

Research Article

Pratyay Malakar**Between Participation and Dissent: A Narrative Inquiry with D. El. Ed. Graduates on Building Democratic Classrooms in Delhi****Abstract**

This paper examines how pre-service teachers in Delhi conceptualise democratic and inclusive education within the Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.) programme. Drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2017; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2019) and democratic education (Dewey, 1916; Thoreau, 1849), it situates teacher preparation as both a professional and civic project. Using a mixed-method survey of 51 graduates from government District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), the study combines quantitative indicators with qualitative narratives to explore how course elements—lectures, practicum, peer learning, and institutional culture—shape teachers’ understandings of fairness, participation, dissent, and citizenship. Findings reveal a youthful, predominantly female, urban cohort whose reflections are influenced by the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) and institutional contexts, but also highlight tensions between ideals of inclusion and everyday realities. The analysis positions teachers as cultural workers navigating the consensus–dissent spectrum, underscoring the need to centre marginalised voices and justice-oriented pedagogy in pre-service training. Ultimately, the paper argues that teacher education in India must be reimagined as a civic endeavour, preparing educators to balance participation with resistance in order to sustain democratic vitality.

Keywords: Democratic education, teacher education, pre-service teachers, critical pedagogy**Introduction**

Education has long been envisioned not merely as a transfer of information, but as an ethical, moral, social, political, and civic project. A report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2021) frames education as the "foundation for the

renewal and transformation of our societies.” This articulation can mean an array of things for a country like India with its deeply diverse and pluralistic society in terms of caste, class, gender, region, language and religion. “School is an integral part of the society” and is expected to “prepare the students” to “decide what is right or wrong, to understand the values of life and become better citizens” (Vishnoi, 2021, p. 1). It is crucial to understand schools as a microcosm of our immediate society, because “schools do not just train individuals for jobs” but also serve the greater purpose of instilling democratic values, like equality, justice, and respect from a young age (Vishnoi, 2021, p. 1) and not just in terms of economic productivity. However, a truly democratic education is only possible if the teachers in our schools are prepared to extend their focus beyond academic instruction towards shaping how young learners understand democracy, citizenship, and justice in their everyday lives. Teachers play a “crucial role in helping students” develop an awareness of what it means to live in a democracy. The great majority of young people in any given nation are directly influenced by the educational system and, consequently, by the educators who work within it. As these children grow older and become more active in their local and national communities, the lessons these teachers impart to them about democracy, civics, and citizenship will stay with them. Researchers such as Keith Heggart have referred to teachers as “democracy workers,” meaning they have the ability and duty to uphold the institutions, values, and sensibilities that are essential to the functioning of any country that claims to be a functional democracy (Heggart, 2022). Scholars from John Dewey, Paulo Freire to bell hooks, have noted the importance of teachers as “cultural workers” who promote democracy, equity, and social justice through acts of listening and questioning. Freire (1998) asserts, “Listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level, is a human duty and reveals identification with democracy and not with elitism” (p. 32). However, it is important to note that this can only become a reality if teachers are prepared to understand at democratic classrooms as an urgent call to action, not as an add-on to their everyday practice or something that they do once in a while to build classroom engagement through isolated debates and discussions. Therefore, teacher education, particularly pre-service training, becomes a crucial site for nurturing these dispositions, since it is here that future educators form their pedagogical orientations, ethical commitments, and civic identities.

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) has identified “democratic spirit,” and in particular the “constitutional values,” as one of its fundamental principles that will guide the larger

educational systems as well as the individual institutions within it (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 5). In India, one of the primary pre-service programmes for training elementary school teachers is the Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.). Private colleges, aided institutions, and District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) all offer D.El.Ed. programmes in Delhi NCR, each with its distinct institutional history and culture. These training institutions are essential for providing educators with the professional skills and values of democratic participation and inclusion that the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Curriculum Framework (2005) identify as fundamental to education. However, little is known about how graduates themselves understand, assimilate, and relate their education to concepts of democracy and citizenship. It is relevant to note here that the importance of practice-based teacher education (PBTE) has grown significantly over the last two decades. Well-known American universities, such as Stanford, Michigan, and Washington, have created teacher education curricula that place strong emphasis on real-world experience. The emphasis of these programmes is on practical, hands-on teaching practices that meet the demands of prospective educators in their future roles. According to Grossman et al. (2018), these practices specifically cover lesson design, delivery, teaching strategies, and classroom management. With nations including Australia, Chile, China, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Uganda, and India pursuing PBTE initiatives, this trend has also acquired global prominence (Hammerness et al., 2020).

The D.El.Ed. programme is no exception to this. If we look at the D. El. Ed. curriculum followed by the State Council of Education, Research and Training (SCERT), Delhi, it aims at incorporating democratic and constitutional values in trainee teachers through transacting courses like Education and Society through classroom lectures. But is that enough for a teacher to know while they are actually working to build democratic classrooms? Do course elements other than lectures also play a part in invoking curiosity around democratic learning spaces in future teachers? Little is known about that. Therefore, this research paper aims to close that gap. This paper explores pre-service teachers' conceptions of democratic and inclusive education, how course components including practicum, lectures, and peer interactions form these understandings, and how institutional cultures impact their civic commitments by examining their narratives. In doing so, the paper positions teacher education as a civic and ethical endeavour that has significance for India's democratic future in addition to being a professional training programme. This paper also investigates the

transaction potentiality of the D.El.Ed. programme to foster inclusive practices, democratic principles, and a dedication to equality in the classroom (Giroux, 2024).

This paper is guided by the understanding that teacher education is not merely a process of professional preparation but also a civic project rooted in democratic participation and social justice (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970/2017; Giroux, 2019). Within the context of Delhi's DIETs, the paper explores how D.El.Ed. graduates make sense of key ideas such as fairness, inclusion, and citizenship in education. It examines how course elements—such as lectures, practicum experiences, peer learning, and institutional culture—shape these understandings, and how graduates interpret their own preparedness to create inclusive and democratic classrooms. The paper further investigates the tensions between institutional ideals and everyday realities, asking what these narratives reveal about the broader civic and ethical dimensions of pre-service teacher education in India.

Democracy, Classrooms, Pedagogies: A Theoretical Overview

The idea that classrooms can act as microcosms of democratic life has deep roots in political and educational thought. John Stuart Mill (1859) argued that liberty and free expression are vital for cultivating autonomous citizens, principles that resonate with participation in dialogic learning environments. John Dewey, in 1900, first conceptualised schools as the “miniatures of the societies,” where learning emerges through participation, shared responsibility, and experiential inquiry. Dewey’s framing suggests that a democratic classroom is not “merely about transmitting knowledge” (Dewey, 1900), but also about cultivating habits of cooperation, dialogue, and reflective thinking. Dewey suggested that just as a community of citizens grows, interacts, and learns from one another, a community of learners will do the same in a democratic classroom (Ehrlich, 1998, p. 508). However, Dewey has also noted that democracy is more of a cultural phenomenon than a political one, as suggested by Thoreau, and this helps us move towards a pedagogy of social reconstruction (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011, pp. 53-54). Similarly, Henry David Thoreau, in his famous 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government (Civil Disobedience),” emphasised on civil disobedience and the moral responsibility of individuals to resist unjust systems. In an educational context, Thoreau’s insistence on conscience and dissent underscores the political role of teachers in fostering critical citizenship, where questioning authority is

essential as well as following institutional norms. It is important to note that Thoreau and Dewey have slightly different approaches to viewing classrooms as democratic spaces. According to Thoreau, a person's right to disobey with conscience incorporates all aspects of democracy that have traditionally been used to defend and uphold civic liberties, whereas democracy is a way of life that focuses on the individual and includes “face-to-face communication with others based upon freedom, equality, and most importantly, friendship,” according to Dewey (Dewey, 1900, as noted by Saito, 2006). Despite their differences, this involves both thinkers learning from each other’s differences, and it is inextricably linked to education (Saito, 2006, p. 94). Thoreau and Dewey both place strong emphasis on moral principles that need to be actively fostered in the teaching of dissent. A process of improving democracy is indicated by these elements of civic education, which are rooted in the ancient Greek idea of *paideia*. Unlike Thoreau, however, Dewey does not view democracy as a retreat from the common, while defining it as a way of life. Such traditions lay the foundation for what may be termed as a “pedagogy of dissent” (Jahanbegloo, 2021)—a pedagogy that legitimises questioning, nurtures critique, and embraces the tensions that come with democratic participation.

Moving beyond the knowledge transmission-oriented models, Paulo Freire, in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), explicitly framed education as the “practice of freedom” (Freire, 1970/2017). His problem-posing approach challenges the “banking model” (Freire, 1970/2017) of teaching and learning, creating spaces for dialogue in which students and teachers can co-create knowledge by critically interrogating their own lived realities. More recently, scholars like Henry Giroux have further emphasised the importance of democratic values and the role of “education as a public good” (Giroux, 2024).

Here, dissent is central—not as disruption, but as the generative ground of transformation. bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) builds on this through her idea of “engaged pedagogy” where classrooms must centre on lived experiences and foster mutual respect among students. For hooks, teaching requires vulnerability and care, but also the courage to confront power relations and injustices that shape students' lives. She suggests that to create the ideal environment for learning to start in the most profound and personal way possible, we must teach in a way that honours and cares for the soul of our students (hooks, 1994, p. 13). If we look at both

Freire's (1970/2017) and hooks's (1991) work together, we can situate a framework in which a pedagogy of dissent becomes a relational practice, cultivating spaces where disagreements, resistance, and critical questioning are nurtured as signs of democratic vitality rather than threats to order.

If we are to trace back eminent scholarship on democratic learning spaces, one must follow a tradition of empirical work that examines democracy as a product of diverse identities—including caste, class, gender, region, religion, language, and national identity. These identities are not abstract categories but are actively shaped and reproduced through educational spaces and materials. In school textbooks, for example, gender, class, caste, religion, and nation are interwoven to create a body of normative information about one's identity across social, historical, political, and economic entities (Manjrekar, 2010). Such curricular framings show how democratic ideals are always mediated through questions of power, recognition, and belonging. They also remind us that any discussion of democratic classrooms must attend to the politics of representation and the lived experiences of learners.

Arathi Sriprakash (2012) furthers this argument in her ethnographic work on rural classrooms in Tamil Nadu, where she critiques how development-oriented discourses often position children from marginalised communities as “objects of intervention rather than subjects of knowledge” (p. 31). She advocates for pedagogies of recognition, where education acknowledges and values children's socio-cultural identities, as legitimate forms of knowledge and being. Recognition, as she notes, is not a tokenistic acknowledgement but a “political practice that includes dissent against homogenising notions of what counts as knowledge or progress” (Sriprakash, 2012, p. 45). Her work is significant here in showing how democratic education in India must move beyond access and enrolment to the more complex task of affirming differences as a central part of pedagogy.

Sharmila Rege (2006, 2010) takes this argument further through her articulation of a Phule-Ambedkarite standpoint pedagogy. Rege insists that caste and gender cannot be treated as add-ons to the curriculum but must be central to the very framing of pedagogy. As she writes, “the pedagogy of privilege reproduces privilege unless it is disrupted by the standpoint of the oppressed” (Rege, 2010, p. 101). Her framework can both embody and open an investigation into

a “pedagogy of dissent” within the frameworks of Thoreau, by positioning the voices of marginalised teachers and students, and their subjugated knowledges — particularly those of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi women, gender non-conforming people — not as supplementary examples but as foundational sources of theory and praxis. Such theorisation not only challenges the dominant neo-liberal frames of “inclusion” but also expands democratic pedagogy towards more radical, emancipatory, and decolonial possibilities (Rege, 2006).

When we look at these bodies of literature together, it will be safe to say that democratic education is inseparable from a spectrum with participation at one end and dissent at the other. Thus, to create a democratic learning environment, it is important to have both participation and dissent present in the classrooms. However, it is not enough to have either participation or dissent in their procedural forms or terms; teachers must be able to discern when participation itself requires resistance—whether to systemic hierarchies, silencing practices, or the “common sense” of inequitable schooling structures. For this, we need to investigate the nature of the preparation provided to future teachers through the various elements of pre-service teacher education, for them to navigate the tension between participation and dissent. Pre-service teachers face the challenge of envisioning democracy not merely as consensus, but as a continuous negotiation (Vasilev, 2015) in which dissent and recognition are essential components of justice-oriented pedagogy, reflecting the diverse and intersecting identities present in their classrooms.

Situating Teachers in the Consensus-Dissent Spectrum: A Theoretical Exercise

Should teachers primarily cultivate consensus and shared participation, or should they also encourage resistance, critique, and dissent when dominant structures silence or erase differences? Henry Giroux (2019) reminds us that “teachers are not simply technicians, ...they are cultural workers who bear the responsibility of critically interrogating and transforming the world around them” (p. 52). Similarly, Michael Apple (2006) warns that teacher education is always implicated in wider ideological struggles: schools can function either to reproduce inequities or to challenge them. Nancy Fraser (2005) further broadens this by highlighting how democracy requires not just “redistribution of resources” but also “recognition of identities” and “representation of marginalised voices” (pp. 73–74).

Framed within the spectrum, teachers' roles oscillate between cultivating participation—ensuring that every student has a voice in classroom processes and fostering dissent—legitimising resistance against inequitable norms, silences, and systemic hierarchies. The tension between these two poles is not a weakness but a defining characteristic of democratic classrooms. To prepare future teachers for this task requires engaging them with the political and ethical dimensions of education, rather than restricting their training to mere strategies and techniques of instructional delivery and achievable learning outcomes (Batra, 2021b).

For pre-service teachers in India, this becomes especially significant because their classrooms will inevitably be shaped by linguistic diversity, caste hierarchies, gender dynamics, and economic inequalities. How they conceptualise democracy and inclusion—whether primarily in terms of consensus and participation, or also in terms of critique and dissent—offers insight into the possibilities and limits of current teacher education practices. As Rege (2006) argues, “without the voices of those at the margins, democracy is emptied of its radical potential” (p. 13).

This paper therefore examines the graduates' narratives against the theorisation of the consensus-dissent spectrum. I have chosen the D.El.Ed. programme as it is particularly popular among students coming from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds. The visions of fairness, participation, and rights expressed by respondents are not simply personal reflections, or indicators of how far pre-service teacher education is equipping future educators to enact classrooms as genuinely democratic spaces, but where these future teachers see themselves or their students coming from similar backgrounds, in such spaces. In doing so, this research positions teacher education as both a professional preparation and an emancipatory civic project, one whose transformative promise depends on how teachers are situated within this participation-resistance binary.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods survey design to examine how graduates of the Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.) programme in Delhi NCR conceptualise democratic classrooms. The design combined quantitative items to capture breadth and qualitative prompts to explore depth, allowing for both statistical patterns and narrative accounts of lived experiences.

The research was grounded in a critical-constructivist epistemology, drawing on traditions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2017; Giroux, 2019) and democratic education that promote a “pedagogy of engagement” (Dewey, 1916; hooks, 1994). Knowledge was understood as socially situated, contested, and co-constructed (Haraway, 1988; Rege, 2006), with the voices of D.El.Ed. graduates positioned as central to theorising democratic classrooms.

A bilingual survey tool was designed in Hindi and English to ensure accessibility. It consisted of three sections: a. demographic questions, b. quantitative items and c. qualitative prompts. In the section with Demographic questions, I gathered information on participants’ age, gender, residence, institutional affiliation, and year of completion. The quantitative items included a set of 5-point Likert-scale questions on the frequency of discussions on democracy and citizenship, a self-reporting item on their preparedness to create democratic classrooms, and checkbox items on values emphasised during training and course elements most influential in shaping their democratic perspectives. The last section with qualitative prompts invited narrative responses on their experiences of fairness and inclusion, their visions of democratic classrooms, their anticipated roles and challenges as future teachers, and their perceptions of institutional support and barriers. The survey was preceded by an informed consent form outlining confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Participants were recruited through faculty contacts and alumni networks at government DIETs in Delhi NCR. Although the initial aim was to include aided and private teacher training institutions, access constraints restricted the sample to government DIETs. Data was collected in August 2025 via an anonymised Google Form. Of 55 responses received, four were incomplete, and were therefore excluded, leaving a final dataset of 51 participants. Although this self-selected sample is not statistically representative, it nevertheless provides valuable exploratory insights into the perspectives of recent DIET graduates.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify broad trends in discussions, values, and influential course elements. Qualitative responses were analysed through thematic coding and discourse analysis. An inductive coding framework was developed from the data, complemented by sensitising concepts drawn from

Dewey (1916), Freire (1970/2017), hooks (1991, 1994), Sriprakash (2012), and Rege (2010). Codes included categories such as student-centred learning, fairness in assessment, flexibility in pedagogy, and resistance to sensitive issues. To strengthen credibility, an independent coder with qualitative research experience reviewed a subset of the data. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, and final themes were triangulated with theoretical frameworks. This process ensured that interpretations were not solely shaped by the researcher's positionality and provided a safeguard against over-interpretation.

My own position as a former practitioner in the non-government education sector and my professional ties to DIET faculty facilitated access and trust but may also have influenced candour in responses. As Foucault (1977) reminds us, silences in discourse often reflect power relations, and participants may have hesitated to critique institutional practices even in anonymous formats. To address this, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process, noting how my commitments to social justice and my identity as a first-generation transgender Bahujan PhD researcher informed both the framing of questions and the interpretation of responses. The addition of an external coder provided further balance to this positionality.

Mapping the Participants: Contexts and Characteristics

A total of 51 graduates from government DIETs across the Delhi National Capital Region (NCR) participated in this research. The sample was drawn through purposive and convenience-based outreach to alumni networks and faculty contacts within multiple DIETs. The demographic profile broadly reflects the structure of India's pre-service teacher education system, which predominantly enrolls young adults entering directly after secondary schooling (Batra, 2021a). Most participants were below the age of 25, with nearly equal proportions of those aged 20 years or younger (43.1%) and those between 21 and 25 (43.1%). Only a small proportion (13.7%) were between 26 and 30, with no participants above the age of 30. This youthful age distribution mirrors the standardised entry trajectory of the D.El.Ed. program, which is designed as an early-career professional qualification immediately following senior secondary education.

Institutionally, participants represented nine government-run DIETs across Delhi NCR, including Ramakrishna Puram and Ghuman Hera (each contributing 19.6% of respondents), followed by

Darya Ganj (15.7%), Moti Bagh (11.8%), Rajinder Nagar (9.8%), and smaller but significant representation from Karkardooma, Pitampura, Keshav Puram, and Bhola Nath Nagar. This spread provided institutional diversity across both central and peripheral districts, reflecting a range of urban educational contexts. However, due to access constraints and the researcher's professional associations with Delhi government institutions, private and aided teacher training institutions were not represented in the final dataset. This limitation, while narrowing the institutional scope, also underscores the continued dominance of government DIETs as the primary public infrastructure for teacher education in the capital region (Batra, 2011).

The gender distribution of the sample was notably skewed toward women, with 72.5% identifying as female, 25.5% as male, and one participant preferring not to disclose their gender identity. This imbalance reflects long-standing patterns of feminisation within the teaching profession, particularly in early and elementary education (Napierala & Colyar, 2022). Scholars have attributed this trend to gendered social norms that position teaching as an extension of women's domestic and nurturing roles (Anyon, 1980; Chamberlin & Fischman, 2002). The absence of gender diversity also raises broader questions about how teacher education programs reproduce or challenge normative gendered expectations in the workforce. Notably, the questionnaire did not include transgender or non-binary options for gender identity. This decision was intentional, informed by ethical and contextual concerns about the lack of familiarity or linguistic comfort among participants in self-identifying outside the binary, especially in institutional environments that may not offer safety for gender-diverse individuals (James et al., 2016).

In terms of residence, most participants (76.5%) belonged to urban areas, with smaller proportions from semi-urban (13.7%) and rural (9.8%) regions. This concentration reflects the geographic realities of DIET distribution, as most institutions are located within or around the metropolitan core of Delhi. The predominance of urban participants may also have influence their orientation toward democratic and inclusive pedagogies, given that urban schooling contexts in Delhi often expose pre-service teachers to greater linguistic, religious, and socio-economic diversity (Manjrekar, 2010; Sriprakash, 2012). At the same time, the relative absence of rural respondents limits the representativeness of perspectives from geographically and socioeconomically marginalised settings.

Finally, 82.3% of participants had completed their D.El.Ed. within the last five years, while 17.7% had graduated earlier. This distribution ensured that the majority of reflections captured in this study remained contemporary, shaped by recent educational reforms such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the ongoing implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act 2009). A smaller number of older graduates added temporal variation, offering glimpses into continuity and change in teacher training practices over the past decade.

Participation without Dissent: Quantitative Patterns of Democratic Preparation in D.El.Ed. Training

The quantitative findings of this study draw on survey responses from 51 D.El.Ed. graduates across Delhi NCR. The survey consisted of single-response items designed to capture participants' exposure to discussions on democratic learning environments, their perceived preparedness to enact democratic values, and the curricular emphases they experienced. Constructs such as *democracy*, *preparedness*, and *participation* were operationalised through questions on frequency of discussions, self-reported readiness, and values emphasised in training. Given the relatively small sample size, these findings must be treated as descriptive and indicative rather than generalisable, offering exploratory insights into how democracy is framed within teacher education in India.

More than half of the respondents ($f = 28$; 54.90%) reported that discussions on democracy and citizenship took place very often, at least once a week, while 16 (31.37%) said they occurred about once a month. Six respondents (11.76%) indicated that such conversations happened only a few times a year, and one (1.96%) described them as rare. No respondent reported a complete absence of such discussions. This distribution suggests that democratic themes were present across institutions, but the variation in frequency points to uneven institutional commitment. Such unevenness may reflect differences in faculty priorities, curricular flexibility, or institutional cultures, underscoring the need for more consistent integration of democratic discourse across DIETs.

When asked about preparedness, a majority expressed confidence: 31 respondents (60.78%) felt *very well prepared* to create inclusive and democratic classrooms, while 14 (27.45%) reported feeling *well prepared*. Only four (7.84%) reported feeling *somewhat prepared*, and two (3.92%) reported feeling *not very well prepared*. None selected, *not at all*. Whilst these responses indicate that participants generally viewed their training positively, self-reported confidence must be interpreted with caution. It may reflect the emphasis on participation and inclusion in training, rather than preparedness to engage in dissent or critique. In other words, trainees may feel equipped to foster harmony but less prepared to challenge exclusionary practices or institutional hierarchies. Values data further underscore this pattern. Student participation and voice emerged as the most salient ($f = 48$; 94.12%), followed by respect for diversity ($f = 39$; 76.47%), equality and fairness ($f = 38$; 74.51%), and discipline and order ($f = 34$; 66.67%). Academic achievement was also noted ($f = 28$; 54.90%). A small number ($f = 2$; 3.92%) mentioned *others*. This distribution indicates that while participation, diversity, and fairness were central, traditional emphases on discipline and achievement remain significant. The coexistence of progressive and conventional values illustrates the hybrid nature of teacher education in India, where democratic rhetoric coexists with entrenched hierarchies.

Experiential learning modes—peer work ($f = 40$; 78.43%), internships ($f = 37$; 72.55%), and debates ($f = 35$; 68.63%)—were reported as most influential, far surpassing lectures ($f = 22$; 43.14%) and assignments/projects ($f = 21$; 41.18%). This preference aligns with broader pedagogical scholarship that highlights the transformative potential of interactive and relational learning (Lander et al., 2020). It also suggests that DIETs may be more effective when they foreground practice-based engagements rather than relying on didactic instruction.

Finally, the representation of perspectives in course materials reveals a critical gap. While children's voices were moderately represented ($f = 27$; 52.94%), marginalised communities and diverse teacher perspectives were largely absent, with only six participants (11.76%) identifying each. Five respondents (9.80%) felt the content reflected mostly dominant or mainstream knowledge, while seven (13.73%) were unsure. This absence reflects broader critiques of Indian teacher education curricula, which often reproduce dominant knowledge systems while sidelining

subaltern perspectives (Batra, 2021a, 2021b). Such silences limit the capacity of pre-service teachers to engage with democracy as a project of justice and equity.

Taken together, these quantitative findings depict a participation-heavy but critique-light model of democratic teacher preparation. Trainees reported frequent opportunities to engage in discussions of fairness, inclusion, and citizenship, which made them feel reasonably well prepared to create democratic classrooms. Values such as student participation and respect for diversity were highly emphasised, while dissent and structural critique were far less visible. The most influential learning experiences came through interactive and experiential elements rather than lectures, reflecting broader pedagogical shifts in teacher education. At the same time, the underrepresentation of marginalised voices and the lingering emphasis on discipline and achievement suggest limitations in how democracy is framed within the D.El.Ed. programme.

Negotiating Democracy: Narratives of Participation, Inclusion, and Fairness Contradictions in D.El.Ed. Training

While the quantitative findings provide a broad overview of how frequently democratic and inclusive themes were addressed in the D.El.Ed. programme and which elements most influenced the participants, they only partially capture the complexity of trainee teachers' lived experiences. In this section, we will examine the narratives of how the graduates interpreted and enacted these ideas in practice, especially during their school internship programs across both academic years. These accounts illuminate the specific moments by turning to the participants' narratives and observations from their courses, while situating them within clusters of experiences such as conceptions of democratic classrooms, roles and challenges as future teachers, perceptions of institutional support, and constraints.

Most graduates recalled formative experiences from their D.El.Ed. that shaped their understanding of democracy through examples of fairness, participation, and rights. These stories highlight how democratic teaching is not only taught but also help trainee teachers experience it at times within institutions. One participant recalled a moment in the first year when the question of including the Gayatri Mantra in the morning assembly was raised. A teacher from the DIET responded to her: "If you want that, also include something from Sikhism on Monday, something from Islam as

well." This demonstrates how fairness in education demands recognition of multiple faiths and traditions. She realised that pluralism must be actively cultivated in education to safeguard democracy (Nussbaum, 2010).

Another participant recounted the struggles of a visually impaired peer, who lacked access to Braille text:

She recorded her lectures with a voice recorder and used computer software, because she had no access to braille supplementary books. One of our professors asked us to record the chapters for her. That day I realised that exclusion is often not conscious, but ignoring the needs of individual students.

These articulations by trainees can be connected to the way in which teacher education systems often overlook social, cultural, and ability differences, and end up treating students, and by extension, also teachers as peripheral rather than central to pedagogy (Sriprakash, 2012). The graduate's reflection, "we could have thought of solutions ourselves, but our teacher had to remind us" illustrates how recognition of exclusion must be intentionally nurtured (Kollerová & Killen, 2021).

Several narratives revealed subtle but powerful interventions around gender and discipline. One second year trainee recalled, "In my class, boys did not want to sit with girls. I noticed this and changed the seating arrangement—pairing a boy with a girl. This made the class more disciplined and harmonious." It's interesting to note here that democratic classrooms should ideally challenge traditional hierarchies and create new possibilities for relationships not only between teachers and students, but among students themselves (hooks, 1994). New teachers should never create a "culture of standardisation" through assessment and classroom practices that often reproduce inequalities unless challenged (Apple, 2006).

Language, Leadership, and Teacher Identity in Democratic Classrooms

Language emerged as a critical site of inclusion through the narratives of multiple trainees. One of them noted: "Some children could not answer well in class tests due to language barriers. So later I explained the text in their mother tongue first, and then gradually brought them to English." They

went on to focus on how “linguistic recognition” is central to a democratic and multilingual society (Rege, 2010). Some trainees also described opportunities that enabled participation and leadership in classrooms while talking about the practices of their DIET faculties: “They give every single child a chance to lead or participate in organising programmes,” and “community lunches and assemblies give us freedom to express ourselves.” This takes us back to John Dewey’s (1916) vision of schools as “laboratories of democracy,” where collective practices shape the civic habits of the institution. When asked to describe their vision for democratic classrooms, many graduates articulated practices grounded in co-creation, participation, and recognition of differences.

Another emerging theme was shared rule-making, as one respondent recalled: “During the school experience programme, we created classroom contracts. If there were a total of five rules, we asked children to decide three of them, while we teachers added the rest. Every child felt included and respected.” Democratic classrooms are not based on abstract ideas but should be inculcated as a way of life (Dewey, 1916), emerging through everyday institutional practices, peer relationships, and mentorship.

It is important to note that some of the respondents revealed and shared contradictory constructions of teacher identity in democratic classrooms. They positioned themselves within the broad tension between teacher practice of participation and dissent, constrained in their practice as budding future teachers. Some of them repeatedly defined democracy as “mutual respect” and an ongoing exercise of “co-creation.” One trainee explained how: “Learning is not just top down but built through shared responsibility. The teacher is a facilitator, not only an authority.” Another echoed: “As teachers we need to just let every child speak as per their point of view, and not impose ours on them. That’s the most significant learning that I had during my D.El.Ed. programme.” These accounts invoke the notion of ‘engaged pedagogy’ (hooks, 1994, p. 13). It further sheds light on how teachers should decentralise their authority and create a dialogic space for the classroom instruction.

Some of the respondents also linked democratic classrooms to access to equitable opportunities across backgrounds, “A democratic teacher should be one who understands their students’ cultural, social, or economic constraints and gives equal opportunity to everyone.” This articulation pushes

us to examine whether it is a democratic teacher's role to address how their classroom spaces must foreground the caste, class, and gendered exclusion to create real justice (Rege, 2010).

Some respondents also spoke about using innovative strategies and skills such as research and probing to shape themselves as democratic teachers. They also spoke of problem-posing pedagogical strategies (Freire, 1970/2017), to explore and create knowledge collaboratively in a democratic classroom. Flexibility and empathy were also seen as vital. As one trainee expressed: "A teacher must be flexible and sensitive—sometimes changing pedagogy, extra support, building confidence with encouragement. Diversity is not a barrier, but an opportunity to enrich learning." Democratic classrooms demand teachers to be “cultural workers” or “transformative intellectuals” whose responsibility is not only instructional but also civic, shaping environments of empathy and inclusivity (Giroux, 2014). Many graduates emphasised that teaching is “different than many other professions,” because they focus on “building a just society” and “challenge the social inequalities.” Freire (1973) noted in his conception of praxis, in which teachers are agents of change who engage in reflection and action to transform oppressive structures. This casts teachers as “ethical actors” committed to fairness and democratic renewal, rather than just transmitters of content and pedagogical knowledge. When asked about the most important lesson the D.El.Ed. course had taught them about working with children from a diverse background, the graduates shared reflections that illuminated how democratic practices were understood and internalised. These accounts reveal a vision of teaching that is not confined to knowledge transmission but is deeply relational, flexible, and oriented towards recognition of differences in students' backgrounds. A recurrent theme was the importance of thinking critically as a teacher. Respondents emphasised that democratic classrooms require teachers to question their own assumptions, problematise their own pedagogical methods, and remain open to multiple perspectives (Freire, 1973). It is also interesting to note here that some participants also referenced the necessity of “control, order, and discipline.” These accounts reveal a tension between democratic ideals and the practical challenge of managing a classroom. This discourse reflects what Friedman (1985) describes as the “construct diction of authority” in feminist classrooms. Teacher identity is not singular but negotiated across competing discourses. As teacher trainees aspire to be “change agents” and facilitators of dialogue, but the realities of authority and systemic constraints continue to trouble them. Their reflections on preparedness underscore the urgent need

for teacher education programmes to adopt democratic, justice-oriented practices in structured and sustained ways (Conklin & Hughes, 2015). It is worth noting that D.El.Ed. classrooms need to be designed on the basis of shared authority, inclusive practice, diversity, and the voices of students.

Role of Institutional Support and Constraints in Learning

Many participants described their institutions as “generally supportive of discussions on equality,” and several recalled their school internship mentors actively guiding them on applying these ideas in real classrooms during their school internships. Moreover, some of them also pointed to faculty members “modelling” democratic practices by encouraging student voice and collaborative decision-making.

Institutional initiatives included open discussions on student participation, the creation of multiple clubs that enabled teacher trainees to participate actively in classrooms, and ample opportunities for public speaking that strengthened the confidence of these future teachers. Beyond the classroom, DIETs also supported the democratic values by organising seminars for parents of trainee teachers on the importance of education, offering explanations of different state and national scholarship schemes for disadvantaged trainees, and conducting expert workshops on topics such as storytelling, that promoted inclusion and creativity. Exposure to educational policies such as the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) further grounded discussions in a broader civic and policy framework. Together, these accounts highlight the ways in which institutional practices created enabling spaces for future teachers to engage with democratic and inclusive ideas.

At the same time, some of the trainees identified curricular and institutional barriers that limited the depth and sustainability of these engagements. Several of them noted that “practical exposure and resources were very limited,” making it difficult for them to translate democratic ideals into real classroom practices during their school internships. Some teachers tended to “avoid sensitive topics,” and prioritised theoretical knowledge over practice, which hindered their critical engagement. There were also accounts of bias at the institutional level—unfair grading practices or special treatment for relatives and known students—pointing to contradictions between the formal rhetoric of democratic education and its enactment within teacher education spaces.

Participants' narratives illustrate the tensions between institutional ideals of democracy and the realities of everyday practice. The trainees reported that they might need more structured “opportunities for dialogue,” because currently these are diluted by “rigid curricula, exam-driven pressure,” and hierarchical dynamics that often restrict open debate. For example, though public speaking was encouraged, controversial or sensitive issues were deliberately avoided, stifling dissent and critical interrogation. This duality—supportive initiatives on the one hand, silences and inequalities on the other—reveals the challenges of institutionalising democratic pedagogy. Institutions frequently serve as formal models for democratic processes but fall short in practice, especially when internal biases or systemic limitations are present. This contradiction draws attention to the nuanced role that teacher-training programmes play in both promoting and restricting democratic learning.

Respondents consistently emphasised that fairness and inclusion are understood in terms of opportunities for participation—through practices such as shared rule-making, multilingual teaching, and student leadership. These orientations reflect John Dewey’s (1916) conception of democracy as “everyday participation” and bell hooks (1994) emphasis on voice and mutual respect. However, what remained largely absent was an articulation of dissent as a form of democratic practice. Graduates did not explicitly connect democratic education with the courage to question dominant norms, challenge hierarchies, or contest exclusionary structures. This silence is significant here as Rege (2010) reminds us, “without attending to structural oppression, inclusion risks remaining within liberal frameworks” that accommodate difference without transforming societal power relations. The continuous depoliticisation of diversity, treating it as something to be 'managed' rather than recognised as grounds for contestation reflects a broader tension within the discourse around just schooling (Sriprakash, 2012).

Participants also noted that sensitive issues such as caste, gender-based discrimination, and religious intolerance were often avoided in classrooms, with faculty preferring to focus more on the theoretical or policy-oriented content. This tendency is identified by scholars as the “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 2006), where silences are as telling as what is spoken. The avoidance of controversial issues undermines the potential of teacher education to prepare graduates for the complex, conflict-ridden realities of Indian classrooms. Democratic pedagogy cannot just remain

apolitical or neutral; it must explicitly engage with contentious social realities (Giroux, 2014, 2019). One of the most intriguing silences in the data was the limited discussion of institutional barriers. Respondents alluded briefly to instances of bias and favouritism within their institution. This raises an important question: were the trainees hesitant to criticise their institutions, even within an anonymous survey? If so, this reluctance itself reflects the shaping of democratic imagination during teacher training. As trainees, if they are unable—or unwilling—to dissent against dominant faculty practices, what does this imply for their ability to foster dissent in their own classrooms? Michel Foucault's (1977) insights on surveillance and disciplinary power remind us that silence and self-censorship are not accidental but are cultivated within institutional cultures.

While respondents often invoked terms such as “critical thinking” or “thinking critically as a teacher,” their examples suggested a lack of depth in how criticality was conceptualised during their programme. More often, critical thinking was described as “respecting students’ opinions” or “being flexible,” rather than as questioning systemic inequalities or critiquing dominant cultural narratives. This points to a broader absence of critical scholarship in the teacher education curriculum (Akena, 2012). However, on a more hopeful note, many respondents were sensitive to the linguistic diversity during the school experience programmes, focusing on using the students’ mother tongue alongside classroom languages—predominantly English in Delhi. Rege (2010) has pointed to the “politics of language and affirming marginalised linguistic identities”; such practices suggest an emergent recognition of multilingualism as a resource for democratic learning, though participants acknowledged systemic barriers—rigid curricula and exam pressures—that often constrain such efforts.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated how graduates of the Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed.) programme in Delhi NCR conceptualise democratic classrooms, largely through the lens of participation rather than critique. While inspiring practices such as shared rule-making, multilingual teaching, and responsiveness to diversity were evident, silences around sensitive issues, institutional hierarchies, and systemic inequities remain striking. These tensions highlight the gap between Deweyan notions of participatory democracy and the more radical demands of Thoreauvian and Freirian praxis, which emphasise dissent and structural critique as central to

democratic education (Saito, 2006). The implications for curriculum design are significant: if democracy is reduced to mere participation without critique, classrooms risk becoming spaces of conformity rather than justice. To address this, the D.El.Ed. curriculum must embed critical pedagogy, integrate modules on social justice, and institutionalise reflective practice so that pre-service teachers can interrogate their own positionalities and biases (Batra, 2011). Within District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), faculty must model democratic practices through dialogic teaching, shared decision-making, and openness to dissent, while also creating safe spaces for critical dialogue on sensitive social issues. Such pedagogical practices would enable graduates to envision themselves not only as facilitators of participation but also as agents of civic transformation who challenge dominant narratives and stereotypical notions. Future research should extend these insights through longitudinal studies that track graduates into their professional practice, ethnographic classroom observations to examine how democratic ideals are enacted or constrained, and comparative analyses across states to highlight regional variations in conceptualising democracy. Additionally, exploring faculty perspectives would shed light on how institutional cultures shape pre-service teacher training. By centering pre-service teacher voices and addressing the systemic barriers they identify, teacher education in India can be reimaged as both a professional and civic project—one that prepares future teachers to educate future citizens in ways that are participatory, emancipatory, and transformative.

References

- Akena, F. A. (2012). Critical analysis of the production of Western knowledge and its implications for Indigenous knowledge and decolonisation. *Journal of Black Studies*, 43(6), 599–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934712440448>
- Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162(1), 67–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42741976>
- Apple, M. W. (2006). *Educating the “right” way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Batra, P. (2011). Teacher education and classroom practice in India: A critique and propositions. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 8(1), 31–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097318491100800103>

- Batra, P. (2021a). Politics, policy, and practice of teacher education reform in India. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.427>
- Batra, P. (2021b). Re-imagining curriculum in India: Charting a path beyond the pandemic. *Prospects*, 51(1–3), 407–424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09518-6>
- Chamberlin, M., & Fischman, G. (2002). Imagining teachers: Rethinking gender dynamics in teacher education. *Contemporary Sociology*, 31(3), 345–346.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3089713>
- Conklin, H. G., & Hughes, H. E. (2015). Practices of compassionate, critical, justice-oriented teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 67(1), 47–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487115607346>
- Dewey, J. (1900). *The school and society*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. Macmillan.
- Ehrlich, T. (1998). Reinventing John Dewey’s “pedagogy as a university discipline.” *The Elementary School Journal*, 98(5), 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1086/461905>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1975).
- Fraser, N. (2005). Reframing justice in a globalising world. *New Left Review*, 36, 69–88.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Westview Press.
- Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1970)
- Friedman, S. (1985). Authority in the feminist classroom: A contradiction in terms. In M. Culley & C. Portugues (Eds.), *Gendered subjects* (pp. 203–208). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism’s war on higher education*. Haymarket Books.
- Giroux, H. A. (2019). Higher education and pedagogy in the age of Trump. In G. Yancy (Ed.), *Educating for critical consciousness* (pp. 45–66). Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A. (2024). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Bloomsbury.

- Grossman, P., Schneider Kavanagh, S., & Dean, P. G. (2018). The turn to practice in teacher education: An introduction to the work of the core practice consortium. In P. Grossman (Ed.), *Teaching core practices in teacher education* (pp. 1–14). Harvard Education Press.
- Hammerness, K., Klette, K., Jensen, I. S., & Canrinus, E. T. (2020). Opportunities to study, practice, and rehearse teaching in teacher preparation: An international perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 122(11), 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012201108>
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledge: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Heggart, K. (2022). Australian teachers as democracy workers. In K. Heggart & S. Kolber (Eds.), *Empowering teachers and democratising schooling* (pp. 145–162). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-4464-2_9
- hooks, b. (1991). Theory as liberatory practice. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, 4(1), 1–12.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Jahanbegloo, R. (2021). *Pedagogy of dissent*. Orient Blackswan.
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. transgender survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality. <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>
- Kollerová, L., & Killen, M. (2021). An experimental study of teachers' evaluations regarding peer exclusion in the classroom. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(1), 463–481. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12373>
- Lander, N., Mazzoli, E., Cassar, S., Symington, N., & Salmon, J. (2020). Embedding active pedagogies within pre-service teacher education: Implementation considerations and recommendations. *Children*, 7(11), 207. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children7110207>
- Manjrekar, N. (2010). Learning India, learning Gujarat: Texts in context. In D. Bhog (Ed.), *Textbook regimes: A feminist critique of nation and identity* (pp. viii–xv). Nirantar.
- Mill, J. S. (1859). *On Liberty*. John W. Parker and Son.
- Napierala, J., & Colyar, J. (2022). *Gender representation trends among Ontario University Faculty*, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. Canada. Retrieved from <https://coilink.org/20.500.12592/ktdkss> on 23 May 2026. COI: 20.500.12592/ktdkss.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2005). *National curriculum framework 2005*. NCERT.

- National Education Policy. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, Government of India.
https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English.pdf
- Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
- Rege, S. (2006). *Against the madness of Manu: B. R. Ambedkar's writings on Brahmanical patriarchy*. Navayana.
- Rege, S. (2010). Education as “Trutiya Ratna”: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(44/45), 88–98.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20787534>
- Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, No. 35, Acts of Parliament, 2009 (India).
https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/RTE_Section_wise_rationale_rev_0.pdf
- Saito, N. (2006). Perfectionism and the love of humanity: Democracy as a way of life after Dewey, Thoreau and Cavell. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 20(2), 83–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jsp.2006.0014>
- Saltmarsh, J., & Zlotkowski, E. (2011). *Higher education and democracy: Essays on service-learning and civic engagement*. Temple University Press. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9549>
- Sriprakash, A. (2012). *Pedagogies for development: The politics and practice of child-centred education in India*. Springer.
- Thoreau, H. D. (1996). Resistance to civil government (Civil disobedience). In N. L. Rosenblum (Ed.), *Thoreau: Political writings* (pp. 1–22). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1849)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. A Global Report. UNESCO Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ASRB4722>
- Vasilev, G. (2015). The uneasy alliance between consensus and democracy. *The Review of Politics*, 77(1), 73–98. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670514000849>
- Vishnoi, P. (2021). School as a microcosm of society. *Learning Curve*, 9, 73–77.
<https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/publications/learning-curve-issue-9>