

Who Deserves Full Membership? Prospective Teachers' Constructions of Citizenship, Personhood, and Disability in Punjab's Initial Teacher Education



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Abstract: *This qualitative research study explores pre-service teachers' conceptions of citizenship, personhood, and disability in the context of pre-service teacher education in Punjab, Pakistan. Telephonic interviews were conducted with 12 pre-service teachers pursuing teacher-training in Punjab using the semi-structured life-world interview protocol. TurboScribe was used to perform the translation and transcription, and the subsequent analysis was done in NVivo 15 in the form of meaning condensation and thematic coding. The findings provided three themes: (1) conditional citizenship expressed in the form of deficit discourse; (2) disputed personhood expressed in terms of normative expectations; and (3) pedagogical ambivalence expressed in connection with inclusive education. Most pre-service teachers' dominant themes explained disabled students as objects of care, but not as rights-bearing citizens, thus placing the disability beyond the frame of full community membership. The research thus explains why teacher education reproduces the exclusionary ideas of citizenship, thus urging the high-stakes necessity of transformational pedagogical interventions that acknowledge the personhood and democratic participation of disabled students.*

Keywords: Citizenship Education, Disability Studies, Teacher Education, Personhood, Qualitative Interviews, Punjab, Pakistan

Introduction

What does it take for a person to be considered a full member of a community? The foundational question, formulated by Marshall and Bottomore (1950) in the form of an interplay between disability and education, is significantly underexamined, especially in the Global South. Disabled people are one of the largest minorities in global society, although even the recognition of their humanness remains disputed (Kittay & Carlson, 2010; Kittay, 2011). Disability movements not only advocate for inclusion but also challenge the concept of personhood itself (Watermeyer et al., 2019). Teachers, therefore, emerge as gatekeepers who may facilitate or limit access to the disabled learners to the full rights of citizenship, depending on their beliefs and pedagogical practices.

Exclusionary educational practices in Pakistan overlap with multilayered marginalisation, making the construction of disability and citizenship of utmost importance to inclusive schooling by prospective teachers. Pre-service teacher education is an important site where future teachers develop professional identities and pedagogical inclinations towards diversity (Florian & Rouse, 2009). Although the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities began after the policy commitments were made following Pakistan's endorsement of the convention, this practice is still at a fragmented level, as disabled children have persistently been seen to be systematically sidelined (Muhammad & Bokhari, 2024; Anis et al., 2025; Waqar et al., 2025). Scholarship examining how Pakistani pre-service teachers conceptualise the relationship between disability, personhood, and citizenship rights is scant, and empirical evidence indicates that teacher attitudes are very important in influencing inclusive outcomes (Sharma & Sokal, 2016).

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The available literature on teacher education and disability is mainly based on the Global North context, hence confirming a Northern theory that generalises specific experiences at the expense of excluding majority world views (Connell, 2020). This gap in scholarship is particularly problematic when one considers the fact that citizenship functions differently under the conditions of different sociocultural milieus; collectivist frameworks that are common to South Asian societies can render belonging in unique ways (Grech & Soldatic, 2015). Although an extensive body of research explores teachers' attitudes towards disability, there is a relative lack of literature examining the epistemological assumptions underlying pre-service teachers' attitudes towards the principles of full humanity and entitlement to citizenship.

To fill these gaps, this study evaluates how prospective teachers in the initial teacher education programmes in Punjab construct understandings of citizenship, personhood, and disability. The research questions, therefore, lead to the following inquiry (1): How do pre-service teachers understand citizenship and full membership in the community as part of an educational context? (2) What beliefs do pre-service teachers hold about the personhood of disabled learners? (3) What are the pre-service teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical roles towards disabled learners within frameworks of citizenship rights? Through semi-structured life-world interviews to elicit the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), the study can be regarded as providing an empirical background of especially global south-related topics of teacher education.

Literature Review

Citizenship, Disability, and Personhood

Traditional scholarship on citizenship conceptualizes it as a membership through legal status, political participation, and social rights (Marshall & Bottomore, 1950). This paradigm is challenged by modern disability researchers, who argue that the concept of citizenship does not effectively discuss the systematic deprivation of full membership in the community of disabled people (Watermeyer et al., 2019). It is not just a matter of belonging, but also the question of whether disabled individuals are regarded as fully human within normative typologies (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016).

Disability scholars are now applying post-humanist conceptualisations to question the ways in which the requirement to belong to the human category represents an exclusionary practice, especially for intellectually disabled people (Watermeyer et al., 2019). Citizenship gains specific relevance in Global South conditions when there is a presence of colonial legacies, and the lack of resources influences the definition of right holders in the community (Grech & Soldatic, 2015).

Teacher Beliefs and Inclusive Education

Teachers' beliefs have a powerful impact on the practice of inclusive education as they mediate the process of implementing policy requirements into practical classroom scenarios (Florian & Rouse, 2009). Teachers who ascribe deficit-based views in relation to disability are less likely to embrace inclusive pedagogies in favour of segregating disabled learners into dissimilar intervention programs (Reeves et al., 2020). The literature on teacher attitudes indicates that there has always been a persistent tension between care-based and rights-based approaches to teacher attitudes, which revolve around the concept of justice (Hodkinson, 2023). Many teachers are ready to incorporate disabled students but have low expectations (Slee & Tomlinson, 2018). In relation to the Pakistani context, scant research has suggested that teachers in most cases are not trained in inclusive pedagogies and the cultural attitudes that view disability as part of the medical and charity conceptions (Miles, 2002).

Initial Teacher Training and Rights-Based Frameworks

Initial teacher education is a significant stage in the establishment of professional identity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014; Flores, 2020). Programs that directly include citizenship education improve the ability of pre-

service teachers to equip students to participate in a democracy (Westheimer & Ladson-Billings, 2024). However, citizenship education frameworks rarely incorporate disability views (Lister, 2007). Empirical evidence has shown that disability related content in teacher education programmes has a marginal presence; it is usually located in special education electives and not integrated into the whole programme (Florian & Rouse, 2009). The opposing theoretical stance between rights- and care-based models drives modern disability studies. The orientations of rights make disabled people autonomous agents that deserve equal citizenship rights (Degener, 2016), and feminist scholars have criticised the epistemic shortcomings of unqualified rights-based approaches to interdependence and care relations (Kittay et al., 2005; Tronto, 2013).

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Foundations

The qualitative research adopted the methodology of semi-structured life-world interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The purpose of the research was to understand the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of pre-service teachers with respect to citizenship, personhood, and disability.

The epistemological position recognises the existence of knowledge being co-constructed through the interrelationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This study ontologically belongs to the phenomenological approach, which focuses on the subjective experiences of participants as the reality at the centre of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Furthermore, the study was developed in the tradition of hermeneutical interpretation, when the key to understanding is to empathically interpret meanings but question them critically in the context of larger sociocultural frames (Ricoeur, 1976).

Participants and Data Collection

The sample size was 12, recruited through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) from three initial teacher education institutions in the Punjab province. The participants were twelve in number, consisting of nine women and three men, with an average age of twenty-six years. Semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted between August and October 2025, with an average duration of fifty-eight minutes. The interview guide addressed the conceptualisations of the participants on the concept of citizenship and belonging, beliefs about the capacities and personhood of disabled students, and their pedagogic responsibilities to diverse learners. The researcher used various types of questions defined by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), such as follow-up probes, which explored deeper meanings. All the interviews were conducted in the language of their choice and recorded with informed consent.

Transcription and Analysis

The first transcription was performed using TurboScribe software, after which the researchers verified the accuracy. The analysis was conducted using the same methodology as proposed in the Brinkmann and Kvale (2018); that is, meaning condensation, which assumes a six-step approach: (1) holistic reading to gain a general sense; (2) finding of natural units of meaning; (3) paraphrasing the themes based on the perspectives of participants; (4) questioning of meaning within the framework of the research questions; (5) identification of key themes; and (6) confirmation of results. The analysis of qualitative data was supported with the help of NVivo 15, which provided the opportunity for code creation, text retrieval, thematic mapping, and systematic data management (Saldaña, 2021).

Validity and Ethics

This was done in line with the three-fold framework of validation by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015): craftsmanship using systematic checking and questioning, communicative validity by use of member checking and debriefing and pragmatic validity to be judged by actions findings inspire. The trustworthiness criteria raised by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were addressed using credibility, dependability, confirmability and

transferability. The procedure of informed consent was applied to make sure that the participants were aware of voluntary participation, confidentiality and right of withdrawal. The personal identifiers were substituted with pseudonyms to retain anonymity.

Findings

It was identified that pre-service teachers had framed citizenship, personhood, and disability through three higher-order themes, namely: (1) Conditional Citizenship: Deficit Narratives and Bounded Belonging; (2) Contested Personhood: Humanity Conditional on Capability; and (3) Pedagogical Ambivalence: Between Inclusion Rhetoric and Segregation Logic. The next sections provide details regarding these themes.

Conditional Citizenship: Deficit Narratives, Bounded Belonging

The concept of citizenship was constructed as instrumental, and the participants associated full membership with economic productivity and social contribution.

The participants when questioned on what made someone a full member, began to mention the potential of working and not being dependent. This emphasis on productivity puts disabled learners in an unfortunate situation: "A citizen is one who works for the nation, contributing to the development of the nation. But special children do not have the ability to work like other ordinary people; their citizenship is just different, limited in a more specific way" (Participant 8). Amira clearly spelled out the concept of conditionality:

There is the fact that everybody has rights as a Pakistani citizen. However, children with special needs cannot live up to the demands of citizenship. They require people to always take care of them. That is why they are kind of... partial citizens, perhaps. (Participant 3)

This indicated that prospective teachers consider citizenship as an exchange of rights and responsibilities. They felt that students with disabilities were incapable of carrying out the duties of citizenship, and thus they were limited members.

Participants also explained educational inclusion as being conditional upon disabled learners approximating normal behaviour. Complete membership means compliance with classroom demands. There was one boy, Sarah told me:

He had some mental problems, and he was making noises and going around. The teacher eventually informed the parents that he would never come again because he was disrupting the class. I pitied him, and the teacher was right. Normal children should be taught. (Participant 5)

This recurrent use of normal children influenced the creation of a more specific form of hierarchical citizenship in which access to the rights of non-disabled learners overshadowed the rights of disabled learners. When enumerating access to education, the participants mostly used charitable, and hence not rights-based, discourse. Fatima thought:

"Islam teaches us to be nice to weak and helpless people. Special children are innocent; they are like angels. We should be merciful and assist them to the best of our ability" (Participant 7).

This framing made disabled learners recipients of benevolence and not rights-bearing agents with valid claims.

Contested Personhood: Humanity Conditional on Capability

Participants expressed grim scepticism about the personhood of intellectually disabled students. Complete humanity is conditional on the ability to think rationally and learn. Nadia was an example of such confusion:

Physically disabled students, the blind, and those with the inability to walk are fully human; they are also able to think in a normal way. But mentally disabled students... it is difficult to say. They

are unable to comprehend or speak properly. To some degree, they are not full persons; they are not complete. (Participant 4)

Aisha said,

When I look at a special child who cannot speak or learn anything after trying to learn for several years... I ask myself; do they have a soul like us? Can they know Allah? (Participant 1)

These descriptions can shed light on the participants' questioning of the humanity of intellectually disabled learners, thus making cognitive ability the measure of being a person.

At the same time, the participants expressed counter-narratives that recognised the emotional ability and spiritual value of the disabled learners:

“Special children are very innocent; they do not think badly like us. They are pure souls. Perhaps, Allah had them this way to show us mercy” (Participant 7).

This romanticised construction, although with inherent value attached to it, reifies othering, making disabled learners appear like essential, distinct people as opposed to being full-fledged community members.

Pedagogical Ambivalence: Between Inclusion Rhetoric and Segregation Logic

All participants claimed to support inclusive education on a nominal level, referring to both policy requirements and Islamic standards of justice, as follows: However, probing revealed that there was considerable practical resistance. The same ambivalence was seen with Zainab, who explained,

Of course, I support inclusion; all children deserve an opportunity to study. However, we know that it is pragmatically impossible within our schools with 60-70 students per classroom, no resources, no training, etc. Special children belong to special schools. (Participant 10)

Prospective teachers showed enormous anxiety about their capacity to teach disabled children: “I am afraid I will not be able to teach special children; I will hurt them by doing something wrong. They require professional teachers who have undergone special training in education” (Participant 2).

This shows how the failure of teacher education to incorporate content about disability creates graduates who believe that disability expertise is not part of their job. Multiple participants described conflicts between personal caring and perceived system duty. For example, Saba stated,

During my recent teaching practice, there was a deaf girl in my class. She was mighty sweet, invariably pleasant, and doing her best. I would have liked to do something to assist her in this regard. But 68 other students were required to pass their exams. The others would have been disadvantaged if I had spent more time with her. (Participant 12)

It revealed that the needs of disabled students were viewed by prospective teachers as an aspect of competition rather than an aspect of teaching responsibility.

Discussion

Interpretation and Connection to Literature

The results highlight the way pre-service teachers within the teacher education of Punjab engage in practices of constructing citizenship and personhood that undergird the exclusion of disabled students as full members of the community. Overall, the participants positioned disabled learners as members with limited status who were worthy of conditional membership, as opposed to right-bearing citizens who had the right to unconditional membership. The conditional citizenship model, that is, productivity stating normative performance in relation to membership, resembles the notion of neoliberal disablism by Soldatic (2019), whereby the value of citizenship is based on economic output. This research builds on the body of knowledge by demonstrating how neoliberal rationalities have permeated the minds of future educators, who will define the concept of belonging for future generations.

The participants' disputed perceptions of personhood are echoed in scholarship showing that full humanity is conditional among disabled people (Kittay et al., 2005). Their questions regarding the presence of souls in intellectually disabled learners are examples of the violence of normative human categories (Goodley et al., 2019). The theme of pedagogical ambivalence sheds light on the major loopholes between inclusion rhetoric and the logic of segregating and indicates that the inability of teacher education to render disability content results in graduates who think that disabled learners are not their business (Slee & Tomlinson, 2018; Hodkinson, 2023).

Therefore, the results agree with international studies related to deficit-oriented beliefs but uncover the role of citizenship constructions in mediating these beliefs. The argument between rights-based and care-based models is a recurring theme in feminist disability scholarship (Kittay et al., 2005; Tronto, 2013). The fact that the participants focus on care indicates their true understanding of interdependence, but their creation of care in the form of prioritising care over rights recreates paternalistic relations that ignore the agency of disabled people.

Implications, Limitations and Future Research

This study theoretically builds on citizenship theory by showing that the concept of recognition of personhood is a condition of citizenship rights. Teacher education scholarships should, therefore, consider more basic ontological questions, as opposed to only teaching methods.

In practice, teacher education interventions should construct pre-service teachers' conceptions of citizenship and personhood, rather than simply admit them into teaching practices. The incorporation of disability content into the curriculum, instead of segregating disability into specialised courses, emulates inclusion practices. Conceptual resourcing associated with the reconceptualisation of disabled learners as rights-bearing citizens might be achieved by explicitly introducing rights-based frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Limitations also include that only three Punjab institutions were used as a sample of the prospective teachers, which restricted transferability. The increase in the participants' consciousness of socially desirable answers could have resulted in the development of displays of support that were not based on real beliefs. The positionality of the researchers, whose beliefs remain deeply dedicated to inclusive education, may have come into play. Finally, non-verbal communication could not be observed in the telephonic modality of interviewing.

Future researchers need to explore the ways in which teacher educators understand their role in developing inclusive pedagogical practices that respect the citizenship rights of disabled learners. Future research should investigate how sociocultural factors may further impact teachers' teaching strategies.

Conclusion

This study reveals disturbing tendencies of marginalisation that hinder the implementation of inclusive education in Punjab. Pre-service teachers portrayed disabled students as conditional citizens whose status is conditioned by productivity and normative performance and charity instead of entitlements. The inquiries into the completeness of the humanity of intellectually disabled students showed that the issue of personhood is disputed, with far-reaching consequences of its acknowledgment in terms of educational accessibility. The pedagogical ambivalence of the students we interviewed communicates a picture that policy mandates are not the key that can change the deep-rooted beliefs regarding the kind of individuals who should be a part of the educational communities.

The urgency of these findings is that they undermine the context of teacher education in Pakistan and similar Global South setups. In a systemic exclusion of disabled students, prospective teachers would

keep going to the classrooms without a conscious focus on the actions of citizenship and personhood construction that associate disabled students with a less privileged form of membership. Teacher educators will need to develop a transformative learning experience that will enable prospective teachers to identify disabled students as rights-bearing citizens who deserve to belong without conditions. Since the vision of Sustainable Development Goal 4 to include disabled students in education delivery in Pakistan has been undertaken, it is now imperative to consider the question that came up in the background: who is worthy of being included in the educational circles around us? The only way in which teacher education can result in teachers who become able to create the truly inclusive school where all students, disabled ones included, can feel appreciated members of the same humankind is through challenging and changing the constructions of exclusionary citizenship.

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