Navigating Progressivism in the Middle of the Traditional Paradigm: Women Teachers' Strategies in Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

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Abstract : *This research focuses on exploring the progressive learning practices applied by female teachers who graduated from education in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, as well as the social and institutional barriers they face. The main objective of this study is to understand how teachers implement participatory, student-centered learning in an environment that is still dominated by traditional and score-oriented approaches. This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to describe the teachers' experiences and views related to the application of progressivism in the classroom. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations of four female teachers in several schools that adopted progressive education principles. The data analysis technique used is the Miles and Huberman model, which involves the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to identify the main themes of learning practices and challenges faced by teachers. The results show that although teachers have a strong understanding of the principles of progressive learning, they face obstacles from schools and parents who still adhere to conventional methods. Teachers seek to overcome these barriers through individual student observation and flexible adjustments to teaching methods, such as project-based learning and creative expression, to increase student engagement. The implications of this study suggest that institutional support and collaboration with parents are essential to enable the effective implementation of progressivism. This research contributes to the progressive education literature by highlighting how social and cultural variables affect the application of educational theories in developing countries, as well as providing practical guidance for educators in facing similar challenges in different contexts.*

INTRODUCTION

Progressive education has taken center stage in many developing countries (Zhan et al., 2022; Wijaya & Khoir, 2022; Chuanchen, 2023), especially in efforts to address educational inequalities and improve the quality of student-centered learning (Vázquez-Villegas et al., 2023; Kerimbayev et al., 2023; Zaini, 2024). Like many countries in South Asia, Nepal, faces significant challenges in implementing learning methods that are more responsive to students' needs (Khadka, 2021; Thapaliya, 2023). Mainly due to limited educational infrastructure, limited resources, and the strong influence of traditional approaches that place more emphasis on exam results (Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2021; Gamage et al., 2023; Hamidah, 2023). According to data from Nepal's Ministry of Education (Nahakul, 2023), nearly 70% of schools in the Kathmandu Valley still adopt conventional learning models, which focus on lecture-based teaching and memorization repetition, hindering the development of students' critical thinking skills and creativity. In the midst of this need to improve the quality of education, the progressive learning approach presents an opportunity to create a more inclusive and adaptive learning environment (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Zaini, 2023; Håkansson Lindqvist et al., 2024). Based on the theory of social constructivism from Vygotsky (Alkhudiry, 2022; Stoltz et al., 2024), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in learning, this study becomes relevant to explore how progressive approaches are applied by teachers in Nepalese schools (Paudyal & Rana, 2021; Sah & Kubota, 2022; Alam & Mohanty, 2023), as well as identify emerging challenges and solutions in these contexts (Lwakatare et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2021; Susilawati & Astuti, 2022).

Through the observation activities carried out, it was found that although there was awareness from teachers of the importance of progressive learning, the practice was still limited by cultural and structural constraints. Female teachers working in Kathmandu Valley schools, for example, often face resistance from school management and parents who are still oriented towards test scores and academic achievement as a measure of educational success. This reality suggests an imbalance between theory and practice, where the vision of progressivism is often hampered by social pressures to achieve quantitatively measurable results. One of the respondents in the study mentioned that "schools are more focused on test scores and academic achievement, making it difficult for me to implement interactive, student-centered learning," which shows how teachers are sometimes forced to abandon progressive principles in order to meet the expectations of others. This problem is a significant issue in this study because it shows that the implementation of progressivism is not only a technical problem, but also related to the larger social structure, which requires a holistic approach to system change.

Previous research has provided a diverse picture of the application of progressive learning and the challenges faced by educators in a global context. Gupta & Srivastava, R. (2024) highlight how progressive approaches in education often experience institutional constraints, especially in education systems that are still oriented towards testing and academic achievement.

These findings are in line with the context in Nepal, where pressure from schools to achieve academic achievement can hinder the adoption of more interactive learning approaches. Meanwhile, Esnaashari et al. (2023), examined the effectiveness of observation methods in understanding students' learning profiles and found that an approach based on a deep understanding of students' needs can increase student engagement in learning. These findings are relevant to this study because teachers in Nepal also use observation to adapt learning methods to the needs of students. Abels & Mushaben, (2020), stated that conservative expectations from parents, who want traditional learning methods, are one of the main challenges in the implementation of progressivism in several developing countries. These studies show a gap between the theory of progressivism and the social realities faced by teachers, but have not explored more deeply the adaptation of progressive approaches in specific cultural contexts such as Nepal.

This study highlights the existence of a clear gap between the expectations of progressivism theory and the reality of its application in the field, especially in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. While previous research has addressed the obstacles teachers face in implementing progressive approaches in general, this study offers a unique perspective on how these barriers arise in Nepal's different cultural and social contexts. By focusing on female teachers and the influence of social norms and parental expectations in educational practice, this study seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature. This research is important for the development of progressive educational science, especially in understanding how social and cultural variables affect the application of educational theories in developing countries.

The study offers novelty by focusing on the experiences of women teachers in implementing progressive learning in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, which has not been explored much in previous studies. This novelty lies in an in-depth exploration of how women teachers face institutional and social barriers in their efforts to create student-centered learning environments, as well as the strategies they use to address those challenges. The study also offers a new perspective by combining Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism with local cultural realities, to produce a more adaptive approach to progressivism in the context of Nepalese education. This approach is expected not only to provide new insights, but also to contribute to the development of more contextual and relevant progressive learning methods in developing countries.

This study aims to understand how women teachers in Nepal apply progressive learning methods in the classroom and how they face and overcome various obstacles that arise in the process. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive education policies, as well as offer relevant solutions for educational institutions in developing countries that want to adopt a progressive approach effectively and sustainably.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research method uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research, which aims to describe in depth the progressive learning practices applied by female teachers in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. The selection of this descriptive qualitative approach is based on the research objective to explore teachers' understanding, experience, and perspective related to the application of student-centered learning methods in a specific socio-cultural context (Ismailov et al., 2021). This approach allows researchers to capture nuances and details that cannot be achieved through quantitative methods. The use of qualitative methods is considered more appropriate than quantitative methods because this study focuses on in-depth explanations of the learning process, constraints, and strategies faced by teachers, which require contextual and narrative understanding from the perspective of participants. The main data collection techniques in this study are in-depth interviews and direct observation in several schools located in the Kathmandu Valley. Interviews were conducted with four female teachers who had completed formal education in education and worked in schools that implemented progressive systems. The selection of respondents in a purposive manner is based on their criteria as active progressive education practitioners, so that they can provide rich and relevant information. The number of participants was limited to four to allow researchers to dig into the data in depth and focus, while the location of the study was chosen because the Kathmandu Valley is an educational hub in Nepal with a variety of schools that apply a progressive approach.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which gave respondents the flexibility to describe their experiences and views without being tied to a rigid format, allowing for in-depth exploration of information. Direct observation is also carried out in the context of the classroom, to observe the application of participation-based learning methods and other progressive approaches directly. Interviews and observations are carefully recorded, recorded, and transcribed to maintain the accuracy of the information. In addition, field notes are compiled during the observation process to document classroom conditions, teacher-student interactions, and student reactions to the learning approaches used. Triangulation techniques are also applied to increase the validity of the data, by combining data from interviews and observations so as to provide a more holistic perspective on the learning practices being researched.

The data collected was analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model data analysis technique (Kosar, 2020), which involved three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. In the data reduction stage, researchers sort, select, and simplify raw data that is relevant to the focus of the research, namely regarding progressive learning practices and challenges faced by teachers. This stage is carried out by reviewing interview transcripts and observation notes to select meaningful data and group data based on key themes, such as teachers' understanding of progressivism, learning techniques, and institutional and social barriers.

The second stage, namely the presentation of data, is carried out by compiling data in the form of descriptive narratives and tables, making it easier for researchers to see the relationship between themes and patterns that emerge. The final stage is conclusion drawn, where the researcher interprets the data and draws conclusions based on the relationships found between the key themes. In this process, researchers continuously verify the findings to ensure consistency of interpretation. This analysis model was chosen because it allows researchers to organize complex data and dig deeper meanings from participant experiences, as well as ensure that the analysis conducted remains rooted in an authentic research context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal how female teachers who are graduates of education programs in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, practice a progressive learning approach in the classroom. Based on interview and observation data, these findings are presented in sub-sections describing teachers' efforts to implement more student-centered learning methods, the obstacles faced in this practice, and how they navigate the challenges.

Understanding of Women Teachers Towards Progressive Education Practices

The results of this study show that teachers have a deep understanding of progressive education approaches, especially in encouraging student-centered learning that emphasizes active student involvement and adjustments based on individual needs. An informant, namely one of the teachers, said that he tried hard to understand the learning profile of his students before designing teaching activities. "I try to study their learning profile, their skills, interests, readiness, strengths, and weaknesses, in order to adjust the learning plan accordingly," (Belina, last interview, May 5, 2023).

The interviews conducted above reflect the teacher's efforts to understand every aspect of the student's learning profile as a whole as a basis for developing relevant lesson plans. This step shows a commitment to implementing an adaptive individualized approach, where teachers focus on various factors, such as skills, interests, learning readiness, to students' strengths and weaknesses, as a strategy to accommodate diverse learning needs. The approach signifies a deep understanding that effective learning cannot be uniformly carried out for all students, but must be tailored to the unique characteristics of each individual, thus allowing students to learn optimally according to their individual capacity.

This was also conveyed by another teacher through an interview activity conducted where he said that, "I recorded all their interactions, even in my free time, to understand the tendencies of each student, whether they prefer moving or sitting activities," (Creta, last interview, April 28, 2023).

Through the interview activities conducted above, it shows that teachers use a careful observational approach to understand students' learning preferences and tendencies more deeply. By recording student interactions, even outside of the main classroom activities, teachers are able to identify different learning patterns or styles, such as whether students are more interested in activities that involve movement or those that are more static.

This approach illustrates the detailed attention of teachers in adapting teaching methods, suggesting that understanding individual student learning preferences is key in creating an appropriate and effective learning environment. Through thorough observation, teachers can develop more targeted learning strategies and increase student engagement in the classroom.

Classroom observations show that teachers practice a variety of learning methods, from group-based projects to outdoor activities, to meet the diverse needs of their students. These observations reinforce that these teachers have a progressive understanding and apply it in an effort to provide an equal opportunity for each student to be involved in the learning process.

This in-depth understanding of progressive learning is relevant to Vygotsky's theory of *the Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), in which teachers act as facilitators who help students reach their optimal potential through gradual support (Stoltz et al., 2024). In this context, the teacher's understanding of the individual profile of the student allows the creation of a learning environment that supports social and intellectual development.

Participatory and Active Involvement Based Learning Practices

The learning practices applied by teachers show efforts to encourage active student involvement in the learning process through various approaches, such as project-based learning, group discussions, and individual creativity development. Jajwalya stated, "I prepare worksheets and use different learning methods to ensure every student, both fast and slow learners, is actively engaged," (Jajwalya, last interview, May 20, 2023).

The interview conducted above, revealed the teacher's inclusive approach in creating adaptive learning, where every student, both fast and slow learning ability, is given the opportunity to be actively involved. By preparing customized worksheets and using varied teaching methods, teachers strive to reach the entire spectrum of students' abilities. This approach shows awareness that students' learning speeds and styles vary, so the use of flexible methods is a way to ensure that every student can follow the learning well. This not only increases student engagement but also creates a learning environment that is more inclusive and responsive to individual needs.

Furthermore, Nanda described in the interview activities that were carried out that. "After the excursion, I give them the opportunity to express what they have learned, whether by writing poetry, singing, or telling stories. This gives them space to express themselves according to their interests," (Nanda, last interview, May 18, 2023).

Through the interview activities conducted above, it shows the teacher's approach that provides freedom of expression to students after the excursion activity, by providing various media to convey what they learn, such as through poetry, singing, or storytelling. This approach illustrates the teacher's understanding of the importance of facilitating various forms of expression that suit each student's interests, which not only fosters creativity but also promotes active participation and deep understanding. In this way, teachers create a learning environment that respects individual differences, allowing students to explore and express their learning in a personal and meaningful way.

The results of the observation show that the classes managed by these female teachers are very dynamic, with group activities involving active discussions, presentations, and collaboration between students. Classes are not only a place to transfer knowledge, but also a vehicle for students to develop social skills and critical thinking. Related to the research findings of this sub-study are as shown in figure 1.
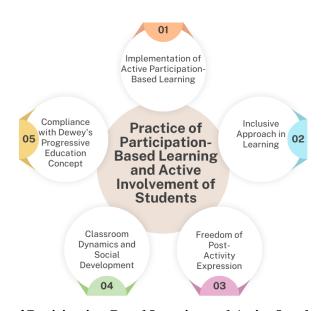

Figure 1. Practice of Participation-Based Learning and Active Involvement of Students

This practice is in line with the concept of progressive education put forward by Dewey, where active and experiential learning is able to encourage students to develop comprehensively (Jamison et al., 2022). In this case, active student involvement can also increase learning motivation, as suggested by constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes that students should be at the center of the learning process.

Challenges in the Implementation of Progressive Learning in Schools

Although teachers are committed to implementing progressive learning, they face a variety of institutional and social challenges that limit the practice. Belina revealed the challenges she faces, especially from the school management who still tend to prioritize exam results over holistic student development: "The school is more focused on test scores and academic achievement, so it is difficult for me to implement interactive and student-centered learning," (Belina, last interview, May 5, 2023).

From the interviews conducted above, it can be understood that the challenges faced by teachers in implementing interactive learning methods in the midst of a school culture that emphasizes more on exam scores and academic achievements. The institution's focus on traditional academic outcomes limits the space for teachers to explore student-centered approaches.

Which should focus on active engagement and the development of students' critical thinking skills. This shows a conflict between formal achievement-oriented school policies and teachers' efforts to create more inclusive and interactive learning, thus creating obstacles in the implementation of progressivism in the classroom. In addition, Creta cited challenges in terms of insufficient resource support and lack of parental understanding: "Parents tend to expect strenuous assignments and book-based learning, so I often have difficulty explaining the benefits of a project-based approach and active learning," (Creta, last interview, April 28, 2023).

The statement delivered by one of the teachers above illustrates the conservative expectations of parents who prioritize traditional learning methods such as heavy assignments and book-based learning. This expectation is a challenge for teachers in implementing a project-based approach and active learning, which is actually designed to increase student engagement and understanding in a deeper way. The difficulties faced by teachers in explaining the benefits of these more progressive methods indicate a gap in understanding between teachers and parents regarding modern educational strategies. This also reflects the need to increase parents' awareness and understanding of the benefits of active learning approaches so that support for this method can be formed more strongly.

Field observations show that these progressive classrooms often lack adequate teaching aids, as well as time constraints that cause teachers to be unable to complete all learning activities that have been planned optimally. The challenges in the implementation of progressive learning are as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Challenges in the Implementation of Progressive Learning

Main Theme	Examples of Practice	Challenge
Teachers' Understanding of Progressivism	Reviewing student learning profiles to tailor learning	School management resistance
Student Participation and Engagement	Project-based learning and creativity	Parents' expectations of conventional methods
Institutional Challenges	Use of creative media in the classroom	Lack of props and resource support

The challenges experienced by teachers reflect findings in previous studies that show that the application of progressivism is often constrained by systems that are still oriented towards traditional academic outcomes. In accordance with Dewey's concept, experiential education is not something that can only be applied theoretically, but requires structural support from all parties involved, including parents and administrators (Jamison et al., 2022).

Balance between Professional and Family Demands

Female teachers in this study also face challenges in balancing their roles as educators and family responsibilities. Nanda stated, "As a woman, it is difficult for me to fully manage the time between work and responsibilities at home, because often work has to be taken home," (Nanda, last interview, May 18, 2023).

Through the interviews conducted above, the challenges experienced by female teachers in balancing professional roles and domestic responsibilities. Time constraints and the demands of work that often have to be taken home indicate the double burden experienced, which can affect personal performance and well-being. This situation reflects the dilemma faced by many women in the teaching profession, where they have to meet professional expectations amid family demands. This challenge demonstrates the need for greater support, both from schools and families, to create a balance that allows female teachers to perform their roles optimally without sacrificing their personal lives.

Creta also adds that additional burdens, such as the demands of creating lesson plans and other administrative tasks, often do not allow them to focus on developing more creative learning: "I try not to bring work home, but sometimes I have to do it because of the limited time at school," (Crete, last interview, April 28, 2023).

From the results of the interviews conducted above, the teacher's efforts to maintain the boundary between professional and personal life by trying not to bring work home. However, limited time at school often forces teachers to continue to complete their assignments outside of working hours. This indicates high work pressure and a lack of sufficient time allocation to complete professional responsibilities in the school environment. These challenges reflect the overworkload and the need for more effective time management in the workplace, so that teachers can carry out their duties without sacrificing personal time, which is essential for their well-being and life balance.

This is in line with observation activities showing that teachers often still work outside of working hours to prepare teaching materials that suit the individual needs of students. This shows that administrative burdens and professional expectations often add to the mental and physical burden of teachers. This underscores that the implementation of progressivism in the classroom requires not only structural reforms in schools but also systemic support that can ease the administrative burden and allow teachers to focus on developing student-centered learning.

The results of this study show that there is a harmony as well as a difference with previous research on the application of progressive learning and the challenges faced by teachers in the context of education. The findings of this study support the argument from the study by Gupta & Srivastava, R. (2024) which states that teachers who apply student-centered learning methods often face institutional barriers and a lack of support from school management, especially in environments that prioritize conventional academic achievement. In this study, it was found that the institutional focus that is still dominant on traditional academic outcomes limits the space for teachers to fully implement the progressive approach. On the other hand, research from Esnaashari et al. (2023), shows that the active role of teachers in understanding individual student profiles through observational methods contributes significantly to the effectiveness of progressive learning, in line with the results of this study which shows that female teachers in Nepal observe student interactions to understand their learning preferences.

However, in a broader perspective Abels & Mushaben. (2020), highlights that challenges in progressive learning also include conservative expectations from parents who want traditional learning methods, which is in line with the difficulties experienced by teachers in this study when facing parental expectations that place more emphasis on book-based tasks. The combination of institutional challenges, lack of support, and differences in understanding between teachers and parents shows that the successful implementation of progressivism depends not only on teachers' understanding, but also on structural support and paradigm shifts from all parties involved in the education system.

This research makes a practical contribution by offering insights into concrete ways that teachers can overcome the challenges of implementing a progressive learning approach, such as through in-depth observation of students' learning preferences and the use of flexible methods to encourage active participation. This strategy can be a guide for teachers in a variety of educational contexts that face similar constraints, such as traditional academic expectations and limited institutional support.

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of the application of progressivism theory in education by highlighting the importance of adaptation to the individual needs of students as a manifestation of *Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which underlines the role of teachers as facilitators who help students reach their optimal potential through a gradual approach and personalized support. In addition, this study reinforces the constructivist theory that emphasizes that student-centered and experiential learning is more effective when adapted to the social and cultural context faced by teachers, resulting in a deeper understanding of the dynamics and challenges in the application of progressivism in developing countries.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that female teachers who graduated from education in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, have a deep understanding of progressive learning approaches and strive to apply them in the classroom. These findings highlight that teachers not only use active participation-based learning methods, such as group projects and creative activities, but also adjust teaching methods based on students' individual needs. From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces Vygotsky's *concept of Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD), which positions teachers as facilitators who help students reach their full potential through personalized support and student-centered learning. In practical terms, these findings provide valuable insights for educators and educational institutions regarding the importance of flexibility in teaching methods to accommodate the diversity of students' learning styles and speeds, so that learning can be carried out optimally and inclusively.

This study makes a significant contribution to the science of progressive education by showing how the principles of progressivism can be adapted in the context of Nepalese education, especially in the face of institutional and social barriers that are still conservative.

This research renews the existing perspective by illustrating the real practice of the concept of progressivism in different cultures and emphasizing the need for collaboration between schools, parents, and teachers to achieve optimal learning outcomes. However, this study also has limitations, namely its limited focus on female teachers in certain regions, which limits the generalization of the findings. In addition, the methods used mainly focus on interviews and direct observation, so other aspects, such as wider demographic variation and quantitative survey methods, still need to be studied in further research. Subsequent research can expand the scope to vary in gender, age, and other educational settings, thereby enriching the understanding of the application of progressivism and supporting the basis for the development of more inclusive and local education policies.

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