



Decolonizing Formal Education through Indigenous Pedagogy: Experiences of Tharu Teachers and Students in Nepal

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Abstract: This study aims to explore Tharu teachers' and students' experiences and efforts to decolonize formal education through the indigenization of pedagogical practices. Guided by interpretivist paradigm and basic qualitative research design, the study employed interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect data from Tharu teachers and students. In-depth interviews and classroom observations were conducted with teachers, while focus group discussions were conducted with students. The findings revealed that experiential learning, localized instructional approaches, the development of contextualized curricula, integrative learning, the involvement of local resource persons as guest teachers, and the promotion of inclusive classroom practices grounded in community traditions were among the principal strategies employed by Tharu teachers to decolonize educational practices. These Indigenous pedagogical practices contributed to more meaningful and sustainable learning and fostered a more equitable learning environment in mainstream school classrooms. The study also offers implications for educational policy, pedagogical practice, and future research.

Keywords: decolonization, integrative learning, indigenous pedagogy, Tharus.

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge (IK) represents a repertoire of wisdom accumulated and transmitted across generations within Indigenous communities (Havemann, 2015; Magni, 2017). The IK is conveyed through various modes, such as storytelling, demonstration, celebration of rituals and cultural practices (Niure et al., 2024; Owuor, 2007; Stevens, 2008). Countries with diverse ethnic and Indigenous groups have a wealth of IK; however, their formal education systems have not been able to incorporate these knowledge systems as required. Despite the fact that IK has a profound significance in the lives and identities of individuals belonging to particular communities, in most cases, IK is misperceived as the knowledge and practice of marginalized and disadvantaged communities. This perception contributes to the further marginalization of IK in formal schooling (UNESCO, 2016). Studies have claimed that disregarding the cultural identities of Indigenous learners by not incorporating their knowledge and value systems in the education system creates injustice (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005). Integrating Indigenous knowledge bases in mainstream education would be a good step towards decolonizing education (Ewulley et al., 2023; Poudel et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2023). It can also work as an essential resource for human resource development to sustain the community, its livelihood, and culture (Lontoc et al., 2021). Decolonization of education aims at creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment in school classrooms for children from minority and Indigenous backgrounds.

Nepal, a country characterized by the existence of 142 caste/ethnic groups speaking more than 124 languages, aims at promoting education that incorporates linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and Indigenous diversity (National Statistics Office, 2023; MoEST, 2019). Within this context of diversity, this study has taken the case of the Tharu community (one of the Indigenous communities residing in the southern part of Nepal), the second-largest Indigenous group, comprising 6.2% of the population. The knowledge and identity of the Tharu community are directly connected to land and natural resources. Despite having a wealth of IK within the Tharu community, such knowledge rarely appears in formal education. Indigenous scholars and social workers have raised concerns regarding the gradual decline in efforts to preserve and promote the Tharu language, knowledge, and cultural practices (Niure et al., 2024). Tharus have their own value systems, ways of being, and perspectives; not recognizing them in educational practices is against the core principles of a welfare society.

Saeed (2023) mentioned that the recognition of diverse forms of knowledge and values, including Indigenous perspectives, is essential to decolonize education. Overemphasis on modern knowledge, while overlooking Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, can create a sense of exclusion among students in schools. Such a situation creates a sense of alienation within educational programmes. More importantly, school curricula include content that carries the values of dominant groups, and such content does not directly relate to the daily life experiences of children from Indigenous backgrounds, ultimately creating injustice in educational spaces. This trend not only disadvantages marginalized student populations but also limits opportunities for quality education because failing to give equal attention to the values of ethnic or Indigenous populations leads to marginalization in educational opportunities (Poudel et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2016). Several studies have concluded that the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge, the promotion of multiculturalism, the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy, and the mobilization of local intellects from Indigenous communities can contribute to the decolonization of education.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper draws on the premises of decolonization, which aims to respond to the need for a transformative understanding of education in terms of knowledge construction and epistemic ownership. Colonialism has had a profound and lasting impact on the education of children, especially those who come from ethnic, marginalized, and disadvantaged backgrounds, as it has sought to develop homogeneous thinking within contexts of diversity. The prevalence of Eurocentric and Western ideologies in education, especially in countries of the Global South, continues to be a threat to the mainstreaming of IK (Breidlid, 2013). We understand Eurocentric and Western influence on education as a way of privileging dominant languages, cultures, knowledge systems, and practices as primary elements of curriculum and pedagogy. This hegemonic knowledge system of the West, which originated in sixteenth-century Europe, has had a grave impact on knowledge-building processes in the Global South (Breidlid, 2013). Decentering Eurocentric knowledge in curriculum and teaching methods would contribute to rehumanizing education (Datta & Starlight, 2024; Rigney, 2024). The imposition of dominant knowledge and values on ethnic or Indigenous communities through the suppression of aboriginal knowledge and practices rooted in their communities was one of the characteristics of colonialism (Eaton, 2024). One consequence of this

political trend is that it promoted meritocracy and supported a culture of silence when it came to raising the voices of historically marginalized populations. In education systems, colonialism developed as a powerful force for the suppression, marginalization, and underrepresentation of the histories, cultures, and knowledge systems of Indigenous communities (Maldonado-Torres & Cavouris, 2017). Further to this was the emergence of a sense of inferiority among minorities and students from Indigenous backgrounds (Hermans, 2024). The erosion of Indigenous knowledge, the marginalization of local languages and culture, and the creation and perpetuation of inequalities between different groups are some of the detrimental consequences of colonialism in education. Such effects can also be seen in educational policy, curricular content, instructional techniques, and assessment procedures (Hermans, 2024). The interconnectedness of Indigenous people and their lands, and the dysfunctional consequences of colonial policies that have separated them, should be understood in order to decolonize education (Niure, 2019).

Hence, the positioning of ethnic or Indigenous knowledge, skills, practices, and languages in education systems has remained challenging (Poudel, 2024), as it involves undoing colonial practices, especially through confronting dominant discourses in order to provide space for underrepresented, marginalized, and disadvantaged populations (Birdi, 2023; Eaton, 2024; Hermans, 2024). Through decolonial perspectives and practices such as the development of literacies of land, the promotion of ecological knowledge, and storytelling, more just and welfare societies can be established. Education is one such system that can connect Indigenous systems with mainstream education (Datta & Starlight, 2024; Eaton, 2024; Styres, 2019). As communities with plural social, cultural, and ethnic features aim to create increasingly just public systems, the decolonial perspective can support this by positioning inclusion at the heart of transformative initiatives, including changes in teaching, learning, and assessment systems (Niure et al., 2024; Poudel, 2024). This requires educators and educational stakeholders to engage in continuous reflection, critical self-examination, commitment to growth and development, and the development of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Birdi, 2023; Cope, 2023; Flynn, 2024; McDowell, 2024). Indigenizing pedagogy is one of the ways of creating sustainable and just learning environments in schools, as this process can embed the cultural knowledge and value systems of Indigenous peoples in education (Carol, 2012; Kovach, 2010; UNESCO, 2010). Based on this theoretical perspective, this paper analyses Tharu teachers' practices and students' perceptions of decolonizing

pedagogy through embedding Tharu values and cultural practices in the formal education system. By decolonizing formal education, we specifically refer to the Tharu teachers' and students' efforts to recognize, value, and integrate their historically accumulated wisdom and cultural practices into the formal education system.

Methodology

Research design and context

This study was guided by basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) within interpretive paradigm (Bryman, 2016; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three public secondary schools from Jitpur-Simara Sub-metropolitan City, a rapidly changing city in Madhesh Province, were selected for the study. This city is inhabited by people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, including Tharus as one of the Indigenous groups. The National Population and Housing Census of Nepal 2021 reported that Tharus constitute the third-largest ethnic group in Madhesh Province. This sub-metropolitan city is situated in Bara District and has a significant Tharu population, the second-largest ethnic group, constituting more than 15% of the total population in the province (National Statistics Office, 2023).

Participants and methods

The participants selected for this study were secondary-level Tharu teachers and Tharu students studying for a master's degree. The six teachers were from three purposively selected public secondary schools in Jitpur-Simara Municipality. The ten Tharu students (five boys and five girls) were studying at the master's level at a public campus in Kathmandu. The master's-level students were selected with the expectation that they would share their experiences of being taught at the secondary level. Another reason for their selection was convenience, as the students were pursuing their master's degree at the institution where the first author works. Their participation was meaningful because, as prospective teachers, they could clearly and critically articulate their reflections on their past experiences as students and connect these experiences to the teaching profession in which they are likely to be involved in the future. Therefore, qualitative data were collected from them and the Tharu teachers through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and focus-group discussions to gain a deeper

understanding of the indigenizing efforts they made in formal education. The application of these pedagogies in the formal education system can be useful in decolonizing the dominant methodological practices that have been used in formal education for a long time.

Individual interviews with each of the six Tharu teachers, observations of five consecutive lessons taught by each teacher, and two focus-group discussions with students were conducted. Each interview, classroom observation, and FGD ranged between 35 and 50, 35 and 45, and 55 and 80 minutes, respectively. Prior to conducting the interviews, observations, and discussions, written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Subsequently, all interviews, including the FGDs, were transcribed by incorporating verbatim accounts. The transcribed information was then coded, classified, and thematized by incorporating sufficient verbatim excerpts (Clarke & Braun, 2017). To enhance credibility and authenticity, the study employed triangulation, member checking, thick description, and a peer-review process. While analysing the data, the two authors read the transcripts, coded the text, and discussed the initial ideas to understand the patterns in the data. Following repeated engagement with the data, the authors developed a set of codes that commonly emerged across the datasets. Each code was evaluated and reviewed by the authors to enhance credibility, and the codes were subsequently organized into themes that are reported as the findings of this study. Moreover, participants were assured that their individual and organizational identities would remain anonymous. Pseudonyms were assigned to all key informants during the analysis of the qualitative data (Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher F; Focus Group A, Focus Group B) in accordance with research ethics.

Results

The findings of the study reveal that the Indigenous pedagogy of the Tharus, among several other Indigenous groups, offers valuable insights for possible interventions in transforming the present education system into a culturally responsive and equitable one. As the findings reported below show, Tharu teachers used several strategies, such as experiential learning, collaborative learning, practical skills, and problem-solving in natural settings. These strategies could be effectively utilized in formal education curricula. In this section, we report the results on a thematic basis, drawing on the practices and preferences of Tharu teachers in turning a traditional curriculum into a locally responsive and inclusive one.

Experiential learning

Tharu children acquire a wide range of Indigenous knowledge, skills, and values through firsthand experiences. During a focus group discussion, the students shared;

We usually obtain majority of knowledge and skills from family, community, and peer groups through firsthand experiences. When we gather for cultural celebration and family rituals, our parents and grandparents share a lot of good insights related to our daily life and being (Focus Group-B, five girls, aged 21–24).

Further to this, the students reported that they learn several skills through experiencing on the land, through daily chores and activities that their ancestors engage in. For example, children learn harvesting, fishing, ploughing, and farming through firsthand experiences while accompanying their elders. Teacher A, male, 46 years old, mentioned, “Tharu children learn their aboriginal knowledge, cultural norms, and values through active participation in their daily lives. We can also teach curricular contents in our formal classroom through hands-on activities, field trips, and real-world projects.”

The teacher claimed that children’s learning experiences through these activities become sustainable. The sustainable and meaningful learning concerns have been presented here more subjectively, as we have obtained perceived data from teachers and students. This indicates that the inclusion of experiential learning opportunities, such as project work, field visits, community work, etc., as integral parts of the curricula in formal education, would contribute to meaningful learning. Teacher D, male, 51 years old, added, “Opportunities to learn through firsthand experiences enable learners to move beyond rote learning and provide students with opportunities to learn through direct engagement.”

Thus, giving space for learning through first-hand experiences has the potential to enhance learning outcomes for all students, including those from ethnic backgrounds. Students also reported that they develop a deeper understanding of the contents, enhance problem-solving skills, and critical and creative thinking skills through first-hand experiences

Use of localized instructional techniques

Study results reveal that Tharu teachers employed various instructional techniques that are rooted in their Indigenous community level practices and traditions. During a focus group discussion, the students said, “Our

parents use different instructional techniques to clarify various knowledge, skills, and values at a time when one does not work.” Teacher C, female, 38 years old, also shared similar experiences as, “A variety of methods, as practiced in Tharu community, can be handy to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment in the classroom.” For example, field-based observation is one of such methods of teaching, especially in science and mathematics learning. Teacher A, male, 46 years old, mentioned;

Children learn better through observation. I used to go to the field with my parents and see how they do fishing. You know I had easy feeling in learning contents such as waves, fishing, etc. included in my textbooks as I had previous field-based knowledge on it.

Similar observations were also reported by Teacher B, female, 33 years old. She said,

I usually relate my classroom activities to the community activities that are used by Tharu people. For example, wherever there comes content about temperature maintenance to keep home warm, I show the Tharu homes, the way the walls are built with mud to keep warm during winter, and cooler during summer.

I even task students to take photos of such things and ask them to present to the class, which makes learning more realistic and connected to the community knowledge and practices. To further solidify this concept, he asked one of the Tharu teachers to report how her home was constructed. Text below illustrates what happened in the classroom.

Teacher: Ramjanam, can you tell us how your house has been constructed, for example, direction, design, decoration, colour?

Ramjanam: Okay sir. My house faces North-south. The walls are made up of cow dung and grass. The roof is made up of tile. Our house wall also includes paintings of animals (elephant for example) and birds (peacock for example), flowers (Lotus for example), God and Goddesses. Basically, our house colour is like the colour of mud, a colour close to the nature.

Teacher: Oh, great. Thanks. By the way, why was your house facing north-south?

Ramjanam: You know sir, the north-south facing house is called Rasiya Ghar, and people believe that the Kuldeuta (the family god) feels comfortable in such house. So, my parents did this.

The classroom observation also revealed that Tharu teachers tried to connect the learning of topics related to mathematics, science and

vocational training with their traditional craft skills such as weaving, pottery and agriculture. This process has supported the integration of Tharu community knowledge with formal education. Students during the FGD also expressed similar experiences.

Diversified and contextual curriculum

Each social unit has its own unique cultural curriculum to teach its Indigenous knowledge, skills, and values to new generations. The Tharu Indigenous community also has this pattern. The students from a minority background enrolled in schools attended by students from dominant cultural groups do not feel comfortable sharing their experiences, needs, and aspirations, as their social, cultural, and linguistic patterns are different from those of the dominant ones generally incorporated in the school curriculum. The curriculum turns into a monolithic one as it does not incorporate the diversity of the schooling context. Consequently, a monolithic curriculum cannot adequately address the diverse needs, interests, and problems of learners who come from different backgrounds.

This concern was raised by teachers as well. For example, Teacher C, female, 38 years old, said, “In our formal educational institutions, especially at the school level, we need a curriculum directly related to the local context, that addresses the unique needs of learners and provides them with the knowledge, values, and skills they need to succeed in their lives.”

This indicates that the development and implementation of a contextual curriculum are imperative to address this issue by providing functional curricular contents that are directly related to the local needs, problems, norms, and values of the learners. Similar opinion was also put forward by students during focus group discussion B (five girls, aged 21–24). They mentioned, “The currently practiced curriculum fails to address the diverse needs of our students... A more contextualized curriculum can be a solution to align learning with daily life. Such a curriculum not only enhances student engagement but also enables them to mobilize locally available resources.”

This type of curriculum can help provide functional knowledge that ensures the internal and external efficiency of the formal education system in Nepal. “Only a context-relevant curriculum provides ample opportunities to learn for all learners since they come from diverse backgrounds,” Teacher D, male, 51 years old, revealed. Due to these reasons, responsible agencies, for example, the Curriculum Development Center, should consider planning

and implementing a contextually relevant curriculum within formal educational institutions, especially in lower classes.

Integrative learning

Study findings show that Tharus prioritize integrative learning over fragmented and compartmentalized learning. They teach their children many things through day-to-day activities by allowing them to learn aboriginal knowledge, values, and skills simultaneously. Tharu children acquire functional and integrative knowledge in their working environments. In response to a query in this regard, Teacher B, female, 33 years old, informed, “While fishing, they not only learn the names of various fishes but also become familiar with the techniques required to catch them and the health benefits of consuming them.”

While, in general, formal schooling exposes students to content from different subject areas in a fragmented and compartmentalized manner, the association of learning materials with several other socially and culturally familiar concepts facilitates the Tharu children’s meaningful learning. The delivery of content that detaches it from the children’s community knowledge fails to establish sustainable learning on the part of the children and also does not enable them to solve their daily problems and challenges.

The study participants thought that the integration of school curriculum content with that of their community funds of knowledge and skills contributes to improved engagement in learning. During focus group discussion, a focus group (five boys, aged 22–24) mentioned, “In social studies, we can integrate historical, geographical, and cultural knowledge to provide students with a holistic understanding of their community and the globe.” They further added in response to a similar query, “Classroom activities that integrate knowledge systems from the local contexts, such as those from daily community and home practices, would make learning more sustainable.” Teacher B, female, 33 years old, further supported this concern as;

We can also use approach to providing integrative knowledge for teaching science in formal schooling as in Tharu community... Medicinal properties of specific plant, ecological significance of the plant, and its role in local economy can be discussed simultaneously while teaching content related to plant.

The knowledge integration can also be found in the celebration of cultural festivals such as Maghi (the major festival of Tharus celebrated around

January). During this festival, they usually make annual family budget decisions (that involve mathematical calculations), plan human resources for farming (social studies and life skill learning), and start the consumption of newly harvested rice (food science). The students, therefore, learn to integrate their learning from the formal education curricula into their domestic as well as community-based cultural practices that support them in making learning more sustainable.

This is a departure from traditional compartmentalized learning to holistic learning. Although formal schooling does not directly focus on teaching about Maghi or activities related to this festival, students develop skills at school and apply them more practically to discharge their responsibilities in their real-life cultural contexts. Their knowledge and ability to count, analyse food-related issues, and make budget decisions, etc., did not develop in a day or through a particular lesson; rather, it occurred as a collective learning experience in school.

Using local intellects as resource persons

The knowledge, skills, and values that are specific to a particular community are closely tied to a learner's life. Individuals who possess this local knowledge have the expertise to effectively teach these concepts and skills to students in formal education settings. They can convey such content more effectively to the students than a trained teacher who only has mastery over a specific discipline. "Elders in any community have long-term experience and wisdom that cannot be organized in structured textbooks," Teacher B, female, 33 years old, answered.

When local experts are involved in sharing their aboriginal knowledge, students from the relevant community feel a sense of ownership and engage more actively in the learning process. Students can also expand their horizons of knowledge when they share their own knowledge, values, and skills with each other. It is therefore suggested that local intellects from Indigenous communities can be utilized as resource persons to transfer local content into formal educational institutions. Supporting the statement, Teacher E, male, 44 years old, added,

Using local intellects as resource persons would be a powerful way to bridge the gap between school and community. Such practices not only foster respect for local community but also empower students to see themselves as valuable contributors to their Indigenous knowledge.

Thus, locally available human resources can be deployed as an important catalyst to determine the linkage between formal education and Indigenous education. Mobilizing local resources not only enhances student engagement in their learning but also fosters a deep respect for local culture and empowers students to recognize the value of their ancestral wisdom. We can effectively transfer invaluable local knowledge, skills, and values to students by inviting local experts into our classroom(s).

With this understanding, the teachers invited several local Tharu personnel to deliver guest talks on specific days in specific areas of social and personal life, connecting them with local culture, art, architecture, and literature. The guests shared based on their lived experiences rather than on anything coming from textbooks or media.

For example, in one of the guest lectures on the social studies topic 'Our Festivals', the teacher related the origin of the culture to the worship of gods and goddesses. The guest teachers introduced the idea of the multi-layered existence of gods (family god, Tharu community god, and Hindu god) and the distribution of their roles. He said, "Our family god lives in Gharthan (a sacred place made inside the home), the community god lives in Brahmathan (a specific place in the community, usually under a Pipal tree), and the Hindu god lives in a temple." This clarification helped students understand the concept of festivals and the religious rationale for the celebration of these festivals.

Promotion of classroom inclusion

In the Tharu family or community, both male and female parents play important role in imparting aboriginal knowledge, values, and skills to their children. Certain types of knowledge and skills are exclusively taught by mothers to their daughters, and fathers to their sons, something like gender-specific mentoring. Understanding the gender-specific community practice, roles and values, the Tharu teachers considered forming groups in the class based on gender. They thought that while teaching and learning some contents such as reproductive health, puberty symptoms and mensuration, the girls would feel uncomfortable to discuss with their peer boys. Teacher A, male, 46 years old, mentioned his experience as, "In formal schooling, girl students feel hesitant to learn some curricular contents (such as reproductive health) in co-education classroom... Gender-based grouping could be more engaging and fruitful to teach such contents in Nepalese education system." While asked about why such gendered-sitting matters, then the teacher further added, "These are the cultural values that children

have grown with, and we as teachers cannot create discomfort for the girls, so I usually group like that in some specific content-focused sessions.” Teacher D, male, 51 years old, added to this concern as, “While segregated schools may not be ultimate solution, we should identify approaches to creating gender-inclusive and equitable learning environment in the classroom so that all students can participate in a safe and comfortable learning.” Teacher C, female, 38 years old, further mentioned, “Though segregated educational setting is not a good option to promote inclusion in education, gender-based grouping is necessary to teach some contents, reproductive organs for example.”

Hence, the narrations shared by informants highlight the significant roles of gender-based support in receiving Indigenous knowledge, values, and skills that can also be applied in the formal education system. A gender-inclusive learning environment can be created in the classroom through teacher training and identifying alternative approaches, for example, gender-based grouping.

The Tharu community is characterized by a relatively closed social structure in which gender roles are traditionally defined. Male members are usually engaged in outdoor activities, while women are mainly responsible for indoor responsibilities. Consequently, females, including those attending school, have limited opportunities to interact with males outside their family.

As a result, many girls feel uncomfortable speaking openly with male classmates about issues such as pubertal changes, sexuality, and reproductive health, but they tend to participate more actively in discussions with same-gender peers during classroom activities. Although contemporary educational research frequently emphasizes heterogeneous grouping as a strategy for promoting inclusion, the voices of girls from the Tharu community often become louder in homogeneous group settings when discussing sensitive topics, which is primarily cultural in nature. The findings of the study also signal that the cultural contexts of students should be considered when making decisions about instructional approaches.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore Tharu teachers’ agency and Tharu students’ experiences of decolonizing formal schooling through the adoption of Indigenous methodologies in their classrooms. Tharus, as Indigenous

people, possess a rich repertoire of knowledge, values, and skills passed down through generations to sustain their livelihood (Niure, 2014; Niure et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this Indigenous knowledge system has been marginalized within the formal education system by giving more emphasis to Eurocentric and Western perspectives and the languages of dominant social groups.

In the Nepalese context, decolonizing knowledge means addressing both Western and internal dominance in knowledge generation. National curricula, even at the school level, usually reflect hill Brahmin-Chhetri perspectives, the mainstream caste, since they hold nearly 90% of textbook authorship and 42.6% representation despite being 30% of the population, while Tharu voices remain absent, though they represent 6.2% of the national population (Education in Every Home, 2024).

Decentering Eurocentric knowledge in curriculum and teaching methods is advantageous for decolonizing education (Datta & Starlight, 2024; Rigney, 2024). The findings of this study revealed that several Indigenous pedagogies, such as experiential learning, gender-based grouping, diversification of curricular content, integrative learning, and mobilization of community personnel in supporting students to learn the curricular content meaningfully, were used by the Tharu teachers.

The Tharu students, who are also future teachers, shared similar experiences while being educated and were also interested in doing so in their future classroom contexts. Their attempts and critical consciousness in taking decolonial action to promote indigeneity in educational practices reinforce the grounded discourses in the decolonization of the curriculum in formal education (Poudel et al., 2022).

By integrating Indigenous knowledge into their instruction, Tharu teachers not only aimed to enhance student learning but also contributed to reviving their linguistic and cultural characteristics, ultimately facilitating intergenerational knowledge transfer among Tharu children. Studies have shown that Indigenous ways of teaching effectively utilize culturally appropriate methods of communication and knowledge transmission that not only improve the academic performance of Indigenous learners but also develop a sense of belongingness among students from Indigenous backgrounds (Phyak, 2021; UNESCO, 2010).

Integration of local ecology, histories, languages, cultures, and knowledge into the curriculum challenges dominant narratives by promoting critical consciousness of power dynamics and the significance of diversity in

knowledge production in education systems (Birdi, 2023). The decolonial attempts of the Tharu teachers and students in this study exemplified the importance of contextually relevant curricula. Engaging local communities to address environmental challenges and promote sustainable practices is also helpful in decolonizing education (Prah, 2018).

Recognizing the diverse needs and learning styles of students from different backgrounds, a diversified or contextual curriculum can effectively address the limitations of a “monolithic curriculum” by providing functional knowledge and skills that are directly relevant to the local context and empower learners to mobilize locally available resources.

The curriculum can be decolonized by integrating Indigenous perspectives, histories, and knowledge (Zembylas, 2024). Decolonizing narratives and stories are important parts of decolonizing education (Styres, 2019).

Furthermore, the study results indicate that gender-sensitive instructional approaches have also been used in the Tharu community to address gender-specific learning needs. Girls in the community learn much Indigenous knowledge from their grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, for example, and vice versa.

Further to this, Tharu teachers engaged students in field-based activities in communities and also invited community personnel to deliver experience-based knowledge that provided a solid basis for children to understand the content well by relating it to their context. Engaging students in community-based projects and activities helps decolonize education (Zembylas, 2024).

The study results indicate that this method can be effectively applied in formal education to teach various subjects such as science, mathematics, social studies, and so on. It can also be integrated into vocational education programs to teach practical skills like carpentry and sewing. This approach fosters both specific skills and problem-solving abilities by providing students with firsthand experiences.

The decolonial actions undertaken by the Tharu teachers have several benefits for children. For instance, students often feel more comfortable receiving academic support from peers than from teachers. Students’ active involvement is also crucial to reimagine education by addressing environmental, social, and racial injustices in the classroom (Saeed, 2023). This method is particularly valuable in resource-constrained settings like Nepalese public schools, where teacher scarcity leads to idle class time.

Tharu people consistently emphasize holistic and integrative learning, through which they can receive functional knowledge applicable to real-life situations. The present study identified that Tharu teachers made pedagogical choices in relevance to the contexts of their work, helped promote education that respects cultural identity, and builds on one's own values.

Involving local experts as resource persons from the Tharu community can bridge the gap between formal and Indigenous education. Dzvimbo et al. (2023), in their study in Zimbabwe, concluded that passing conventional knowledge by knowledgeable people from society in schools would play a significant role in preserving Indigenous knowledge.

Fostering a deeper connection between formal education and local communities can be achieved by encompassing Indigenous knowledge within the formal curriculum (Saeed, 2023). Collaborative efforts between teachers, students, and community members open a dialogue between them through inclusive curricula, cross-cultural exchanges, and opportunities for meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities (Birdi, 2023; Taieb, 2014).

Teachers' agency also plays a crucial role in decolonizing education by exercising their autonomy, challenging the status quo, and fostering critical thinking by encouraging students to question dominant narratives and analyse power structures (Glowach et al., 2023).

Recognizing and dismantling power imbalances within and outside the classroom is therefore necessary to decolonize the modern education system (Saeed, 2023). This approach fosters respect for local knowledge and empowers students to recognize the value of their ancestral wisdom. The findings in this paper also resonate with these claims, drawing on the case of Tharu Indigenous teachers working at public schools in Nepal.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper explored the decolonial practices in formal education undertaken by Tharu teachers and the experiences of Tharu students. By incorporating Indigenous pedagogies, such as experiential learning, the adoption of diverse teaching methods, the development of context-specific curricula, integrative learning, and local resource mobilization, and by developing inclusive and engaging learning environments, the Tharu

teachers catered to the diverse learning needs of all students, thus contributing to more localized, sustainable, and meaningful learning.

Their attempts did not only make learning meaningful but also minimized colonial influences in formal education practices. The Tharu teachers realized that every social unit has its own unique hidden curriculum, which can be integrated with the formally developed distant curriculum to make the educational environment responsive to local culture, context, and traditions.

This study reports that the Tharu teachers and students collectively aimed to establish a land-based pedagogy to support students' quality learning and provide students with lifelong learning experiences. This attempt played a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of Indigenous people through the connection between the classroom and the community.

Students also reported that such connections could enhance their sense of belongingness to the community and the formal curriculum.

The findings of the study imply that developing culturally and contextually relevant curricula, as well as pedagogical practices, would have multiple benefits, such as meaningful and sustainable learning and the preservation of Indigenous culture and traditions through the intergenerational transfer of funds of knowledge. From the pedagogical perspective, the Tharu teachers' consistent connection with community knowledge and practices, while implementing the formal curriculum, showed their mature understanding of the need and significance of decolonizing pedagogies. They implemented the national-level curriculum but tried their best, through their agentic action, to make the curriculum more locally appropriate. This further implies that teachers and students, from the classroom level, can collectively exercise their agency in appropriating the curriculum according to the context, especially through their self-regulated agency. The curriculum development and implementation agencies should therefore aim to engage teachers in curriculum planning and development and support them in creating more equitable and meaningful learning, particularly through training.

Indigenous knowledge integration into education fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation among all learners by valuing diverse knowledge and practices; therefore, the centrally developed national curriculum should be implemented in a way that provides teachers with more space to use innovative and context- as well as culture-specific

activities. This flexibility should not only be in pedagogy but also in assessment practices, both formative and summative, to fully integrate IK into education at the local level. Emphasis on integrated learning helps formal education move beyond rote learning and empowers all students with the knowledge, skills, and values they need to succeed in their lives. The incorporation of Indigenous pedagogies, the implementation of contextually relevant curricula, and the promotion of flexibility and inclusivity support students' learning experiences based on their culture and context.

Though this research is based on a selected Tharu community in Jitpur–Simara Sub-metropolitan City and draws on the experiences of the sampled teachers and students, further research might explore what specific methodologies are applied by teachers of other Indigenous groups to decolonize the national curriculum and pedagogical practices.

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