

Overall, this study contributes to changing the perspective of the "policy-practice gap" within the context of citizenship education in Pakistan. It is not as if the teachers who graduate are inadequately prepared to teach; rather, it is because the institutional context does not provide the conditions that enable teachers to put their theoretical knowledge into practice. These issues require a coordinated response both in the design of teacher preparation curriculum and in school resourcing, as well as in professional development infrastructure. Pre-service courses should have a clear citizenship component and establish it as an essential field of study, and include explicit scaffolding that integrates IBL skills with democratic civic purposes as opposed to citizenship and civic pedagogy as incidental parts of generic methods courses.

Future research should focus on multi-site and longitudinal studies to examine the link between pre-service conceptions and enacted classroom practice over time and to explore

institutional conditions that enable teachers to enact inquiry-based citizenship education in practice within the material realities of Pakistani elementary classrooms. Particularly important is the realisation that such democratic imaginations in the classroom are a real pedagogical resource; all they need is the institutional space to become a resource for their enactment.

References

- Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, 37(3), 129–139. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08317501>
- Barron, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). Prospects and challenges for inquiry-based approaches to learning. In H. I. Dumont, David & F. Benavides (Eds.), *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice* (pp. 199–225). OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264086487-11-en>
- Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
- Castro, A. J., & Knowles, R. T. (2015). Social studies education. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.): Elsevier.
- Crawford, B. A. (2007). Learning to teach science as inquiry in the rough and tumble of practice. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(4), 613–642. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20157>
- Crawford, B. A. (2014). From inquiry to scientific practices in the science classroom. In N. G. Lederman & S. K. Abell (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Science Education, Volume II* (pp. 515–541). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203097267>
- GoP. (2009). *National education policy*. Ministry of Education.
- Hmelo-Silver, C. E., Duncan, R. G., & Chinn, C. A. (2007). Scaffolding and achievement in problem-based and inquiry learning: A response to Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006). *Educational Psychologist*, 42(2), 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701263368>
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Muhammad, Y., & Brett, P. (2015a). Beyond binary discourses? Pakistan studies textbooks and representations of cultural, national, and global identity. *IARTEM e-Journal*, 7(3), 74–100. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21344/iartem.v7i3.743>
- Muhammad, Y., & Brett, P. (2015b). The challenges of undertaking citizenship education research in Pakistan. In S. Fan & J. Fielding-Wells (Eds.), *The Future of Educational Research* (pp. 41–50). Sense Publishers.
- Muhammad, Y., & Brett, P. (2019). Addressing social justice and cultural identity in Pakistani education: A qualitative content analysis of curriculum policy. In *Education, Ethnicity and Equity in the Multilingual Asian Context* (pp. 235–253). Springer.
- Muhammad, Y., & Brett, P. (2020). Infusing cultural diversity into Pakistan studies textbooks: An analysis of textbooks and teachers' perspectives. In M. S. Pervez (Ed.), *Radicalization in Pakistan: A Critical Perspective* (pp. 61–76). Routledge.
- Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307–332. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543062003307>
- Parker, W. C. (2010). Listening to strangers: Classroom discussion in democratic education. *Teachers College Record*, 112(11), 2815–2832. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811011201104>

- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rauf, A., & Muhammad, Y. (2026). Representation of cultural diversity in history textbooks in elite schools of Pakistan. In *Decoding Multicultural Education in Asia: Prospects and Challenges for School Development* (pp. 153–167). Springer Nature Singapore.
- Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.57.1.j463w79r56455411>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237–269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>
- Windschitl, M. (2002). Framing constructivism in practice as the negotiation of dilemmas: An analysis of the conceptual, pedagogical, cultural, and political challenges facing teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(2), 131–175. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543072002131>
- Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 89–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487109347671>