

# Education and Justice in Nepal

## Introduction

Access to education is key to the translation into practice of constitutional aspirations for justice and inclusion in Nepal. To this end, Nepal's Constitution has guaranteed citizens' rights to compulsory and free education up to the basic level and free education up to the secondary level provided by the State ([Government of Nepal, 2015, 2018](#)). Likewise, every child is entitled to get basic education in their mother tongue. The State has prioritized education not only as a vehicle for human resource development, and economic growth but also as an indispensable tool for citizens' participation in and contribution to democratic practices.

In an effort to improve the quality and efficacy of education, the State has decentralized the education system. For this, the responsibilities and functions in the administration and management of education have been delegated to three tiers of government. In the current decentralized form, basic and secondary education comes under the local government tier, which is also responsible for disaster management, protection of natural resources, including watersheds, wildlife, mines and minerals, and protection and development of languages and cultures ([Government of Nepal, 2015, 2017](#)). The local and federal governments also share the responsibility for addressing issues related to utilizing natural resources, protecting biodiversity and responding to natural and man-made calamities.

The Local Government Operation Act ([Government of Nepal, 2017](#)) has delegated more regulatory powers and responsibility to local governments in framing local curricula and designing local textbooks. Despite such power-sharing, Nepal's school education system is still highly centralized, with the central administration exerting authority over most aspects of education, from policy to classroom pedagogy ([Paudel et al, 2024](#)).

In line with the global trend, Nepal has increasingly utilized school education as a vehicle for the protection of the environment and the equitable utilization of natural resources for sustainable development. To this end,

Nepal's secondary school education aims to produce environmentally aware citizens who (a) can contribute to sustainable development by protecting, promoting and utilizing natural resources; (b) are aware of climate change and natural calamities and respond to them wisely; and (c) can actively participate in the development of an inclusive, just and equitable society. These curricular goals are principally informed by the targets of SDG 4 that 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'; achieving these envisioned goals will be difficult without the incorporation of environmental, epistemic and transitional justice in the curriculum and everyday classroom practices. Against this backdrop, this chapter reports the findings of the Nepal case of the JustEd study. Although the study was conducted in two sequential phases – qualitative and quantitative – this chapter focuses exclusively on presenting the qualitative findings of the study.

## **Education and justice in Nepal's policies**

We reviewed educational and non-educational policies, focusing on how policies align with and promote the principles of environmental, epistemic and transitional justices in education. The reviewed policy documents are given in [Table 4.1](#). Five policy makers were interviewed online via Zoom or Google Meet to understand the process, priority areas of educational policy development, and the incorporation of the justice landscape into educational policies. Two of the policy makers interviewed were representatives from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The other three were Tribhuvan University professors involved in developing national education policies such as the School Education Sector Plan (SESP) ([Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022](#)) and National Curriculum Framework (NCF) ([Curriculum Development Centre, 2019](#)).

**Table 4.1:** Policy documents reviewed according to the three justices in Nepal

Type of justice	Selected policies that were reviewed
Environmental justice	Environment Management Framework for SSDP Nepal (2017) Climate Change Policy 2019
All three justices	The Education Act 1971 (Seventh Amendments, 2001) The Constitution of Nepal 2015 School Sector Development Plan (SSDP 2016–2024) School Education Sector Plan (SESP 2024–2035) Local Government Operation Act 2017 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2007 and NCF 2019

Nepal's education system has undergone significant transformation through policies designed and focused on ensuring inclusivity, equity and fairness, and to increasing access, quality and efficiency in education. These efforts aim to provide equal opportunities for all learners regardless of socio-economic, geographical or cultural backgrounds. Nepal National Framework SDG 4: Education 2030 is targeted to achieve the goal of SDG 4 regarding quality education and guaranteeing equitable access ([Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019a](#)). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2019 emphasizes ensuring equitable access to free quality education up to secondary level for all, expanding open and non-formal education to increase access, providing inclusive and special needs education, and establishing child-friendly environments in schools ([Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019b](#)). Similarly, the SESP focuses on making the school system inclusive, resilient and accountable. The SESP is instrumental in decentralizing Nepal's school education to strengthen people's access to education. The plan aims at improving education in Nepal by aligning with both national goals and international commitments, like the SDGs. The Local Government Operation Act 2017 ([Government of Nepal, 2017](#)), another important document, grants powers to local bodies to manage schools, make decisions on framing local curricula and teaching-learning materials, conducting training, and more. The decentralization of educational governance under Nepal's federal system brings both opportunities and challenges. While decentralization can lead to solutions that are more tailored to local needs and encourage greater community involvement, it also risks exacerbating existing disparities if local governments lack the capacity or resources to effectively carry out national policies. As Nepal is still in the early stages of transitioning to federalism, the education sector, like many others, is navigating through this complex change. Making sure that decentralization doesn't weaken the impact of justice-focused policies is a significant challenge that will require careful planning and ongoing support from both the central government and international partners. However, the implementation of these plans shows several gaps that remain unaddressed.

Our analysis of Nepal's policy documents demonstrates that they have addressed directly or indirectly environment-related issues such as the impact of humans on the environment and the protection and equitable distribution of natural resources. However, these issues are not approached through the justice perspective. In what follows, we present a review of major policy documents to examine the place of environmental justice therein. Nepal's Constitution ensures the citizen's right to live in a healthy and clean environment, and the compensatory right of the victim of environmental pollution ([Government of Nepal, 2015](#)). Espousing this constitutional aspiration, the Environment Protection Act 2019 ([Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2019](#)) and the Fifteenth Plan 2019/20–2023/24

(National Planning Commission, 2020) emphasize sustainable use of natural resources and the protection of biodiversity and the natural environment for future generations. The Fifteenth Plan outlines strategies for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction to ensure sustainable development. The SDG 4 framework ensures that those who are vulnerable to environmental challenges should have fair access to environmental resources. The environmental concerns articulated in the Constitution are to some extent addressed in the Education Act, School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) (Ministry of Education, 2016) and SESP by considering education as a means to equip learners with the knowledge, understanding, attitude and skills to address local environmental issues. The Education Act, SSDP and SESP emphasize the incorporation of environmental sustainability, human values, inclusivity, diversity, human rights and environmental change in the curricula and learning processes. Additionally, they focus on supporting marginalized and vulnerable groups, including those impacted by crises, including natural disasters, thereby ensuring justice in education. The NCF (Curriculum Development Centre, 2019), a principal curriculum framing document, has also recommended the incorporation of environmental issues in the school curriculum (Government of Nepal, 2017; Sharma et al, 2024). It aims to develop conscientious citizens capable of supporting sustainable development while also protecting the natural resources and cultural heritage through education.

Our review reveals that although environmental concerns figured in Nepal's policy documents, they are yet to be linked with justice. For instance, none of the documents mentions the term 'environmental justice', nor do they speak about potential injustice incurred because of ongoing environmental problems. So, teachers and stakeholders must bridge this gap by integrating justice-focused practices into education and policy implementation in Nepal. Environmental justice has to do with the people's equitable access to natural resources and their right to live in a healthy environment, as well as a symbiotic relationship between humans and non-humans. Accordingly, environmental justice in education pertains to embedding these and other environmental issues in education policies, and teaching-learning materials and activities so future generations can participate in sustainable development while taking care of the entire ecosystem. Embedding environmental justice in education has a twofold goal. First, it enables learners to comprehend human interactions with the natural environment and devise effective measures to strengthen such interactions. Second, it develops understanding and awareness among learners about injustice resulting from overexploitation of natural resources and natural calamities and inspires them to play a proactive role in mitigating such injustice.

The Constitution values epistemic justice by recognizing local cultural experiences and knowledge and enshrining the citizen's right to have a

voice in decision-making and equal opportunities to contribute and benefit from knowledge and education. The SSDP and School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) ([Ministry of Education, 2009](#)) both highlight Nepal's dedication to providing fair and inclusive education. Over time, Nepal's education policies have increasingly focused on themes of justice, emphasizing fair access, equity, quality education and inclusivity. The SSDP places a strong emphasis on improving the quality of education, prioritizing equitable access to overcome disparities faced by disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities and those from remote areas. The NEP (2019) aims to provide mother tongue-based and multilingual education; ensures affirmative action, reservation, prioritization and incentivization to marginalized communities; and provides for inclusive and special needs education to mainstream people with disabilities in education. The Local Government Operation Act ([Government of Nepal, 2017](#)) guarantees opportunities to provide traditional education aimed at continuing, preserving and promoting the traditions, values, norms, culture, rituals and practices within the society; it allows for the operation of institutions dedicated to educating children in these aspects. Education policies focus on targeted programmes for the poor and marginalized and remote communities through scholarships, free midday meals, free education, free learning materials and more. Working towards ensuring equitable access to compulsory and free education, the Fifteenth Plan working policy arrangement was providing open and alternative education and establishment of residential schools to meet the educational needs of children from poor, marginalized and endangered communities, as well as inclusive education for children with disabilities.

When it comes to transitional justice, we critically examined the educational policies to discover how education is addressing historical events and (in)justices; advocating equity, fairness and peace; promoting reconciliation; and providing reparation to conflict-affected people. The SSDP emphasizes resilience within the school system and ensures that schools are protected from conflict through a comprehensive school safety approach. Furthermore, governance and management will adapt to accommodate the political and administrative restructuring of the education sector, aligning with the identified needs of the federal context ([Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2016](#)). Although the SSDP was developed and implemented after the settlement of the Maoist conflict and the major political transition in State restructuring, the policy lacked clear and specific strategies and programmes to address the educational needs of conflict-affected children and communities, address political transition and advocate for justice in post-conflict situations. The SESP ([Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2022](#)) prioritizes enrolling and retaining conflict-affected children – as well as children from vulnerable, disadvantaged, endangered and other targeted groups – in school education

while also ensuring easier access, increasing participation and improving learning outcomes. The plan also considers the protection of school-going children from conflict, violence, natural disasters and diseases. Furthermore, the policy addresses the government's commitment to safeguarding children's right to education, protecting children during emergency and crisis situations caused by wars, conflicts, pandemics or natural disasters. It highlights the challenges of education in emergencies and crises, such as whether to provide education as a cross-cutting or separate subject, or whether to focus just on the risks from natural hazards or to also address epidemics and social conflicts.

While the SESP emphasizes ensuring social justice and education's role in the country's political transition, it notably lacks strategies, programmes, activities and outcomes aimed at addressing transitional justice within the education sector. During the time of the Maoist insurgency, Nepal had developed the Schools as Zone of Peace National Framework and Implementation Guidelines ([Ministry of Education, 2011](#)) aimed at keeping schools free from the impact of armed activities and other kinds of violence; party-based politics and other interferences; and discrimination, abuses, neglect and exploitation. This document addressed the negative impact of armed conflict, as well as other activities and incidents, on schools and children. The Local Government Operation Act ([Government of Nepal, 2017](#)) ensures the right to specific opportunities for children of individuals who were declared martyrs and those who disappeared as well as those who were injured or disabled during people movements, armed conflicts or revolutions. Furthermore, it ensures that children who were injured or affected by any incidents or events are provided education in a safe and secure environment. The fifteenth five-year plan in its vision focuses on creating foundations for a justice-oriented education system that guarantees equality, inclusivity, a dignified life and freedom from exploitation and discrimination, ensuring that the rights of individuals affected by past injustices are acknowledged or addressed ([National Planning Commission, 2020](#)).

## **Justice in the Nepal national curriculum and school textbooks**

We critically analysed the curricular materials given in [Table 4.2](#) using the critical content approach and keywords given in [Chapter 3](#). Recent Nepal Government curricula for grades 9 and 10 comprise five core subjects – Nepali, English, mathematics, science and technology, and social studies – and two optional subjects. Following the elimination of Health, Population and Environment (HPE) from the core curriculum, environmental issues are partly included in science and technology and social studies.

**Table 4.2:** Curricular materials analysed in Nepal

Level/year	Document title and date
Secondary education (grades 9 and 10)	Social studies curriculum (2014) and textbooks, old
	Social studies curriculum (2021) and textbooks, new
	Science curriculum (2014) and textbooks, old
	Science and technology curriculum (2021) and textbooks, new
	Health, population, and environmental education (2014), old

Key environment-related objectives featured in the current curricula of science and technology and social studies ([Curriculum Development Centre, 2021](#)) are:

- to explain the interrelation between biotic and abiotic components in aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems;
- to define the food web and food chain in ecosystems and show the relationship between flora and fauna;
- to explain the concept, cause and effects of climate change;
- to discover measures to minimize climate change;
- to list endangered animals and measures for their protection;
- to list traditional plants through investigation of their utilizations;
- to analyse human–environment relationships;
- to understand sustainability and community roles in environmental protection;
- to learn about national environmental policies and challenges; and
- to emphasize responsible resource management.

The 2014 curriculum for grades 9 and 10 covered a wide range of environment-related topics, such as natural hazards, pollution and climate change ([Curriculum Development Centre, 2014](#)). It also emphasized the interrelationship between health, population and the environment. In contrast, the 2021 curriculum for science and technology focuses on ecosystems, food chains, ozone layer depletion and other issues. The removal of HPE as a subject has not only limited learners' exposure to environmental issues but also de-emphasized the urgency of environmental education in national and provincial policy documents, further creating a policy–practice gap. This has led to barriers in translating policy aspirations and goals into action for environmental protection and preservation. The analysis of secondary-level textbooks of science and technology, social studies, and HPE shows the dominance of theoretical knowledge of environmental issues. The areas covered in these textbooks include, among others, ecosystems; ozone layer depletion; effects of excessive use of insecticides and chemical fertilizers; the concept, causes, effects and mitigation of climate change;

acid rain; the greenhouse effect; pollution induced by industrial chemicals; chemical waste management; and conservation of endangered animals. These textbooks fail to include contents rooted in learners' local contexts or to link theoretical knowledge to learners' lived experience. Bridging this gap through experiential learning is essential for enhancing understanding and action for protecting the environment. Since HPE has not been recognized as a core subject in the new curriculum, there is no comprehensive textbook that can play a supportive role in carrying out the intended action.

In line with the national education aims as given in the NCF, local governments have developed their own curricula incorporating the diverse local environments and other issues. The local curricula should expose learners to a range of environmental issues at local and global levels, including pollution, climate change, natural disasters and deforestation, and their impact on their everyday lives. Such content allows learners to connect environmental problems to their contexts and find the measures to mitigate them. Bringing local environmental issues and experiences to classroom teaching can be counted as a sustainable way of promoting epistemic justice in and through education.

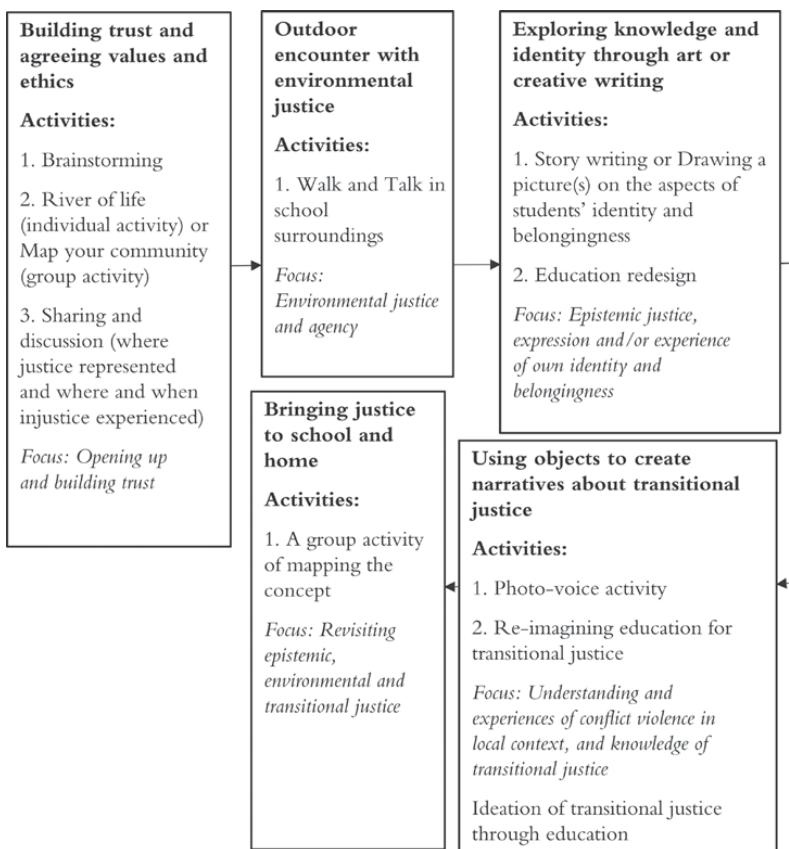
Although some content on culture, language, traditions and traditional music are included in the old social studies textbooks, learners felt that such content inadequately represents the diverse religious, cultural and traditional values of minority groups such as Muslims, Tharus and Chepang. A lesson on social problems discusses harmful traditional practices such as witchcraft, as well as the *Jhuma* and *Deuki* traditions of offering girls to monasteries and temples, respectively. These girls are not allowed to marry and have reportedly experienced sexual exploitation and violence ([United Nations Nepal, 2020](#)). The content covers discrimination in society in terms of gender, language, race, class and disability, as well as economic inequality. Additionally, it covers human rights and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights under the topic of civic sense. All this content is merely presented as information-sharing rather than critical engagement of learners towards understanding the complex interplay of social issues. There is a dedicated lesson on rights related to women and *aadibasi janajati* (Indigenous nationalities). This makes learners become more knowledgeable about respecting and valuing diversity, as well as eliminating inequalities in society. The latest secondary-level curriculum includes several key concepts related to concerns of epistemic justice such as socialization; identification of social/cultural diversity and preservation of social unity; the importance of traditional knowledge, skill and technology; identification and preservation of cultural heritage; recognition and exploration of traditional arts; and exploration of social norms and values.

While the previous social studies curriculum had limited content on aspects of transitional justice, the new curriculum addresses the gap by incorporating

some key aspects of transitional justice. However, the term transitional justice is not used in the old or new curricula or textbooks. The preface section of the new social studies textbook mentions that education needs to develop learners' competencies regarding their rights, promoting freedom and equality, practising healthy living, making decisions based on critical analysis, and more. Furthermore, it is expected that secondary education develops competencies so that learners demonstrate good moral character, sensitivity towards social cooperation and a commitment to sustainable peace through conflict management, among other things. The inclusion of chapters on social responsibility, domestic violence, identification of social issues and problem-solving skills, the role of international organizations in addressing social problems, and human rights fosters knowledge and understanding of (in)justice in society, recognizes and addresses past and ongoing injustice, and informs learners about where to report if injustice prevails in the society. Content coverage of various historical movements and conflicts from the time of the Rana regime to the recent federal republic system in Nepal and their positive and negative consequences highlights certain aspect of transitional justice within school educational discourse. For instance, an old social studies textbook for grade 10 ([Curriculum Development Centre, 2017](#)) describes a narrative around the Maoist insurgency and the formulation of the new Constitution in 2015.

The recent grade 10 textbook mentions that the current federal state system was established following the decade-long Maoist armed conflict, the 19-day People's Movement, the Madhesh protests and other significant events. There is discussion of the concept of a global brotherhood. It mentions that global brotherhood encompasses the sense of unity and the human right of every individual to live equally in peace and coexistence. Use of terms like social harmony, peace, coexistence, equality, end of discrimination, respect to other, human rights and sense of individual responsibility develop awareness among the learners towards maintaining cohesion and resilience in society. Similarly, use of terms like 'sacrifices of life during conflict' and 'violence and murder during conflicts' makes learners aware of the harsh realities faced by individuals and communities during times of conflict.

Although the content covers some important terms related to transitional justice, neither explicitly discusses how injustice prevailed during the conflict; nor about conflict resolution, reparation conflict healing; and preventing future conflict in the aftermath of large conflicts. When we asked learners about this, they suggested the incorporation of content on the causes and consequences of major conflicts in school textbooks. Likewise, a teacher emphasized the importance of equipping young learners with knowledge and skills in conflict management. It is difficult to see how curriculum and textbook content in its current form could contribute to building social harmony, reducing conflict, promoting peaceful coexistence and

**Figure 4.1:** In-person creative activities conducted with learners in Nepal

fostering resilience in society, all of which are essential in the process of transitional justice.

## **Learners' experiences and classroom practice related to the three justices**

We conducted a range of in-person participatory activities with learners, involving them in a series of individual or group tasks to explore their knowledge, experiences, skills and intended actions related to the environmental, epistemic and transitional justice concerns of the study. A total of 24 learners, comprising 6 secondary-level (grades 9 and 10) learners from each school, were involved in the in-person activities.

We also conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 teachers of 3 subjects and 4 head teachers (one from each school). Furthermore, we observed 62

classes for the selected subjects in the same schools to capture the classroom situation, including teaching and learning strategies, teacher and learner engagement, and assignment and assessment. This was followed by post-class interactions with three learners for each class observation.

### *How justice-related issues are taught in classrooms*

The study found several cases of dissonance between pedagogical principles and classroom practices. We observed the delivery of lessons in the subjects for which we had analysed the curriculum. In this way, we aimed to capture the ‘curriculum in practice’. We developed an observation template so that the different researchers engaged in the observations within and across the different schools produced comparable and consistent data related to classroom teaching and learning. The template was filled out by a researcher who either sat at the back of the classroom during the lesson or completed it while reviewing a recording of the lesson (audio and video). After the lesson had finished, the researcher conducted brief interviews on the spot with one to three learners in the class to gain their immediate reflections on their experience in the class.

In the observed classes, the teachers commonly entered the classroom without preparation and planning of lessons; classroom teaching was mostly dominated by teacher’s talk; delivering and paraphrasing textbook contents; discrepancy between learners’ everyday experiences and classroom instruction; and limited practice of problem-solving, critical thinking, exploration, experimentation and project-based learning (Paudel et al, 2024). This traditional mode of teacher-fronted instruction limited learners’ learning opportunities and further restricted their abilities to access, process and share their knowledge and experiences (Adhikari and Poudel, 2024). We suggest that this is a significant epistemic injustice since it devalues learners’ knowledge and experiences in teaching–learning resources and activities and does not recognize their capacity as knowers (Fricker, 2007).

Effective learning calls for learners’ engagement in hands-on experiences, critical and appreciative perspectives on their surroundings, systemic thinking, a sense of responsibility and knowledge on wise use of environmental resources, environment protection and sustainability, and their involvement in decision-making (Piscitelli and D’Uggento, 2022). Despite this, such learner-centred and discovery-oriented teaching–learning activities were missing from most of the observed classes. For instance, the observation of an environmental lesson in grade 10 science in an urban Terai school showed that learners had very limited opportunities to engage in activities and put forward their ideas and experiences during classroom teaching and learning. The head teacher from the same school reported that the secondary curriculum has introduced the concept of sustainable development endorsed

by the UN, but its effective delivery and practice rely heavily on teachers' skills, capabilities and commitment. The head teacher also mentioned that learners were not involved in activities beyond the school. This suggests a lack of external engagement opportunities for learners to go outside the school to participate in community awareness and environmental campaigns. Opportunities for learners to engage in community activities make them realize their position as change agents in the community. The issues of environment and episteme are directly associated with society and learners' everyday life experiences, calling for multimodal pedagogy (Sharma et al, 2024). Creating situations where learners share their stories and everyday experiences and connecting classroom practices to their personal experiences are vital for meaningful and experiential learning, thereby enhancing better educational outcomes (Nuwategeka et al, 2021b).

Lack of criticality in classroom instruction was another phenomenon that hindered learners' learning processes. We found that curricula, instructional materials and teaching–learning practices regarding all subjects were mostly informative and did not incorporate the critical approach to understand societal and environmental issues and problems from justice perspectives. Such issues cannot be addressed adequately through traditional teacher-centred pedagogy. The lecture method monopolized most of the teachers' classes with limited dialogic interaction (Adhikari and Poudel, 2024) that can leverage learners' place-based knowledge and experiences. Justice in pedagogical practices emphasizes the participation, recognition and representation of learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, particularly those from marginalized and deprived communities.

A head teacher noticed no significant shift in pedagogical approaches and complained about the teachers' use of traditional approaches to minimized learner contribution to learning processes. In his observation, the teachers were not very aware of participatory learning and critical thinking. Another head teacher from a rural Terai school talked about his effort to create a stress-free teaching and learning environment in the school. However, as the interview data revealed, he was not clear what he meant by a stress-free environment and how it could be created, further suggesting a gap between his saying, understanding and doing.

We also found a lack of connection between learners' lived experiences and classroom teaching–learning activities. For instance, two of the learners shared observations of their surroundings. They complained about the lack of greenery and open space and wished to see more trees in their surroundings. Likewise, two learners from a rural school talked about floods and landslides in their area. However, the curricula and prescribed textbooks contain pre-selected and fixed content, allowing limited or no space for teachers and learners to discuss the impact of such adverse environmental events on their everyday lives and society as a whole. By the same token, the teachers

were also found to be limited to the delivery of book content, failing to encourage learners to bring their place-based knowledge to the classroom discussion. It follows that lack of flexibility in the curricula and textbooks and teachers' inability to invoke learners' everyday experiences related to their surroundings could not address environmental and epistemic justice in the classroom.

We found that the lecture method is predominantly employed to teach lessons on social issues and conflicts, with teachers applying a similar approach to science and HPE. Learners from both an urban hill school and a rural Terai school expressed that teachers primarily rely on the textbook content, simply explaining and paraphrasing what is written, and seldom go beyond that; the use of critical and innovative approaches for engaged learning is lacking.

This was particularly evident from learners' interview data that they had never engaged in discussions about topics related to crime, violence and conflict, apart from teacher lectures and informal peer interactions. There is no teaching about the major transitions in the country dealing with the narratives, complexities and consequences of historical events. We found that teachers and learners have little knowledge and awareness of transitional justice and its processes and mechanisms. Learners were asked about their knowledge and experiences of past conflicts, including the Maoist insurgency and Madhesh movement, that had occurred in the country. Respondents mostly talked about redress of entrenched systems of domination, discrimination and inequality in society that they had experienced or studied in school. They reported existing caste-based and gender-based discrimination; social taboos like the dowry system, child marriage and witchcraft practice; and violence and crime adversely impacting social harmony, unity and peace. Only a fraction of learners had some knowledge and understanding of past conflicts and movements in the country, while the majority had little to no knowledge or awareness of them. A learner from rural Terai said, 'I think that Madhesh movement was for equality', while another learner from same school said, 'I am unaware of it'. Three learners and two teachers viewed the Maoist insurgency and Madhesh movement as a political issue. When rural Terai learners were asked about martyrs' memorials in their localities, learners were found to be unaware of the purpose of their construction, while a learner from a mountain school opined that a martyr's gate is to remember those who have been lost and provide justice for the family.

There was a distinct gendered dimension here. A female learner from a rural Terai school admitted she had no idea of the causes behind the Madhesh movement. She explained, 'in our society, political matters are not usually discussed with females ... they shut us out, even if we ask ... they say women don't need to know about political matters'. The learner's statement highlights the gender-based exclusion in society leading to

injustice, inequality and reduced participation. This suggests a significant barrier to inclusive participation in decision-making and accountability mechanisms in post-conflict situations, as they often fail to critically examine the impacts of patriarchy and the distinct experiences of different genders (Billingsley, 2018).

Based on these findings, we argue that past conflicts and major political events need to be part of school curricula that help learners understand the context of society and foster the educational goal of informed citizenship. Critical and reparative pedagogy helps students learn and critically analyse the dynamics of conflict, promote empathy and tolerance, and foster decision-making capacity. Davies (2017, p 4), advocating for a justice-sensitive approach in education, highlights the 'need of structural reforms, changes in curriculum and institutional culture'. Education reforms offer the chance to initiate change both from the ground up and across various levels, involving key stakeholders such as educators, school leaders and administrators. They play a critical role in ensuring the successful implementation and broad dissemination of reform efforts to ensure transitional justice (Logan and Murphy, 2017).

### *Transfer of learners' learning into practice*

Poor transfer of learners' learning into practice was another important theme that emerged in interviews and class observations. The curriculum teaching and learning covered the topics of environmental issues, and the learners were taught such issues in the classroom. One striking example comes from a rural Terai school. During our field visit, we noticed the school premises littered with plastics and other waste materials, which is indicative of the lack of use of learners' theoretical knowledge in keeping the environment clean. In other words, learners failed to translate environmental concepts learned from books into actions. This also shows that the theoretical knowledge could not bring about changes in learners' behaviour, which further highlights the need for effective teaching–learning activities to modify students' behaviours concerning the environment.

Several factors can be attributed to the learning–practice gap. The first reason is inadequate coverage of relevant content in curricula and textbooks leading to the lack of attitudinal and behavioural change. Secondly, there was low efficacy of what is taught and learned in schools. For instance, classroom teaching was predominantly lecture-based and required learners to memorize information, facts and figures rather than engage in interactive, problem-solving, project-based and critical thinking activities. Thirdly, learners had limited opportunities to engage in co-curricular, extracurricular and community engagement activities. Fourthly, there was inadequate coverage of social impact of environmental deterioration

in curricula, textbooks and teaching–learning practices. For example, following the science and technology textbook, the teachers covered the ‘what’ aspect of climate change (definition, causes and effects) and the ‘so-what’ aspect (mitigation measures) but did not engage learners in the ‘now-what’ aspect (what learners can do immediately to deal with environmental issues at home and society).

School–community collaboration affords new and additional learning opportunities for learners, thereby solidifying, extending and expanding their classroom experiences. The learners in the study also highlighted the value of home and community engagement. They shared their experience of learning through interactions with parents, grandparents, relatives, neighbours and peers. At the societal level, they also learned through their involvement in clubs, campaigns, social work, volunteer services, and cultural and religious practices. This shows that the school should plan how to engage the learners in family and community activities, and accordingly that classroom instruction should capitalize on learners’ family and community experiences related to the environment. Our classroom observations showed that the teachers mostly gave homework requiring learners to answer questions rather than collecting information from their families and communities. Classroom instruction should capture what learners have learned in and from their communities and encourage them to use classroom learning to solve their real-life problems.

The study revealed a lack of school–community collaboration, particularly in relation to environment protection and dealing with societal problems. A head teacher from rural Terai mentioned that his school planted a variety of plants on school premises. However, the villagers did not realize the importance of the initiative and let their animals graze on and damage the plants, which is indicative of the villagers’ limited awareness of environmental sustainability. Another important issue related to this is the lack of community engagement in the environmental initiatives taken by the school. The head teacher from the urban hill school admitted her school did not create community engagement opportunities for learners. She further mentioned that her school is in the VIP area and that the children from this elite community do not enrol in this school. Consequently, the school remains isolated from the community. A head teacher from urban Terai reported that the school managed dustbins for waste disposal, started segregating the waste into biodegradable (organic) and non-biodegradable (other); constructed a well-managed garden; and built a child-friendly, plastic-free green school. Such school initiatives can serve as an example for the community, leading to substantial and transformative outcomes in society. School–community collaboration is instrumental in achieving SDG 4 Quality Education and SDG Target 13.3, which aims at improving education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity to meet climate change.

### *Schools as sites of diversity and peace*

All four head teachers stated that their schools represent diversity in terms of learners' ethnicity, religion, gender, culture, geographical location, development and socio-economic status. For example, the head teacher from the urban hill school said that her school had learners belonging to the Tamang, Tharu, Magar, Brahmin, Kshetri and Dalit communities, as well as others from different parts of Nepal. She pointed out the multiple advantages of diversity in school education, where learners share with their colleagues their cultural, religious and other community practices and other place-based experiences. Learners from diverse communities grown in diverse geographical, social, familial, economic and cultural milieus can bring into the classroom their Indigenous and local-specific knowledge, ideas and practices of environmental conservation, along with Indigenous practices of dealing with natural disasters and ways to mitigate the environmental issues. However, we found that there were very few opportunities for learners to discuss and share their knowledge, experiences and skills connecting these with subject content. Furthermore, where there are disconnections between their experiences and what they are taught, these learning opportunities are unexplored (Paudel et al, 2024).

A learner belonging to the Muslim community expressed that Muslim knowledge systems and cultural practices have limited representation in the school curriculum or in its cultural programmes. The learner's statement reflects discriminatory epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2012), where certain traditional knowledges and cultural perspectives are marginalized or undervalued within the curriculum and knowledge-creating and -sharing spaces like school. In the same line, a female learner belonging to the Dalit community pointed out that 'when a community lives as a minority, there is a risk that their traditions, culture, rituals and language may face extinction if they are not passed on to the next generation through education. For instance, many younger people are unable to speak their mother tongue'.

All four head teachers stated that their learners were comfortable with Nepali or English as the medium of instruction. However, our interviews with learners showed a different story. Most of the learners expressed their discomfort with English as a medium of instruction. There were a few non-native Nepali speaker learners who experienced difficulty in understanding content taught in Nepali. For example, a Tamang girl learner from Rasuwa said that she did not participate in class discussions due to her limited proficiency in Nepali. A science teacher from a remote hill community also stated that he had difficulty making the Tamang-speaking learners understand subject content in English or Nepali. These learners often avoided classroom discussion or interaction with him, as on the one hand their proficiency in Nepali or English was limited, and on the other, he did

not speak Tamang. Epistemic justice calls for recognition and participation of all learners – irrespective of their background, identity or cultural differences – in knowledge consumption, recognition and production (Balarin and Milligan, 2024).

Although schools are officially considered zones of peace, the influence of political unrest on education institutions in Nepal remains significant. Political activities disrupt the school environment, affecting learners, teachers and the overall learning process. During fieldwork, we witnessed a political campaign taking place on school premises during class hours, showing the intersection of education and politics. A teacher reported an incident in a rural mountain school where a dispute arose in the school as one group of learners supported a party-declared bandh while another group opposed it. A teacher from the urban hill school revealed a situation of fear and insecurity in schools during the Maoist conflict. He further said that at that time schools in remote areas were sites of Maoist activism, and education was regularly disturbed. According to him ‘once in a school while Maoist parade and programme was happening army helicopter came to surveillance the activities, which made learners and teachers flee in panic from the school due to fear of bombardment’. Similarly, it was reported by a teacher that they were compelled to pay money from their salary to support Maoist activism. A head teacher from a rural Terai school reported that the Maoist insurgency and the Madhesh movement significantly disrupted teaching and learning. During the Madhesh movement, schools were closed for many days, and once normalcy returned, the school faced difficulties in locating and reintegrating learners into the classroom. Two teachers, from a rural mountain school and an urban hill school, respectively, said that there were learners who had lost their fathers during the Maoist conflict. The loss of a father makes it difficult for the family to sustain their lives and has severe, irreparable consequences for the children and the entire family (Billingsley, 2018). A head teacher from an urban Terai school reported significant displacement and migration of many learners from remote Terai and hill schools to their school due to the Madhesh Movement and the Maoist insurgency. During the Maoist conflict, teachers and others were targeted and victimized by both Maoist insurgents and State security forces, often due to suspicions of supporting and aiding the opposite side (Selim, 2018). Conflict in the country undermined and violated children’s right to education, peace and security in school, yet it is a topic that is almost entirely absent across policy, curriculum and practice.

## Conclusions

This chapter concerned the examination of justice in Nepal’s secondary education system. The study reveals the marginal presence of justice issues in broader educational and curricular policies. There is lack of conceptual

deliberation of justice in education in general, or epistemic, environmental and particularly transitional justice. These different forms of justice are implied peripherally and limited content concerning these justices are included in curricula and textbooks.

In principle, teaching–learning practices are supposed to be informed and guided by the nation’s overall educational polices, thereby demonstrating their strong congruence between practices. The constitutional provisions for every citizen’s right to live in a clean and healthy environment, sustainable practices for environmental conservation, inclusivity through equal participation of marginalized communities in decision-making, and equitable access to natural resources serve as a foundation for incorporating justice in education. It prioritizes equitable access to overcome disparities faced by disadvantaged groups, children with disabilities, and those from remote areas. Adequate infrastructure, including child-friendly, gender-conscious and disaster-resilient facilities, is a key focus, with an emphasis on providing WASH facilities. However, there is very limited consideration of a justice approach, for example including learners’ knowledge of environmental issues such as disasters, pollution and climate change in day-to-day life. The SSRP and SSDP’s emphasis on disaster risk reduction is at risk of not being realized in practice. One of the significant concerns raised by experts is a disparity in education quality between urban and rural areas. A policy expert mentioned that while the SSRP and SSDP emphasize inclusivity, disadvantaged regions like Karnali and other remote areas still face challenges in terms of infrastructure, quality teachers and access to resources. Experts argue that these gaps are the result of a lack of action-oriented policy and monitoring. Furthermore, there has been elite capture of reservation quotas, which were designed to uplift disadvantaged groups but are mostly utilized by those with better social standing, undermining the goals of affirmative action. Experts point out that the SESP, while addressing social justice, misses key elements of environmental, epistemic and transitional justice areas. Epistemic justice would promote the inclusion of local knowledge, languages and cultural practices in the curriculum, a critical area that the SSRP and SSDP overlooked. As such, while the SESP represents a step forward, experts believe that an emphasis on environmental and epistemic issues are necessary to fully address the challenges in Nepal’s education system. This would ensure not only fair access but also create a learning environment that respects and integrates the diversity of knowledges and experiences across all regions and social groups.

Another key issue we identified was the translation of the policy aspirations into real practices. The Fifteenth Plan ([National Planning Commission, 2020](#)) identified the education sector’s failure to ensure full access to quality education for all, especially for targeted groups of children. Furthermore, it highlighted disparities in access to educational opportunities and learning

outcomes, underscoring the persistent issues of epistemic injustice. We found the curricula and textbooks lack an effective and functional structure. We found that the concepts of fairness, equity, inclusion, participation and collaboration in curricula and textbooks are neither framed within nor guided by the principles of the three forms of justice. Although the curricula recommend using general as well as specific child-centred and activity-based teaching methods for subject teaching, they lack clear guidance on applying these methods to specific topics and on developing learners' practical skills. Subject contents are mostly presented as abstract notions with little or no connection with learners' lived experiences, and teachers do not create opportunities for learners to link textbook content and classroom learning with their day-to-day lives or community life. Because of this, classroom delivery has also not been able to fulfil the concepts of justice in education. This requires teachers to adopt the place-based approach (Gruenewald, 2003; Ajaps and Forh Mbah, 2022) that affords opportunities for the learners to share their lived experiences with each other and fosters a deeper understanding and engagement with environmental and social responsibility.