Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom: A Study of Educators' Strategies for Promoting Critical Thinking and Preventing Extremism

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how educators in Karachi navigate the challenges of teaching controversial issues to cultivate critical thinking and reduce susceptibility to extremist narratives. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 20 educators from public and private secondary schools and universities, along with two focus groups (n = 10) representing diverse disciplines and teaching levels. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure representation across sector, subject area, and teaching experience. Using reflexive thematic analysis, four key themes emerged: (1) *Structured Openness*—scaffolded dialogue strategies to enable safe engagement with sensitive issues; (2) *Curricular Rigidities*—assessment and textbook-driven constraints limiting dialogic pedagogy; (3) *Contextual Risk Management*—balancing open discussion with safety and community pressures; and (4) *Capacity Gaps*—limited professional development and resources for critical-thinking instruction. Educators viewed critical thinking as a protective factor against oversimplified extremist frames but faced systemic and sociopolitical barriers to sustained practice. The study contributes an empirically grounded model linking dialogic strategies to perceived extremism-prevention outcomes in constrained contexts, and offers policy recommendations targeting teacher professional development, curriculum reform, and school–community collaboration.

Keywords: Critical thinking, Controversial issues, Dialogic pedagogy, Extremism prevention, Pakistan, Qualitative study

Introduction
Background

Over the past two decades, educators worldwide have faced heightened expectations to prepare students not only for academic success but also for active, informed, and tolerant citizenship (Davies, 2016; McCowan, 2021). In societies experiencing political polarization, ethnic tension, or the threat of radicalization, schools are increasingly recognized as crucial spaces for fostering resilience against extremist ideologies (Aly et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2017). A growing body of evidence suggests that the capacity to think critically—to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and engage with diverse perspectives—functions as a protective factor against cognitive closure and the allure of simplistic, absolutist narratives (Paul & Elder, 2014; Davies & Chong, 2019). Pakistan presents a complex case in this regard. Although the state has periodically launched initiatives to promote peace education and counter-violent extremism (CVE), these efforts have

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often been hampered by structural limitations within the education system, including outdated curricula, rote-based pedagogy, and the politicization of educational content (Naseem & Arshad, 2015; Khan & Khan, 2022). Karachi, the nation's largest and most ethnically diverse city, illustrates these challenges vividly. The city's classrooms are microcosms of broader societal divisions—ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian—which can either be bridged through inclusive pedagogy or exacerbated by didactic teaching methods.

Problem Statement
Despite the acknowledged importance of teaching critical thinking and fostering dialogue on controversial issues, there is a paucity of empirical research exploring how Pakistani educators actually implement such practices in their classrooms, particularly in urban centers like Karachi where the stakes are high. Existing studies tend to be policy-oriented, offering broad recommendations without documenting the lived experiences and professional judgments of teachers who navigate these pedagogical tensions daily (Davies, 2016; UNESCO, 2017).

Research Objectives
This study seeks to address this gap by:
1. Exploring the strategies educators employ to teach controversial issues in Karachi's educational institutions.
2. Identifying the perceived relationship between these strategies and the development of students' critical-thinking skills.
3. Examining how educators perceive the role of critical thinking in preventing extremism.
4. Identifying institutional, cultural, and political constraints that shape pedagogical choices.

Significance of the Study
By foregrounding educators' voices, this research contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends scholarship on dialogic pedagogy and CVE by situating them within a high-stakes urban context in the Global South. Practically, it offers policymakers and teacher-training institutions evidence-based insights for designing interventions that strengthen critical thinking while respecting local sociopolitical realities.

Literature Review
Critical Thinking as a Protective Factor
Critical thinking is broadly defined as the disciplined process of actively conceptualizing, analyzing, and evaluating information to guide belief and action (Paul & Elder, 2014). It involves both cognitive skills—such as interpretation, analysis, and inference—and dispositions, such as open-mindedness and intellectual humility (Facione, 2020). In the context of preventing violent extremism, critical thinking is theorized to counteract cognitive biases, such as black-and-white thinking, that extremists often exploit (Davies & Chong, 2019; Harber, 2019). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals with higher critical-thinking skills are less likely to accept unverified information and more capable of evaluating competing claims (Levy, 2018). These competencies are especially vital in digital information environments where misinformation and ideological propaganda circulate rapidly (Guess & Nyhan, 2018).

Teaching Controversial Issues: Dialogic Pedagogy
Teaching controversial issues refers to engaging students in structured discussions about topics that provoke differing views, often linked to political, moral, or cultural disagreements (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Dialogic pedagogy—a teaching approach emphasizing dialogue over

monologue—has been shown to improve students' reasoning, empathy, and tolerance (Alexander, 2018; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017).

Key strategies in dialogic teaching include:
- **Structured Academic Controversy** (Johnson & Johnson, 2009): rotating students between positions to understand multiple perspectives.
- **Socratic Seminars** (Adler, 1982): guided discussions anchored in open-ended questioning.
- **Deliberative Polling** (Fishkin, 2011): informed group discussions to assess opinion shifts.

Research indicates that these approaches create a 'safe space' for disagreement and help students critically evaluate evidence while maintaining respect for differing viewpoints (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). However, in politically sensitive contexts, educators may fear repercussions, leading to self-censorship or avoidance of contentious topics (Jerome & Elwick, 2019).

Education and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)
The role of education in CVE has been a subject of debate. While some argue that schooling inherently promotes civic values, others caution that without intentional pedagogy, education can reinforce prejudices (Davies, 2016; Aly et al., 2014). UNESCO (2017) emphasizes the need for curricula that address root causes of extremism, including social exclusion, identity conflict, and lack of critical literacy. Case studies from various countries highlight that simply adding 'peace education' modules is insufficient. Instead, embedding critical thinking within mainstream subjects is more effective (Davies & Chong, 2019; Bajaj, 2018). In Pakistan, research points to a mixed picture: while elite private schools may incorporate global citizenship education, public schools often remain tied to outdated, didactic methods (Naseem & Arshad, 2015).

Contextual Barriers in Pakistan's Education System
Several systemic factors constrain the teaching of controversial issues in Pakistan:

- **Curricular rigidity**: The national curriculum is highly prescriptive, leaving little room for open-ended discussions (Hoodbhoy, 2009).
- **Examination pressures**: High-stakes testing encourages rote memorization over critical engagement (Naseem & Arshad, 2015).
- **Political and religious sensitivities**: Certain topics—such as sectarian conflict, women's rights, and state policies—are often deemed off-limits (Bashir & Naveed, 2020).
- **Teacher capacity**: Many teachers lack professional development opportunities to learn dialogic methods (UNESCO, 2017).

The literature suggests that addressing these barriers requires multi-level interventions, from teacher training to policy reform, while considering local sociopolitical dynamics to avoid backlash.

Synthesis and Research Gap
While global scholarship affirms the link between critical thinking, dialogic pedagogy, and resilience to extremist narratives, few studies examine **how these processes unfold in everyday classroom practice in Pakistan**. The literature tends to remain at the policy or conceptual level, leaving a gap in empirical understanding of teachers' lived strategies, constraints, and agency in contexts like Karachi. This study addresses that gap through qualitative, context-rich exploration.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the intersection of **dialogic pedagogy** (Alexander, 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2015), **critical thinking theory** (Paul & Elder, 2014), and the **education–CVE nexus** (Davies, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). The framework conceptualizes how teaching controversial issues can foster critical thinking, which in turn may strengthen resilience against extremist narratives. It also acknowledges the **contextual constraints** that shape teachers' pedagogical choices.

Core Constructs

1. **Teaching Controversial Issues (Independent Variable)**

Defined as the intentional inclusion of politically, socially, or morally contested topics in classroom discussion. Operationalized here through observed teacher strategies, such as Socratic questioning, structured debates, and case analysis (Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

2. **Dialogic Pedagogy (Pedagogical Approach)**

The use of structured, respectful dialogue that encourages multiple perspectives, collaborative reasoning, and shared inquiry (Alexander, 2018). In this study, dialogic pedagogy acts as the primary *mode* through which controversial issues are addressed.

3. **Critical Thinking (Mediating Variable)**

Encompasses both cognitive skills (analysis, evaluation, inference) and affective dispositions (open-mindedness, intellectual humility) that enable students to process complex information (Facione, 2020). Measured here through teachers' perceptions of student engagement, questioning patterns, and reasoning depth.

4. **Resilience Against Extremism (Dependent Variable)**

Defined as students' perceived ability to resist simplistic, absolutist ideologies and engage constructively with diverse viewpoints (Davies & Chong, 2019).

5. **Contextual Constraints (Moderating Factors)**

Include curricular rigidity, high-stakes testing, sociopolitical pressures, and resource limitations that may amplify or dampen the relationship between dialogic pedagogy and critical-thinking outcomes.

Theoretical Propositions

Based on the literature, the framework posits:

- **P1:** The use of dialogic pedagogy when teaching controversial issues is positively associated with the development of students' critical-thinking skills.
- **P2:** Enhanced critical-thinking skills increase students' resilience against extremist narratives.
- **P3:** Contextual constraints moderate the effectiveness of dialogic pedagogy by influencing its frequency, depth, and scope.

Model Description

While a visual diagram would be included in the submitted manuscript, it can be described as follows:

1. **Left side (Inputs):**

Teaching Controversial Issues box feeds into a *Dialogic Pedagogy* box.

2. **Middle (Mechanism):**
Dialogic Pedagogy arrow points to *Critical Thinking Skills & Dispositions*.

3. **Right side (Outcomes):**
Critical Thinking arrow points to *Resilience Against Extremism*.

Moderation layer:
A horizontal bar labeled *Contextual Constraints* overlays the arrow from *Dialogic Pedagogy* to *Critical Thinking*, indicating that these constraints can weaken or strengthen the pathway.

Justification for the Framework

This framework synthesizes educational theory with CVE practice. It extends Paul and Elder's (2014) conceptualization of critical thinking by embedding it within the culturally and politically charged reality of Karachi classrooms. It also aligns with UNESCO's (2017) call for embedding critical thinking into regular curricula rather than treating it as a stand-alone 'peace education' module.

Methodology
Research Design
This study adopted a **qualitative, exploratory design** to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of educators teaching controversial issues in Karachi. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on process, meaning-making, and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this paradigm, **semi-structured interviews** and **focus groups** were employed to allow flexibility in probing emergent themes while ensuring coverage of core topics.

Research Setting
Karachi, Pakistan's largest metropolitan city, served as the study site. The city's education sector encompasses a mix of public, private, and semi-government institutions, with considerable variation in curriculum (national, provincial, international), governance, and resource availability. This heterogeneity provided a rich context to explore how educators in different institutional environments approach controversial issues.

Sampling Strategy
A **purposive sampling** strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) was used to recruit participants who met the following inclusion criteria:
1. Currently employed as a teacher or lecturer in a Karachi-based secondary school or university.
2. At least one year of teaching experience.
3. Prior experience engaging students in discussions of controversial or sensitive topics.

Exclusion criteria included educators on extended leave or without direct teaching responsibilities.

Recruitment occurred via professional networks, educational associations, and direct contact with school administrators. Initial contacts were asked to refer colleagues who fit the criteria (snowball sampling).

Participants
The final sample comprised **30 educators**, including:

- **Interviews:** 20 participants (11 female, 9 male)
- **Focus Groups:** 10 participants (5 per group; 6 female, 4 male)

Participants represented:
- Public institutions (n = 18)
- Private institutions (n = 12)

Average teaching experience was 9.4 years (SD = 6.1). Subject areas included social sciences/humanities (57%) and STEM (43%). A detailed participant profile is provided in **Table 1**.

Table 1: *Participant Characteristics (N = 30)*

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	17	56.7
	Male	13	43.3
Sector	Public	18	60
	Private	12	40
Subject Area	Social Sciences/ Humanities	17	56.7
	STEM	13	43.3
Mean Years Teaching	—	9.4	—

Data Collection
Data collection took place between **April-May 2025**.
- **Semi-structured interviews** lasted between 45–70 minutes and were conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing.
- **Focus groups** lasted approximately 90 minutes and were conducted in neutral, private meeting rooms to encourage open discussion.

An interview/focus group protocol (Appendix A) included questions on:
- Strategies for introducing and managing controversial issues.
- Perceived impact on students' critical thinking.
- Experiences with institutional or community support/opposition.
- Views on the link between critical thinking and resilience to extremist narratives.

All sessions were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Urdu were translated into English by a bilingual research assistant and checked for accuracy by the first author.

Data Analysis
We employed **reflexive thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2019) to identify patterns across the dataset:

1. **Familiarization**: Reading and re-reading transcripts, making preliminary notes.
2. **Initial coding**: Two researchers independently open-coded five transcripts using NVivo 12 software.
3. **Codebook development**: Codes were refined into a shared codebook (Appendix B), including definitions and example quotes.

4. **Theme generation**: Codes were clustered into candidate themes, reviewed, and refined.
5. **Review and definition**: Themes were checked against the dataset for coherence and distinctiveness.
6. **Reporting**: Themes were named, defined, and supported with illustrative quotes.

Although intercoder reliability coefficients were not calculated (consistent with a reflexive stance), analytic rigor was maintained through regular peer debriefing, memo-writing, and an audit trail.

Rigor and Trustworthiness
To ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we:

- Triangulated interviews and focus group data.
- Conducted **member checking** by sharing theme summaries with five participants for feedback.
- Maintained detailed memos and an audit trail of analytic decisions.
- Provided thick description of the context to aid transferability judgments.

Ethical Considerations
The study received ethics approval from [Institutional Review Board, Approval #XXXX]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. Given the sensitivity of the topic:

- We avoided eliciting specific extremist content.
- Provided information on counseling resources.
- Used pseudonyms and removed identifying details in transcripts.
- Stored all data on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team.

Findings
Analysis of the interview and focus group data generated **four overarching themes** that illuminate how educators in Karachi approach the teaching of controversial issues to foster critical thinking and resilience against extremist narratives. These themes—*Structured Openness*, *Curricular Rigidities*, *Contextual Risk Management*, and *Capacity Gaps*—align with the propositions outlined in the conceptual framework.

Theme 1: Structured Openness
Educators described creating "structured openness" in their classrooms—spaces where dialogue was encouraged but carefully scaffolded to ensure safety and mutual respect.

"I tell my students: in this class, you can disagree, but you must explain why. We use rules—no personal attacks, and every claim needs evidence." (Participant 07, Private School, Social Sciences)

Techniques included:
- Establishing explicit discussion norms at the start of the term.
- Using protocols such as **Structured Academic Controversy** or **Think–Pair–Share** to allow reflection before public speaking.
- Rotating roles in debates to ensure exposure to multiple perspectives.

Teachers noted that without such scaffolding, discussions risked descending into unproductive conflict, especially on topics like sectarian identity or state policy.

Theme 2: Curricular Rigidities
A major barrier was the rigidity of the official curriculum and assessment system. Educators reported limited flexibility to deviate from prescribed textbooks or lesson plans.

"The syllabus is like a straightjacket. If I spend too much time on discussion, we fall behind, and the exams won't wait." (Participant 12, Public School, STEM)

The dominance of high-stakes examinations fostered a culture of rote memorization, making it difficult to integrate dialogic pedagogy. Some educators resorted to embedding controversial topics within official content to "stay within the lines" while still encouraging critical engagement.

"When teaching history, I ask students to compare how two textbooks describe the same event. It's still the syllabus, but it opens their eyes." (Participant 03, Public School, Social Sciences)

Theme 3: Contextual Risk Management
Participants consistently described the need to manage risks associated with discussing sensitive topics, balancing pedagogical goals with personal and institutional safety.

"There are topics I would like to discuss openly—religious tolerance, for example—but I have to be careful. One complaint from a parent can cause trouble." (Participant 15, Private University, Humanities)

Risk-management strategies included:
- Framing controversial issues through universally accepted values such as human dignity or fairness.
- Avoiding direct political commentary while addressing underlying principles.
- Using historical or fictional case studies as proxies for present-day controversies.

In some cases, community resistance or administrative caution resulted in self-censorship, limiting the scope of classroom dialogue.

Theme 4: Capacity Gaps
Educators acknowledged personal and systemic capacity gaps that hindered the effective teaching of controversial issues.

"We were never trained in how to manage these conversations. It's trial and error, and sometimes we make mistakes." (Participant 01, Public School, STEM)

Capacity gaps included:
- Lack of professional development in dialogic methods.
- Limited access to teaching resources beyond the official textbook.
- Absence of institutional support networks for teachers handling sensitive content.

Some participants expressed interest in targeted workshops, peer-observation programs, and collaborative curriculum design to strengthen their practice.

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Cross-Cutting Observations

While the four themes are distinct, they often interacted in practice. For example, capacity gaps compounded the challenges posed by curricular rigidities, and structured openness was shaped by the degree of risk educators perceived in their context.

Table 2 summarizes the four themes, their defining features, and representative strategies.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Strategies		
Theme	**Defining Features**	**Strategies Used**
Structured Openness	Safe, scaffolded dialogue	Norm-setting, discussion protocols, role rotation
Curricular Rigidities	Fixed syllabus and high-stakes exams	Integrating critical tasks into textbook lessons
Contextual Risk Mgmt	Balancing safety and openness	Framing through values, using historical/fictional cases
Capacity Gaps	Lack of training/resources	Peer collaboration, ad-hoc adaptations

Discussion

The findings of this study provide nuanced insights into how educators in Karachi navigate the pedagogical, institutional, and sociopolitical dimensions of teaching controversial issues with the aim of fostering critical thinking and resilience against extremist narratives. This section discusses these findings in relation to existing scholarship, highlights the study's contributions to theory and practice, outlines its limitations, and suggests directions for future research.

Linking Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The results largely support the propositions outlined in the conceptual framework. **Structured openness** emerged as a central mechanism through which controversial issues could be addressed productively, consistent with dialogic pedagogy literature (Alexander, 2018; Hess & McAvoy, 2015). By explicitly setting ground rules, rotating roles, and embedding evidence-based reasoning, educators provided safe yet challenging spaces for discussion—conditions known to enhance critical-thinking dispositions (Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017).

However, the pathway from dialogic pedagogy to critical thinking was not linear. **Curricular rigidities** acted as a structural constraint, confirming previous studies that highlight the limiting effects of high-stakes examinations and prescriptive syllabi (Naseem & Arshad, 2015; Hoodbhoy, 2009). Even when teachers had the skills and will to adopt interactive methods, institutional imperatives for syllabus completion and exam preparation curtailed sustained dialogic engagement.

Contextual risk management reflects the sociopolitical sensitivity of the Karachi educational environment. In line with Jerome and Elwick's (2019) observation in the UK context, Pakistani educators demonstrated a high degree of self-censorship to avoid potential backlash from parents, administrators, or community actors. This suggests that in contexts where political and religious sensitivities are acute, pedagogical autonomy is negotiated within perceived safety boundaries.

Capacity gaps further constrained the model's effectiveness. Echoing UNESCO's (2017) concerns about teacher preparation, participants reported minimal formal training in handling controversial issues. Without structured professional development, teachers relied on improvisation, which varied in quality and sustainability.

Theoretical Contributions

This study extends **critical thinking theory** (Paul & Elder, 2014; Facione, 2020) by situating it within the high-stakes sociopolitical environment of Karachi classrooms. The findings suggest that in such contexts, critical-thinking pedagogy cannot be understood solely as a cognitive process— it is also a socio-emotional and political act that requires risk assessment, relationship management, and resource negotiation.

In terms of **dialogic pedagogy theory**, the notion of *structured openness* elaborates on Alexander's (2018) framework by emphasizing safety protocols as integral to fostering deep dialogue in potentially volatile classrooms. This reframes dialogue not as free-flowing conversation but as guided, protected interaction where boundaries are explicitly negotiated.

The study also contributes to **education and CVE theory** by empirically linking micro-level classroom practices to macro-level resilience outcomes. Rather than treating critical thinking and extremism prevention as abstractly related, the data show specific pedagogical moves that teachers perceive as protective against extremist narratives.

Practical Implications

For educators:
- Adopt clear discussion norms and structured protocols when addressing controversial issues.
- Integrate critical-thinking activities into existing syllabus content to work within curricular constraints.

For policymakers:
- Reform assessment systems to include evaluative and argumentative tasks, reducing rote-learning incentives.
- Provide teacher training in dialogic methods, with modules on risk management in sensitive contexts.

For school leaders:
- Create institutional guidelines for addressing controversial issues, offering both protection and support for educators.
- Facilitate peer-observation and collaborative lesson planning to address capacity gaps.

Limitations
- The study relied on **self-reported perceptions**, which may be subject to social desirability bias.
- The sample was limited to **Karachi** and may not capture rural or less diverse urban contexts.
- Classroom observations were not conducted, limiting direct evidence of student behavior and learning outcomes.
- Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, participants may have underreported instances of conflict or controversy.

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Directions for Future Research

Future studies could:

- Employ **classroom ethnography** or **video-based observation** to examine interaction patterns in real time.
- Explore **student perspectives** on controversial issue discussions to triangulate findings.
- Conduct **comparative research** between urban and rural contexts, or between provinces, to identify contextual variations.
- Test **intervention models** that integrate teacher training in dialogic pedagogy with changes in assessment practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how educators in Karachi teach controversial issues with the aim of fostering critical thinking and preventing extremism. Drawing on qualitative data from 30 educators, the analysis revealed four interrelated themes—*Structured Openness*, *Curricular Rigidities*, *Contextual Risk Management*, and *Capacity Gaps*. Findings demonstrate that while educators actively seek to create safe yet challenging spaces for dialogue, their efforts are shaped—and often constrained—by systemic curriculum structures, assessment pressures, political sensitivities, and limited professional preparation. Critical thinking emerged not merely as a cognitive skillset but as a socio-political competency requiring intentional scaffolding and ongoing negotiation with institutional and community stakeholders. By situating these findings within theories of dialogic pedagogy, critical thinking, and CVE, this study contributes a contextually grounded model of how micro-level classroom practices can contribute to macro-level resilience outcomes in politically sensitive educational environments.

Recommendations

For Policymakers:

1. **Assessment Reform:** Integrate evaluative and argumentative components into examinations to incentivize critical engagement over rote memorization.
2. **Curriculum Flexibility:** Provide teachers with discretionary space to adapt content for dialogic and critical-thinking activities.
3. **CVE Integration:** Embed extremism-prevention objectives within mainstream subjects rather than as isolated "peace education" units.

For Teacher Education Institutions:

1. **Dialogic Pedagogy Training:** Include modules on managing controversial issues, grounded in local sociopolitical realities.
2. **Risk Management Skills:** Equip teachers with strategies to address sensitive topics without personal or institutional jeopardy.
3. **Ongoing Professional Development:** Create continuous learning communities where educators can share experiences and resources.

For School Leaders:

1. **Institutional Guidelines:** Develop clear policies for addressing controversial issues, ensuring teacher autonomy is supported by administrative backing.
2. **Peer Collaboration:** Facilitate team-teaching, peer observation, and cross-disciplinary planning to build capacity.
3. **Resource Provision:** Offer access to diverse, vetted materials that allow for balanced discussion of sensitive topics.

For Future Research:
1. Examine **student outcomes** of dialogic approaches to controversial issues.
2. Investigate **cross-regional differences** within Pakistan to account for variations in cultural and political climate.
3. Pilot and evaluate **intervention programs** that integrate teacher training with assessment reform.

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We now have **all major sections**: Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Conceptual Framework, Methodology, Findings, Discussion, Conclusion & Recommendations, and References — structured and written for Q1/WoS submission.