



Enacting Anti-Discriminatory Pedagogy in Compulsory English Classrooms in Grades XI and XII in Nepal: Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

This study argues that the pedagogy in compulsory English classrooms for grades XI and XII in Nepal can be reoriented to actively promote justice by challenging the social problem of untouchability and caste-based discrimination experienced by the Dalits, the assumed lowest caste. The study has two objectives: to critically review legal provisions and compulsory English textbooks of grades XI and XII by tracing the caste issues, and to theorize and propose the possibilities of implementing anti-oppressive pedagogy in those classrooms. While achieving those objectives, this paper performs content analysis of the constitutional/legal provisions, the curriculum, and compulsory English textbooks from the theoretical perspective of critical pedagogy and multiliteracies. The analysis reveals that the prescribed compulsory English textbooks for grades XI and XII are neutral about the caste discrimination experiences of the Dalit identities. Therefore, this study proposes and exemplifies a possibility of pedagogical interventions against the caste discrimination faced by the Dalits. Hence, this study advocates for integrating anti-discriminatory pedagogical approaches to foster critical consciousness among students, and proposes to promote social harmony and justice across the nation.

Keywords: Caste, untouchability, the Dalits, social justice, teaching English

Introduction

This study explores and advocates for strategies to integrate discussions of caste issues into the compulsory English classrooms in grades XI and XII in Nepal,

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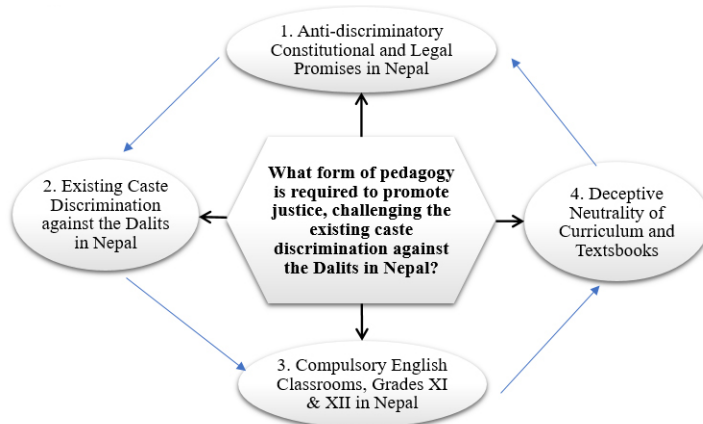
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empowering students to challenge and disrupt the discourses and practices of caste-based discrimination. As a qualitative study, it mainly seeks to promote justice by addressing caste-based discrimination experienced by the Dalit communities, who are often categorized and marginalized as ‘low caste’ in Nepal. Despite being legally outlawed and punishable, caste-based discrimination continues to persist, with the Dalits frequently subject to treatment as ‘untouchable.’ To achieve this goal, the study draws on the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2014) and multiliteracy pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015) to analyze and interpret the qualitative data.

This study’s qualitative data comprise legal and constitutional provisions against caste discrimination, the curriculum, and primarily two English textbooks: *English (Grade 11)* (2020) and *English Grade 12* (2021). By critically examining these materials, the study proposes some innovative and justice-oriented pedagogical strategies that educators can implement to foster critical consciousness and advance social justice, disrupting the caste-based discrimination that some Dalit communities continue to endure in Nepal. Although Nepal’s current constitution envisions the establishment of social justice through the protection of citizens’ dignity and rights, along with the eradication of all forms of discrimination, including casteism, the actualization of these ideals has remained incomplete. However, despite these theoretical promises, the policies, programs, and practices embedded within the compulsory English curriculum for grades XI and XII have inadequately addressed systemic caste-based discrimination discourses and practices. In response to this gap, the study advocates for integrating critical and multiliteracy pedagogies in these classrooms. Hence, this study highlights the need for a pedagogical shift in compulsory English classrooms to better align with the country’s constitutional vision of social justice and equity. The conceptual framework guiding this study has been presented as follows:

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Based on this conceptual framework, our paper is an attempt to answer the following research question:

1. In what ways can compulsory English pedagogy in grades XI and XII be designed to disrupt discrimination against the Dalits in Nepal?

To investigate the concerns of this research question, this study explores the *why* and *how* of introducing and applying critical and multiliteracy pedagogies in teaching *English (Grade 11)* (2020) and *English Grade 12* (2021). The objective is to spark dialogue and engage the educational discourse community in Nepal on this crucial topic. In addressing these pedagogical issues, we consciously reflect on our positionality as non-Dalits and approach the subject with critical reflexivity and a commitment to honesty, avoiding distortions or stereotypes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To strengthen our analysis, we employ triangulation by drawing on multiple data sources and theoretical frameworks (Flick, 2018). The texts include legal documents, newspaper articles, curriculum materials, and textbooks, whereas the theoretical insights include critical and multiliteracy pedagogy.

Literature Review

This section positions our study within the broader discourse of alternative pedagogy in Nepal, focusing on caste, untouchability, and educational reform. Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural country. However, the Dalits, mainly from the rural parts of the country, remain the most marginalized group, often treated unlawfully as an ‘untouchable’ caste. As stated in *National Population and Housing Census 2021 (National Report)* (2023), the Dalits comprise 13.8% of the population. Despite legal protections, they sometimes face exclusion from basic social functions, including temple entry, access to public water sources, and inter-caste marriage. With Nepal’s lowest human development index, the Dalits experience gross violations of human rights and dignity (Dahal et al., 2002; Sob, 2012; Kharel, 2010). The caste-based social hierarchy—Brahmin, Chhetri, Vaishya, and Shudra—is responsible for the perpetuation of discrimination and hindering development, as reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2005). The report of ILO also highlights that caste-based discrimination in Nepal violates both the ILO Convention 1958 and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). It emphasizes the need to eliminate discrimination in the workplace and society, ensuring that Dalits can live and work with “freedom, equity, security, and dignity” (Consult, 2005, p. xi). Consequently, addressing discrimination for justice, freedom, and equality must include reforms in educational materials and pedagogical practices. In addition, existing research corroborates this urgency. Folmar (2007),

who studied untouchability and the Dalit issues in Nepal since 1979, notes that while the Dalits strive to blur caste boundaries in political participation, the elimination of discrimination will be “slow and painful” due to entrenched beliefs and practices (p. 51).

In addition, the revised curriculum for grades XI and XII, developed under the *Secondary Education (Grade 11 & 12) Curriculum, 2076* (2020), aims to cultivate students as responsible citizens who uphold human values and democratic culture and contribute to building an equitable society. Despite these progressive goals, the Dalits continue to face systemic discrimination that demonstrates a gap between curricular ideals and societal realities. The compulsory English curriculum in grades XI and XII plays a significant role. As stated in the curriculum, “For some students, secondary education serves as a basis for preparation for university education, whereas for some other students, it may be a preparation for entry into the world of work” p. 35). Thus, it serves as a foundation for university education entrance and prepares them for the workforce. It is evident that compulsory English is mandatory for all students, regardless of their chosen streams and disciplines. This makes the course a critical transition point that equips students for higher education or professional life. Therefore, addressing caste-based discrimination through education becomes a social and pedagogical exigency.

Advocating for social justice through pedagogy has become an increasingly prominent trend, particularly in the Western academic context. First-Year Composition (FYC) courses in North American universities frequently incorporate social issues into writing instruction as part of this broader movement. A notable example is the *Ferguson Syllabus*, a movement that emerged in response to the police killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. This initiative offers a powerful model for integrating social justice concerns into the classroom. McCoy’s “Writing for Justice in First-Year Composition” (2020) builds upon the principles of the *Ferguson Syllabus*, promoting the incorporation of social justice themes in FYC courses to empower students to critically engage with systemic inequalities and real-world challenges that affect marginalized communities. This framework is particularly relevant for addressing caste-based discrimination through the application of critical pedagogy in Nepal’s compulsory English curriculum as well, where similar pedagogical approaches can be proposed to foster critical awareness and advocacy for social equity.

Furthermore, scholars have also explored how English teachers in Nepal can implement alternative pedagogy to promote justice and combat caste discrimination. For example, Sharma and Phyak (2017) argue that critical pedagogy must strike a balance to achieve social transformation, which can be accomplished by developing appropriate teaching materials, workshops, and dialogues. They state that “Nepal continues to endure multiple layers of inequalities in terms of economy, ethnicity/caste,

class, and gender,” necessitating “teachers’ critical awareness” (p.215). Unfortunately, their case study concludes that both critical pedagogy and critical awareness are lacking in Nepal. Other research has highlighted the need for English classrooms in Nepal to integrate English language texts with local contexts. Tin’s (2014) ethnographic observations of English classrooms in Nepal reveal that curriculum innovation and improvement require an understanding of interactions both inside and outside the classroom. Tin argues: “until we know what really happens between people inside and outside the classroom, curriculum innovation and improvement cannot succeed” (p. 415). This suggests the need to engage compulsory English classrooms in Nepal with socio-cultural issues and exigencies. Therefore, our paper addresses the issue of caste-based inequality and discrimination within English classes, as outlined in the research question.

Theoretical Framework: Critical and Multiliteracy Pedagogy

This study draws on two key theoretical perspectives—critical pedagogy and multiliteracy pedagogy—as both are relevant approaches for fostering social justice and addressing caste discrimination in Nepal’s compulsory English classrooms.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a form of teaching that aims to liberate students by imparting critical consciousness against social injustices and discrimination. Reflecting on Paulo Freire’s (2014) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Cho (2012) notes that critical pedagogy can lead to a “transformation of consciousness from an acceptance of oppression/reality to a belief that reality can be changed” (p. 80). It advocates for directing education that challenges oppression and promotes social transformation. Freire contrasts the banking model of education, which reinforces passivity, with problem-posing education, which encourages active dialogue, critical reflection, and a transformative approach to reality. Moreover, the Freirean problem-posing pedagogy is a form of critical pedagogy that “affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (p. 84) in pursuit of ideals such as liberation, justice, peace, and progress. In this framework, education becomes a dialogic process in which teachers and students co-create knowledge, fostering liberation and justice. Our study applies Freirean critical pedagogy to explore how dialogic engagement and critical reflection can be integrated into compulsory English classrooms in Nepal to address caste-based discrimination and promote equity.

Freire’s problem-posing education emphasizes three essential preconditions for dialogue: “love for the world and for people” (p. 89), “humility” (p. 90), and “an

intense faith in humankind” (p. 91). This authentic education is driven by real-world challenges that engage both teachers and students, allowing them to critique and transform their surroundings collaboratively. Bhattacharya (2020) highlights that this model encourages students to reflect on their communities and beliefs, questioning the status quo (p. 404). Freire’s pedagogy is thus defined by an openness to rethinking, a rejection of passivity, and the promotion of critical reflection and dialogue (Darder, 2014). In this study, we examine how these principles of Freirean pedagogy can be integrated into Nepal’s compulsory English classrooms for grades XI and XII, to foster social justice and transformative learning experiences concerning the theme of casteism.

Pedagogy of Multiliteracy

The pedagogy of multiliteracy, as discussed by Cope and Kalantzis (2015), extends beyond traditional literacy approaches by integrating multimodal texts and considering diverse social, cultural, and technological contexts and concerns. This approach enhances teaching and learning by “bringing multimodal texts, particularly those typical of new digital media, into the curriculum and classroom” (p. 3). These authors outline four key pedagogical practices: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. These practices are found to be effective tools for cultivating critical consciousness and reflexivity among students, with teachers acting as designers who incorporate multimodal and contextually relevant issues to engage students and foster critical agency.

Multiliteracy pedagogy incorporates various forms of literacies and multimodalities into teaching and learning practices. It aligns with reflexive pedagogy, emphasizing “regular returns to student lifeworld experiences” to facilitate the analysis of diverse perspectives and the purpose of knowledge (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 15). A central concept in this approach is ‘identification,’ or ‘Experiencing the Known,’ which involves “a conscious, introspective focus on social and environmental conditions of experience” (p. 24). This positions students as critical agents in their learning. In this model, teachers are seen as designers who “select a range of activities . . . to bring to the learning environment, plan their sequence, and reflect on learning outcomes during and after the learning” (p. 31). The goal is to create classroom activities that are purposefully aligned with educational objectives, with learning seen as a process of “using multimodal media to externalize [and refine] our thinking” (p. 32).

The concept of multiliteracy, introduced by The New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996), broadens traditional representations of literacy to include “the visual, audio, gestural, and spatial semiotic systems”, which are “more dynamic and flexible” and extend beyond rigid language rules (p. 10). This multivocal approach enables students

to transcend the limitations of text-based language. It encompasses “multiple literacies and literate practices, as well as a growing variety of new texts and technologies” (Bull & Anstey, 2019, p. 7). Consequently, multiliteracy pedagogy accommodates new cultural and technological developments within the classroom. This study employs a multiliteracy pedagogy approach, combined with critical pedagogy, to propose a teaching method that addresses social justice through a critical and multimodal lens in Nepal’s compulsory English classrooms for Grades X and XI. This integrated framework informs our exploration of alternative pedagogies designed to disrupt caste-based discrimination.

Methods and Procedures

This study is based on the qualitative research method. The philosophical assumptions guiding this qualitative inquiry reflect the researcher’s perspective (Creswell, 2007) throughout the research process. Ontologically, this study aligns with constructivism (Bryman, 2012), asserting that caste is a socially constructed category. Epistemologically, the study adopts an interpretive stance grounded in the belief that qualitative researchers must “grasp the subjective meaning of social actions” within a given context (p. 26). These philosophical positions are particularly relevant to this study, as they help us challenge the socially constructed phenomena of caste and untouchability. In this study, the method of analysis and interpretation is content analysis. While analyzing the content, the study employs the triangulation method, reading selected texts from a comparative perspective. Then, this paper proposes a critical and multiliteracy pedagogy by interpreting and interrogating qualitative texts—legal provisions, curriculum, and prescribed textbooks. Regarding the study materials, the qualitative documents in our discussion are the official texts released by the government of Nepal. In this sense, our study confirms the quality criteria of reliability into account.

Results and Discussion

The analysis and interpretation of the selected documents reveal that there exists a gap between legal promises and educational delivery regarding issues of caste in the context of Nepal. Therefore, this section thematically reviews the findings in three headings: Anti-Discriminatory Policies and Provisions, Representation of Caste Issues in Compulsory English Textbooks, and Possibilities of Critical and Multiliteracy Pedagogy in Compulsory English Classrooms.

Anti-Discriminatory Policies and Provisions

Nepal's legal framework upholds equality and urges its citizens to maintain it in all aspects. *The Constitution of Nepal* (2015) enshrines the Right to Live with Dignity as a fundamental right: "Each person shall have the right to live with dignity" (Article 16, p.5); Article 50 (1) the Directive Principles, envisions "ending all forms of discrimination" by maintaining communal harmony, solidarity, and amity" (p.16). Article 51(a) also emphasizes "mutual understanding, tolerance, and solidarity among various castes" (p.17). These constitutional provisions clearly indicate that caste-based discrimination is illegal and punishable under the law. *The National Civil Code (Act)* (2017) further classifies caste discrimination as a crime, explicitly outlined in Chapter 3. Additionally, *The Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability, Offense and Punishment Act* (2011) prescribes penalties "the punishment of imprisonment for a term from three months to three years and a fine from fifty thousand rupees to two hundred thousand rupees" and "imprisonment for a term from two months to two years and a fine from twenty thousand rupees to one hundred thousand rupees" (p. 7). Despite these strong legal protections, caste-based discrimination remains a significant issue for the Dalit communities across the country.

Although constitutional and legal provisions promise equality, caste-based discrimination practices have persisted in Nepal, which can be seen through the frequent reports in the news media. Two incidents illustrate this ongoing issue. In one case, a Dalit boy and his friends were stoned to death for attempting to visit the boy's non-Dalit girlfriend (Mulmi, 2020). In another case, a Dalit girl was denied housing in Kathmandu due to her caste (Subedi, 2020). These incidents demonstrate the continued prevalence of caste-based discrimination, which has undermined social harmony. Given the persistence of caste-based discrimination, there is an urgent need to address these issues through education in every classroom practice. Conversely, educational institutions in Nepal have often reinforced the structural inequalities and caste discrimination practices (Poudel, 2007). We would argue that one of the reasons for persistent practice is the lack of well-planned and intentionally executed educational programs that would bridge the classrooms and the lived reality. Therefore, it is essential to adopt pedagogical approaches that can promote justice for the Dalits. Researchers argue that future education in Nepal should promote equity and social justice (Khanal & Charles, 2022). We argue that critical and multiliteracy pedagogy could be one measure of addressing these harmful practices and discontinuing them.

Representation of Caste Issues in Compulsory English Textbooks

Our study shows that the prescribed compulsory English textbooks, *English (Grade 11)* (2020) and *English Grade 12* (2021), are indifferent to caste discrimination.

These textbooks, divided into sections on Language Development and Literature, offer minimal and superficial references to caste-related issues. This raises serious concerns about the curriculum and textbook content, highlighting a significant gap in addressing such a critical social issue. The grade XI English textbook mentions the term “caste” five times, with only one instance loosely addressing caste discrimination: “Do you think there is racial/caste-related discrimination in our country? Discuss with your friend; write a five-minute speech” (p. 84). This phrasing is problematic as it suggests that caste discrimination may or may not exist, despite ample evidence to the contrary. Similarly, the grade XII English textbook references caste only once, in the context of debating quota reservations based on caste (p. 103). This minimal and insignificant space provided in the text shifts the focus away from the critical issue of caste-based discrimination. The textbooks’ silence on caste discrimination is a missed opportunity to engage students with the harsh realities faced by Dalit communities. It helps to relegate a significant social issue to the periphery. This underscores the need to explore critical and multiliteracy pedagogy to bring caste discrimination into sharper focus within the classroom.

Possibilities of Critical and Multiliteracy Pedagogy in Compulsory English Classrooms

Numerous opportunities can be achieved to integrate critical and multiliteracy pedagogy into the compulsory English curriculum for both grades XI and XII. The textbooks are divided into two themes: language and literature. While the primary goal of the language development sections is to enhance students’ language skills, the literature sections introduce them to various literary genres, both of which inherently aim to promote communicative skills and critical and creative thinking. These objectives can be further enriched by discussing the causes and effects of caste discrimination and encouraging students to explore potential strategies for addressing and combating these issues.

Several units in the language development section provide ideal spaces to apply critical and multiliteracy pedagogy. For instance, English Grade 12 (2021). includes units on “Critical Thinking,” “Human Rights,” and “Power and Politics,” while English (Grade 11) (2020) covers “Media and Society,” “Democracy and Human Rights,” and “Power and Politics.” These units, along with all others, offer ample opportunities for teachers to engage students in discussions about caste discrimination while developing their language proficiency. This approach aligns with the multiliteracy pedagogy outlined by Cope and Kalantzis (2015), which not only enhances students’ language abilities but also fosters what Freire (2014) describes as critical consciousness—an awareness that actively challenges caste discrimination against the Dalits in Nepal.

When implementing the aforementioned classroom practices, teachers can incorporate news broadcasts, articles, podcasts, and social media content that address caste discrimination into their lessons. Teachers can integrate language materials related to caste discrimination while guiding students in practicing the four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In Nepal, cases of caste discrimination are often reported in English through national and international media channels, including Nepal Television, Radio Nepal, and various local Frequency Modulation (FM) stations. Additionally, students can listen to or watch news broadcasts from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which is highly regarded and considered one of the most credible sources of news among television-watching and radio-listening audiences nationwide.

To enhance reading skills, teachers can provide students with newspaper articles that critique caste-based discrimination, prompting them to develop arguments against such practices and deliver speeches in class. Teachers can also encourage students to create language content for podcasts, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok, engaging them in critical discussions about caste discrimination. In writing activities, teachers can ask their students to compose anti-discriminatory social media posts, essays, speeches, or letters to the editor. Since these social media platforms are widely popular among the youth in Nepal, they can serve as practical classroom tools for learning objectives. By integrating these activities, teachers can develop students' language skills and cultivate their critical awareness. This critical consciousness, once developed, contributes to promoting justice against caste discrimination experienced by Dalits in Nepal.

Educators have numerous opportunities to implement critical and multiliteracy pedagogy when teaching the literature components. Teachers can incorporate discussions on Nepali literary texts that address caste discrimination while introducing students to the conventions of literary genres, such as poetry, drama, essays, and fiction. A critical and multiliteracy approach can be effectively implemented by thematizing, characterizing, interpreting, and assimilating literary texts in the context of Nepalese society. This does not imply detaching the texts from their historical contexts of production; instead, it involves understanding and interpreting them through processes of assimilation and identification. One effective strategy is to have students compare and contrast the themes and characters in literary works of foreign contexts concerning caste-based discrimination in Nepalese communities. In doing so, teachers can draw upon various examples, such as audiovisual materials, protest movements, graphics, and art created by Dalit communities to connect the historical contexts, themes, and characters discussed in class.

Several texts in the grade XI curriculum lend themselves to interpretations that address caste discrimination. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

explores the theme of art versus life. The story depicts a husband who, while painting his wife, overlooks her suffering, leading to her death: “This is indeed Life itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved: She was dead!” (p. 203). This theme of human indifference is parallel to the experiences of the Dalits in Nepal. In many localities where the Dalits are still treated as ‘untouchables,’ due to which they are forced to perform labor-intensive tasks, such as building houses and temples, crafting clothing, and working with metal. However, after completing these tasks, they are often excluded from the very spaces they helped create. In some communities, the Dalits are forbidden from entering the homes and temples they built. This reflects a societal contradiction where the art is revered, but the human lives behind it are marginalized and discriminated against.

Similarly, teachers can address the Dalit issues when teaching poetry in grade XI. Robert Burns’ poem “A Red, Red Rose” celebrates the theme of unconditional love, where it is portrayed, physical distance is insignificant in the face of deep affection: “And I will come again, our love/Tho’ it were ten thousand mile!” (p. 246). While discussing this theme, teachers can introduce the topic of social barriers that hinder love in Nepalese society, particularly caste-based discrimination. In Nepal, love and marriage between upper-caste non-Dalits and Dalits are often met with social stigma and strong disapproval from families and communities. Teachers can complement these discussions with YouTube videos, TikTok clips, and news reports that highlight the stigma surrounding inter-caste marriages. This approach encourages students to engage in critical conversations about caste-based discrimination in their own communities. In the grade XII, many literary texts can be analyzed through the lens of caste discrimination. For example, Lu Xun’s “My Old Home” narrates the poignant story of two childhood friends whose relationship is shattered by economic disparity in adulthood. The narrator’s childhood friend, now impoverished, perceives him as a superior ‘master’ and hesitates to approach him when they reunite years later: “addressed me in a loud clear voice: ‘Master!’” (p. 214). This narrative can be related to the context of caste differences in Nepal, where social hierarchies are deeply ingrained. Even when the Dalits achieve economic prosperity, they are often still regarded as inferior due to their caste. Engaging students in discussions about these issues can be productive in the investigation of social issues in classroom activities.

Additionally, teachers can promote justice against caste discrimination by teaching poetry as well. Ben Okri’s poem “The Awakening Age” reflects on the destructive consequences of ethnic, cultural, and political conflicts, specifically the North-South conflict in Nigeria that resulted in war, death, and bloodshed. The poem ultimately calls for reconciliation and harmony: “There’s more to a people than their poverty/There’s their work, wisdom, and creativity” (p. 240). While discussing this poem, teachers can explore potential socio-cultural conflicts in Nepal, with caste

discrimination as one possible underlying cause. Through such discussions, students can develop a critical awareness of the caste system and its potential to incite conflict, cultivating a commitment to social justice in students towards the issues they encounter. There are numerous instances, as discussed here, in which teachers can utilize the reading materials of other contexts to relate them to the context of caste discrimination in Nepal. By incorporating these approaches, teachers enhance students' literary analysis skills and nurture critical consciousness and a sense of justice regarding caste discrimination in Nepal.

Conclusion

This study underscores a pressing need to incorporate and integrate critical and multiliteracy pedagogies into the compulsory English classroom in grades XI and XII in Nepal. These anti-discriminatory approaches are essential for fostering critical thinking and equipping students to confront social injustice, particularly caste-based discrimination. By cultivating such anti-oppressive critical consciousness, English classrooms can become transformative spaces where students actively engage in challenging discriminatory practices that continue to marginalize the Dalit communities. The study advocates for a reimagined compulsory English curriculum, syllabus, and pedagogy that extends beyond language and literature instruction to include meaningful dialogues on social justice by connecting education with broader societal goals of equity. Hence, this work highlights the importance of future studies on curriculum and syllabus design, professional development, teacher preparedness, and a critical assessment of the performance of Dalit students, reinforcing the need for ongoing educational reforms to achieve a more just and equitable Nepali society.

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