



# Curriculum Reform in Federal Nepal: Toward A Ground-up and Just Pedagogical Vision

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**Abstract**— This article explores curriculum reform in federal Nepal, focusing on the potential and challenges of creating a ground-up, justice-oriented pedagogical vision. Following Nepal's shift to federalism in 2015, the decentralization of education governance has opened new spaces for localized curriculum development. However, structural centralism, bureaucratic inertia, and limited local capacity have hindered transformative change. Drawing on central pedagogy, decentralization theory, and textual analysis of provincial education plans, this study argues that curriculum reform must move beyond administrative devolution to become a participatory and culturally responsive process. The analysis reveals that while some provinces have begun incorporating local knowledge and languages, most reforms remain constrained by national frameworks and top-down implementation. The article calls for a reimagining of curriculum as a democratic, dialogical practice, grounded in the lived experiences of diverse Nepali communities. It proposes practical pathways—including inclusive curriculum committees, mother-tongue education, integration of indigenous knowledge, and localized teacher training—to build a more equitable and contextually relevant education system.



**Keywords**— Curriculum Reform, Federal Nepal, Ground-Up Approach, Just Pedagogy, Decentralization, Local Curriculum Development, Community Participation, Inclusive Education, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Equity in Education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since Nepal transitioned to federalism in 2015, the restructuring of governance has presented both challenges and opportunities in reforming the education system. With the Constitution of Nepal (2015) mandating significant autonomy to provincial and local governments, curriculum development—once the exclusive domain of the central government—has begun to shift toward more localized and participatory approaches. This paper explores the possibilities and limitations of ground-up curriculum reform in federal Nepal, emphasizing the necessity of a just pedagogical vision that reflects local contexts, cultures, and aspirations.

Despite the constitutional recognition of education as a concurrent power among the three tiers of government, centralized practices persist in curriculum design. This has led to tensions between top-down mandates and the realities of diverse linguistic, cultural, and geographical settings

across the provinces (MOEST, 2020). The ongoing curriculum reform debates must therefore grapple with a central question: **who decides what knowledge matters for Nepali students in a federal system?** This article argues that a just and contextually rooted curriculum reform must begin from the ground up—driven by the voices and lived experiences of local communities, educators, and learners.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have long debated the implications of decentralization in education, particularly in post-conflict or transitioning states. Bray and Mukundan (2003) caution that decentralization, while promising in theory, may exacerbate inequalities if local capacity and accountability are not adequately ensured. However, proponents of localized curriculum argue that federal structures enable the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, languages, and community-

specific needs into formal education systems (Shrestha, 2018).

In the Nepal context, curriculum reform has often been shaped by political shifts rather than pedagogical needs (Phyak, 2013). Historically, education served nation-building and central control, especially through the unifying force of the Nepali language and standardized textbooks. The federal turn has disrupted this model by introducing local governments as stakeholders in curriculum development (Rana et al., 2021). Yet, meaningful reform has been slow due to bureaucratic inertia, lack of resources, and unclear jurisdictional roles.

The theoretical foundation for a ground-up pedagogical vision is best captured by critical pedagogues like Paulo Freire (1970), who envisioned education as a dialogical and liberatory process. Freire critiques the “banking model” of education and calls for pedagogy rooted in learners’ lived experiences. Giroux (1988) and McLaren (2006) argue that meaningful learning must emerge through social critique and cultural engagement. These scholars contend that local actors must be recognized as knowledge producers—not passive consumers of a national curriculum.

Michael Apple (2004, 2012) furthers this by showing how dominant ideologies become embedded in school curricula, systematically marginalizing minority perspectives. Ladson-Billings (1995), through her work on culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizes the importance of community-rooted learning in enhancing educational equity. These global theories strongly support the argument that Nepal’s curriculum reform must center local knowledge systems, languages, and values as fundamental—not supplementary—components of education.

Critical pedagogy literature, notably the work of Paulo Freire (1970), emphasizes the role of education in liberating oppressed communities by valuing their knowledge systems and encouraging dialogue. Freire’s idea of education as a practice of freedom aligns with the need for Nepali curriculum reform to become participatory and emancipatory. Similarly, Apple (2004) stresses the political nature of curriculum and the importance of empowering communities to define educational priorities.

Research by Carney and Bista (2009) points out that despite policy rhetoric, Nepali schools remain hierarchical, exam-driven, and alienated from local life. Therefore, curriculum reform in a federal context must go beyond administrative devolution and embrace pedagogical democratization—what Rizvi and Lingard (2010) term “educational justice.” For Nepal, this entails reimagining curriculum as a tool for community empowerment, not merely academic instruction.

Comparative examples from the Global South reinforce these insights. In Bolivia, the Education Intercultural, Intercultural y Plurilingüe policy restructured curriculum around indigenous languages and knowledge systems, empowering local communities to take curricular leadership (Howard, 2009). In India, the National Curriculum Framework (2005) promoted flexible, context-sensitive curricula, though its implementation has often depended on local capacity and political will (Kumar, 2014). These cases reveal both the potential and the limitations of decentralized curriculum reform in practice.

In Nepal, while the Constitution guarantees education in mother tongues and acknowledges local content, actual implementation has lagged. Studies by Phyak (2016) and Bista et al. (2017) demonstrate that national examinations, language hierarchies, and bureaucratic standardization continue to constrain local autonomy. Rana, Koirala, and Pradhan (2021) observe that many provincial governments mirror centralist practices due to unclear mandates and a lack of curriculum expertise.

The literature thus suggests that for curriculum reform in federal Nepal to be genuinely transformative, it must re-centre power in the hands of communities. A just pedagogical vision demands participatory structures, curricular flexibility, and ideological openness to multiple ways of knowing. It is not enough to decentralize education bureaucratically: curriculum reform must also decentralize epistemologically—valuing the local as a site of legitimate knowledge production. This means not only writing policies that mention local content but creating systems that enable communities to define and own the learning agenda.

In summary, the literature suggests that true curriculum reform in federal Nepal cannot be achieved through administrative decentralization alone. It must be driven by a bottom-up pedagogical vision that values diversity, democratizes knowledge, and empowers communities. Only then can education move beyond formal access to foster meaningful, inclusive, and liberatory learning.

### III. ANALYSIS OF PROVINCIAL EDUCATION PLANS

An examination of selected provincial education plans reveals a mixed picture of reform intent and implementation. Provinces like Bagmati and Sudurpaschim have begun to articulate localized curricular goals, though these are often limited to language inclusion and textbook distribution (Bagmati Province Education Plan, 2021). The Karnali Province Plan, in contrast, outlines a more ambitious vision by proposing the integration of indigenous knowledge, agriculture-based learning, and mother-tongue

instruction in early grades (Karnali Education Policy Draft, 2022).

Despite these promising directions, textual analysis shows that most provincial plans remain aligned with the National Curriculum Framework (NCED, 2019), limiting their transformative potential. For instance, the National Curriculum Framework continues to prioritize core subjects such as English, science, and mathematics, reflecting a modernist development agenda rather than local priorities. Provincial adaptations are framed more as supplements than alternatives to the central curriculum, indicating a hesitance to assert autonomy.

The language used in the plans often emphasizes “capacity-building” and “implementation support,” signaling a technocratic approach to reform. This depoliticization of curriculum undercuts the very ethos of federalism, which is to allow for political and cultural self-expression at the local level (Acharya, 2020). Moreover, teacher training programs across provinces remain centralized, with little emphasis on local content knowledge or participatory pedagogy (Tamang and Rai, 2022).

The plans also lack clear mechanisms for community consultation, curriculum co-design, or feedback loops. This top-down drafting process, even at the provincial level, replicates the centralist logic that federalism was supposed to dismantle. Without ground-up processes of deliberation, curriculum reforms risk becoming cosmetic adjustments rather than structural transformation.

## **Toward a Ground-Up and Just Curriculum**

### **1. Reframing Curriculum as a Democratic Process**

In Nepal’s federal context, curriculum development must transcend traditional top-down models and embrace a democratic, participatory approach. Historically, curriculum decisions have been centralized, often neglecting the diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic realities of local communities. This centralized approach has led to a disconnect between what is taught in schools and the lived experiences of students, particularly those from marginalized groups.

A ground-up curriculum approach recognizes that knowledge is not solely the domain of experts but is co-constructed through the lived experiences of communities. This perspective aligns with principles of critical pedagogy, which advocate for education rooted in the cultural and social contexts of learners. By involving local stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and community leaders—in curriculum development, education becomes a collaborative process that reflects the values, needs, and aspirations of the community.

### **2. Empowering Local Stakeholders**

Empowering local stakeholders is crucial for the success of decentralized curriculum reform. Teachers, in particular, play pivotal roles as they are the primary facilitators of learning. However, studies indicate that teachers in Nepal often have limited involvement in curriculum development processes. To address this, professional development programs should be implemented to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary for active participation in curriculum design.

Moreover, School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) should be strengthened to ensure meaningful community involvement. These bodies can serve as platforms for dialogue, allowing community members to share their perspectives and contribute to curriculum decisions. Ensuring that SMCs and PTAs are representative and inclusive is essential for capturing the diverse voices within a community.

### **3. Integrating Indigenous Knowledge and Local Contexts**

A just curriculum must value and integrate indigenous knowledge systems and local contexts. Nepal is home to a rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and traditions, which are often underrepresented in the national curriculum.

Incorporating local histories, languages, and practices into the curriculum not only validates the identities of learners but also enhances engagement and relevance. For instance, integrating local agriculture practices, traditional crafts, and oral histories into the curriculum can provide students with practical knowledge and a deeper connection to their heritage. Such integration fosters a sense of pride and belonging among students and helps preserve cultural traditions that might otherwise be lost.

### **4. Addressing Challenges in Decentralized Curriculum Implementation**

While the shift towards decentralized curriculum development holds promise, it is not without challenges. One significant hurdle is the lack of capacity at the local level. Many local governments and schools lack the resources, expertise, and infrastructure necessary to develop and implement localized curricula effectively.

To overcome these challenges, targeted capacity-building initiatives are essential. This includes training programs for educators and local officials, the development of resource materials tailored to local contexts, and the establishment of support networks for sharing best practices. Additionally, partnerships with non-governmental organizations and academic institutions can provide technical assistance and support for curriculum development efforts.

## 5. Balancing Standardization and Localization

A critical consideration in decentralized curriculum reform is finding the balance between standardization and localization. While localized curricula ensure relevance and cultural responsiveness, there is also a need for a coherent national framework to maintain educational standards and facilitate mobility.

Developing a flexible national curriculum framework that outlines core competencies and learning outcomes can provide a foundation upon which local adaptations can be built. This approach allows for consistency in educational quality while granting local authorities the autonomy to tailor content to their specific contexts.

## 6. Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Decentralized curriculum development must also prioritize equity and inclusion. Marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and individuals with disabilities, often face systemic barriers to education. A ground-up curriculum approach should actively seek to dismantle these barriers and ensure that curricula are accessible to all students.

For example, incorporating mother tongue instruction in early education can significantly improve learning outcomes for children from non-dominant language groups. Additionally, curricula should address

issues of social justice, human rights, and gender equality to foster an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Nepal's transition to federalism presents a historic opportunity to reimagine curriculum reform as a ground-up, just, and democratic process. While current provincial education plans show some movement toward localized content, the overall system remains constrained by centralist structures and bureaucratic inertia. To fulfil the promise of federalism in education, curriculum reform must empower local stakeholders, integrate indigenous knowledge, and embrace pedagogical principles grounded in equity and participation.

Practical steps—such as forming inclusive curriculum committees, enhancing teacher training, adopting mother tongue education, and fostering community engagement—are necessary to realize a curriculum that reflects the diverse realities of Nepal's peoples. This article calls for a paradigm shift: from curriculum as a fixed, standardized product to curriculum as a living, dialogical process that honours and uplifts local knowledge and agency.

Only through such transformative reforms can Nepal's education system become truly inclusive, relevant, and

just—preparing learners not just to navigate the world, but to shape it.

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