



Reclaiming Subaltern Voices through Critical Pedagogy: Insights from South African Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of subalterns and subalternism in education, focusing on the systemic exclusion of marginalised groups from equitable educational opportunities and decision-making processes. Grounded in postcolonial theory, subalternism refers to the marginalisation of socially, politically, and economically oppressed people who lack a voice in dominant societal structures. In education, subaltern groups – such as ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, women, and the economically disadvantaged – face significant barriers to access, representation, and culturally relevant curricula. These barriers perpetuate cycles of inequality, limiting social mobility and reinforcing power imbalances. The paper argues that addressing subalternism in education requires comprehensive critical pedagogical approach that informs comprehensive reforms in curriculum, pedagogy and policy. Curricula should incorporate diverse perspectives and histories that reflect the experiences of marginalised groups, moving beyond dominant, often Eurocentric, narratives. Pedagogical strategies must prioritise inclusivity, equity, and critical thinking, fostering awareness of social justice and empowering students from subaltern backgrounds. Teacher education is also essential, with an emphasis on cultural competence to ensure educators can effectively engage with diverse student populations. At the policy level, removing systemic barriers such as economic inequality, language exclusion, and geographical isolation is imperative. Equitable resource distribution, localised curricula, and community participation in educational governance are identified as key strategies in disrupting entrenched hierarchies. This paper contributes to the discourse on educational equity by proposing a transformative framework that integrates postcolonial and critical pedagogical perspectives to empower subaltern voices and promote social justice in education,

Keywords: *Subalternism, postcolonial theory, systemic barriers, educational equity, critical pedagogy*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji konsep subaltern dan subalternisme dalam pendidikan, dengan menyoroti pengecualian sistemik terhadap kelompok marginal dari akses pendidikan yang adil serta dari proses pengambilan keputusan. Berlandaskan teori pascakolonial, subalternisme merujuk pada peminggiran kelompok masyarakat yang tertindas secara sosial, politik, dan ekonomi, yang tidak memiliki suara dalam struktur sosial yang dominan. Dalam konteks pendidikan, kelompok subaltern – seperti minoritas etnis, komunitas adat, perempuan, dan kelompok yang kurang beruntung secara ekonomi – menghadapi hambatan signifikan dalam hal akses, representasi, dan kurikulum yang relevan secara kultural. Hambatan-hambatan ini melanggengkan siklus ketimpangan, membatasi mobilitas sosial, dan memperkuat ketidakseimbangan kekuasaan. Penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa penanggulangan subalternisme dalam pendidikan memerlukan pendekatan pedagogi kritis yang komprehensif guna mendorong reformasi menyeluruh dalam kurikulum, pedagogi, dan kebijakan. Kurikulum

perlu mengintegrasikan beragam perspektif dan sejarah yang mencerminkan pengalaman kelompok marginal, melampaui narasi dominan yang sering kali bersifat Eurosentris. Strategi pedagogis harus memprioritaskan inklusivitas, keadilan, dan pemikiran kritis, menumbuhkan kesadaran akan keadilan sosial serta memberdayakan peserta didik dari latar belakang subaltern. Pendidikan guru juga menjadi hal yang esensial, dengan penekanan pada kompetensi kultural agar pendidik mampu berinteraksi secara efektif dengan populasi peserta didik yang beragam. Pada tingkat kebijakan, penghapusan hambatan sistemik seperti ketimpangan ekonomi, eksklusi bahasa, dan isolasi geografis merupakan suatu keharusan. Distribusi sumber daya yang adil, kurikulum yang terlokalisasi, serta partisipasi komunitas dalam tata kelola pendidikan diidentifikasi sebagai strategi kunci untuk meruntuhkan hierarki yang telah mengakar. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada wacana keadilan pendidikan dengan mengusulkan kerangka transformasional yang mengintegrasikan perspektif pascakolonial dan pedagogi kritis untuk memberdayakan suara subaltern dan memajukan keadilan sosial dalam pendidikan.

Kata kunci: *Subalternisme, teori pascakolonial, hambatan sistemik, keadilan pendidikan, pedagogi kritis*

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Introduction

Education, in its ideal conception, is heralded as the great engine of social mobility and the foundation for a just society. Yet, the reality across many parts of the world, particularly in nations grappling with legacies of colonialism and institutionalised racism like South Africa, reveals a far more complex and often painful narrative. The concept of the "subaltern," popularized within postcolonial studies, refers to social groups who are politically, socially, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure, whose voices, experiences, and knowledge systems are marginalised or silenced (Spivak, 1988; O'hanlon, 1988). Within the realm of education, "subalternism" describes the systematic mechanisms through which marginalized groups—such as indigenous communities, ethnic minorities, women, and the economically impoverished—are excluded from equitable access to quality education, representative curricula, and meaningful participation in decision-making processes (Dutta & Pal, 2010; Brissett, 2020). This exclusion is not a matter of individual circumstance, but a structural feature embedded within educational systems that perpetuate existing social hierarchies and power imbalances.

The manifestation of subalternism in education is not an incidental phenomenon but rather a product of power structures deeply ingrained in history, policy, and pedagogical practice. South Africa's apartheid legacy provides a stark and tragic case study of how education can be deliberately engineered as an apparatus for maintaining racial hierarchies and economic inequality. The Bantu Education Act of

1953, for instance, was explicitly designed to limit the educational opportunities of black South Africans, ensuring they acquired only the skills necessary for subordinate labour roles within the economy (Houston, 2022; Pirtle, 2021). Although the apartheid regime ended over two decades ago, its legacy endures in the stark resource inequalities between schools, the crumbling infrastructure in formerly oppressed townships and rural areas, and a curriculum still struggling to fully shed its Eurocentric perspectives (Chetty, 2019; Heleta, 2022; Ngobeni et al., 2023). These inequalities are not merely material but also epistemological, concerning whose knowledge is deemed valid and worthy of being taught (Mbembe, 2004).

Globally, while the forms may differ, the underlying patterns of educational subalternism are recognisable. Marginalised groups consistently encounter economic barriers that restrict access to books, technology, and well-resourced schools (Thapan, 2022). Language policies favouring dominant tongues alienate students whose mother tongues are not the medium of instruction, creating significant cognitive and cultural disconnects (Joshi & Eslami, 2024). Curricula dominated by Western narratives render the histories and contributions of non-European peoples invisible or peripheral (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Furthermore, governance structures in education frequently exclude meaningful participation from these very communities, ensuring that policies are designed for them rather than with them (Omodan, 2023). This cyclical process perpetuates injustice, limits social mobility, and ultimately reinforces the status quo of power.

However, the educational space also holds immense transformative potential. Critical pedagogy, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, offers a framework for disrupting passivity and reconceiving education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970). This approach encourages students to critically "read" their world, interrogate structures of injustice, and perceive themselves as agents of change. In the context of the subaltern, critical pedagogy becomes a vital tool for reclaiming voice, validating local knowledge, and empowering marginalised communities. The integration of postcolonial theory—with its focus on deconstructing colonial legacies—and critical pedagogy—with its commitment to action and change—provides a powerful analytical lens for both understanding and dismantling subalternism within educational systems. This synthesis moves beyond mere critique towards the articulation of actionable, emancipatory alternatives.

Research Problem

Despite growing awareness of educational inequities and reform efforts at various levels, the profound challenges faced by subaltern groups within education systems, particularly in post-conflict contexts like South Africa, remain complex and persistently unresolved. Existing scholarship has extensively documented various systemic barriers, ranging from resource disparities to curricular biases (Arday et al., 2021; Nkomo, 2021). However, a significant gap often exists between the theoretical diagnosis of subalternism and the implementation of effective, contextual, and transformative pedagogical strategies and policies within actual classroom spaces. Furthermore, while there is a substantial body of research on South African education, analyses that explicitly connect the apartheid legacy with the theoretical frameworks of subalternity and critical pedagogy to design holistic pathways forward remain an area requiring deeper exploration. Therefore, the central research problem of this study focuses on the question: How is subalternism manifested in education systems, particularly in South Africa, and what transformative strategies in curriculum, pedagogy, and policy can effectively empower subaltern voices and advance educational justice?

Research Objectives

Derived from the stated problem, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

To analyse the manifestations of subalternism in education through the integrated lens of postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy, with an in-depth case study focus on the post-apartheid South African context.

To explore and propose curricular reforms that move beyond Eurocentrism towards epistemological inclusion, genuinely representing the knowledges, histories, and lived experiences of subaltern groups.

To examine and recommend inclusive and empowering pedagogical approaches that are student-centred, foster critical consciousness, and acknowledge and leverage cultural diversity within the classroom.

To analyse and formulate policy recommendations aimed at deconstructing systemic barriers—economic, geographical, linguistic, and political—that hinder the full access and participation of subaltern groups in education.

Significance of the Study

This research holds substantial theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to academic discourse by synthesising and applying the

frameworks of postcolonial theory (particularly the Gramscian and Spivakian concepts of the subaltern) and critical pedagogy (from Freire and others) to analyse contemporary educational challenges. This synthesis enriches our understanding of how power operates within educational institutions and how these spaces can be reclaimed for emancipatory purposes.

Practically, the findings and recommendations from this study are intended to provide valuable guidance for various stakeholders:

For Educators and Teacher-Training Institutions: The study offers insights into culturally responsive and transformative pedagogical practices, emphasising the imperative of integrating cultural competence development into teacher training programmes. For Curriculum Developers and Education Policymakers: It provides robust arguments and concrete examples to advocate for inclusive curriculum overhauls and equitable policies, such as fair funding formulas and support for multilingual education. For Communities and Civil Society: It strengthens the advocacy for greater community participation in school governance and educational decision-making, ensuring education systems are more accountable and responsive to local needs. For Future Research: It establishes a foundation for further empirical research that tests the effectiveness of the proposed approaches in diverse contexts and explores the role of digital technologies in amplifying subaltern voices.

By focusing on the South African context—a living social laboratory of transition from systematic oppression to a democracy still grappling with deep-seated inequities—this study seeks to draw lessons relevant not only to that nation but also to other societies struggling with the legacies of colonialism, racism, and injustice within their educational frameworks. Ultimately, the fundamental aim of this research is to contribute to a vision of education as a fundamental human right and a powerful tool for social justice, where every learner, irrespective of background, can see themselves reflected, be heard, and be empowered to shape their own future.

Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology with a systematic literature review and policy analysis approach. This design is appropriate for the exploratory and analytical aims of understanding the theoretical constructions of subalternism and

evaluating existing policy and pedagogical responses. The research procedure was conducted in several stages.

First, source identification and collection involved a systematic search of prominent academic databases (including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus) using combined keywords such as "subaltern," "subalternism education," "postcolonial theory education," "critical pedagogy," "educational equity South Africa," "decolonising curriculum," and "systemic barriers education." The gathered sources encompassed scholarly journal articles (national and international), books, book chapters, government policy reports (e.g., from the South African Department of Basic Education), theses/dissertations, and official curriculum documents (such as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement/CAPS). The publication timeframe focused primarily on the last two decades, with emphasis on seminal works in postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy.

Second, source selection and evaluation were based on relevance to the research questions, credibility (peer-reviewed publication, reputable publisher), and depth of analysis. Priority was given to literature explicitly addressing education in Global South contexts, particularly South Africa.

Third, data analysis and synthesis were conducted using thematic analysis. Following close reading, coding was employed to identify key themes emerging from the literature, such as: (a) Conceptualisations of the subaltern and its educational manifestations; (b) Forms of systemic barriers (economic, geographical, linguistic, epistemological); (c) Strategies for inclusive curricular and pedagogical reform; (d) Analysis of post-apartheid education policies and their effectiveness. These themes were then synthesised to build a coherent argument addressing the research objectives.

Fourth, the analytical framework is grounded in an integrative theoretical lens combining postcolonial theory (specifically the subaltern concepts of Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) and critical pedagogy (primarily from Paulo Freire). This framework is used both to critique existing structures of injustice and to design emancipatory, transformative alternatives centred on empowerment and justice.

Finally, regarding validity and limitations, source triangulation was employed to enhance validity by comparing findings across different document types (policy, academic research, reports). A key limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data, meaning it does not involve direct data collection from participants (teachers, students) in the field. However, the depth of theoretical analysis and synthesis from a

rich variety of sources is expected to provide a significant contribution to the discourse. Future research is recommended to test this study's recommendations through empirical work, such as ethnographic case studies in specific schools.

Results and Discussion

Manifestations of Subalternism: A Global and South African Analysis

The theoretical framework elucidates how subalternism operates structurally. In practice, this manifests through intersecting barriers. Economic inequality creates a fundamental rift, where students from subaltern backgrounds lack access to essential resources – textbooks, technology, and safe learning environments – directly impacting academic engagement and success (Thapan, 2022; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022). This is acutely visible in South Africa, where the apartheid-engineered disparity between former "Model C" schools in affluent areas and township or rural schools persists. Despite policy tools like the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSF), quintile 1-3 schools serving the poorest communities remain chronically under-resourced (Mestry & Ndhlovu, 2014; Ngobeni et al., 2023).

Language exclusion acts as a profound epistemological barrier. When education is conducted in a dominant language not spoken at home, subaltern students face a double burden: learning new content through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. This not only hinders comprehension but also devalues their mother tongue and, by extension, their cultural identity (Joshi & Eslami, 2024; Mullen, 2020). South Africa's multilingual Language in Education Policy (LiEP), which promotes mother-tongue instruction, faces implementation challenges, particularly in higher grades and due to a lack of teaching materials in indigenous languages, effectively privileging English and Afrikaans (Heugh, 2020; Diko & Celliers, 2024).

The curriculum itself is a key site of subaltern silencing. A Eurocentric curriculum marginalises the histories, philosophies, and scientific contributions of non-European societies, presenting a partial and often superior-inferior view of world knowledge (Shahjahan et al., 2022; Bell, 2019). This constitutes what postcolonial scholars term "epistemic violence" – the systematic negation of alternative knowledge systems (Spivak, 1988; Zembylas, 2018). In South Africa, the post-apartheid curriculum (CAPS) has made strides but still grapples with fully integrating African cosmologies and indigenous knowledge systems in a meaningful, non-tokenistic way (Blignaut, 2021; Du Plessis, 2021).

Finally, the exclusion from decision-making reinforces subaltern status. When students, parents, and communities from marginalised backgrounds have no meaningful voice in school governance or policy formulation, the system remains unresponsive to their specific needs. Research in South Africa shows that structures like School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) often fail to genuinely incorporate subaltern perspectives, with decisions remaining centralised or dominated by more privileged stakeholders (Gqeba, 2021; Omodan, 2023). This lack of political voice within education mirrors their broader societal positioning.

Transformative Pathways: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Policy

Addressing these manifestations requires interconnected reforms across three domains: curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and systemic policy.

1. Curricular Reforms for Epistemological Inclusion

Moving beyond critique requires constructing curricula that are inclusive and representative. This involves decolonising the curriculum – not merely adding content about marginalised groups, but fundamentally rethinking the epistemological foundations of what is taught (Shahjahan et al., 2022). Successful examples include integrating Indigenous knowledge into science education, acknowledging its sophisticated understanding of ecology (Chilisa, 2017), and centring African American history and literature to provide a counter-narrative to dominant U.S. historiography (King et al., 2019). For South Africa, this means going beyond CAPS to actively develop and resource localised curricula that reflect the cultural, historical, and social contexts of specific communities, making learning relevant and engaging (Demssie et al., 2020).

2. Pedagogical Shifts Towards Empowerment

Curriculum change must be matched by pedagogical transformation. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), as articulated by Geneva Gay (2002), is essential. CRT uses students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference to make learning more effective and affirming. It transforms the classroom into a culturally validating space. This aligns with critical pedagogy in practice, where the teacher becomes a facilitator who poses problems rooted in students' realities, fostering dialogue, critical analysis, and collective problem-solving (Bhattacharya, 2020). This approach directly counters the "banking model" and empowers subaltern students to analyse power structures affecting their lives. The effectiveness of such pedagogy is contingent upon teacher cultural competence. Pre-service and in-service teacher education must prioritise developing educators' ability to understand, communicate

with, and effectively teach students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Lindo, 2020; Elias & Mansouri, 2023). This requires ongoing professional development, mentorship, and reflective practice (Johnson et al., 2023; Zaffini, 2022).

3. Policy Reforms to Dismantle Systemic Barriers

Sustainable change requires supportive policy frameworks. Equitable resource distribution is non-negotiable. Policies must ensure that funding formulas aggressively redress historical inequalities, targeting infrastructure, learning materials, and teacher salaries in the most disadvantaged schools (Salmi & D'Addio, 2021). South Africa's no-fee school policy and National School Nutrition Programme are steps in this direction but require consistent and corruption-free implementation (Mahomed, 2020).

Robust multilingual education policies must be operationalised. This goes beyond permission to use home languages; it requires investment in developing high-quality academic and pedagogical materials in all official languages and training teachers for multilingual classrooms (Kirsch et al., 2020; Kirss et al., 2021).

Finally, policies must institutionalise participatory governance. This means legally mandating and resourcing meaningful community participation in SGBs, ensuring subaltern community members have the support and power to influence decisions on budgets, curriculum implementation, and school culture (Thapan, 2022; Chakma & Dubey, 2023). This aligns with the Freirean principle of dialogue and shared ownership of the educational process.

Synthesis and Discussion: An Integrated Approach

The analysis demonstrates that subalternism in education is a multi-layered problem requiring an integrated solution. The proposed framework shows how postcolonial theory (diagnosis) and critical pedagogy (praxis) inform action across all three domains. A decolonised curriculum (informed by postcolonial critique) is delivered through culturally responsive and dialogical pedagogy (informed by critical pedagogy), all within a policy environment that dismantles material barriers and enables community agency. For instance, a lesson on environmental science in a rural South African school could draw on local indigenous knowledge about water management (decolonised content), engage students in dialogue about current water challenges in their community (critical pedagogy), and link to a school project supported by policy-mandated community collaboration on a water conservation solution.

Challenges remain, including resistance from entrenched interests, lack of teacher preparedness, and insufficient political will. However, the South African context,

with its explicit constitutional commitment to redress and equality, provides a unique, if fraught, opportunity to implement this transformative framework. The legacy of apartheid makes the need for such an approach not just academic but a moral and social imperative for the nation's future.

Conclusion

This study has argued that addressing the deep-seated issue of subalternism in education necessitates a comprehensive, integrated approach grounded in the synergistic frameworks of postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy. Subalternism manifests not as a series of isolated challenges but as an interlocking system of barriers—economic, linguistic, epistemological, and political—that silence marginalised voices and perpetuate inequality. The South African case vividly illustrates how historical injustices like apartheid become fossilised in contemporary educational structures, from unequal schools to alienating curricula.

The proposed transformative pathway involves simultaneous action on three fronts. First, curricular reform must move beyond additive inclusion to undertake the deeper work of epistemological decolonisation, validating and centring the knowledge systems and histories of subaltern groups. Second, pedagogical practice must shift from transmission to transaction, embracing culturally responsive and critical pedagogies that foster dialogue, critical consciousness, and student agency. Third, policy must be reoriented to aggressively redistribute resources, substantively support multilingualism, and democratise educational governance through genuine community participation.

The integration of postcolonial theory and critical pedagogy provides both the analytical lens to understand the problem and the practical toolkit to address it. This framework bridges the gap between critique and construction, between understanding how subalterns are silenced and enacting ways for them to speak and be heard. While the challenges in contexts like South Africa are formidable, the imperative for change is undeniable. Transforming education into a truly equitable and empowering space for all learners, especially those historically relegated to the margins, is fundamental to building just and democratic

societies. Future research should build on this theoretical and policy analysis by conducting empirical studies on the implementation and impact of such integrated reforms in diverse classroom settings, further refining the praxis of educational justice.

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