

# Justice, safety and dignity in education to advance the Sustainable Development Goals

Lessons for policy and practice from the JustEd study  
November 2023





*Credit: Rachel Wilder; School children waiting for the bus in northern Nepal*

## Executive summary

**This policy brief reports findings from ‘JustEd’, an international study that explored educational policies, curricula, pedagogies and young people’s experiences of secondary schooling in Nepal, Peru and Uganda and surveyed their knowledge, attitudes and intended actions in relation to sustainable development. It offers recommendations to increase the effectiveness of education’s contributions to the SDGs by giving greater priority to young people’s experiences of justice, safety and dignity in school.**

Survey results with over 4000 learners indicate that young people are much more likely to take actions that will help advance the SDGs when they have had positive experiences of justice in and outside of school, compared to their intentions for action related to the SDGs on the basis of school-based knowledge acquisition. Findings from qualitative research methods show that young people face a range of different injustices in their daily lives, including discrimination

and violence. Schools are both sites of injustice and spaces where young people are unsupported to make sense of injustices that affect them outside of school. Based on our findings, we discuss four barriers and offer recommendations of ways to improve young people’s experiences of schooling which in turn can improve the potential role of education for sustainable development.

‘JustEd: Education as and for environmental, epistemic and transitional justice to enable sustainable development’ (JustEd) is a large international study of justice in secondary education policies, curricula, pedagogy, learner experiences and intentions for future action. It is implemented by the Group for the Analysis of Development (GRADE), Peru; Gulu University (Uganda); Tribhuvan University (Nepal); the University of Bath and the University of Bristol (UK). JustEd is funded by the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund.



Students at a secondary school in northern Uganda, mapping their village during a group discussion

## Key finding: The contribution that education can make to diverse Sustainable Development Goals is limited by young people's experiences of injustice

**Current approaches to SDG 4 – improving educational outcomes – often fail to recognize the importance of addressing foundational features of young people's quality of life as prerequisites to succeeding in education. Furthermore, when young people do not succeed in school, the impact of education on a range of development outcomes, at both micro and macro levels, is limited. Our qualitative research with 146 secondary school learners in rural and urban areas of Nepal, Peru and Uganda suggests that young people's everyday experiences of discrimination, injustice, humiliation and violence, in and out of school, prevent them from benefiting from education as an enriching and life changing investment.**

Discussions of education's role in enabling other Sustainable Development Goals, such as preventing violent conflict (SDG16), fostering transformative climate action (SDG13) and reducing inequalities (SDG10), often focus on curricular content, with limited attention to the role of learning experiences in theories

of change (UNESCO, 2017). Our survey results – with more than 4000 secondary school learners in Nepal, Peru and Uganda – show that learners' experiences of different aspects of justice were strong and consistent predictors of their intended actions in relation to sustainable development, whereas school-based knowledge acquisition had a limited effect. These findings cannot be accounted for due to learner and school characteristics, as we controlled for these variables in our analyses.

***'learners' experiences of different aspects of justice were strong and consistent predictors of their intended actions in relation to sustainable development, whereas school-based knowledge acquisition had a limited effect'***



Secondary school in northern Nepal

## Recommendations for strengthening the role of education in delivering diverse SDGs

**Based on JustEd findings, we recommend that education leaders and practitioners focus explicit attention to young people’s lived experiences of justice, and injustice, in and outside of school, in order to deliver the SDGs, including but beyond SDG 4 (quality education). In particular, we recommend that policy makers and practitioners:**

1. Prioritise young people’s safety and wellbeing within schools.
2. Treat all learners with dignity. This includes enabling all young people to speak and contribute in the classroom, without fear of discrimination or retribution.
3. Through curricula and pedagogy, support young people to understand the inequalities and injustices that affect them, their families, their communities and their natural environments so that they are empowered to contribute to positive change and action.

A **just** education, based on the central tenets of redistribution, recognition and representation, is one that:

1. is environmentally, mentally and physically safe, and free from discrimination, for all learners
2. recognizes and responds to children’s lived experiences and embeds within it the place where children live – including histories, legacies and contemporary experiences of conflict, violence and inequalities, dominant and repressed socio-cultural identities and practices, 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



Secondary school classroom in northern Uganda

## Barrier 1: Young people encounter violence in their everyday experiences of schooling

The JustEd study results demonstrate how young people experience physical, emotional and psychological violence and humiliation in lessons and in the wider school context. This was commonly found in Ugandan schools, which could uphold a strict English-only language policy with learners punished for speaking any other language or speaking English incorrectly. Punitive consequences included learners being beaten or caned, being made to stand holding bricks, being soaked in water, and being made to sit in the midday sun (which is often more than 40 degrees C). In Nepal, learners talked about harassment, bullying and punishment from both peers and teachers. Learners reported incidents of child-on-child cyberbullying, including sexual harassment through social media, and in-person verbal and physical abuse. Learners also reported that the rationale for punishments inflicted by teachers were not well understood, some learners experienced more severe punishments than others for similar deeds, and there were no opportunities for redress.

Violent and humiliating episodes in school, including but beyond formal punishments, have severe negative consequences for learners' safety and wellbeing,

as well as their subjective sense of self-worth and identity. They lead young people to feel fear and shame, and they become less likely to engage with the curriculum and contribute in class. As a result of violence and humiliation in schools, and their negative consequences, schools are impeding progress towards SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 4 (quality education), and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions).

### Policy response:

- Prioritise children's safety and dignity in schooling, including teacher education programmes.
- Design disciplinary policies and practices that affirm learners' sense of self worth and are free from psychological and physical violence
- Ensure that disciplinary protocols are available to all members of the school community and are implemented safely, transparently and consistently
- Implement language policies in ways that prioritise children's safety and wellbeing, recognising that children have varying abilities and resources.



Secondary school learners in a classroom in Huaycán, Peru, during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Barrier 2: Secondary curriculum relevant to sustainable development is decontextualized from learners' daily lives

Curriculum content related to sustainable development is present in secondary school curricula in Nepal, Peru and Uganda, however learners often find it relate to this content, which does not resonate with their immediate context or experience. Interviews with young people and teachers in all three countries and classroom observations in Nepal showed that there are limited opportunities for young people to share their experiences and discuss them in relation to the content of school lessons and textbooks. This makes curricular content far less meaningful and is a missed opportunity to engage young people in critical analysis of what is happening around them and to inspire them to take positive actions now or in the future. In Peru, for example, some female learners highlighted that while school lessons emphasize progress in gender equality, these gains often do not reflect ongoing discrimination and violence in women's lives (e.g. femicides, rapes, etc.).

While learners in Nepal similarly noted that lessons do not resonate with their experiences or contexts, our analyses of policy documents revealed that Nepal's National Curriculum Framework – the guiding document for education across the country – recognises the

importance of local knowledge, customs and language, and recognises the power of local government actors to adapt or supplement the curriculum to this end. Through interviews, policy makers suggested that this often did not occur in practice due to limited resources and capacity at local levels. These findings suggest that while this barrier has already been addressed at the highest policy level in Nepal, further investment is required to ensure policy intentions are realised through implementation.

### Policy response:

- Schools could use place-based teaching aides and pedagogies that support learners to connect their learning at school with their experiences.
- Learners can be invited to share their examples and to collaboratively develop solutions for ongoing discrimination, inequalities and injustices.
- Invest in research and enhance capacity at local level to build understanding, skills and tools for adapting the national curriculum to local contexts.

## Barrier 3: Shallow pedagogies and discrimination silence and limit young people's contributions

**Despite distinct differences in curriculum design and content across the three countries, ranging from a prescriptive to flexible and competency-based, we consistently found that shallow pedagogies limit young people's development of key skills needed to make sense of the contradictions and injustices discussed in barrier 2.**

For example, in Peru's national curriculum, 'cultural diversity' is mentioned frequently, however the message is consistently positive and reductive (e.g. 'celebrate cultural diversity'); it does not engage with Peru's history of conflict and inequality related to cultural differences that endures in contemporary times. The oppression experienced by marginalised groups is not discussed or evaluated, for instance the document does not once use the term 'indigenous peoples'. Learners said that neither their teachers nor their families talked about the country's legacy and experiences of conflict, leaving them feeling confused and left out of a sensitive and important aspect of the local and national identity. Even while the JustEd study was underway, large-scale, violent protests and demonstrations were taking place in Peru, emphasising the need for young people to have safe, supportive educational environments to talk about and analyse unresolved tensions across cultural groups, and not hear messages of peaceful coexistence that are evidently false. It is a positive message of collaboration among people across age groups and cultural communities.

Learners also experience discrimination, and are silenced, because of the language they speak. While English as a Medium of Instruction is intended to expand opportunities and learning for young people, there are varying degrees of English language skills in a single classroom and those with less ability expressed feeling silenced and discrimination based on their language skills. Learners in Uganda and

Nepal expressed a lack of familiarity and confidence in the language of learning and teaching (e.g. English) and suggested that this restricts the potential for in-depth discussion for many students. Where talk does happen, those who do not understand the language or fail to express themselves correctly are excluded, further exacerbated by fear of punishment or violence.



*This image, in Peru's National Curriculum (NC) document (p. 198-99), shows a meeting or workshop, including indigenous women from the Andes, in a classroom decorated with Andean motifs. The people are connected with red strings, which is woven between and across the circle.*

### **Policy response:**

- Design curricula that explicitly supports all learners to talk and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills so that they can individually and collectively make sense of the injustices around them.
- Consider wider school policies, such as recognition of young people's home languages and education for sustainable development into the whole school curriculum and pedagogies.
- Policy makers could consider reducing the quantity of material that learners need to learn for formal assessments to enable teachers to give some topics more time and depth in the classroom.
- Use reparative pedagogies to discuss issues of discrimination and to support critical consciousness and healing/change.

## Barrier 4: Gender-related discrimination and violence

Across all three countries, we found that learners face gender-based discrimination and violence. Despite explicit policy statements in support of gender equality in and through education, gender inequalities continue to be embedded in school policies, teaching practices and in learners' experiences in and outside of school settings.

In Uganda and Nepal, the lower value placed on girl children, compared to boys, means families are less likely to invest in their daughters' education. This includes paying school fees, sending daughters to the same (higher) quality of school that they select for their sons, buying school resources including books, and ensuring their daughters have the time they need to attend school and study at home. In Nepal, for example, girl learners expressed that they could not give enough time to their studies because of household chores. One learner in urban Terai said, "Being a daughter we have to face many challenges compared to boys. We have to always live in limitations.... we don't have much freedom". In far western Nepal, the Chaupadi tradition (whereby girls and women are kept in isolation during menstruation and are restricted in terms of what they can do) is still widely practiced. Learners suggested that many girl students are therefore kept home from school, from prayer (pooja) at temples and public events when menstruating. This is in spite of educational content promoting equal rights for women and men.

---

One learner in urban Terai said:

*"Being a daughter we have to face many challenges compared to boys. We have to always live in limitations.... we don't have much freedom"*

---

### Policy response:

- Educational policies and programmes might recognise and seek to transform harmful gender norms, for example social norms that blame young women for unplanned pregnancies and perpetuate educational inequalities through excluding young women and mothers.
- Schools and decision makers might consider positive action to encourage girls to continue in education and work with families and community leaders to encourage investment in girls' education.
- Curricula and teacher training could promote greater depth of understanding of gender equality, for example promoting discussion about national legislation with learners' actual experiences of gender inequalities.

## **Lesson Ten**

### **Rights Related to Women Right and Aadibasi Janjati (Indigenous Nationalities)**

Women cover more than 50 percent of population of our country. Women empowerment is impossible without ensuring women right Therefore, to ensure women rights, following provisions have been made in the constitution, law and policy making level of Nepal:

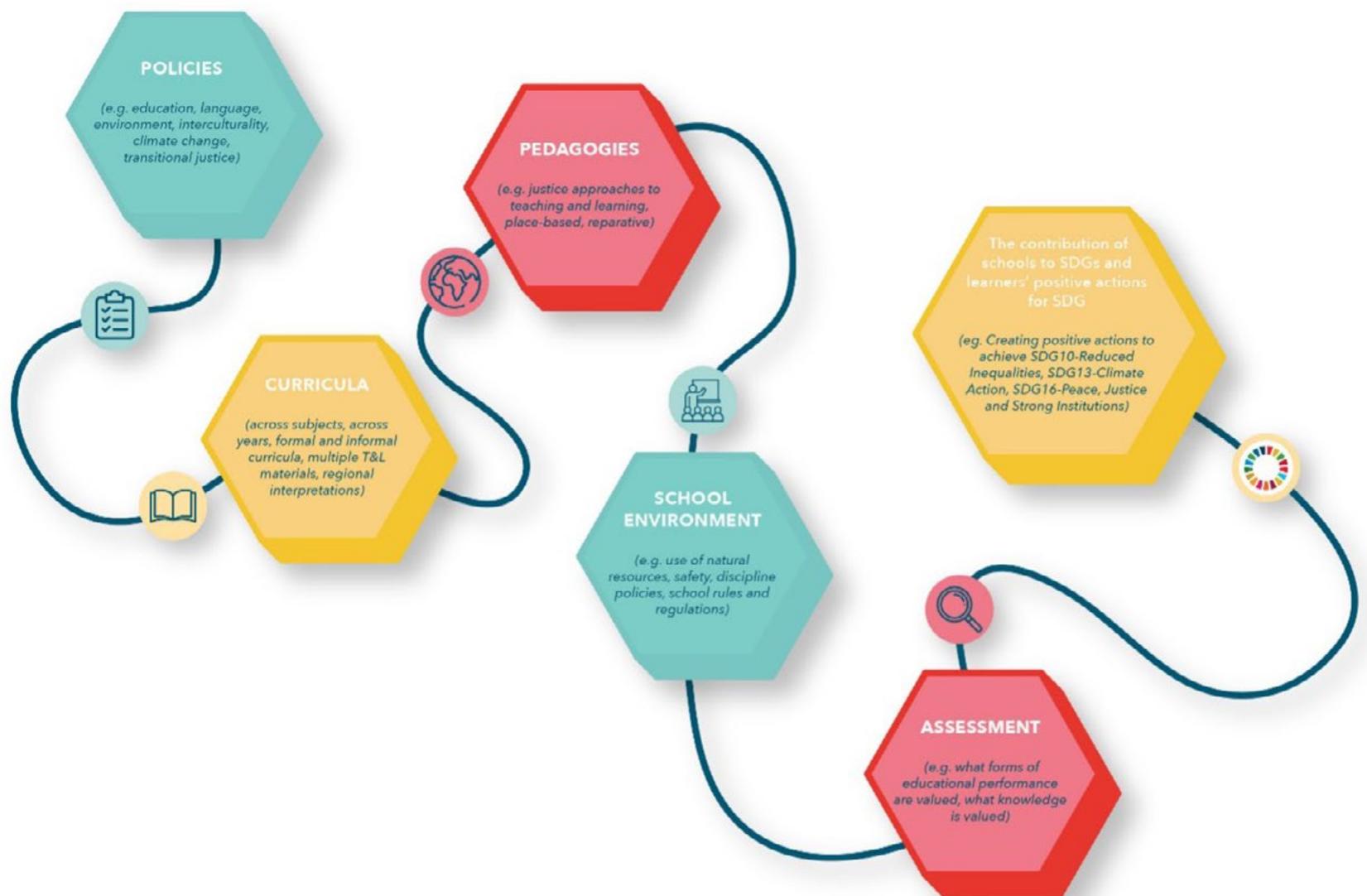
1. Develop equitable society based on the principle of proportional, inclusive and participatory approach.
2. Eliminating gender discrimination
3. Provision of citizenship by mother's name
4. No one shall be discriminated in general use of law regardless of religion, colour, caste gender, disability, etc.
5. There shall be special provision for socially and culturally backwarded women, protection of disabled citizen, empowerment and development of them according to law.
6. Women shall be provided equal hereditary right without discrimination.
7. Women shall be provided right to safe maternity and right to pregnancy.
8. Women shall not be exploited physically, mentally, sexually, psychologically or any other kinds of violence based on religion, cultural tradition or any other reason and such action shall be punished and victim shall be compensated.
9. Every sector of the state shall have women's representation based on the principle of inclusiveness.
10. Women shall be provided special opportunity based on positive discrimination in education, health, employment and social security.
11. The married couple shall have equal right in property and family affair.

## Final conclusions

**This research makes clear that young people's learning about sustainable development, and how they define their own role in advancing equalities and justice, are inextricably intertwined with their daily experiences of (in)justice in and outside of school. Knowledge-based teaching and learning has, in comparison, a minor role in shaping young people's present and future actions in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our research has made clear that young people experience a wide range of injustices in schooling, both in the classroom, in teaching and learning, and in the wider school environment. These include violence, including related to school punishments; silencing, for example being unable to express their interpretations and ideas in a language that they feel comfortable speaking; and discrimination, such as being excluded or expelled from school due to menstruation or pregnancy. These injustices make school a place where safety is not assumed,**

**where dignity is at risk. Importantly, these injustices are not contained within a school but interact with experiences of injustice in other parts of young people's daily lives.**

For curricula to enable education for sustainable development, it is evident that we need to look across the education system and the essential roles of policy, teacher training, the wider school environment and assessment. For example, for critical thinking to be placed centrally in curriculum, this needs teachers to feel confident in appropriate pedagogies, policies and the wider school environment to support learners to talk and take risks, and assessment that allows learners to demonstrate this type of learning [REF to image below]. Most significantly, the role of the school environment and young people's experiences of schooling cannot be overlooked and must be seen as a necessary part of planning for education for sustainable development.



In order to enable education to contribute to the wider Sustainable Development Goal agenda by empowering young people to take action for positive change, we recommend that policy makers, educators and school leaders:

- Prioritise young people's safety and wellbeing within schools.
- Treat all learners with dignity. This includes enabling all young people to speak and contribute in the classroom, without fear of discrimination or retribution.
- Support young people to understand the inequalities and injustices that affect them, their families, their communities and their natural environments.

## References

UNESCO (2017): Education for Sustainable Development Goals. Learning Objectives. Paris: UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002474/247444e.pdf> (Lead authors: Marco Rieckmann, Lisa Mindt, Senan Gardiner)

**Published in November 2023 by the University of Bath**

[www.bath.ac.uk/projects/justed/](http://www.bath.ac.uk/projects/justed/)

Twitter: [justed58210237](https://twitter.com/justed58210237)

JustEd (2023) Advancing climate action, justice and equity goals through environmental education: Lessons for policy and practice from the JustEd study. University of Bath.

For more information, contact Dr Rachel Wilder at [rw2031@bath.ac.uk](mailto:rw2031@bath.ac.uk).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10213729

**Suggested Citation:** Milligan, L.O., Wilder, R. and Soysal, N. (2023) Justice, safety and dignity in education to advance the Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons for policy and practice from the JustEd study. Bath: JustEd. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10213729

Copyright JustEd

This work is published under the CC BY-NC-SA International 4.0 License.

This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon the text in this work for non-commercial purposes. Any new works must also acknowledge the authors and be non-commercial. Derivative works must also be licensed on the same terms. This license excludes all photographs and images, which are rights reserved to the original artists.

