

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, REFLEXIVITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in Pakistan is still contested within initial teacher education (ITE), whereby future teachers face serious conflicts between policy requirements and the actual conditions of various classes. This phenomenological research examined how prospective educators in Punjab, Pakistan, construct their professional identities, practice reflexivity, and develop orientations towards social justice as it relates to inclusive education. The research was conducted with 22 prospective teachers who had studied ITE programmes in Punjab using the three-interview method of the phenomenological approach. The data were obtained by means of three successive interviews with the participants, each lasting about 90 minutes, centred on life history, current lived experience, and reflection on meaning. TurboScribe AI helped with the transcription, which was later verified and corrected by the research team. The AI-assisted coding in NVivo helped organise and analyse the data for developing themes. The analysis identified four themes, including the burden of biographical experience, moral dissonance and professional becoming, reflexivity as a constrained and contested practice, and social justice as desire and obstacle. The results show that orientations of prospective teachers towards inclusive education are mediated by personal experiences, cultural norms, and the institutional conditions of Punjab ITE programmes, and the discrepancies between ideals and inclusive practice. The study can guide the ITE curriculum change, teacher education, and inclusive education policy in Punjab.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Pre-Service Teacher Education, Professional Identity, Reflexivity, Social Justice, Phenomenological Interviewing, Punjab, Pakistan

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central concept in global educational discourse since the signing of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and other international obligations, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which requires nations to provide quality and equitable education to all. Inclusive education in South Asia and in Pakistan in particular has been enshrined in legislative frameworks, such as the National Education Policy and the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities; however, its application in the classroom remains uneven and superficial in most cases (Andreoli et al., 2026). Scholars have confirmed that teachers' contextual view on the possible ways in which teachers can be oriented to inclusive education through the lens of professional identities, the development of reflective abilities, and adherence to social justice has been confirmed by scholars that who argue that teacher orientations towards inclusive education determine whether inclusive education becomes a reality or a policy dream (Pantič & Florian, 2015).

The main teacher education programmes in Punjab, such as the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) and Associate Degree in Education (ADE), are the principal institutional pathways

through which prospective teachers are socialised around the idea of inclusive education and, occasionally, as its practice, particularly in Punjab, the most populated province in Pakistan. Evidence indicates that ITE programmes have failed to develop the dispositions and competencies that potential teachers need to teach inclusively (Bokhari et al., 2026). These findings indicate a structural failing in ITE delivery that extends beyond curriculum material and encompasses professional identity development and reflexive practice.

The concept of professional identity in teaching is viewed as dynamic and relational, contextually situated, enabling teachers to create a sense of who they are and who they are becoming as teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It is shaped by the previous experience of biography, institutional exposure, and the broader socio-cultural forces (Sachs, 2005). Reflexivity, which refers to the ability to critically question one's assumptions, practices, and structural conditions that have shaped one's practice, is considered necessary for teachers operating in heterogeneous and inequitable educational settings. A social justice orientation within teacher education prompts aspiring teachers to identify and challenge structural obstacles that create exclusion and to become agents of transformation on behalf of marginalised learners (Pantič & Florian, 2015). These three constructs—professional identity, reflexivity, and social justice—form an intersecting conceptual space for this study.

Although research on inclusive education in Pakistan is growing, the phenomenological understanding of how prospective teachers form professional identities in relation to inclusive education remains limited. Previous research has mainly used quantitative indicators to determine teacher attitudes towards inclusion and structural and policy barriers to inclusion. These methods provide valuable descriptive information but do not capture the biographical, emotional, and sense-making dimensions through which prospective teachers develop their orientations to inclusive education. The phenomenological dimension of teacher formation, specifically the interaction of personal history, lived ITE experience, and meaning-making that shapes professional orientation, has not been effectively studied in the Punjab context.

One such gap is related to the role played by reflexivity in the process. Although reflective practice has been theorised as a practice toward the inclusive classroom (Safdar et al., 2024), the circumstances in which reflexivity can arise and the structural and cultural barriers to its enactment in the ITE system of Punjab are poorly understood. Similarly, the lived relationship between the social justice commitment of prospective teachers and the cultural and religious environment of Punjab has not been investigated. These gaps constrain the capacity of teacher educators and policy-makers to design ITE programmes that could promote inclusive professional formation.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the lived experience of prospective teachers in Punjab as they encounter the construction of professional identity, the applicability of reflexivity, and the development of social justice orientations in connection with inclusive education. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How are the biographical experiences of prospective teachers in Punjab reconstructed in terms of determining their orientations to inclusive education?
2. What are the perceptions of prospective teachers in Punjab regarding the lived experience of learning about inclusive education in ITE programmes?
3. How do prospective teachers in Punjab define their experiences in reference to professional identity, reflexivity, and social justice?

This study expands the phenomenological account of teacher formation by adding context-specific and context-general features in Punjab, application of the three-interview series by Seidman (2019), and contributes theoretically to discussions of social justice, reflexivity, and teacher education. The article then presents a literature review, an elaborate methodology description, a presentation of results thematically, a discussion, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

Professional Identity in Teacher Education

One of the most theorised and disputed areas of teacher education research is professional identity formation. Scholars broadly concur that teacher identity is not a fixed or self-created phenomenon but rather a product of the interactions among personal life, school experience, and forces in society at large, through which both personal biography and institutional experience interact with broader societal forces to shape professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This convergence of influences is particularly significant in the context of ITE since the identity as formed in training influences the future practise of prospective teachers, the capacity to resist the systemic influences, as well as responsiveness to student diversity (Sachs, 2005). Studies in other countries have indicated that aspiring teachers bring to ITE their preconceived notions of teaching, learning, and difference that are hard to alter based on their years of prior schooling, and can scarcely be altered by coursework alone (Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992).

The study of the Pakistani context revealed that the practicum is the primary site at which a prospective teacher constructs a professional sense of self, and the practice of a prospective teacher includes the practicum, rather than instructional content, as the primary site of identity formation (Shamim et al., 2026). Nevertheless, these practicum settings are often marked by traditional, transmission-based teaching that limits the potential of a prospective teacher to become an actor in the context of inclusive and socially just teaching (Shamim et al., 2026). The institutional frames of the ITE programmes in Punjab, such as a high number of pupils in classes, inadequate resources, and an exam-driven curriculum, produce professional identities that resist commitment to inclusion (Bokhari et al., 2026).

Reflexivity and Inclusive Teaching

Reflexivity, which can be understood as the critical analysis of one's own practice, values, and structural contexts, is theorised as a core competency of inclusive teaching. Pantić and Florian (2015) identify four dimensions of teacher agency for social justice: purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity and this is necessary because it allows a teacher to assess experience, recognise structural limitations, and self-evaluate their actions. Andreoli et al. (2026) also show that teacher agency in the context of inclusive education is supported by enabling conditions: opportunities for critical reflection, participatory institutional cultures, and professional development (Andreoli et al., 2026).

Reflexive practice in teacher education is an institutionally underdeveloped area in Pakistan. According to a recent opinion paper, reflective practice could fill the gap between inclusive policy and classroom reality when incorporated into teacher training and professional development, as it allows teachers to question their own beliefs and attitudes instead of merely learning the technical skills of classroom management (Safdar et al., 2024). Nevertheless, such preconditions of actual reflexivity, such as institutional trust, secure working communities, and time to engage in long-term reflection, are not always within ITE programmes in Punjab. In the cultural setting of Punjab, where it is acceptable to comply with authority and challenging one's beliefs may be viewed as threatening, developing reflexive dispositions becomes even more difficult.

Social Justice Orientations and Inclusive Education

Pantić and Florian (2015) theorise the relationship between social justice and inclusive education: teacher agency for social justice is understood as a transformative process through which equity is promoted by reducing the risk of school failure and social marginalisation for all students. This frame repositions inclusive education from a technical issue of disability management to a broader frame of rights, equity, and the democratic goal of schooling. A social justice orientation encourages prospective teachers to recognise how exclusion is structurally

produced across dimensions of class, gender, language, disability, and religion, and to act deliberately to disrupt it.

Research on social justice in teacher education in Pakistan, though limited, is growing. In Skardu, a phenomenological study established that teacher educators built social justice in relation to equity, diversity, and relationships, and had some concerns about the marginalisation experienced by prospective teachers (Rizwan & Ali, 2024). A case study by Bibi et al. (2026) discovered that, even with awareness and commitment to inspire prospective teachers through curricula of teacher education, the structural transformation required long-term institutional commitment. The linguistic and socioeconomic diversity of Punjab presents a distinctive context in which social justice orientations have to contend with the intersecting inequalities of class, language, gender, and disability that characterise the school population in the province (Tamim, 2020).

Inclusive Education in Punjab's ITE Programmes

The institutional setting of inclusive education within the ITE programmes in Punjab is characterised by a substantial gap between inclusive policy commitments and institutional provision. Punjab has a national and provincial policy that promises to provide inclusive schooling; however, initial teacher education programmes have been slow to embed inclusive education meaningfully within their curricula (GOP, 2020). Scholarship continues to identify insufficient teacher preparation as a key barrier to inclusive education in Pakistan, with pre-service teachers describing inclusion coursework experiences as conceptually disconnected and lacking sufficient content to develop practical competence or dispositional readiness (Bokhari et al., 2026; Ullah & Samad, 2025). In their investigation of teacher agency supporting inclusive education, Andreoli et al. (2026) state that inclusive practice depends on the presence of professional development, facilitation of institutional roles, and cultures of collaboration, which in the ITE landscape of Punjab do not consistently occur.

The policy context has changed in recent years. The Directorate of Staff Development in Punjab has implemented in-service training programmes around secondary inclusion and elementary inclusion and has the policy-level requirement for ITE to address diversity in terms of gender, faith, ethnicity, and disability (Niaz & Fatima, 2022). However, the disconnection between these policy promises and the lived experience of potential teachers in ITE programmes is still broad, and the phenomenological data regarding the meaning prospective teachers make of inclusive education within ITE contexts are not represented in the literature. This gap is addressed in the present study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which was based on the phenomenological interviewing approach by Seidman (2019). The qualitative inquiry was suitable because the research question aimed to comprehend the lived experiences, sense-making, and subjective orientations of potential teachers, dimensions that quantitative enquiries could not adequately capture. Seidman's (2019) system of three interviews was chosen as the particular methodological approach because it offers a structured yet flexible system for reaching the depth of human experience through biographical context, lived experience, and reflection on meaning.

Philosophical Paradigm

The paradigm of the study is grounded in an interpretive, phenomenological philosophy and rooted in the key notions of Schutz (1967), who indicated that the social world is formed by the subjective meanings of what happens to people, and the researcher has the duty of reaching and revealing the intersubjective structures of meaning. Seidman (2019) outlines four phenomenological themes that guide his interviewing methodology: the temporality of

experience, the subjective nature of understanding, the centrality of lived experience, and the embeddedness of meaning in local, social, and cultural contexts.

This study adopts an epistemological stance in that knowledge is constructed through the researcher's interaction with participants' reconstructions of experience (Seidman, 2019). This is not a positivist effort to extract objective facts but an interpretive effort to understand meaning-making. Ontologically, the study is based on the reality that prospective teachers' orientations towards inclusive education are plural, constructed, and contingent rather than singular or universal.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive, criterion-based sampling was used to identify the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be currently undergraduate students in a B.Ed. or ADE programme in a government or privately-run teacher education institution in Punjab and had to be prepared to participate in three consecutive interviews. The exclusion criteria were no prior professional teaching experience of more than one academic year in an institutional school environment, because the aim of the research was to focus on prospective teacher formation experience.

Fourteen ITE institutions in urban and peri-urban settings across Punjab were used to recruit 22 prospective teachers. The sample size was chosen, consisting of seventeen women and five men representing the B.Ed. programmes in Punjab. The participants were aged between 20 and 28 years. The number of participants is appropriate, as the recommended range of ten to twenty in phenomenological research aligns with the three-interview commitment and produces sufficient data depth.

Data Collection: The Three-Interview Series

Data were produced by the three-interview series described by Seidman (2019), with each interview taking approximately 90 minutes and interviews separated by three days to one week, making the data generation period two to three weeks per participant.

Interview one: focused life history. The initial interview was designed to encourage participants to narrate their biographical experiences related to education, diversity, and difference from early schooling to their current ITE enrolment. Participants were invited to share as much as they wished about themselves in relation to the topic, without omitting their experiences in schooling, family background, and encounters with diversity and disability. Questions were phrased using the word *how* instead of *why* to prompt narrative reconstruction instead of defensive justification (Seidman, 2019).

Interview two: details of lived experience. The second interview focused on the objective details of the current lived experience of the participants in their ITE programmes concerning inclusive education. The participants were invited to recreate what they did and experienced in courses, practicum, and peer interactions pertaining to inclusion. They also narrated certain events, experiences with teacher educators and classmates, emotions, and thoughts that accompanied their learning. The focus was on what actions and observations characterised normal ITE life and were examined through close inquiry.

Third interview: reflection on meaning. The third interview asked the participants to move beyond immediate experience and reflect on the meaning of what they had shared in the previous two interviews. The question asked was, "What does this experience mean to you?" The participants were involved in relating the current experience of learning inclusive education to the life histories they had described in the initial interview and articulating what they had come to understand about themselves as prospective teachers in relation to inclusion, social justice, and professional identity.

Interviewing Techniques

The interviewing process conformed to the main principles described by Seidman (2019). The interviewer relied more on listening and less on talking, as they followed up on the participants rather than on a predetermined script. The participants were made to reconstruct their experiences as opposed to merely recalling them, a factor that leads to richer and more detailed experiential descriptions (Seidman, 2019). Silence was treated as a productive space for reflection. The interviewer avoided leading questions, minimised interaction and used the interview guide as a resource and not a script. The lack of structured questions was in favour of naturally occurring questions that emerged as a result of the narratives of participants. Questions arising naturally from participants' narratives were preferred to scripted prompts.

Data Recording and Transcription

The interviews were digitally recorded after the informed consent of the participants (Seidman, 2019). The TurboScribe AI was used in verbatim transcription, and the final transcripts were subsequently checked against the audio recordings by the research team. Non-verbal cues, such as pauses, laughter, and sighs, were also considered important parts of the data, given the presence of transcripts containing non-verbal information such as these signs (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Punctuation was given close consideration as an interpretative act because it was noted that punctuation choices in transcription carry interpretive weight (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analysed based on the analytic paradigm of Seidman (2019), which has four stages. During Phase 1, the research team read through every transcript multiple times, but took an open inductive approach and noted passages of interest that were compelling, illuminating, or surprising. In Phase 2, the process of marking passages occurred, which were tentatively labelled, and categories were created out of the data, which were provisional and open to revision. NVivo was used in this inductive coding process supported by AI-assisted coding, which helped to organise and retrieve the coded segments of the complete dataset (Jackson & Bazeley, 2024). The researchers reviewed and narrowed down AI-created codes successively so that the categories reflected participant meaning-making rather than algorithmically detected patterns, as confirmed through iterative researcher review.

In Phase 3, we thematically followed Seidman (2019) by grouping coded passages into categories and identifying connecting patterns across the cohort. Phase 4 involved interpretative analysis, which entailed making thematic links within and between categories, relating the results to the research questions, and constructing an interpretation of participant meaning. In the process, the research team adhered to the principle of honouring the voice of participants but applying the act of analytical interpretation, as Wolcott (1994) suggests that qualitative transformation requires moving beyond description to explanation and interpretation.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness was established based on the four criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). It was supported by credibility, which was based on the three-interview series itself, a form of extended engagement, in which participants' accounts deepened across interviews, and by member checking, in which participants assessed emergent interpretations. Dependability was addressed through a systematic audit trail of analytical decisions, including NVivo project logs and analytical memos kept during the process. The research team ensured confirmability with the help of reflexive practice, a clear record of the procedure followed in analytical work, and verbatim data that kept participant voices central. The possibility of transferability was supported by thick description, especially of the life history dimension, in

which readers obtain sufficient contextual information to evaluate the applicability of the outcome to other ITE situations in Punjab and similar environments (Tracy, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

Data generation was conducted in accordance with the ethical research standards. All participants provided written informed consent and were told clearly the nature and form of the three-interview commitment, their right to withdraw at any time penalty-free, and the confidentiality and anonymity process to be followed (Seidman, 2019). All participants were given pseudonyms, and their names and institutional information were concealed to avoid recognition. The data were kept on the institutional servers, which were secured by password protection and accessible only to the research team. The ethical approach of the study was informed by the I–Thou relational principles, which hold that participants are the end, not the means toward the research results, and that the researcher must offer true respect, curiosity, and concern to every interview experience (Seidman, 2019).

Findings

The analysis identified four dominant themes. All four themes are based on the three-interview data and are interrelated, with life history informing lived ITE experience, which in turn shaped the meaning participants attributed to both.

Theme One: The Weight of Biographical Experience

The first theme concerns how participants carried into ITE prior dispositions towards inclusive education shaped by their schooling, family encounters with difference, and community responses to marginalisation. Participants consistently narrated their biographical experiences as formative and consequential, and typically in a manner that created a sense of ambivalence but not a sense of commitment.

Aisha, a 23-year-old participant from a semi-rural area of central Punjab, recounted a similar experience that occurred during her school days:

A girl in my school had hearing difficulties. She was never seated in the front by the teacher. I recall that she was in distress, but no one did anything. I believe that I had the image with me all the time.

This reconstruction is an example of what Seidman (2019) refers to as the constitutive power of early experience: the perceived sense of unfairness caused by Aisha's own education, brought to her ITE programme. Similar biographical cues were observed throughout the data, with participants noting family histories involving someone with a disability or learning difficulties tending to state that their orientation towards inclusion was more concrete and emotionally grounded, while those without such experience described inclusive education as an abstract concept prior to ITE.

One of the participants, Usman, explained his biographical formation in radically different terms:

I attended a school as a growing-up child, and such a school was comprised of children without disabilities. Inclusion was never brought up. My teachers had never talked of children with special needs. This is what I did not even consider until I went to university. Hence, once when I was attending the course about inclusive education, I was forced to challenge all that I believed about the process of teaching. It was uncomfortable. (Participant 12)

This description is based on the third interview, during which Usman reflected on the significance of his experiences, and this demonstrates the biographical gap evident in most ITE entrants and the gap that is made decisive when first experienced in a university classroom. The link with literature is strong: the idea of the apprenticeship of observation by Lortie (1975) can be used to understand how thousands of hours of previous schooling, where the concept of inclusion remained untested, are a powerful informal curriculum that shapes the assumptions prospective teachers bring to ITE.

Theme Two: Moral Dissonance and Professional Becoming

The second theme addresses the experience of moral dissonance or a tension between values, which participants identified as central to their professional development in ITE. In the case of prospective teachers who found themselves exposed to inclusive education as a normative requirement during their course studies, these conflicts manifested as tension between their biographical orientations, constructing professional identities, and the structural reality they perceived during practicum work.

The participants referred to this dissonance with a lot of feeling. According to a twenty-two-year-old student in her second year of a B.Ed. programme, Sana, the following outlines what happened on a first visit to a mainstream school during her practicum:

In my course, I learned that inclusion implies that all children are part of the classroom. Then I visited a school during my teaching practice, and there was a child with Down syndrome sitting in the corner, and he was not doing anything. The teacher ignored him. I needed to do something, but I did not know what. And I wondered, what sort of teacher am I? And this is what inclusion is supposed to mean here? (Participant 7)

This account is a phenomenological fact of what Seidman (2019) refers to as the distance between the world introduced in formal education and the one experienced in practice. The professional identity question, which is at the centre of this study, is exactly what Sana poses when she asks what kind of teacher she is becoming. The dissonance Sana experiences is productive: It generates reflexive questioning. Pantić (2015) argues that reflexivity focused on structural and cultural conditions rather than personal behaviour alone is the cornerstone of teacher agency oriented towards social justice (Andreoli et al., 2026).

Another reaction to dissonance described by other participants was a retreat into compliance. Haroon replied:

I am aware of what is contained in the books. At my school, the teachers have twenty-five minutes during a class and forty pupils. You cannot do inclusion. And then I only concentrate on the exams until I pass.

In this calculated compliance, the way structural constraints foreclose the development of social justice orientations is demonstrated, giving rise to what Andreoli et al. (2026) call the absence of enabling conditions for teacher agency. The conflict between desire and structural constraints was a common strand in the accounts presented by the participants.

Theme Three: Reflexivity as Contested Practice

The third theme has a direct relation to reflexivity, wherein participants were invited to explore how they felt about being asked to critically examine their assumptions and practices, as well as the structural formations that shape inclusion in schools in Punjab. For many participants, reflexivity was an unfamiliar and, at times, threatening practice.

The participants characterised the culture of their ITE programmes as largely transmission-based, in which the teacher educators covered content on inclusive education without necessarily modelling or providing space for critical questioning to occur. Razia described in her reflection on her course on special education as follows:

There were the types of disability, the laws, and the procedures explained by the teacher. We took notes. What we thought of it was not questioned by us. I had numerous questions, but I did not pose them.

This narrative from the second interview illustrates how reflexivity is constrained by the pedagogical culture of ITE institutions in Punjab, consistent with wider findings on the transmissive orientation of teacher education in the region (Safdar et al., 2024).

Where reflexivity emerged, it was generated primarily through practicum and peer experience rather than formal instruction. The participants characterised peer discussions, personal scholarship, and practicum experiences as more generative sources of reflexive

questioning than formal coursework. In her third interview, Amna explained that there was a turning point:

I began questioning myself, why this child is excluded. Not what is wrong with the child. This was the actual transformation on my part. I had always believed there was something wrong with the child. So, I began to question; there is a problem with the system.

Such a change from a deficit to a structural frame is a major break in social justice orientation, and it did not occur in one interview but occurred through the process of meaning-making across the three interviews.

Theme Four: Social Justice as Aspiration and Barrier

The fourth theme concerned the participants' understanding of social justice in relation to inclusive education, their hopes for equitable practice, and the obstacles they perceived to achieving equitable practice in schools and ITE institutions in Punjab.

Participants repeatedly expressed strong ethical commitment to fairness and equity, typically expressed through Islamic ethics of justice and protection of the vulnerable. Nevertheless, it was not easy to translate this ethical conviction into specific professional orientations towards inclusive education. The majority of participants defined social justice as an overarching moral sentiment and not as specific practices or a course of action. This coincides with the observation that teacher educators in the Pakistani context construct social justice in the relational and moral values dimension without necessarily connecting it to structural critique or agentic practice.

The participants observed several obstacles. On the macro level, they cited structural constraints, including: no clear policy implementation, no provision of resources, and an exam-based curriculum. On the meso level, they characterised ITE institutions' culture as non-reflexive, compliance-focused, and unable to support inclusive professional formation. At the micro level, they identified personal uncertainty, lack of experience, and a sense of inadequacy as important. The clearest articulation of this tension came from Naila in the third interview:

I would like to become a teacher who will not leave any children behind. I believe in this very deeply. However, I also know that once in a classroom with forty students, I will not receive any support, training, or resources. And I will be compared against the number of children who pass the test. So what do I do with my belief? Should I retain it or let it go?

The main tension that the study raises and is summarised by Naila's question is the disconnect between the social justice aspirations that prospective teachers bring to inclusive education and the realities of the educational system in Punjab that constrain its realisation. Andreoli et al. (2026) focus on this in their model of teacher agency: enabling conditions, strategies, and outcomes must align for agency to be exercised (Andreoli et al., 2026). These enabling conditions are often lacking in the Punjab ITE situation.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The four themes identified in this research help to understand the complexity of prospective teacher formation concerning inclusive education in Punjab. The results indicate that the process of professional identity formation in this regard is strongly biographical: those joining ITE already have orientations related to inclusion, disability, and difference shaped by years of previous formal schooling, where these questions have been largely absent. This aligns with the argument proposed by Lortie (1975) regarding the power of the apprenticeship of observation, as well as with the conclusion that teacher attitudes and personal attributes are facilitating conditions enabling inclusive practice to be realised, as highlighted by Andreoli et al. (2026).

Moral dissonance as a theme is rather theoretically productive. It suggests that ITE constructs a space of identity dissonance in which participants are simultaneously expected to

commit to inclusive education and confronted by structural conditions that make such a commitment difficult. Seidman (2019) claims that this productive tension is most apparent in the third interview, which is based on the meaning-making, and the data presented in this study support that notion. The reflections of the participants in the third interview were more analytically rich and emotionally deep than the responses in the earlier interviews, suggesting that the three-interview design deepened engagement with identity questions.

Connection to Existing Literature

The results support and broaden current studies in numerous critical ways. The structural gap between inclusive policy and ITE practice in Punjab, as qualitatively documented by Bokhari et al. (2026), is documented here at the phenomenological level, showing how prospective teachers experience moral dissonance, reflexive constraint, and structurally frustrated aspiration. The research extends the model of teacher agency presented by Pantič and Florian (2015) by introducing biographical and contextual specificity, showing how the four dimensions of agency comprising purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity are enabled or constrained in the Punjab ITE context (Andreoli et al., 2026); Pantič and Florian (2015).

The finding that reflexivity is constrained by the pedagogical culture of ITE institutions in Punjab challenges optimistic accounts in reflective practice literature (Safdar et al., 2024) that presuppose an individual capacity to develop reflexivity independently. The data indicate that reflexivity is a practice that is structurally enabled or constrained by institutional cultures, resource access, and the relational dynamics of ITE programmes. This is consistent with socio-cultural approaches to teacher learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

The other important contribution of the research is that the role of biographical experience in determining the social justice orientations among prospective teachers in Punjab is documented. Although this relationship has been conceptualised in Western settings (Sachs, 2005), it has not been explored phenomenologically in the Punjab context. The finding that participants with biographical experience of exclusion or disability were more inclined towards social justice orientations indicates that ITE programmes might provide a strategic means of creating structured experience that supplements or compensates for limited biographical exposure.

Implications

Theoretically, the results contribute to the development of knowledge regarding professional identity formation by demonstrating that it is formed through the interaction between biography, lived institutional experience, and meaning-making over time. Three interview techniques were necessary to reveal this temporal dimension. In practice, the findings suggest that ITE programmes in Punjab need to attend to the biographical orientations that prospective teachers bring, promote structured contexts for reflexive practice, and focus on the enabling conditions to teach inclusively instead of solely focusing on the development of technical skills (Andreoli et al., 2026). Policy-makers must address meso-level factors, including curriculum design, teacher educator capacity, and practicum quality, if social justice in inclusive education is to move beyond rhetoric Malik et al. (2014).

Limitations

Several limitations qualify the scope and transferability of these findings. The 22 participants used as the sample in the research are appropriate as far as phenomenological research is concerned; however, they do not reflect the entire spectrum of possible experiences of prospective teachers in numerous ITE institutions in Punjab. The gender imbalance in the sample reflects the actual gender distribution in B.Ed. programmes, which limit the representation of male prospective teachers' experiences. The three-interview design, which was rigorous in terms of its methodology, demanded a significant investment from the

participants, potentially introducing selection bias, since only more reflective participants may have volunteered. Finally, contextual limitations have influenced transferability, as the unique institutional, cultural, and policy context of Punjab means that findings cannot be directly transferred to other provincial or national contexts without careful consideration of contextual differences.

Future Research Directions

This study creates three possible directions for future research. First, longitudinal studies on the same groups that involve ITE and their initial years of teaching would indicate whether the orientations formed during ITE persist, evolve, or erode under school conditions. Second, a comparative study of ITE institutions that demonstrate varying pedagogical orientations, that is, transmissive and reflexive institutional cultures, would provide insights into the institutional conditions that enable or inhibit social justice orientations. Third, a study that would bring teacher educators themselves to a phenomenological inquiry on their own professional identities and orientations toward inclusive education would complement the focus of this study on the perspectives of prospective teachers, adding the relational and institutional dimensions of ITE.

Conclusion

This study examined how prospective teachers in Punjab construct their professional identities, engage in reflexivity, and develop orientations towards social justice in relation to inclusive education using the three-interview phenomenological approach with 22 participants enrolled in ITE programmes. The analysis found four key themes: the weight of biographical experience in the development of initial orientations toward inclusion; the moral dissonance arising when inclusive ideals encounter structural realities in ITE and practicum; the experience of reflexivity as a constrained and contested practice within the transmissive cultures of Punjab ITE; and the tension between social justice as a moral aspiration and the structural, institutional, and personal constraints to its realisation in professional practice.

The study has implications for future research on teacher formation. It shows that the professional identity, reflexivity and social justice orientations are not only about attitude or the content of the curriculum, but they are produced when the biography, institutional culture and structural conditions of the educational system interact. The methodology of three interviews was essential to revealing this temporal and biographical dynamic, and the findings indicate that it is through continuous dialogue rather than in individual exchanges that meaning-making about professional identity is achieved through time. With implications for the design of ITE curricula and teacher educator development, as well as including education policy in Punjab, attending to the biographical orientations that prospective teachers bring, provision of enabling conditions of authentic reflexivity, and development of enabling conditions of teacher agency should be at the heart of ITE reform.

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