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Between Policy and Placement: Student Teachers' Constructed Meanings of Structural Contradiction in Pakistani Pre-Service Teacher Education
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Abstract

Pre-service teacher education in Pakistan faces a persistent tension between prescribed professional standards, pedagogical approaches, and assessment requirements as prescribed in policies and what is expected to be present in practicum schools. This paper shares the findings of a qualitative study that explored the meaning-making of BS Education student teachers encountering dilemmas between policy and classroom practice during teaching practice placement in schools in Sialkot, Punjab. Semi-structured interview data subjected to reflexive thematic analysis to generate four themes: collapse of idealism before placement, structural constraints on the authentic teaching opportunity, policy as prescription and classroom as reality, and learning through contradiction. The results reflect that the contradiction of policies and practices does not occur randomly; it is reproduced as a structure, the position of student teachers at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy, and the limitation of institutional mediation encountered by them as they negotiate this contradiction in their practice. Professional learning is, therefore, more limited in scope than policy intends, while being adaptive and resilient. The paper offers an interpretive and participant-centred perspective in an area that has been dominated by macro-structural analysis and can be directly applied in the field of programme designing, scheduling of placements, and practicum policy reform in Pakistan.

Keywords: Student Teacher Perceptions, Policy-Practice Gap, Teaching Practice, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Pre-Service Teacher Education, Pakistan, Professional Identity

Introduction:

The quality of teaching practice in pre-service teacher education (PSTE) has been a focus of ongoing research, with a general consensus that teaching practice is important for teachers' professional formation (Bhandari et al., 2025; Darling-Hammond, 2006; García-Lázaro et al., 2025; Thaanyane & Jita, 2024). In the Pakistani context, this consensus took the form of the National Education Policy and four-year teacher education (BS Education and B.Ed. (Hons)), wherein the actual implementation of the Practicum was at the centre of teachers' preparation. However, aspiration and reality have not been aligned in the institutional design of policies. This mismatch between the discourses of Practicum and the school has been recorded in Pakistani literature, but mostly from a structural and administrative perspective, which emphasises the systemic issue instead of the subjective meanings that student teachers form through their Practicum (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2018).

This is a significant gap from an analytical point of view. Student teachers are not simply passive recipients of an apparatus of a policy; on the contrary, they are active sense-makers who negotiate contradiction based on their beliefs, expectations, and professional future aspirations (Flores & Day, 2006). However, if the policy design demands standardised lesson plans, technology-integrated pedagogies, and student-centred assessment practices, schools have overcrowded classrooms with no or limited technology and schedules that view invigilating exams as a more important task than teaching, then the student-teacher is placed in a situation where they may be required to bridge a structural gap left unaddressed by policy and teacher education providers. The professional and psychological responsibility for bridging is with the individual student teacher.

Most previous research on pre-service teacher education in Pakistan focuses on curriculum change, enhancing teacher capacity, and addressing numerous issues of policy failure (Begum, 2017; Gopang et al., 2021; Sharma, 2014). Little has been explored about the way that student teachers negotiate and make sense of policy-practice conflicts. Excluding the perspectives of those the programme serves ultimately produces the redesign of the programme and policy reform based on a top-down analysis of structures. This study directly addresses this gap.

In this paper, the results of a qualitative study conducted at GC Women's University, Sialkot, in Punjab are presented. (2) What influences do prospective teachers experience on the quality and authenticity of their teaching practice? (3) What is the gap between the prospective teachers' beliefs and the influences they feel in their teaching practice experience in terms of quality and authenticity? (2) What are the teacher candidates' views in terms of the consistency between policy and the opportunities for teaching? (3) At what issues do prospective teachers see a potential conflict between the policy expectations and actual experiences of learning? The paper follows the steps of a thematically organised literature review, a thorough methodological description based on the Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the presentation of the four themes that the interview data gave rise to, an interpretive discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature, and a conclusion that discusses the contribution of the paper within theory and practice.

Literature Review

Student Teacher Beliefs and the Practicum

Student teachers' beliefs are not background phenomena; they function as anticipatory frameworks that create interpretations of experience, create responses to classroom challenges, and shape the uptake of and resistance to programme-recommended pedagogical practices (Flores & Day, 2006). Research consistently shows that a practicum does not merely apply 'ready-made' beliefs, but it involves disrupting, renegotiating, and reconstructing beliefs within specific institutional contexts (Korthagen, 2010). In a qualitative research, Liu et al. (2024) identified that first practicum experiences impacted student teachers' beliefs in terms of professional identity, teacher-student relationships, pedagogical orientation, identity as a teacher, and instructional orientations, with student teachers reporting that first practicum experiences challenged their beliefs rather than confirmed them. These disruptions are integral to professional formation during field-based experiences. The methodological implication is to view small-scale qualitative research (as opposed to large-scale surveys) as better suited to describing the relational and contextual aspects of the formation of belief.

The Policy-Practice Gap

There is a theoretical framework to explain why this policy-practice gap in teacher education emerges, namely the notion of translation of policy in action, which is shaped by the players' own institutional limitations, local knowledge, and professional considerations (Ball, 2012;

Fullan, 2007). In pre-service teacher education, this gap creates a "structural tension" between how the Practicum and material are conceptualised in the professional standards policy and the material, social, and institutional conditions the student teachers find in the schools in which they are placed (Zeichner, 2010). An in-depth qualitative study in South Africa found that pre-service programmes, pre-service teachers identified significant discrepancies between skills and knowledge encouraged by pre-service programmes and those of the workplace (Merwe, 2022). Pre-service preparation in Zambia was largely theoretical in nature, with the set structure between teacher training and school playing a direct constraining role in teacher competence through participatory action research (Mandyata et al., 2024). These findings support the understanding that this is a problem of the policy-practice gap as a result of institutionally operating logics in registers that are not coordinated.

Authentic Learning and Practicum Quality

Authentic learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000) is an evaluative lens for assessing practicum quality, as it is learning in real-world contexts via contextualised and meaningful activity. We propose that the foundational practice is the broad distribution of instructional responsibility within a supervised framework that allows student teachers to be directly responsible for the learning of a group of students. Student teachers learn best when given genuine instructional responsibility within a supervisory framework with sufficient complexity to require professional judgement (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In the Pakistani context, qualitative research has found that although student teachers see the developmental potential of the practicum, skills to implement policy recommendations are often missing, and two main factors-lack of supervision and lack of resources-are especially limiting, along with institutional cultures that favour compliance with policy requirements and do not inspire innovation (Shah et al., 2020). Standardised administrative processes (such as a specified form for the lesson plan, a required sequence of syllabus categories, and an administrative deadline) add to the conflict between authentic learning and compliance with policies, particularly regarding curriculum content and lesson planning. When this is the case, responsible and spontaneous practice in learning is supplanted by a controlling and formalised administrative structure that upholds policy compliance.

Teacher Education in the Pakistani Context

In Pakistan, the pre-service teacher education systems have undergone significant structural reforms in the last two decades, from Associate Degree to a four-year B.Ed./BS Education (Shah et al., 2020), aiming to produce more practice-ready graduates (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2018). However, consistent empirical evidence shows that there is unevenness and contestation in the implementation of Practicum. Studies on the relevance of theoretical preparation and placement realities have been conducted through surveys and have revealed certain structural barriers that continue to exist in the form of class sizes, lack of resources, lack of positive school cultures, and heavy workload for administrators (Kataria & Nawab, 2026; Siddiqui et al., 2021; Zahra et al., 2025). Qualitative research has just started to document these paradoxes in students' teacher experience: The recurring problems experienced in the Punjab are that teachers are overcrowded in classes, they teach multiple grades, teachers are asked to stay in the background and do not do any hands-on teaching, teachers lack infrastructures, and student teachers are only placed in secondary schools. This study has focused on methodological commitment to a meaning-making approach in the analysis; the methodological approach that differs from the earlier research conducted elsewhere in Pakistan is its focus on analysing the contradictions experienced by the student teachers and how they make sense of them in the light of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, both as an epistemological approach and an analytical technique.

Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative research paradigm and interpretivist research approach, and analysis was carried out based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Reflexive TA was chosen as it is epistemologically flexible and consistent with constructionism; the research questions were exploratory, pointing to the subjective and the process of meaning-making. The approach constructs themes rather than discovers them, treating them as resources actively negotiated between the researcher and the participants' claims, in the light of particular theories (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was directly related to the objective of the study (to shed light on how student teachers make meaning out of policy-practice contradictions) and does not involve mapping frequency or distribution of policy-practice contradictions.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

Using the sampling technique of purposive sampling as defined by Patton (2015), eight participants were selected, and these participants had direct experience of the phenomenon. The criterion for inclusion was being enrolled in the BS Education programme at GC Women University, Sialkot, and having recently completed teaching practice in at least one formal education program in the Sialkot district (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sample consisted of 100% females, which is consistent with the gender profile of enrolments in the BS Education Programme in this institution. Participants came from Semesters 7 and 8, with some having experience in placement in private schools and some in government schools, to offer comparative experience on each school type. Participant numbers (Participant 01 to Participant 08) were used as pseudonyms. The information power of the sample guided the assessment of sample adequacy and was judged adequate given the eight participants' directly relevant, recent experience of the phenomenon (Malterud et al., 2016).

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted in a private setting either at or near the university. The interview schedule was designed based on the Research Questions/Interview Questions Matrix prepared by Bloomberg and Volpe (2022) as a parallel to the Research Questions to the thematic content area, with open-ended designed questions across eleven thematic areas: beliefs about teaching practice, policy knowledge, authentic learning experiences, contradictions, and recommendations. The interviews were held in both Urdu and English (depending on the language of preference of the participant) and were of approximately 50–60 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed and verified against the audio recording before analysis, with the participants' consent. Transcript files were kept in password-protected files and were only available to the researcher.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedures

Reflexive TA was used in six phases, which were repeated throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For the purpose of developing analytic sensitivity to the dataset as a whole, all eight transcripts were read repeatedly during Phase 1 (Familiarisation) and initial observations were recorded in a reflexive journal. In Phase 2 (Generating Codes), data extracts relevant to the research questions were coded systematically to reflect both content and interpretation. Phase 3 (Generating Initial Themes) involved the category clustering of similar codes, producing themes centred on shared meaning across participants rather than on data frequency. In Phase 4 (Developing and Reviewing Themes), candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the full dataset to check coherence, distinctiveness, and analytical scope; weak themes were revised or merged. For Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes, each theme received a descriptive name and brief definition capturing its central organising concept and its relationship

to the research questions. Themes were fleshed out as written analytic narratives, based on the quotes of the participants, in Phase 6 (Writing Up).

4.5 Trustworthiness and Quality

Four criteria for qualitative inquiry were used to assess trustworthiness: Credibility was established through engagement with the data across multiple analytic phases, discussing analytic claims with the study supervisor, and the corrective action of the reflexive journal. The dependability was achieved by making the important methodological decisions leading to final decisions explicit in the reflexive journal and the methodology chapter. Reflexive transparency, by making the researcher's assumptions, positionality, and analytic decisions explicit, enabled third-party evaluation of interpretive claims. Transferability was discussed using a thick description of the study context, participants, and analytic process so that the reader could draw conclusions about these findings and how they might be relevant to their context. The study makes no claims of statistical generalisation.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Before collecting the data, ethical approval was obtained from the GC Women's University, Sialkot. Prior to signing an informed written consent, all participants were given a clear explanation of the purpose, scope, and procedures for using the data of the study. Participation was always voluntary, and participants were made aware that they would not be penalised for withdrawing. To ensure anonymity, the identifying information in all documents and data files were replaced with pseudonym. Digital data were saved in password-protected files and accessible only to the research team. The study was conducted by openly communicating the rights of the participants, the nature of the interview (not evaluative), and the researcher explicitly stating that the content of the interview would not be used in any academic evaluation of the participant.

Findings

Eight participant interviews were transcribed, and a reflexive TA resulted in four themes being identified. Each theme is a pattern of collective meaning, centred not on a topic summary, but on the central meaning—analytic concept—of its specific theme.

Theme 1: The Collapse of Pre-Practice Idealism

This theme documents the systematic breaking of the entry beliefs experienced by all eight participants as they entered their practicum schools. Its organising concept is the anticipatory schema: the theoretically formed professional expectations that student teachers bring to placement, and how these shape their initial responses when placement realities contradict those expectations.

Sub-Theme 1a: Idealised Notions of Teaching Ease and Student Cooperation

When entering the practicum, all participants entered placement with idealised notions of teaching ease, the nature of student behaviour, and the independence of the teaching function that they would take on. Participant 05 said: " I think that before the teaching practices, I had thought that teaching practice was very easy and that we could easily manage classrooms, but after the teaching practice, I have realised this is not the case. Participant 02 talked about what she expected of students - "We expected children to be good, they were quiet and sat down, and they were all good students, but that is not the case, and we find all kinds of children in the classroom. Participant 08 expressed the expectation for independent teacher training status: "We were expecting independent teacher training status, we were sent to classes, as we used to do in our former teacher training class, we were given proper classes, lectures." Across these accounts, a common structure emerged: They were not only being asked to demonstrate their

ability to do a thing well, but the conditions within which they were able to do well were also being asked for. Their shocks were, therefore, not only cognitive but also structural.

Sub-Theme 1b: Disruption Upon Entry

On entering the placement, their beliefs were not merely challenged; they collapsed. Participant 05 explained her entry time: "We had a fantasy in our brain that we were going to come out and do whatever we wanted, (...) but as we entered the field, they shattered all our dreams." Participant 03 paints a picture of a disconnection between what is to be learned in theory and what happens once the students enter the classroom:

Everything changed, I think, when we were doing our theory material, when we came into the classroom, everything was different. Everything was different here - the curriculum was different, the students were different, and the environment was different, too, than what we had envisioned. However, in the classroom, this was a great support to our learning. (Participant 03)

Participant 07 reported a more complex disruption, where the institutional welcome was in contrast to the structural role; for the participant, the institutional welcome was warmer than was initially conceived: "I thought that the teachers there may not be very cooperative with me, but when I arrived, they allowed me to be my imperfect self." Overall, what emerged from the analysis of the participants' entry beliefs revealed a disjunction between theory-based preparation and the material and institutional realities of placement.

Theme 2: Structural Constraints on Authentic Teaching Opportunity

In this theme, the institutional, organisational, and resource limitations that hindered most participants' access to a pedagogic practice are discussed. Its organising concept is structural displacement: student teachers change their position from the practitioner to that of the observer, assistant, and invigilator.

Sub-Theme 2a: Relegation to Observer and Assistant Roles

The most consistent constraint was placement during examination periods, which curtailed teaching time. This was clearly stated by Participant 07, "I was assigned to 9th and 10th standard girls, and I had to teach them math, and during those 15 days, their papers were going on, so invigilation work had to be done, and I did not deliver a proper lecture. Participant 08 reported that her assigned tasks were to follow the mentor teacher, observe board preparation, and mark the exercise books. She explained the impact it had: "If they had taken an interest in our children, if they had given one lecture on how to treat the children a day, instead of just tying us together with the teachers, we would have known how to behave as a teacher, how to get on with the kids."

Sub-Theme 2b: Resource Scarcity and Physical Constraints

Participants reported a lack of match between the conditions of the material of university students and placement schools. This was put in other terms by participant 06:

The policy talks about the use of technology, such as multimedia, but does not ensure its provision. There was a shortage of these resources in the school. I could not use technology to teach. The only element that was present was the use of the board and charts. I believe that these should be in schools; this technology needs to be available. (Participant 06)

Participant 03 mentioned class size as a significant constraint: "Large classroom sizes were also a major constraint as this aspect of policy was particularly demanding, making it very difficult to ensure that students were involved in the classroom.

Sub-Theme 2c: Inadequate Placement Duration

Fifteen days was consistently identified as insufficient for any participant to engage in meaningful professional development. Participant 07 said, "I think that the teaching practice should be

longer, at least a month rather than 15 days," giving the general opinion of the participants. Participant 01 said that the outcome was incomplete learning: "I still need to practise more."

Theme 3: Policy as Prescription, Classroom as Reality

This theme, the most analytically significant of the four, highlights how the particular contradictions between policy requirements and classroom settings experienced by the participants were not solely at the individual classroom level but were structurally reproduced. The big organising idea is the institutional gap—the institutional mismatch between the conditions the Policy assumes and the conditions the placement schools offer.

Sub-Theme 3a: Syllabus Completion Mandates and Student Readiness

The tension between mandatory syllabus completion and what students need to be ready and able to learn was described as the most enduring and most professionally constraining contradiction. Pedagogically, "Participant 07" explained:

As teachers, we are frequently given directions to follow. A curriculum is developed into chapters, and we are told to finish the first four chapters before the midterm. On our visits there, we see that the class is not in the mood, there are a lot of kids not in attendance, and so on. Sometimes the lesson taught is not even known to the children beforehand. Moreover, we have been told that the task at hand is to complete those four chapters. Hence, the occurrence of rote learning – we are simply hurrying to teach, and children are rote learning them. (Participant 07)

Participant 03 said, "I think it was just about paperwork; it was just the way the curriculum was designed, and it was not about the teaching at all."

Sub-Theme 3b: Behaviour Management Policies and Classroom Realities

Participants noted a consistent conflict between the behavioural approach expected of students, as outlined in the policy, and classroom behaviour issues. Participant 08 reported feeling coerced to be very tolerant in situations in which she felt there needed to be a more nuanced response: *Children are not taking homework to school. Thus, it is up to the teachers to do their homework. It is also the responsibility of the teachers. No strictness was observed towards such children. Spoiling children with too much attention and love was not essential to love some children that way. With the children, a tone had to be struck that was sometimes stern but always kind and gentle. (Participant 08)*

Participant 05 said, "Policymakers issue directives without understanding classroom realities."

Sub-Theme 3c: Technology Requirements and Institutional Provision

A structural contradiction arises from the mismatches between the goals of technology integration in the Policy and the treatment of technology in placement schools. Participant 06 explained that not having the technology tools meant she missed out on learning because technology should have been used instead: "The lack of technology, I mean technology should be... time constraints prevented me from applying newer methods." A contradiction mentioned by participant 03 was "excessive paperwork and rigid assessment practices," where "assessments were only done by taking tests, and it was not formative, there was no Socratic method, no discussion between students and teachers. These factors were frustrating."

Theme 4 – Learning Through Contradiction

This theme reflects what participants stated they built as skills and attributes of professionalism: its organising concept is adaptive formation, that is, developing professional capacity through engagement with constraints rather than through an idealised policy pathway.

Sub-Theme 4a: Confidence and Professional Identity Development

Despite the limitations outlined in Themes 2 and 3, all eight participants reported increased confidence as a result of their practicum. Participant 07 reported: "But my confidence also grew a little bit—my sense of being in the field and having to be a pro, there were lots of things I had

to handle—aggressiveness, stress, and more.” Participant 03 provided a more balanced description: “Well, I somehow felt confident at times, and then during certain times I felt, ‘I still have to learn something. I can handle.’”

Sub-Theme 4b: Adaptive Skills Acquired Through Constrained Navigations

Many participants explicitly identified discordant and/or limiting characteristics of the practicum as the source, not the limitation, of learning to practice. Participant 03 commented: “I was taught about adaptability, being flexible, if something new and unexpected seems to emerge, how to adjust to it; I was also taught about problem solving.” It seems that this constraint—the pedagogical flexibility nexus—was well illustrated by participant 06, who asserted that “I also learned that we have to develop flexibility dependent on the circumstances, find ways of overcoming the challenges and issues that we faced. Participant 02 expressed key professional knowledge, “I was taught to manage the class no matter the circumstances; we need to manage the class and keep the class engaged with us.”

Sub-Theme 4c: Recommendations as Evidence of Professional Agency

Most participants went beyond description to name some changes they would like to see; agency was reflective, a product of firsthand experience with structural contradiction. Participant 03 argued, “Concerning policies, I would say that it should be more flexible. Moreover, during the design phase, more consultations should be conducted with teachers to understand how they cope and what challenges they may face.” Participant 01 characterised this as the most direct type of formulation—the teaching policies would be more elastic and closer to the real classroom environment:

Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

Themes 1 to 4 together explain one phenomenon, structural contradiction, across four analytical dimensions. Challenge: Student teachers enter their practicums with a set of beliefs from their theoretical training that does not prepare them for placement in schools in Pakistan (Theme 1). They are then placed in institutional contexts that, in various ways, displace them from the teaching they had been prepared for by policy as well as by their own professional aims (Theme 2). The specific policy requirements they must meet assume resource and time constraints that placement schools do not necessarily have (Theme 3). Despite these limitations, participants developed real-world competencies by learning to navigate contradictions (Theme 4). The central finding is that the policy-practice contradiction in Pakistani PSTE is structurally reproduced in the study. The burden of that contradiction falls on student teachers as the lowest-status actors in the institution's hierarchy, with inadequate institutional mediation.

6.2 Connection to Existing Literature

The disruption of pre-practice beliefs documented in Theme 1 aligns with prior research on students' teacher belief development, showing that pre-service experiences challenge rather than facilitate previously formed teacher beliefs (Flores & Day, 2006; Korthagen, 2010). The aspect that this study contributes to what has already been written on this topic in Western literature is that participants encountered not only greater classroom complexity than anticipated, but were also structurally displaced into non-teaching roles. Institutional displacement goes beyond belief disruption by eliminating teaching access entirely.

The structural constraints chronicled in Theme 2 further explore Ball's (2012) and Fullan's (2007) perspectives on analysing policy-practice gaps. Ball's policy-as-text and policy-as-practice framework illuminates how the gap between stated and enacted policy is displaced onto student teachers. However, the evaluative criterion based on which the quality of this bridging can be judged is the authentic learning framework of Herrington and Oliver (2000) because without

systematically provided conditions for authentic learning, including genuine instructional responsibility, reflective supervision, and appropriate complexity, policy cannot achieve its developmental goals regardless of individual effort.

The findings from Theme 3 confirm and expand on the literature from Pakistan that focuses on structural barriers to implementing the Practicum but does not access the subjective experience of those barriers (Mahmood & Iqbal, 2018; Shah et al., 2020). This study makes the unintended, invisible dimension of structural contradiction that lies beyond “policy-practice” alignment or misalignment more apparent; participants are not simply telling that Policy and practice are misaligned, but that misalignment is professionally disabling and signals policymakers' limited awareness of classroom conditions. By situating the analysis within participants' meaning-making, this constructionist approach constitutes a methodological contribution that is absent from previous Pakistani studies.

Theme 4 moves away from the deficit discourses that dominate Pakistani practicum literature. The finding that participants gained meaningful professional competence—aspects of adaptable problem-solving, classroom management in conditions of constraint, and critical reflective agency—through contradiction aligns with Korthagen's (2010) situated learning perspective, which identifies the reconceptualisation of prior practice as the driver of professional growth. It also supports the idea that experience in the field results in situated professional judgment is not an outcome of the classroom preparation experience. This type of professional formation reported here, however, is both more and less than policy envisages: more in reflexive situated knowing, less in pedagogical range when authentic teaching access is constrained.

6.3 Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the policy-practice gap in PSTE cannot be resolved through curriculum design or standard-setting alone. The material and scheduling conditions of placement schools will remain structurally contradictory unless policy reforms address them. This has implications for the practical preparation of programme coordinators: placement realities, including role relegation during examinations, resource scarcity, and behavioural challenges unpredicted by policy, must be explicitly addressed in the practicum preparation. Methodology is therefore involved in ensuring that knowledge about the policy-practice gap not derivable from macro-structural analysis is available through Reflexive TA conducted through participant accounts rather than institutional documents.

6.5 Limitations

The sample in this study is small and purposive, drawn from a single programme at one university. It is important to stress that the results are the meanings of this particular group that have been built, and not that they are statistically generalisable. Self-reported data may reflect social desirability or retrospective reconstruction. While efforts were made to protect the ethical and methodological integrity of the work, the power differential between the researcher and participants as undergraduate students could not be fully mitigated. The study was unable to obtain the views of mentor teachers and school principals who directly influenced the pressures and decisions shaping the practicum environment participants experienced.

Conclusion

The present study examines policy-practice contradictions and how student teachers construct meaning from them by eight BS Education student teachers during their teaching practice in Punjab, Pakistan. The analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts produced four themes from the data: the collapse of pre-practice idealism; structural constraints on authentic teaching opportunity; policy as prescription and classroom as reality; and learning through contradiction. Together, these themes show that the policy-practice gap in Pakistani PSTE is not incidental but

is institutionally reproduced through the preparation process itself; and that, as a result, the student teachers, positioned without institutional authority or established professional experience, encounter this gap without adequate support from their placement institutions. However, the gap is part of their preparation process.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. It provides a participant-centred, interpretivist perspective on a phenomenon that, in Pakistani literature, has been examined only in macro-structural terms, and documents the personal and professional burden of the policy-practice gap on individual student teachers. It also challenges the deficit discourse on the quality of practicum, which reflects a dominant view in policies on the subject in Pakistan, by demonstrating that structural constraints, while significant, do not preclude adaptive professional competence in the following ways. The situated knowledge constructed by participants was not merely a response to policy failure but reflects student teachers as active sense-makers navigating a structurally constrained system.

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