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DOI Number of the Paper: <https://zenodo.org/records/19512166>

Link of the Paper: <https://jar.bwo-researches.com/index.php/jarh/article/view/549>

Edition Link: [Journal of Academic Research for Humanities JARH, 6\(1\) Jan-Mar 2026](#)

HJRS Link: [Journal of Academic Research for Humanities JARH \(HEC-Recognised for 2025-2026\)](#)

Perceptions of Critical Thinking among Teachers and Leaders in Private Pakistani School Education

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Paper Information

Citation of the paper:

(JARH) Shahid. M. M. (2026). Perceptions of Critical Thinking Among Teachers and Leaders in Private Pakistani School Education. In *Journal of Academic Research for Humanities*, 6(1), 13–20.

Subject Areas for JARH:

- 1 Educational Leadership
- 2 Critical Thinking

Timeline of the Paper at JARH:

Received on: 15-05-2025.
Reviews Completed on: 16-09-2025.
Accepted on: 25-02-2026.
Online on: 31-03-2026.

License:



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Recognised for BWO-R:



Published by BWO Researches INTL:



DOI Image of the paper:

DOI [10.5281/zenodo.15649213](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15649213)

Abstract

QR Code for the Paper:



Given the increased emphasis on critical thinking in the realm of teaching and learning across the globe and the lack of attention afforded to this crucial skill in schools in Pakistan, a study based on grounded theory was conducted in four high-end private Pakistani educational institutions. This exploratory study, with data collected by way of extensive interviews, was conducted to ascertain how critical thinking is perceived by teachers, school leaders and school directors in these private schools. The findings suggest that although critical thinking is valued by teachers, school leaders and school directors in these schools, it is restricted by a range of diverse factors, the most significant being a grade-oriented mindset among all stakeholders, which includes teachers, school leaders, school directors, the student body, as well as parents. This obsession with grades is exacerbated by a 'pervasive culture of hegemony', where the parent body seems interested only in their child's results and a return on investment. Similarly, teachers and school leaders are concerned more about their image and the reputation of their institutions, respectively. The resulting 'consumerism', coupled with an already existing hegemonic culture, is perhaps one of the reasons that may have contributed to a sense of 'inertia' in the overall system of education in the country. Consequently, though the private school systems advertise the inclusion of critical and creative thinking in their curriculum, which is based on the UK-based Cambridge O and A-level examination, the findings do not quite support this claim.

Keywords: critical thinking, perceptions, Pakistani private sector education, teachers and leaders, culture of hegemony, Grounded theory study

Introduction

Private schooling is an important feature of the educational landscape of Pakistan that has witnessed a significant expansion over the past decade. These are also called elite schools, where children from the middle and upper-middle class receive education. Admission criteria in private schools could vary, but are largely dependent on parents' financial status - to be able to pay the cost of schooling in the form of admission registration and regular monthly fees (Sathar & Lloyd, 1994; Rahman, 2001; World Bank, 2002). A report published by the World Bank (2012) records that one-third of all Pakistani students go to private schools in Pakistan. Another report by NEMIS (2015) quotes nearly 37% of the school-age population of the country enrolled in private schools in Pakistan. Private schools have the flexibility and means to supplement governmental efforts to provide quality education to the young people who come from mid to high-income groups (DeStefano & Moore, 2010).

However, interestingly, in the Pakistani education system, teachers joining the private sector schools do not receive standard formal teacher training, Andrabi et al. (2002; 2009)

Hence, it is up to schools to train them. Teachers are required to sign a bond, in which they exhort their commitment to the school in return for this training. This bond stipulates that if teachers wish to enhance their professional qualifications, then they need to remain with the organisation for up to 4 years; failing which results in disempowering teachers from withdrawing their own provident funds. In such cases, their provident fund is impounded. Despite this condition, the reason teachers aspire to work in private sector schools is the handsome pay packages and high standards in terms of student quality, facilities, and opportunities for professional development. This turns the private sector into a highly competitive market, in which affluent organisations are the most successful in teacher recruitment and retention.

This results in a vicious circle, where school owners exert pressure on the school leadership

to hire the crème de la crème and ensure high academic output, and the school leaders, in turn, pressure teaching staff for exceptional results. Along with the internal pressures from the organisations to improve quality and standards, both teachers and school leaders face copious external pressures, as well.

The issues and challenges presented above resulted in an exploratory study about values attached to Critical Thinking (hereinafter CT) among teachers, leaders, and directors of schools. A crucial point was researching what CT meant and how it was defined by the aforementioned parties. Here exists the significance of this research, which was to explore perceptions about CT and the value attached to this notion by the major stakeholders in the private sector schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The ambit of this research was also to ascertain if this skill, which is a combination of the cognitive and affective domains, is recognised and acknowledged in its essence among the respondents of the study.

The study aimed to investigate educators' and teachers' perceptions and understanding of CT in private Pakistani schools. This study will further probe leadership and pedagogical practices and the extent to which the inclusion of CT is enabled or inhibited in the process of teaching and learning. The guiding research question for this study was: "How do teachers, leaders, and educators perceive Critical Thinking in Pakistani private schools?"

The significance of the study lies in the exploration of values and beliefs attached to CT not only at the micro level (classroom) but also at the macro level (organisational) (Abrahamson & Fombrun, 1992). This was done by zooming into pedagogical and leadership practices and school culture, which provided valuable insights into how CT is valued and perceived, the quality of teaching, ethos and various other leadership practices that either enable or limit the incorporation of CT in private Pakistani schools.

Method

For the purpose of this study, CT is defined

as: reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do. It is the art of explicating, analysing and assessing these arguments, and logic is essential to leading an examined life (Paul 1990, 66). Moreover, it is purposeful, action-oriented, self-regulatory judgment Facione (1990 a) that combines skills and dispositions for a rational democratic society. Finally, CT always takes place in a context which has social influences and interactions, whether direct or indirect. The individual's thinking is affected by the various affordances and constraints of different contexts (Ennis, 1993; Delphi Report, 1990; Paul, 1990; Illeris, 2004).

Using a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1966), the study comprised in-depth Skype interviews. As part of the interview process, participants (n=13) — teachers and leaders in Pakistani private schools — were requested to select and email a picture/photograph or an image that represented 'CT' for them and be prepared to share reasons for their choice. It is important to note that not only did all participants readily agree to share their views and experiences on 'CT,' but they also took particular interest in picture selection for the purpose of the interview.

The data collection process started with interviews. Keeping in view the Grounded Theory (hereinafter GT) methodology, the first stage interviews were carefully scheduled with 'gatekeepers.' The analysis began as soon as the data were collected from the first stage interviews. This analysis was used to direct the next interview, and taking cues from the first bits of data, salient and relevant issues were incorporated into the next set of interviews. Strict adherence to data collection procedures and systematic analysis enabled the research process to capture all potentially relevant aspects of the topic as soon as they were perceived (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The interviews began with a broad introductory question that followed the Photo Elicitation Inquiry (Hereinafter, PEI) approach

suggested by Allen (2009) and Werts et al. (2012). This approach facilitated the interview process, as pictures, images and photos shared by the participants helped anchor subsequent dialogue about the participants' perceptions of CT (Frith & Harcourt, 2007) and provided an insight into the less visible dimensions of CT (Allen, 2009; Werts et al., 2012).

The broader question about respondents' perceptions of CT using a photograph/image was followed by what Spradley (1979) calls a 'task-related grand tour question'. The purpose of this question was to get participants talking about something they knew well in a focused way. This question also set the direction for the interview, and the follow-up questions helped in unpacking the concept of CT within the realm of teaching and learning.

Findings

The findings encompass the thinking, beliefs, values, and actions of the thirteen respondents with respect to CT. This research study, using in-depth interviews, began with a question designed to open an exploration that would generate substantive theory regarding perceptions about CT among teachers and leaders in four leading private Pakistani schools. The question that guided the research process for the paper was: How do teachers, leaders and educators perceive CT in Pakistani private schools?

The research question was targeted to elicit respondents' perceptions about CT. How is CT perceived by teachers and leaders in private Pakistani schools?

The respondents had strong opinions that ranged from defining CT as a cognitive as well as an affective process that, in essence, embodies creativity. Below is an example by Senior Leader 3 that exemplifies how CT is perceived by a school leader.

CT is like you can evaluate, analyse and create something and produce something at the end of the day. In the CT process you become more tolerant...and more understanding about others and that's another aspect that I've grasped on to, okay, because I

have to kind of like have to stand in the other person's shoe and look at the perception of what they are, what they've done and what they've created it's out of the box, it's no longer inside the box.

This question was broken down further: 'Tell me about the picture you selected and how that reflects CT for you?' Using the PEI method, I had requested all respondents to share pictures that reflected CT for them and be ready to talk about their selected picture during the interview. This was conveyed to the respondents in the consent form emailed to them.

Starting the interviews with the pictures they had shared with me before the interview served a two-pronged purpose: one, it bridged the gap between me and the respondents, [Allen \(2009\)](#); Werts, Brewer and [Mathews \(2012\)](#), and secondly, it helped anchor subsequent dialogue about the respondents' perceptions of CT ([Frith & Harcourt, 2007](#)).

All 13 participants explained their perceptions of CT using the pictures they had shared as a stimulus. Listed below are the pictures along with the verbatim explanations provided by the respondents. I have grouped the pictures, explanations and analysis according to teachers, middle leaders, school leaders and directors.

Annexure (A)

Discussion

After having analysed responses of all thirteen respondents on the research question about their perceptions of CT, the overall understanding of all thirteen respondents was compared with the operationalised definition of CT. The table below illustrates a comparative analysis between what was revealed in the dataset related to the respondents' perceptions of CT and the operationalised definition drawn from the three disciplines of CT: educational, philosophical, and sociological.

Table 2

A comparison between the operationalised definition of Critical Thinking and the way it is perceived by the respondents.

Operationalized Definition	The way CT is perceived
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	by the respondents of the study
For this study, CT is defined as reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do, and it is the art of explicating, analysing, and assessing these arguments, and logic is essential to leading an examined life. Moreover, it is a purposeful, action-oriented, self-regulatory judgment that combines skills and dispositions for a rational democratic society (Facione, 1990). Finally, CT always takes place in a context which has social influences and interactions, whether direct or indirect. The individual's thinking is affected by the various affordances and constraints of different contexts, (Ennis, 1993; Delphi Report, 1990; Paul, 1990; Illeris, 2004; Cole & Scribner, 1974)	A systematic, reflective, collaborative and critically reflective process, which encourages reasoned judgement and is guided by emotions. It is a process of self-discovery and a creative process that is facilitated by an experienced other. The CT process is strategic, and it fosters experiential & collaborative learning. It encourages breaking the mould of conformity and progressing towards enlightenment despite social pressures & influences.

On comparing the respondents' perceptions about CT with the operationalised definition, the table above, it was found that both matched closely. It was found that the philosophical and educational traditions had a great deal of similarities between the operationalised definition and the one shared by all thirteen respondents. The sociological tradition, which is to do with the culture and context, [McPeck \(1990\)](#) figured only in two descriptions shared by two respondents. The two instances where the sociocultural context was referred to were the Jonestown massacre (see Fig 3 above), depicting negative effects of social pressure and two pictures that show the traditional versus the modern version of society (see Fig 11 above), demonstrating a positive sociocultural influence that comes with the power of education. Moreover, the reference made by D2, who mentions 'breaking the mould

of conformity,' is evidence of 'agency' and 'will' to bring about change at the sociocultural level, thus involving critical sociological thinking (McPeck, 1990). Inferring from the perceptions shared by respondents about CT, it is felt that there is a need for awareness in the area of 'critical sociological thinking' among educationists. Educational professionals can be instrumental in affecting the social structures and influencing the general culture of the Pakistani society, provided they can develop mechanisms to influence the deep-rooted culture in society that resists change.

The respondents had considerable time to mull over their beliefs and perceptions about CT and email pictures and images that to them represented this notion. In addition, the respondents had been informed that in the interview, they would be required to explain in detail the reasons their image/picture depicted their belief about CT. Upon analysing the images and the explanations provided by the respondents, it was noticed that although all respondents demonstrated a fair understanding of CT in terms of philosophical, psychological, and educational traditions, the understanding of CT as a sociological discipline was focused on by only a third of the respondents. The latter respondents paid particular attention to culture and context in fostering CT and mentioned discussions and peer learning as necessary tools in instilling CT among students.

Conclusion

By exploring an existing idea in a new field using a Grounded Theory methodology — for the first time addressing the multidimensionality of CT skills and exploring values and perceptions about CT among private Pakistani teachers, leaders, and directors — the study combined conceptual framework with an interpretive paradigm in a novel way to explore CT skill's perceptions and values among educationists in four leading private sector schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The GT methodology was consciously employed to get deeper and uninhibited insights into CT and its role in teaching and learning in the realm of the private Pakistani school sector.

Using theoretical sampling to refine input along the way and doing a constant comparative analysis to make sense of the data helped categories to emerge organically and patterns to form logically, thus data driving the research rather than the other way around was a unique way to reach conclusions. The study helped identify the various dimensions of CT and the dimensions most linked with the notion of CT. This research has also provided a direction for further work, which is to explore and delve deeper into the realm of critical sociological thinking.

Classrooms that nurture collaboration and encourage debate are precisely the forums where CT can flourish. And unless CT comes out from an individualistic focus and is seen as a socio-cultural phenomenon, the current grade and performance-oriented system is bound to prevail. However, it is also true that no amount of education can break the shackles of a deep-rooted culture and conformity that resist change till the familial structure and the society, as a whole, engage in meaningful discussions and allow collaboration and debate on issues of mutual interest and import. Therefore, to bring about change at the sociocultural level, families and the society must demonstrate agency and will; this aspect was referred to by respondent D2 (Fig 11) who attributed the power of education and the aspect of time as necessary ingredients that can enlighten people and transform societies making way not just for CT, but more importantly for 'critical sociological thinking.'

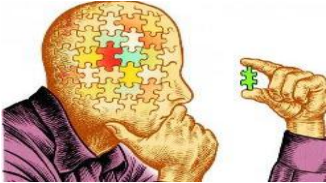





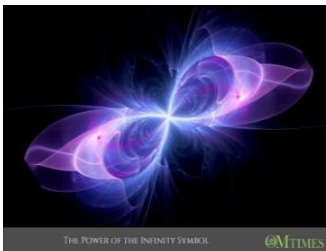
The title of Halpern's 2014 book 'Thought and Education' presents us with the question, "Can Critical Thinking save the world?" To respond to this question, I wish to quote Hanson (1958), who says that all cooking recipes of 'hare stew' should begin with the prescription, 'First catch your hair!' As I come to the end of my investigation of perceptions of CT among teachers and leaders in Pakistani private schools, I feel that we are still struggling to catch hold of the 'hare', so to speak (read CT). And like the parable of the blind men and the

elephant, where each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body and then describes it based on their limited experience, we, too, are holding perhaps only a part of critical thinking, and believe we have understood it completely. Appreciating CT in its entirety is what is needed if we wish to break the mould of conformity. We must move beyond the educational, philosophical, and psychological disciplines of CT and try to achieve an understanding of Critical Thinking, which should be about reaching the level of 'strong sense' Paul (1990) imbibed as a 'way of life.' Educating teachers, leaders, and other stakeholders to foster an attitude for CT is perhaps the first step that is likely to cultivate this critical skill among all involved.

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Annexure (A)**Table 1****Perceptions of critical thinking and respondents' explanation - Photo Elicitation Inquiry method**

No.	Picture	Respondent's Explanation
1.		An organised way in which the thoughts have been processed, and secondly, it also means that you need to analyse, reflect and make real-world applications. T1 Amna, Ghazali School
2.		As they go through their own thought process, they evaluate the information that they have been given, and then, through their own process, they eventually reach this lightbulb moment, where they come to their own conclusion. T2 Fatima, Abacus School
3.		It is not only about understanding an event or a phenomenon or an ideology, but it is to start questioning why something like this happened. Why is that so? (The picture depicts the 'Jonestown Massacre'). T3 Ahad, Arete School
4.		CT is all about finding a solution to any problem, keeping in mind a few factors and having the sense of fulfilment when the puzzle is fixed. ML1, Seema, Ghazali School
5.		This picture, for me, encapsulates the whole process of life. You've got two trees, the quintessential yin and yang. It's about the two faces of life and how they transform each other and allow you to grow, age and become wiser. ML2 Ali, Abacus School
6.		So, for me, CT is like this puzzle that a child struggles with and needs an adult to nudge and support to complete. It doesn't come automatically; a person needs patience and is willing to give it time for it to become second nature. ML3 Hassan, Arete School
7.		I see CT as a connection with whatever one's understanding is, one's experiences and how they are then connected to their own feelings and experiences and perceptions of themselves and then when they can connect that with the world around them. I also see it as a kind of spiral; it goes back to where it had started. So, the starting point determines...where you will/where your CT will lead you. Or how far it will lead you. And where it will take you. SL1, Ghazali School

8.		<p>...the process of reflecting upon something very intently. And there is this fish in the brain, so there are all these things that are going on in the back of your mind when you are thinking critically about any event. Then there is a wall, which has a kind of honeycomb background. And there are different shades of the boxes, some are bigger, and some are smaller. So, I see this as life experiences coming together... to form our thinking process.</p> <p>SL2 Abacus School</p>
9.		<p>To me, this picture indicates the Big Bang theory, things coming to life. There was a process of thinking about the question you'd asked me and what you really wanted. I was analysing it in my brain, evaluating and analysing and creating something and producing something. I have gone through all these stages, but with the help of my teacher, who held my hand. She said here are the colours, now go for it.</p> <p>SL3, Arete School</p>
10.		<p>In the picture, you see children applying all their mental faculties to finding an answer in the game. The sense of competition in terms of matching each other's techniques. That sense of achievement when you outdo the other person you know in a game-like situation where you're not physically sort of using your physical abilities, you're all at par, perhaps at that level and in terms of the mental faculties. I think there's a lot of patience that goes into it. You actually learn from the other, strategic moves. You learn the good moves, and you pick them up and inculcate them in your learning abilities.</p> <p>D1, Abacus School</p>
11.		<p>The journey that transcends generations. From being demure to resplendent, from being uneducated to being enlightened despite social pressures and influences</p> <p>D2, Ghazali School</p>
12.		<p>I've been thinking about it. But to me, I think the easiest one is where I see a picture of students sitting in small groups of three to four, students sitting together and discussing an issue and the topic. And to me, that I think is one very simple and easy way of encouraging discussion.</p> <p>D3, Arete School</p>
13.		<p>They can be across gender, they can be whatever, but a class that is organised around peer learning can introduce probably CT and reflection a lot more easily than a class that is organised the way we do or see the straight benches and children sitting facing the teacher. The teacher's role in this class is to go from group to group and encourage.</p> <p>D4, Avantgarde University</p>