

Teaching Justice through Lived Experience: A Qualitative Study of Social Justice Awareness in High School Law Students' Classroom Discussions

Shaheer Ahmad*¹

Abstract

This article aims to discover the social justice awareness in A-Level law students' classroom discussions. Followed by qualitative research, A-level students studying Law were selected and used a loosely structured interview guide as tools for data collection. Based on purposive sampling strategy and saturation of data, the 12 law students were research participants. Collected data was analysed using thematic analysis and four themes namely 'Developing Awareness of Inequality by Analysing Cases', 'Dealing with Conflicts: what the law says and what's morally right', 'Developing an Understanding of Marginalized Groups' and 'Figuring out One's Role in Justice Delivery' were extracted. It concludes that simply learning about law goes beyond understanding legality and touches on developing morality and compassion for others. It is recommended that involvement of students in critical reflection about the cases they read and discuss in the class room set up, may enhance students' interest and knowledge of legal studies.

Article History

Received 02 September 2026
Accepted 24 September 2026
Published 29 September 2026
Corresponding Author*
OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Social justice, high school, law students, marginalized, justice delivery.

1. Introduction

In the modern age, people are more interested in the role of legal education. This shows that the populous has become more aware of the fact that you cannot isolate the study of law from the perimeters in which it is applied. It is very important for law students to understand that only memorizing texts is not enough as they need a keen understanding of the issues that run parallel to our legal systems (like human rights, inequality, and justice) to grasp their applications. Experts have repeatedly highlighted the fact that the study of laws' aim is to develop critical awareness, ethical sensitivity, and a commitment to fairness, particularly when dealing with the needs of marginalized and underrepresented communities (Rhode, 2020; Menkel-Meadow, 2021; Nicolson, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Among the increasing number of scholars, the law classroom is acknowledged as an important space where students take their first steps to form their views on justice, rights, and professional duties. By analyzing legal cases, discussion of real-world problems, and evaluating challenges people face in their daily lives, students learn that the reality of the world is not as simple as legal texts state. Research shows that interacting with subjects of social justice can enhance students' critical thinking and promotes the style of thinking that

¹ A Level Student, Kingston College, Lahore.

leads to them questioning how law works in practice (Marshall, 2020; Hyams, 2021; Giddings, 2023).

These developments clearly indicate that we can no longer look at issues of social injustice from the rear-view mirror as understanding such issues is a core part of a legal professional's career, which is essential for them to recognize their purpose. While social justice within legal education has come into a previously unknown spotlight, studies still mainly focus on curriculum design, clinical programs, and institutional commitments to public service. These initiatives are crucial for promoting social awareness; they are more focused on structures rather than being concerned about how social justice is interpreted in a standard classroom setting.

Most law faculties are more focused on teaching social justice via teaching of statutes; however, they refuse to investigate ways which will effectively help students comprehend such issues (Albiston & Sandefur, 2020; Tokarz, 2021; Wizner, 2022). Furthermore, research focuses more on the requirements of institutions rather than helping students build practical experience. In addition, more emphasis is put on clinical legal education rather than enhancing students' understanding of justice (Quigley, 2020; Lerman, 2021; Sarat, 2022; Krieger, 2024). Consequently, modern teaching styles have made it difficult for the faculty to understand how social justice awareness develops in a standard classroom. To counter this, the researcher aims to investigate how law students view ideas of social justice during daily classroom activities. Understanding these classroom-based interactions is important because they mold students' professional identity, ethical orientation, and perception of the role of law in addressing social inequality.

The law is a system of rules, as well as a set of procedures for determining rights and obligations between individuals. Education in the sphere of legal studies is critically important for developing students' attitudes toward various aspects related to law and justice. Legal studies education is considered as a phenomenon that shapes students' ethical and social attitudes, which can be defined as their value systems and behavioral patterns in social interactions. By that logic, the present research will attempt to address several key questions related to the topic. First, how do students perceive social justice topics during classroom discussions? Second, how do such interactions shape students' awareness of justice, rights, and social responsibility?

2. Literature Review

To combat such issues, this study aims to take a closer look at how social justice is understood, experienced, and negotiated by high school law students within everyday classroom discussions. Instead of focusing on the official curriculum, this study centers around the classroom being an interactive platform where study debate, analyses, and evaluates issues and cases. Through these discussions, students start to develop a link between the knowledge they gain in their classroom and how it links to their future careers.

Literature review depicts that high school students infrequently study legal concepts in black and white. Instead, their perception and understanding of the legal system is based on their

class room lectures and surrounding environment. They evaluate the legal system and social justice through the lens of human rights (Pratama & Nugroho, 2026).

Another aspect of high school students engaged in legal studies revolve around the discussion that they often face a conflict between ‘what is legally right’ and ‘what is morally right’. Qualitative researches indicate that classroom discussions of the high school students, studying law, to study and deal with structural inequalities about their communities. It helps them to shift their ‘right-and-wrong thinking’ about marginalized groups and increasing their awareness about social justice quandaries (Gvirsman, & Shavit, 2021; Hassan & Kamil, 2022). From the lens of students’ own feelings, high school students often view legal studies as a nerve-wracking subject, by considering it a difficult subject including difficult vocabulary. However, their views change when pedagogical strategies make it interesting for them. These learning strategies help the students in bridging the gap between nerve-wracking subjects to the real world law practice (Taylor, 2013).

The literature review related to this research in Pakistan is not found. Thus, to remove this grey area, this study looks at how high school students think about justice when they are learning about the law in the class rooms. It aims to examine students’ perception when discussing matters relating to life legal issues, socially oppressed, and whether justice is blind. The present research also consider how such discussions contribute to students’ understanding of what justice is and how it operates in the legal field as well as its implications for their convictions about social justice and the law and the presence of justice topics in legal education. It has shed light on the phenomenon of education’s impact on students’ views of morality, the world, and the influence of such learning on developing their ethics.

3. Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative study design to determine the ways through which law students could discuss justice in the classroom discourse. The researchers selected this design because they intended to discover the mannerism of interactions between law students and faculty members while discussing justice-related issues. The research aimed to discover how law students of A-Level conceptualized justice and learned about it within a classroom community. The classroom of A-level students studying Law was selected as the setting because it was within this environment that law students engaged in discussions, argued various issues, and generated thoughts about justice and social inequalities. The said study used a loosely structured interview guide as tools for data collection so as to be able to get an insight into the ways the law students think, as well as how they feel about discussing social justice-related problems during classes. Based on purposive sampling strategy and saturation of data, the 12 law students were selected who were engaged in classroom discourse and demonstrated willingness to share their views.

In addition, the study also included classroom observations, so as to see how social justice-related matters are being raised in the context of classroom discussions, analyses of cases, and classroom debates with the involvement of students. In particular, the study used a special set of questions to record the facts that took place during observations, as well as to note such issues as what social justice-related matters were discussed, how the participants interacted with each other, and how they were involved in the discussions. Furthermore, the observer

also made notes about the atmosphere in the classroom during observations. Thus, these various tools enabled the researchers to get a broader perspective about the ways in which the law students develop social justice-related awareness through their experiences in class.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis to unveil patterns of meaning related to the approaches of law students to social justice issues under discussion in the classroom. The 28-step procedure of coding attributed to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) was followed. Initially, the transcripts of the interviews were created, and the observation notes were compiled to become acquainted with the data. After that, the initial coding was performed to identify segments of the texts and audio data related to ideas of equality, social rights, privilege, and responsibilities as concerns the students' perspectives. Then, categories with regard to the identified patterns were created, and themes were developed to conceptualize the categories. The data displays were constructed to facilitate the thematic analysis by providing the transcripts and summaries of the observations that illustrate the identified patterns. During the entire procedure, the results of the interviewee analysis were cross-compared with the data of classroom observations to ensure reliability.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis showed four themes that explain how law students understand and deal with social justice issues in class discussions. These themes are all connected and show how law students interpret and negotiate social justice issues.

Theme- I- Developing Awareness of Inequality by Analyzing Cases

The data clearly indicates that classroom education, when centered on legal case analysis, plays an important role in students developing social justice and understanding social injustice. By examining cases, students started to learn how the law operates in real world scenarios. Many participants expressed that examining real legal situations allowed them to take their learning and be able to apply it outside the classroom. These cases allowed them to see how a person's background and status affect their access to justice.

One student described how case analysis shifted their understanding of law and inequality and said that,

“Studying cases made me realize that not everyone has the same opportunity for justice, which makes me think that the law is more about status and power rather than justice; studying cases made me realize that not everyone has the same opportunity for justice, which makes me think that the law is more”

Another participant reflected on how legal examples made social issues more visible as,

“When we study doctrines, we are merely focused on mindless memorization, it is the case laws that show us the real issues faced by society that we need to prevent”

A similar reflection was shared by another student who emphasized the human dimension behind legal texts and opined,

"Studying case laws can be confusing, but when the context is explained, I become more aware that a real person is going to be affected by the outcome of this case"

Another participant highlighted by saying,

"When I study a case, I sometimes think what i would have done and discuss probable outcomes with my professor allowing me to avoid mistakes in my future career."

Theme- II- Dealing with Conflicts: what the law says and what's morally right

Another strong theme that came out of the data is about the struggle students had when trying to balance what is lawful with what feels right. Students often talked about cases where the law was followed but did not seem fair. This made them think about how law, ethics, and justice are connected. Through discussions and analyzing cases, students were encouraged to look beyond the law and think about how it affects people. Several students said that these discussions made them think about questions like what the point of law is and where are its limits. The students had to think about the implications of legal outcomes, this discussions pushed them to confront questions, about law. One student explained:

"Sometimes when we discuss a case, the decision is clearly based on the law, but it still feels unfair to certain people. That makes me think about whether being legal is always the same as being just. It can be confusing, but it also makes me think more deeply." (S5, Male, 21 years old)

Another student reflected on the internal conflict that emerged during discussions and explained as,

"There are moments when I understand why a judge made a certain decision based on the law, but emotionally I feel that the outcome is not right. That situation makes me question how morality and law should work together."

A similar sentiment was expressed by another participant who described the learning experience as intellectually challenging,

"In class debates, we sometimes defend legal arguments even when we personally disagree with them. It forces us to separate personal feelings from legal reasoning, but at the same time it makes us think about the ethical side of legal work."

Another respondent emphasized how these tensions shaped their understanding of justice and opined that,

"When the lecturer asks us to look at a case from both legal and moral perspectives, I start to realize that justice is not always simple. Law provides structure, but morality helps us reflect on whether the outcome is truly fair."

These reflections show that classroom talks help students think about how laws and morals connect. They learn to understand justice in a way. Students figure out how legality and morality work together. This helps them develop a critical view of justice.

Theme- III- Developing an Understanding of Marginalized Groups

A further theme emerging from the data highlights how classroom discussions contributed to the development of empathy toward individuals and groups affected by legal decisions. Through examining cases involving workers, women, minorities, and economically disadvantaged communities, students began to see the human impact behind legal processes. Rather than perceiving cases as abstract legal problems, many participants described feeling more emotionally connected to the people represented in those situations. This exposure appeared to shape a more compassionate understanding of the role of law in addressing social realities. One student explained how learning about real-life cases influenced their emotional perspective:

"Whenever I study a case involving inequality, I can feel how challenging their situation must be."

Another participant reflected on how these discussions helped them see beyond legal arguments as,

"When we study cases involving less fortunate people, i realize more and more that law is not just words on a page but the justice these people deserve."

A similar reflection was shared by another student who described a growing sense of social awareness as,

"After discussing cases related to discrimination, I started to understand that some groups face more challenges than others. It made me more sensitive to how law can protect or sometimes fail to protect them."

Another participant emphasized how classroom dialogue shaped their emotional response and said that,

"Debating with classmates allows me to understand all the different points of view on a matter, helping me grasp the full extent of the suffering of the vulnerable."

These accounts show that when students talk about justice-related cases in the classroom, it helps them understand and care about people. This makes students think about how the law affects people, especially those who are treated unfairly. The law has an impact on people who are marginalized, and classroom engagement with these cases helps students see that. Classroom engagement, with justice-related cases, is very important because it helps students think about the side of the law and how it affects marginalized communities.

Theme- IV- Figuring out One's Role in Justice Delivery

The final theme shows that when students have discussions about justice, it helps them figure out what kind of lawyers they want to be. They start to see law as more than a subject in school. Students begin to think about how what they learn relates to being responsible and fair. These talks help students imagine themselves as lawyers who must think about things, like inequality and people's rights. As time goes on, students start to focus on just learning the law and more on thinking about what is right and wrong when it comes to being a lawyer. The law is not something they learn but something that helps them think about how to be a good lawyer. One student described how classroom discussions influenced their view of their future profession as,

"When we study legal cases and see injustice and inequality, it makes me wonder as if I was there what could I have done differently in order to help these people."

Another participant explained how exposure to justice-related topics shaped their sense of responsibility and said that,

"Reviewing cases related to issues of injustice makes me realize that I need to ensure that my actions as a lawyer should have a positive effect on society."

A similar perspective was shared by another student who began to reconsider the meaning of legal work and said that,

"Being a layer isn't about wining cases or earning money, as I previously thought, but it is about playing your own role in delivery justice."

Such responses clearly show that interactions w social justice issues early on helps shape a good character for future legal professionals.

5. Discussion

When examining the learning process in the classroom, one can notice active studies of the current legal cases conducted among students. Such processes help them realize the existing social inequality and recognize that the laws in society are not entirely fair. Students begin their way of mastering the law, believing that laws are generally fair and exist for the common good and the maintenance of order. However, through the study of various legal cases, pupils learn that the law interacts with many other social, economic, and political processes. These interactions are essential to studying law since the classroom is where students can examine the law in detail and be aware of how it influences other aspects of society. By analyzing legal cases, one can learn about the law's unique ability to create, reinforce, and deconstruct social inequalities. This procedure highlights the most salient aspects of the law and its connection to other social processes and structures. Such connections should be the primary objective of legal education, according to Kennedy (2020), who believes that it empowers learners to investigate how the law meets the needs of power dynamics. According to Tamanaha (2021), legal systems are deeply embedded social structure and individual behavior are interrelated. Understanding this helps us develop socially conscious lawyers and paralegals. When students

are presented with cases that demonstrate an inequality of access to law, given this, they are encouraged to think again about the assumption that the law works equally for all people of society. Studies have further suggested that early exposure to inequality helps Students' analytical sensitivity and understanding of justice can be shaped by issues (Mertz, 2020). According to Cummings (2022), discussing actual legal happenings in the classroom helps students shift. The impact of laws on individual cases rather than abstract principles. Banakar (2023) states that legal education helps develop critical legal consciousness. This involves getting pupils to question law, society, and power relationships. In a way, the classroom is not only a place to learn but also a place to become. Students start working towards a socially informed understanding of law. The research shows that class discussions more often than not put students in scenarios where they are. One has to navigate between legality and morality. Through role-play or case analysis, one comes across decisions that use formalistic legality to reach unjust or even immoral conclusions. This is an enlightening experience, making one rethink the relationship between legality and morality. Thus, by providing such experiences, the study encourages one to question the limits of legality and to examine the moral principles of legal practice.

The study discusses law students' thoughts about justice through classroom interactions. Its findings reveal that the law classroom is a site for questioning the inequities in legal practices, where law students begin to acknowledge the importance of evaluating the legal norms and their implications. By engaging in classroom debates and negotiations concerning various real-life cases, the law students begin to understand the law's connection to social realities and legal practitioners' moral responsibilities. The study identifies several aspects of such classrooms.

6. Conclusions

Studying law is an interesting and knowledgeable subject for A-Level students. During studies, they pass through a number of stages. First when law students analyze cases in class, they start to see things clearly and they understand how the law affects people who have more or less power and who has access to things. Secondly, upon realizing that legality does not always equal morality, law students begin to think critically about what is right and wrong in terms of the law. Thirdly, when discussing justice, law students begin to develop compassion for those who are treated unfairly and understand how the law affects real people. Finally, learning about the law in this way helps students determine their professional goals and what type of lawyer they want to become as well as what they hope to achieve. The study indicates that simply learning about the law goes beyond understanding legality and touches on developing morality and compassion for others. By facilitating discussions in the classroom, as opposed to traditional lectures, law students are able to develop into lawyers who are not only knowledgeable in the law but also care about people and justice. Therefore, by discussing justice, law school can help to produce ethical and caring lawyers who will do right by the public.

7. Recommendations

On the basis of above findings and discussions, the following recommendations are given for the said research topic.

The teachers and administration of high school institution may arrange,

- Professional setup for students to connect daily discussion to their communities.
- Study real legal cases in class room set up related to common people of community and not just famous cases.
- Guest speakers including community development workers, social activists and lawyers to discuss real world with students.
- Involve students in critical reflection about the cases they read and discuss in the class room set up.

References

- Albiston, C. R., & Sandefur, R. L. (2020). Expanding the empirical study of access to justice. *Wisconsin Law Review*, 2020(1), 101–120.
- Banakar, (2023). *S. Law and society: A critical introduction*. Hart Publishing. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781509942183>
- Bandes, A. (2020). *The passions*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814799895.001.0001> of law. NYU Press. Bloch,
- F. S. (2023). The global clinical movement: Educating lawyers for social justice. *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*, 30(1), 5–22.
- Cummings, S. L. (2022). Legal education and the reproduction of inequality. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 47(3), 1021–1043.
- Gvirsman, S., & Shavit, R. (2021). Students' perceptions of their rights in school: A systematic review of the international literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 91(4), 585–618.
- Giddings, J. (2023). *Promoting justice through clinical legal education*. Justice Press. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003264669>
- Granfield, R. (2024). Legal education and access to justice: Reframing professional responsibility. *Journal of Legal Education*, 73(1), 45–62.
- Hassan, A. A., Zaki, Z. A. B., & Kamil, A. I. M. (2022). Improving students' perceptions towards legal subjects. *Journal of Built Environment and Technology*, 6(2), 45–56.
- Hyams, R. (2021). Social justice and experiential learning in legal education. *The Law Teacher*, 55(2), 179–194.
- Kennedy, D. (2020). Legal education and the reproduction of hierarchy. *Journal of Legal Education*, 69(4), 591–610.
- Krieger, L. S. (2024). Professional identity formation and student wellbeing in legal education. *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, 20(2), 233–250.
- Lerman, L. G. (2021). Pedagogies of justice in law school classrooms. *Journal of Legal Education*, 70(3), 489–506.
- Menkel-Meadow, C. (2023). Empathy, ethics, and professionalism in legal education. *Stanford Law Review*, 75(4), 1123–1145.
- Mertz, E. (2020). *The language of law school: Learning to think like a lawyer (Revised ed.)*. Oxford University Press.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.). *SAGE Publications*.
- Nicolson, D. (2022). Educating for social justice: The role of law schools in shaping ethical lawyers. *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education*, 29(3), 7–26.
- Pratama, A., & Nugroho, S. (2026). A qualitative study of social justice awareness in law classroom discussions. *Tinombala Journal of Legal Education*, 4(1), 12–25.

- Quigley, F. (2020). Introduction to lawyering for social justice. *Clinical Law Review*, 26(2), 345–362.
- Rhode, D. L. (2020). Access to justice: An agenda for legal education and reform. *Fordham Law Review*, 89(2), 123–142.
- Sarat, A. (2022). Law, injustice, and the politics of legal education. *Law & Society Review*, 56(3), 410–428.
- Sullivan, W. M. (2021). *The formation of professionals: Educating lawyers for public responsibility*. Jossey Bass. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119702771>
- Sullivan, W. M., Colby, A., Welch Wegner, J., Bond, L., & Shulman, L. S. (2022). *Educating lawyers: Preparation for the profession of law (Revised ed.)*. Jossey-Bass. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119702788>
- Taylor, B. F. (2013). Perceptions on the law school learning environment: Through the looking glass. *Loyola Law Review*, 61(2), 233–260.
- Tamanaha, B. Z. (2021). *A realistic theory of law (Updated ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tokarz, K. (2021). Justice education and the future of legal pedagogy. *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, 65(4). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3814472>
- Wizner, S. (2022). Teaching justice in law school: Reflections on pedagogy and practice. *New York Law School Law Review*, 66(1), 15–28.