

Lived Experiences of Minority Teachers and Students in State and Private (Christian) Schools: A Case Study from Pakistan

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Abstract:

This study explores the experiences of religious minority teachers and students in Pakistani public and private schools, emphasizing the complex interaction of identity, workplace dynamics, classroom interactions, and institutional policies. The literature review highlights how Pakistan's education system, shaped by national policies that stress Islamic values, uses textbooks to influence students' identities, often reflecting political compromises and potentially marginalizing non-Muslims. Using a qualitative research approach and a case study method, this study concentrates on teachers and students from five major cities in Pakistan. Data was gathered through focus group discussions, with participants divided into groups from government and Christian schools. The results show that religious identity is vital for teachers and students, who frequently face subtle and overt discrimination, especially in government schools where they encounter social exclusion, promotion obstacles, and pressure to adopt Islamic cultural expressions. In classrooms, teachers and students self-censor to avoid blasphemy accusations, which limits dialogue beyond Islamic topics and hampers students' critical thinking and social development. Institutional policies and societal fears of blasphemy further restrict their teaching freedom and lead to biased assessment practices that disadvantage non-Muslim students. The study suggests updating textbooks to include positive stories of minorities, providing anti-discrimination training for school staff, creating merit-based promotion systems, and offering legal protections against blasphemy accusations to build a more inclusive education system.

Keywords: Christian teachers, Hindu teachers, Minorities in Pakistan, Identity negotiation, Blasphemy laws, Educational and Curricula reform.

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Introduction

The education systems established by states remain incomplete, and the political and social tensions among different groups in society continue to influence educational goals, curriculum, and standards. On one hand, states aim to prepare students for a future world that is globally connected and driven by new ideas created through technological advancements and mobility of people and ideas; on the other hand, they want to uphold existing ideals of national identity, which may conflict with a future-oriented outlook. Researchers argue that the education system functions as a tool used by the state to promote certain ideas and values through policies, curriculum, teachers, and school practices. Educational spaces also serve as crucial sites for exploring how students develop their perceptions of themselves, others, society, culture, and religion (Caplan, 2019; Gillinson & O’Leary, 2006; Hong & Perez, 2023). Pakistan’s education policy states that education is “a vital investment for human and economic development” and recognizes that “societal, political and governmental structures also impinge on the effectiveness of the education system.” The policy further emphasizes the “importance of Islamic values” and mandates that the education system must “adhere to the agreed principles” (Government of Pakistan, 2009) of Islam.

It is argued that textbooks reflect national education policies, and this research is based on the assumption that curriculum and textbooks shape students' identities and influence their views on various social, cultural, political, and religious aspects of their society and country. The textbook is a product of “the politics of official knowledge” and “the politics of accords or compromises,” and the compromises and agreements made among different groups are influenced and shaped by the powerful group, which also causes “these compromises are never stable (Apple, 2014).” Urdu textbooks in Pakistan exemplify these compromises made between different groups, especially religious groups and the ruling establishment (comprising political and military elites). This research examines the teaching and learning experiences of teachers and students from religious minorities from public and private schools, preparing students for the state-mandated secondary school leaving certificate (HSC) examination in Pakistan, which relies solely on state-approved textbooks for designing exam questions. The study seeks to understand how teachers from religious minorities feel when teaching Social Sciences subjects—whether their experiences foster a sense of inclusion and safety or evoke feelings of exclusion and

marginalization; and whether the information about Pakistan and its people included in the textbooks makes them feel secure or creates a sense of insecurity and division.

Literature Review

It is argued that teachers are street-level bureaucrats, whom Lipsky (2010) described as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (p. 3). He argued that teachers interact with many people, including pupils, and can “delimit [their] lives and opportunities” (p. 4) because of their significant discretionary powers, which remain unchecked by their clients and superiors. The policies, eligibility criteria, rules, and regulations governing their service are established by the “policy elites and political and administrative officials” (p. 4) who influence teachers’ practices. Other influences on teachers’ practices include their supervisors, the community, and occupational norms. Teachers in Pakistan are “strongly guided by their administrative leaders and school principals but exercise some degree of discretion in carrying out their professional activities.” (Muhammad, 2015).

Professional practices are shaped by their educational journey and teacher education program, which is influenced by policies established by the state through various education administrative bodies. It is presumed that all teachers should possess strategic knowledge, explained as “teacher’s intellectual toolkit; it comprises principles of teaching, learning, and development derived from empirical research; accumulated practical know-how and expertise accrued through experience.” (Goldstein, 2008). He also added “moral, ethical, and ideological commitments—fairness, respect, equity, integrity, dedication,” and “that are considered fundamental to the profession” (p. 451). Pakistan’s teacher education program is designed to meet the standards set by the government of Pakistan in its education policy, which presents the vision of the education system in Pakistan as our education system must provide quality education to our children and youth to enable them to realize their individual potential and contribute to development of society and nation, creating a sense of Pakistani nationhood, the concepts of tolerance, social justice, democracy, their regional and local culture and history based on the basic ideology enunciated in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2009).

The education program is aligned with the constitution of Pakistan that asserts that the government will follow the “principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam” enabling Muslims living in

Pakistan to shape their lives in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam, [read Sunni Islam], and the state will provide “*adequate provision* [the author adds the emphasis]... for the minorities to freely profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures” (Government of Pakistan, 2024).

The main obstacle for minority teachers is that the education system in Pakistan, shaped and influenced by Islam, aims to shape students into devout Muslims through its curriculum, textbooks, and practices. Most public and private schools—excluding those operated by non-Muslim organizations—are affected by this emphasis on Islamic values, practices, and rituals. These schools observe Islamic religious events and hold activities such as celebrating Islamic days like Milad, Quran recitation, Naat recitation (poems praising Prophet Muhammad), and singing competitions. However, these schools do not provide Muslim students with exposure to other religions, leaving them to learn about different faiths mainly through Indian and Western movies.

The second challenge faced by minority teachers is the state examination system. Pakistan requires Muslim students to take Islamic Education, while non-Muslim students have Ethics as an alternative. Although the government promised support for non-Muslim students, this did not include studying or being tested on their religion, unlike Muslim students. Recently, Quran Nazra (reciting and memorizing the Quran) was added, but non-Muslims can only choose from two Ethics exam papers—one replaces Islamic Education, and the other is for Quran Nazra. This curriculum is used across all provincial boards and exams, although the BISE Lahore—the largest in Punjab—offers Religious Education specifically for non-Muslims. According to the National Curriculum Council, religious education allows non-Muslim students to select studying their religion (BISE Lahore, 2012, 2024). However, students in the 2025 exams, part of the 2024-2026 cohort, couldn't access this option because the policy, though announced, was not implemented by the relevant educational and assessment authorities.

Analysis of Social Sciences (English, Urdu, Islamic Education, and Ethics) textbooks reveals that while Islamic Education aims to teach students about Islamic principles and Quranic verses, Ethics primarily focuses on providing basic information about various religions, including Islam, rather than fostering ethical development. These studies show that non-Muslim students learn extensively about Islam, its history, and people in other core social science classes like Urdu and English. The textbooks are designed to inform Muslim students about Islam's rich history and to influence non-Muslims to convert through negative portrayals of non-Muslim characters (Khokhar, 2021, 2023, 2024; Khokhar & Muhammad, 2020,

2022). This approach influences future teachers from religious minorities, shaping their classroom practices by discouraging certain discussions to avoid incidents of blasphemy accusations from Muslim staff, students, or parents (Baker, 2001; Fides, 2023; Staff/Compass, 2012).

Minority teachers' and students' perceptions of Pakistani society, its culture, history, people, and what is acceptable are shaped by textbooks, as they consider the textbook content authentic because of the state-backed agency producing these texts. Students from all faiths in Pakistan, like many in third-world countries, rely on textbooks as an authentic and reliable source of information. These textbooks are the primary source of information about Pakistan, its society, culture, independence, and political history, shaping their national and global worldviews. The financial constraints, lack of accountability, and technical knowledge to use technology to make curriculum and textbooks accessible to all stakeholders made the textbooks' knowledge, *official knowledge*, and the textbooks' narrative the *true knowledge* that shaped Muslim students' worldviews about Pakistan and its people (Apple, 1993; Apple, 2014). The researchers, since the 2000s, have published a plethora of studies analyzing Pakistani Social Sciences textbooks, and the findings of these studies can be summarized as follows:

1. Textbook content is Islamized, frequently referencing Islamic personalities, teachings, and values; Pakistani identity—both political and cultural—is rooted in Islam; religion (Islam) serves as the main boundary between the Muslim Pakistani self and the outsider, the non-Muslim (Durrani & Dunne, 2010; Joshi, 2010; Khokhar & Muhammad, 2020; Lall, 2008)
2. Textbooks omit all references to non-Muslims in both the pre- and post-independence history of Pakistan, due to limited space, and portray non-Muslims using a negative representation strategy (Saigol, 2005; Tripathi, 2018).

Educational spaces became a key area of research in Pakistan after the 1990s, due to numerous changes and movements in the 1980s that significantly influenced educational spaces and materials. Many researchers have published studies summarizing their findings, such as how educational spaces and materials, including textbooks, shape specific ideas of identity; how gender is represented in textbooks; and how Pakistan, its people, and their culture are portrayed, among other topics. Though this space is insufficient to list all the studies, but all the studies analyzing Social Sciences textbooks identified how a particular notion of Pakistani identity was

constructed and reinforced; how a specific concept of Pakistani society was developed and promoted; how gender disparity visible in Pakistan Pakistani society is reflected in the textbooks; and how religious minorities were depicted and presented in the textbooks. While all these studies focused on textbook content, none examined the perceptions and experiences of teachers and students from religious minorities as they interacted with the content as learners and educators.

Methodology

This research project adopts the qualitative research paradigm and borrows ideas from the social constructivist/interpretivist approach (focus on social construction of reality), the critical approaches (focusing on power, inequality, and emancipation), and the social phenomenological approach (focusing on essence and meaning) perspectives. The primary research method is qualitative content analysis. Case study methodology is selected because this research focuses on studying, understanding, and analyzing a social phenomenon in naturally occurring settings, and because the “boundaries between object of study and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2018). This study aims to explore a problem in depth and explain it through a rich description of the social phenomenon, using a “detailed representation of the participants’ perspectives and the consideration of the contextual influences” (Goldstein, 2008).

The participants for this research were selected from the state schools through convenience sampling, and the snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit teachers working at these schools. The administration of the chosen Christian schools from these five cities was approached, and after their approval, teachers who teach Urdu and English were recruited for this study. The participants were divided into small groups of five (with separate focus groups for teachers from state schools and Christian schools). The author organized online meetings with the teachers and shared the guiding questions before starting the sessions. Teachers who agreed to participate from both types of schools were informed about the scope of this study, and the author obtained their consent before beginning each focus group. Most participants in the discussion sessions did not want their interviews recorded, but they agreed to the notes being shared with them at the end of each session.

This study is limited to teachers and students from the five major cities of Pakistan: Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and Lahore. The researcher was unable to find Hindu teachers teaching Social Sciences in public schools, and many

Hindu teachers and students in Christian schools were unwilling to participate in this study. The researcher reassured the Hindu teachers that their identities and shared information would remain confidential, but this could not convince many Hindu teachers and students to take part.² The choice of Christian schools was due to the high number of such schools in these five cities, making it easier to approach Christian teachers, although many were hesitant and shared similar fears to those of their Hindu counterparts. This research examines the lived experiences of minority teachers in Pakistan, necessitating thoughtful, open-ended questions that facilitate in-depth reflection. The questions guiding the focus group discussion focused on understanding the participants' (1) Personal Identity & Cultural Adaptation, (2) Workplace Dynamics & Professional Challenges, (3) Student Interactions & Classroom Experience, (4) Institutional Policies & Societal Influence, and (5) Reflections & Moving Forward. The questions were divided into two groups: one for teachers working in state schools and another for teachers working in Christian schools. Although most of the questions asked were similar, questions related to Workplace Dynamics & Professional Challenges and Student Interactions & Classroom Experience were rephrased for teachers from public schools.

Findings

Personal Identity and Cultural Adaptation

The participants' identity results from both internal and external factors; the former includes inherent characteristics and symbolic expressions of belief shaped by religious values received from their families, churches, and church-led youth groups. The latter involves perceptions and assessments of the views held by the majority group (Muslims) or other minority groups (Hindus, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians). Both groups of participants—teachers working in state schools and teachers in Christian schools—shared their stories of becoming teachers because they believed it was their calling or vocation (a divine call) to work with students from either the majority faith or the minority faith. Teachers in state schools explained their reasons for choosing this sector, aiming to influence the perceptions of Muslim teachers and students about

² Hindus do not have a school in Pakistan. The Zoroastrian community runs two schools in Karachi. Christians (from different denominations) have 350+ schools registered with different government education bodies, spread all over the country. However, most of these schools are located in Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan. The majority of students attending these schools are from the main faith, Muslims. Various churches and Church-base non-governmental organizations operate numerous unregistered primary and non-formal schools in the Christian slum areas and the underprivileged communities across Pakistan, particularly in Punjab.

Christians. In contrast, teachers in Christian schools sought to support minority students and help them advance to positions typically held by Christians in Pakistan.

Muslims associated jobs like sewage cleaning, road maintenance, office work, and waste picking with Christians, viewing them as illiterate, uneducated, and from the lowest socio-economic classes. The government promoted these roles, explicitly stating that only non-Muslims could apply—a policy that was recently canceled after a lengthy legal battle initiated by organizations of religious minorities and human rights groups in Pakistan. Teachers in government schools aimed to showcase the diversity within Pakistan's Christian community, including farmers, church leaders, workers, office employees, and small business owners. For Christian teachers, working in the public sector was a way to challenge and dismantle their Muslim peers' stereotypes—that non-Muslims are only suited for sanitation or cleaning jobs—by demonstrating that Christians work across all sectors and positions, from entry-level roles to senior administrative positions.

The social dynamics also included expressions of social, cultural, and religious identity, such as verbal exchanges, daily greetings, prayers, attitudes, and ways of celebrating religious festivals like Christmas, Easter, Diwali and Wisakhi. Participants in public schools faced more challenges compared to their peers in Christian schools, where school authorities actively supported and organized celebrations, such as Christmas plays and school closures during Holy Week, from Holy Thursday to Easter Monday. Students in public schools often hesitated to show their religious identity, fearing covert discrimination such as being ignored or called derogatory terms like "Chora" or "Bhangi"—words associated with untouchables who perform sewage cleaning and waste collection—words that even university graduates used, according to a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) session. Both groups noted that participants in public schools experience discrimination both at work and outside, whereas participants from Christian schools mainly faced discrimination outside their workplaces, in broader Pakistani society. These discriminatory behaviors were often subtle but could sometimes be overt.

The FGD sessions revealed that religion is a central part of their identity, regardless of whether they attended state schools or Christian schools. They incorporated many cultural elements, such as greetings like Islamic/Arabic phrases—*As-salamu alaykum*, [English translation: peace be upon you] and its typical response *wa-'alaykumu s-salām*, [English translation: and peace be upon you]—as well as *Allah Hafiz*, [English translation: May Allah be your Protector]. This phrase replaced

Khuda Hafiz during General Zia's Islamization and Arabization of the country and all aspects of Pakistani society. Khuda is the Persian word for God, while Allah is the Arabic term. Other Arabic phrases that became popular during Zia's era and afterward include *Fi Amanillah*, [English translation: be with the safety of Allah], and *Jazakallah*, [English translation: May Allah give you more blessings and goodness]. Participants from state schools felt that they needed to use Arabic greetings to join conversations and be accepted by their colleagues and students in their schools.

The participants from Christian schools did not feel pressured to use all the Arabic greetings, and they still used Western greetings like Good Morning and Good Afternoon. However, all of these schools preferred greetings with a neutral religious tone, such as 'God bless you,' which serves as an alternative to Arabic greetings that involve the word 'Allah.' Despite this, teachers believed that parents of students in Christian schools continued to use Arabic greetings when meeting with teachers and school administrators. One group mentioned that they would start conversations with Muslim parents by saying 'God bless you,' but the parents would respond with 'As-salamu alaykum,' prompting the teachers to reply in Arabic with 'wa-'alaykumu s-salām,' and then conclude the exchange with another Arabic greeting, 'Allah Hafiz.' This unconscious influence made participants feel compelled to use Arabic greetings to make parents feel comfortable and secure, and to support the idea that "Christian schools are not places of preaching Christianity and converting Muslim students to Christianity" (quotation from a FGD session). The participants felt pressured to communicate to Muslim parents and students that the "Christian school is a place of learning academic knowledge and not a preaching place" (quotation from a FGD session).

Workplace Dynamics & Professional Challenges

During the FGD session, participants from state schools shared quiet moments, revealing inner struggles and conflicts, as well as concealed discrimination, harassment, and professional challenges. Their Muslim peers often regarded them as inferior or untouchable, avoiding conversations and refusing to sit or eat with them. One participant (teacher) recounted an incident from his time as a student at a state college, where a Muslim student persistently preached Islam to him over two years. "It [the conversations] was aimed at converting me to Islam by that student" (from the FGD), but he feared refusing, worried about the safety of himself and his cousins, who also studied there. He kept this to himself, assuming his cousins faced similar

experiences. He told his family he planned to move to another city for university, though he did not explain his reasons.

The participants from state schools shared their experiences of feeling invisible during school programs. These programs typically began with Quranic recitations and the Arabic phrase *Bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi* [English translation: In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate]. The schools believed that only Muslim teachers should speak at such events. The only opportunities for students to showcase their talents were singing and acting, as Muslim teachers thought they could sing well—since singing is part of Christian religious worship and prayers. One teacher and a few students, who were skilled at singing, were always asked to sing movie songs at school events, even though there was a Muslim teacher capable of singing well, but he was only asked to sing religious and nationalist songs. The participants felt that his peers made him feel as if he was doing something profane because he was the only one asked to sing movie songs—prohibited by Islam—linking his religious singing during service to a blasphemous activity. The participants believed that the idea of Christian workshop songs being profane stemmed from Western movies showing characters singing and dancing during Christian worship. For example, movies like *Sister Act* and *Sister Act 2* depict a combination of singing and dancing in religious settings. Muslim teachers and students have watched many Western movies and shows on YouTube and cable TV channels depicting Christian worship and religious events.

Teacher participants from state schools faced challenges in being promoted to higher grades and leadership roles, which were seen as exclusive to Muslims. These positions involved attending public events and speaking at school gatherings, often starting with the Arabic phrase, which the participants did not do. One participant said, “There were hidden forces at play in my promotion to Principal” (quote from the FGD session) highlighting that Muslim teachers could influence promotions to leadership roles within schools and the education department. While teacher participants from Christian schools did not feel similar pressure at their workplaces, they shared experiences of conversion attempts by Muslim students and teachers during their college years. Both groups reported being cautious in interactions with Muslim peers and students, fearing misunderstandings that could lead to violence against Christians in their communities.

Research participants (teachers) from the Christian school face indirect pressure. Muslim teachers, especially women, who opt to teach there tend to come

from higher socio-economic backgrounds and possess better qualifications than their Christian counterparts. Their chances of promotion to senior academic and administrative roles, such as coordinators and subject specialists, are greater than those of Christian teachers. The Christian school administration promoted Muslim teachers to various administrative and academic roles based on merit. Both groups of teachers felt that an unseen, invisible force influenced decisions—whether applying a merit-based approach in Christian schools or overlooking it in state schools.

Student Interactions and Classroom Experience

An important aspect of participants' lives is their interactions with students in the classroom, which mainly depend on classroom instructions. "The teachers' choice of instructional methods is shaped by their ability to interact with their students without any fear (detectable or undetectable) in their teaching spaces, such as schools and classrooms" (quotation from FGD session). Explaining the stories in the English and Urdu textbooks was challenging because the stories featured non-Muslim characters in various accounts of Islamic history and personalities from the early Islamic period. Teachers teaching Urdu and English during the FGD session were aware of the research on the Islamic content in these textbooks. They knew that about 70% of the text directly (40%, Prophet Muhammad, his family and friends, early history, and the start of Islamic rule) or indirectly (30%, Muslim rulers of the Indian subcontinent, history of Pakistan's independence movement, heroes of independence, wars with India and the heroes of these wars), and even social content, used Islam and Islamic teachings to relate ethical and moral issues. This included caring for the sick and elderly, protecting the environment, and keeping neighborhoods clean—all connected to Islamic teachings.

The participants in the FGD shared that they felt pressured while teaching these texts and hesitated to share their religion and its teachings on ethics, society, culture, and morals, fearing it would cause problems not just for themselves but also for their communities. "I was always conscious of what I say when I am teaching a text about Islam and Islam related (direct or indirect) in Urdu and English textbooks, because I could not expand the focus of the classroom discussion beyond Islam, and Islamic stories" (quote from the FGD session). This classroom teaching culture did not help the teachers to "cultivate exclusive values which seemed to be the purpose of English and Urdu textbooks and the whole educational experience" (quote from the FGD session), and teachers couldn't broaden students' perspectives beyond Islam, resulting

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in a lack of social skills such as communication, cooperation, and empathy, which are necessary in an exclusive and diverse society.

The participants from the state schools shared their experiences of working with Muslim parents. They felt that the parents were interested in their children's academic performance. However, the teachers believed that the parents hesitated to discuss their children's moral and ethical development during these meetings. The parents of Muslim students acknowledged the teachers' role in the students' overall development—physical, cognitive, and moral—but did not talk about moral and ethical practices like praying, fasting, and religious duties, believing that participants have no role in their children's moral growth. During these FGD sessions, the participants expressed concerns about being accused of promoting Christian values through the stories they might share with students to foster moral and ethical development.

Institutional Policies & Societal Influence

The FGD sessions revealed that participants working in state schools and Christian schools are aware of the country's education and curriculum policies. They learned about these policies through educational sessions organized by various non-governmental organizations focusing on social justice, equality in the Pakistani social system, and minority rights. Participants in state schools understand that they will be working within a system rooted in Islamic principles, teachings, and values. They are aware that their chances of promotion to higher administrative positions in state schools are minimal, or "rather non-existent" (phrase from an FGD session), because of their faith and their inability to integrate into the school culture fully. They also recognize that they will be teaching textbooks that include content about Islam, its teachings, history, the Prophet Muhammad, his family, and friends. Participants shared that their choices for classroom discussions are limited due to the fear of blasphemy, especially if they choose to discuss narratives or texts that depict non-Muslims negatively.

Participants from the state schools also highlighted the lack of support for non-Muslims within the country's law enforcement and justice system. Law enforcement agencies and their top officials failed to prevent attacks on Christian and Ahmadi residential areas, particularly in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Police often remained passive witnesses as non-Muslims' homes, properties, and businesses were set on fire and destroyed by mobs. Teachers expressed disappointment and

frustration that no one from the perpetrators was brought to justice through Pakistan's judicial system, despite many non-Muslims being killed by Islamist zealots—either in prison or during court visits—even after courts declared them not guilty. Additionally, societal realities limited the options for co-curricular activities in state schools. Efforts to educate Muslim students about other religions were barred, as such “activities risked being seen as proselytism” (quote from a FGD session), and Islamic-religio-political parties pressured the government to change the Ethics curriculum policy. They argued that Muslim students do not need a separate Ethics course, as Islamic Education provides all necessary knowledge, including principles of living and co-existence in a multi-religious society.

Participants were distressed to see non-Muslim students struggling to achieve marks similar to their Muslim peers. This disparity stemmed from the state's discriminatory policies in its assessment policy. For example, "Muslim students would get 90% in Islamic Education, while non-Muslim students often received only passing marks or up to 50%" (from the FGD session). They also noted the absence of a dedicated Ethics teacher in state schools; often, a Muslim teacher was assigned to teach Ethics, which some participants described as an attempt to teach Islamic Ethics under the guise of Ethics classes. During Zia's regime, policies allowed Muslim students to earn twenty-five extra marks if they had memorized the Quran, favoring Muslim applicants for medical, engineering, and public university admissions. This practice reduced non-Muslim students' chances of being selected in these professional educational institutes, discouraging them from pursuing their desired careers. Although it took 30 years and judicial intervention to declare this practice illegal and unconstitutional, the state introduced a similar policy by adding a subject called Nazra Qura (memorizing the Quran) into the curriculum.

Discussion

This study explores the complex lived experiences of teachers and students from religious minorities in Pakistani state and private schools and reveals that constructing academic and professional identities is an ongoing challenge for Participants in Pakistan, where religion plays a key role in shaping identities. The findings highlight the existence of a system, both explicit and implicit, that often views teaching as a divine calling to serve underprivileged Muslim and non-Muslim communities, helping them navigate challenges rooted in systemic biases and societal perceptions.

Personal Identity and Cultural Adaptation

The lived experience of Participants revealed a dynamic interplay of religious values, shaped through family and church (internal perceptions) and the perceptions of their Muslim peers in schools and Pakistani society (external perceptions). This interplay influenced their self-perception and their professional and vocational aspirations. Challenges faced by participants in state schools included responding to societal stereotypes—such as being labeled as low socio-economic status, uneducated, sanitation workers, or doing cleaning jobs—by Muslim students and teachers. They also struggled to establish themselves as relevant and important members of the state's education system. The participants took pride in the history of Christian education and institutions in Pakistan, viewing it as a testament to the ideals of diversity and inclusivity—highlighting Christianity's desire to collaborate and connect with the majority faith group rather than remain isolated. Additionally, they aspired to see Pakistan as an inclusive state, echoing the vision outlined by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, known as Quaid-e-Azam, in his address to the country's first constituent assembly. While explaining Islam's history and linking it with the concept of an inclusive Muslim state, he stated, “You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed — that has nothing to do with the business of the State (Hear, hear)”(Government of Pakistan, 1947).

The participants from state schools felt an implicit pressure to adopt Islamic/Arabic greetings and cultural expressions to feel integrated, accepted, and included in their Muslim peers' ingroup. While this adaptation seems harmless, it subtly and unconsciously pressures them to conform to the majority group's culture and practices. Similar feelings were shared by participants from Christian schools, where Muslim students' parents often used Islamic/Arabic greetings like *As-salamu alaykum* and *Ma Sha Allah* [English translation: As God has wished] to ensure a sense of security and avoid implications of proselytization. This illustrates how the majority's cultural narrative influences engagement practices among minority groups in both state and Christian schools—a delicate balance between maintaining their identity and ensuring their safety. Christian schools used inclusive greetings, such as “God bless you” instead of *As-salamu alaykum*, though Muslim teachers in Christian schools were not prohibited from using Islamic/Arabic greetings in classrooms. Participants expressed fears of hearing derogatory language and experiencing hidden discrimination, especially in state schools, which further prompts cautious use of self-

expression. These findings align with research showing that minority communities often adopt a 'turn inward' strategy and strategic behaviors to protect their identity under external pressures, both explicit and implicit (Cvetkovska et al., 2020; Leath *et al.*, 2019; Vossoughi *et al.*, 2024; Yip & Saito, 2024; Yip & Xu, 2024).

Workplace Dynamics & Professional Challenges

The study reveals discriminatory practices embedded in the school culture and educational experiences designed for students, showing how these challenges become insurmountable obstacles for Participants in their promotions. From the day they joined the state school, the Participants faced issues such as social ostracization and being treated as inferior or untouchable by their Muslim peers, who would avoid social interaction and even sharing meals with them. There was also a subtle yet pervasive attempt to convert them to Islam, evident from the Participants' experiences during their formal schooling years. This was worsened by a culture of fear for personal, family, and community safety if Participants reported such behaviors to higher authorities. The Participants became 'invisible' during school programs, a form of marginalization of minority teachers by making them feel excluded because they did not fit into the majority culture. They were often pigeonholed and asked to perform popular movie songs, an activity considered profane by Muslim teachers. This symbolic exclusion also highlights the invisibility of Participants within the educational administration, preventing their promotion to higher administrative positions in schools and the local education system.

Participants from Christian schools face an unseen and subtle influence: more qualified Muslim teachers, which also indirectly pressures the Christian administration of these schools. Muslim teachers expect the school administration to adopt a merit-based approach in promoting teachers to administrative roles, leading to the denial or delay of promotions for participants in Christian schools. Christian schools often appoint Muslims to administrative positions to promote diversity in their leadership culture, and many Muslim teachers continue working in Christian schools for long periods. In contrast, state schools discourage diversity in their teaching and administrative staff, prompting participants to consider leaving these schools—challenging efforts to diversify the workforce to reflect Pakistan's population.

Student Interactions & Classroom Experience

Classrooms are not only spaces for learning but also sites where Participants face ethical dilemmas while practicing their pedagogical skills. The fear often influences these dilemmas either visible or hidden—of facing repercussions for their choice of teaching strategies. Since 70% of language textbooks mention Prophet Muhammad, his family, friends, Islam, Islamic teachings, and Muslim rulers—either directly or indirectly. The curriculum set by the government guides participants teaching English and Urdu in state or Christian schools. They are also aware of past incidents where non-Muslim teachers faced blasphemy charges, prompting them to avoid reading or teaching these stories critically (Baker, 2001; Fides, 2023; Staff/Compass, 2012). This self-censorship limits Participants from engaging with students more deeply or using the classroom to expand and reshape their worldviews beyond Islam, especially in a global, diverse society. As a result, there is little focus on developing students' essential social skills—like communication, cooperation, and empathy crucial for living and working in diverse, multicultural environments, both offline and online. Research from the Global North shows that having teachers from minority groups can enhance not only minority students' academic success but also their overall development within schools (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; de Gendre *et al.*, 2024; Jones, 2022). This study's results align with research examining how school policies and practices shape the identity and roles of minority group teachers. Their participation or lack thereof in school activities and curricula can lead to feelings of isolation among minority students, which in turn impacts the academic outcomes of both teachers and students from minority backgrounds.

Institutional Policies and Societal Influence

The study revealed that institutional policies and broader societal influences are closely linked, forming a complex network that presents various challenges for participants in both public and private Christian schools. Teachers in these schools are aware of the 'deep roots in Islamic principles' embedded within the educational system, curriculum, and textbooks. They recognize that the textbooks contain numerous references to Islam, its teachings, its founder Prophet Muhammad, his family and companions, and Muslim rulers. Their awareness of limited options for classroom activities and their role in fostering students' holistic development are also impacted by the narrow range of pedagogical strategies, which hinder students' ability to develop critical thinking skills. It is not only the classroom and school environment that influence pedagogical choices but also Pakistani society, where pervasive

'blasphemy fear' heavily restricts classroom discussions. This fear particularly affects debates involving texts where textbook writers use negative stereotypes to depict non-Muslim characters in stories about Islam and Muslim figures, especially Muslim rulers (Mesti, 2011; Naseem *et al.*, 2016; Qazi, 2020; Qazi, 2023).

The lack of social and judicial systems in Pakistan deepened teachers' feelings of powerlessness and alienation. The state failed to protect blasphemy victims, many of whom were killed by Islamist extremists even in state-controlled places like courts, police stations, and prisons. This neglect fostered a sense of abandonment, with Islamist extremists often destroying non-Muslims' homes and businesses under the guise of punishing blasphemers. Law enforcement and prosecution agencies remained passive, allowing offenders to escape justice and creating an environment of significant insecurity. These conditions affected participants' professional choices, reducing their ability to organize co-curricular activities that promote interfaith understanding. Additionally, social practices driven by Islamic political parties prevented curriculum developers from creating an inclusive Ethics curriculum, as these parties argue that Muslim students do not need such a course, further reinforcing the dominance of Islam-related content in social sciences textbooks.

Conclusion

This study provides a crucial insight into the lived experiences of participants in Pakistan's educational system. It shows that beyond the explicit curriculum, both subtle and overt socio-cultural dynamics, along with deeply rooted institutional policies, create significant challenges for participants in both public and private Christian schools. They continuously negotiate their identities on various levels—national, cultural, religious, and professional—and adapt to systems established by the state educational authorities and their Muslim peers. The explicit and implicit Islamization of school culture, practices, and curricula hampers their ability to perform as competent teachers and to adopt pedagogical approaches that make classrooms and schools more inclusive, fostering understanding of minority faiths among students and teachers from the majority faith. The state-sanctioned discriminatory assessment practices impacted their academic performance during their formal education years and also contributed to their competition with Muslim peers for admission into preferred professional programs after graduation. Additionally, fears of blasphemy accusations, along with the lack of support from the state's law enforcement and judicial systems, restrict their pedagogical freedom, limit identity expression, and ultimately disadvantage non-Muslim teachers and students.

Participants viewed teaching as their vocational calling, motivated by a desire to challenge stereotypes about the Christian minority and to aid in the socio-economic development of Pakistan's Christian community. The study revealed the state's efforts to establish a unified national identity based on Islam, which unintentionally encouraged exclusionary behaviors among Muslim teachers and students, contradicting the principles of a pluralistic society as envisioned by Pakistan's founder, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The implementation of minority-inclusive policies often seemed symbolic rather than effective, exemplified by the Single National Curriculum's provisions for minority religious textbooks, which exposed the gap between official intentions and actual realities faced by the state and its decision-makers. The findings suggest that Pakistan's current educational practices inadequately support religious minority teachers and students, highlighting the need for policy reforms to promote true inclusivity, equity, and a more representative education system for all.

Recommendations

This study recommends that the country's textbook authorities revise social sciences textbooks (Urdu, English, and History) to include positive, representative narratives of all religious minorities in Pakistan. These narratives should recognize their historical, cultural, and societal contributions to Pakistan's independence movement as well as its social, cultural, political, and judicial structures—moving beyond superficial mentions and actively challenging negative stereotypes. Additionally, the study urges the government to develop policies that transform secondary and higher secondary school classrooms into inclusive environments. Teachers should be empowered to choose pedagogical strategies that foster students' critical thinking and their ability to thrive in a multicultural, multireligious, and pluralistic society. Mandatory sensitivity and anti-discrimination training should be provided for all school staff—teachers, administrators, and support personnel—in both public and private schools operated by Muslim organizations or individuals. This training must cover unconscious biases, derogatory language, and the importance of respecting diverse religious and cultural expressions within Pakistan and globally. State schools should adopt transparent, merit-based promotion processes for all administrative roles and promote inclusive practices—such as celebrating non-Muslim religious festivals—so minority teachers and students feel visible and valued. Furthermore, the state must offer legal protections to teachers, ensuring their safety in cases of blasphemy accusations in educational settings. This includes prompt

investigation, protection of the accused, a fair trial, and severe penalties for malicious complaints lodged against religious minorities under blasphemy laws.

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