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

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**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 design.

**Place and Duration of the Study:** The study was conducted at Teacher Education College, in Mumbai, between June and September 2023.

**Methodology:** The present study employs **constructivist grounded theory** given by Charmaz, K. (2006) approach was utilised wherein open coding, focused coding and constant comparative methods were used to analyse the data. Recurring patterns and categories were coded inductively, leading to the development of emergent themes.

**Result:** Two core themes emerged out of the constant comparison of data with data, codes with codes, forming focused codes and categories to map the student teachers perception of social justice. The analysis revealed a breach between the participants’ perceptions of social justice and the existing social justice literature. Their limited hold on the conceptual understanding of social justice, equality, equity, inclusion and diversity, gaps between the social justice principles and their instructional choices, and the influence of embedded institutionalised discrimination on the implementation of their pedagogical practices. The use of the grounded theory analysis techniques enabled validation of these findings and strengthened the reflective inquiry during the research process.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights the importance of critical reflection with contextual understanding to make a bridge between theory and practice. It empowers the pre-service teachers to continually examine the inequalities and diversity around them and thereby transform them to inclusive and equitable practices in their classrooms. This inturn synchronises with NEP 2020’s vision of creating inclusive, safe, and transformative educational classrooms that promote subject expertise, cooperative learning and all round learner development.

**Key words:** Perception of Social Justice, pre-service teachers, inclusion, equality, equity, injustice, diversity, educational practice, grounded theory, 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.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

To holistically internalise the basis of social justice it is important to critically analyse the social justice theories from Plato, Aristotle to Mill, Rawls to Young, Fraser to Sen, Nussbaum, all stressing justice to be an essential component to harness social unity (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.

Parallelly, **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** refers to pre-service teachers knowledge and understanding, of equality, equity and inclusion, in education, and their perceived 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’, acceptance and acknowledgement of varied student identities, personal experiences, and viewpoints in classrooms to promote equal opportunities and an inclusive learning environment.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

* To analyse Pre service teachers’ perception of social justice in relation to NEP 2020’s vision of inclusion and diversity.
* To analyse the factors shaping Pre service teachers’ perception of social justice.
* To analyse Pre service teachers’ 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 set up?

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:**

This study is limited to Pre service teachers’ of greater Mumbai area only. The purpose of the research is only to understand 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.

**METHODOLOGY:**

**CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY DESIGN:**

Constructivist Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology focusing on participant experiences. The research involves data coding, deducing focused codes, generating categories and evolving a theory grounded in participants' perspectives.

**SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE:**

A convenient sampling technique was used, as it was easy to select the participants—the researcher being an Assistant Professor at a College of Education situated in Mumbai. Further, only those four Pre service teachers’ were interviewed who gave their consent to participate in the interview. After their consent a personal Data sheet was duly filled by them.

**Table 1- SAMPLE PROFILE OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Age | Educational Qualifications | Pedagogy subjects | Class | Caste | Religion |
| Bhargavi | 20-25 | BA Sociology | English and History | Middle class | Open | Hindu |
| Rita | 25-30 | MSC (Physics) | Maths and Science | Middle class | Open | Christian |
| Vedika | 25-30 | B.E | Maths and Science | Middle class | Open | Hindu |
| Gargi | 25-30 | MSC (Biology) | Science and maths | Lower middle class | Reserved- SC | Hindu |

**DATA COLLECTION TOOLS:**

**Personal Data Sheet:**

This sheet provided participants personal characteristics like name, age, educational qualification, pedagogy subjects, gender, class, caste and their religion

**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.

**Interview Transcript**

The transcripts were done after getting the consent of the participants for video recording of their interviews. Two of the interviews lasted till 20-25 mins, other two were of the duration 35-40mins approximately. It took approximately 2 hours to transcribe. The interviews which lasted more than 30 mins it took 2 hrs 30mins approximately. All the transcripts were checked twice or thrice by listening to the videos to avoid missing out on any part or wrong transcribing.

**DATA COLLECTION:**

For collecting the data the researcher personally asked the consent of the pre service teachers. Those who gave their consent for interview and video recording of it, only they were interviewed. Later on these video recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Further analysis was carried out on them.

**CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY DATA ANALYSIS:**

The data underwent series of analysis procedure-

* Open coding or line by line coding was done where a name was attributed to a segment
* Focused coding- Here the similar open codes are grouped and it becomes focused code
* Category- Category are deduced out of open and focused codes, it serves as a broader category which encapsulated focused and open coding.
* Constant Comparison method- The constant comparison method where the codes are compared with codes, new codes with focused codes and focused with codes and new data, this process often evolves new codes and focused codes.

**Result and Discussion**

**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 Pre service teachers’ interview transcripts 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-**

**“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.”**

**Discussion-** Rita’s has limited conceptual understanding of social justice wherein she insists on fairness but hesitates, stating, Her **dismissive attitude** (smiling, jerking neck) signals **indifference—"I don't care.”**

**Vedika** (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 he was very intelligent and a ranker… b*ut still jo log rich the unko marks, rank nahi milta tha aur jo log poor the unko hamesha age age jaane dete the wo log*.”(rich students didn’t get marks or rank teachers favoured the poor to go ahead)

**Discussion-** Despite acknowledging the poor boy’s merit, Vedika perceives institutional equity as **"reverse order discrimination."** It reflects how justice tools are condemned as unjust by the privileged, including her.

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

**Discussion-** Here Gargi, is seen **supporting 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. 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. 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 to give the meaning of equity 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.

**OVERALL SUMMARY: PRE SERVICE TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, INCLUSION, AND DIVERSITY: A THEMATIC MAPPING:**

**Table 2- Mapping Focused Codes with Interview Excerpts to Derive Findings**

| **Category and Focused Codes (with n values)** | **Participant Interview Excerpts** | **Findings** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Meaning of Social Justice**  • Injustice — n-3  • Affirmative action — n-1  • Conceptual vagueness — n-1  • Support for structural Inclusion — n-1 | Rita- Social justice means treating everyone equally.  Bhargavi: “caste system is also a social justice… woman harassment or whatever.” | * equality and social justice are synonymous. * conceptual vagueness, * clubbing disparate issues under social justice without depth. |
| Vedika: “They always passed him (the poor boy)…he was very poor... but still jo log rich the unko marks, rank nahi milta tha... poor the unko hamesha age age jaane dete the.”(rich people were were not given rank or marks and poor were supported to go ahead | * affirmative action is perceived as unfair, * seeing equity as **reverse discrimination**, * indicative of privileged misunderstanding of justice tools. |
| Gargi: Advocates reservation in education: “They want to study but have no opportunities… we should have this (affirmative action) for them (slum children).” | * understands social justice as corrective, * supports structural inclusion measures like reservation and relaxed criteria for marginalized communities. |
| **Perception of Equality and Inclusion**  • based on gender — n-2  • rejecting insensitive teachers approach as means of discipline — n-1  • Inconsistent articulation of equality — n-1 | Gargi: “you should behave properly, you don't have a father... but at least you can be behaving properly and studying properly.” | * Discipline often hides exclusion. * Teachers show insensitivity. * Bereaved children need empathy. * Inclusion requires emotional support. |
| Gargi (on community visit): “Teachers didn’t teach them… it’s not the students’ fault, so the percentage... should be less.” | * supports equity-based inclusion * Acknowledges systemic neglect * Emphasizes need for policy support * Advocates equal participation |
| Rita- Treating girls and boys similarly  Bhargavi- Equal, like men woman every gender everything equal. | Considering equality only on the basis of gender. |
| Vedika- equality as in if we are having a teacher and we have five students so the teachers should be teaching us equally…No I will not give proper attention to this certain person because of so and so reasons. I'm talking in terms of teaching but if you talk in terms of country then equal again the same thing justice equal opportunities being treated equally no casteism no racism. okay not dividing up but like not separating out certain people like staying together | • Begins with a simplistic definition of equality as uniform treatment. • Contradicts herself by endorsing selective attention. • Mentions equality in national context (no casteism, no racism) but lacks clarity in classroom application. • Unclear about criteria for differentiated attention |
| **Perception of Equity**  • Insufficient understanding of Equity — n-1  • Relevance of equity in real life missing — n-1  • Application of equity to education missing — n-3  • Equity in education as social mobility tool — n-1  • Affirmative action as unfair — n-1 | Bhargavi-Ah (laughing) I heard but you know, I can’t explain that it’s not coming up. You say na that there should be more equity than equality or something | Incapable of stating the meaning of equity |
| Vedika- aaphine padhaya tha  ( you had taught) maybe in this same semester? What example was like there were two kids like a certain family had two kids one elder the other one is younger. So elder one is healthy. Okay, the younger one is weak. So what the doctor prescribed is jo chotta wllah hain give him Okay, donoko one glass of milk milta tha  every day okay, and what the doctor prescribed is the younger one should get more milk like he should consume more milk in order to get his health in in place. So, what parents did is to elder one they gave half cup and to the younger one they give one and a half cup. So that could be equity, equality is both of them were getting one cup each one cup of milk every day it was equality | * Recalls classroom example of equity * Fails to apply concept in real-life context * Views affirmative action as unfair * Demonstrates limited internalization of justice principles |
| Gargi-ma'am, there is a there is a picture of it floats on Instagram, Facebook. So, yeah. So, there is one window and in which one are students and the three students and, and they are given equal like steps or schools or books to stand on. Kind of ladder to be above the window. what we do is the window remains same everything remains same, but what happens we give different tools to different people so that they can everyone can see what is there on the other side of the matter | * Relates equity to real-life school disparities * Acknowledges lack of support in rural schools * Advocates education as a means to uplift the poor * Supports reservations as a tool for social justice |
| Rita- Equity is giving that much to person according to his need.  Bhargavi: “caste system is also a social justice… woman harassment or whatever.” | * Aware of equity but doubts its daily classroom feasibility * Struggles to explain caste-gender discrimination * Holds academic knowledge but lacks practical insight * Displays superficial understanding of social justice issues |
| **Understanding Diversity and Discrimination**  • Partial understanding of equity and social justice concepts — n-2  • Difficulty applying equity and social justice in classroom practice — n-2  • Perceives affirmative action as unfair or biased — n-2  • Empathy towards marginalized and trauma-affected students — n-1  • Advocates inclusive and compassionate teaching practices — n-1  • Recognizes structural inequalities in education — n-1 |
| Vedika: “They always passed him…he was very poor, that he couldn’t afford his fees… but still jo log rich the unko marks, rank nahi milta tha… poor ko hamesha age jaane dete the.” | * Acknowledges merit but sees equity-based actions as unjust * Views affirmative action as unfair advantage to marginalized * Personal bias influences understanding of social justice *  Discomfort with corrective measures despite knowing their intent |
| Gargi: Emphasizes need for teacher sensitivity: “The teacher… taunted the child about his father’s death… instead of offering support...”  Gargi: “They want to study but have no opportunities… we should have this (affirmative action) for them (slum children)” | * Understands emotional and psychological exclusion in classrooms * Shows empathy towards trauma-affected students * Advocates for compassionate and inclusive teaching practices * Recognizes structural inequalities in education * Supports affirmative policies as tools to promote equity * Demonstrates commitment to social justice through empathetic stance |
| Role of a teacher in fostering inclusive classrooms  Disbelief in daily equality and equity (n-1)  • Limited commitment to inclusive practices (n-1)  • Gap between theory and practice (n-1)  • Passive/skeptical stance on equity (n-1)  • Rigid, authoritative teaching style (n-1)  • Lack of empathetic pedagogy (n-1)  • Risks silencing marginalized students (n-1)  • Prioritizes control over differentiated needs (n-1)  • Initiative to support struggling learners (n-1)  • Inclusive and equity-based practices (n-1)  • Recognition of diverse learning needs (n-1)  • Student-centered supportive pedagogy (n-1)  • Language barrier affecting articulation (n-1)  • Equality perceived as gender-based seating (n-1)  • Superficial understanding of equality (n-1)  • Lack of grasp of structural equity/inclusion (n-1) | Rita: “equality and equity cannot be achieved every day in the classroom” (low voice, looking away, smiling). | * Expresses disbelief in achieving daily equality and equity in classrooms * Indicates limited commitment to inclusive education practices * Reflects a gap between theoretical understanding and practical application of social justice * Suggests a passive or skeptical stance toward implementing equity in real settings |
| Vedika: “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.” | * Demonstrates rigid, authoritative teaching style * Lacks inclusive and empathetic pedagogical approach * Risks silencing vulnerable or marginalized students * Prioritizes control over differentiated learner needs. |
| Gargi- Conducting extra classes for weak students | * takes initiative to support struggling learners * Demonstrates inclusive and equity-based teaching practices * Recognizes and responds to diverse learning needs * Aligns with student-centerd and supportive pedagogy |
| Bhargavi- like sitting arrangement in the classroom so I'll give them you know like one boy and one girl so there is no you know… this is I, not unfair | * Struggles with articulating ideas due to language barriers * Associates equality with seating arrangement based on gender * Demonstrates a superficial understanding of equality *  Lacks depth in grasping structural aspects of equity and inclusion |

**INTERPRETIVE INSIGHTS:** It can be interpreted from the above table that the Pre service teachers’ exhibits varied understandings and practices regarding inclusive classrooms. While some show scepticism and authoritarian tendencies, others demonstrates empathy and and actively support marginalized learners. Language barriers and limited grasp of equity concepts affect articulation and implementation. Overall, a gap persists between social justice theory and practical classroom inclusion.

**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.

**POSITIONING 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 the upper castes as being marginalized due to equity measures. Vedika stated that "the poor are getting all the benefits while the rich are penalised and drained of marks and ranks." Bhargavi expressed scepticism about the intellectual capacities of individuals from lower castes, believing they were leveraging reservations to secure marks and jobs.

Despite of being a sociology graduate, Bhargavi demonstrated a very limited conceptual understanding of the basic concepts like equality, equity, diversity, discrimination, and social justice. She faced no adversity herself, as she hailed from a privileged background nor had her ancestors experienced discrimination. Yet, she was incapable of interpreting her subject matter conceptually.

Both she and Vedika, while from privileged backgrounds, had weak academic foundations. Rather than acknowledging this, they chose to blame those from underprivileged communities for their own academic aspirations—viewing their intellect as a **SHAM**, attributing it entirely to constitutional provisions like reservations. In doing so, they ignored ongoing discrimination, propagated a false notion of merit, and revealed 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 Arilines 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 emerging theory highlights the need for a comprehensive, pragmatic understanding of social justice. Participants' varied perspectives reveal challenges in implementation, exposing weak foundational perceptions that lack 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. Promoting reflective practice, Encouraging analytical reflection, scholarly inquiry and cooperative engagement promotes socially aware individuals. In order to achieve the aim of NEP’s vision of promoting inclusion and addressing diversity we require a strong and committed force of teachers.

**CONCLUSION:**

This study acts as a reflection point for teachers, teacher educators to critically examine how to relate their teaching to the principles of social justice. The interpretive insights drawn from four pre-service teachers offers significant observations for both pre service and in-service educators encouraging them to both evaluate and deepen 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.

**SUGGESTIONS:**

**FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPERS:**

* Integrate social justice themes into curricula
* Design materials to promote critical thinking on social issues
* Relate content to diverse perspectives and current contexts
* Relate the teaching content to the society issues relating to inclusion, diversity and justice

**TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR TEACHERS:**

* Encourage diverse experiences to deepen social justice understanding.
* Create spaces on campus discussions on various social issues.
* Facilitate classroom activities that foster safe dialogue on diversity
* Conduct teacher training programs based on Inclusion and diversity
* Implementing more inclusive policies in education to support marginalized communities,

**FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION:**

* Cultivate an inclusive culture and support innovative teaching
* Foster collaborative learning opportunities
* Connect with communities through activities
* Foster reflective practices to enhance learning impact
* Ensure diverse student participation in activities.
* Organising training programs for teachers w.r.t. enhance their understanding of social justice, and factors affecting their understanding of social justice which includes- Equality, equity, Inclusion and diversity
* Implement affirmative action to foster equal opportunities for all students

**For Further Studies:**

* Studies can be conducted on other aspects of social justice such as access to resources, economic inequality, economic justice, employment discrimination
* A large-scale quantitative study on social justice education can be conducted.
* A Social Justice program can be designed with the aim to promote inclusion and diversity for Teachers and employees outside the education sector to promote an inclusive workplace environment.
* search can be conducted on how social justice factors are integrated in the syllabus
* Further research can be conducted in perceiving student teacher understanding of inequality/ discrimination in education**.**

**Consent:**

To maintain the ethical standard and research ethics written consent as well as recorded consent of Pre service teachers’ were taken along with that to safeguard their identity names have been changed.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Option 1:

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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Details of the AI usage are given below:

1.

2.

3.

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