



Cultivating Global Citizens in the Global South: A Phenomenological Exploration of Undergraduate Experiences in a Civics and Community Engagement Course

Dr. Yaar Muhammad¹, Dr. Naima Qureshi², Razia Boota³

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot.

Email: Yaar.Muhammad@gcwus.edu.pk

² Assistant Professor, Division of Education, University of Education, Lahore.

Email: naima.qureshi@ue.edu.pk

³ PhD Scholar, Department of Education, GC Women University, Sialkot.

Email: raziaboota@hotmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: August 26, 2026 Revised: September 07, 2026 Accepted: September 23, 2026 Available Online: October 03, 2026 Keywords: Global Citizenship Education, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Undergraduate Students, Community Engagement, Global South, Pakistan Corresponding author: Dr. Yaar Muhammad Email: Yaar.Muhammad@gcwus.edu.pk	This study examines the Global Citizenship Education (GCE) experiences and understanding of undergraduate students in Punjab in the compulsory Course on Civics and Community Engagement (GCCE-101) within its context. Twenty-two students were interviewed using semi-structured interviews that were then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with NVivo 15 software. The following three themes emerged from the analysis of the Group Experiential Observations: (1) From Passive Recipients to Active Civic Agents is about students' transition from passive receivers to active civic agents; (2) Navigating Local Belonging and Global Responsibility is about tensions between national, community, and global belonging; and (3) Caring Ethics and Humanity Empowerment in Practice is about the enactment of care, empathy, and collective wellbeing in the communities to which students belong. Findings expand on GCE scholarship by foregrounding the voices of undergraduates in the Global South, providing empirically rooted readings of GCE and how they are lived, interpreted, and embodied in a higher-education space in Pakistan. There are implications for pedagogy and policy in the field of civics/citizenship education.

Introduction

Global citizenship education (GCE) has quickly emerged as a key approach in the field of education in the post-secondary sector, offering the promise of nurturing global citizens who are capable of critically engaging in local, national, and global issues, while also fostering values of justice, equity, and sustainability (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Bosio & Torres, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). In the Global South, GCE has gained traction as a means of tackling structural inequalities, decolonising curricula, and creating an ethical engagement beyond the nation-state (Andreotti, 2010; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Spring, 2004). Although policy-central, GCE remains contentious, with a variety of interpretations ranging from neoliberal skills for employment to critical transformative pedagogies focusing on social justice and human dignity (Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Veugelers, 2021).

Educating young citizens about the importance of nurturing citizenship values through a compulsory civics and community engagement course at the undergraduate level has been gaining momentum in Pakistan as national efforts begin to step in (HEC, 2021; PU, 2020). These courses may take on different names, such as GCCE-101 (PU, 2020), but they are designed to be places

where students can cultivate civic skills, ethics, and a community political attitude. However, little empirical work that explores how undergraduate students perceive and give meaning to the curricular efforts of cultivating "responsible citizens" (Baring et al., 2022; Mandigo et al., 2021).

A lot of research in this area from the Global South has been done focusing on teachers' experiences or a macro-level review of the curricula, for example, in the context of Ghana (Bosio & Waghid, 2023), South Africa (Angyagre, 2023), Egypt (Awad & Carbajal, 2023), Mexico (Felix, 2023), and the Caribbean (Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023). The studies reveal the pivotal role played by critical consciousness, caring ethics, democratic deliberation, and decolonial pedagogies within the nature of GCE practice. However, there is also a clear deficiency: while the lived experiences of undergraduates—who are the populations that are being engaged by GCEs—have been under-researched, especially in contexts like Pakistan (Iftekhhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023).

This is a notable gap, for a number of reasons. First, GCE is a purely phenomenological project: It is about the lives of individuals, their multiple affiliations, and the ways they behave ethically in everyday life (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Smith et al., 2022). If it does not account for students' experiences, the discourse of GCE can easily seem top-down and have less impact when it comes to students' realities (Andreotti, 2010; Stein, 2021). Second, in the Global South, where GCE has become a stake in colonising ideologies and systems, in response to pressures of neoliberalism and socio-political fragility, the understanding of the students' interpretation and embodiment of GCE has become imperative to ensure not only contextually relevant, transformative curricula but also to reduce the performance dimension/representativeness of GCE (Allais, 2007; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Young, 2010). Third, previous research in the Global South has focused on the views of educators and/or policymakers, while primarily overlooking students' voices in the production of knowledge about GCE (Angyagre, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023).

However, several questions remain unanswered: How do students from Punjab, Pakistan perceive and comprehend GCE in a required civics class? What do each of these terms mean to them, such as global citizenship, community engagement, and civic responsibility? How do they manage between local belonging and global responsibility, between 'aspirational individualism' and 'shared welfare'? If not, the goal of GCE in the Pakistani context of Higher Education can become doomed as either Northern epistemologies or neoliberal viewpoints continue to persist without grappling with the realities of lived experiences of the learners (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Spring, 2004; Veugelers, 2021).

This study attempts to fill the gaps by examining the experiences of undergraduate students in the context of GCE in the compulsory course of undergraduate education, GCCE-101, 'Civics and Community Engagement' in Punjab. Based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study poses two guiding questions: (1) How do the undergraduate students experience and make sense of Global Citizenship Education in the GCCE-101 course? (2) What conflicts, shifts, or trends are there in students' stories of civic personae, civic involvement, and global citizenship? (3) What are the students' interpretations of critical GCE frameworks that are focused on decoloniality, caring ethics, and democratic deliberation?

This study adds to the scholarship of GCE in three ways: (1) grounding GCE in the lived experiences of undergraduate students/young people in the Global South, specifically South Asia; (2) broadening the conversation about GCE from a lens focused on the teacher to the student; and (3) providing pedagogical and curricular insights into designing contextually responsive and ethically grounded GCE interventions (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2023; Smith et al., 2022). The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Global Citizenship Education: Conceptual Debates and Critical Frameworks

GCE is a complex construct that has been defined in different ways, such as education for global competencies (UNESCO, 2015), ethical engagement, critical consciousness, and/or transformative action (Bosio & Schattle, 2023). At the core of GCE is ensuring that learners are prepared to function as citizens in a world defined as such, which involves inequality, conflict, environmental degradation, and cultural diversity (Leite, 2021; Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024; Spring, 2004). However, there are studies that warn of the dangers of the uncritical adoption of GCE with the potential to reproduce neoliberal agendas, North epistemologies, and depoliticised framings that conceal power relations (Andreotti, 2010; Giroux, 2004; Stein, 2021).

Critical GCE frameworks, on the other hand, stress decoloniality, social justice, and moral responsibility in doing GCE praxis (Bosio & Torres, 2019; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Freire, 1995). These approaches are phenomenological and critical pedagogical and focus on (active) lived experiences, agency, and moral commitments (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2022; Tracy, 2010). In the Global South,

critical GCE has been called upon to resist North imposing its knowledge framework and solving problems by disregarding local values, contexts, and methods, in order to worry about ethical issues in relation to its own context and the local context for the problem/situation. In the Global South, critical GCE is used to oppose North hegemony, to recover indigenous epistemologies, and to engage with ethical issues in relation to its context as opposed to that of the local context of the problem/situation (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Iftekhhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023).

GCE in the Global South: Policy, Pedagogy, and Practice

Empirical work on GCE in the Global South shows a range of varying applications and understandings of GCE. For instance, GCE has been incorporated in the academic programmes in Universities in Ghana, using courses like governance, leadership, and ethics that emphasise intercultural awareness and responsible citizenship (Angyagre, 2023). In South Africa, GCE has been achieved using pedagogies that are deliberative and that include a focus on student voice, reflexivity, and ethics for the community, such as ubuntu (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023). The Islamic Republic of Iran, Egypt, and Mexico have attempted to conceptualise democratic citizenship education as an example of GCE, but with the required ability to engage in dialogue and civic engagement held in teachers' repositories (Awad & Carbajal, 2023). Despite huge investments in higher education, some have voiced concern about the lack of GCE in the policy context in the Caribbean (Felix, 2023).

In all these contexts, it can be concluded that themes rapidly emerge: critical consciousness becomes central and important; humanistic attitudes of caring and service to the community become important; local and global identities become significant; and pedagogical strategies that involve active citizenship and decidedly break with the 'passive' curriculum emerge as required (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Stein, 2021; Veugelers, 2021). Yet, one common trait across all instances is the lack of student voice in the production of knowledge, which spans educators' and/or policymakers' standpoints. However, there is one commonality in all of these: a focus on the educators' and/or policymakers', marginalising the student's voice in the production of knowledge (Angyagre, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023).

Undergraduate Students and GCE: The Missing Voice

As scholarship is expanding in GCE in the Global South, there is limited published research on the experiences of undergraduate students. Teachers' perspectives (Angyagre, 2023; Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023), policies (Felix, 2023; UNESCO, 2015), or the design of the curriculum (Baring et al., 2022) has been focus of the scholarship. In instances in which students are included, they are frequently marginalised as objects of GCE, rather than agents of meaning-making (Andreotti, 2010; Giroux, 2004).

This is especially noticeable in South Asian contexts. Although there has been some research carried out in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal (Iftekhhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023), Pakistan has not been well represented in GCE scholarship. In the context of the post-colonial past, socio-political turbulence, and development stories, the introduction of compulsory civic education subjects such as GCCE-101 in Punjab provides a platform to revisit and examine how students experience civic engagement and interpret it. The introduction of civic education subjects such as GCCE-101 in Punjab opens a space to reflect and rethink students' civic experience and interpretation of civic education in a context of post-colonial situations, socio-political instability, and developmental narratives.

Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology, Care Ethics, and Democratic Deliberation

This study is based on three converging theories. First, phenomenology is philosophically grounded in understanding the experience and meaning making of individuals in their world (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Smith et al., 2022). As a phenomenological approach that emphasises interpretations within the lived experiences of participants, IPA fits well with research that is concerned with students' interpretations of GCE (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Second, care ethics provides a lens through which one can examine how students embody empathy, responsibility, and collective wellbeing collectively in a community engagement (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Noddings, 2013). In the Global South, care ethics has been "organised" to support alternative conceptions of citizenship, other than the individualistic and market-oriented one, which emphasise the relational, social, and ethical aspects of GCE (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023).

Third, democratic discussion can frame the way in which students have an opportunity to engage in deliberation, understand, and negotiate differences, from where they are able to act as citizens in learning environments (Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Bosio & Waghid,

2023; Stein, 2021). Deliberative pedagogies have been introduced and are seen as places where students can engage in critical consciousness, critique power relations, and envision other futures (Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Veugeliers).

These frameworks provide information for the analytical approach of the study and how the students' narratives will be interpreted in relation to wider GCE discourses and critical pedagogical traditions (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2022).

Methodology

In this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of a group of undergraduate students in the required course, Global Citizenship Education from the class of GCCE-101: Civics and Community Engagement, at a University in the Punjab province of Pakistan. The study had a phenomenological tone and was concerned with the interpretation of key events in life (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022), this was a reason given for the choice of IPA. IPA is a methodology that is quite appropriate for small, purposive, in-depth studies, which aims to deepen and describe participants' subjective sense (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Smith et al., 2022).

The selection of IPA is indicative of the epistemic perspective of the study, which is based on the view of knowledge as co-constructed by the researcher and the participant, and of a focus on students' meaning-making, lived experiences, and emotions (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Smith et al., 2022). The idiographic approach of IPA, which involves exploring individual case studies and then drawing general theoretical conclusions from patterns across case studies, ensures that the analysis is focused on the participants' narratives in order to prevent abstraction before being reported to facilitate the generalisation of a theoretical case conclusion. IPA's idiographic focus, its preference to analyse each case in-depth before making general conclusions about patterns across cases, helps to ensure that the study is grounded in the individual case but allows for theoretic generalisations of the case conclusion.

The study was conducted in an interpretive/phenomenological approach that suggests that people construct reality, and knowledge arises from their meanings of what they observe and experience (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A relativist approach was taken; therefore, this study does not recognise any single "true" meaning of GCE but rather a multiplicity of meanings that emerge in situations of lived experience by students (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Smith et al., 2022). Epistemologically, the study acknowledges that interpretation is always located, partial, and co-constructed with the located other of the emergent schemas and practices, which is the researcher in their co-construction of knowledge in relation to the participants' schemata and practices (Smith et al., 2022; Tracy, 2010).

The participants were recruited using purposive/criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows: undergraduate students currently enrolled in the state of Punjab, Pakistan; completed or were currently taking GCCE-101: Civics and Community Engagement; and were willing to participate in a semi-structured interview on their experiences with GCCE-101. The exclusion criteria were those who did not take the course or were not willing to provide informed consent.

A total of 22 students (12 females and 10 males), aged 18–24 years, with diverse discipline backgrounds (social sciences, humanities, business, and STEM) were selected. Diversity in demographics was included because it allowed for the representation of varying views and perspectives without being statistically representative. Participants were anonymised by assigning them pseudonyms.

A semi-structured interview approach was used, as it allowed for the exploration of the participants' everyday experiences and their processes of making sense of what was occurring (Flick; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Saldaña, 2025). Interviews were face-to-face or online, with participants choosing their method (45–75 minutes). A list of potential questions was developed on the basis of the research questions and theoretical frameworks of the study and probed students' experiences with GCCE-101, understanding of civic concepts (e.g., "community engagement," "global citizenship"), and thoughts about civic identity and civic agency.

All participants provided permission for their interviews to be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken, and context was noted, and included cues in interviews because they are not verbal. Information was kept safely in the protected files with codes, and the valuable information of participants' anonymity was maintained.

Data analysis followed the six steps of the IPA (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022) process: (1) reading and re-reading transcripts to immerse in the data; (2) descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes as a way of exploring the data; (3) development of emergent themes derived from initial notes; (4) searching for connections between emergent themes to identify patterns within each case; (5) moving to another case, repeating steps 1–4; and (6) looking for patterns across cases to identify Group Experiential Themes (GETs).

NVivo 15 was used to analyse qualitative data (Beekhuizen & Bazeley, 2024). The functions that were used included organising the emergent themes and GETs; coding new themes and GETs; searching for key phrases and concepts; analysing the key concept (forming coding notes/memos); creating node hierarchies/own concept maps; and safe storing, archiving, and interpretation of the transcripts and coding files. NVivo supported analytical rigour in several ways: It allowed for systematic coding, retrieval of sections of the data, and visualisation of thematic relationships (Frieze et al., 2018; Woolf & Silver, 2018).

Several strategies for trustworthiness were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Credibility was strengthened by reading the transcripts many times into the data, member checking by summarising the data with participants and asking for feedback, and by debriefing with peers. An audit trail (all decisions made during the analysis and all coding iterations documented) ensured dependability. The issue of confirmability was tackled by reflexivity (reflexive journaling to keep track of researcher values and reflexive position). Transferability was promoted by thick description (providing considerable information regarding the context and the designers with a demographic profile for students to evaluate the applicability of the results to other contexts) (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Miles et al., 2014).

The institutional review board granted ethical clearance before data collection. Written consent forms, which included an explanation of the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study, were employed for informed consent. All information was anonymised and kept securely for the participants, and complete confidentiality was maintained. Information was provided to participants that gave them the freedom to stop participating at any time, and that they would not be discriminated against. To safeguard data, password-protected files and encrypted storage (Adu & Miles, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2023; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015) were used.

Findings

Three Group Experiential Themes (GETs), each with 2 to 3 subordinate themes, were produced in the analysis. The following interpretation notes and a few quotes from participants of a GET are presented.

From Passive Recipients to Active Civic Agents

This theme is students' stories of change; from learner as a recipient of knowledge to community of learners, to a citizen of action.

Awakening to civic responsibility

All students referred to GCCE-101 as the 'wake-up call' and were made aware of their civic duty. One participant said, "Before this class, I just knew that citizenship was voting; now, I know it is doing things like helping others, speaking up, and being responsible" (Participant 3). Another reflected:

It was a great course as it helped me understand that I am not only a student, but also an individual on my own. I have duties and obligations to a community. Simply sitting in the classroom and absorbing what is being taught is not sufficient. You must get to the point where you must get up and go to others, volunteer something, and do something to make a difference. You are a citizen; that means. (Participant 7)

These narratives fall within the lines of critical gaze on education frameworks, such as civic agency and transformative action (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004). Students' movement from passive orientation to active orientation indicates pedagogies that question the conventional hierarchy and subjugation and strengthen students' voice (Stein, 2021; Waghid, 2023).

Finding voice through community engagement

An important arena for students to be civic agents was through community engagement. The topics discussed included volunteering, making awareness campaigns, and making contact with local communities. "I never thought that I could organise a project, but with GCCE-101 I did have a cleanliness drive in my neighbourhood. People listened, and we made a difference" (Participant 12). Another noted:

On visiting the village, I observed people's lifestyle there. It was eye-opening. Then I realised that I have privileges as a student, but on the other hand, there are responsibilities that I have as a student. I cannot ignore what is going on around me. I need to help those around me through my education. (Participant 15)

These narratives echo the scholarship of GCE on experiential learning and community-based pedagogy, as presented in (Angyagre, 2023; Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023). Students' narratives show that community work helps build empathy, think about issues, and become a citizen (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Veugelers, 2021).

Navigating constraints and possibilities

In addition to enthusiasm, students talked about structural limitations and constraints that emerged while carrying out this project: limited resources, institutional constraints, and socio-political challenges. "We want to do more, but sometimes there is not enough support in the university, or no funding is provided" (Participant 9). Another reflected:

Sometimes I feel like I need to do all the things, and sometimes I feel like I don't want to, but want to at the same time. There are more serious problems, such as corruption, inequality, and lack of opportunities. I don't feel powerful all the time. However, the course helped me realise that it is the little things that count. (Participant 18)

These conflicts echo criticism from places in the Global South, where narratives about GCE are often juxtaposed against structural realities (Allais, 2007; Felix, 2023; Young, 2010). Student stories highlight the importance of pedagogies in GCE that recognise the limitations and call for increased resilience and collective action.

Navigating Local Belonging and Global Responsibility

This theme is students' struggle with local involvement and interests (family, community, country, nation) and global accountability (climate justice, human rights, global solidarity).

"I am Pakistani first, but also a global citizen"

A majority of students made a clear statement of their sense of national identity and global citizenship. "As a Pakistani first, and a family first, and a cultural first, and a language first, but then again, I care about what's happening in the world, the climate change, the refugees, the inequalities" (Participant 5). Another noted:

Being a citizen of the world does not entail forgetting one's origins. It involves recognising that local decisions impact the wider world. For instance, when I waste water here, I am affecting those in other places, said one student. Therefore, I want to be a responsible citizen, both locally and globally. (Participant 11)

These stories are similar to the GCE focus on hybrid identities and glocal citizenship (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Leite, 2021; Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024). The unassuming articulation of "Pakistani first, but also global" by the students takes critical GCE's focus of rooted and contextual cosmopolitanism (Andreotti, 2010; Veugelers, 2021).

Tensions between tradition and modernity

There was some reported discursive conflict between the norms of the values (family values, gender roles) and norms of global citizenship ideals (Global Gender Equality, Civil Rights). One participant commented, "My family expects me to look after them first, to want to be a wife, to want to have children – it's a struggle, because I'd like to be a leader, I'd like to look after women's rights" (Participant 8). Another reflected:

In the culture in which we are a part, we learn to revere those older than ourselves and obey traditions. Some of them I do not want to do because they go against my class instruction on human rights, equality, etc. I cannot seem to get the balance between both. I love my family, and I do not want to run away from that; I want to hold them accountable for doing what is wrong. (Participant 14)

The tensions resonate with related scholarship in the field of cultural negotiation and moral issues (Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Stein, 2021; Waghid, 2023). The discussions in the students' narratives reveal the complexities of participatory action for GCE in the situation of patriarchy and post-colonial contexts (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Iftekhhar et al., 2023).

Global issues, local actions

Students in their various conversations often connected global problems/situations (e.g. poverty and climate change) to civic actions (e.g. recycling and volunteering). One participant said, "I can do my part here: by reducing waste, by planting trees, educating others" (Participant 6). Another noted:

I once believed that I couldn't do anything about global issues! The course taught me, however, that it is the little things that count. Even if I teach about recycling to my neighbours, it is still a contribution to global change, or even if I volunteer at my local school. It doesn't have to be heroic. It's a thing of doing as much as possible wherever you're. (Participant 20)

The accounts align with pedagogies advocated for by the GCE, which focus on localised responses to global challenges using action-oriented and constructive approaches (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; UNESCO, 2015; Veugelers, 2021). Learner stories highlight the need to make the GCE relevant to everyday, real-life activities in the context of students' learning (Angyagre, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023).

Caring Ethics and Humanity Empowerment in Practice

This theme reflects students' actions that envision caring and showing concern and promoting the common good in a community context.

"Caring for others is caring for myself"

Many students referred to caring as a two-way street, involving caring for others and personal care and growth. "It is not only about them; when I want to help others, I feel good about myself, but I also want to become a better person myself" (Participant 4). Another reflected:

Caring was something I thought was a sign of weakness. But how, I ask myself, is that to be regarded as strength? Another person that I listen to, another person that I aid, I am not losing anything. I am growing in terms of empathy, understanding, and humanity. Basically, that's what GCCE-101 has taught me. (Participant 10)

Ethics narratives here are in keeping with care ethics concepts that advocate for care as being central to ethical citizenship (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Noddings, 2013). The mutual care articulation that students make adheres to GCE's focus on humanity and collective wellbeing, as illustrated by Freire (1995) and Veugelers (2021).

Empathy across difference

Students often recounted their empathy towards other groups of people, their rural communities, or some of the more marginalised groups, and their refugees. One participant commented, "Not talking with people from villages at all, but during this course, I met them, listened to their story; and I there realised that we are not so different" (Participant 13). Another shared:

The moment I met the refugees, I cried. I could never have fathomed living that way, living on the streets, with no home or security. But they were so kind and hopeful. This made me reflect on my privileges. I got a roof, food, and education. I should be thankful and participate in helping others. (Participant 17)

These narratives align with the work of scholars in the field of intercultural awareness and empathy in education (Angyagre, 2023; Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Waghid, 2023). Students' narratives illustrate the ethical awareness and sense of community that comes from community engagement (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Stein, 2021).

Empowerment through collective action

For the students, empowerment was not a personal accomplishment; it was a movement, working together to meet the needs of the community. One participant commented, "Whereas I cannot do much by myself, with my classmates, we raised funds, organised a campaign, and helped families; this is real empowerment" (Participant 19). Another reflected:

Don't tell me that empowerment is not about being the best. It's all about helping others up. It's when we come together, utilise resources together, and support one another that real change occurs. Through GCCE-101, I found this out. (Participant 22)

The narratives are consistent with a communitarian perspective and ubuntu-based ethics, which prioritise communal welfare over individual selfishness (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023; Waghid, 2023). The idea of empowerment as collective action is emphasised in the articulation by students as part of GCE, which is focused on solidarity and social justice (Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Veugelers, 2021).

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate three main aspects of students' lived experiences of GCE: (1) being transformed from passive recipients to active civic agents; (2) negotiating local belonging and global responsibility; and (3) acting towards caring ethics and empowerment of humanity. These dimensions relate closely to the key dimensions of GCE, emphasising agency, contextualised cosmopolitanism, and care ethics (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Veugelers, 2021).

Pedagogies that challenge hierarchical and transmission-oriented approaches to learning are seen in the ways students' civic awakening and agency have been represented through the pedagogies of their narratives. The focus on participatory approaches, both as pedagogical methods and as learning environments, reflects the emphasis on experiential approaches to learning and problem-based learning carried out in the community, which is commonly advocated in GCE literature (Angyagre, 2023; Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt, 2023). Concurrently, learners' recognition of structural limits further emphasises the need to teach against system issues and empower them to take action and build resilience (Allais, 2007; Felix, 2023; Young, 2010).

The negotiation of local and international belonging amongst students highlights the complexities of GCE in the Global South, where national belonging and culture, as well as global responsibilities, can overlap and sometimes even come into tension (Andreotti, 2010; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Stein, 2021). Rooted cosmopolitanism—grounded within local contexts yet engaged with global issues (Leite, 2021; Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024; Veugelers, 2021)—is likely the most appealing articulation of GCE that arguably resonates with their own statements of “Pakistani first but also global.”

Students' performances of care, empathy, and collective empowerment resonate with notions of care ethics and communitarian thinking, with a focus on ethical citizenship (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Noddings, 2013). Their narratives reject individualistic, market-oriented representations of citizenship in favour of the notion of GCE that emphasises humanity, empathy, and social justice (Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Veugelers, 2021).

Connection to Existing Literature

The findings have filled the literature gap by highlighting the voices of undergraduate students from the Global South in comparison to being foregrounded in existing scholarship (Angyagre, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023). This study adds empirical contextual evidence to previous research on educators' perceptions, policy, or curriculum design perspectives on GCE and instead investigates students' experiences of and interpretations of GCE within the context of South Asia.

The results corroborate the literature on the importance of critical consciousness, commitment to the community, and care ethics in GCE (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Stein, 2021; Veugelers, 2021). They also build on this literature by emphasising students' agency in situations where they can overcome social structural barriers, work through cultural challenges, and collectively exercise a sense of empowerment, which has been less explored in previous research by scholars of educators' agency (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Iftekhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023).

However, there are differences between the results and some discourses about GCE that focus on global competencies or so-called employability (Leite, 2021; Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2015). The study contrasts with the neoliberal perspective. Critical studies on GCE place greater emphasis on individual progression, while in this study, students' focus was on ethical responsibility, collective wellbeing, and social justice. The priorities placed on ethical responsibility, collective wellbeing, and social justice by students in this study align with critical frameworks (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Freire, 1995; Giroux, 2004), which focus on social justice, and conflict neoliberal framings of GCE (Allais, 2007; Felix, 2023; Spring, 2004), which emphasise individual progression.

Implications

Theoretical implications would lead to progress in the phenomenological perspective of GCE and show the ability of IPA to uncover the students' lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The results also indicate the development of acts of empathy, solidarity, and collective empowerment in care ethics as well as communitarian approaches in GCE (Bosio & Schattle, 2023; Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Noddings, 2013).

Implications for practice are drawn, such as ensuring that GCE curricula place student voice, first-hand learning, and involvement in the community at the centre of the learning experience (Angyagre, 2023; Awad & Carbajal, 2023; Terblanche & van der Walt,

2023). Pedagogies should promote critical consciousness, ethical responsiveness, and collective action, yet must be aware of constraints and tensions within the structures, such as societal and cultural constraints (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Stein, 2021; Veugeliers, 2021). Policy implications cover the need for supporting variables that foster the dignity of the colonised learner in relation to lived experiences in their surroundings and environments, which are grounded in learners' perspectives and experiences in GCEs in Pakistan and similar contexts (Bosio & Waghid, 2023; Iftekhhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023).

Contributions to methodology include showing the usefulness of NVivo 15 in IPA research in managing qualitative datasets, visualising the themes showing their relationships, and enhancing the rigour of the analysis (Beekhuizen & Bazeley, 2024; Friese et al., 2018; Woolf & Silver, 2018).

Limitations

This study excluded other aspects, such as the limited number of participants (22) and a limited context, and this may limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The data were also self-reported and thus could be prone to social desirability bias (Miles et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010). Reflexivity measures used to minimise interpretation biases may also be explained by researcher positionality, as the researcher was a GCE-qualified academic who knew the discourses related to the study (Adu & Miles, 2023; Smith et al., 2022).

Future Research Directions

Future research might consider (1) long-term studies tracking students' civic trajectories over time; (2) comparative studies to look at people from different contexts in the Global South in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, etc.; and/or (3) mixed-method studies, such as those using a combination of IPA and surveys or experimental designs, to evaluate the effect of GCE on civic outcomes. In a methodological vein, future research and studies may include digital ethnography or participatory action research methods to assess students' experiences with digital civic engagement and co-generation of knowledge (Iftekhhar et al., 2023; Pathak-Shelat & Bhatia, 2023).

Conclusion

This study aimed to discuss the real experiences of undergraduate students from the perspective of Global Citizenship Education in Civics and Community Engagement. Through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach, the study identified three themes: (1) the realisation of a change from being a passive receiver to an active citizen, (2) navigating between local subjects and global responsibility, and (3) manifesting care ethics and the empowerment of humanity. The results reported here support the idea that, when premised on a critical pedagogy and participation-oriented approach to community, youth in the Global South can be empowered to participate and engage in civic action, accountability, and communal flourishing.

This study is significant as it foregrounds student voices, which were lacking in the current scholarship on GCE in the Global South. The emphasis on students' lived experiences provides insight into GCE based on empirical data on how it is interpreted, enacted, and lived in a higher-education context in Pakistan. The implications for GCE intervention for curriculum design, pedagogy, and policy are suggested as interventions focus on experiential learning, ethical responsibility, and collective action while recognising structural and cultural tensions.

Future research is needed to address the longitudinal and comparative aspects of GCE in the Global South, and new methods of capturing the processes of how students' civic involvement changes over time and across geographic regions, such as working with digital and participatory methods. Finally, raising global citizens in the Global South cannot simply be about pedagogical approaches to the curriculum; it must go hand in hand with pedagogies that listen to students and give them voice, engage students in examining the world through a critical lens, and put them in a position to create a better and more humane world through action.

References

1. Adu, P., & Miles, D. A. (2023). *Dissertation research methods: A step-by-step guide to writing up your research in the social sciences*. Routledge.
2. Allais, S. M. (2007). Why the South African NQF failed: Lessons for countries wanting to introduce national qualifications frameworks. *European Journal of Education*, 42(4), 523–547. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2007.00320.x>
3. Andreotti, V. d. O. (2010). Postcolonial and post-critical "global citizenship education". In G. Elliott, C. Fourali, & S. Issler (Eds.), *Education and social change: Connecting local and global perspectives* (pp. 233–250). Bloomsbury Publishing.
4. Angyagre, S. E. (2023). Conceptions of global citizenship education in an African university curriculum: Case study from Ghana. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 127–151). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_008
5. Awad, Y., & Carbajal, P. (2023). Democratic citizenship education as an instance of global citizenship education: An insight at teachers' perceptions and pedagogical practices from Egypt and Mexico. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 152–176). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_009
6. Baring, R., Magno, F. A., Reysenc, S., & Katzarska-Miller, I. (2022). Student religious attitudes and global citizenship antecedents, identification, and outcomes in a Filipino sample. *Journal of Beliefs & Values in Education*, 43(2), 159–170.
7. Beekhuyzen, J., & Bazeley, P. (2024). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
8. Bosio, E., & Schattle, H. (2023). Ethical global citizenship education: From neoliberalism to a values-based pedagogy. 53, 287–297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-021-09571-9>
9. Bosio, E., & Torres, C. A. (2019). Global citizenship education: An educational theory of the common good? A conversation with Carlos Alberto Torres. *Policy Futures in Education*, 17(6), 745–760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210319825517>
10. Bosio, E., & Waghid, Y. (Eds.). (2023). *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742>
11. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
12. Felix, J. J. (2023). Global citizenship education in the Caribbean: A case study in policy and practice failure. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 107–126). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_007
13. Flick, U. (2022). *Doing interview research: The essential how-to guide*. Sage Publications.
14. Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* (R. R. Barr, Trans.). Continuum.
15. Frieze, S., Soratto, J., & Pires, D. (2018). *Carrying out a computer-aided thematic content analysis with Atlas.ti*. https://www.mmg.mpg.de/62142/WP_18-02_Frieze-Soratto-Pires_AtlasTI.pdf
16. Giroux, H. A. (2004). Public pedagogy and the politics of neo-liberalism: Making the political more pedagogical. *Policy Futures in Education*, 2(3–4), 494–503. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2004.2.3.5>
17. Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage Publications.
18. HEC. (2021). *Revised curriculum for degree programs in education*. Higher Education Commission.
19. Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press.
20. Iftekhar, S. N., Kayombo, J. J., Kinyota, M., & Misiaszek, G. W. (2023). Southern epistemologies for disrupting Northern global citizenship education models: Ecopedagogical analysis and reinvention. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 41–62). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_004

21. Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage Publications.
22. Leite, S. (2021). Using the SDGs for global citizenship education: Definitions, challenges, and opportunities. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 20(3), 401–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1882957>
23. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
24. Mandigo, L., Magno, F., & Baring, R. (2021). *Global citizenship education in Southeast Asia: A comparative policy analysis*. Routledge.
25. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
26. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
27. Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
28. Pathak-Shelat, M., & Bhatia, K. V. (2023). Geopolitical epistemes in global citizenship education: A postcolonial approach. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 86–106). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_006
29. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
30. PU. (2020). *GCCE-101: Civics and community engagement*. Higher Education Department, Government of Punjab.
31. Saldaña, J. (2025). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
32. Santamaría-Cárdaba, N., Gajardo-Espinoza, K., & Cáceres-Iglesias, J. (2024). Global citizenship education: A systematic review of educational research. *Educational Process International Journal*, 13(4), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2024.134.7>
33. Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage Publications.
34. Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.
35. Spring, J. (2004). *How educational ideologies are shaping global society: Intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, and the decline of the nation-state*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410610454>
36. Stein, S. (2021). Reimagining global citizenship education for a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 19(4), 482–495. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1904212>
37. Terblanche, J., & van der Walt, C. (2023). Towards global citizenship education in South Africa: Cultivating deliberative encounters in the context of gender-based violence. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 198–222). https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_011
38. Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
39. UNESCO. (2015). *Global citizenship education: Topics and learning objectives*. UNESCO.
40. Veugelers, W. (2021). How globalization influences perspectives on citizenship education: From the social and political to the cultural and the moral. *Compare*, 51(8), 1174–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1716307>
41. Waghid, Y. (2023). Reflections on defamiliarisation among pre-service teachers in advancing critical global citizenship education. In *Global citizenship education in the global south: Educators' perceptions and practices* (pp. 223–246). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004521742_012
42. Woolf, N. H., & Silver, C. (2018). *Qualitative analysis using MAXQDA: The five-level QDA method*. Routledge.

43. Young, M. (2010). National qualifications frameworks as a global phenomenon: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Education and Work*, 16(3), 223-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1363908032000099412>



2026 by the authors; Journal of Global Social Transformation (JGST). This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).