

Welcome the Unwelcoming: Exploring Social Justice in School Pedagogies

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Abstract

This article emphasizes looking for social justice in school pedagogies and practices to welcome students coming from other than the mainstream cultural background. The article utilizes the qualitative research design under which the narrative interview was carried out with a single student coming from an ethnic minority background in one of the rural schools situated in the Kathmandu district. The goal was to explore their experiences about the mainstream school's practices in which Nepali language as a medium of instruction, uniformed pedagogy, and centralized curriculum are the dominant approach. To understand the experiences of children with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, the article employs the multicultural perspective as a lens. The article argues that most of the classroom management, teachers' teaching skills and manners, school culture, and subject matters in the curricula and text are the most unwelcoming aspects to welcome children coming from different socio-cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. The article explores many unexplored areas that concern the several gaps between entire schooling processes and ethnic/indigenous students' socio-cultural backups. School culture, pedagogy, and classroom management have not well fostered the willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, interconnectedness, inter-reciprocity, and mutual understanding to welcome the unwelcoming in school. The article, therefore, warrants an immediate initiation to bringing an entire improvement in school culture in a way that addresses every need and expectation of linguistically, culturally, ethnically, economically, geographically, and religiously diverse children.

Keywords: *Classroom management, diversity, multicultural education, pedagogy, social justice*

Background

The current pedagogical practices of Nepali schools are yet to be more welcoming and enthusiastic to the students coming from other than Nepali speaking mainstream cultures have been a core of critiques over time because of the students' failures, poor school achievements, and lags. National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2019) has clearly stated that we have a centralized curriculum, though very little space is left for local curriculum, having uniformity in character spontaneously suggests using mainstream language and uniformed pedagogy. Even if the mother tongue school and the policy provision about the use of the bilingual or multilingual approach in schools have been advocated (National Education Policy, 2019), these language policies are called to be

subordinate to the mainstream language and are ranked as a second position in the classroom. Further, teachers are not well capacitated to fully utilize these languages in the classroom and have a problem with a proper understanding of them from students' language perspectives. These different factors intersected with the issue of social justice in our entire education system appear to be relatively accountable for the critiques about the poor performance of the public schools. These critiques interrogate the education policies provisioned to ensure equity and equality in education and warrant an initiation to meticulously assess the shortcomings of the education system that hinders welcoming the unwelcoming.

The concern about why students from different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds experience poor school success and often have school dropouts pushes school practices into the interrogation. Equally, the parents coming from the same socio-cultural background have less affiliation to and ownership with schools further raising a question mark to schools as a whole.

Improving school education and practice to welcome the unwelcoming has been less explored and there have not been sufficient studies dealing with the social justice issue to welcome them. This study, therefore, has a significant contribution to highlighting school practices and learning environments that must work for all reflecting diverse needs of student diversity.

Today's society with diversity is reflected in Nepali classrooms. The conventional classroom practices are no longer enough to nurture a school environment that works for partiality. Arguably, the adapted traditional approach in our schools is less effective in mitigating injustice, bias, and prejudice against linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse students. It causes most difficulties for these students because of the mismatch between what they bring to school and how they experience school culture (Stoicovy, 2002). The school culture experienced by the child is very different from the culture of the family and community in which the child lives (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This fault is reflected in students' school failure, poor achievement, and school dropout. This issue, therefore, questions the current school practices, curricula, and modes of classroom delivery that work against the spirit of social justice in the school system.

School is a foundation stone for developing a good fabric of a disciplined society through acknowledging a mosaic of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversities, which are deeply intersected with each other in Nepali society. Our future national unity will rely on a balanced acknowledgment of these diversities by fostering free of potential bias, prejudice, and discrimination in educational policies, curricula, and pedagogies that lead to establishing a disciplined society where everyone can enjoy and celebrate. For this to happen, an approach to diversity is imperative to address may be a multicultural education that could work with adjusting every issue concerning language, culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. the root of the society (Neito, 2017; Banks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Referring to this, Woolfolk (2004) argues that multicultural education is a response to the increasing diversity of the school population as well as the growing demand for equality for all groups. It signals multicultural education as a compatible pedagogy that widely addresses every student's identity, social class, ethnicity, and

gender in view of social justice. This pedagogy seeks to answer the situation by contextualizing the teaching-learning process relying on the diversity of the students (Stoicovy, 2002).

In conclusion, the more we delay revisiting our school pedagogical practices from a social justice point of view earlier, the later and the harder it will be to establish school a center for social justice to be inculcated in students for future societal ethos. Because established social justice in school practices could cater the democratic morals, conduct, values, inter-cultural/ethnic relationship, and mutual understanding in the early mind of children and youths for a utopian society.

Conceptual Intersection

The face of the Nepali classroom is changing and demanding a new pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. This direction shows the necessity of addressing the demand for multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual communities if school culture welcomes them by heart. The promising approach to address the varied needs of diverse students may be multicultural education (See, Nieto, 2017; Banks, 2016) that could work through the path of social justice.

Banks (1994) argues that multicultural program encompasses not only programs designed to restructure and desegregate schools, but also programs designed to increase all kinds of contact among the diversities. This program includes encouraging ‘minority teachers, anti-bias programs, and cooperative learning programs’. Addressing the issue of diversity is a difficult endeavor, as it requires a commitment to promoting a conducive school culture that undermines equality and equity to all student diversities for catering to all kinds of learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Banks, 2016).

Concerning an approach to multicultural education, Sleeter (1996) delineates five approaches to multicultural education. The ‘teaching the culturally different approach’ tries to raise the academic achievement of students of color by carrying out culturally relevant instruction. The ‘human relation approach’ suggests that commonalities of all people are taught through understanding their social and cultural differences, but not their differences in terms of institutional and economic power. The ‘single group studies approach’ emphasizes the histories and contemporary issues of oppression concerning people of color, women, low socioeconomic groups, and gays and lesbians. Likewise, the ‘multicultural education approach’ assumes transforming the educational process that reflects the ideals of democracy in a pluralistic society. The approach prioritizes teaching students the contents using instructional methods that value cultural knowledge and differences. The last is the ‘social reconstructionist approach’. This approach goes a bit further to teach students about oppression and discrimination and how they exist in different forms and nature. For this to recognize students learn culturally responsive practices and strategies and identified through the research and review of the literature.

J. A. Banks (2016) has discussed a multicultural framework that envisages addressing student diversities, a well-elaborated model that does not require much effort to implement in an education setting. First, the ‘content integration’ advice to deem the contents belonged to the history, culture, values, wisdom, festivals, etc. of student diversity in the curriculum in a balanced way. Second, the ‘knowledge construction’ process involves different levels in which students

are assisted by the teachers to explore, understand and assess the implicit cultural assumptions. Third, the 'prejudice reduction' enables teachers to need to self-appraisal and critically assess their personal behaviors, teaching behaviors, and the methods they are using in the classroom and outside the classroom, and make every time to reduce their bias, prejudices, and discrimination. Fourth, the 'equity pedagogy' provides teachers with varied methods, strategies and ways the teacher attempts to bring into the classroom brings in a way that addresses and maintains social justice. Last, the 'empowering school culture' suggests bringing an improvement in the social structure of the school as a total school culture aiming at ensuring equity and equality.

Culturally relevant pedagogy appears as a core pedagogical approach to multicultural education. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) conceptualize four motivational conditions that involve establishing inclusion, enhancing positive attitude, promoting meaning, and engendering competence. These are the major concerns in multicultural education that typically cover and address the typicality of student diversity in school by concerning all the educational components – curriculum, pedagogy, infrastructure, and classroom management. Jackson (1994) provides a seven-step strategy to be applied in multicultural settings – building trust, becoming culturally literate, building different methodological approaches, using effective questioning techniques, providing effective feedback, analyzing instructional materials, and establishing positive home-school relations. These strategies add a unique address as to how student diversities could be approached in multicultural settings reflecting the importance for teachers to have them for their professional development and for school administrators to adopt them for promoting school culture as well.

In conclusion, the school system in Nepal very poorly imagines the concept of multicultural education since teacher training packages appear to slightly include some ideas without any correspondence to the guiding principle of multicultural education. It indicates therefore that the poorer the correspondence of principles of multicultural education in school practices, the greater the indifference against social justice for the students coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds. The theoretical discussion seemingly upholds the practical implication of social justice and equity, in essence, needs clicking on the mind of our educators, planners, decision-makers, and curriculum organizers to think of social justice from a multicultural perspective.

Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative interview with one of the ethnic students studying in one of the schools situated in the Kathmandu district. A narrative approach, one of the qualitative research designs that I employed for generating the empirical evidence, is all about collecting and telling stories by studying a single person who describes experiences, life experiences, and the meaning is sought by discussing with the person (Creswell, 2012; Cohen et., (2018). While collecting data, the researcher's reflexivity was highly maintained by interrogating my socio-cultural construction, knowledge system, and privileges (Grenfell, 2014). For this, every discussion question I asked him was rigorously and critically assessed, together with being self-awareness of if I was overestimating or underestimating his remarks and voices. The boy, studying in grade 9, coming from an ethnic minority background was interviewed using an unstructured open questionnaire in order to explore the in-depth description of his personal stories about

his school trajectory. Complying with the ethical consideration, I maintained privacy that his identity and the name of his school would be anonymous and agreed that no recording device would be utilized to record his experiences. The data were collected in the form of descriptive notes and were carefully coded to develop a small summary that could produce themes of the stories generated. These were carried out by focusing on the content and structure of the stories and the ways how the stories were conveyed (Bryman, 2012).

Result and Discussion

The data collected through interviews reveal that Nepali classroom practices less allow students, other than mainstream students, to express their views, ideas, and understanding because of having either insufficient knowledge about the contents or classroom hindrances – hesitation, annoyance, mocking, scolding, neck-names. The following sub-points provide field findings and their theoretical connection to understanding the ongoing classroom practices.

School culture: Concern about equality and equity

School culture encompasses all the school practices of a school that depicts a whole school system about how it functions, behaves, and supports students coming from different socio-cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds for their greater learning experiences. Banks (2016) argues that it deals with the social structure of a school as a total school culture that emphasizes improving the connection among the school family to ensure equity and equality in schools. He contends:

I have friends from all different communities and have a friendly relationship with them. During school time I sit with them, play with them, and also share the class work with one another. Even though they support me, I am no better at classroom activities, as I feel confused to grasp some contents and their meanings in the mainstream language (Excerpt-1).

All ethnically, linguistically, and culturally different students possess their identity and culture and have their way of learning styles to grasp the meaning. As they encounter the circumstances, the school culture, other than their homely environment, set them back from understanding and grasping the meaning in such circumstances to the degree that their mainstream counterparts grasp. Because of the different school cultures, they encounter, their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds result in a discrepancy in school achievements and performances. A conducive and friendly school culture incorporating student diversity, and involvement of all in ensuring equity and social justice in attitudes, manners, and behaviors could generate equal learning experiences in students. He reveals:

I am usually a regular student. In a praying line, I sometimes try to stand in front, but mainstream students push me back or they pull my hair or clothes and compel me to stand back. Teachers find their activities, but they are convinced by the students and scold me with a warning. Then, I am less willing to stand in front during the praying time (Excerpt-2).

Here, the remark indicates bitterness toward the school culture. The school culture must be justifiable and neutral – neither favorable for someone or unpromising for others. It must have

equal and equitable elements that apply to all. If so, the more the school environment becomes conducive to welcoming and adjusting the need of diverse students, the better the opportunity for them to present themselves in the school environment with a respectable pride. As a result, it is likely to reduce the hatred, embarrassment, hostility, and differentiation among the cultural groups, and promote interconnectedness, interdependence, and brotherhood.

School pedagogy: Concern about achievement

School is more screened and commented on by the public based on the school achievement immediately exhibited rather than their qualities gained through the schooling process in the long-term return students achieve. Teaching is basic to provide students with immediate and long-term gain to satisfy the public and to lead a future life in society as well. If a society claims a democratic, participatory, and inclusive, school and its pedagogy are the foundation of such a society for inculcating social justice in children. For making teaching effective including all types of students, there needs, as Woolfolk (2004) advises, to teach classroom procedures directly, even ways of doing things that you thought everyone would know. The following excerpt reflects the classroom practices that are less corresponding to inclusiveness.

Some teachers are good at teaching, but sometimes scold me with neck names, and also pull my hair as I am not able to answer the question, but do not beat me with a stick. Teachers say I do not study at home and am not conscious of my study, and poor in class (Excerpt-3).

Here, the excerpt indicates the idea of blaming the victim and easily gives an answer to why students coming from ethnically, culturally, and linguistically have poor school achievement. Durden (2008) contends that the most common factors that affect racial achievement gaps are: socio-economic and family conditions, student and youth behaviors, and schooling conditions and practices. Strengthening the development of an instructional program relevant to the diversity of students is, therefore, a need for a classroom-relevant pedagogy that seemingly enhances the lost belief and confidence of these students. In this connection, the core of culturally relevant instruction is the culture of learners to be addressed through our pedagogical strategies. Similarly, teaching differences in the classroom is not an easy project, but a commitment to this goal, may take a longer time and need constant patience to reach.

In promoting a classroom free of discrimination, violence, bias, and prejudice, a requirement is to get to know the customs, traditions, and values of your students coming from different backgrounds (Woolfolk, 2004). The school failure of students, therefore, has varied, a cultural mismatch between the students and school, cultural differences, teacher's poor understanding of students' cultural heritage, communication and relation between teachers and students, and their motivational system as well

He disagrees with classroom practices, *"I hardly find the teacher's correction to my homework. But how lucky are some students sitting towards front rows often get feedback and advice, and towards back the teachers just monitor if we have done the homework"* (Excerpt-4). The teacher himself/herself is not the problem, but a crowded classroom and overloaded work schedule are the problems. For this, therefore schools and government agencies cannot get out of it, not

properly supporting teachers to manage a classroom in a way that teachers could reach all the students equally. The teacher also cannot escape from it as he/she could arrange the classroom and prioritize students who are shy, weak, culturally different, and have a poor exposure to the classroom activities. Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that culturally compatible pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically.

At last, it is necessarily important to know for all that unless teachers are strengthened, they are less successful to create a caring, safe, and secure learning environment to welcome these students. To welcome these students' differences in classroom learning, a culturally relevant pedagogy must meet three criteria (ibid, 1995) – an ability to develop students academically, wiliness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness.

Classroom management: Concern about teacher

Managing a classroom relying on the diversity of the students is a complex task, as it attempts to impart learning experiences to all ethnic and cultural groups with a principle of equality and equity. Classroom management corresponding to a multicultural perspective may minimize the school failure of students coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds. It helps create an environment in which students behave appropriately without any fear of punishment or desire for reward, but with a sense of personal responsibility (Weinstein et al, 2004). He shares his experience:

There is no good management as some of the students staying back to me often pull my hair and hang a paper-made tail on my back and mock me. If the sitting arrangement is changed regularly, it could be avoided; also, it boosts the freshness and smoothness of learning, and students may feel active in learning (Excerpt-5).

Multicultural classroom management not only facilitates the students to express their desires, intents, and needs spontaneously but also provides an opportunity to share, challenge, and accept the cultural diversities of others with democratic practices (Neito, 2017; Banks, 2016). Weinstein et al (2004) insist to make cultural diversity a lens through which teachers view the tasks of classroom management. These tasks include (a) creating a physical setting that supports academic and social goals, (b) establishing expectations for behavior, (c) communicating with students in culturally consistent ways, (d) developing a caring classroom environment, (e) working with families, and (f) using appropriate interventions to assist students with behavior problems. If a teacher fails to manage the classroom properly in a way that boosts the psychological well-being and security, it usually welcomes all kinds of threats to students' presence and violates the right to gain equal learning experiences in the classroom. In this context, he tells his story:

I always go to the school on time and sit in my regular place in the class towards the back. Sometimes, I want to sit at the front desk, but other friends do not let me sit there. Once I tried, they threw my bag and threatened me not to sit there. The class teacher does not manage the class in a way that all students should get a chance to sit in the front row at least once a week (Excerpt-6)

This story reflects the dynamism and necessity of classroom management in order to ensure equal learning experiences for all and install social justice through pedagogical practices. Weinstein et al (2004), believe that teachers should have fundamental understandings that can begin to reflect on the ways their classroom management practices promote or obstruct equal access to learning.

One of the goals of classroom management, as Ladson-Billings (1995) contends, is to focus on an urgent need for positing effective pedagogical practices in a theoretical model. This model does not only address students' achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identities while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequalities that school perpetuates. Teachers' skills in classroom management add psychological inputs to the physical space where students celebrate classroom interaction in a family environment forgetting their distance created by the societal hierarchy.

However, Weinstein et al (1994) consider classroom management has a greater and more powerful impact on student achievement rather than their general intelligence, home environment, and motivation. Establishing social justice in classroom participation from the diversity perspective, our school teachers are mostly accountable to accelerate equitable classroom experiences through a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence and academic potency. The teacher's failure is the school's failure is explicitly connected with students' achievement that equally interrogates the entire school family. On the contrary, I do not see our teachers are not alone the responsible entity for this but all who are directly and indirectly connected with the school. Thus, a collective effort of all is important to recognize the fact that those students who do not feel valued in school settings are further likely to develop lower self-esteem, alienation, and desperation from school learning. Enriching and equipping our teachers with skills and competencies in generating methods, and ways that communicate a multicultural education is a concern of the current school system in Nepal.

Curriculum and textbooks: Concern about representation

Nepali school-level curricula and textbooks about equity and social justice are less explored to respond to the needs of diverse students. School curricula and textbooks implicitly exercise the power over ethnic minorities and culturally different students, mostly they are the working instruments as pedagogies of the social elite or dominant cultural group (Bourdieu and Parsson, 1990). Nieto (2017) and Banks (2016) indicate the different ways that could create inequality and injustice to students coming from other than mainstream communities or cultural groups. Banks (2016) presents a dimension of multicultural education in which the first dimension emphasizes content integration. Content integration (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg 1995; Jackson, 1994) in curricula and textbooks fosters establishing inclusion, enhances positive attitude and meaning, and helps build trust and becomes culturally literate. This exclusively advises perceiving school curricula and textbooks as a representative of all the community dynamism irrespective of culture, language, ethnicity, gender, color, geography, etc. Against these prevailing ideas of multicultural education, Nepali school curricula and textbooks are less free from bias and prejudice that are reflected in the following excerpt. He points out:

School curricula do not have sufficient contents, and subject matters but slightly I encounter some contents about some of the ethnic/indigenous festivals and some cultures. I do not see my own in detail except just an introduction, and not the contents and subject matter available in my locality. This is also I do not do better by reading these contents that are less known to us, and my family does not know them to teach me (Excerpt-7).

Here, the school curricula at least have attempted to address the issue partially, the detail could be addressed in local curricula as an alternation. Besides, not only teaching but also the teaching-learning materials may represent the classroom diversity if teachers are knowledgeable about the culture of the students of their classes. One of the failures of the national curriculum is covering all the contents of ethnic and indigenous communities, thereby the concept of local curriculum in practice could locally incorporate them (Bhattarai & Khatri, 2012). Teachers teaching in school first grasp the idea of the national curriculum, and the contents it talks about could make references to teaching the contents belonging to the local ethnic/indigenous diversity. This is a way that teachers can foster a multicultural classroom and extend the connection to the local diversities, even in the absence of the local curriculum in school. Banks's (2016) argument reflects that a multicultural program is designed to access all kinds of contents belonging to school diversity. In this case, if national curriculum contents are absent addressing a particular ethnic/indigenous community, teachers are the sole sources of linking the issue with contents of local diversity.

Talking about the importance of acknowledging the contents, or knowledge of local surroundings, if not communities, is a likelihood of accelerating the school achievement of students coming from such localities or communities. He argues:

If I hear the contents belonging to local subject matters, local traditions, and our festival, they trigger my attention and I feel enthusiastic to learn and discuss them. If the examination questions are from such content, the school achievement could be very good (Excerpt-8).

This seems to be crucial to introduce the contents of localities of diverse students that like to promote the students' eagerness and engagement in learning may lead to better school achievement. This seeks a teacher's dynamism and competency to think of the different multicultural strategies and methods to represent the values and cultures of students' local diversities. Sleeter (1996) proposes the culturally different approach which places a focus on improving students' achievement by employing culturally relevant instruction. Like Sleeter, Jackson (1994) advises applying a strategy that enhances multicultural setting – using effective questioning techniques and establishing positive home-school relations. Thus, by critical analysis and understanding of the classroom diversity, teachers could utilize any alternatives to represent the diversities of local communities, such alternatives uphold by any means a multicultural practice to welcome the un welcoming in a school setting.

Conclusion

Unless we redesign teaching strategies and our classrooms with regard to responding to cultural diversity in the days to come, we will undoubtedly have to bear a great loss in the academic field. Today's foremost challenge in education is to create a learning environment that maintains the cultural integrity of every child while enhancing educational success (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). However, through designing integrated content and reducing gender bias, discrimination, prejudice, violence, and racial attitudes, we could at least empower school culture and social structure which ultimately become a platform for establishing a just society. Moreover, it is expected to establish inclusion in school or the activities of school so that all experiences, cultural tools, and competencies can carefully be blended to promote a learning environment in which students and teachers feel respected by and connected to one another. If this thing let the classroom happen, the roles of students in a long run will culminate in a constructive social improvement so that they may participate in the generation of a more equitable future society.

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