

SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE LENS OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEP 2020'S VISION OF INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

ABSTRACT:

Aim: The study aims to explore how four pre-service teachers perceive social justice and examine how their understanding influences their educational practices, particularly in fostering inclusive and diverse classrooms.

Study Design: This is a qualitative study based on the constructivist grounded theory methodology.

Place and Duration of the Study: The study was conducted at K. J. Somaiya College of Education, Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai, between June and September 2023.

Methodology: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four pre-service teachers purposively selected from the B.Ed. program. The constructivist grounded theory approach was applied using constant comparative analysis. To minimize researcher bias, triangulation was ensured through interview transcripts, reflective journals, and classroom observation notes. Recurring patterns and categories were coded inductively, leading to the development of emergent themes. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants' confidentiality was maintained throughout.

Result: The analysis revealed three core themes, indicating a disconnect between the participants' perceptions of social justice and their pedagogical practices. These included limited conceptual clarity about social justice, inconsistencies between stated beliefs and classroom decisions, and the influence of structural and institutional barriers on the implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies. The use of multiple data sources enabled validation of these findings and enhanced reflexivity in the research process.

Conclusion: The study underscores the need for teacher education programs to integrate critical reflection and contextual analysis to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Enabling pre-service teachers to analyze oppression and diversity equips them with skills to adopt inclusive, equity-driven strategies in their classrooms. This aligns with NEP 2020's vision of inclusive, safe, and transformative educational spaces that foster content mastery, collaborative learning, and holistic student development.

Key words: social justice, pre-service teachers, inclusion, diversity, perception, educational practice, grounded theory analysis, NEP 2020's vision.

INTRODUCTION:

"Education is the most efficient tool for encouraging societal revolution without violent violence."

Since times immemorial the absence of social justice in the world societies has been the most major issue, addressing the challenges of social justice globally, UN has taken steps to include it in SDGs which aimed at fostering tolerance, brotherhood, and preventing conflicts, achieving these goals by 2030 remains a monumental task before the countries. This reinforces the need for a fundamental revamping of the societies for infusing just conditions for harmonious coexistence.

Renowned educationists from John Dewey, Paulo Friere to Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and Dr. D.S. Kothari have long asserted that any change to be instilled should be done through education. To bring effective societal change, it is essential to start with children. Thus, developing them into agents of social change requires educators who are not only knowledgeable and rational but also compassionate and humane in their approach.

The National policies of India from Indian National Education Commission (1964-66) to NEP 2020 advocates education as a powerful tool for fostering inclusion, addressing diversity and advancing national development. Social Justice Education aligns with this vision, addressing disparities and empowering students for societal transformation, as articulated by Lee Ann Bell and Freire's principles. It encourages societal responsibility, and critical analysis of power, privilege, and inequality. To achieve this, educators today must develop essential skills in communication, empathy, and the practical application of social justice principles.

This pioneering task however cannot be left to a few individuals; it demands a collective, constructivist effort from a committed community of educators united in their dedication to the cause of social justice. Building this cadre, begins with preservice teachers, who must be equipped with both the understanding and the resolve to adopt an action oriented approach – remaining vigilant in identifying injustice and replacing the same with justice, using the very tools of justice – This is the clarion call for the present teacher education program to imbibe.

With this intent, I aim to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding social justice in education, focusing on their understanding of inclusion and diversity. By gaining insights into their perceptions, I seek to access how effectively their understanding contributes to promoting social justice through classroom discourse. This study aims to guide future researchers in designing apt intervention programs to better prepare the future teachers for the vital responsibility of addressing diversity and fostering inclusive classroom environment.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

To understand the foundation of social justice, it's necessary to explore the key theories that have shaped it -ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Taparelli, Mill, and Rawls, each emphasising justice as vital for societal harmony (Plato, 380 BCE; Aristotle, 350 BCE; Taparelli, 1840–1843; Mill, 1863; Rawls, 1971). The reviewed literature critically engages with these ideas, offering insights into their relevance today (Grant, 2008).

Plato's Theory of Justice emphasizes a tripartite class system—rulers (wisdom), auxiliaries (courage), and producers (moderation)—where justice is served when each performs their designated role (Osegenwune, 2011). However, critics argue that this rigid class division risks authoritarianism and undermines equality and individual freedom (Golmreza & Saeed, 2019).

Aristotle's Theory of Justice builds on Plato by proposing universal and practical justice, including distributive and corrective aspects grounded in merit and fairness (Chroust & Osborn, 1941). Von Lupkevon (2020) critiques its hierarchical bias and calls for adapting Aristotle's ideas to address contemporary issues like gender equity and structural inequalities.

Utilitarian Theory of Justice – upholds greater good to greatest number of people in greater. The proponents of this theory, Bentham and Mill sees justices as maximizing happiness for the greater number of people overlooking the minority rights. This is the major criticism of this theory as it reinforces majoritarianism (Singer, 1993; Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1963). Critics like Moore (1903) and Hayry (2021) push for a broader more compassionate lensthat includes, marginalized groups, animals, and holistic well-being (Moore, 1903; Hayry, 2021).

Rawls' Theory of Justice proposes justice as fairness, where social inequalities are justified only if they benefit the least advantaged, achieved through the 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls, 1971). However, Shelby (2004) and Nielsen (1980) critique its failure to address historical and structural injustices, particularly racial and economic inequalities rooted in capitalist frameworks.

In the evolving journey of justice theory, **Iris Marion Young** was among the first to challenge traditional notions. She believed justice wasn't merely about distributing wealth or resources; it was about *recognition, inclusion, and participation* (Young, 1981; 1991). To her, true justice required dismantling institutional structures that perpetuate oppression and marginalization.

Responding to Young, **Nancy Fraser** acknowledged the importance of recognition but argued for a *bivalent approach*—justice must address both *economic redistribution and cultural recognition* (Fraser, 1997; 1998). Unlike Young, she did not discard the value of distributive justice but insisted it be balanced with addressing misrecognition and status-based inequalities.

Ingrid Robeyns agreed with Fraser's integration but cautioned that the balance between redistribution and recognition must be *context-sensitive* (Robeyns, 2003). She highlighted the need for an intersectional lens to ensure that neither economic nor cultural aspects of justice are overlooked.

Meanwhile, **Axel Honneth** shifted the focus entirely toward *recognition*, arguing that justice stems from three interwoven dimensions: *love* (emotional support), *rights* (legal equality), and *solidarity* (social value and respect) (Honneth & Joel, 1995). For him, these forms of recognition shaped a person's sense of worth and paved the way to social progress.

However, **Zurn** critiqued Honneth's view, pointing out that *recognition alone cannot resolve material inequalities* (Zurn, 2005). He emphasized the role of *participatory decision-making* but acknowledged that ignoring *power dynamics and structural barriers* weakens the pursuit of justice.

Parallely, **Amartya Sen** introduced the **Capability Approach**, arguing that justice lies not just in what people have, but in what they are *capable of doing and being* (Sen, 1992; 1995). He illustrated this with the example of two people who are hungry—one by choice, one due to poverty—showing that freedom and real opportunity, not just outcomes, matter most.

Building on Sen's insights, **Kuklys and Robeyns** gave the Capability Approach practical wings. Kuklys used *econometric tools* to measure capabilities, while Robeyns applied the approach to *gender, education, and policy*, showing how theory could inform real-world justice (Kuklys & Robeyns, 2004).

Numerous studies emphasize educators' role in addressing social inequalities (Bailey et al., 2003; Cox, 2015; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Welton et al. (2015) highlight diverse classrooms as spaces for social justice discussions. However, biases persist despite efforts to challenge them (Picower, 2009). While reflective practices are explored (Wehbi & Boske, 2011; Boske, 2014), existing norms remain unchanged (Zeicher, 2009). Teachers must champion inclusion (Pantic, 2015) with critical skills (Hackman, 2005), and training should emphasize collaboration (Singh et al., 2010).

NEP 2020, though hailed as a landmark reform for social justice, is critiqued by Prasad (2020) for deviating from Nai Talim's practice-based, inclusive vision and undermining RTE and Kothari Commission ideals. He argues it promotes exclusion through early vocationalization and privatization. In contrast, Sarkar (2023) views NEP as inclusive, aligning with SDGs and promoting accessibility, multilingualism, and equity. It emphasizes education for marginalized groups and persons with disabilities, aiming to eliminate segregation and enhance linguistic competence through a multilingual framework (Soni, 2023). In addition to it promotes inclusion, equity, and education quality through contextual analysis (Rangarajan, Sharma, & Grové, 2023). However it also faces challenges in inclusive higher education for marginalized communities (Mangat, 2024).

This grounded theory study examines preservice teachers' perceptions of social justice to deepen understanding and inform inclusive educational practices, aiming to make them more sensitive and responsive to classroom complexities arising from students' diverse ethnic, social and economic backgrounds –factors that often shape students' mental frameworks. Since schools function as microcosms of the larger society, the teacher must develop the ability to relate the present realities with the curriculum content and accomplish the goals outlined in the NEP 2020. This approach is instrumental in nurturing the capacities and capabilities of the school students from their childhood, so

they grow up with ability to value freedom, respect diversity and contribute to both individual as well as societal development (Sen 1999; Nussbaum, 2011)

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF THE VARIABLES OF THE STUDY:

Perception of Social Justice among pre-service teachers refers to their understanding, interpretation, and attitude toward equality, equity and inclusion, in education, and the way in which they perceive their role in addressing systemic inequalities in classrooms.

Perception of Inclusion refers to pre-service teachers' understanding and application of equitable participation and representation of all students by addressing systemic barriers within educational settings.

Perception of Diversity refers to pre-service teachers', recognition, acceptance, and integration of varied student identities, experiences, and perspectives in classrooms to foster equal opportunities and an inclusive learning environment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To analyse student teachers' perception of social justice in relation to NEP 2020's vision of inclusion and diversity.
- To analyse the factors shaping student teachers' perception of social justice.
- To analyse their perceived role in fostering inclusion and addressing diversity in the classroom.
- To generate a theory grounded in data.

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How do pre-service teachers perceive social justice with respect to inclusion and addressing diversity in the classroom?

GROUNDING THEORY DESIGN:

Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology focusing on participant experiences. The research involves data coding, generating categories and theory development rooted in participants' perspectives. In the initial phase, interviews are transcribed, and data is systematically coded, employing constant comparison techniques to iteratively develop a grounded theory.

SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE:

A convenient sampling technique was used, wherein interviews were conducted on 4 pre-service teachers of Private Institute of B.Ed.

Table 1 : SAMPLE PROFILE OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS:

Name	Age	Educational Qualifications
Bhargavi	20-25	BA Sociology
Rita	25-30	MSC (Physics)
Vedika	25-30	B.E
Gargi	25-30	MSC (Biology)

DATA COLLECTION TOOL:

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW TOOL

The tool consisted of various questions about Student-teacher's perception of Social Justice and the factors contributing to understanding social justice education. The tool was validated by three experts based on their expert suggestions those relevant to the study were kept, new suggestions were added.

Ethical Standard- To maintain the ethical standard and research ethics written consent of B.Ed teachers were taken along with that to safeguard their identity names have been changed.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

This study is limited to B.Ed. preservice teachers in selected Mumbai areas, restricting generalizability. It focuses on their perception of social justice in the context of NEP 2020's vision of inclusion and diversity, excluding aspects such as multidisciplinary education and skill development.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

The data underwent grounded theory analysis of interviews to explore participants' social justice perceptions with respect to inclusion and addressing diversity.

Phase 1-

In this phase students present level understanding of social justice is acquired through Personal Interviews

Findings of Research Question: How do pre-service teachers perceive social justice with respect to inclusion and addressing diversity in the classroom?

THEME 1: PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE WITH RESPECT TO INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

The analysis of student teachers' responses revealed significant variations in their understanding of social justice in relation to promoting inclusion and addressing diversity. Two subcategories emerged:

1. **Lack of conceptual clarity of social justice** – Pre-service teachers exhibited theoretical knowledge, often detached from real-life application, highlighting potential gaps due to ambiguity or ignorance of social justice tools.
2. **Barriers to implement Social Justice** – Participants identified challenges such as personal biases or constraints, and misconceptions that hinder inclusive and equitable practices.

For example

Rita lacks concept clarity: insists on fairness but hesitates, stating,

“equality and equity cannot be achieved every day in the classroom” (low voice, looking away, smiling). Bhargavi, unclear on social justice, vaguely says,

“caste system is also a social justice... woman harassment or whatever.” Her **dismissive attitude** (smiling, jerking neck) signals **indifference—“I don’t care.”**

Vedika criticizes inclusion as injustice, citing an anecdotal record of her engineering college days before joining B.ed program – she states, she had a poor but brilliant classmate whose father was an auto-rickshaw driver:

“They always passed him...he was very poor, that he couldn’t afford his fees...his dad was auto rickshawdriver... but was very intelligent and a ranker... but rich students didn’t get marks or rank.”

Despite acknowledging his merit, she perceives institutional equity as **“reverse order discrimination.”** It reflects how justice tools are condemned as unjust by the privileged, including her.

Gargi supports equality and inclusion: emphasizing that social justice entails equal opportunities for all and calls for affirmative action in teacher recruitment. She critiques teachers who misuse the notion of discipline as a pretext for unfair practices.

“you should behave properly, you don’t have a father”, but at least you can be behaving properly and studying properly.”

She asserts that teachers should be sensitive to children who have lost loved ones. Referring to this statement, Gargi highlights how the teacher, fully aware that the child had recently lost his father, still chose to taunt him about his loss. She asserts that teachers must be sensitive toward children who have experienced such profound grief. In this case, the teacher’s harsh rebuke, intended as a tool for discipline, became a tormenting act for a child merely expressing himself naturally. Instead of offering support, the teacher attempts to strip the child of his normalcy, pushing him deeper into the chasm of bereavement.

Gargi emphasizes inclusion and advocates **reservation in education** for marginalized communities. Recalling her visit to Rajasthan government school in Rajasthan, as a part of Community service initiative she observed,

“Teachers didn’t teach them... it’s not the students’ fault, so the percentage (marks in percentage) for these categories should be less.” She strongly supports **relaxation in marks criteria** for marginalized students and draws attention to the struggles of urban slum - ***“There are people who don’t have opportunities like us... clean water like us.”***

Admiring slum children’s resilience, she affirms, *“They want to study but have no opportunities... we should have this (affirmative action) for them (slum children)”*

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Most pre-service teachers exhibited theoretical knowledge of social justice but lacked practical awareness. Their perceptions often contradicted their beliefs—Rita equated social justice with fairness but questioned its consistent implementation, Bhargavi acknowledged caste-based discrimination yet justified its persistence, and Vedika dismissed affirmative action as unfair rather than corrective. Biases further shaped their views; majority, saw reservations as discriminatory, failing to recognize their role in rectifying historical injustices. Except for Gargi, others came from privileged backgrounds where opportunities were never denied, yet their academic underperformance seemed to fuel resentment towards affirmative action.

Factors contributing to the meaning of social justice

The factors that emerged out of the constant comparison of the data are – equality, equity, discrimination and perceived educational practice. This gave rise to additional major theme:

THEME 2: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS UNDERSTANDING OF EQUALITY AND EQUITY IN FOSTERING INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

The analysis shapes their perception of equality and equity as a fundamental aspect of inclusion: Pre-service teachers equated equality with equal treatment, with Gargi supporting equitable participation of the underprivileged, while Bhargavi struggled despite her sociology background. Vedika and Rita correctly defined equality, but Vedika’s stance shifted, emphasizing educator authority to enforce order. For instance, she asserted,

“This will not work—you have to listen to me. I know you might be studying my subject in your tuitions, but during my lecture, you have to pay attention.”

Vedika’s rigid approach risks silencing shy students, reflecting a lack of inclusive strategies.

Additionally, while participants recognized gender-based discrimination in sports, they overlooked caste oppression. As women, they identified sexism but largely failed to grasp its impact on historically and socially marginalized groups. This suggests a partial understanding of systemic inequalities in fostering truly inclusive classrooms.

EMERGING GROUNDED THEORY:

Labelling marginalized students as incompetent echoes dominant ideologies reinforcing elite superiority. While Rita supported inclusion theoretically, she doubted its feasibility. Gargi strongly advocated affirmative action, arguing that assessing underprivileged students on the same scale as privileged ones is unjust. Bhargavi, despite her sociology background, struggled to articulate social justice concepts. Vedika, emphasized authority in maintaining classroom order, and Rita viewed reservations as undermining merit. Discussions on discrimination exposed gender biases, particularly in classroom treatment and sports access. Opinions on affirmative action varied—Gargi supported it as a tool against discrimination, while Bhargavi dismissed it as outdated, and Rita deemed it merit-diminishing.

POSITING SELF: Participants' understanding of social justice is shaped by their personal realities. As Gargi, hailed from a marginalized community, she had the knowledge of discrimination and the loss of opportunities. This understanding helped her to realise to the struggles of other deprived groups, who were more marginalised than her, such as Rajasthan's students without teachers and slum children lacking access to schooling. In contrast, Rita, Vedika, and Bhargavi, belonging to privileged caste backgrounds, perceived upper castes as marginalized due to equity measures. They ignored ongoing discrimination, propagating a false notion of merit, revealing signs of vested interest.

While Bhargavi, and Rita's concerns might seem valid from a meritocratic perspective but in their stance they forgot that calibre is the part of intelligence and environmental factors. Genetic inheritance provides cognitive potential, but environmental factors like education and experiences shape their development. The underprivileged did not get the environment to develop their intellectual capacities before Independence; it is only 76 years now that they have been receiving constitutional affirmative action. In reality the relaxation in marks is very recent around 1966 onwards as there was no representation of the lower caste communities seen in educational institutes (Rohtas Bhankhar v. Union of India, 2004). The privileged caste people, to which, the three participants belonged, had never been subjected to social out casting which is the root cause of historical deprivation. Near about, till now two to three generations have sought the benefit of reservation, that too not everyone from the community is benefited out of it, many are still out of school and out of jobs just because of persistent casteism. If merit and calibre is truly valued the privileged should not be threatened by the underprivileged who are struggling to survive in this meritocratic society.

Vedika introduced the notion of “**reverse discrimination**”, emphasizing perceived disadvantage for the privileged based on social class. Majority of the pre –service teachers acknowledged challenges encountered by open category individuals but the moment they pondered to describe equity, they negated equality. The discourse on affirmative action exposed a gap between ideal and practical application. Gargi viewed it as a tool for level playing field, whereas, Bhargavi, voiced concerns about potential injustice and discrimination against the upper caste.

Notably, reservations are the very fabric of outrage, which in actual sense is the mark of democracy. The 75 countries across the world are incorporating affirmative action in their constitution as it guarantees the chances of empowerment to the underprivileged. In United States affirmative action is implemented not just in the public sector but also voluntarily in the private sector. Companies like Microsoft, Alcoa, American Airlines actively promote diversity by providing opportunities for Black

employees. **Microsoft** reported annual revenue of over \$245 billion, reflecting a 16% increase year-over-year (2024 Annual Report). **Alcoa** reported annual revenue of approximately \$10.6 billion (Macrotrends, 2024).

What can be the possible reason for this inclusive step of America? may be because they are not very narrow and rigid-minded people. And they accept that wrong has been done on the Blacks and it cannot be rectified in a few decades. Also it is important to note that America got Independence more than a century before India, it has completed 247 years of Independence and still doesn't think of banning affirmative action policy whereas Indians see it as a mark of injustice with just 76 years of independence. Additionally the American government gives reservations not just in education, jobs and politics but their participation is also seen in sports, movies etc. In India it is not provided in sports, movies and the private sector. So how many gold medals have come to India? How many private firms are on the global market shouldering foreign countries? How many movies bagged Oscars? (Tirpude, 2018). These questions warrant reflection.

The emerging theory highlights the need for a comprehensive, pragmatic understanding of social justice. Participants' varied perspectives reveal challenges in implementation, exposing weak foundational perceptions lacking holistic inclusion and diversity. This reflects India's ongoing struggle to balance ideals with practice. Teachers must counter students' non-inclusive stances; ensuring classrooms become transformative spaces where equality, equity, and diversity are embedded in subject matter through historical context, present relevance, and future impact. Encouraging critical analysis, research, and collaboration fosters socially conscious individuals. Strong social justice-oriented educators are essential to achieving NEP's vision of an inclusive, just, and equitable society.

CONCLUSION:

This study offers a space for educators to pause and reflect on how closely their teaching aligns with the principles of social justice. Grounded in the voices of four pre-service teachers, it provides meaningful insights for both aspiring and practicing educators to assess and strengthen their commitment to equity. The findings of the study reinforce the needs prescribed in the NEP policy concerning inclusion and diversity, highlighting it as a major need for equipping educators with the tools of justice. These tools enable them educators to develop clear understanding of the unequal practices of the society and identify oppression and equate educational gaps by continually replacing the unjust practices by just and humane education. By making social justice approach to teaching as a professional commitment, educators can truly celebrate diversity, promote inclusion, and cultivate in learners a shared enthusiasm for addressing diversity and promoting equity through inclusive practices for a just and harmonious co-existence.

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