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Editorial

Ethics as the First Philosophy: Implications for Transformative Praxis

Niroj Dahal* (iD), and **Bal Chandra Luitel** (iD)

Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

Email: niroj@kusoed.edu.np, and bcluitel@kusoed.edu.np

Abstract

This editorial explores the ethics of first philosophy, examining its transformative implications for educational praxis in contemporary learning communities. Drawing on phenomenological traditions and critical pedagogy, we argue that positioning ethics as the foundational philosophical stance fundamentally reconceptualizes the relationship between the self and the Other in transformative learning contexts. This reconceptualization challenges traditional ontological and epistemological frameworks that have historically privileged being over ethical responsibility. Through a critical examination of community-oriented pedagogical approaches, we demonstrate how the primacy of ethics transforms educational encounters into spaces of infinite responsibility toward the Other. Also, the editorial analyzes the processes of 'Othering' and their implications for inclusive educational practices, proposing that transformative learning emerges when educators and learners embrace their fundamental ethical obligation to foster authentic human relationships. We contest community-based educational approaches, when grounded in ethics as first philosophy, create possibilities for transformation that excel individual learning toward collective greater good. The editorial lays the groundwork for further exploration by articulating a vision of transformative praxis that prioritizes ethical responsibility as the foundation of meaningful educational change, addressing practical implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders committed to fostering just and inclusive learning environments. The editorial concludes by offering a synopsis of the articles featured in Volume 6, Issue 1.

Keywords: *Ethics. First Philosophy. Transformative Learning. Praxis. Community Education. Othering. Phenomenology.*

Introduction

In an era marked by unprecedented global challenges and educational transformations, the question of what constitutes the foundation of educational philosophy has become increasingly

critical. Levinas's revolutionary claim that 'ethics is first philosophy' offers a philosophical framework for reconceptualizing educational praxis in transformative learning contexts (Kretchmar, 1993; Peperzak, 1995; Wyschogrod, 1999). This editorial examines the implications of positioning ethics as the emerging philosophical stance, exploring how such a stance fundamentally alters our understanding of educational relationships, community engagement, and transformative possibilities. The contemporary educational scenario, that increases diversity, technological advancement, and social complexity, demands new philosophical orientations that can address the multifaceted challenges facing learners and educators alike (Liu, 2025). Traditional educational paradigms, often grounded in rationalistic and individualistic assumptions, have proven inadequate in fostering the kind of transformative learning necessary for addressing contemporary global challenges (Luitel & Dahal, 2020). The turn toward ethics as first philosophy offers a compelling alternative that prioritizes relationality, responsibility, and community engagement as foundational elements of educational experience.

Concept of First Philosophy

The notion of 'first philosophy' has historically been associated with metaphysics and ontology in the Aristotelian tradition, where it referred to the study of being in the capacity of being. However, Levinas's revolutionary insight challenges this tradition by asserting that ethics, rather than ontology, constitutes the most fundamental philosophical inquiry (Crowell, 2012). This shift from 'being' to 'responsibility' represents a paradigmatic transformation in philosophical thinking with philosophical implications for educational theory and practice. For Levinas, first philosophy is a matter of logical priority, as it concerns the most fundamental human experience: the encounter with the Other. This encounter is always ethical, preceding any theoretical or cognitive engagement with the world. In educational contexts, this means that the pedagogical relationship is fundamentally ethical before it is epistemological or didactic. The teacher-student relationship, the curriculum content, and the learning process itself are all grounded in ethical responsibility toward the Other (Peperzak, 1995). The implications of this shift can change educational praxis. When ethics is understood as first philosophy, academic institutions and practices shall be reimagined as primarily ethical spaces where the fundamental question is not 'what do we know?' But rather 'how do we respond to the Other with infinite responsibility?' This reorientation challenges educators to move beyond instrumental approaches to learning toward more holistic and relational pedagogies that feature the dignity and alterity of every learner.

Ontology and Epistemology

The relationship between ontology, epistemology, and ethics in Levinas's (1989) framework requires careful examination. Traditional Western philosophy has typically prioritized ontology—the study of being—as foundational, with epistemology—the study of knowledge—following as a secondary concern. Ethics, in this traditional schema, often appears as an applied field that emerges from ontological and epistemological foundations (Wittmayer et al., 2024). Levinas's (1989) ethics, as a first philosophy, has fundamentally disrupted this hierarchy. Rather than beginning with questions about what exists (ontology) or how we know (epistemology), Levinas (1989) argues that philosophy shall begin with the ethical encounter with the Other. This encounter is pre-ontological and pre-epistemological—it occurs before questions of being or knowing arise. The face-to-face encounter with the Other puts us into question, disrupting our self-enclosed existence and demanding an ethical response. In educational contexts, this reorientation has reflective implications. Traditional educational

approaches often begin with ontological assumptions about what exists (knowledge, truth, reality) and epistemological frameworks for how this knowledge can be acquired and transmitted. A Levinasian approach, however, begins with the ethical encounter between teacher and student, recognizing that learning is fundamentally a relational and ethical process (Levinas, 1989). Knowledge emerges from and is situated within ethical relationships rather than existing as an abstract entity to be transmitted or discovered. This perspective aligns with contemporary developments in transformative learning theory, that emphasizes the relational and contextual dimensions of learning. Transformative learning, as articulated by Mezirow (1991) and further developed by critical pedagogues, recognizes that meaningful learning involves fundamental shifts in perspective. That often emerges through dialogue and relationship with others (Stetsenko, 2023). When grounded in ethics as a first philosophy, transformative learning becomes a cognitive and psychological process, along with an ethical imperative.

Ethical Orientation

The ethical orientation that emerges from Levinas's (1989) philosophy is considered with several key features that have direct relevance for educational practice. First, this orientation is fundamentally asymmetrical—it does not assume reciprocity or mutual exchange but instead emphasizes the infinite responsibility of the self toward the Other. This asymmetry challenges educational approaches that assume equal exchange between teacher and student or that reduce learning to contractual relationships based on mutual benefit. Second, the ethical orientation is characterized by what Levinas (1989) terms 'saying' rather than 'said'—the ethical dimension of language that exceeds propositional content and opens possibilities for encounter. In educational contexts, this distinction emphasizes the importance of how we communicate with others, recognizing that the ethical dimension of communication precedes and enables the transmission of content (Benade, 2015). Third, the ethical orientation acknowledges the fundamental vulnerability and mortality of the Other as the basis for ethical obligation (Dahal & Luitel, 2022). This recognition challenges educational practices that instrumentalize learners or reduce them to measurable outcomes. Instead, it calls for pedagogical approaches that honor the irreducible singularity of each learner and respond to their fundamental vulnerability with care and responsibility. Contemporary research in critical digital pedagogy demonstrates how ethical orientation can inform transformative educational practices in contexts where power imbalances and structural inequalities (Ncube & Tawanda, 2025). When educators adopt an ethical orientation grounded in infinite responsibility toward the Other, they create possibilities for transformation that address individual learning outcomes in general and broader social justice concerns in particular.

Ethics and Others

The relationship between ethics and Others constitutes the central focus of Levinas's (1989) philosophical work and offers crucial insights for transformative educational praxis. For Levinas (1989), the Other is not limited to simply another person or entity to be understood or known, but rather the condition of possibility for ethical experience itself. The encounter with the Other disrupts the totality of the self's experience, calling the self into question and creating an ethical demand for response and responsibility. In educational contexts, this understanding of the Other has reflective implications for how we conceptualize learning relationships, curriculum development, and pedagogical practice. The Other refers to learners who need to be educated, or the teacher who possesses knowledge, or any being whose alterity calls us to an ethical response. This includes human others, as well as cultural, linguistic, and non-human

others, that constitute the broader learning environment. Ethical encounters with Others in education require what Levinas (1989) calls 'substitution'—the willingness to take responsibility for the Other even to the point of substituting oneself for the Other's suffering or need. This formulation challenges educators to move beyond professional boundaries and contractual obligations toward a more radical understanding of pedagogical responsibility. It suggests that education involves a willingness to be transformed by encounters with Others rather than simply seeking to transform others according to predetermined outcomes. Recent research in community-based education demonstrates the transformative potential of ethical encounters with Others. In this relation, both, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2022) raise their brow whether community-based research partnerships grounded in ethical responsibility create possibilities for addressing complex social challenges while respecting the dignity and agency of all participants. Their work illustrates how ethical orientation toward Others can inform research methodologies that are both rigorous and socially responsive.

Others and Othering

The phenomenon of 'Othering'—the process by which individuals or groups are constructed as different, inferior, or threatening—represents a perversion of the ethical encounter with the Other. While Levinas's (1989) Other calls us to ethical responsibility, Othering reduces the Other to a category, stereotype, or object of control. Understanding this distinction is crucial for developing educational practices that regard alterity while resisting oppressive forms of Othering. Othering in educational contexts manifests in multiple ways: through curricula that exclude or misrepresent certain cultural perspectives, through pedagogical practices that privilege certain learning styles or cultural backgrounds, through assessment practices that fail to recognize diverse forms of knowledge and expression, and through institutional structures that systematically disadvantage certain groups of learners. These practices of Othering create barriers to learning and perpetuate systems of inequality and exclusion. The challenge for transformative education is to create spaces that welcome Others while resisting practices of Othering. This requires what we might call 'ethical vigilance'—a continuous commitment to examining how educational practices either respect or violate the alterity of Others. It also requires institutional changes that address structural forms of Othering embedded in educational systems. Contemporary research on intercultural education offers important insights into how educational practices can resist Othering while embracing alterity. Conti (2025) argues that intercultural education shall move beyond superficial multiculturalism toward engagement with difference that transforms all participants in the educational encounter. This approach recognizes that intercultural learning requires ethical openness to being challenged and changed by encounters with Others. The distinction between Others and Othering also has implications for how we understand diversity and inclusion in educational contexts. Rather than simply adding diverse perspectives to existing curricula or increasing the representation of marginalized groups, an ethical approach requires a fundamental transformation of educational structures and practices to create a welcoming environment for Others. This transformation involves both individual and collective commitment to ethical responsibility and ongoing reflection on how educational practices either enable or constrain ethical encounters.

Doing Good to Others

The imperative to 'do good to Others' emerges naturally from Levinas's (1989) ethics as first philosophy, but requires careful consideration to avoid paternalistic or instrumental approaches to goodness. For Levinas (1989), doing good to the Other is not a matter of applying external

moral principles or achieving predetermined outcomes rather responding to the ethical demand that emerges from the encounter with the Other's face. This response is always contextual, relational, and open to the possibility of being wrong or inadequate. In educational contexts, doing good to Others involves creating conditions for learning with the principle of dignity, agency, and alterity of all participants. This includes providing material support for learning, creating inclusive and welcoming environments, developing curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and ways of knowing, and implementing pedagogical practices that recognize and respond to different learning needs and styles. However, doing good also requires humility and willingness to be guided by Others rather than assuming we know what is good for them. The concept of doing good to Others also extends beyond individual relationships to encompass broader social and political dimensions of education. Thus, transformative education that is grounded in ethics as first philosophy necessarily involves commitment to social justice and structural change. This means addressing immediate educational needs within the broader context of conditions that create educational inequality and exclusion. Recent research on critical pedagogy demonstrates how doing good to Others can inform transformative educational practices. For instance, Sahoo (2025) argues that critical pedagogy empowers students through education that addresses both individual learning needs and broader social transformation. This approach recognizes that education cannot be separated from efforts to create more just and equitable societies. The practice of doing good to Others in education also requires ongoing reflection and dialogue about what constitutes goodness in particular contexts (Luitel & Dahal, 2020). Different cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions offer different understandings of the good, and transformative education shall create space for these differences while maintaining commitment to ethical responsibility. This requires what we might call 'ethical pluralism'—the ability to hold multiple understandings of goodness in creative tension while maintaining commitment to the fundamental ethical imperative to respond to Others with responsibility and care.

Community Orientation and Transformative Learning

The alignment of community orientation with transformative learning represents a decisive space for ethics as a first philosophy in educational practice. When ethics is understood as first philosophy, learning cannot be conceived as an individual or isolated process, but rather as situated within the broader community of relationships that constitute the learning environment. Community becomes not merely the context for learning but the possibility for ethical encounter and transformation. Community-oriented approaches to transformative learning recognize that meaningful learning emerges from and contributes to the flourishing of learning communities. This orientation challenges individualistic assumptions about learning and assessment that have dominated educational systems, particularly in Western contexts. Instead of focusing primarily on individual achievement or competence, community-oriented transformative learning emphasizes collective growth, mutual support, and shared responsibility for creating conditions that enable all community members to thrive. The philosophical foundation for community-oriented transformative learning lies in Levinas's understanding of the 'third part'—the recognition that ethical responsibility toward the Other always occurs within a broader community of Others who also demand ethical response. This creates what Levinas calls the necessity of justice—the need to balance infinite responsibility toward each Other with the practical demands of living in community with multiple Others. In educational contexts, this means developing pedagogical practices and institutional structures that can respond to the diverse needs and perspectives of all community members while maintaining commitment to ethical responsibility. Recent research demonstrates the transformative potential of community-oriented approaches to education. Mpuangnan and

Ntombela (2024) argue that incorporating community voices in curriculum development creates possibilities for more relevant and transformative educational experiences. Their research shows how community-based knowledge can inform educational practices that are both culturally responsive and academically rigorous, creating opportunities for learning that serve both individual development and community flourishing. The implementation of community-oriented transformative learning requires attention to both pedagogical practices and institutional structures. At the pedagogical level, it involves developing teaching methods that emphasize collaboration, dialogue, and mutual learning rather than one-directional transmission of knowledge. It also involves creating curricula that draw on community knowledge and address community needs while maintaining high academic standards. At the institutional level, it requires developing governance structures that involve community members in educational decision-making and creating partnerships between educational institutions and community organizations. One of the key challenges in implementing community-oriented transformative learning is navigating the tension between local community needs and broader educational goals. This requires what we might call 'rooted cosmopolitanism'—the ability to be committed to communities while maintaining openness to broader perspectives and concerns. Educational institutions shall find ways to serve their local communities while also preparing learners to engage effectively with global challenges and opportunities. The assessment of community-oriented transformative learning also requires new approaches that can capture both individual learning and community transformation. Traditional assessment methods that focus on individual performance and standardized outcomes are inadequate for evaluating learning that is fundamentally relational and contextual. Alternative assessment approaches might include portfolio-based assessment, community-based projects, peer assessment, and narrative evaluation methods that can capture the complexity and multidimensionality of transformative learning.

Implications for Educational Practice

The implications of ethics as a first philosophy for educational practice are both thoughtful and practical, requiring changes at multiple levels of the educational system. At the classroom level, educators shall develop pedagogical approaches that prioritize ethical relationships and responses to Others while maintaining academic rigor and effectiveness. This involves creating learning environments that welcome alterity, foster dialogue across difference, and support both individual growth and community flourishing. Curriculum development from the perspective of ethics as first philosophy requires fundamental reconsideration of what knowledge is most important and how it should be organized and presented. Rather than beginning with disciplinary content or learning objectives, curriculum development shall begin with consideration of how particular content and approaches can foster ethical relationships and transformative learning. This might involve integrating multiple cultural perspectives, addressing social justice issues, and creating opportunities for students to engage in real-world challenges in their communities. Teacher education programs also be transformed to prepare educators who can implement ethics as the first philosophy in their practice. This requires a theoretical understanding of ethical philosophy and transformative learning theory with practical skills in dialogue facilitation, conflict resolution, community engagement, and cultural responsiveness. Teacher educators shall model the kind of ethical relationship and transformative practice they hope to see in classrooms and schools. At the institutional level, implementing ethics as first philosophy requires changes in governance structures, resource allocation, and partnership development. Educational institutions shall find ways to involve community members in decision-making processes, allocate resources in a way that supports both individual learning and community development, and develop partnerships with

community organizations that can enhance educational opportunities while addressing community needs.

Caveat

This editorial has explored Levinas's (1989) claim on ethics that constitutes first philosophy and examined its change-driven implications for educational praxis (Kretchmar, 1993; Peperzak, 1995; Wyschogrod, 1999). We have argued that positioning ethics as the foundational philosophical stance fundamentally reconceptualizes educational relationships, community engagement, and change-driven orientation. The shift from ontology to ethics as first philosophy challenges educators to move beyond instrumental approaches toward more holistic and relational pedagogies with a degree of dignity and alterity of all learners. The examination of concepts such as Others and Othering, doing good to Others, and community-oriented transformative learning demonstrates the practical implications of this philosophical shift for praxis-driven approaches. When education is grounded in ethics as first philosophy, it shall become a process of knowledge transmission or individual development with a space of ethical encounter and collective transformation that has the potential to address broader social challenges and create more just and inclusive communities. The implementation of these insights requires ongoing commitment from educators, institutions, and communities to examine and transform educational practices, considering ethical responsibility toward Others. This is an ongoing process of ethical awareness and responsive adaptation to the changing needs and perspectives of learning communities. As we face increasing global challenges and educational complexity, the wisdom of ethics as first philosophy offers a compelling foundation for creating educational experiences that can foster both individual flourishing and collective transformation.

Volume 6, Issue 1 Covers

Volume 6 features one editorial and seven original articles. The editorial argues that placing ethics, rather than ontology or epistemology, as the foundational principle of philosophy (ethics as 'first philosophy') radically transforms educational practice. It critiques traditional frameworks that prioritize abstract being over concrete ethical responsibility to others. Drawing on phenomenology and critical pedagogy, the editors argue that this ethical primacy redefines the relationship between the self and the Other in learning communities. Education becomes a space of 'infinite responsibility' toward the Other, challenging processes of 'Othering' and fostering inclusive, authentic human relationships. The analysis demonstrates that community-based pedagogical approaches, grounded in this ethical stance, shift the goal of education from individual knowledge acquisition to collective flourishing. Transformative learning emerges when educators and learners embrace their fundamental obligation to the Other, creating just and inclusive environments. The editorial concludes by outlining this vision of transformative praxis and introduces the contributions within the journal issue that further explore these themes, offering implications for educators, policymakers, and community leaders.

In the first article, *Pant* critiques the disciplinary egocentrism dominating Nepali classrooms. Using participatory action research (PAR), a STEAM project was implemented in a public school, engaging teachers and students in a collaborative bird conservation initiative ('Save the Species'). This project integrated math, science, social studies, and art with ethical and cultural considerations. Findings revealed a multilayered transformative learning process: 1) Transformation as thinking, driven by critical reflection and authentic tasks; 2) Transformation as intentional attempt, involving continual, collaborative effort; and 3) Transformation as process, prioritizing dialogue and knowledge co-construction over

measurable outputs. The research demonstrates that a participatory STEAM framework can transcend rote learning, fostering relational, ethical, and creative knowledge. It integrates disciplinary learning with local context and global issues, such as sustainability, to promote holistic student development. *Thakuri*, in the second article, critiques epistemic injustice within inclusive justice systems. Through self-reflection and non-chronological narrative, she exposes how the knowledge and experiences of the hard-of-hearing are marginalized. Her journey explores the emotional impact of the injustice while resonating with broader minority struggles for legitimized voices. The article identifies critical research gaps concerning deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, arguing that their needs are distinct and shall be understood through a social justice lens to achieve true equity. In the third article, *Giri, Neupane, and Subedi* explore how Participatory Action Research (PAR) drives whole-school improvement in a Nepali private school amid 21st-century global and technological changes. Through collaborative, cyclical engagement with leaders, teachers, students, and parents, the PAR intervention offered a shared vision, teacher development, school-community partnerships, and a supportive learning environment. These changes enhanced student performance. The research provides actionable insights for stakeholders and policymakers seeking holistic, context-sensitive school improvement. In the fourth article, *Kafle* presents a critical self-reflection on his four-year project documenting Kathmandu University's "Vision 2030." Through the lenses of rhetorical situation, critical autoethnography, and currere, Kafle analyzes the institutional dynamics and personal journey that are integral to the work. He concluded that the experience to be both institutionally insightful and personally rewarding, despite the lack of formal recognition or publication of the findings.

Likewise, in the fifth article, *Acharya* critiques the assessment practices of Nepali community schools, which prioritize ranking and exams (assessment of learning). He argued that assessment practices create test anxiety, reduce creativity, and have negative societal consequences. Through interviews with headteachers and teachers, a disconnect emerged between perceived good practice and the reality of inequitable learning opportunities. The article advocates reform to promote assessment for learning. Drawing on the assessment practices approach, he proposes strategies to ensure equity, support holistic development, and provide all students with diverse and equitable learning opportunities. *Ojha*, in the sixth article, examines the integration of transformative learning theory in undergraduate business courses as a Nepali management educator. Applying the theory's four-step process—from disorienting dilemmas to perspective transformation. The researcher, *Ojha*, finds that it enhances students' critical thinking and problem-solving. However, he agreed that challenges arise from existing academic standards, teaching practices, and socio-cultural factors, which influence how students experience transformative learning. The self-study concludes that for interventions to succeed, institutions shall establish a realistic, context-based educational framework that offers pathways for educators to design instruction that supports transformative learning praxis in Nepali higher education. Finally, in the seventh article, *Poudel and Baral* critically examine Nepal's diploma and pre-diploma TVET curricula. Using qualitative data. They find the courses overly focused on general subjects at the expense of technical skills and workplace preparation. Key issues include limited stakeholder input during the design phase and reliance on summative assessments. The analysis calls for restructuring to align with industry needs by reducing general content, integrating soft skills, and adding workplace learning. They recommend a national curriculum framework, reformed assessments, greater stakeholder involvement, and a shift to competency-based curricula for improved relevance and effectiveness.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this editorial are within the editorial.

Conflict of Interest

The editors declare that the editorial was written in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Discloser Statement

We confirm that we have used the Grammarly Edu version to refine and polish the language. At the same time, the Grammarly Edu version does not influence this editorial; instead, it is grounded in our cognitive and evaluative abilities. We have approved it for publication.

ORCiD IDs

Niroj Dahal https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8585-7676
Bal Chandra Luitel https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5483-2385

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