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Transformative and Empowering Education: Thiruvalluvar’s Vision of Learning in the Light of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract

Tirukkural articulates profound insights into education and learning that have deeply influenced Tamil philosophical and pedagogical thought. Thiruvalluvar’s verses encapsulate dimensions of several modern educational paradigms—behaviorism, cognitive learning, humanism, and social constructivism—underscoring the enduring relevance of his ideas. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis between Jack Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the metaphorical constructs employed by Thiruvalluvar in Chapters 40 to 43 of the Tirukkural, which focus on the nature, purpose, and process of learning. By situating Thiruvalluvar’s educational ideals within the framework of transformative learning, this study demonstrates how his conception of education emphasizes self-realization, critical reflection, and empowerment of the individual and by extension, the society. The findings highlight Tirukkural’s vision of learning as a transformative enterprise that promotes both cognitive advancement and social progress.

Keywords: Tirukkural, Transformative Learning Theory, Thiruvalluvar, Tamil Philosophy, Educational Theory, Empowerment, Cognitive Growth.

Introduction

In the preface to his 1886 translation of Tirukkural, G. U. Pope called Thiruvalluvar “their greatest classic author, who has sung of so many topics, *Musaeo contingens cuncia lepore*, touching all things with poetic grace.” (Pope, 1886, p. iii). The Tirukkural is an extensive collection of ethical sayings by the great Tamil philosopher-poet Thiruvalluvar, which has had a profound impact on the development of the Tamil mind and values. Tirukkural can be compared to the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, *De Officiis* of Cicero and *Analects of Confucius* (Bava, 2000; Sanjay Jha, 2023) in terms of the conceptual depth and wide-ranging aphorisms of its ethical scope. The ethical principles in Tirukkural have united all people of Tamil culture, irrespective of their caste or religion, to create a sense of Tamil identity.

The present study places Thiruvalluvar’s Visionary ideas of vision any ideas about education alongside the modern Frame work of transformative learning espoused by Jack Mezirow, and uncovers meaningful correlations and relevance. Nor does it assert that

Thiruvalluvar predicted Mezirow, but it suggests that important conceptual similarities can be found between the two, both from different eras and cultural backgrounds. The comparative analysis between Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and the metaphorical constructs used by Thiruvalluvar in Chapters 40 to 43 is mainly about the nature, purpose and process of learning and its outcome. The present study is an attempt to show how education as conceived by Thiruvalluvar involves critical reflection, recalling received knowledge and empowering the individual in the process of learning and the resultant transformation of the society to be inquiring, rational, inclusive and humane. The approach used in this study is comparative hermeneutical method that explores conceptual similarities between Tiruvalluvar's educational philosophy in chapters 40-43 of Tirukkural and Transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow. This study does not hypothesize that Thiruvalluvar foreknew the modern educational psychology of Mezirow or that he is dependent on it historically. It aims to broadly discuss issues of commonality in educational thought in diverse cultural and historical contexts.

The study centres on the primary use of metaphorical expressions used by Thiruvalluvar for the word learning, wisdom, ignorance, reflection and intellectual empowerment. The metaphors are explained in the light of central concepts in Mezirow's theory which include critical reflection, perspective transformation, autonomous thinking and meaning reconstruction. The comparison is not specific, but rather a theme and a philosophic approach.

The study uses a qualitative textual analysis method. The features of the selected Kurals, in Chapters 40-43, are analyzed in terms of similar ideas expressed by Mezirow in his writings on transformative learning. In this study, special focus is put on the conceptualization of education as a process of perspective transformation and ethical development in both frameworks.

This study also acknowledges the inherent constraints of cross-temporal and cross-cultural comparisons of ancient deliberations with modern socio-scientific theories. The socio-cultural environment of classical Tamil society was the background for Thiruvalluvar's ethical and poetic approaches, while the twentieth century context of modern adult education and critical pedagogy in the West was the background for Mezirow's theory. So, there are no historical or chronological causal connections between the parallels that are drawn in this research.

Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory: Origin and Description

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) was developed by Jack Mezirow, an American educator and adult learning theorist. His research is largely directed toward understanding the learning, change and growth of adults, with a specific emphasis on learning and growth in education and personal development. In 1978, he introduced the basic concepts of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in his seminal paper, "Perspective Transformation" (Mezirow, 1978). In subsequent decades he further developed the theory (Mezirow, 1981) by the publication of his book "Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning". The Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) of Mezirow is still largely adopted and valued by adult educators and in various fields such as professional development, intercultural education, and leadership training. It has evolved into a key theoretical model over the years for describing adult learning and a key personal change. Of how Mezirow's TLT challenges and changes individuals, Michael Christie (et al) observes as follows: "The aim of transformative learning is to help individuals challenge the current assumptions on which they act and if, they find them wanting, to change them. This includes a mental shift as well as a behavioural one." (Christie et al, 2015, p. 10).

Mezirow's Theory (TLT) suggests that adult learning is a radical change of perspective that causes people to reflect on their assumptions, beliefs and experiences (Kitchenham, 2008). The

theory focuses on a disorienting dilemma that confronts an individual's current frames of reference, resulting in a process of examination and reasoned discourse or analysis. The disorienting dilemma is a starting point for a sequence of events that will culminate in a change in the frame of reference of the learner. "We learn most about our assumptions when they are at risk. In the context of a crisis or a disorienting dilemma that usually operates as the starting point of transformative learning as well (see Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2012), we become more aware of what holds us back from adapting to new situations or from resolving conflicts" (Eschenbacher, 2020, p. 766). Through this reflective process, learners reconstruct their meaning perspectives, developing more inclusive, and integrative worldviews. Ultimately, transformative learning enables individuals to think autonomously, act with greater self-awareness, and engage more effectively within complex social and cultural contexts, eventually resulting in personal growth and a deeper understanding of themselves, their social location and others around them. Mezirow would underscore the goal of transformative education as personal growth, greater self-awareness of his own self and the decisions that one would make: "to help the individual to become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11).

Thiruvalluvar on Education through Metaphors

Tirukkural, the *magnum opus* of Tamil Philosopher-Poet Thiruvalluvar, is massive collection of couplets covering wide range of topics organized into three major sections: virtue (*Arathupal*), wealth (*Porutpal*) and Love (*Inbathupal*). Tirukkural contains 133 chapters; each chapter contains 10 short poems (couplets): 38 in virtue, 70 in wealth, and 25 in love.

The middle segment on wealth and civic responsibility focuses on issues relating to governance, economics, leadership, trade and public life. It emphasizes the need to be clever and practical in the handling of money and the effects of materialism.

While Thiruvalluvar educates the reader through each poetic line, he dedicates four chapters to specifically discuss the significance of education, and its importance: chapter 40 on learning, chapter 41 on ignorance, chapter 42 on Hearing, and chapter 43 on the Possession of knowledge. He employed different metaphors to convey his key ideas (cf. Murugayan & Ramalingam, 2024). I will mention four kinds of metaphors:

1. Metaphors of Lack of Learning
2. Metaphors of Process of Education
3. Metaphors of Education as Transformation
4. Metaphors of Education as Empowerment

Metaphors of Lack of Learning

Tiruvalluvar turns towards two prominent metaphors in this regard in Kurals 393 and 410.

கண்ணுடையர் என்பவர் கற்றோர் முகத்திரண்டு

புண்ணுடையர் கல்லா தவர்.. (Kural 393)

The unlearned have (merely) two sores in their face, implying intellectual blindness.

விலங்கொடு மக்கள் அணையர் இலங்குநூல்

கற்றாரோடு ஏனை யவர்.. (Kural 410)

As beasts by the side of men, so are other men by the side of those who are learned in celebrated works.

By presenting, the unlearned state of ignorance as blindness and animal-like, Thiruvalluvar does not denigrate the unlearned, rather prompts them to strive out of their undesirable state of

ignorance and commit themselves to learning and growth. The change has to start within oneself to strive towards knowledge out of the shackles of traditions and ignorance.

Metaphors of the Process of Education

Two evocative metaphors are used to highlight the process of education in Kurals 396 and 423.

தொட்டனைத் தூறும் மணற்கேணி மாந்தர்க்குக்

கற்றனைத் தூறும் அறிவு.. (Kural 396)

Water will flow from a well in the sand in proportion to the depth to which it is dug, and knowledge will flow from a man in proportion to his learning

எப்பொருள் யார்யார்வாய்க் கேட்பினும் அப்பொருள்

மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்ப தறிவு.. (Kural 423)

To discern the truth in everything, by whomsoever spoken, is wisdom

The first metaphor relates to digging for water, the source of life. He points out that the depth of learning is proportionate to exerted effort. He encourages learners to dig deeper, where the precious water would be found; not to be satisfied with superficial knowledge, rather to pursue after wisdom. The second metaphor is presented like a treasure hunt - “truth hunt.” Truth is not easily found. It must be searched and researched with objective openness, diligence, and dexterity. Meiporul is a double entendre, meaning “real truth” and “real treasure/wealth.” Discovering the core truth remains the underlying focus of the learning process.

Metaphors of Education as Transformation

Here, Thiruvalluvar presents two powerful metaphors to point out the transformation that takes place among learners.

எண்ணென்ப ஏனை எழுத்தென்ப இவ்விரண் டும்

கண்ணென்ப வாழும் உயிர்க்கு.. (392)

Letters and numbers are the two eyes (sight) of mankind

அறிவுடையார் ஆவ தறிவார் அறிவிலார்

அ.தறி கல்லா தவர்.. (427)

The wise are those who know beforehand what will happen; those who do not know this are the unwise.

The two metaphors are related to recovery of Sight for the blind and a sense of Premonition or discernment. These metaphors together reveal how a blind brute (referring to a state of intellectual deprivation) transforms into one with sight and foreknowledge. He instills hope in the hearts of the unlearned that their condition can be rectified through education. It is not a fatalistic predicament that one cannot escape by his conscious agency.

Metaphors of Education as Empowerment

The two metaphors that Thiruvalluvar uses highlight how education becomes an agent of empowerment and confidence.

கேடில் விழுச்செல்வம் கல்வி யொருவற்கு

மாடல்ல மற்றை யவை.. (400)

Learning is the true imperishable riches; all other things are not riches

அறிவற்றங் காக்குங் கருவி செறுவார்க்கும்

உள்ளழிக்க லாகா அரண்.. (Kural 421)

Wisdom is a weapon to ward off destruction; it is an inner fortress which enemies cannot destroy.

The first metaphor presents knowledge learned through education as imperishable wealth. The second metaphor presents wisdom knowledge as a weapon and an impregnable fortress. While the uneducated are easily manipulated and deceived, the learned has confidence to resist and thwart detrimental influences and ideologies towards protecting their intellectual and social well-being.

Tirukkural and Transformative Learning Theory: Synthesis of Comparable Concepts

The ensuing analysis demonstrates several significant conceptual convergences between Thiruvalluvar's educational philosophy and Mezirow's TLT. Although separated by vast historical, cultural, and intellectual distances, both frameworks envision education not merely as the transmission of detached data, but as a transformative process that reshapes the learner's perception, judgment, and ethical orientation. The following comparative matrix summarizes the principal thematic correspondences identified in this study.

Comparative Matrix

Here is a brief comparative matrix, highlighting the concepts of Mezirow and its related themes in Tirukkural.

Mezirow's TLT	Tirukkural Theme	Related Kural
Critical Reflection	Discernment of Truth	423
Perspective Transformation	Recovery of Sight	392
Autonomous Thinking	Wisdom as Fortress	421
Meaning Reconstruction	Digging for Wisdom	396
Empowerment	Knowledge as Imperishable Wealth	400

Comparative Analysis: Thiruvalluvar and Transformative Learning

This section emphasizes the important thematic connections between Kural and TRT. Three effects of education upon learners would be laid out as follows: education as critical reflection, education as perspective transformation, and education as empowerment.

Education as Critical Reflection

The most important conceptual overlap between the educational philosophy of Thiruvalluvar and Mezirow's TLT is the importance of critical reflection as a key element of learning. Mezirow believes that transformative learning starts when people question and reflect on their taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and inherited frames of reference. This reflection allows students to go beyond mere receptivity and to re-construct their knowledge by engaging in rational inquiry and self-awareness (Mezirow, 1997). A similar concept is found in Kural 423, where Thiruvalluvar says that wisdom is knowing the truth of a situation, irrespective of the source. This awareness turns the focus of learning from authority, status or tradition to objective discernment and intellectual evaluation. This does require a new social attitude to the dynamics of status, power and authority, one that would have been revolutionary at the time kural was written.

In both, the learner must engage in questioning of ideas, not critical reception and passive conformity. Therefore, both Thiruvalluvar and Mezirow reject blind acceptance and call for reflective inquiry as the basis for intellectual integrity and autonomous decision making.

Education as Perspective Transformation

One other parallel between Thiruvalluvar and Mezirow can be noted in their conception of education as a process of perspective transformation. Mezirow believes that transformative learning

is a process that fundamentally changes the learner's worldview, which involves the reconstruction of meaning structures and the emergence of new ways of seeing the world. Mezirow points this process as follows: "[it is] an approach to teaching based on promoting change, when educators challenge learners to critically question and assess the integrity of their deeply held assumptions about how they relate to the world around them" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. xi; Cf. Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Thiruvalluvar also uses metaphors of blindness, sight, and awakening of the intellect to represent the power of education. In Kural 392, letters and numbers are called the "eyes" of human beings, indicating that education provides perceptual clarity and increased awareness. Similarly, the images of the unlearned as blind or animal-like suggest a lack of knowledge or understanding that can be acquired through learning.

Education is not only the gaining of information, but the restoration of intellectual sight and the rehabilitation of discernment. The metaphors used by Thiruvalluvar make learning seem to be a process that alters not only what is learned, but also the impact of learning, or how one sees the world based on the knowledge acquired. This conception is similar to Mezirow's idea of transformative learning causing a shift in the learner's frame of reference that allows for cognitive reorientation (Mezirow, 1997).

Education as Empowerment

Thiruvalluvar and Mezirow also envision education as a means of empowerment and ethical agency. Mezirow's theory focuses on the ability of the learner to think independently, to make independent judgments, and to act with self-awareness in complex social situations as a result of transformative learning. Mezirow goes on to point out autonomous thinking as "essential for full citizenship in democracy and for moral decision making in situations of rapid change." (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). Thiruvalluvar also depicts education and wisdom as a source of inner strength and protection. Kural 400 says that learning is an unending treasure, while Kural 421 portrays wisdom as a fortress that cannot be conquered by enemies. These metaphors collectively indicate that education provides intellectual strength and moral assurance that surpasses material wealth. The learned person is not easily influenced by ignorance or social pressures.

In this regard, education is a liberating force from vulnerability and dependency due to ignorance. Both frameworks thus offer learning as a transformative process that enables people to become different, to be ethical, and to be responsible citizens (Ponniah & Safeek, 2024).

The Differences between Mezirow TLT and Tirukkural

Although there are many conceptual similarities, there are also some differences between the educational philosophy of Thiruvalluvar and Mezirow's TLT. While the reflections on learning in Thiruvalluvar's work are part of a broader ethical and poetic framework that focuses on the practice of good living, social harmony, and moral wisdom, Mezirow's theory is situated within the context of modern adult education and cognitive psychology (Eschenbacher, 2020).

In addition, Mezirow's emphasis is on perspective transformation through critical reflection, whereas Thiruvalluvar's emphasis is always on personal growth and ethical responsibility toward society (Ponniah & Safeek, 2024). While Tirukkural presents its educational insights in the form of aphoristic poetry and metaphor, Mezirow presents a systematic theoretical framework based on the contemporary educational discourse. However, although there are variations in context, form, and emphasis, both frameworks share a vision of education as a transformative process that fosters intellectual maturity, reflective inquiry, and human flourishing. M. Prabakaran aptly points out that the Thirukkural is not about conditioning but about learning as a transformative process

that develops discernment and ethical judgement: “The Thirukkural is not about conditioning, but about learning as a transformative process that develops discernment and ethical judgement.” (Prabhakaran, 2026, p.7).

Conclusion

The vision of education in Tirukkural is profound and consistent with the transformative learning theory of Mezirow. Both frameworks highlight the ethical, reflective, experiential and empowering nature of education. Although Tiruvalluvar’s educational philosophy and Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory come from different cultural and historical backgrounds, they share a similar vision of education as a transformative and empowering process. Both stress the need for personal growth and the need to expand one’s worldview, and both call for education beyond the acquisition of knowledge. The principles of Tiruvalluvar, which include virtuous living, moral responsibility, and social harmony, resonate with Mezirow’s principles of perspective transformation, critical reflection, and empowerment. These strategies can be combined to create more comprehensive, transformative learning experiences.

The debate on education in the present day society of India can be broadly divided into two: preservation and perpetuation of knowledge and conservation and transformation of knowledge. While Dipesh Nathwanti’s approach represents the return to and the reintegration of ancient pedagogies into modern education, Poonam Batra’s methodology highlights the reformist and socially-inclusive approach towards education in the Indian milieu. (Nathwanti, 2026; Batra, 2020). The first is to transmit traditional knowledge with reverence, sincerity to keep it relevant, and the latter indicates the need to evaluate knowledge received with care, discarding regressive elements that are not conducive to a rational and egalitarian society. This highlights the importance of conservation, not forgetting the lessons and inherited wisdom of the past, but not taking it on board without critical reflection and rigorous scrutiny. This reading seems to align with Mezirow’s and Thiruvalluvar’s focus on “truth hunt” towards perspectival transformation.

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