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Faith, Privilege, and National Identity: Insights into the Construction of Citizenship in Elite Pakistani Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The study, which forms part of larger qualitative research project, applies the methodology of grounded theory developed by Strauss and Corbin to explore the process of construction and negotiating citizenship education in elite Pakistani classrooms. The study has been designed based on systematic collection of data, i.e., observing the classrooms, conducting in-depth interviews with the teachers, the students and the analysis of the documents. This study discusses how religious faith, and socio-economic privilege contributes to the complicated interaction of all three factors i.e. religious faith, privileged position in the society, and the national identity formation in the elite educational establishments in Pakistan. The grounded theory analysis reveals three identified main categories, namely, the category of privileged patriotism, faith-mediated citizenship, and exclusionary belonging. These findings shed some light on how social stratification is replicated by the educational elite as a part of citizen education. The research paper gives information on how inequality is maintained by the elite institutions through the practice of education.

Keywords: Citizenship Education, Elite Schools, Pakistan, Grounded Theory, Islamic Identity, Social Reproduction, Privileged Patriotism

Introduction

The Pakistani education system is one that is marked by a high degree of stratification such that the elite institutions function as an gatekeeper of the social privilege as well as a propagator of existing hierarchies (Rauf et al., 2024a, 2024b). These elite schools inappropriately dominate national discourse and the production of future elites to the

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extent to which they are coupled with socio-economic elites. There is, therefore, a need for a more critical consideration of socialization to citizenship in such middle-class classrooms in the context of the mechanisms of social reproduction and constructions of national identity (Rauf et al., 2023).

Citizenship education is seen as a multidimensional process which is managed by blending of stories that form civic participation, dynamics of power and ideologies (Banks, 2017). This intricacy is made further worse by the fact that in the case of Pakistan, Islamic ideology exists alongside and in the majority of the cases in the opposite direction - in contradiction with the Western educational model. (Hoodbhoy, 2017). In a sense the elite schools delineate the space - they act as mediators between the global and local paradigms of citizenship being, at the same time, became globally selective in a socio-economic sense, characterized more by cosmopolitan longings and an English-medium instruction (Rauf et al., 2021).

The given study deals with one of the gaps of the scholarly understanding therein: It observes how elite Pakistani institutions create and argue over the sets of citizenship narratives. Though there has been significant research on the educational dualism and specific role of madrassa in Islamism in Pakistan that articulates the religious identity (Shah, 2016), little emphasis has been given on how elite secular schools deal with religion, privilege, and nationhood. This negligence is especially remarkable considering the fact that students of these institutions often hold seats of great influence in Pakistani society.

The central research question to be pursued in the given investigation is as follows: How does elite Pakistani schools deal with and develop citizenship education? Questions of how religious faith and socio-economic privilege specifically play these roles in this constructive process, as well as how processes of social stratification connect to the dynamics of the constructive process are also focused of the study. Theoretically, the research explains the process of elite reproduction and can be used as input for a more inclusive educational policy; practically, it addresses sensitive issues about national unity as well as social justice in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Since T. H. Marshall wrote of the tripartite category of civil, political and social rights, there have been many critical works that have attempted a theoretical space for citizenship in terms of identity, belonging and civic participation (Isin & Turner, 2002). The division of citizenship into a legal category and citizenship as a desirable pursuit, conceptualized by Kymlicka and Norman (1994), highlights that democratic integrity is highly dependent on both civic virtues and societal participation. In post-colonial contexts, the process of a search in citizenship learning is more complicated since the newly formed states identify the colonial structures that have been passed down and interact with local cultural paradigms. Pakistan is a case in point: The historical and religious identity-based two-nation theory intersects along such a nationalist territorial line (Jalal, 2014). Schools are therefore required to develop national unity and, in the process, be authentic in their religious commitments.

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus have been utilized to explain the social reproduction role of elite education (Bourdieu, 1986). These facilities are transmissive institutions whereby privileged families invest in the symbolic capital of

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their children, ensuring a generation of privileged competence. The investment is not only in didactic competence, but also in disposition, in tastes and worldviews that delimit the same towards the elite and the other collective.

This model is supported in empirical research in Pakistan that demonstrated the legacy of colonial pedagogies of depriving the power, also to reproduce societal hierarchies. Elite schools often established in societies that are largely Islamic are often treated as Western-centric enclaves of learning that led to a careful negotiation or balance between civic ideals on the one hand and local cultural norms and values on the other. Such contestations can be observed in language policy and in curricular design, and the debate behind national identity and cultural authenticity is equally a wider discussion (Anjum et al., 2021; Diana et al., 2022).

Another aspect that poses a challenge to analytical work is religion and national identity, which have interacted deeply within the state system of Pakistan (Rafiq et al., 2025; Rauf & Muhammad, 2025). The state roles of Islam breed stratified meanings in the discourse of citizenship (Dean, 2005; Muhammad, 2019; Zia, 2003). Institutions consequently maintain a balance of educating Islamic values and preparing to enter a global arena and, as a result, tend to result in a hybrid curriculum, which combines religious instructions with secular ideas of citizenship.

Despite recent academic concern, there is scarce understanding of the dynamics involved in the most elite schools in Pakistan. Literature has mainly been on madrassa-centered religious education or macro-level policy changes; hence, little has been focused on the legacies of the peculiarities of citizenship construction within privileged educational places. To overcome this gap, the current research uses grounded theory as a research methodology to come up with indigenous frameworks based on the reality on the ground in terms of education in Pakistan.

Methodology

The current qualitative research reflects a constructivist epistemology as the study recognizes that citizenship education is the product of social construction between the educators, students, and the institutional environment (Charmaz, 2014). The study is exploratory in nature, and since the researchers needed to develop theoretical observations using empirical observation instead of applying external theories, the investigators chose grounded theory as a methodological direction. This study, therefore, uses the systematic protocol of Corbin and Strauss (2015) grounded theory that focuses on constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, and cyclical development of grounded theories following the use of empirical data to develop substantive theories. The protocol also establishes a set of three-step coding processes, or open, axial, and selective coding, that helps to shift descriptive categories to theoretical integration in a methodical way.

The author has used four of the elite schools in a metropolitan city, and they have been chosen based on reputation, fee structure, and their influence within society. These schools form part of the varied organizational forms in the elite education field, such as conventional grammar schools, international curriculum schools, and hybrid or mixed schools between local and global components. The participants included 15 teachers, 20 students (aged 16-18), and eight administrators, chosen with the use of purposive and theoretical sampling methods (Denieffe, 2020; Obilor, 2023).

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The research focused on ethical considerations in the foreground (Ryen, 2021). Consent was negotiated with participants who were continuously asked to participate, and it was provided through institutional review boards (Adu & Miles, 2023; Miles et al., 2020). Extraordinary emphasis was placed on the power dynamic since such a topic is sensitive to talking about privileges and inequality. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by pseudonyms and procedures in the handling of data (Miller et al., 2012).

There were various approaches taken to offer triangulation and theoretical saturation. The classroom observations of more than 40 hours were used to reflect daily practices in the citizenship education that included formal educative hours, informal conversation, and extra-curricular events. Participants were interviewed in group discussions and semi-structured interviews about their views of citizenship, national identity, and the role of education in society. Curriculum, policies, and school printed materials were also examined to bring an explication of institutional frameworks and institutionalized discourse.

Analytical steps involved retaining the stages of Strauss and Corbin that first involved open coding in tracing initial concepts and categories, axial coding in discovering the relationship between categories, and selective coding in drawing the generalizations with core theoretical constructs. The development of analyzing categories assisted by continuous comparison of sources of data and theoretical sampling

Findings and Analysis

Core Category 1: Privileged Patriotism

In the analysis below, we present a key construct, which is referred as privileged patriotism, whereby elite schools in Pakistan reinforce class hierarchies that are accompanied by the development of national identity. Privileged patriotism occurs when the rich and influential citizens of Pakistan capture national symbols and narratives. They use such symbols to demonstrate themselves as the certain rulers of future of the country. At the same time, they exclude or overlook other forms of civic virtues that could be regarded as real Pakistani citizenship..

There are multiple sub-dimensions that interact in the maintenance of this construct. To begin with, the histories taught in these educational institutions highlight the role of the educated elites in the establishment of Pakistan and its subsequent evolution at the expense of the activities of the working classes and organizations at the grassroots level. As the interview with one of the history teachers shows, “We teach the guidance of Quaid-e-Azam and other educated leaders because these are the figures with whom our students can actually connect and strive to follow suit” (Teacher Interview 7, 2025).

The second dimension, leadership cultivation, has a greater focus on preparation to take up roles of influence at the national level. The training does not end with being an academic excellence but goes further to include training on natural leadership abilities that are supposed to give an elite student a differentiation over students in other learning environments. According to a senior student, the lesson is that as a privileged student, serving the country is a part of his duty, but it is taught that one must serve in power (Student Interview 12, 2025).

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Third, a cultural superiority complex is rampant in the classroom discussion on citizenship to emphasize the cosmopolitan life and English mastery of elite students as national developmental resources. Instructors tend to contrast the global view of their students with what they term as the kind of myopic vision held by learners in other education systems. It is this relative positioning that consolidates distinctions between non-elite and elite citizenship and legitimizes privileges by means of a service discourse.

As classroom observations also showed, the privileged patriotism comes into action in practice on a daily basis. In one of the lessons on civics on national development, students addressed issues mainly through the prism of the concepts of proper leadership and educated governance, projecting themselves as the potential national problem-solver in an implicit manner. This discussion was made by the teacher who said, “What special things can your people like you do to the progress of Pakistan?” which further supported this assumption that elite students have special qualifications to serve the nation.

This finding can be evidenced by a review of school publications and speech discussions. The repeated references in these writings to the creation of the future leaders of Pakistan and the custodians of the national development create the effect of elite education being exclusively patriotic, while urging other forms of education as less Pakistani or less likely to produce good citizens.

Core Category 2: Faith-Mediated Citizenship

The second thematic area helps us to explain how elite Pakistani schools mediate the complex intersections between Islamic identity and the form of modern citizenship in subtle ways that involve religious interpretation and cultural negotiation. It assumes the existence of faith-mediated citizenship as a unique form in which the belief system becomes a constituent element of civic life and, at the same time, becomes transformed to suit the cosmopolitan norms and global interference.

This type also finds a discourse of moral citizenship which is all over the elite educational domains, in which the Islamic morals form the normative model of civic life. The discussion, however, does not conform to strict fundamentalist interpretations of the faith, and is characterized by teachers and administrators as “enlightened Islam” or “progressive Islamic values.” According to one Islamic studies teacher, the aim of education is to teach Islam as a religion of peace, tolerance, and social justice; this would prepare our students to be global citizens and hence preserve their true identity (Teacher Interview 3, 2025).

Markers of religious authenticity play a crucial role in the process of authorizing the claims of elite school children to Pakistan citizenship despite their frequent Westernized manner of life and international dreams of opportunities. The schools strike a delicate balance between Islamic practices and contemporary education in order to assist the students to display religious credentials and explore the world's opportunities. Prayer rituals, classes in Islamic history, and Quranic studies are used as markers of authenticity and set elite Pakistani schools apart as not just secular schools.

The cosmopolitan story of Islam is the most sophisticated version of faith-mediated citizenship, or rather, Islam is inherently suited to embrace modernity and the

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cosmopolitanism of worldly interaction. This discourse also enables elite students to continue identification with religiosity and, at the same time, adopt Western education content and lifestyle. An administration remark was, "Islam teaches that we must pursue any form of knowledge, and thus our global exposure helps us excel and not hinder us in our Islamic identity at all" (Administrator Interview 4, 2025).

The classroom observation of classes studying Islam recorded other examples of the effectiveness of teachers in negotiating potentially controversial material by emphasizing the ways in which Islam had aided civilization and its compatibility with democratic principles. Muslim schoolchildren studied the works of Islamic literature with the lexicographic models of Western literary methodology, without losing respect for religious authority. This method of teaching allows the advanced intellectual range of work with religious substances and conditions the students to succeed in academic environments of international universities.

According to the dimensional analysis, a higher rate of religious identity is tied to a more assured navigational performance in the global context by ensuring that a student enjoys the comfort of his/her cultural authenticity in addressing the diversity of worldviews around. On the other hand, less religious students have a high risk of anxiety being subjected to cultural authenticity, and it results in the strictness and affirmative interpretations of conservative interpretations or a total denial of religious identity.

Core Category 3: Exclusionary Belonging

The third thematic strand questions how elite Pakistani schools are creating a sense of citizenship as an exclusivist status, and not as an inherent right, thus creating elaborate social boundary maintenance mechanisms that decide who is acceptable as a full member of the national community. Composed of cultural-capital prerequisites, linguistic identifiers, and social-network limits that deny meaningful citizenship to all but those with the possession of the right credentials and networks, this exclusionary belonging is perpetuated.

The cultural-capital demands can be most obvious through the assumptions of what kind of knowledge, skills, and character qualities people should have in order to become successful citizens. Educational institutions in the elite domain promote specific types of cultural literacy - knowledge of Western literature, aesthetic preferences, and ease with the customs of social interaction in international society, to meet national leadership requirements. One of the eloquent literature teachers states that students who are intelligent enough to talk about Shakespeare and Iqbal in the same manner are also capable of introducing Pakistan on an international scale (Teacher Interview 9, 2025).

The use of language and accents is a powerful means of inclusion, with certain modes of English usage indicating access to the educated upper classes and the downgrading of examples of regional forms of language and stress. These hierarchies become part of the way the students think about things. Students feel the pressure to speak English correctly. They do not perceive this as mere communication tool. Instead, they see appropriate English as evidence of their credibility. Students would like other people to perceive them as individuals who could bring a valuable input into the serious debates about the future of Pakistan (Student Interview 15, 2025).

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The mechanisms of social network exclusivity are informal and limit meaningful communication to students with similar backgrounds. Although there is institutional rhetoric on the division of social difference and inclusion, it was observed that there are strict patterns of social segregation based on the schooling background, and scholarship students are often placed on the outskirts of social strata. These trends do not exist only in the schooling environment but also in work and social networks that determine future possibilities of the elite students and their potential influence.

The dimensions of exclusion come out clearly on such occasions when parents attend school functions and ceremonies where the pattern of attendance and participation substantiates social hierarchies. The family networks, business relationships, and cultural-capital presentation precede the informal sifting techniques of full inclusion into elite social groupings of students. As one administrator admits, “Although they are open to any kind of student, it is also predictable that students who have the chance to acquire more or less the same values and experiences in similar and related ways than other students will relate to each other closely” (Administrator Interview 2, 2025).

Dimensional analysis shows that as the degree of exclusion increases, the degree of boundary-maintenance mechanisms also increases, with the schools that employ more inclusionary rhetoric often employing more deceptive though equally powerful exclusionary mechanisms. Exclusionary belonging seems to be specifically related to social reproduction, where graduates are involved in elite networks that reproduce their privileges in many generations to come.

Theoretical Model Development

According to the classification, paired in the three crucial dimensions (elite-level patriotism; faith-mediated citizenship; and exclusionary belonging), the create an elite Pakistani school is regarded to be a complex process of creating different exclusive and inclusive patterns of citizen-hood. The theoretical approach that is the outcome of this research characterizes citizen formation as such as a continuity interactive hub of a process of negotiation based on which they are in contrast to the special and to the discriminative needs of authenticity, excellence and exclusivity.

This is achieved through such negotiations which can be referred to as selective appropriation. Nevertheless, we could add that simultaneously native institutions are uniting a few features of the disparate traditions of citizenship, in modes like opposition to relations of domination. This claim of selectivity allows schools to preserve their legitimacy for various constituencies as they continue to defend the interests of the elites.

The Elite Citizenship Construction Process is directed by three main factors of input. Religion discourse as moral foundations and legitimacy, relations of class privilege and access to necessities, cultural capital, and the institutional culture supply the framework with which to build meaning. Such inputs are refracted with mediating operations of selective appropriation and construction of narratives of citizenship, which emerge as universalizable but then maintain exclusive functions.

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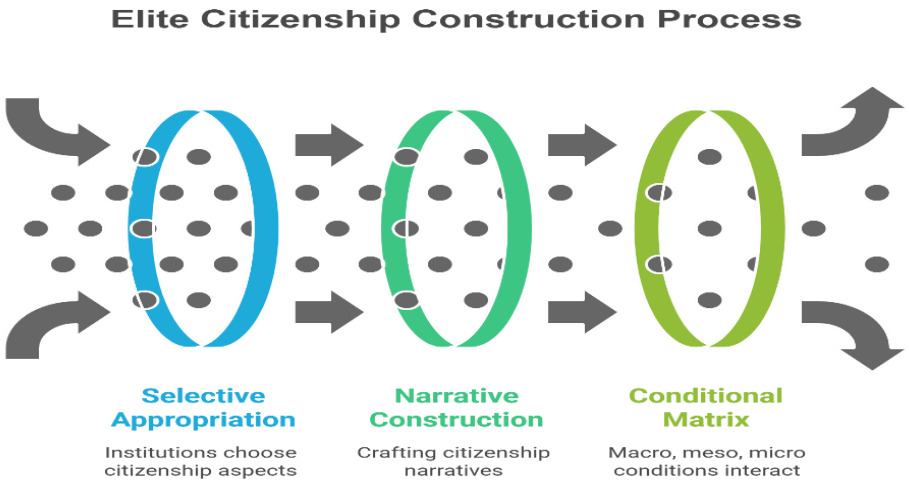
An analytical process that forms the basis of this process is based on a conditional matrix. The macro conditions include the national ideology of Pakistan that is a focus of Islamic identity, policies of education that give prominence to privatization, and external influences of the pressures of competitiveness globally. Meso conditions involve practices in institutions, communal norms, and politics. Micro conditions are individual agency, classroom interactions, and overtures of peers, which result in concrete contexts.



The current model contributes to the field of study of citizenship education by demonstrating the way elite institutions are going through the process of complex identity negotiations, as well as setting social boundaries. Moreover, the model reflects how potentially contradictory terms, discursive forms of exclusion and practices of exclusion are found in complex institutional forms that reflect elite interests institutionalization and are themselves expressions of the functions of national interest.

Discussion

This study contributes to new knowledge as it pertains to what Citizenship Education is. The latter means to what extent integration is taking place from formulations of world citizenship and to the Pakistani value systems called and expressed into the elitist institutions of Pakistan. The paper knits together three interrelated important ideas - religion (Islam), class and nationalism. This has enabled us to look at underlying social structures which holds the Pakistani together as well as how the religious imaginary in the school works to reinforce social difference which is inevitably linked to a Pakistani identity.

But there are also several things that it has been noticed that if not revolutionary are nonetheless important and significant and to an extent upend the popular notions of school as the school for the elite class and citizenship. First, no school other than elite schools get closer to western conceptions of citizenship than elite schools do. Yet this idea has translated to be accessible to the Pakistani nation while preserving his saints -

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relatively low cost and high income accessible only for well-off students. Second, the Muslim scholars fall not within the provisions found in the ordinary resolutions in the Islamic creed. Hence, instead of essentially correct one another, members of these schools use Islamic concepts in a wide range for the sake of seeking a balance between the needs for traditional and modern forms of citizenship.

The research did show, however, that students with strong religious identities do open up the world for the students. This is the exact opposite of development and religion as majority humans tend to believe in modern times also. Pakistani elite students far it is as concern for maintaining their Islamic identity and at the same time being able to benefit from the world's values. This said, the relation that religion had to the life of modernity is far messier than is normally preserved through books of citizenship training; this does a lot to challenge the prevailing bourgeois myth of being able to identify clear-cut cases of religion's pre- or post-modern existence.

If a comparison was made between the elite ranked schools working in Pakistan, today and those that were made in previous colonized countries, several similarities and differences could be drawn in the context of complementary freedoms playing a huge role in creating elite bound governance, today. The Pakistani Schools, elite schools of India and Pakistan, totally negation of meritocracy openly denied their students, and hidden the process of the students removal from schools on non-meritocratic basis. They also result in social alienation in view of this need for culture. On the other hand, the use of Islamic discourse for the reinforcement of such activities, leaving the internationalism open, is interpreted as a particular feature reserved only to (some Islamic) nation states.

This paper demonstrates that the elite groups influence the teaching of national identity at schools. These special interest groups purport to represent the entire nation at the expense of the other citizens. This undermines democracy and interpersonal peace in Pakistan. Suppose this is the case, renewal of education must be done to give more equal perspectives on citizenship.

Implications and Recommendation

According to the study, active citizenship should educate people on privilege and inequality and not conceal them. The present policy in the education sector damages inclusiveness in citizenship as it gives the elites greater authority, privatizing education and commercializing it. The study proposes teacher training to explicitly relate privilege, inequality, and making citizens fully inclusive. It also states that teachers must learn to become conscious of and eliminate neutral practices that exacerbate social inequality.

Lastly, they must assist in devising means of developing democratic citizenship. The curriculum should be socialized, and the types of materials available should allow the students to consider being a part of society by learning about the lives of other people to be ready to become citizens.

Since inclusion is important, other schools cannot be listed in terms of diversity statements and held accountable only because they have them. This might involve monitoring outcomes achieved in related status in different social groups, social integration based on schools, while comparing different levels of civic engagement after school.

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There is need for comparative studies that compare citizenship constructions in a range of different types of schools present in Pakistan (public schools; madrassas; and indeed, all types of private schools). An extended examination about the outcomes of the different types of citizenship education and the public activity of the graduates would provide policymakers with a useful foundation for policymaking.

Using student voice to investigate citizenship construction research: Opening pathways to understanding how children negotiate citizenship discourses they are exposed to in schools. On top of that, it may lead to the identification of opportunities for more democratic and inclusive practices of citizenship-schooling. There is therefore a need for more studies with inventive examples of citizenship education for elite schools to identify points of reference for wholesale reform.

Limitations and Conclusion

The study has limitations. These findings might not be appropriate for the other countries for elite education sector. Further, because there are time limitations for developing grounded theory, this research constitutes a temporal mark for political and social processes that are built up against the introduction of citizenship and over time may be changed in relation to them.

Second, because the very research participants influenced the stage of data formation and the stage of analysis because of their position in the area and in our society, this research may have biases. Again, that these influences were identified and incorporated in reflexive processes, does not mean that they can be altogether eliminated from qualitative research of this nature.

Despite the limitations of this case study, it provides richer understanding of citizenship education in the case of the elitist school of Pakistan, and the patterns of social reproducibility of Pakistani education practices, generally. The study shows that citizenship education is, at best, never neutral but that instead it is always and unavoidably about the narration of certain stories rather than others about 'legitimation' of certain identities over others and the encouragement of certain ways of belonging rather than others.

From the intersectional perspective and inserted in critical institutional analysis - findings are about the necessity for critical questioning of elitist modes of thinking and practice in education, for productive social reproduction - benchmarking in the name of working for the interests of the public (nation). Reasserting this identity has mistaken meritocracy for democracy and universalist belonging for exclusive belonging; has meant neglecting issues like national oppression; and so, has meant not being able to offer a citizenship education that engenders a critical understanding of privilege so as to enable us to follow through on any serious claim to national integration.

In a context like Pakistan, which as we speak is dealing with social integration, democratic governmentality, lack of economic development and much more challenges, the role of educational organizations vis-a-vis reproduction and/or a blow-up of the existing social inequalities is increasingly important. Obviously, action research informs them that all changeable action in education need to be based around the questions of which kind of society they are equipping their citizens for - with access and quality going on after that.

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The realities of privilege and inequality mean the way forward for policymakers and educators, and for the communities that comprise more democratic education will not be an easy one, but it will be a long one nonetheless, one marked by more authoritative theories and understandings of citizenship moving in the direction of more authentically democratic education. Only through such a process will it be possible for the education system of Pakistan to fulfil itself as an agency for national cohesiveness and social justice and not one of elitist locational reproduction and social partitioned society..

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