

Early Civic Learning and the Development of Social Competence: A Study of Elementary Schools in Pakistan

Uzma Ghori

uzmaghori100@gmail.com

PhD Scholar, Department of Education, University of Wah, Wah Cantt., Pakistan

Dr. Jan Alam

jan.alam@uow.edu.pk

Chairperson / Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Wah, Wah Cantt., Pakistan

Dr. Mehwish Jabeen

drmehwish17@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Wah, Wah Cantt., Pakistan

Corresponding Author: * Uzma Ghori uzmaghori100@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss how civic education could build social competence in elementary school students in Pakistan and use the views of teachers and classroom instances. Although civic education is well known in terms of promoting democracy and citizenry, its potential in the social competence development of students at the elementary level is not fully developed and studied especially in the developing contexts. A qualitative research design was used in this study where data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty teachers of Social Studies and non-participant classroom observations in twenty Federal Government elementary schools. The thematic analysis was employed in analyzing the data to determine the patterns of social interaction, cooperation, empathy, and responsible behavior among the students. The results indicate that civic education is significant in terms of enhancing social competence through facilitation of participatory learning, respectful discourse, collaboration, and consciousness to social responsibilities. According to teachers, civic practices in the classroom facilitated good interaction with peers, as well as assisting students to acquire the necessary interpersonal skills. This paper has emphasized the need to enhance civic education in the lower level and use teaching models that involve the students through active learning on social issues. The results provide an implication to the curriculum design, teacher education, and educational policy to raise socially competent and responsible citizens at a tender age.

Keywords: social competence, civic education, elementary education, qualitative study, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Civic education has been widely considered as a pillar of school education which equips the learners to be responsible citizens in the social and democratic life. In addition to inculcating the knowledge regarding the rights, duties, and civic institutions, civic education helps to cultivate necessary social skills that allow the individuals to relate positively within their communities. Civic learning in early life stages at elementary school level can be very crucial in influencing social competence among students, which encompasses skills of being cooperative, empathetic, communicative and respectful of others.

The concept of social competence is becoming one of the primary results of education, and it is tightly connected with the academic achievement, the emotional state of students, and their future civil activity.

Schools are major social settings where children get to learn how to cope with interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution or how to engage in group activities. Civic education in this regard offers formalized methods of encountering social values, exercising democracy and being responsible towards the other members of society. Studies indicate that participatory and value-based civic education would have a beneficial influence on social and moral growth of students through encouraging active participation and critical thinking (Torney-Purta et al., 2019; Schulz et al., 2018).

The social competency concept is extensive. Thorndike in 1927 contrasted one of the earliest studies on the concept of competence as a socially relevant phenomenon and social intelligence. Social competency was also viewed as it is the ability of an organism to be able to interact with the environment succinctly (White, 1959). It is the attitudes, skills, motivation and the collection of abilities, which are socially relevant, that the young learners require in order to master within the initial settings through exposure to the social environment in order to promote their well being (Garbarino, 1985). Social competence be differentiated into; civic engagement, effective citizenship, acquisition of democratic values, ethics and morality, community affiliations, self-discipline and awareness of the environment. Social competence can be described as skillfulness (or control) of social skills through which one can create the impact that is needed in social relations (Argyle, 1999). The ability to reach the objectives of individual in social interactions and at the same time preserve positive relationship with other people over time and under various circumstances is the strength of social competency.

As, social competence refers to the ability or skill to create some influence in the social relations (Rubin and Krasnor, 1992). Youth training has long been aimed at encouraging young children to develop social skills in them. Social skill is the strength of attaining personal goals in social cooperation by serving well-maintained relations with others over the time and in different settings. It has been quoted to constitute all the socio-emotional and cognition and abilities that children require to achieve their goals and relate with others in a constructive and positive manner (Argyle, 1999).

Lim, et al., (2013) suggested that social competence would be divided into social competence and interpersonal skills into social competence and social competence. The former category is skills that are applicable in the field of education, i.e., self-control and listening. On the other hand, interpersonal skills refer to those skills (such as sharing, working in a team, and taking the initiative) that are needed to work effectively in a social group comprising the educational environment. Garbarino (1985) continues to explain that competence must be goal of socialization and development as it is the ability to succeed in world (p. 81). This concept of social competence was widely spread in the succeeding years (Ogden and Hagen, 2019).

It has been considered that social competence is an essential skill among young children in order to effectively and adequately choose and execute their interpersonal interests, which is agreeable to the theories of Garbarino on the topic (Guralnick, 1990). Social competence is a sum total of the knowledge and skills that people develop to handle different opportunities, challenges, and decisions that life offers (Han and Kemple, 2006; Leffert et al., 1997). A growing body of evidence suggests that there is a developmental Sattar, Farooq 4 relationship between social competence in classroom and social knowledge in children (Slaughter, et al., 2015). Educators consider the social competency of children to be an indicator of school preparation.

The development of social competence in children is the primary objective of numerous preschool programs, and the ultimate aim of these initiatives is to equip children with social, emotional, and behavioral skills that will allow them to survive in the formal school setting, which in most industrialized states starts at age five or six years. The social competence in the classroom is defined as the social skills needed to

interact with the peers and teachers in a desirable way (to share, cooperate) and the ability to avoid self-destructive behaviors like violence, bullying (Denham et al., 2015; Siraj et al., 2025; Naoreen et al., 2023; Parveen et al., 2022). The social competence relating to learning is an important concept which can be employed to foretell academic success both at the elementary school and in the later in life. These skills enable positive interactions between the individual and other agents in the classroom social interactions (Del Prette and Del Prette, 2005; Lim et al., 2013). The other concept of social competence is the ability to effectively control the other people, the ability to create and maintain strong linkage, and the ability to react effectively towards the social circumstances (Orpinas, 2010; Jabeen 2021; Kayani 2016).

In Pakistan, the Social Studies curriculum is considered the civic education subject at the elementary level, which focuses on the citizenship, social responsibility, and national values. Nonetheless, the practices in the classroom are usually content-oriented and little is done to capture the social and interactive aspects of civic learning. Although the policy statements underscore the relevance of citizenship education, no empirical studies have been conducted to reveal the ways that civic education is being applied in classrooms and the impact it has on social competency of students, especially in the viewpoint of teachers who put the curriculum into daily practice.

Current research on civic education in Pakistan has been predominantly curriculum analysis or policy discussion, which has not provided much information on classroom life experience and performance. Furthermore, social competence research has frequently focused on psychological or developmental approaches and little has been said about other subject specific teaching, like civic education. The latter can be observed especially in the lower stages, at which the initial social skills are established and strengthened.

In bridging this gap, the current research paper examines how civic education can be used to form social competence among elementary school children in Pakistan. Using qualitative data on the teachers of Social Studies and classroom observations in elementary schools of Federal Governments, the research aims at offering context-based information on the role civic education plays in the social development of students. The results will be used to enlighten teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers on the opportunities of civic education to facilitate the development of socially competent and active students at a young age of schooling.

Objective of the Study

- To investigate the importance of civic education in building social competence in the elementary school level students in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civic education has been well known as one of the most important components of schooling that extends well beyond factual education to the attainment of attitudes, social and values that uphold the life of a democracy and a community. In recent studies, it is highlighted that civic education should not concentrate on instructing the formal forms of the government but to encourage interpersonal and societal skills, including cooperation, empathy, dialogue, and responsible conduct (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025; Asmara, 2025). The competencies are similar to the more generalized constructs of social competence, meaning the capacity to communicate effectively and in an ethical way in social situations (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025; Asmara, 2025).

In the primary education system, the role of civic education has been associated with creating social attitudes at a young age and the effective involvement in the life of the community. The reviews of literature

in the context of primary education show that civic education leads to the formation of positive social behaviors, including tolerance, mutual cooperation, and legal awareness, which are the pillars of social competence (Marzuki & Al-Amin, 2025; Malik 2018). These values are based on the interactions in the classroom and the activities which happen in the classroom instead of rote teaching about civic facts. Research highlights that international exposure to civic ideas at an early age may influence a child in her or his social behaviors and enable them to become an active member of the society (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025; Zafar et al., 2025).

The Pakistani learning environment has produced research which has revealed a discrepancy between the policy of civic education and classroom practice. To illustrate, the analysis of textbooks at the primary level in Punjab revealed that civic content has different perspectives in developing social competencies, which implies that curricular improvements are possible (Taseer, Sattar, and Siddique, 2023). Although Social Studies curricula have civic themes, their contribution to social competence depends on the enrichment of activities and pedagogical plans in the classroom (Taseer et al., 2023).

The idea that classroom practices are important is supported by qualitative investigations in different other contexts. According to case studies, students who have been associated with contextual activities like conversations, social project and community participation do not just learn the concepts of citizenship but also show prosocial behavior (Civic Education PKn case study, 2025). On the same note, civic education grounded in project learning fosters student responsibility, cooperation, and confidence in addition to emphasizing the relational aspect of civic learning (Ishayati, Triyanto & Rintayati, 2024).

The role of teachers plays the center-stage in this process. The area of research on teacher preparation and the development of social-civic skills states that educators can be trained to combine social and civic skills to enhance the results of civic education (Guerrero Elecalde et al., 2024). Pedagogical options, classroom dynamics, and facilitative practices of teachers determine whether the civic learning of students leads to social competence. Students feel more inclined to internalize the social skills that come with civic responsibility when they have participatory and learner-centered experiences that are created by the teachers.

In spite of these perceptions, there is scanty empirical studies that examine the perceptions and classroom practices of civic education by teachers in comparing them with the social competence of students in Pakistan. The bulk of the existing literature addresses content or student attitudes in the secondary setting, is not associated to teacher experiences, nor is it associated with social competencies as observed in the elementary learners. To bridge the gap between policy and practice, it is necessary to know how civic education occurs in the classroom and how educators see the role of civic education in social competence.

Overall, the current literature underpins the concept of the ability to integrate interactive and contextually grounded civic education with those of social competence (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025; Asmara, 2025; Ishayati et al., 2024). However, the qualitative evidence available locally around the elementary schools, especially the teacher point of view and classroom observations is sparse. This gap highlights the role played by the current study, which places the voices of teachers at the center of explaining the role of civic education in social development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this case, the qualitative research design was taken to obtain a more detailed insight into the role of civic education in the process of building social competence in elementary school students. The qualitative method was found to be suitable because it enables exploration of experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices of the participants in their natural environments. The research was an exploratory one, which did not measure predetermined variables but the interpretation of civic education by teachers and their social consequences.

Participants and Research Situation.

Twenty Federal Government elementary schools were chosen as the participants of the study among which twenty Social Studies teachers participated. One teacher was in one school, and another was in a different school, which allowed the context of the classroom and methods of instruction to differ. The fact that Federal Government schools were selected offered a standardized system of curricular frameworks that made it possible to study the implementation of civic education through the prism of a standardized system. The teachers who participated are those who had experience in teaching at the elementary level and were directly involved in classroom instruction in civic related areas.

Data Collection Methods

Two methods were selected to collect data in terms of qualitative approach: semi-structured interviews and non participant observation in classrooms. All the twenty teachers were interviewed in semi-structured interviews to learn about their perception of civic education, teaching methods, and the perceived impact on social competence in students. The interview format was flexible to make participants talk at length on their experiences without denying the areas of focus which included social skills, classroom interaction and civic learning.

Moreover, the observations in the classroom were also carried out to test the implementation of civic education. The observations were made in terms of teacher-student interactions, student-participation, collaborative activities as well as behaviors indicating social competence e.g. cooperation, respect and responsible behavior. Observational data gives contextual evidence which complemented the interview finding and triangulated methodologically.

Credibility and Moral Choices

The multiple data sources such as interviews and observations were used in order to increase the credibility of the study. The ethical aspects were taken into account. All participants gave informed consent, and the identities of schools and teachers were anonymized, and thus, the confidentiality was ensured. All the appropriate educational authorities were contacted and given permission before data was collected and the study was conducted in accordance with the set rules and standards of conducting ethical educational research.

FINDINGS

Interpretation of interviews and classroom observations by means of thematic analysis showed that there are four key themes in terms of which civic education helps elementary school students attain social competence.

Theme 1: Civic Education Poses Cooperation Interaction.

According to teachers, civic education lessons were always those where students worked in groups. Group discussions, shared tasks and role plays were among other activities where students were invited to negotiate ideas and support one another. One of the teachers added that civic classes helped to establish natural space where children could learn how to cooperate and respect opinions of each other. It was observed that where collaborative tasks were practiced in the classrooms there was better peer support and positive interaction.

Such results are consistent with the wider literature on civic education that highlights the importance of such education in promoting cooperation, mutual understanding, and respect in primary schools (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025).

Theme 2: Civic Discourse Empathy and Respect.

One of the major points that teachers emphasized is that civic issues usually included debates on equality, rights, and social duties. Educators expounded that studying these notions assisted scholars in looking beyond the self. The shots were made at the time when the students were able to respect each other during the discussions, listen to peers without interrupting and accept the opponents' point of view.

This endorses global activity that indicates that civic education can cultivate empathy and prosocial perspective when structured as a set of values and shared responsibility (Asmara, 2025).

Theme 3: Social Awareness and Responsibility.

It is because of civic education most teachers associated it with responsibility. They claimed that students that were subjected to civic lessons were more willing to assist classmates, obey rules and assist in small classroom activities. Indicatively, in the case of teachers, they narrated how students offered themselves to lead classroom activities, school setting management, or reminding students about classroom procedures.

Such a trend supports the notion that organized civic work can strengthen the notion of social responsibility, which is one of the major aspects of the concept of social competence (Ishayati et al., 2024).

Theme 4: Curriculum to Social Practice Problems.

Though the teachers appreciated the potential of civic education, most of them reported structural difficulties. The lack of time in instruction, the number of pupils in the classroom, and the too big emphasis on the textbook matter disarmed chances of further social interactions. Some of the teachers told that there were not many interactive and socially oriented activities in the assessment practices that focused on memorization.

These limitations resonate in larger issues of successful delivery of civic education, where the pedagogical demands and resource scarcity may undermine the chances of actual acquisition of social skills.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that civic education in the elementary classrooms is not just about passing the content along. It establishes relation-based situations in which students are able to train on collaboration, compassion, accountability, and respectful dialogue, which are important components of social ability. These findings expand the current literature by placing the experiences of teachers and classroom activities at the core of the civic learning processes, which has been less studied in the earlier literature in Pakistan.

Although it is emphasized in the reviews that civic curricula play a crucial role in developing social attitudes (Marzuki and Al-Amin, 2025), this research shows how these dynamics occur in reality. Facilitators, who are teachers, are an essential aspect of converting curriculum intents to learning processes that are interactive. The quality of the civic engagement and the social outcomes are highly influenced by their perceptions and strategies.

Nevertheless, the difficulties, which are reported by teachers, refer to systemic constraints. Where time of instruction is limited or the content taught is content-based, then relational learning opportunities are limited. This is similar to reports that have been made by curriculum analyses in the area that identify imbalances between a curriculum ideal and classroom experiences (Taseer et al., 2023).

The international studies of the teacher training also indicate that teacher capacity development in terms of civic-social-civic skills is essential to maximize the educational effects (Guerrero Elecalde et al., 2024; Safdar et al., 2025; Alam et al., 2024). This indicates not only the necessity of curriculum redesign but also the continuous professional growth which can help the teachers to design the participative civic learning practice.

The paper also validates the concurrence of the wider research findings that civic learning, particularly in the early years, can lead to positive social behaviors, which form the basis of life-long civic engagement. Despite several studies in the globe on adolescent or secondary setting, such conclusions have supported the fact that early involvement is important and have an implication on schooling and the society.

CONCLUSION

The present study presents some strong qualitative research that civic education is a factor that leads to the maturation of social competence in students of elementary schools in Pakistan. Civic learning enhances interpersonal and civic behavioral patterns that are congruent with societal objectives through the collaborative activities, respectful discourse, and task-based responsibility actions.

The role of teachers in determining such results is very important, although structural and pedagogical constraints may hinder the full potential of civic education. The solution to these challenges will involve refinement of the curriculum, teacher development, and the school policy that puts more emphasis on interactive and socially engaged learning.

PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In order to enhance the role of civic education towards social competence development:

1. The curriculum designers ought to incorporate more participatory and practice based activities that focus on the cultivation of social skills.

2. The programs of teacher training should incorporate specific training in civic and social-civic pedagogy.
3. The evaluation should appreciate social competence achievement as well as the knowledge gained.
4. Through cultivation of these abilities since early stages, teachers are able to help one of the generations of students who do not only understand civic ideas, but are also socially well-equipped and ready to take part in their society by means of being constructive.

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