

Education as justice across the system

Evidence brief 3

JustEd: Education as and for Environmental, Epistemic and Transitional Justice to enable Sustainable Development

JustEd: ‘Education as and for Epistemic, Environmental and Transitional justice to enable Sustainable Development’ (JustEd) is a research project that ran from 2020-2023, funded by the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund, led by researchers from the University of Bath (UK), Group for the Analysis of Development (Peru), Gulu University (Uganda), Tribhuvan University (Nepal) and the University of Bristol (UK). Our mixed-methods research design included analysis of policy, secondary school curricula, pedagogy, young people’s experiences and their intended actions related to the SDGs in Peru, Nepal and Uganda.

We have identified the complex trajectories between secondary education and sustainable development and, based on our analysis, we argue that schooling needs to focus far more attention on the role of

education as justice to enable education’s expected contribution to sustainable development. By this we mean that education leaders and teachers need to consider the ways that schooling environments and educational experiences are just, and how far secondary curriculum and pedagogy respond to, and support young people to understand and eventually change, the multiple injustices that they experience in their daily lives. We have developed three evidence briefs to share key aspects of the project’s outcomes.

- Evidence brief 1: Key findings
- Evidence brief 2: The importance of a justice-based approach to secondary school curriculum and pedagogy
- **Evidence brief 3: Education as justice across the system**

Introduction

In this evidence brief, we demonstrate the complex trajectories between secondary education and its intended outcomes in relation to the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Quality education is the focus of SDG4 but education is also widely expected to contribute to the fulfilment of other SDGs, such as those related to positive climate action (SDG13), sustained peace (SDG16) and reduced inequalities (SDG10). A central assumption of the role of education for enabling sustainable development is that what is learnt in school will translate into positive attitudes and behaviours. Education's contribution can assume linear trajectories in global and national policy documentation, with an emphasis on policy and curricular content following through to positive outcomes. However, as visualised in image 1 (next page), our findings show that these trajectories are more complicated and depend on a range of factors within the education system, notably in relation to pedagogy, the school environment and assessment.

JustEd has included a focus on environmental, epistemic and transitional justice. These foci broadly map onto SDG 13 (climate action), SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG10 (reduced inequalities). In evidence brief 1 ([direct link](#)), we present our multiple justices framework and we argue that for secondary education to enable positive actions related to the SDGs it needs to be one that:

- (1) is for all, environmentally and physically safe, and free from discrimination
- (2) recognizes and responds to children's lived experiences and is situated in the place where children live – including the histories of conflict and inequalities and contemporary experiences of violence, climate change and environmental degradation; and
- (3) enables all young people to participate fully in the consumption and production of knowledges needed to help prevent violent conflict, foster transformative climate action and reduce inequalities.

Central to this framework is that we view the education system and secondary schools as sites of multiple and interconnected forms of justice; notably environmental, epistemic and transitional (in)justice. In the sections below, which show disconnections and complexities at different stages in the journey from policy to intended outcomes in Nepal, Peru and Uganda, we include examples from across the three forms of justice.

The troubled path from curricula to outcomes

There is significant curricular content related to the SDGs in all three countries – particularly related to environmental education - but disconnections impact the potential for enabling positive action. In our analysis of secondary education curricula from Nepal, Peru and Uganda, the most significant content related to SDG-related topics is in relation to climate change and environmental education. In Peru, an 'environmental approach' is one of the seven 'cross-cutting approaches' for secondary education. In Nepal, there are topics in Science and Health, Population and Environment on climate change, manmade hazards, greenhouse effects, environment pollution and biodiversity. There is a lot of content related to climate change, environmental degradation and ecology in the new Ugandan secondary curriculum, cutting across Geography, Biology and Agriculture. For example, the Geography syllabus related to ecology includes topics on climate and the natural vegetation of East Africa, climate change in East Africa and the world, mining in East Africa, wildlife conservation and tourism in East Africa, and the sustainable use of fishery resources in East Africa.

While there is no lack of environment-related content, our analysis further shows that in the absence of a justice lens in what, and how, this content is delivered, learners do not relate these lessons to their own lives or engage with it meaningfully, and therefore this content rarely translates into positive climate action (please see Evidence brief 2 – [link](#) – for full discussion of a justice approach). Here we see a disconnection between the expected role of education in enabling positive action (as set out in national environment

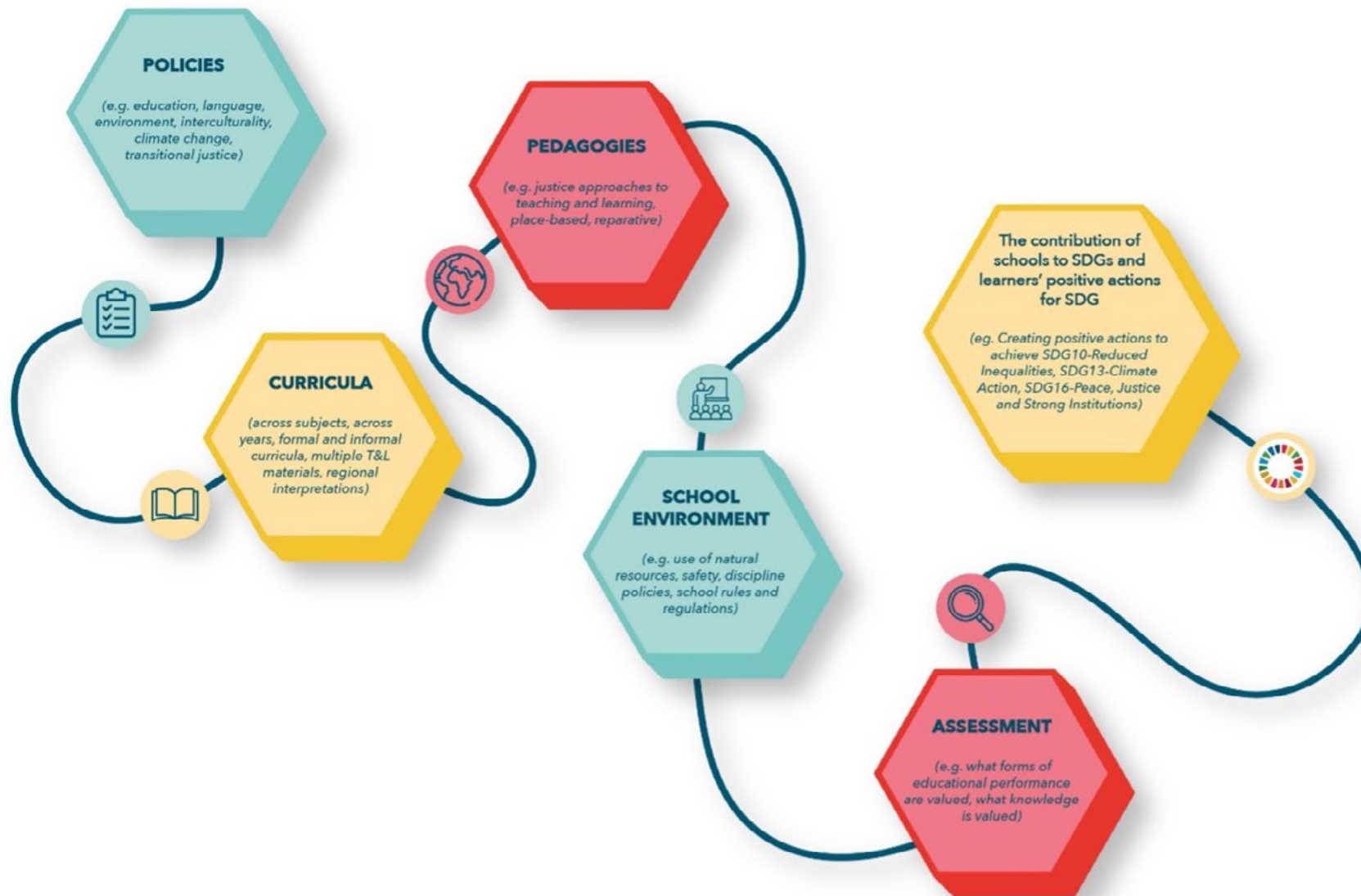


Image 1

and/or education policies) and the actual content and pedagogies. For example, the Ugandan National Environment Act (2019, Part XIV) explicitly states that the Act provides for ‘integration of environmental education into educational curricula and programmes’, with the implicit assumption that such integration can help to support the delivery of the National Environment Act. However, while there is content included in the education curriculum, there is much less focus on the type of content and pedagogies that might be needed to deliver the objectives of the Environment Act through schooling.

Disparities between expected pedagogies and actual classroom practice

In Nepal, we undertook classroom observations of 67 grade 9 and 10 lessons in four districts and across a range of subjects related to the SDGs. These observations consistently showed the use of teacher-centered pedagogies that place teachers at the center of teaching with transmissive approaches that give strong emphasis on the transfer of content knowledge from the teachers to learners (Kember and Kwan, 2000)¹. This is despite there being an expectation in pre-service teacher training and the curriculum that a range of teaching/learning methods will be used in the classroom. In Science and Health, Population and Environment curricula these are described as lectures, demonstrations, explorations, discussions, project work and field study. The ‘Health, Population and Environment’ curriculum also recommends the use of problem solving, discovery, role play and the development of critical thinking. These are methods that map closely to those recommended by UNESCO (2014) as necessary for developing young people’s skills to address the uncertainty and complexity of multiple sustainability challenges². Observations and interviews with teachers show there is a lack of clarity within the curriculum for which methods are to be used for what content. For example, the curriculum does not specify how to develop learners’ practical

skills in environmental and peace education. This leads to teachers focusing on the delivery of content with an absence of the development of learners’ practical skills to put the knowledge into action in their respective daily life contexts. This suggests the importance of establishing clear links between curriculum, intended outcomes and pedagogy and the need to improve in-service teacher training to support teachers in delivering the full range of teaching/learning methods.

In Uganda, it is evident that the size of the curriculum and the number of children in the classroom have a detrimental impact on what teaching methods can be used. Teachers and learners reflected on the challenges of having sixty learners in one class, alongside an expectation for a certain amount of the curriculum to be covered in each 40-minute lesson. This necessitates the use of teacher-centered approaches with many learners saying that when learners are encouraged to contribute, teachers often focus on the most academically able learners as it is not possible to open it up to every learner in the classroom. These time constraints were also seen in the schools in Nepal. Here, teachers have some more autonomy in terms of what methods they can use and many offered ideas of how to diversify their classroom practice in interviews, including using YouTube, practicals and field trips. When asked why these were not brought into practice in the school, they bemoaned that there was too much to cover in the curriculum and that there was lack of financial support for these methods that were deemed ‘additional’ to core content delivery. In Peru, where the competencies-based curriculum means that teachers have significant autonomy to determine how to teach, we still found quite limited pedagogic choices. Interviews with teachers suggested that this is because teachers feel unsupported to translate broad curriculum guidelines into their own developed lessons. This can lead to teachers relying merely on content in textbooks.

The three countries offer interesting case studies of differences in teacher autonomy for curriculum delivery; however, there is a consistent finding across the three which is the essential role of teacher and teaching practice in enabling the trajectory of curriculum design through to outcomes. Teachers need support and space to embed a range of teaching methods that engage all learners, and these needs are dependent on the type of curriculum and broader contextual factors such as the numbers of learners in the classroom.

An important lesson from this finding is that there is understanding among curricula designers and teacher trainers that didactic, traditional teaching methods are not sufficient to achieve the objectives for sustainable development that expected within education. At the level of education design and professional training, there is an appreciation that depth of understanding and meaningful learning requires considerate, learner-centred pedagogies – pedagogies that embed some dimensions of a justice approach. The gap that needs to be addressed here is in implementing those pedagogies in classrooms. However, it is necessary to note that such learner-centred pedagogies require skilled teachers and appropriate support systems which are often unavailable in low and middle-income countries.

Assessment is disconnected from broader learning outcomes related to attitudes and action for sustainable development

There are also some clear disconnections between the expected outcomes of secondary education in relation to sustainable development and the ways that such topics are being assessed in examinations in Nepal and Uganda. In Nepal, we identified a clear gap between the assessment process suggested in the Science, Health, Population and Environment and Social Studies curricula – which encourages comprehension, creativity and practical application, alongside knowledge - and the actual practice of assessment which focused mostly on the presentation of factual knowledge (see boxes on the right with examples of questions included in course

assessments in Nepal). Similarly in Uganda, our analysis of secondary school examinations, together with perspectives from learners and teachers, showed that assessments are largely memory-testing tasks, requiring learners to produce textbook knowledge that was learnt for a learning cycle of four years. Teachers are committed to ensuring the syllabus is comprehensively taught and covered so that learners are fully prepared when they face the examinations board. In Geography, the subject with more content on environmental issues, around half of the national assessment is memory-testing, for example, through multiple-choice questions. Application and problem-solving examinations tasks are largely not built in the assessments.

This is an area that was just one part of our overarching analysis and we suggest that this is a potential disconnect that merits greater attention; especially given the similarities between the gap in policy and practice that we found between intended pedagogies and actual teaching practices.

Questions in Nepal's compulsory Science assessments

- 1. How does acid rain occur? Write with chemical equation. Present two suggestions to minimize the effect of acid rain in Nepal.*
- 2. How does over industrialization cause greenhouse effect? Mention any two points that justify it.*

Questions in Nepal's Social Studies assessments

- 1. Write down the role of United Nations on peace keeping, problem solving, end of war and socio-economic development.*
- 2. What kind of rights are you utilizing now which are provided by World Human Rights Declaration? What kind of benefits do you get from the utilization of those rights?*

Disconnections between what is taught in school and young people's lived experiences of (in)justices within and beyond school

Our qualitative findings across the secondary schools in all three countries show that for secondary education to enable positive actions in relation to environmental and transitional justice, more attention needs to be paid to the ways that schools can be sites of (in)justice. For example, schools are sites of epistemic (in)justice in terms of lack of support for all young people to participate fully in knowledge recognition, consumption and production or help young people to develop the skills to engage with and contribute knowledges³. Most of our qualitative evidence with learners and teachers suggests that schools are spaces where most young people speak very little and do not engage in learning that encourages critical thinking. Where young people are not engaged in knowledge production within schooling, it is difficult to envisage how schooling can enable them to become actors in the future who will produce new knowledge such as to be able to solve multifaceted problems. In Uganda, and to a lesser extent in Nepal, it is also clear that an unfamiliar language of instruction is another epistemic injustice that further limits young people's talk and learning. In Uganda, this is further compounded by strict English-only language policies in the schools that are enforced by punishments, including corporal punishments, further curbing young people's propensity to speak.

Our findings show that in Nepal, Peru and Uganda, secondary schooling is very limited in making connections to young people's lived experiences of issues related to sustainable development, which in turn impacts on their potential to make positive action in relation to sustainable development. Where curricular content does reflect key issues for young people, there is very limited attempt to contextualise the content in their lived experiences and young people are often left wholly unsupported to make sense of the tensions between what they are learning and what they are experiencing in their daily lives. For example, in peri-urban contexts in Peru, young people are taught about individual environmental responsibility

and the need to take action through recycling. However, no mention is made of the fact that rubbish collection and recycling facilities are mostly unavailable in the areas where the young people live. In turn, we found that learners struggled to discuss the contradictions that appeared when discussing issues related to inequalities, peace and climate action. We saw this particularly when we tried to discuss the contradiction between what they are taught in schools about valuing and celebrating cultural, ethnic and racial diversity and what they witness and experience in their daily lives of the ways that diversity is associated with significant discrimination, high levels of violence, cultural marginalisation and economic precarity. Learners expressed the need for safe and supportive educational experiences that acknowledge ongoing complexity, tension and violence within and across groups in their contexts.

Curricular content in all three countries is presented in quite abstract and decontextualised ways, for example, focusing on technical aspects of conflict resolution or scientific descriptions of climate change, and divorced from any sense of continuity through time or relevance to ongoing injustices that young people experience and observe around them. For example, in Nepal, the conflict is presented as entirely historical, that starts at one point and finishes at another fixed point, with no connections made to legacies of that conflict. Similarly, in Peru, the interviews and survey with learners from Lima, Ucayali and Ayacucho, showed that learners can describe contemporary environmental issues, but found it much harder to analyse or articulate the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on their own lives or the urgency to act beyond simplistic responses such as not littering. When placed together with the findings related to the lack of connections between formal school knowledge and lived experiences, we argue that this relatively abstract and decontextualised understanding of environmental issues impacts young people's propensity to make positive actions. This suggests the essential role of connecting what is taught in school with young people's lived experiences of issues related to sustainable development so that multiple knowledges can be connected and the link between those knowledges and action can be enabled.

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¹ Kember, D., & Kwan, K. (2000). *Lecturers' approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching*. *Instructional Science*, 28, 469–490.

² UNESCO (2014). *Sustainable Development Begins With Education: How education can contribute to the proposed post-2015 goals*. Paris: UNESCO; See also: Bourn, D., & Soysal, N. (2021). *Transformative Learning and Pedagogical Approaches in Education for Sustainable Development: Are Initial Teacher Education Programmes in England and Turkey Ready for Creating Agents of Change for Sustainability?* *Sustainability*, 13(16), 8973. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13168973>; UNESCO (2020). *Education for Sustainable Development: a roadmap*. France: UNESCO

³ Balarin, M., Paudel, M., Sarmiento, P., Singh, G. B., & Wilder, R. (2021). *Exploring epistemic justice in educational research*. <https://zenodo.org/record/5502143>

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