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# Teachers as Peacebuilders: Exploring the Role of Educators in Promoting Conflict Resolution, Social Justice, and Social Cohesion in Schools

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## Abstract

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Although schools play an important role in promoting peace, conflict resolution, social justice, and social cohesion, limited research has examined teachers' experiences and practices of peacebuilding across different school contexts in Pakistan. This study explored the lived experiences of secondary school teachers as peacebuilders, focusing on conflict resolution, inclusive classroom practices, school-level peace culture, and social cohesion in Karachi. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted, using purposive sampling to select 12 secondary school teachers from various school settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, which were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo 15. Member checking, reflexive analysis, and systematic coding procedures were used to enhance trustworthiness. Four interrelated themes emerged: teachers as peacebuilders, the classroom peace environment, school peace culture, and the perceived social outcomes of peacebuilding. Participants recognised peacebuilding as a core professional competency and identified respectful communication, inclusive pedagogy, restorative practices, and collaborative school leadership as key supports. The study provides context-specific evidence of teachers' agency in peacebuilding across multiple education systems in Karachi and calls for continuous professional development, whole-school peacebuilding initiatives, and institutional support to build peaceful and socially cohesive learning communities.

Keywords: *Teachers as Peacebuilders; Peace Education; Conflict Resolution; Social Cohesion; Qualitative Research*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are increasingly diverse in social, cultural, religious, and political terms, creating both opportunities and challenges for peaceful coexistence (Kamraju, 2025). In these settings, schools are viewed as influential social institutions with the potential to shape not only student learning but also students' values, beliefs, and attitudes towards others (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024). Education is therefore increasingly recognised as a key means of fostering peace, social cohesion, and inclusion, particularly in contexts marked by inequality, discrimination, social conflict, and marginalisation. UNESCO (2021) notes that schools are among the first settings in which young people encounter individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives, learn to negotiate and make decisions constructively, and develop positive attitudes towards diversity (Riaz et al., 2023). As a result, teachers are increasingly expected to assume responsibilities beyond academic instruction by creating peaceful, inclusive, and respectful learning environments.

Although related, peacebuilding, peace education, social justice, social cohesion, restorative practices, and social-emotional learning are distinct but complementary concepts. Peacebuilding refers to processes that prevent conflict and promote peaceful relationships within communities, while peace education involves developing the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that contribute to peaceful coexistence (Harris & Morrison, 2012). Social justice focuses on equality, belonging, and equitable access to education (Banks, 2020), whereas social cohesion concerns the strengthening of trust, belonging, and positive relationships among different groups. Restorative practices provide constructive ways to address interpersonal conflict, while social-emotional learning helps students develop empathy, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and the capacity to manage relationships in ways that benefit others (Durlak et al., 2011). Together, these perspectives contribute to a whole-school approach to creating peaceful school environments in which teachers play a central role.

Teachers are key figures in this process because their beliefs, teaching methods, and professional autonomy directly influence students' social experiences (Sidik & Dilawati, 2025). Previous research has shown that teachers who promote democratic engagement, inclusive pedagogy, respectful communication, and cooperative learning help create a climate that cultivates empathy, mutual respect, and peaceful conflict resolution (Halai & Durrani, 2018; Bashir & Akbar, 2021). Similarly, consistent classroom management and restorative approaches to conflict help build a sense of belonging and reduce the risk of exclusion and discrimination. Such practices extend beyond classroom management by enabling learners to develop the interpersonal skills required to live constructively in diverse societies.

These issues are particularly significant in Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolitan city, which is highly diverse ethnically, linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically (Imtiaz, Dahar, & Ali, 2025). Karachi's schools operate in varied social settings and therefore provide a meaningful context for examining teachers' experiences and practices of peacebuilding within complex educational environments. Although awareness of peace education is growing in Pakistan, relatively little empirical work has examined teachers' lived experiences of implementing peacebuilding in the everyday life of schools. Existing literature has largely focused on peace education programmes and initiatives, curriculum efforts, policy frameworks, or student outcomes, with less attention to how teachers balance institutional expectations, classroom practices, and contextual demands and challenges when fostering peaceful learning environments (Sayed et al., 2016; Halai & Durrani, 2018). This leaves important questions concerning teachers' professional agency, the institutional conditions that enable or constrain peacebuilding, and the approaches teachers adopt across different school settings.

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In response to this gap, the present phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of secondary school teachers engaged in peacebuilding in Karachi, Pakistan. Specifically, it explores how teachers foster conflict resolution, inclusive classroom practices, social justice, and a school-wide culture of peace, as well as how institutional opportunities and challenges shape these practices. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study contributes to the existing literature and evidence base on teacher agency in peacebuilding and on the development of peaceful learning environments in culturally and linguistically diverse urban contexts.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

- To explore the experiences of secondary school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan, as peacebuilders in order to understand the complexities of creating peaceful, inclusive, and socially cohesive classrooms.
- To analyse the school- and classroom-level practices of secondary school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan, in addressing conflict, social justice, and peace.
- To understand the barriers to and opportunities for peacebuilding within the educational contexts of Karachi, Pakistan.

### 1.2. Research Questions

- What does acting as a peacebuilder mean to secondary school teachers in Karachi, Pakistan?
- What practices and techniques do secondary school teachers use at the classroom and school-level to achieve social justice, social cohesion, and conflict resolution?
- What are the possibilities and barriers of peacebuilding in the school system of Karachi, Pakistan?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Teachers as Peacebuilders

Teachers occupy a central position in peacebuilding because they can shape students' academic achievement as well as their social values, interpersonal relationships, and understandings of conflict and diversity. In contemporary educational discourse, teachers are regarded as agents of change and contributors to peaceful societies who can foster students' capacities for dialogue, empathy, respect, and cooperation. Peacebuilding in education is not limited to preventing violence; it also involves creating learning environments in which learners can understand diversity, question injustice, and acquire the skills needed for positive interaction with others (Harris & Morrison, 2012).

Teacher agency is closely connected to the role of teachers as peacebuilders. It refers to teachers' ability to exercise autonomy and discretion in decision-making, flexibility in practice, and a degree of control over their work within institutional and social constraints. In diverse and socially complex contexts, teachers may face situations involving cultural differences, inequalities, and student conflict. They can nevertheless act as agents of peace by fostering social cohesion, strengthening relationships, and challenging divisive narratives (Halai & Durrani, 2018).

Teachers engaged in peacebuilding also play a significant role in developing students' social and emotional skills. In the classroom, teachers can cultivate empathy, cooperation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making among learners. Research on social and emotional learning (SEL) indicates that intentional SEL instruction can positively affect student behaviour, reduce aggression, and improve interpersonal relationships (Durlak et al., 2011). These skills are central to peacebuilding because they help students manage conflict, consider multiple perspectives, and interact more positively in their social lives.

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Inclusive and justice-based pedagogies are also important components of classroom peacebuilding. Teachers need to recognise and value individual differences while ensuring that all children experience respect, participation, and belonging in inclusive educational settings. Banks (2020) argues that teachers play an important role in fostering democratic values by helping students understand cultural diversity, social equality, and civic responsibility. By providing equitable opportunities, enabling student voice, and challenging discriminatory attitudes, classrooms can become spaces in which students learn the principles of fairness and social justice. This is especially important in diverse societies, where schools can help students learn to coexist peacefully.

The way teachers address conflict also has a significant influence on the creation of peaceful school environments. Traditional disciplinary practices tend to emphasise punishment, whereas peacebuilding approaches focus on dialogue, mediation, and restorative practices. Restorative practices enable students to understand the impact of their actions after conflict, repair damaged relationships, and rebuild trust. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) highlighted that restorative practices shift school discipline away from punitive responses towards relational approaches centred on responsibility and reconciliation.

Teachers are essential to peacebuilding, but they also face significant challenges. Limited opportunities for professional development, examination-driven education systems, inadequate institutional support, and wider social conflicts can all constrain their capacity to promote education for peace. UNESCO (2021) emphasised the need for systemic support for sustainable peace, including teacher preparation, inclusive curricula, and supportive school policies. Teacher empowerment therefore requires not only individual commitment but also organisational and policy-level support.

### 2.2. Classroom Peace Environment

The classroom is a major social space in which students communicate and cooperate with people outside their families and learn how to manage conflict. Fostering a peaceful classroom is therefore an integral part of school-based peacebuilding. A peaceful classroom environment is characterised by respectful teacher-student relationships, emotional safety, inclusion, meaningful engagement, and positive interpersonal relationships (Cremin & Bevington, 2017). In such an environment, learners can experience democratic principles in practice and acquire the social skills needed to live harmoniously with others. Contemporary approaches to peace education extend beyond the absence of violence to include the development of positive relationships, justice, and cooperation in everyday learning situations (Harris & Morrison, 2012).

Teachers are central to shaping classroom climates through their teaching styles, interactions with students, and responses to student behaviour. Their approaches to setting norms, resolving conflicts, and relating to students influence students' understandings of fairness, respect, and belonging. Teachers who encourage discussion, value students' ideas, and promote interaction can strengthen students' sense of being valued and respected. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argue that teachers' social and emotional competencies significantly affect classroom climate because emotionally aware, empathetic teachers with strong relationship-building skills are better able to create positive learning environments.

The intentional development of students' social and emotional skills is important for creating peaceful classrooms. Social and emotional learning (SEL) focuses on skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, responsible decision-making, and relationship management. These skills are directly relevant to peacebuilding because they enable students to consider others' perspectives and resolve disagreements constructively. In a meta-analysis of

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school-based SEL interventions, Durlak et al. (2011) concluded that SEL programmes positively affect students' social behaviour, emotional skills, and academic achievement while reducing negative behaviours. Classrooms that incorporate social and emotional learning therefore provide students with important tools for managing conflict and maintaining positive relationships.

Promoting inclusion and equality is another important dimension of classroom peace. Students enter classrooms from varied social, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, and these differences can sometimes contribute to misunderstanding or exclusion. Inclusive pedagogical practices can help minimise social divisions by valuing different experiences and ensuring that all students are included. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) highlighted the importance of inclusive pedagogy in providing learning opportunities for all students rather than only for groups identified as different. In this way, inclusive classrooms can become spaces in which students develop respect for diversity and acceptance of others.

Conflict is part of social interaction, and the way it is handled can determine whether it becomes destructive or educational. In peaceful classrooms, teachers move away from authoritarian, punishment-focused discipline towards more restorative approaches that incorporate dialogue, accountability, and relationship repair. Restorative practices give students opportunities to reflect on their behaviour, understand its impact, and restore relationships damaged by conflict. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) suggested that restorative approaches can shift school discipline from punishment towards respectful relationships, helping students develop an understanding of justice and peaceful problem-solving. The physical and emotional classroom environment also affects students' sense of security and belonging. A psychologically safe classroom encourages the sharing of ideas, cooperation, and participation. Research on school belonging suggests that positive relationships with teachers and peers are strongly associated with students' emotional wellbeing and engagement in learning (Allen et al., 2018). Students who feel accepted and supported are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards others and to participate actively in classroom activities.

### 2.3. School-Level Peace Culture

Schools are not only academic institutions but also social settings that shape values, identities, and patterns of interaction that influence students' future participation in society. Establishing a school-level culture of peace therefore requires an environment in which respect, inclusion, dialogue, justice, and cooperation are embedded in everyday school life. Unlike isolated classroom interventions, a school peace culture involves leadership, teachers, students, policies, curriculum, and relationships across the school community in creating peaceful educational spaces. This approach recognises that peace cannot be achieved through isolated activities but requires the engagement of the whole school community (UNESCO, 2021). From this perspective, schools become places where students learn democratic principles, social responsibility, and peaceful coexistence through everyday experience. Norms that promote diversity, participation, and the redress of inequalities can strengthen students' sense of fairness and shared responsibility (Galtung, 1996).

School leadership is central to creating and sustaining a culture of peace. School environments are shaped by the values of principals and educational leaders through their decisions, policies, and support for teachers. Leadership models that promote cooperation, participation, and ethical integrity create conditions conducive to peacebuilding. Leithwood et al. (2020) argue that effective educational leadership influences school culture by establishing shared visions, supporting teachers, and creating organisational conditions that enhance teaching and learning.

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Teacher collaboration is another important feature of a school-level culture of peace. While individual teachers shape their own classrooms, collective teacher practices influence whether peace-related values become part of the wider institutional identity. Professional learning opportunities can enable teachers to share approaches to conflict management, support for diverse learners, and inclusive education. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) highlighted that effective professional learning communities strengthen teachers' capacity for reflective learning and continuous improvement in response to complex educational challenges.

Curriculum and school policies also play important roles in shaping cultures of peace. Banks (2020) emphasised that the knowledge and skills developed through multicultural and civic education can support participation in democratic societies. Promoting inclusion and social cohesion is a key aspect of school-level peace culture. Schools bring together students from different cultural, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic groups and therefore provide important settings for learning how to coexist. However, diversity can become divisive when schools fail to address discrimination and unequal participation. Ainscow (2020) stated that inclusion in education requires schools to remove barriers to students' participation in learning and social life. Inclusive policies and practices can minimise exclusion and strengthen students' sense of belonging. Schools with strong cultures of peace also tend to incorporate restorative practices into discipline and conflict-management systems. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) argued that restorative justice can shift the focus within schools from controlling behaviour to strengthening relationships.

Despite the importance of establishing school cultures of peace, schools face several challenges, including limited resources, inadequate teacher preparation, examination pressure, and social conflicts that are reflected within educational settings. Developing sustainable peace cultures therefore requires an ongoing process involving institutional commitment, teacher development, supportive leadership, and family and community engagement. UNESCO (2021) argued that education systems need to be reimagined with greater emphasis on cooperation, inclusion, and social responsibility in order to address contemporary challenges and foster peaceful societies.

### 2.4. Social Outcomes of School-Based Peacebuilding

School-based peacebuilding extends beyond classroom learning, classroom relationships, and the immediate school environment; it can also influence wider social outcomes by shaping students' values, behaviours, and capacities to participate peacefully in society. Schools are significant social institutions in which young people learn about justice, diversity, cooperation, and citizenship. Through peace-oriented educational practices, students can develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to engage positively with social differences and become more inclusive members of society (Tibbitts, 2025). Education is increasingly understood as having a transformative role in strengthening social cohesion, preventing violence, and contributing to peaceful societies (UNESCO, 2023).

One of the most important social outcomes of peacebuilding education is greater cohesion among students and communities. Social cohesion is built through positive relationships, trust, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to cooperate across differences. Schools can contribute to social cohesion by providing opportunities for children from different backgrounds to meet, work, and learn together around shared values. Veerman and Denessen (2021) emphasised that school-based social cohesion is reflected in students' interpersonal relationships, collective belonging, and group solidarity. When schools foster inclusion, respect, and cooperation, they enable students to understand and embrace diversity and to engage more positively in wider society.

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Another significant potential outcome of school-based peacebuilding is the reduction of prejudice, discrimination, and social isolation. Students from different cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds may come together in schools, but these differences can produce divisions when appropriate school practices are absent. Inclusive educational approaches enable students to view diversity as a social strength rather than a barrier. An inclusive education system should proactively address barriers to participation and ensure that all students feel accepted and recognised within the system (Ainscow, 2020). Positive attitudes towards diversity and greater acceptance of others are more likely to develop when students participate in inclusive school practices.

Peacebuilding education also develops students' interpersonal and emotional skills, with potential long-term effects on social relationships. Empathy, communication, cooperation, and conflict-management skills help individuals address disagreements constructively and maintain positive relationships. Recent research on social and emotional learning has shown that interventions emphasising emotional competence positively affect social behaviour and reduce negative interactions among students (Mahoney et al., 2018). These capacities are particularly important in societies affected by social tensions because they provide young people with peaceful means of resolving conflict. When peacebuilding is implemented effectively in schools, its influence may extend to families and communities. Teachers and students can carry social values into relationships at home and in the wider community. Education focused on peace, human rights, and global citizenship can contribute to broader social change by empowering learners to question injustice and participate in collective problem-solving.

## 3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### 3.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences of secondary school teachers from the perspective of their roles as peacebuilders in public schools. An interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted because the study sought to examine the perceptions, interpretations, and meanings teachers drew from their experiences of promoting peacebuilding, conflict resolution, social justice, and inclusive school environments rather than measuring relationships between variables (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach enabled the researchers to examine teachers' everyday experiences within the natural contexts of their classrooms while recognising the institutional and social contexts in which those classrooms are situated.

### 3.2. Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in District Korangi, Karachi, Pakistan. District Korangi is one of Karachi's largest and most demographically diverse educational districts, serving students from varied socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. This context provides an appropriate setting for exploring teachers' experiences of peacebuilding in urban public schools.

The study population consisted of teachers working in public secondary schools in District Korangi. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which enables researchers to select individuals with first-hand knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2014). Eligible teachers were currently employed in a public secondary school in District Korangi, had at least three years of teaching experience, and were actively involved in classroom management, student guidance, and school activities. Only teachers who had served for five years or longer were included, while temporarily appointed teachers and those with limited teaching experience were excluded.

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Twelve teachers (n = 12) participated in the study. The sample captured a range of perspectives on classroom peacebuilding, conflict resolution, social justice, and inclusive educational practices because participants represented different academic disciplines, levels of teaching experience, and school contexts.

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews using an interview guide developed from the research objectives and literature on teachers as peacebuilders, peace education, social justice, classroom climate, and school peace culture. Before data collection, the interview guide was reviewed and piloted with reviewers who had extensive experience in educational research and qualitative methodology to ensure its relevance and clarity.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu or English according to participants' language preferences during [Month-Month 2026]. Each interview lasted approximately 20-35 minutes. All participants provided written informed consent before the interviews began. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Urdu were translated into English, and the translated texts were carefully cross-checked against the original recordings to preserve meaning and context.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated inductively from participants' narratives and subsequently grouped into broader codes and themes through constant comparison across interviews. The themes were reviewed, summarised, and interpreted in relation to the research questions and relevant literature.

NVivo 15 software was used throughout the analysis to organise, manage, and retrieve the qualitative data. The software supported coding and data management; however, the themes were developed by the researchers rather than generated by the software.

### 3.5. Trustworthiness and Research Quality

The trustworthiness of the study was guided by the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through sustained engagement with the interview data, member checking, and consistent comparison of participants' responses during analysis. Detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and data-collection procedures were provided to help readers assess the transferability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining a clear audit trail of interview procedures, coding decisions, and theme development. To strengthen confirmability, the researchers used reflexive memo writing during data analysis and engaged in regular discussion to reduce individual bias and maintain interpretations grounded in participants' accounts.

### 3.6. Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee, and permission was secured from participating schools. Participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary. They were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study without penalty. Pseudonyms (e.g., T1-T12) were used when reporting the findings, and all interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

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**Table 1**
***Participant Profile***

| Participant Code | Gender | Subject Specialization | Teaching Experience (Yrs) | School Type | School Level | District |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | Male | English | 5 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T2 | Female | Science | 6 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T3 | Male | Mathematics | 7 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T4 | Female | Social Studies | 8 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T5 | Male | Urdu | 9 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T6 | Female | Islamiat | 10 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T7 | Male | Biology | 11 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T8 | Female | Pakistan Studies | 12 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T9 | Male | Physics | 13 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T10 | Female | Chemistry | 14 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T11 | Male | Computer Science | 15 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |
| T12 | Female | General Science | 16 | Public | Secondary | Korangi |

Notes. Participants were purposively selected from public secondary schools in District Korangi, Karachi, Pakistan. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 16 years. This variation was important because it enabled the study to capture differing perspectives, experiences, and approaches to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and inclusive education at the school level. To ensure confidentiality, participants were identified by codes T1 to T12.

## 4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study findings are organised around the following themes:

### 4.1. Demographics of Participants

The study used purposive sampling to select twelve (12) secondary school teachers from Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan, who were directly involved in classroom- and school-level interactions with students. Participants varied in teaching experience and subject specialisation. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 16 years, providing perspectives from teachers at different stages of their careers. This diversity enriched the findings by bringing together different perspectives on teachers' roles in promoting peacebuilding, conflict resolution, social justice, classroom harmony, and social cohesion within Karachi's culturally diverse school environment.




*Figure 1: NVivo 15 Word Cloud Showing Frequently Occurring Terms in Teacher Interviews*

The NVivo-generated word cloud provides an overview of the dominant concepts emerging from the twelve teacher interviews. Frequently occurring terms such as 'teacher,' 'students,'

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'school,' 'social,' 'peace,' 'respect,' 'classroom,' 'conflict,' and 'teaching' indicate that participants focused strongly on the importance of teachers and schools in peacebuilding and social cohesion. The frequent appearance of terms such as 'respect,' 'cooperation,' 'communication,' 'values,' 'inclusion,' and 'support' also reflects the emphasis teachers placed on positive relationships and supportive learning environments. Words including 'conflict,' 'issues,' 'problems,' and 'challenges' suggest that participants frequently discussed social problems and obstacles to peaceful school environments. Similarly, terms such as 'peacebuilding,' 'responsibility,' 'culture,' 'relationships,' and 'society' indicate that teachers viewed schools as important sites for fostering social values and preparing students to become responsible members of society. Overall, the word cloud supports the thematic findings by highlighting four closely connected areas: the teacher's role in peacebuilding, school-level relationships, classroom culture, and social outcomes. These recurring concepts informed the development of the major themes identified through thematic analysis.

### 4.2. Teachers as Peacebuilders

Teachers emerged as key actors in creating peaceful and socially responsible school climates. The findings suggest that teachers viewed their role as extending beyond academic instruction to include responsibility for shaping students' attitudes, behaviours, and relationships. As role models, teachers influence students through their communication, fairness, empathy, and responses to difference. In Karachi's diverse classrooms, participants regarded peacebuilding as a core responsibility because students come from culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically varied backgrounds. Teachers emphasised fostering respect, tolerance, dialogue, and understanding among students in order to strengthen social relationships and reduce conflict. The findings indicate that teachers' daily interactions, counselling, and values-oriented teaching contribute to students' capacity to live peacefully with others. In this sense, teachers act as agents of social change by embedding values of peace in students' learning experiences.

Teacher T1 stated:

> *"Teachers are not only teaching math, science, or languages; teachers are teaching people how to be. Students watch and learn how teachers behave; then over time they learn to be patient, fair, and respectful as well."*

Teacher T2 explained:

> *"Teachers have a responsibility beyond completing the syllabus. In our schools, students come from different backgrounds, so teachers need to teach them how to respect differences and solve problems through discussion instead of conflict."*

Teacher T3 highlighted:

> *"I believe teachers are role models for students. Students learn from our actions, not only from our words. When teachers show respect and handle disagreements peacefully, students develop similar behaviors."*

### 4.3. Classroom Peace Environment

The second theme emphasises the importance of developing classroom communities characterised by respect, inclusion, emotional safety, and equal participation. Classrooms were identified as among the first social spaces in which students learn to engage with people from different backgrounds. Teachers explained that a peaceful classroom is not one in which conflict is absent, but one in which students feel valued, supported, and confident in expressing their opinions. The findings show that teachers promote peace by communicating respectfully, using

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inclusive practices, facilitating group work, and treating students fairly. Participants also emphasised avoiding discrimination based on academic achievement, social status, or other differences. Teachers believed that fairness and a sense of belonging encourage cooperation and help prevent negative behaviour. A peaceful classroom therefore provides an important foundation for empathy, tolerance, and positive social relationships.

Teacher T4 stated:

> *"Mutual respect is a first step towards a peaceful classroom. "I try to make kids feel that each kid has value, and that's whether they're doing well in school or they need extra help, both of those kids deserve to be encouraged, respected."*

Teacher T5 explained:

> *"The students learn better if they are emotionally safe, I attempt to put the environment in place so that students can make mistakes, ask questions and share ideas without being embarrassed."*

Teacher T6 highlighted:

> *"To have a peaceful classroom, students must feel that they belong; I encourage students to respect others' opinions and understand that they're allowed to disagree, but they're not allowed to be disrespectful."*

### 4.4. School-Level Peace Culture

The third theme captured teachers' views on the importance of extending peacebuilding beyond individual classrooms through a whole-school approach. Participants emphasised that sustainable peacebuilding requires supportive leadership, appropriate policies, teacher collaboration, and consistent institutional practices. They explained that individual teachers' efforts are valuable but insufficient without commitment from the wider school community. The findings indicate that schools can foster a culture of peace through discipline policies, teacher coordination, communication with parents, student activities, and leadership support. Participants also identified gaps, including a lack of structured peace education programmes, counselling services, and professional development opportunities. Teachers regarded school leadership as essential for creating environments in which they are empowered to incorporate social and emotional learning into their teaching. The findings therefore point to the importance of shifting from reactive responses to conflict towards proactive approaches centred on student wellbeing, communication, and inclusion.

Teacher T7 stated:

> *"Peacebuilding is not a responsibility of individual teachers; there is a need for setting up suitable systems, counseling, communicating, working in groups and addressing conflicts in schools."*

Teacher T8 explained:

> *"It is important that school leadership places value on student wellbeing and academic achievement as teachers will feel more motivated to contribute when they have support from leadership to do this."*

Teacher T9 highlighted:

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*"There must be collaboration between teachers, management, parents and students for a positive school culture to take hold while discipline is also a key factor, schools must also have a program in place to cultivate students' social and emotional skills."*

### 4.5. Social Outcomes of School-Based Peacebuilding

The final theme concerns the perceived contribution of school-based peacebuilding to social outcomes by preparing students to participate in society as responsible, respectful, and socially engaged citizens. Teachers highlighted that schools influence not only students' educational outcomes but also their future roles in society. Participants believed that students who experience respect, cooperation, and inclusion at school are more likely to demonstrate these values in their communities. They viewed schools as important sites for social cohesion, particularly in Karachi, where social diversity and difference shape interpersonal relationships. The findings suggest that education can help bridge social divides by encouraging students to value diversity and communicate peacefully. Teachers also emphasised that character development should be part of peacebuilding education alongside academic achievement. Schools can therefore contribute to social transformation by developing citizens who are able to solve problems constructively, respect differences, and participate actively in their communities.

Teacher T10 stated:

*"Schools owe it to themselves to produce students who know what it means to be respectful, tolerant and cooperative. Students take these attributes with them to their families and communities and, therefore, education has an impact beyond the school setting."*

Teacher T11 explained:

"*The goal of education is to produce successful professionals and responsible human beings; peace-loving societies need people that can respect differences and can have the ability to solve problems with understanding."*

Teacher T12 highlighted:

*"Karachi is a diverse city, and school can help students to learn to accept and cooperate, students who acquire peaceful communication skills are more prepared to contribute positively to society."*

## 5. DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of secondary school teachers as peacebuilders in public secondary schools in Karachi, Pakistan. The findings suggest that teachers view peacebuilding as part of their everyday professional practice rather than as an additional task to be added to the curriculum. Across the four themes, participants repeatedly described peacebuilding as embedded in their daily interactions and communication with students, their approaches to conflict management, and their efforts to create inclusive learning spaces. The study extends previous research by providing context-specific evidence from Karachi, a culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse setting in which teachers work with multiple forms of diversity. Participants viewed peacebuilding not as a one-off programme but as an ongoing process integrated into everyday teaching and learning.

The first theme, teachers as peacebuilders, shows that participants viewed themselves as role models whose attitudes, communication, and ethical conduct significantly influence students'

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attitudes towards respect, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024). These findings support Halai and Durrani's (2018) argument that teachers' professional agency affects students' understandings of diversity and social relationships, as well as UNESCO's (2021) view that teachers are central to developing peaceful and socially responsible schools. In the Karachi context, however, this role also has an important institutional dimension. Although teachers expressed strong personal commitment to peacebuilding, they identified challenges arising from examination-focused teaching, limited professional development, and inadequate institutional support. This suggests that individual teacher agency may be insufficient without supportive school policies and organisational structures (Imtiaz, Dahar, & Ali, 2025).

The second theme emphasises the importance of the classroom peace environment as a primary setting in which students experience peacebuilding. Participants highlighted emotional safety, respectful communication, equal treatment, and fairness as conditions that enable cooperation and reduce interpersonal conflict (Riaz et al., 2023). These findings align with research on SEL showing that empathy, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills are associated with stronger classroom relationships and fewer behavioural problems (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018). Similarly, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) found that teachers' social and emotional competence directly influences classroom climate. The present findings also suggest that peaceful classrooms are fostered not only through formal peace education programmes but also through informal pedagogical interactions between teachers and students in Karachi's diverse and multicultural school context.

The third theme indicates that participants viewed school-level peace culture as a collective responsibility rather than the responsibility of individual teachers alone (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024). Leadership support, collaboration with other professionals, counselling services, and school-wide policies were identified as key factors in sustaining peacebuilding (Imtiaz, Dahar, & Ali, 2025). These findings support UNESCO's (2021) whole-school approach to peace education and align with Leithwood et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of school leadership in developing shared values and positive school cultures. At the same time, participants identified gaps such as limited access to counselling, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate institutional capacity for proactive conflict management. The findings therefore suggest that strengthening peacebuilding requires organisational commitment alongside the commitment of individual teachers.

The final theme concerns the perceived social outcomes of school-based peacebuilding. Participants believed that students who experience respectful, inclusive, and cooperative relationships at school are likely to reproduce these behaviours in their families and communities. These perceptions align with previous studies suggesting that schools contribute to citizenship, belonging, trust, and healthy social relationships (Bickmore, 2014; Veerman & Denessen, 2021). These findings should, however, be interpreted with caution. The study explored teachers' perceptions of the potential social outcomes of peacebuilding rather than directly measuring changes in student behaviour or community-level outcomes (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024). The results therefore reflect teachers' interpretations of the wider significance of peacebuilding rather than evidence of its longer-term social effects (Imtiaz, Dahar, & Ali, 2025).

This study contributes to the literature on peace education by highlighting teachers' immediate experiences in urban public schools in Karachi. The findings suggest that a positive school culture, opportunities for professional development, and supportive institutional systems are essential to effective peacebuilding alongside teachers' personal commitment. The study illustrates the interaction between teacher agency and organisational context, adds to knowledge of how peacebuilding is enacted in everyday educational practice, and provides contextually

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grounded evidence relevant to teacher education, school leadership, and peace-oriented education policy in Pakistan.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of secondary school teachers as peacebuilders in promoting conflict resolution, social justice, a peaceful classroom environment, and social cohesion in secondary schools. The findings show that teachers influence students' attitudes, values, and interpersonal relationships in addition to fulfilling their academic roles. Participants viewed themselves as role models who contribute to peace through respectful communication, care, fairness, dialogue, and inclusive teaching. The study also identified four key characteristics of a peaceful classroom: emotional safety, equal participation, belonging, and supportive teacher-student relationships. It further highlighted the need for a whole-school approach to sustainable peacebuilding. Although teachers make substantial individual efforts to promote peace and inclusion, school leadership, institutional policies, teacher collaboration, and counselling services are needed to sustain a broader culture of peace. Participants also emphasised that school-based peacebuilding extends beyond the school by equipping learners with the competencies required to become responsible citizens who value diversity, cooperate with others, and contribute positively to society. In Karachi, Pakistan, education plays an important role in fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence because schools reflect diverse social, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers, however, require continuous professional development, institutional support, and adequate resources to address the growing social and emotional challenges faced by students.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schools in Karachi and other diverse educational settings should develop a formal peace education curriculum that integrates conflict resolution, tolerance, empathy, human rights, and social responsibility into the existing curriculum through a whole-school approach rather than treating peace education as an additional activity.
- Teacher professional development should provide ongoing training in peacebuilding strategies, restorative practices, classroom conflict management, inclusive pedagogy, and social-emotional learning. In contexts such as Karachi, where teachers may work with highly diverse student populations and complex social circumstances, strengthening teachers' capacity is essential for creating peaceful and supportive learning environments.
- School leadership should adopt a whole-school peacebuilding strategy by developing policies that support student wellbeing, providing systems through which students can access counselling, and strengthening collaborative relationships among teachers, parents, and communities. A culture of peace should not depend on a single teacher but should be integrated into the identity of the school.
- Schools should encourage inclusive classroom practices that promote equal participation, respect for diversity, and emotional safety for all students. Teachers should focus on building and strengthening positive relationships among students and reducing social divisions by creating opportunities for group work, cooperative learning, dialogue-based discussion, and peer support.
- Educational institutions should promote student-led projects and community engagement programmes such as peace clubs, diversity-awareness campaigns, peer mediation, and social-responsibility initiatives.
- Teachers should be provided with stronger support services, including access to counsellors, training materials, and institutional guidance for addressing students' social

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and emotional needs. Such support is particularly important in urban settings such as Karachi, where students may experience social pressures, inequalities, and conflicts beyond the school environment.

- Schools should be recognised in future education policies as key sites for social cohesion and peacebuilding at both national and global levels. Governments and educational organisations can support research-based interventions that enable schools to develop responsible global citizens, address diversity and discrimination, and resolve conflict constructively.

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