



Civic Engagement and Critical Thinking Skills among Pre-Service Teachers in Multicultural Societies

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Abstract

In multicultural societies, pre-service teachers are increasingly expected to function as educators who are both civically engaged and critically reflective. This study examines the conceptual relationship between civic engagement and critical thinking within pre-service teacher education through a qualitative library-based research approach. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature in teacher education, multicultural pedagogy, and democratic citizenship, the study analyzes how civic engagement experiences contribute to the development of higher-order thinking and ethical awareness among future teachers. The findings indicate that civic engagement, when framed through critical and multicultural pedagogical perspectives, fosters reflective judgment, democratic values, and intercultural sensitivity. Critical thinking emerges as a mediating capacity that enables pre-service teachers to interpret civic experiences analytically and respond constructively to social complexity. The study further highlights the role of critical reflection in transforming community engagement into professional knowledge. Overall, the analysis suggests that integrating civic engagement and critical thinking within teacher education strengthens the preparation of educators capable of promoting inclusive, democratic, and socially responsive learning environments in culturally diverse contexts.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Critical Thinking, Multicultural Education, Pre-Service Teachers, Democratic Citizenship.



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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary multicultural societies increasingly demand educators who are not only pedagogically competent but also civically engaged and intellectually reflective, particularly at the level of pre-service teacher preparation. Teacher education institutions are now expected to cultivate dispositions that enable future teachers to navigate social plurality, democratic participation, and ethical responsibility within diverse learning environments (Castro, 2013; Castro, 2014). Civic engagement emerges as a foundational dimension of this preparation, as it shapes how pre-service teachers understand citizenship beyond procedural participation toward critical and inclusive practice. At the same time, critical thinking functions as a cognitive anchor that allows these future educators to interrogate dominant narratives, question inequities, and respond constructively to complex social realities (Waghid, 2024).

Within multicultural contexts, civic engagement is no longer confined to voluntary participation or community service, but is increasingly associated with reflective action grounded in social justice and democratic values. Empirical studies indicate that when pre-service teachers are meaningfully involved in community-based or service-oriented learning, their awareness of cultural difference and civic responsibility expands in measurable ways (Nokes et al., 2005; Alarabi et al., 2025). Such engagement encourages the development of participatory identities that align teaching with broader societal commitments rather than isolated classroom objectives. These experiences also provide concrete contexts in which abstract democratic principles are translated into lived professional ethics.

Critical thinking plays a pivotal role in mediating the relationship between civic engagement and multicultural competence among pre-service teachers. Research demonstrates that critical thinking dispositions significantly influence democratic values and multicultural self-efficacy, suggesting that reflective judgment strengthens teachers' capacity to engage constructively with diversity (Sivaci & Altaş, 2023; Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018). Through critical pedagogy, pre-service teachers learn to recognize power relations embedded in curricula, institutional practices, and social interactions. This intellectual orientation enables them to approach multicultural education not as cultural celebration alone, but as a process of ethical inquiry and transformation.

Teacher education programs increasingly emphasize critical multicultural education as a framework for preparing educators who can respond to cultural plurality with sensitivity and analytical rigor. Studies reveal that exposure to critical multicultural perspectives enhances pre-service teachers' attitudes toward diversity while deepening their understanding of structural inequality and social inclusion (Arsal, 2019). Such preparation fosters pedagogical reflexivity, allowing future teachers to align instructional decisions with principles of equity and democratic participation. These outcomes underscore the necessity of integrating critical thinking explicitly within multicultural teacher education curricula.

Civic engagement further contributes to the formation of critically conscious teachers when accompanied by structured reflection and dialogic learning. Online discussions, global citizenship education, and collaborative inquiry have been shown to nurture empathy, social awareness, and critical reasoning among pre-service teachers (Waghid, 2024). These dialogical spaces encourage participants to articulate perspectives, confront assumptions, and refine arguments through sustained interaction. As a result, civic engagement becomes intellectually generative rather than merely experiential.

Critical reflection functions as a mechanism through which civic experiences are transformed into professional knowledge and ethical awareness. Research highlights reflective practice as essential for developing cultural awareness and critical consciousness among pre-service teachers working in diverse settings (Acquah & Commins, 2015). Reflection enables future educators to examine personal biases while situating their experiences within broader socio-cultural frameworks. This process strengthens their ability to enact inclusive pedagogies grounded in self-awareness and social responsibility.

The interdependence between civic engagement and critical thinking is further evident in studies examining service-learning and democratic participation. Evidence suggests that experiential learning initiatives contribute simultaneously to cultural competence, civic awareness, and higher-order thinking skills when intentionally designed (Nokes et al., 2005). These findings reinforce the argument that cognitive and civic dimensions of teacher education cannot be treated as separate domains. Instead, they must be cultivated through integrated pedagogical strategies that align community engagement with analytical rigor.

Despite growing scholarly attention, gaps remain in understanding how civic engagement and critical thinking intersect within pre-service teacher education across multicultural societies. Existing research often addresses these constructs independently, leaving their relational dynamics underexplored (Castro, 2014; Alarabi et al., 2025). A focused examination of this relationship is essential for informing curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and policy development in teacher education. Investigating civic engagement and critical thinking as mutually reinforcing capacities offers a meaningful contribution to preparing educators capable of fostering democratic and inclusive learning environments..

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a qualitative library-based research design grounded in systematic and critical analysis of scholarly literature on civic engagement, critical thinking, and pre-service teacher education in multicultural societies. Primary data consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical works, and empirical studies relevant to teacher education, multicultural pedagogy, and democratic citizenship, which are selected through purposive criteria emphasizing conceptual relevance, methodological rigor, and international scope. The analysis is conducted through interpretive reading, thematic categorization, and critical comparison to identify recurring patterns, theoretical intersections, and conceptual gaps between civic engagement and critical thinking frameworks. This approach enables the synthesis of nuanced insights without reliance on field-based data collection, allowing the study to construct a

coherent analytical perspective that contributes to theoretical development and pedagogical discourse in teacher education research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Civic Engagement as a Foundational Dimension of Pre-Service Teacher Development in Multicultural Societies

Civic engagement has increasingly been recognized as a core dimension in shaping the professional identity of pre-service teachers operating within culturally plural societies. Rather than functioning as an auxiliary component of teacher education, civic engagement frames how future educators conceptualize citizenship, responsibility, and ethical participation in democratic life (Castro, 2013; Castro, 2014). Engagement with communities exposes pre-service teachers to social realities that challenge homogenized views of learners and schooling. These encounters cultivate an awareness that teaching is inherently relational and socially situated (Egüz & Kafadar, 2020).

In multicultural societies, civic engagement extends beyond participation in institutional activities toward meaningful involvement in diverse social spaces. Community-based experiences position pre-service teachers within contexts where cultural difference, social inequality, and democratic negotiation are lived rather than abstract concepts (Soong, 2013; Palpacuer-Lee et al., 2018). Such engagement fosters intercultural sensitivity while encouraging reflective inquiry into one's positionality as a future educator. Through sustained interaction, civic participation becomes a catalyst for ethical and pedagogical growth (Damiani, 2020).

Empirical scholarship consistently demonstrates that civic engagement contributes to the development of professional competencies relevant to multicultural education. Studies indicate that structured community engagement enhances cultural competence, civic responsibility, and reflective judgment among pre-service teachers (Nokes et al., 2005; Lasen et al., 2015). These outcomes suggest that experiential involvement supports learning processes that formal coursework alone struggles to achieve. Civic engagement thus serves as a bridge between theoretical understanding and socially responsive teaching practice (Ambe, 2006).

The relationship between civic engagement and democratic values becomes particularly salient within teacher education programs grounded in critical pedagogy. Engagement in civic contexts enables pre-service teachers to confront issues of power, representation, and inclusion embedded within social institutions (Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018; Güngenci, 2025). These experiences nurture dispositions aligned with democratic participation rather than compliance-oriented professionalism. Civic engagement therefore supports the formation of educators who view teaching as a public and moral endeavor (Keegan, 2025).

Table 1. Selected Empirical Findings on Civic Engagement Outcomes among Pre-Service Teachers

Author(s)	Context of Engagement	Key Civic Outcomes
Nokes et al. (2005)	Service-learning in teacher education	Increased civic engagement and cultural competence
Lasen et al. (2015)	Community-based sustainability projects	Enhanced civic responsibility and reflective capacity
Soong (2013)	International community service	Intercultural awareness and civic identity formation
Palpacuer-Lee et al. (2018)	Community language programs	Negotiation of intercultural citizenship
Alarabi et al. (2025)	Community engagement initiatives	Growth in 21st-century civic competencies

As illustrated by existing empirical findings, civic engagement consistently contributes to the development of civic awareness and professional responsibility among pre-service teachers.

Community-oriented learning environments encourage participants to interpret social issues through dialogic and participatory lenses rather than technocratic frameworks (Alarabi et al., 2025; González-Valencia et al., 2020). These settings stimulate moral reasoning grounded in lived experience. Civic engagement thereby strengthens the ethical foundations of teaching practice within diverse societies.

Civic engagement also functions as a formative space for cultivating global and intercultural citizenship. Research emphasizes that pre-service teachers involved in community initiatives demonstrate greater openness toward cultural diversity and social plurality (Rudik et al., 2025; Hadjoannou & Hutchinson, 2014). These experiences foster narrative understanding and empathetic engagement with culturally diverse communities. Civic participation thus reshapes how future teachers conceptualize inclusion and belonging in educational spaces (Arsal, 2019).

Within multicultural societies, civic engagement enables pre-service teachers to critically examine dominant cultural narratives that shape schooling. Engagement-based learning disrupts deficit-oriented perspectives by situating learners within reciprocal relationships with communities (Acquah & Commins, 2013; Pourdavood & Yan, 2020). This relational approach encourages educators to value community knowledge alongside institutional expertise. Civic engagement consequently supports pedagogical orientations grounded in respect, dialogue, and social justice (Waghid, 2024).

Teacher education programs that prioritize civic engagement contribute to the preparation of educators capable of navigating sociopolitical complexity. Studies show that engagement-oriented curricula promote active citizenship dispositions aligned with democratic ideals (Kin Cheung Adrian, 2019; Egüz & Kafadar, 2020). Such dispositions equip pre-service teachers to address contested issues within classrooms responsibly. Civic engagement therefore functions as a professional competency rather than an extracurricular activity (Castro, 2014).

The sustainability of civic engagement outcomes depends on intentional pedagogical integration within teacher education frameworks. Programs that align community engagement with reflective and critical learning objectives demonstrate stronger developmental impact (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Gulya & Fehervari, 2024). This integration supports coherence between experiential learning and theoretical inquiry. Civic engagement becomes an enduring element of professional identity formation rather than a temporary intervention.

Overall, civic engagement emerges as a foundational dimension in preparing pre-service teachers for multicultural societies. Through sustained interaction with diverse communities, future educators develop civic consciousness, ethical sensitivity, and professional commitment grounded in democratic participation (Castro, 2013; Damiani, 2020). These capacities are essential for teaching in contexts characterized by cultural plurality and social complexity. Civic engagement thus represents a critical pillar in the formation of reflective, socially responsive, and democratically oriented teachers.

The Interplay between Civic Engagement and Critical Thinking Skills in Teacher Preparation

Examining how civic engagement interrelates with critical thinking among pre-service teachers reveals that engagement experiences are not merely extracurricular activities but fundamental developmental spaces in teacher education. Civic engagement challenges pre-service teachers to analyze, evaluate, and respond to socio-political realities, which intrinsically demands higher-order thinking aligned with democratic action (Castro, 2013; Waghid, 2024). This dynamic suggests that engagement activities serve both as platforms for reflective judgment and as contexts for meaning-making that transcend traditional classroom boundaries (Acquah & Commins, 2015). Through community interaction, pre-service teachers encounter real dilemmas that require them to think critically about inclusion, equity, and social justice, thus bridging theoretical commitments with lived practice.

Empirical evidence from education research reinforces the notion that civic engagement influences pre-service teachers' capacity for critical political thinking and social justice awareness. For instance, a service-learning program involving 123 pre-service teachers was shown to enhance their civic attitudes, critical political thinking, and sense of responsibility toward social justice challenges in community work. These developments indicate that opportunities for active participation in community settings invite teachers to confront structural inequities and reflect on their roles as democratic educators (Sivaci & Altaş, 2023). Pre-service exposure to authentic civic contexts encourages the type of cognitive and ethical complexity necessary for effective multicultural teaching.

Nevertheless, the nature and quality of engagement experiences significantly shape the extent to which critical thinking is developed alongside civic commitment. Structured engagement that integrates reflection, dialogue, and problem-solving fosters deeper conceptual understanding as opposed to superficial participation that lacks analytical framing (Castro, 2014). Critical thinking arises when pre-service teachers are prompted to question assumptions, examine evidence, and consider multiple perspectives within civic contexts (Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018). These cognitive movements are essential for teachers who must navigate diversity with intellectual agility and moral sensitivity.

To understand the measurable nuances of the interrelationship between civic engagement and critical thinking, the following table presents selected quantitative outcomes from an empirical study that links community engagement with skill development among pre-service teachers:

Table 2. Effects of Civic Engagement on Critical Thinking and Related Skills among Pre-Service Teachers

Outcome Measure	Pre-Service Teacher Perception (%)	Activity Source
Increased critical political thinking	74%	Service-Learning program outcomes
Enhanced civic attitudes	81%	Reflective diaries analysis
Raised awareness of social justice issues	69%	Service-Learning outcomes
Growth in civic responsibility	77%	Reflective accounts post-engagement

Source: Maravé-Vivas, et al. (2022)

The figures in Table 2 illuminate the potential of civic engagement to stimulate critical thinking dispositions among future educators, but they also prompt inquiry into how these processes are mediated by reflection and pedagogical framing. Reflection within engagement contexts allows pre-service teachers to unpack experiences so that encounter becomes a source of cognitive restructuring rather than passive involvement (Acquah & Commins, 2015). This reflective lens transforms experiential knowledge into conceptual insight, which strengthens both critical thinking and civic agency (Waghid, 2024). Without such structured reflection, engagement runs the risk of reinforcing surface-level participation rather than intellectual growth.

Moreover, the diversity of civic experiences matters for the depth and breadth of critical thinking outcomes. Engagement activities that situate pre-service teachers in varied socio-cultural environments such as working with marginalized groups or engaging with contested social issues provokes a richer cognitive engagement with complex realities (Arsal, 2019). Exposure to such diversity encourages teachers to examine their own biases, interrogate power differentials, and apply analytical reasoning to unpredictable real-world challenges (Castro, 2013; Castro, 2014). These cognitive practices align with democratic education as they prepare teachers to foster similar inquiry in their future classrooms.

In contrast, if engagement opportunities are limited in scope or occur without adequate support structures from teacher education programs, the potential for critical thinking development may be constrained. Pedagogical scaffolding, reflective dialogue, and theoretical integration within teacher preparation are necessary to convert civic experience into deep cognitive engagement (Sivaci & Altaş, 2023). By situating engagement within intentional learning frameworks, programs can ensure that pre-service teachers are not merely participating but are engaging in analytical negotiations with social realities. This distinction underscores the need for programmatic coherence between civic activity and intellectual growth.

The literature suggests that the developmental interplay between civic engagement and critical thinking is symbiotic rather than unidirectional. Engagement provides the social contexts in which critical thinking is sparked, while critical thinking enables pre-service teachers to derive meaning from engagement encounters and envision pedagogically sound responses (Uluçınar & Aypay, 2018; Waghid, 2024). Such reciprocal development enhances teachers' capacities to act ethically and critically

in multicultural classrooms. These intertwined processes thus contribute to holistic professional formation beyond isolated skill acquisition.

However, gaps persist in how teacher education research documents the comparative strength of various civic engagement modalities in fostering critical thinking among pre-service teachers. The existing data indicate positive trends but also point to variability across program designs, institutional supports, and contextual conditions (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Arsal, 2019). Future scholarship should articulate more nuanced measures of critical thought that capture both cognitive complexity and the ethical depth emergent from civic participation. Clarifying these pathways would strengthen the theoretical and practical links between engagement and reflective professionalism.

Ultimately, the integration of civic engagement and critical thinking within pre-service teacher education represents a powerful orientation toward democratic professionalism. Engagement experiences, when thoughtfully designed and supported, mobilize pre-service teachers to question taken-for-granted assumptions, interpret complex social phenomena, and act with moral clarity in diverse contexts (Castro, 2013; Waghid, 2024). The cultivation of critical thinkers who are civically engaged complements the aims of multicultural education and democratic citizenship preparation. This integration reinforces the imperative for teacher education programs to esteem civic participation not only as a catalyst for development but as an epistemic axis of professional identity formation.

Critical Multicultural Pedagogy as an Integrative Framework for Civic Engagement and Critical Thinking

Critical multicultural pedagogy provides an integrative framework through which civic engagement and critical thinking are cultivated simultaneously in pre-service teacher education. Rather than positioning multicultural education as cultural awareness alone, this pedagogical orientation emphasizes critique, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility within democratic societies (Castro, 2014; Arsal, 2019). Pre-service teachers are encouraged to interrogate structural inequalities that shape educational experiences across cultural lines. Such an approach situates teaching as an act of civic and intellectual responsibility rather than technical delivery (Ambe, 2006).

Within multicultural societies, critical pedagogy equips pre-service teachers with analytical tools necessary to interpret cultural diversity as a dynamic social process. Research demonstrates that exposure to critical multicultural frameworks enhances teachers' sensitivity toward marginalization while strengthening their interpretive reasoning and reflective judgment (Hadjioannou & Hutchinson, 2014; Gulya & Fehervari, 2024). These pedagogical experiences enable future educators to move beyond essentialist understandings of culture. Critical thinking becomes embedded in how teachers read social realities and curricular narratives (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020).

Civic engagement assumes greater educational significance when embedded within critical multicultural pedagogy. Engagement activities framed through critical inquiry encourage pre-service teachers to examine how civic participation intersects with power, identity, and democratic inclusion (Keegan, 2025; González-Valencia et al., 2020). This framing transforms community involvement into a site of epistemic engagement rather than symbolic participation. Civic action thus becomes a medium through which analytical reasoning and ethical deliberation are cultivated (Waghid, 2024).

Empirical studies suggest that critical multicultural approaches strengthen pre-service teachers' readiness to engage with culturally diverse learners through reflective and dialogic practice. Teacher education programs emphasizing critical pedagogy report improved capacities in critical citizenship, intercultural understanding, and democratic engagement (Güngenci, 2025; Rudik et al., 2025). These outcomes reflect the convergence of civic engagement and critical thinking within a shared pedagogical space. The integration reinforces the notion that effective teaching in multicultural societies requires both cognitive depth and civic orientation (Castro, 2013).

Table 3. Empirical Evidence on Critical Multicultural Pedagogy, Civic Engagement, and Critical Thinking

Author(s)	Focus of Study	Key Findings
Arsal (2019)	Critical multicultural education	Improved multicultural attitudes and reflective awareness

Author(s)	Focus of Study	Key Findings
Hadjioannou & Hutchinson (2014)	Multicultural literature pedagogy	Enhanced critical engagement and interpretive reasoning
González-Valencia et al. (2020)	Global citizenship analysis	Growth in analytical reasoning on social issues
Güngenci (2025)	Critical pedagogy implementation	Strengthened civic consciousness and critical reflection
Rudik et al. (2025)	Intercultural citizenship education	Increased critical and civic competencies

The evidence summarized in Table 3 illustrates how critical multicultural pedagogy operationalizes civic engagement as an intellectual and ethical practice. These studies demonstrate that when multicultural content is approached critically, pre-service teachers develop interpretive skills that allow them to analyze social issues systematically (Arsal, 2019; González-Valencia et al., 2020). Critical thinking emerges through engagement with contested narratives rather than passive cultural exposure. This process aligns teaching practice with democratic ideals rooted in inquiry and deliberation (Castro, 2014).

Critical reflection serves as a mediating mechanism within critical multicultural pedagogy, connecting civic experience to cognitive development. Reflection encourages pre-service teachers to evaluate their assumptions while situating lived experiences within broader socio-political frameworks (Acquah & Commins, 2015). Through reflective dialogue, civic encounters are transformed into analytical insights. This reflective orientation deepens both ethical awareness and professional judgment in multicultural contexts (Waghid, 2024).

Global and intercultural citizenship education further strengthens the convergence of civic engagement and critical thinking. Studies indicate that pre-service teachers exposed to global citizenship frameworks demonstrate enhanced analytical capacities when interpreting social facts and cultural differences (Damiani, 2020; González-Valencia et al., 2020). These pedagogical approaches encourage educators to frame local issues within global structures of inequality and participation. Such cognitive expansion reinforces critical reasoning grounded in civic responsibility (Rudik et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, challenges remain in implementing critical multicultural pedagogy consistently across teacher education programs. Institutional constraints, curriculum standardization, and limited pedagogical training may restrict opportunities for deep critical engagement (Kin Cheung Adrian, 2019; Gulya & Fehervari, 2024). Without sustained commitment, multicultural education risks being reduced to surface-level inclusivity initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires programmatic coherence and educator preparedness grounded in critical pedagogical principles (Castro, 2014).

Despite these limitations, the literature underscores the transformative potential of critical multicultural pedagogy when civic engagement and critical thinking are treated as interconnected capacities. Engagement activities anchored in critical inquiry foster teachers who are capable of navigating cultural complexity with intellectual rigor and ethical clarity (Keegan, 2025; Güngenci, 2025). These educators are better positioned to cultivate democratic dispositions within their future classrooms. The synthesis of civic and cognitive development thus strengthens the social relevance of teacher education (Ambe, 2006).

In sum, critical multicultural pedagogy functions as a unifying framework that integrates civic engagement and critical thinking in pre-service teacher education. Through reflective engagement, analytical inquiry, and democratic participation, future teachers develop competencies essential for teaching in culturally diverse societies (Castro, 2013; Arsal, 2019). This integration affirms that multicultural education is inseparable from civic and intellectual formation. Preparing educators through this lens contributes to the cultivation of socially responsive, critically minded, and civically committed professionals.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that civic engagement and critical thinking constitute interconnected capacities that are essential for the professional formation of pre-service teachers in multicultural

societies. Civic engagement provides experiential spaces where future teachers encounter social complexity, democratic negotiation, and cultural plurality, while critical thinking enables them to interpret these experiences with analytical depth and ethical awareness (Castro, 2013; Waghid, 2024). The integration of critical multicultural pedagogy further strengthens this relationship by framing civic participation as an intellectual and reflective practice rather than symbolic involvement (Arsal, 2019; Castro, 2014). Through reflective inquiry and community-based engagement, pre-service teachers develop dispositions aligned with democratic citizenship, social justice, and inclusive pedagogy (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Alarabi et al., 2025). These findings affirm that teacher education programs must intentionally align civic engagement with critical inquiry to prepare educators capable of responding thoughtfully and responsibly to cultural diversity and societal change.

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