

## Teacher Education for Equity And Social Justice: A Critical Review

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### Abstract:

*Teacher education is increasingly recognized as a crucial site for addressing issues of equity and social justice in contemporary education systems. This study critically reviews the role of teacher preparation in equipping educators to respond to diverse classrooms shaped by caste, class, gender, language, disability, and rural–urban disparities. Drawing on theoretical perspectives such as critical pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, and democratic education, the paper examines how teacher education can move beyond technical training to foster critical reflection and social transformation. Globally, teacher education for social justice manifests in varied contexts, from multicultural education in the United States to intercultural competence in Europe and community-based approaches in the Global South. In India, policies such as the Right to Education Act (2009), the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2009), and the New Education Policy (2020) emphasize inclusivity; however, challenges persist due to curriculum limitations, faculty preparedness, structural inequities, and policy–practice gaps. This review underscores the need to reorient teacher education as a transformative process that empowers educators to challenge exclusionary practices, embrace diversity, and advance democratic ideals. Ultimately, the study argues that socially just teacher education is essential for creating inclusive classrooms and building equitable societies.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher Education, Equity and Social Justice, Critical Pedagogy, Inclusive Education, Educational Reform.*

### Introduction:

Teacher education has always been at the heart of educational reforms, as the teacher is both a transmitter of knowledge and a shaper of values (Shulman, 1987; Darling-Hammond, 2006). In the 21st century, the goals of teacher preparation go far beyond subject mastery and pedagogical skills. Teachers are increasingly expected to serve as agents of equity, inclusivity, and social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004). As classrooms worldwide become more diverse in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, linguistic practices, cultural traditions, and learning needs, teacher education must rise to the challenge of equipping educators with the ability to recognize, confront, and dismantle systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010).

The term *equity* in education refers to fairness, inclusivity, and the assurance that all learners, regardless of caste, class, gender, race, or ability, receive opportunities to learn and succeed (OECD, 2012). *Social justice*

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in teacher education involves preparing teachers not only to acknowledge diversity but also to engage critically with power structures, privilege, and oppression that shape learners' educational experiences (Freire, 1970; Zeichner, 2010). This review critically explores the role of teacher education in fostering equity and social justice, with particular attention to global perspectives, the Indian context, and the challenges that hinder transformative change.

### **Significance of the Study:**

This study highlights the crucial role of teacher education in promoting equity and social justice by preparing teachers as agents of inclusion and transformation (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). It emphasizes how teacher preparation can challenge caste, gender, linguistic, and socio-economic disparities, ensuring fair opportunities for all learners. By critically reviewing gaps and reforms, the study contributes to reimagining teacher education as a tool for building a more democratic, just, and inclusive society (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **Objectives of the Study:**

This study critically reviews the role of teacher preparation in equipping educators to respond to diverse classrooms shaped by caste, class, gender, language, disability, and rural–urban disparities (NCFTE, 2009; NEP, 2020).

### **Theoretical Foundations of Teacher Education for Social Justice**

The discourse on teacher education for social justice is rooted in critical pedagogy, most notably articulated by Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's concept of education as a practice of freedom emphasizes dialogue, critical consciousness, and the empowerment of marginalized learners. Teachers, therefore, must go beyond rote transmission of knowledge to nurture critical thinkers who can question social hierarchies and resist injustice.

John Dewey's philosophy of education also provides a foundation, stressing the democratic purpose of schooling (Dewey, 1916). Dewey argued that teachers must prepare learners for participation in a democratic society by fostering inclusivity, cooperation, and shared responsibility. More contemporary theorists like Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and Geneva Gay (2010) further advance the argument that teacher education must be deeply contextual, sensitive to diversity, and committed to equity.

These theories converge on one central idea: teacher education must consciously embed social justice principles into its curriculum, pedagogy, and practice. The teacher is not a neutral actor but a cultural worker whose practice shapes and is shaped by societal power relations (Giroux, 1988).

### **Historical Overview: From Transmission to Transformation**

Historically, teacher education was seen as a technical training process—focused on subject knowledge, classroom management, and instructional skills (Cochran-Smith, 2004). This technicist approach overlooked the teacher's role as a social actor and neglected structural inequities. With the rise of civil rights movements, feminist scholarship, and postcolonial critique, the field of education began recognizing the teacher's role in advancing equity (Apple, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In the Indian context, colonial education established hierarchies that privileged Western knowledge over indigenous systems, thereby marginalizing local epistemologies (Kumar, 2005). Teacher training during colonial rule was aimed at producing clerks and loyal subjects rather than transformative educators. Post-independence, the Indian state recognized the importance of teacher education in building a democratic and

inclusive society. Documents like the Kothari Commission Report (1966) emphasized education as an instrument of social change, but in practice, teacher training often remained exam-driven and disconnected from issues of equity.

Today, the discourse has shifted towards socially responsive teacher education, with growing awareness of caste, gender, language, disability, and regional disparities in classrooms (NCFTE, 2009; NEP, 2020). Yet, the persistence of systemic inequities highlights the need for a stronger integration of social justice in teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **Global Perspectives on Teacher Education for Social Justice:**

Globally, teacher education for social justice manifests in diverse ways:

- **United States:** Driven by multicultural education, programs emphasize culturally relevant pedagogy, anti-racist education, and critical awareness of systemic inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teacher education institutions grapple with preparing teachers to work in racially segregated and socio-economically stratified schools.
- **Europe:** Teacher education focuses on intercultural competence, given increasing migration and diversity (Banks, 2010). The emphasis lies on integrating immigrant children, supporting multilingualism, and addressing xenophobia.
- **Global South:** In regions like Latin America and Africa, teacher education often addresses issues of poverty, indigenous rights, and decolonization of knowledge (Tikly, 2011). Community-based teacher preparation programs emphasize empowerment and local participation.
- **Asia:** Countries like India, Bangladesh, and Nepal face challenges of inequality shaped by caste, religion, gender, and rural–urban divides. Teacher education must respond not only to global frameworks but also to deeply entrenched local inequities (Singh, 2016).

These examples show that while the principles of equity and justice are universal, their practical implications are context-specific. A one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate; teacher education must engage with the cultural, political, and historical realities of each society (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

### **Teacher Education in India: Equity and Social Justice in Focus**

In India, the challenges of equity and justice are particularly complex due to the deeply embedded structures of caste hierarchies, gender inequalities, linguistic diversity, and rural–urban disparities (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Education, in such a context, cannot be viewed merely as knowledge transmission; it must be seen as a vehicle for social transformation. Teacher education programs are therefore mandated to address inclusivity and justice through progressive policy frameworks such as the *Right to Education Act (2009)*, the *National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE, 2009)*, and the *New Education Policy (NEP, 2020)*. These documents emphasize the teacher's role not only as an instructor but also as a social reformer capable of bridging divides and nurturing democratic values.

Key concerns in this regard include:

- **Caste and Social Stratification:** Teachers must be trained to recognize and confront caste biases that continue to marginalize Dalit, Adivasi, and other backward communities (Jha, 2002). Prejudices often surface subtly in classroom interactions, teacher expectations, and curricular representations, reinforcing

inequality rather than dismantling it. Teacher education must equip future educators with critical sensitivity and strategies to counter such discrimination.

- **Gender Sensitization:** Patriarchal norms remain pervasive in Indian society, shaping classroom practices, subject choices, and career aspirations (Nambissan, 2000). Teacher education has a critical responsibility to prepare teachers who can challenge gender stereotypes, create gender-inclusive learning spaces, and promote equity in participation and achievement for both boys and girls.
- **Language Diversity:** India's multilingual reality presents both opportunities and challenges. Teacher preparation often privileges English and Hindi, sidelining regional languages and dialects that are central to students' cultural identity (Mohanty, 2010). For education to be inclusive, teachers must be trained to value and integrate linguistic diversity into pedagogy, thereby validating the cultural capital of marginalized communities.
- **Inclusion of Children with Disabilities:** The *Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)* has mandated inclusive education, yet many teacher education programs continue to offer only theoretical discussions rather than practical strategies for classroom implementation (Singal, 2006). Teachers require skills in differentiated instruction, assistive technology, and inclusive classroom management to make real progress toward equity.
- **Rural–Urban Divide:** Rural schools, which serve a large proportion of India's children, often face acute shortages of qualified teachers, infrastructural gaps, and socio-economic disadvantages (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Teacher education must be context-sensitive, preparing teachers who can adapt to resource-poor environments while addressing the specific challenges faced by rural learners.

Despite the existence of progressive policies and frameworks, teacher education institutions frequently remain trapped in rote pedagogy, bureaucratic procedures, and outdated practices. There is limited space for critical reflection, cultural responsiveness, and genuine social transformation. As a result, while the rhetoric of equity and social justice is strong, its translation into everyday teacher education practice remains weak. This gap underscores the urgent need for reform, where teacher preparation must align more closely with the lived realities of learners and the social aspirations of a democratic India (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

### **Challenges in Advancing Equity and Social Justice in Teacher Education:**

While the ideals of equity and social justice are strongly articulated in policies and academic discourse, their translation into teacher education faces multiple hurdles. These challenges highlight the gap between vision and practice, limiting the transformative potential of teacher preparation.

1. **Curriculum Limitations:** Many teacher education programs remain focused primarily on pedagogy, subject content, and examination techniques. While these are important, they often neglect critical engagement with issues of social inequality, such as caste, gender, disability, or linguistic diversity. As a result, prospective teachers graduate with limited exposure to the realities of exclusion and little preparation to foster inclusivity in their classrooms.
2. **Lack of Faculty Preparedness:** Teacher educators themselves may lack training or awareness regarding equity, diversity, and social justice. When faculty members carry implicit biases or insufficient understanding of marginalized learners' needs, these attitudes are unintentionally passed down to trainee teachers. Without systematic professional development, the potential of teacher education institutions to drive social change is significantly reduced.

3. **Structural Inequalities:** Broader social inequities—such as poverty, caste-based discrimination, gender violence, and regional disparities—deeply shape the educational experiences of children. These challenges cannot be fully resolved by teacher education alone, yet they profoundly impact classrooms. Teachers, often working in resource-poor and socially stratified contexts, may feel powerless to counter structural barriers without institutional and community support.
4. **Policy–Practice Gap:** Although progressive frameworks like the NCFTE (2009) and NEP (2020) call for inclusivity and equity, their ground-level implementation is uneven. Bureaucratic delays, inadequate funding, lack of monitoring, and institutional inertia often prevent policies from being translated into meaningful classroom practices. As a result, the rhetoric of equity remains on paper, while teacher education continues in conventional ways.
5. **Resistance to Change:** Efforts to embed social justice frameworks in teacher education sometimes encounter resistance. Teachers and institutions may view such approaches as politically charged, ideologically driven, or disruptive to traditional practices. This resistance often stems from fear of change, attachment to entrenched norms, or lack of clarity about how to operationalize social justice in pedagogy.

In sum, these challenges reveal that advancing equity and social justice in teacher education requires more than curricular revisions; it demands systemic reform, capacity-building for teacher educators, active policy implementation, and cultural shifts within educational institutions.

### Reforms and the Way Forward

To advance equity and social justice in teacher education, several reforms are necessary:

- **Curricular Reorientation:** Embedding social justice, equity, and diversity as core elements of teacher preparation rather than peripheral add-ons.
- **Critical Pedagogy Training:** Preparing teachers to question dominant narratives, challenge stereotypes, and create inclusive classrooms.
- **Community Engagement:** Strengthening links between teacher education institutions and marginalized communities to ensure context-sensitive preparation.
- **Professional Development:** Continuous training for in-service teachers to adapt to evolving social and cultural contexts.
- **Use of Technology:** Leveraging digital tools to promote inclusive pedagogy, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- **Policy Implementation:** Ensuring accountability and monitoring mechanisms to bridge the gap between policy and classroom realities.

The NEP 2020 in India provides an opportunity to rethink teacher education with a stronger focus on inclusivity, interdisciplinarity, and social responsibility. Its success, however, depends on effective execution and grassroots engagement.

### Conclusion:

Teacher education for equity and social justice is not a luxury but a necessity in today's fractured and unequal world. Teachers are uniquely positioned to either reinforce or dismantle systems of privilege and

oppression. A critical review of teacher education reveals both progress and persistent shortcomings: while theoretical frameworks and policies emphasize inclusivity, their practical implementation remains uneven.

The contrasting realities—vibrant global models and deeply entrenched inequities in contexts like India—demonstrate that teacher education must be reimagined as a transformative process. It must move beyond producing competent instructors to cultivating socially conscious educators committed to justice, equity, and democratic values.

Ultimately, teacher education must align with the vision of an inclusive society—one where diversity is celebrated, inequities are challenged, and education becomes a true instrument of liberation.

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