Transformative Learning and Social Justice in Educational Practice: A Document Analysis

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Abstract

This paper analyses the interrelation between knowledge discourses and educational justice via the theoretical perspectives of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, Michel Foucault's power-knowledge framework, and compatible awareness from Jurgen Habermas and Jack Mezirow. In the context of Nepal, the study scrutinises dual-medium instruction, scholarship policies, and environmental education as core areas where justice is both fostered and restricted. Using a conceptual and interpretive approach, the paper includes a global theoretical lens with local educational realities to investigate issues of inclusion, equity, empowerment, and justice as a whole. The outcomes in this study show that, although Nepal's educational policies focus on inclusion, implementation is often bound by linguistic hierarchies, bureaucratic structures, and global-local tensions. In the context of Nepal, the study also argues that achieving educational justice demands epistemic inclusion,

multilingual policies, critical pedagogy, transformative teacher education, decolonial approaches, participatory curriculum development, and greater recognition of indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: *Critical pedagogy, power-knowledge, epistemic justice, Nepalese education.*

Introduction

Traditionally, education has been perceived as a means of passing on knowledge, skills, and values from generation to generation (Freire, 1970; Dewey, 1938). In several societies, it has often been considered a method of transferring information from teachers to the passive listeners (Giroux, 2011). However, education has multiple roles compared to a technical role. In fact, it is a social, cultural, and political location where identities are shaped, power relations are questioned, and ideas of justice are bargained (Apple, 2012; Fraser, 2008). Education can either strengthen forms of inequalities by imparting fixed knowledge discourses over others or become a transformative environment that enhances justice by empowering historically marginalised backgrounds learners too (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). Similarly, education is not only limited to acquiring knowledge but also fosters equity, inclusion, and justice within society (Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

This perspective is relevant to the countries having deep diversity in language, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, and religion, like Nepal (Bhatta, 2011; Onta, 1996). Nepal is rich in cultural and social diversity; however, it presents challenges for justice in education. Though the Constitution of Nepal (2015) ensures equality, dignity, and the right to education for all Nepalese citizens, in practice, several groups still have obstacles to access, participation, and success in education (Government of Nepal, 2015). The discrimination in terms of caste, gender and indigenous languages is still prevailing in classroom teaching and curricula (Caddell, 2007; Carney & Bista, 2009). Educational institutions often focus on superior ideologies, languages, and cultural practices. They provide little space for recognising and valuing diverse knowledge systems (Bennett et al., 2008). Education is not limited to what is taught in the classroom; it is also concerned with whose knowledge is valued (Fraser, 2008; Apple, 2012).

The conflict between the ideal of education as a path to justice and its reality as a place of exclusion and inequality is the concern of this study. In Nepal, discussions about knowledge are closely related to issues of justice. For instance, emphasising Nepali and English as the medium of instruction often overlooks the linguistic rights of minority communities. If education is used to promote social justice, then it needs to focus on academic success. It encompasses broader ideas of fairness, empowerment, and inclusion.

To conceptualise justice in education, multiple ways, such as distributive justice, recognitional justice, and procedural justice, can be used. These dimensions are affected by knowledge discourses. Thus, an academic exercise is not limited to examining the relationship between knowledge discourses and justice. But it is a practical necessity for achieving equitable education in the Nepalese context.

The instrumentalist and technocratic views have often dominated educational discourse in Nepal. Policies focus on enrolment, infrastructure, and performance indicators, which are undoubtedly important, but they rarely interrogate how knowledge is constructed, legitimised, and contested in schools. As a result, systemic inequities are not addressed properly. Dalit students may access schooling, but continue to experience cultural alienation because their lived realities are not included in the curriculum. In the same way, girls may be enrolled in equal numbers in schools, but there are unexpected gendered expectations that limit their empowerment. The above examples show that without addressing the epistemic dimensions of justice, educational reforms risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to overcome.

The objective of this study is to analyse how knowledge discourses contribute to justice in education in Nepal. The inquiry emphasises that the understanding of inclusion, empowerment, equity, and justice is shaped by how knowledge is defined and practised in educational settings. In addition to this, it addresses the guiding statements, such as how existing curricula and pedagogies affect justice. Ways of excluding or including the voices of the voiceless in educational discourses. And how education can be reimagined as a site of justice rather than a space of reproduction of inequalities.

This study aims to contribute both theoretically and practically based on the above guiding statements. From a theoretical point of view, it focuses on the intersection of knowledge and

justice. If it is seen practically, it provides valuable opinions for policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers for making the curriculum more inclusive. Eventually, the study argues that reimagining education requires dismantling the hierarchies of knowledge. It changes students from passive recipients of knowledge to active recipients in forming their learning.

In my opinion, education is not a neutral process of knowledge transfer. It is a contested space where justice can be either maintained or confronted. This confrontation is particularly pressing to everyone in Nepal's diverse cultural era. Therefore, this study aims to advance the dialogue on education and justice by emphasising the epistemic aspects of educational practice, which respect for the diversity of Nepal.

Literature review

Theories of power, pedagogy, communication, and transformative learning clarify how education functions not only as the transmission of knowledge but as a site where identities, hierarchies, and social relations are built up. In the Nepalese context, this argument becomes a burning issue of linguistic diversity, caste hierarchies, and socio-cultural aspects. This literature review analyses the key contributions of Foucault, Freire, Habermas, and Mezirow, as well as perceptions from Nepali scholars, to develop a significant understanding of knowledge discourses in relation to the intersection of justice in education.

Theoretical framework

Foucault's (1975, 1977) analysis of power-knowledge provides a basic perspective for internalising education to operate as a system of social control. As Foucault said, "knowledge is relative, which is always assimilated within power relations". In educational institutions, curricula, pedagogy, and assessment practices function as disciplinary spaces, where students are generally categorised in different layers.

This idea explains the school curricula, which place more importance on the language, culture, and history of dominant groups. But the knowledge and languages of indigenous and minority communities receive no attention. For example, when Nepali and English are mainly used as the languages of instruction, they are seen as more valuable in comparison to

other local languages.

This normalisation creates epistemic injustice. As a result, students from marginalised communities experience detachment. Thus, Foucault's understanding shows that justice in education cannot be achieved without questioning the disciplinary power assimilated in knowledge discourses.

Freire (1970) provides a counter-vision in which education becomes a means of freedom. He argues the "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit information into passive students, and instead advocates for dialogic pedagogy that empowers learners to critically engage with their realities for learning.

Freire's justice in education requires the inclusion of marginalised voices and the recognition of learners as co-creators of knowledge. Dialogue becomes the key to pedagogy. In Nepal, where caste, gender, and linguistic hierarchies remain deeply embedded. Freirean principles incorporate local languages into curricula or empower marginalised groups to integrate their experiences. Critical pedagogy encourages effective participation that fosters empowerment and social transformation rather than access to schooling.

Habermas (1984, 1990) emphasises communication and rationality as the basis of social justice to debate. Habermas differentiates between the system and the lifeworld, where individuals engage in shared meaning-making via communicative action. Education should strengthen the lifeworld by fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and liberty. However, Habermas challenges that the lifeworld is increasingly colonised by the system, reducing education to a technical and economic obligation.

Habermas's framework is concerned with the tension between neoliberal educational reforms and donor-driven policies. These are mainly based on community values, cultural practices, and indigenous knowledge. If policy discourses focus on emphasising observable outcomes over communicative engagement, then learners' lifeworlds are excluded. To address diverse voices equally for achieving educational goals and practices, justice in education is indispensable.

Mezirow (1991) enhances the concept of transformative learning for fostering personal and social modification. According to him, transformative learning occurs when individuals encounter disorienting dilemmas that challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions.

Through critical reflection and dialogue, learners revise their frames of reference and develop more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspectives.

Mezirow's theory is particularly significant for justice in education because it frames learning as a process of emancipation. Learners are not merely absorbing information but questioning dominant ideologies and reconstructing their identities. In Nepal, transformative learning could involve challenging caste-based prejudices, questioning gender roles, or critically reflecting on the privileging of global knowledge over local epistemologies. Such learning empowers students to navigate plural realities and to become agents of social justice.

Empirical review

Empirical classroom-based studies in Nepalese community schools show that dialogic teaching, problem-posing methods, and reflection on lived experiences support transformative learning. Teachers who encouraged students to question social issues such as caste discrimination, gender roles, and local inequalities helped learners re-examine taken-for-granted beliefs. Such practices enhanced students' critical consciousness (*conscientization*) and promoted social justice by giving voice to marginalised learners. However, evidence also indicates challenges, including rigid curricula, exam-oriented teaching, and limited teacher autonomy, which restrict deeper transformative engagement.

Empirical research in multilingual classrooms of Nepal demonstrates that the use of mother tongue–based instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy improves participation of linguistically marginalised students. The research report shows that confidence, classroom interaction, and equitable learning opportunities are maintained for Dalit, Janajati, and rural learners. These practices promote social justice by minimising linguistic hierarchies and epistemic exclusion.

Justice and global-local tensions in Nepali scholarship

Global theorists provide important conceptual tools; Nepali scholars emphasise the contextual realities of justice in education. Koirala (2008) said that education must address

the contradiction between global pressures and local needs in Nepal. On the one hand, globalisation brings demands for competitiveness. On the other hand, there is a need to preserve indigenous knowledge, enhance linguistic diversity, and treat caste- and gender-based disparities. Achieving justice in the educational system with balance is a tough job.

According to Aryal (2023), justice in Nepal's education system is not limited to school visits. Real justice means respecting different cultures, languages, and ways of knowing. For example, policies say that minority languages should be used in schools while delivering the contents, but not in practice. He says local communities should have the right to decide learning and teaching methods. These ideas reflect the association of education with fairness. Foucault says the importance of education, which can make students follow certain rules and ways of better thinking. Freire believes education plays an important role in helping people become aware and improve their lifestyles. Habermas says open and honest conversation. about their ideas and help create positive change.

Additionally, Mezirow shows the powerful role of critical reflection in transformation. Nepali research adds a warm, local touch by placing these ideas within the everyday lives of Nepal's diverse communities.

Despite these contributions, there are gaps in policy and practice. Firstly, the discourse on justice in education in Nepal is policy-oriented, which focuses on access and resources. Secondly, critical theories focus on the emancipatory potential of education; their practice in Nepalese classrooms remains limited. Teacher training, assessment systems, and curriculum design also show hierarchical and technocratic models in education. Finally, there is a need for more empirical studies to judge students' and teachers' experiences of knowledge discourses in everyday practice, which shape justice outcomes.

The literature shows that justice in education is inseparable in terms of how knowledge is defined, legitimised, and practised. The above-discussed four models, viz. Foucault (critique of normalisation), Freire (advocacy for conscientization), Habermas (emphasis on communicative rationality) and Mezirow (model of transformative learning) collectively provide a theoretical foundation for analysing educational justice. Nepali scholars give attention to the contextual dynamics of caste, language, gender, and globalisation.

Methodology

 A conceptual and qualitative interpretive approach is adopted to understand educational programs in Nepal via a justice-oriented knowledge discourse perspective. For this, I have collected the policy-related information from the Google article section. A conceptual paper is suitable for this research as it aims to critically examine existing policies, practices, and theoretical perspectives, incorporating some primary empirical data obtained from teachers. The interpretive approach enables a significant understanding of the complex relationships among knowledge, power, and social justice in the Nepali educational context.

Document analysis can be taken as the primary method of inquiry for this study. I have analysed key documents, such as the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP, 2016–2023), the Local Curriculum Policy (2076), the Teacher Education Framework, and other relevant policy and curricular documents as sources of data. Additionally, scholarly articles, books, and reports related to critical pedagogy, educational equity, and knowledge discourses are also examined as secondary data. This study emphasises how inclusion, empowerment, equity, and justice are understood and functionalised within these documents. and they intersect with broader social, cultural, and political contexts.

I have embedded a reflexive element in this study to acknowledge the researcher's positionality as an M.Phil. scholar situated within the Nepali educational landscape. This positionality influences the interpretation of policies and literature. Reflexivity involves critical self-awareness regarding potential biases and assumptions while engaging with texts and theoretical perspectives.

Overall, this methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the normative and conceptual foundations of justice in Nepali education. It also provides a foundation for critically analysing how knowledge discourses shape educational programs, highlighting areas where policy and practice can enhance more inclusive, equitable, and just educational experiences.

Findings and discussion

Nepalese educational policies, curricular documents, and secondary literature analysis show a complex scenario in which knowledge discourses both enable and restrain educational justice.

Transformative learning and social justice in educational practice

This document explains teachers' experiences of transformative learning and social justice in education. When learning does not help to bring positive change in students' behaviour, it loses its meaning in a real sense. One teacher said, *"Educational justice is established when every learner's language and knowledge are treated as valuable."* It depicts that justice in education begins when schools respect students' mother tongue languages. In the Nepalese context, English and Nepali languages play dominant roles over local languages. In such a situation, some students feel respected, whereas others feel neglected. The main notion of critical pedagogy is also associated with the connection that education should connect with students' real lives. When schools use different languages as a medium of instruction, students take ownership. All languages and knowledge must be valued for establishing fair education.

Another teacher said*, "Power in education is concerned with the valued knowledge instead of limiting it to rules and policies."* This depicts that power and knowledge are interrelated to each other. They can't be separated. Theoretically, the policies support inclusion; however, practically, local voices are sometimes neglected. Though schools often favour dominant knowledge, in such situations, indigenous knowledge is excluded. Due to this, acknowledging different languages and knowledge systems is significant for bringing fairness in education. A third teacher urged, *"Transformation in education happens when teachers and students discuss and question rather than accepting."* This statement reflects the importance of dialogue and reflection for meaningful learning. For making education participatory, students are allowed to take part in questioning and sharing their ideas. In doing so, they develop confidence and empowerment. Finally, education enhances empowerment and social justice in the Nepalese context.

While delivering content, the dual-medium system creates differences in education. English-medium schools are usually better-equipped than Nepali-medium schools in terms of

resources. Sometimes scholarship programs may be ineffective during implementation, though they are designed to support disadvantaged students. Many scholarship schemes are also focused on urban areas instead of focusing on rural areas. This shows that there is a gap between policy and practice. Similarly, environmental education policies always raise their issue in favour of sustainable development, but not in a real classroom teaching.

In fact, Nepal's education system doesn't stand in its own context. External factors like global trends, donor priorities, and international assessments influence it. These often emphasise English skills, exams, and job-related abilities, excluding local knowledge and culture. Ultimately, indigenous languages, local history, and traditional knowledge may be neglected, which creates a challenge in balancing global standards with local identity and educational justice.

Education systems can emphasise some knowledge while ignoring others. Dialogic learning creates an environment of open communication and participation to discuss educational issues. True participation is only possible in the presence of local community involvement. Transformative learning theory emphasises the importance of students' reflection based on their day-to-day experiences. True transformation is impossible when learning is unable to connect to real life.

In my opinion, Nepal's education system presents both positive goals and significant challenges. Policies raise issues about inclusion, equity, and empowerment, but these goals still have not been fully achieved. This is due to language barriers, resource gaps, and cultural neglect. Therefore, curriculum, instruction, and policy are to be connected to local realities in a real sense.

The study shows that different methods can be used to improve the education system in Nepal. Schools should keep local languages and indigenous knowledge as a priority, along with national and global content. Scholarship programs should focus on targeted students to ensure justice. Environmental education should also focus on local community issues to connect learning with students' day-to-day lives. This is the best way to make education more inclusive, meaningful, and transformative.

There is a mutual interconnection among knowledge, power, and justice in education

in the Nepalese context. Opportunities and difficulties, local adaptation, critical reflection, and participatory practices are essential for fulfilling expected goals into equitable outcomes. The creation of empirical observations and theoretical understanding depicts that justice in education is an ongoing, context-sensitive process.

Conclusion

This article contributes to educational research in Nepal, focusing on epistemic justice as a main dimension of educational equity. It increases critical pedagogical discourse, connecting global theory with local realities. Justice in education is not only about access or distribution, but it is also concerned with the validity of knowledge. The study is especially relevant for policymakers, teacher educators, curriculum developers, and researchers interested in critical pedagogy. Decolonial education and social justice are also connected with multicultural contexts. The work has strong potential for publication in peer-reviewed journals, focusing on education and social justice.

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