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Teaching for Democracy and Citizenship in Higher Education: A Comparative Qualitative Study of Faculty Perspectives in Kenya and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions play an important role in preparing students for democratic participation, ethical leadership, civic responsibility, and engagement with complex social challenges. However, universities increasingly operate within contexts shaped by political polarization, misinformation, neoliberal reforms, and debates regarding their public purpose. Although democratic citizenship education has been widely examined in K–12 settings, less attention has been given to how faculty conceptualize and enact it in higher education across different national contexts. Guided by Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE), this comparative qualitative case study examined faculty perspectives from two higher education institutions in Kenya and the United States. Data were collected through faculty focus groups, collaborative research dialogues, institutional document analysis, and researcher field texts and analyzed using iterative thematic analysis. Findings revealed four interconnected themes: (a) higher education as a civic institution for democratic learning, (b) democracy as a lived practice grounded in ethics, dialogue, and relational responsibility, (c) context-specific pedagogical approaches to democratic citizenship education, and (d) decolonizing democratic education through local knowledge and transnational dialogue. Faculty in both contexts viewed democratic citizenship education as central to higher education's civic mission, although their approaches reflected distinct historical, institutional, sociopolitical, and cultural influences. The study highlights the importance of culturally grounded, contextually responsive democratic learning in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Democratic citizenship education; higher education; democratic pedagogy; civic engagement; comparative education; Kenya; United States; decolonial education.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic societies worldwide are confronting growing challenges related to political polarization, declining trust in public institutions, misinformation, social fragmentation, and concerns about civic participation (Elerian et al., 2025; Erdal & Kennelly, 2024). These developments have intensified questions about the role of education in preparing individuals to participate thoughtfully, ethically, and responsibly in democratic life. Although schools have traditionally been viewed as primary sites for civic learning, higher education institutions also play an important role in cultivating democratic dispositions, ethical leadership, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Jones, 2026; Roseneil, 2024). As universities navigate increasing social and political complexity, their civic mission has received renewed scholarly attention.

Historically, higher education has served both private and public purposes. In addition to preparing students for professional careers, universities have contributed to the development of informed citizens capable of participating in democratic societies. Scholars have long argued that colleges and universities play a central role in fostering civic responsibility, public engagement, and service to society (Morse, 1989; Musil, 2009; Russell et al., 2026). Dewey (1916/2004) similarly emphasized that democratic education extends beyond the transmission of knowledge to include participatory experiences that cultivate inquiry, communication, and social responsibility. These perspectives position higher education as a public institution with responsibilities that extend beyond economic advancement.

Contemporary scholarship continues to emphasize higher education's civic role. Universities are increasingly viewed as important spaces for fostering dialogue across differences, ethical reasoning, civic participation, and engagement with complex social challenges (Goldberg et al., 2025; Masyada et.al, 2026; Mou & Mitic, 2026). However, this civic mission has become increasingly contested. Market-oriented reforms, accountability pressures, and growing emphasis on efficiency, employability, and economic outcomes have often narrowed institutional priorities and reduced attention to democratic and civic purposes (Roseneil, 2024; Schuster, 2026). These tensions raise important questions regarding how universities understand and enact democratic citizenship education in contemporary contexts.

At the same time, democratic citizenship itself has become increasingly complex. Participation in democratic societies now extends beyond voting and governmental processes to include digital engagement, community activism, intercultural dialogue, social justice advocacy, and global citizenship (Demir et al., 2026; Hidayatulloh et al., 2026; Vetrivel & Saravanan, 2026). Consequently, democratic citizenship education requires more than the transmission of civic knowledge. It involves helping students develop democratic agency, ethical responsibility, critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and the ability to engage constructively with diverse perspectives (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2026; Lindra et al., 2026).

Faculty play a particularly important role in this process. Research suggests that democratic learning is fostered through curriculum, pedagogy, dialogue, community engagement, and faculty-student interactions (Martin & Mulvihill, 2026; Samsuri, 2026). Faculty

therefore serve as key mediators between institutional missions and students' educational experiences, influencing how democratic values and civic engagement are interpreted and enacted within higher education settings.

Despite growing interest in democratic citizenship education, much of the existing scholarship remains concentrated in K–12 settings and Western contexts. Comparative research examining faculty perspectives across higher education settings remains limited. Furthermore, relatively little scholarship explores how faculty navigate tensions between democratic ideals and local sociopolitical realities, particularly within contexts shaped by colonial legacies, globalization, institutional constraints, and competing understandings of citizenship. Comparative research is important because democratic citizenship education is always shaped by specific historical, political, and cultural conditions.

This study addresses these gaps through a comparative qualitative examination of faculty perspectives in Kenya and the United States. These contexts provide a valuable comparison because both identify democracy as a central societal value while operating within distinct historical, political, educational, and cultural environments. Kenya's postcolonial educational history, constitutional reforms, and ongoing debates concerning civic accountability and educational transformation shape higher education's civic role in distinctive ways. In contrast, higher education in the United States continues to be influenced by traditions of civic engagement and academic freedom while confronting increasing political polarization and debates surrounding curriculum, diversity, and public discourse (Brezicha et al., 2023).

By examining faculty perspectives across these contexts, this study contributes to scholarship on democratic citizenship education, higher education's civic mission, democratic pedagogy, comparative education, and decolonial approaches to civic learning. The findings also provide practical insights for faculty development, curriculum design, institutional policy, and community engagement initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic participation in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education and the Civic Mission

Higher education has long been understood as serving both private and public purposes. Beyond preparing students for employment and professional careers, universities have historically played a central role in fostering civic responsibility, democratic participation, ethical leadership, and public engagement (Dewey, 1916/2004; Tierney, 2021). Early scholarship emphasized that colleges and universities contribute to democratic societies by preparing students for citizenship, service, and public responsibility (Morse, 1989). Similarly, Musil (2009) argued that higher education institutions have an obligation to cultivate ethical judgment, civic awareness, and commitment to the common good. Extending this perspective, Giroux (2014) contends that higher education should function as a democratic public sphere where students

develop civic agency, critical consciousness, and a sense of public responsibility necessary for participation in democratic life.

Recent scholarship has renewed attention to higher education's civic mission in response to concerns about political polarization, misinformation, declining public trust, and reduced civic participation (Jones, 2026; Roseneil, 2024). Universities remain among the few institutions capable of fostering informed citizenship, civic agency, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and democratic engagement (Goldberg et al., 2025). Through dialogue, community engagement, and exposure to diverse perspectives, higher education provides opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for democratic participation.

At the same time, scholars have raised concerns regarding the influence of neoliberal reforms and market-oriented approaches on higher education. Simons and Masschelein (2009) caution against reducing higher education to civic employability, emphasizing instead the university's broader public and democratic purposes. Increased emphasis on accountability, competition, efficiency, and employability has often narrowed institutional priorities and diminished attention to civic learning and democratic participation (Roseneil, 2024; Schuster, 2026). Bryer (2014) argues that universities should intentionally cultivate citizenship and democratic engagement rather than focus exclusively on workforce preparation. Together, these perspectives highlight ongoing tensions between market-driven reforms and higher education's broader civic mission.

Democratic Citizenship Education in Contemporary Contexts

Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE) has emerged as a prominent framework for understanding how educational institutions prepare individuals for participation in democratic societies. Traditional approaches often emphasized civic knowledge and political participation; however, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes democratic citizenship more broadly, encompassing civic agency, democratic dialogue, intercultural understanding, ethical responsibility, social justice, and collaborative problem-solving (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2026; Lindra et al., 2026).

Recent scholarship views democratic citizenship as a multidimensional construct involving political, social, cultural, ethical, and global forms of participation (Owen, 2026). Democratic citizens are expected not only to understand democratic institutions but also to critically evaluate information, engage constructively with diverse communities, participate in public decision-making, advocate for justice, and contribute to the common good. Consequently, democratic citizenship education seeks to cultivate the knowledge, dispositions, and skills necessary for meaningful participation in democratic life.

Central to contemporary DCE scholarship is the understanding that democracy extends beyond formal political arrangements. Waghid (2023) argues that democratic citizenship education should be grounded in dialogue, ethical responsibility, human dignity, and engagement across differences. Similarly, Darmanin (2020) emphasizes participatory engagement and social responsibility as central goals of democratic education. Democracy is

therefore understood not simply as a political system but as a way of living with others in diverse societies.

Contemporary democratic societies also face growing challenges related to misinformation, declining institutional trust, ideological division, and political polarization (Elerian et al., 2025; Erdal & Kennelly, 2024). These developments have renewed interest in education's role in supporting democratic resilience. Rather than promoting ideological conformity, democratic citizenship education increasingly seeks to cultivate critical reflection, ethical reasoning, media literacy, and the capacity to engage constructively with competing viewpoints.

Democratic Pedagogy and Digital Citizenship

Democratic citizenship education is enacted not only through curriculum content but also through pedagogy. Dewey (1916/2004) argued that democracy must be experienced through participation, inquiry, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving rather than taught solely through direct instruction. Democratic pedagogy therefore emphasizes active learning, reflection, dialogue, collaboration, and shared meaning-making.

Goodlad et al. (2004) similarly contended that democratic learning should permeate curriculum, institutional culture, and community engagement rather than be confined to isolated civic education courses. Research demonstrates that experiential learning approaches—including service-learning, community engagement, debates, simulations, and collaborative problem-solving—support the development of democratic competencies and civic participation (Mullins, 2019; Rosyad & Yamin, 2026; Samsuri, 2026). These pedagogies provide opportunities for students to practice democratic skills, engage constructively with diverse viewpoints, and connect academic learning to real-world civic challenges (Gerfanova et al., 2025; Zholdybalina et al., 2026).

An increasingly important dimension of democratic citizenship education is digital citizenship. The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed access to information, civic engagement, and participation in public discourse. Consequently, democratic citizenship education now includes media literacy, digital citizenship, critical information evaluation, and ethical online engagement (Hidayatulloh et al., 2026; Vetrivel & Saravanan, 2026).

Given concerns regarding misinformation, algorithmic bias, and online polarization, students must develop the ability to critically evaluate information and engage responsibly in digital environments.

Decolonial and Comparative Perspectives

A growing body of scholarship emphasizes the importance of decolonizing democratic citizenship education. Traditional approaches have often privileged Eurocentric assumptions and Western liberal democratic models while marginalizing Indigenous, African, and other non-Western knowledge systems (Ntsoane, 2026; Satia & Ma, 2026). In response, scholars have called for more inclusive and contextually grounded understandings of democracy, citizenship, and civic participation.

Decolonial perspectives challenge assumptions that Western democratic models represent universal standards. Instead, they emphasize locally grounded conceptions of democracy informed by cultural traditions, historical experiences, Indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based governance practices (Madhu & Mantry, 2026). Such approaches recognize multiple forms of civic participation, leadership, collective decision-making, and social responsibility that have frequently been excluded from dominant educational narratives.

Comparative scholarship demonstrates that understandings of democracy, citizenship, and civic participation are shaped by historical, political, cultural, and institutional contexts. Kenya and the United States offer particularly valuable comparative settings because both identify democracy as a central societal value while operating within distinct educational and sociopolitical environments. Comparative inquiry therefore provides opportunities to identify shared democratic commitments while illuminating contextual differences in how democratic citizenship education is conceptualized and enacted.

Together, scholarship on higher education's civic mission, democratic citizenship education, democratic pedagogy, digital citizenship, decolonial perspectives, and comparative education highlights the complexity of preparing students for democratic participation in contemporary societies. These perspectives provide an important foundation for the Democratic Citizenship Education framework that guides this study.

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Citizenship Education

This study is guided by Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE), a framework that conceptualizes democracy as both a political system and a lived social practice characterized by participation, dialogue, ethical responsibility, critical reflection, and collective action (Karakatsani & Pliogou, 2026; Kilinc et al., 2023; Lindra et al., 2026). DCE extends beyond traditional understandings of citizenship focused primarily on civic knowledge and political participation by emphasizing the development of dispositions, values, and practices that enable individuals to engage meaningfully in democratic communities.

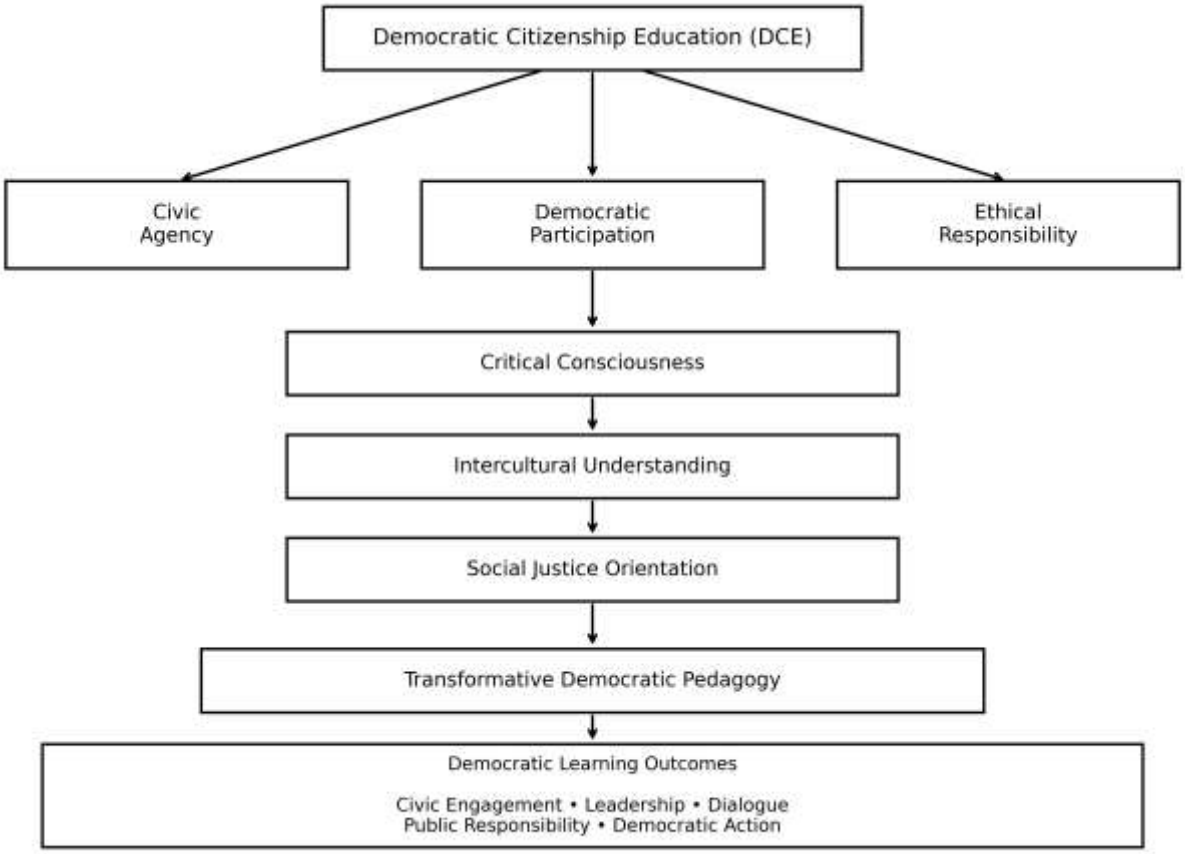
Within DCE, citizenship is understood not simply as a legal status but as active participation in civic, social, cultural, and political life. Democratic citizens are viewed as individuals capable of critical inquiry, ethical decision-making, civic engagement, intercultural understanding, collaborative problem-solving, and social responsibility. Educational institutions play a central role in fostering these capacities through curriculum, pedagogy, institutional culture, and community engagement opportunities.

The DCE framework guiding this study consists of six interconnected dimensions: civic agency, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and social justice orientation. Civic agency refers to individuals' capacity to participate actively in civic and public life, while democratic participation emphasizes engagement in dialogue, decision-making, and collective action. Ethical responsibility highlights commitments to human dignity, accountability, justice, and the common good. Critical

consciousness involves examining social structures, power relations, and inequities, whereas intercultural understanding emphasizes engagement across cultural, social, and ideological differences. Finally, social justice orientation reflects commitments to equity, inclusion, and collective well-being. Together, these dimensions contribute to transformative democratic learning outcomes, including civic engagement, leadership, public responsibility, democratic dialogue, and collective action. Rather than viewing democratic learning as the acquisition of civic knowledge alone, DCE emphasizes the development of democratic dispositions and practices that enable individuals to participate effectively in diverse and evolving democratic societies.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework for Democratic Citizenship Education



The DCE framework is particularly appropriate for this study because it reflects the ways faculty participants described democracy and citizenship throughout the focus groups and collaborative dialogues. Participants consistently framed democratic education as a lived, relational, and contextually situated process rather than merely the transmission of civic knowledge. Faculty discussions emphasized human rights, dialogue, community engagement, ethical leadership, social responsibility, critical reflection, decolonization, and culturally grounded democratic practices. These perspectives align closely with contemporary understandings of democratic citizenship education that emphasize participation, inclusion, and social transformation.

The framework informed all stages of the research process, including the development of research questions, participant recruitment, thematic coding, data interpretation, and cross-case analysis. The six dimensions of DCE sensitized the analysis to issues of civic engagement, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and social justice while remaining open to context-specific understandings of democracy and citizenship that emerged from the data. Furthermore, DCE is particularly valuable for comparative research because it accommodates multiple expressions of democratic participation across diverse cultural and historical contexts. Rather than imposing a singular model of democracy, the framework recognizes that democratic learning is shaped by local histories, institutional environments, cultural traditions, and sociopolitical realities, making it especially well-suited for examining faculty perspectives in Kenya and the United States.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine how faculty in Kenya and the United States conceptualize and enact democratic citizenship education in higher education through a comparative qualitative case study of two institutional contexts.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do faculty in Kenya and the United States conceptualize democratic citizenship education in higher education?
2. How do faculty describe the pedagogical practices through which democratic citizenship education is enacted?
3. How do historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts shape faculty approaches to democratic citizenship education across the two cases?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a comparative qualitative case study design informed by an interpretive phenomenological orientation. Qualitative case study research is particularly well suited for examining complex educational phenomena within real-world contexts and for exploring how participants make meaning of their lived experiences (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). A comparative design was selected to investigate how faculty members in two higher education settings conceptualize and enact democratic citizenship education while identifying both commonalities and differences across contexts.

The study focused on two bounded institutional cases: a private university in Kenya (Sunny University) and a public university in the western United States (Rocky University). Both institutions emphasize civic engagement, democratic participation, and social responsibility within their institutional missions, yet they operate within distinct sociopolitical, historical, and cultural environments. Examining these institutions comparatively provided opportunities to explore how democratic citizenship education is understood and practiced within differing national and institutional contexts.

An interpretive phenomenological orientation guided the study by foregrounding faculty members' lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes (Smith et al., 2009). Rather than measuring democratic learning outcomes, the study sought to understand how faculty members interpret and enact democratic citizenship education through their teaching, scholarship, service, and broader institutional engagement. This approach allowed for a nuanced examination of how democratic values are experienced and translated into educational practice.

Research Context

The study emerged from a collaborative research initiative focused on democracy, citizenship, civic education, and social responsibility in higher education. Faculty participants engaged in focus groups, collaborative dialogues, and reflective discussions concerning democratic citizenship education, democratic pedagogy, social justice, decolonization, and higher education's civic mission.

The Kenyan case reflects a postcolonial context shaped by educational transformation, constitutional reforms, ethnic diversity, and ongoing debates regarding governance and civic participation. In contrast, the United States case reflects a sociopolitical environment characterized by political polarization, concerns regarding misinformation, debates surrounding diversity and inclusion, and renewed attention to democratic engagement. Examining these contexts comparatively enabled exploration of both shared democratic commitments and context-specific understandings of democratic citizenship education.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). To be included in the study, participants were required to (a) hold faculty appointments in higher education, (b) demonstrate professional engagement with issues related to democracy, citizenship, civic engagement, or social justice, and (c) participate in faculty discussions concerning democratic citizenship education.

The final dataset included six faculty participants representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including international relations, criminal justice, sociology, governance, development studies, history, teacher education, civic education, globalization, and social justice education. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to both participants and institutions. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Specific disciplinary categories were collapsed to assure anonymity.

Although the sample was relatively small and uneven across cases, qualitative case study research prioritizes depth, context, and meaning rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The selected participants provided rich insights into democratic citizenship education across two distinct higher education contexts.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Institutional Context	Academic Area	Professional Role	Primary Data Sources
KF1	Sunny University (Kenya)	International Studies	Faculty member and academic leader	Focus groups; collaborative research dialogues
KF2	Sunny University (Kenya)	Social Sciences, Governance and Public Affairs	Faculty member and academic leader	Focus groups; collaborative research dialogues
KF3	Sunny University (Kenya)	Social Sciences, Development Studies, and Kiswahili Education	Faculty member	Focus groups
KF4	Sunny University (Kenya)	Governance and Public Affairs	Faculty member	Focus groups
US1	Rocky University (United States)	Education	Faculty member	Focus groups; collaborative research dialogues
US2	Rocky University (United States)	Education and Social Sciences	Faculty member	Focus groups; collaborative research dialogues; field texts

Data Sources and Collection

To strengthen the credibility and depth of the study, multiple qualitative data sources were used, including faculty focus groups, collaborative research dialogues, institutional documents, and researcher field texts. The use of multiple data sources facilitated triangulation and enabled a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences.

Faculty focus groups served as the primary data source and explored participants' understandings of democratic citizenship education, civic engagement, democratic pedagogy, and higher education's civic mission. Collaborative research dialogues provided opportunities for participants to elaborate on emerging ideas and reflect upon similarities and differences across contexts. Institutional documents, including mission statements and civic engagement materials, offered contextual information regarding institutional priorities and commitments. Additionally, researcher field texts and analytic memos supported interpretation and reflexivity throughout the study.

Data collection occurred between March and May 2025. Focus groups were conducted during April and May 2025, while collaborative dialogue notes, institutional documents, and

field texts were collected throughout the duration of the study. A summary of the data sources and their purposes is provided in Table 2.

Table 2.

Data Sources and Purpose

Data Source	Description	Purpose in the Study
Faculty Focus Groups	Semi-structured faculty discussions conducted across the two institutional contexts.	Primary source for understanding faculty conceptualizations of democracy, citizenship, pedagogy, and higher education's civic mission.
Collaborative Research Dialogues	Faculty conversations and reflective discussions emerging from the ongoing international research collaboration.	Allowed participants to elaborate on emerging ideas and compare democratic citizenship education across contexts.
Institutional Documents	University mission statements, civic engagement materials, and publicly available institutional documents.	Provided contextual information regarding institutional commitments to civic engagement, democratic learning, and public responsibility.
Researcher Field Texts and Analytic Memos	Reflexive notes, observations, and analytic memos developed throughout data collection and analysis.	Supported interpretation, reflexivity, triangulation, and documentation of analytic decision-making.

Note. Multiple data sources were used to strengthen triangulation and support trustworthiness through convergence of evidence across data types.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an iterative thematic analysis approach (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Morgan & Nica, 2020). Analysis began with repeated reading of focus group transcripts, collaborative dialogue records, institutional documents, and researcher field texts to develop familiarity with the data and identify preliminary patterns.

During the first cycle of coding, recurring concepts related to civic engagement, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, social justice, dialogue, decolonization, and democratic pedagogy were identified. In the second phase, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison across data sources and institutional contexts. Analytic memoing was used throughout the process to explore how participants constructed meaning around democratic citizenship education and how these understandings were shaped by disciplinary, institutional, and sociopolitical influences. Subsequently, categories were compared both within and across cases to identify convergences and divergences. This comparative process facilitated examination of context-specific understandings while also highlighting shared democratic commitments across participants.

The final phase of analysis involved synthesizing categories into four overarching themes: (a) higher education as a civic institution for democratic learning, (b) democracy as a lived

practice grounded in ethics, dialogue, and relational responsibility, (c) context-specific pedagogical approaches to democratic citizenship education, and (d) decolonizing democratic education through local knowledge and transnational dialogue. The Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE) framework informed interpretation throughout the analytic process. Table 3 summarizes the coding and theme development process.

Table 3.

Coding and Theme Development Process

Phase of Analysis	Analytic Activities	Outcome
Familiarization	Repeated reading of transcripts, dialogue records, institutional documents, and field texts.	Developed familiarity with the data and identified preliminary patterns.
First-Cycle Coding	Open coding of recurring concepts related to civic engagement, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, dialogue, social justice, decolonization, and pedagogy.	Generated initial descriptive codes across data sources.
Category Development	Related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories through constant comparison across cases and data sources.	Identified patterns and relationships among emerging concepts.
Analytic Memoing	Reflective memo writing used to examine meanings, contextual influences, and relationships among categories.	Supported interpretation and documentation of analytic decisions.
Cross-Case Comparison	Categories were compared within and across the Kenyan and U.S. cases.	Identified convergences, divergences, and contextual influences.
Theme Development	Categories were synthesized into overarching themes informed by the Democratic Citizenship Education framework.	Generated four final themes that structured the findings.

Note. The Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE) framework informed interpretation throughout the analysis while allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, including triangulation, member checking, reflexive memoing, and maintenance of an audit trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of multiple data sources enabled comparisons across participants, institutional documents, and researcher field texts, thereby strengthening the credibility of interpretations. Member checking further enhanced trustworthiness by allowing participants to review and clarify emerging interpretations.

The researchers approached the study from backgrounds in democratic education, citizenship education, comparative education, teacher education, and social justice. Ongoing reflexivity supported sensitivity to context-specific understandings of democracy and citizenship while helping to minimize assumptions regarding universal democratic experiences. Reflexive

memoing also provided transparency regarding analytic decision-making throughout the research process.

The study received Institutional Review Board approval prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants and institutions, identifying information was removed from transcripts and field texts, and all data were securely stored. Care was taken to ensure participant confidentiality given the relatively small and potentially identifiable nature of academic communities represented in the study.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the faculty focus groups, collaborative research dialogues, institutional documents, and field texts generated four interrelated themes: (a) higher education as a civic institution for democratic learning, (b) democracy as a lived practice grounded in ethics, dialogue, and relational responsibility, (c) context-specific pedagogical approaches to democratic citizenship education, and (d) decolonizing democratic education through local knowledge and transnational dialogue. Across both institutional contexts, faculty viewed democratic citizenship education as extending beyond formal political instruction toward the cultivation of civic agency, ethical responsibility, participatory engagement, and culturally grounded understandings of citizenship. While participants shared common commitments, important contextual differences emerged in how democratic learning was conceptualized and enacted.

Theme 1: Higher Education as a Civic Institution for Democratic Learning

Faculty across both institutional contexts rejected narrow conceptions of higher education as solely workforce preparation. Instead, they viewed universities as civic institutions responsible for cultivating democratic participation, ethical leadership, social responsibility, and public engagement. This finding aligns with Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE), which positions higher education as a critical site for preparing students to participate in democratic life rather than simply acquire professional credentials.

Kenyan faculty consistently emphasized higher education's role in character formation and societal transformation. As KF1 explained, “Our role as professors is not just to develop students’ intellectual abilities but also to help them become better citizens.” Similarly, KF2 argued that **“**Higher education should not only prepare students for employment. It should prepare them to contribute positively to society and participate responsibly in public life.”

These statements suggest that Kenyan faculty conceptualize democratic citizenship education as inseparable from moral and civic development. Their emphasis reflects broader concerns regarding ethical leadership, social responsibility, and nation-building within evolving democratic contexts. Democratic learning was therefore viewed as a transformative process that prepares students to contribute to both their professions and their communities.

U.S. faculty expressed similar commitments but focused more explicitly on democratic participation within educational environments. As US2 observed, “The classroom is a mini

government in itself." Faculty described collaborative projects, shared decision-making, and opportunities for student voice as mechanisms through which democratic citizenship education is enacted in everyday classroom practice.

Although faculty in both contexts viewed universities as civic institutions, their emphases reflected differing sociopolitical realities. Kenyan participants frequently framed higher education as contributing to social transformation and community development, whereas U.S. faculty focused more directly on democratic participation and student agency within classrooms. Despite these differences, both groups positioned civic development as central to the mission of higher education, reinforcing a foundational principle of DCE.

Theme 2: Democracy as a Lived Practice Grounded in Ethics, Dialogue, and Relational Responsibility

Across both institutional contexts, faculty described democracy as more than a political system or electoral process. Democracy was understood as a lived ethical practice involving accountability, inclusion, dialogue, justice, and shared responsibility. This finding extends DCE by highlighting the relational and moral dimensions of citizenship that shape democratic participation beyond formal political institutions.

Kenyan faculty frequently emphasized the reciprocal relationship between rights and responsibilities. KF2 explained, "They have a right to be heard without abusing others or destroying property. So, the issue of human rights is two-way**."** Likewise, KF1 described democracy through "the rule of law, equality before the law, consensus building, [and] tolerance to diverse opinions."

These perspectives suggest that democratic citizenship is viewed not simply as participation but as responsible participation grounded in respect for others and accountability to the broader community. Importantly, Kenyan faculty also acknowledged tensions between democratic ideals and societal realities. Participants noted that students encounter corruption, inequality, tribalism, and competing social messages that complicate democratic learning. Democratic citizenship education therefore involves helping students critically navigate contradictions between democratic principles and lived experiences.

U.S. faculty similarly described democracy as relational and participatory. As US1 stated, "Democracy is not simply about elections. It is about who we are as a people and how we live together**.**" Similarly, US2 argued that "Democratic education means modeling dialogue, justice, inclusion, and solidarity."

The comparison reveals a shared emphasis on democracy as an ethical and relational practice but differing focal points. Kenyan faculty stressed accountability, civic responsibility, and coexistence, whereas U.S. faculty more frequently emphasized inclusion, dialogue, and social justice. These differences likely reflect distinct democratic challenges and historical experiences within each context. Nevertheless, faculty across both institutions consistently portrayed democracy as something students learn through participation, reflection, advocacy, and engagement with others.

Theme 3: Context-Specific Pedagogical Approaches to Democratic Citizenship Education

Faculty consistently argued that democratic citizenship education cannot be achieved through content transmission alone. Instead, students must actively experience democratic participation through pedagogical practices that encourage voice, collaboration, reflection, and civic engagement. Across both institutional contexts, democratic learning was described as experiential, participatory, and transformative.

Kenyan faculty frequently described intentionally redistributing authority within classroom environments. KF1 explained, “I give students the free will to engage in discussions. I don't pump knowledge into them.” The same participant further noted, “In the final analysis, they grade themselves. I don't grade them.” Similarly, KF2 described assessment practices where “they are the ones to award marks.”

These examples demonstrate that democratic pedagogy was not limited to course content but embedded within classroom structures themselves. By sharing authority with students, faculty sought to model democratic participation and cultivate civic agency. Such approaches align closely with DCE's emphasis on participation, deliberation, and shared responsibility.

Experiential learning emerged as another significant pedagogical strategy. As KF3 explained, “Students should not only gain the knowledge but also the experience of dealing with emerging issues.” Participants described community engagement, internships, field experiences, debates, and simulations as opportunities for students to connect democratic concepts with real-world challenges.

U.S. faculty described similar participatory practices but placed greater emphasis on intentional reflection. US2 observed that collaborative learning allows students to negotiate responsibilities and ensures that “Everyone is also going to have a voice.” Meanwhile, US1 noted that students may participate in fieldwork or service-learning experiences without recognizing their democratic significance unless instructors explicitly connect those experiences to broader civic concepts.

These findings suggest that democratic pedagogy is inherently context dependent. While instructional strategies varied across institutions, faculty shared a commitment to active engagement rather than passive content delivery. Kenyan faculty emphasized community engagement and shared authority, whereas U.S. faculty highlighted reflection and intentional recognition of democratic learning. Together, these approaches illustrate how DCE can be enacted through pedagogies adapted to local educational priorities and sociocultural realities.

Theme 4: Decolonizing Democratic Education Through Local Knowledge and Transnational Dialogue

The final theme highlights one of the study's most significant contributions. Across both institutional contexts, faculty challenged Eurocentric assumptions embedded within dominant understandings of democracy and advocated for culturally grounded approaches to democratic

citizenship education. Participants viewed decolonization not as a rejection of democracy but as an effort to broaden and contextualize democratic learning.

Kenyan faculty frequently described tensions associated with inherited colonial frameworks. As KF2 explained, “We are teaching a Eurocentric curriculum in an African context, and that creates tension.” Similarly, KF1 questioned dominant democratic models by asking, “What efforts have been made to decolonize democracy?”

These comments reveal concerns that democratic citizenship education often privileges Western examples while marginalizing African histories, Indigenous knowledge systems, and local traditions of governance. Faculty argued that democratic concepts become more meaningful when students can connect them to community experiences, cultural traditions, and local forms of leadership and decision-making.

U.S. faculty raised parallel concerns regarding the marginalization of Indigenous histories and historically excluded communities. US2 observed that “Many educational systems continue to privilege Eurocentric histories while marginalizing Indigenous and minoritized communities.” Similarly, US1 emphasized that meaningful democratic education requires students to engage with “multiple perspectives and understand how different communities experience democracy.”

The cross-case comparison suggests that decolonization functions as a shared framework for reimagining democratic citizenship education. While Kenyan faculty focused on African democratic traditions and postcolonial realities, U.S. faculty emphasized Indigenous perspectives and social justice. These contextual differences reflect distinct historical experiences yet converge around a common critique of universalized democratic models. Consistent with DCE, participants advocated for democratic learning that is culturally grounded, historically situated, and responsive to diverse ways of knowing and participating in civic life. Table 4 presents cross-case analysis (appendix 1).

The cross-case analysis reveals that faculty in Kenya and the United States share a common commitment to Democratic Citizenship Education despite operating within distinct historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. Across all four themes, participants emphasized civic agency, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, and social engagement. However, the ways these commitments were enacted reflected local realities. Kenyan faculty more frequently linked democratic learning to nation-building, public accountability, and postcolonial development, whereas U.S. faculty emphasized democratic participation, inclusion, and navigating political polarization. These differences should not be interpreted as competing models of democratic citizenship education. Rather, they illustrate how democratic learning is shaped by context while remaining anchored in shared democratic principles. Collectively, the findings suggest that effective democratic citizenship education requires culturally responsive, participatory, and contextually grounded approaches that enable students to engage critically with the social realities of their own communities while participating in broader democratic processes.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how faculty in Kenya and the United States conceptualize and enact democratic citizenship education in higher education. Across both contexts, participants viewed higher education as a civic institution responsible for cultivating ethical leadership, civic responsibility, democratic participation, and social engagement. Consistent with Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE), faculty described democracy not simply as a political system but as a lived, relational, and ethical practice enacted through participation, dialogue, critical reflection, and community engagement. These findings demonstrate that democratic citizenship education remains central to higher education's civic mission despite growing pressures associated with marketization, political polarization, and shifting institutional priorities.

The first theme, higher education as a civic institution for democratic learning, reinforces scholarship emphasizing higher education's public purpose in democratic societies (Bryer, 2014; Jones, 2026; Roseneil, 2024). Faculty across both contexts rejected narrow workforce-oriented conceptions of higher education and instead described universities as institutions responsible for preparing students for civic participation, ethical leadership, and social responsibility. While Kenyan participants frequently framed this responsibility in relation to nation-building, public accountability, and community development, U.S. participants emphasized democratic engagement, community partnerships, and civic agency. Despite these contextual differences, both groups positioned democratic learning as an essential dimension of higher education rather than an optional or peripheral outcome. These findings suggest that universities continue to function as important sites for democratic formation even as neoliberal reforms increasingly prioritize employability and economic productivity.

The second theme extends contemporary understandings of democratic citizenship as a lived and relational practice. Participants consistently emphasized dialogue, accountability, inclusion, justice, human rights, and coexistence across difference. These findings align closely with Waghid's (2023) argument that democratic citizenship education should be understood as an ethical and relational process grounded in dignity, dialogue, and mutual respect. Faculty in both contexts viewed democracy as something students learn through interaction with others rather than solely through formal instruction. Importantly, participants also highlighted tensions between democratic ideals and lived realities, including corruption, inequality, polarization, and social fragmentation. These findings suggest that democratic citizenship education must help students navigate contradictions between democratic principles and contemporary social conditions rather than presenting democracy as an uncontested ideal.

The third theme highlights the importance of democratic pedagogy and transformative learning. Faculty described democratic citizenship education as a pedagogical process enacted through debates, simulations, collaborative learning, experiential education, community engagement, internships, reflective dialogue, and participatory assessment practices. These findings support scholarship demonstrating that democratic competencies develop most

effectively through active participation rather than passive knowledge transmission (Dewey, 1916/2004; Martin & Mulvihill, 2026; Mullins, 2019; Samsuri, 2026). A particularly important contribution of this study is the finding that democratic learning is often implicit. Faculty described numerous classroom and community-based experiences that foster democratic dispositions, yet participants also emphasized the importance of intentionally naming democratic learning so that students recognize the civic significance of those experiences. This finding suggests that democratic citizenship education involves not only pedagogical design but also explicit reflection that helps students connect classroom experiences to broader democratic identities and responsibilities.

The fourth theme contributes to growing scholarship on decolonial democratic citizenship education. Faculty in both contexts challenged Eurocentric assumptions embedded within dominant democratic narratives and advocated for culturally grounded approaches that recognize Indigenous, African, and community-based knowledge systems. Kenyan participants emphasized African values, local histories, restorative traditions, and postcolonial perspectives, while U.S. participants highlighted Indigenous histories, curricular inclusion, and the need to address historical marginalization. These findings support emerging scholarship arguing that democratic citizenship education should move beyond universalized conceptions of democracy and instead recognize multiple traditions of democratic participation, governance, and civic engagement (Madhu & Mantry, 2026; Ntsoane, 2026; Satia & Ma, 2026). Rather than rejecting democracy, participants called for more inclusive and contextually responsive understandings capable of reflecting local histories, cultures, and lived experiences.

In sum, the findings suggest that democratic citizenship education is most effective when understood as simultaneously civic, relational, pedagogical, and culturally grounded. The comparative design revealed substantial convergence across the Kenyan and U.S. cases despite distinct historical, political, and institutional contexts. Faculty in both settings emphasized civic responsibility, ethical engagement, democratic participation, and socially responsive teaching. At the same time, local realities shaped how these commitments were enacted. Kenyan faculty more frequently connected democratic education to nation-building, public accountability, and postcolonial development, whereas U.S. faculty emphasized democratic resilience, community engagement, and navigating political polarization. These differences illustrate the importance of contextualizing democratic citizenship education rather than assuming a singular or universal model.

The findings also contribute to the Democratic Citizenship Education framework guiding this study. Participants' narratives reflected all six dimensions of the framework—civic agency, democratic participation, ethical responsibility, critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and social justice orientation. Faculty consistently described democratic learning as a process through which students develop capacities for critical inquiry, civic engagement, ethical decision-making, and constructive participation in diverse communities. The findings therefore provide empirical support for DCE as a useful framework for examining

democratic learning across higher education contexts while also highlighting the importance of local adaptation and cultural responsiveness.

Several implications emerge from this study. First, institutions should move beyond viewing democratic citizenship education as the responsibility of a small number of disciplines and instead integrate democratic learning across curricula and co-curricular experiences. Second, faculty development initiatives should support instructors in designing participatory and experiential pedagogies that foster democratic engagement. Third, universities should create intentional opportunities for students to reflect on and name democratic learning experiences so that civic development becomes more visible and meaningful. Finally, institutions should continue expanding culturally responsive and decolonial approaches that recognize diverse knowledge systems and democratic traditions.

As higher education institutions navigate political polarization, misinformation, democratic uncertainty, and increasing social complexity, democratic citizenship education remains central to their public mission. The findings suggest that universities are uniquely positioned to cultivate ethical, engaged, and critically reflective citizens capable of participating constructively in democratic societies. By fostering democratic learning that is participatory, culturally grounded, and socially responsive, higher education can continue to contribute meaningfully to democratic life in both local and global contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on a small sample of faculty from two higher education institutions and are not intended to be broadly generalizable. Second, the study focused exclusively on faculty perspectives, limiting insight into how democratic citizenship education is experienced by students and enacted in classroom settings. Third, the study relied on participant accounts rather than direct classroom observations, which may not fully capture pedagogical practices in action.

Future research should examine student perspectives and classroom enactments of democratic citizenship education, while also expanding to additional institutional and national contexts. Research across a wider range of disciplines would further illuminate how democratic citizenship education is conceptualized and practiced in higher education. Additional studies are needed to explore decolonial approaches to democratic citizenship education and the roles of digital citizenship, media literacy, and emerging technologies in supporting democratic learning.

Conclusion

This comparative qualitative study examined how faculty in Kenya and the United States conceptualize and enact democratic citizenship education in higher education. Across both contexts, faculty viewed higher education as a civic institution responsible for fostering democratic participation, ethical leadership, critical inquiry, and social responsibility. While participants shared common commitments to democratic learning, their approaches reflected distinct historical, cultural, political, and institutional contexts.

The findings identified four interconnected themes: higher education as a civic institution for democratic learning; democracy as a lived, ethical, and relational practice; context-specific pedagogical approaches to democratic citizenship education; and the importance of decolonizing democratic education through local knowledge and transnational dialogue. The study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that democratic citizenship education is most effective when it is intentionally enacted through pedagogy, culturally responsive, and grounded in local realities rather than universalized models of democracy.

As higher education institutions confront political polarization, misinformation, and growing social complexity, democratic citizenship education remains central to their civic mission and their responsibility to prepare students for thoughtful, ethical, and engaged participation in democratic societies.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 4.

Cross-Case Analysis of Democratic Citizenship Education: Shared Principles, Contextual Differences, and Implications

Theme	Shared Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE) Principle	Contextual Difference	Analytic Interpretation and Implications
Higher Education as a Civic Institution for Democratic Learning	Faculty viewed universities as civic institutions responsible for developing ethical, engaged, and socially responsible citizens.	Kenyan faculty emphasized social transformation, nation-building, and ethical leadership, whereas U.S. faculty emphasized student agency, participation, and democratic engagement within educational settings.	These differences appear to reflect distinct sociopolitical contexts. In Kenya, higher education is often linked to national development and social cohesion, whereas U.S. faculty operate within a context emphasizing individual participation and democratic agency. Both perspectives reinforce DCE's emphasis on civic agency and public responsibility.
Democracy as a Lived Practice	Democracy was understood as a	Kenyan faculty emphasized	The findings suggest that democratic citizenship is shaped by

Theme	Shared Democratic Citizenship Education (DCE) Principle	Contextual Difference	Analytic Interpretation and Implications
Grounded in Ethics, Dialogue, and Relational Responsibility	relational, ethical, and participatory practice rather than merely a political system.	accountability, responsible citizenship, and coexistence, while U.S. faculty emphasized inclusion, dialogue, and social justice.	local democratic challenges. Faculty in both contexts emphasized ethical engagement, but their priorities reflected different social realities. This finding extends DCE by highlighting democracy as a culturally situated practice rooted in relationships and community life.
Context-Specific Pedagogical Approaches to Democratic Citizenship Education	Democratic learning occurs through participation, reflection, collaboration, and experiential engagement.	Kenyan faculty emphasized debates, community engagement, field experiences, and student-led assessment, whereas U.S. faculty emphasized reflection, collaborative learning, and intentionally naming democratic learning experiences.	Faculty adapted democratic pedagogy to local institutional and cultural contexts. The findings support DCE's assertion that democratic dispositions develop through practice rather than content transmission alone. Democratic pedagogy therefore emerges as contextually enacted rather than universally prescribed.
Decolonizing Democratic Education Through Local Knowledge and Transnational Dialogue	Democratic citizenship education should be culturally responsive and grounded in diverse knowledge systems.	Kenyan faculty emphasized African democratic traditions, postcolonial perspectives, and local governance practices, whereas U.S. faculty emphasized Indigenous histories, marginalized voices, and social justice.	Faculty in both contexts challenged universalized and Eurocentric understandings of democracy. This finding extends DCE by demonstrating that democratic learning becomes more meaningful when connected to local histories, cultural traditions, and community knowledge systems.

Note. The table moves beyond thematic description by identifying the underlying Democratic Citizenship Education principles shared across cases, explaining contextual differences, and highlighting broader implications for democratic learning in higher education.