Examining How Equity is Promoted and Experienced in the Ghanaian Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate how teachers promote equity in the classroom and how students experience equity in the classroom in the Akuapem South Municipality of Ghana. The study adopted Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy as its theoretical framework and employed a qualitative case study approach with purposive sampling of 8 teachers and 16 third-year students from various classrooms in four schools. Data was collected through interviews and observations and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed equity issues within the study schools, with students facing various forms of inequity. Teachers promoted equity mainly by avoiding foul language in the classroom and creating interactive classroom sessions. Recommendations included equity training for teachers and students, counselling support, creating inclusive classrooms, and reducing class sizes to support a more inclusive environment.

Keywords: classroom, equity, students' experiences, and teachers' practices.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right for personal and societal development (UNESCO, 2018). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 United Nations Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights emphasise the importance of education investment (Afful-Broni & Sekyi, 2014). Access to education should not be limited by gender, location of birth, race, religion, language, socioeconomic level, wealth, or disability (UNESCO, 2018). Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys receive a comprehensive, equitable, and high-quality education at the primary and secondary levels, without any financial burden (UNESCO, 2018).

Ghana prioritises equal and accessible education. The country is a signatory to Education for All Act, Millennium Development Goals, and SDG Agenda 2030. The nation has invested much in education to reduce inequality (Akyeampong, 2010). The Education Strategic Plan 2018-2030 replaces the 2010-2020 ESP to make Ghana a 'learning nation'. The ESP 2018-2030 aims to promote education in Ghana across all subsectors through strategic objectives; they include equitable access to inclusive education, increased teaching and learning quality, and sustainable education service delivery management. Prioritisation is essential for every child to benefit from these improvements (Ministry of education, 2019).

Basic education has been expanded in Ghana as a result of the Free Senior High School policy. The policy's efforts have enhanced education by tackling issues of equal access and opportunity (World Bank Group, 2021). According to Balwanz & Darvas (2013), Ghanaian basic education system has challenges that arise from issues of fairness. Balwanz and Darvas (2013) argue that many teachers lack the necessary skills to

effectively handle challenging classroom behaviours. Saunders (2020) posits, students and teachers' preconceived views about gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, body type, and more can lead to bias assessments and actions. Unconscious biases can cause automatic, hard-to-detect discrimination (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016).

There has been extensive research on school climate and educational equity (Baidoo-Anu et al., 2022; Baidoo-Anu & Ennu Baidoo, 2022; World Bank Group, 2021). However, quality and access appear to have been the main concerns. Ghana seems not to have benefitted from research on classroom equity promotion and experiences. Research on classroom equity in Ghana has concentrated on specific disciplines like math, science, and English, not classroom dynamics (Abarca Millan, 2020; Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020). Research in this area is therefore essential. The study examined how teachers promote classroom equity and how students experience those practises.

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to explore student experiences and teachers' practices in promoting equity in Ghanaian classroom.

Objectives of the Study

The research objectives were:

1. Explore senior high school students' experiences of equity in Ghanaian classroom.
2. Examine how senior high school teachers promote equity in the classroom.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of equity among senior high school students in the classrooms?
2. How do senior high school teachers promote equity in the classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Ghana's educational system and its equity goals

Ghana's present education system has its origins in its political background. During the colonial era, education had three main purposes: supporting the colonial authority, preparing the next generation of European traders, and bolstering the work of Christian missionaries (Akyeampong et al., 2007). Nonetheless, with less than a decade until independence, and in the years immediately after, Ghana made substantial expenditures in formal education to help drive the country's socioeconomic growth. As one example, the 1951 Accelerated Development Plan in Ghana, which acknowledged the enlightenment concept and focuses on modernity, placed a premium on education as a means to speed up the execution of government policies and programs aimed at achieving economic stability (Agyeman et al., 1998).

Achieving economic stability required ensuring that people of all backgrounds had equal access to educational opportunities. As a result, in 1960, the government mandated that all children must attend elementary and middle school at no cost (Akyeampong et al., 2007). Its aim was to foster spatial justice by erecting educational facilities in a wide variety of neighbourhoods around the country. To further remove the financial obstacles to formal education, a unique scholarship program was formed for students in the Northern portion of Ghana (recognized as the most destitute section in the country). Economic and

geographical obstacles to education were reduced as a result of these investments (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975), but the quality of education suffered as a result of managerial restrictions brought on by the enormous increase in infrastructure (Akyeampong, 2007; Akyeampong et al., 2007).

In 1961, a new educational Act was passed in response to the "expansion-quality challenge." In order to address the quality problems that arose from the fast growth of the educational infrastructure, it shifted the burden of expanding primary education to local educational authorities (Akyeampong, 2007). The Kwapong Review Committee was established in 1966 to look into the declining standard of living and provide recommendations for improvement. The Committee suggested instituting a ten-year primary school program, with a hiatus after the eighth year to allow for the selection of students who were ready for high school. Those who were not chosen continued their schooling for another two years, focusing on vocational training (Akyeampong, 2007). The goal of these initiatives was to guarantee everyone the chance to complete their formal education and training.

The Dzobo Committee was formed in the mid-1970s in response to the numerous problems plaguing Ghana's educational system (Apeanti & Asiedu-Addo, 2013; Donge, 2003; Ministry of Education, 1999; World Bank., 2004). Their mission was to implement changes to increase educational parity. The Committee recommended the following changes to the educational system: (1) reducing the number of years of compulsory education from 17 to 12, (2) increasing the number of hours students spend in class per week, (3) ending the practice of hiring unqualified teachers, and d) ensuring that the system is well-planned and managed (Apeanti & Asiedu-Addo, 2013). With an eye on preparing students for the workforce, the Dzobo Committee prioritized technical and vocational education in junior high (Akyeampong, 2007). The Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) was also implemented in 1996 to boost enrolment and graduation rates. Its goal was to have all children of school-age enrolled by 2005 (Apeanti & Asiedu-Addo, 2013).

In 2002, Ghana's objective of guaranteeing fair access to higher level education was found to be jeopardized by a high failure rate on the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination, which sparked attempts to overhaul the country's educational system (Apeanti & Asiedu-Addo, 2013). Thus, in 2002, the Anamuah-Mensah Committee was formed to make suggestions for moving forward, especially to examine the whole Ghanaian educational system. After considering its findings, policymakers came up with the idea of Senior High Schools, which added a year to the traditional secondary school curriculum and made it a four-year program (Akyeampong, 2010). With a larger student body came a corresponding rise in infrastructural spending. However, the length of time spent in Senior High School was reduced back to three years and has stayed at that length since 2009 (Balwanz & Darvas, 2013). There are currently nine years of schooling available: six years of elementary schooling, three years of middle schooling, and three years of high schooling (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Although the secondary schooling period has been shortened from four to three years, efforts to promote equity have been made, as seen by the implementation of the Comprehensive Free Public Senior High School policy in 2017 ((World Bank Group, 2021). Regardless of their family's financial situation, this policy exempts all senior high school students from having to pay any kind of tuition. To provide students who might otherwise drop out of school owing to financial difficulties a chance to complete their studies. For the same reason, these youngsters receive lunches at school. A total of GH 1.2 billion is planned for 2017 to fund the policy (GH 188 million from the Government of Ghana and GH 200 million from Ghana's oil earnings) (Ministry of Finance, 2017). Other policies and other interventions that are introduced to achieve quality and equitable education include: (1) the Education Strategic Plan 2010–2020, (2) the Information and Communication Technology in Education Policy 2015, (3) the Ghana Education Standard and Guidelines 2015 and (4) the Inclusive Education Policy 2015. The 1992 Ghanaian constitution mandates these practices in Article 38(1): "The State shall provide educational facilities at all levels and in all areas of

Ghana, and shall, to the maximum degree practical, make such facilities available to all citizens" (Gh. Const., art. 38, sec. 1).

From what has been said, it is clear that successive governments of Ghana want to create an educated and productive populace at large, regardless of gender or socioeconomic level (Ministry of Education, 2013). It is unclear, however, from the mainstream literature how far the aims of educational equity have come to translate into actual parity in the classroom.

Equity in the Classroom

Conceptualising equity in the classroom must occur in the context of an "ecology of equity," (Ainscow et al., 2012) as a variety of elements that are present in the classroom setting contribute to the degree to which the experiences and outcomes of students are known to be equitable (Morales-Doyle, 2017). In traditional classrooms, inequities abound on the basis that different students require different forms of support to interact with other interlocutors and to learn while teachers and students' backgrounds and experiences inform their actions (Adams & Bell, 2016). Within that context, inattention to equity create inequities where classroom members are unlikely to be self-conscious of their positions and be unconcerned about how the oppressed perceive their actions and inactions (Adams & Bell, 2016).

The literature delineated several classroom practices that set the example of equity in the classroom. DiMartino and Miles (2004) explains that there are three reform strategies: a) heterogeneous grouping, an inclusive approach that neither creates stratifications within the classroom nor allows the warehousing of disable students in special schools nor encourage segregation and stereotyping; b) differentiated instruction that engages all types of learners by using a variety of instructional strategies and styles; c) integrated assessment that involves using a variety of methods to assess student performance. While each of these have their advantages and disadvantages, Lee & Woods (1998), argued that teacher practice, the utilization of teachers' expertise, values, and ideas in the classroom is a defining factor in promoting equity in the classroom. A growing number of studies have arisen within the global discourses of neoliberalism with the goal of illuminating teachers' equitable practices. According to Banks (1995) "equity pedagogy" refers to tactics and classroom settings that enable students from all backgrounds to develop into "reflective and engaged citizens in a democratic society." Teachers should be motivated by their students' best interests and put them first, while also catering to their students' language and sociocultural requirements, providing them with equitable access to educational materials, and encouraging students to work together on projects (Gay, 2013; Januszyk et al., 2016). Powietrzynska et al. (2021) called for the development of rational trust and real connections between teachers and students as a means of embracing equity by revising and re-enacting contemplative equity education via a humanity lens.

A realist method that combines equitable teaching with conventional materials is demonstrated by Dyches & Sams (2018), who define teachers' context-bound "pedagogical idealism" as "an attitude to teaching that strives to equity and justice for all students." Furthermore, in an age of standards-based and teacher-dominated instruction, equity frameworks like culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013), and equity literacy (Pivoda & Stickney, 2020) can offer concrete strategies for maintaining an inclusive and just learning environment for students from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Equally obvious is the need to encourage fair treatment of students by teachers. Teachers will undoubtedly show prejudice toward students of varying ability levels if they are not provided with specific instruction that guides their actions toward fairness and inclusion (Staats, 2014). Dyches & Sams (2018) state that a focus on educational justice should pulsate throughout every instructional move. Therefore, continuous investigations are required to develop a clear image of equitable pedagogy among instructors in order to

provide a fair learning environment for all.

Gorski and Swalwell (2015) contend that promoting equity in the classroom requires educators to 'put equity at the centre". As such, teachers need to be equity literate (possess equity literacy) and school leadership must have the capacity to conduct equity audits (Gorski & Pothini, 2018).

Promoting equity in the classroom requires equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995) which involves teachers developing teaching strategies and cultivating classroom environments that better support all students, especially those who have been disadvantaged in school and the outside society (Ainscow, 2020). Using equity pedagogy curriculum makes classroom experiences become culturally relevant and equitable, so students from diverse backgrounds, especially those socio-economically, linguistically, and culturally marginalized, can succeed in school as well as the outside society (Banks & Banks, 2015).

Also, equity pedagogy reaches out to structurally disadvantaged students with diverse ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, age, religion, body type, disability, etc. by removing barriers that hinder students from achieving at high levels (Ainscow, 2020). Equity pedagogy values the classroom as a centre of societal change. As such, teachers change their methods to help students from diverse backgrounds to excel in the classroom and bring positive changes to their communities (Banks & Banks, 2019). This creates equitable conditions which influence classroom practices and processes (Freire et al., 2000).

Embracing equity literacy in the classroom requires "bigger efforts to create equitable classrooms and schools" (Gorski and Swalwell, 2015: 36). This requires that teachers move beyond merely understanding school culture to understanding equity and inequity as well as justice and injustice (Freire, 2019). Also, embracing equity literacy means that teachers demonstrate appreciation of general principles of diversity and the abilities to cultivate in students a robust understanding about how people are treated by one another and by institutions (Swalwell, 2013).

In the views of Gorski and Swalwell (2015), equity literacy begins with educators growing themselves first. Gorski (2014) developed an equity literacy framework to build teachers' capacities to "recognize, respond, and redress" unjust practices, policies, and procedures that limit access for some students and not others. Gorski (2018 p.17) defined equity literacy "as the knowledge and skills educators need to become a threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence".

By their argument (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015), equity literacy has four dimensional aspects. The first is for educators and students to develop an awareness capacity which hinges on the recognition of bias, discrimination and inequity in the classroom. The second is a response level capacity which includes taking practical steps to respond to identified bias, discrimination and inequity in a thoughtful and unprejudiced manner. The third is the redress level where teachers and students consciously study how bigger social changes require attention to redressing bias, discrimination and inequity. At this level, teachers and students respond to bias, discrimination and inequity beyond the level of interpersonal relations by identifying aspects of classroom and school culture that creates bias, discrimination and inequity. The fourth level is where teachers and students consciously take up the responsibility of cultivating and sustaining bias-free and discrimination-free classrooms as a basic responsibility to improving society. The essence of this four-dimensional equity literacy is that, when educators commit to cultivating equity literacy, their very presence in a classroom or school threatens the existence of bias and inequity because they will have the knowledge and skills to see it and eliminate it (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015).

Also, promoting equity in the classroom is determined by teachers' equity audit skills. Equity audits are a useful strategy for examining how equity issues may be operating in a school or classroom (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015; Groenke, 2010). However, it can be difficult to paint a precise picture of what an equity literacy looks like in practice. For example, Gorski and Swalwell (2015) explain that an equity audit will be

concerned about: What makes something equitable or inequitable? What (local, regional, global) inequities exist? How have they changed over time, and why? What individual and collective responsibilities do we have to address them? It has three dimensions – knowledge, skills and will.

Gorski referred to 'knowledge' as developing those bigger understandings, strengthening the abilities of educators to recognize the inequities students experience in and out of schools and how those inequities impact their school engagement. It means learning how to apply an equity lens to every decision we make as educators so that we disintegrate those inequities. The 'skills' he referred to as cultivating our abilities to act for equity, to advocate, to prioritize the educational success of students experiencing the most inequity by reshaping policy and practice. But on their own, knowledge and skills are insufficient. Equity literacy requires 'will'. Do educators have the will to develop and use the knowledge and skills to fight for equity, knowing it will create discomfort for some people? Gorki (2018) argues that many (educators) have the knowledge and skills but not the will and are therefore no threat to inequity.

What can be understood from the propositions within the literature on classroom equity is that there are several dimensions. It requires a school environment that is equitable and class members who are equity literate. It requires teachers who will employ equity pedagogy within teaching and learning process. It requires regular equity audits to ensure that equitable conditions exist within classroom, and that classroom processes and practices are fair and support the potentials that every individual class member has. Classroom equity should be understood in terms of classroom conditions, classroom practices and classroom processes that are inclusive. Therefore, in exploring classroom equity, the study sought to understand how teachers and students perceived equity (equity literacy), and examined how classroom practices, process and conditions are equitable as well as how equity was promoted by teachers and experienced by students.

Consequences of inequity

Freire (1970) asserts that everyone strives for a human identity, but oppression impedes the process for many. Individuals get dehumanised as a result of injustice, exploitation, and oppression, according to his argument. As a result of unfairness, it becomes easier for those who experience unfairness to confront their oppressors and transform into their polar opposites. In other words, this simply turns them into oppressors and restarts the cycle (Freire, 2019). Educational inequity is embedded in our society's politics, economy, and ideology, so issues of equity in schools are inextricably intertwined with larger questions of social justice. (Morales- Doyle, 2017). People who have two perspectives on the world and their own experiences may derive strength from their ability to balance these realities. However, for some people, poor 'social mirroring' can have cumulative and long-lasting negative effects on their sense of self, ability to identify with others, and level of success. (Adams, et al., 2022). Teachers who view satisfying the requirements of students with learning difficulties as an unjustifiable burden or unneeded extra labour typically see the necessity of adapting teachings for each class as a demanding aspect of their profession. By acting in these ways, we limit the opportunities of persons with special needs, whether consciously or not (Adams et al., 2022). Disparities in pedagogical approaches can result in unequal educational opportunities. (Schneider, 2018).

The consequences include a loss of faith in one's own abilities, an escalation of feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, a persistent awareness of not being taken seriously, a decline in one's capacity for effective social and occupational functioning, and an increase in destructive behaviour, both external and internal (frequently falling ill, cutting, attempting suicide, depression, etc.), in response to experiencing a lack of affection, rejection, isolation, or visibility. (Adams, et al., 2022 p. 363). According to OECD, (2012), students from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to perform poorly in school, suggesting that personal or social factors are preventing them from reaching their full academic potential (indicating lack of fairness). Dropping out of school is the most obvious consequence of academic failure caused by inequity

(OECD, 2012). From the literature, unfairness will prevent underprivileged students from achieving success in the classroom. This study therefore investigated the experiences and feelings of students in the classroom in relation to inequity.

Research Gap

The educational policy in Ghana has evolved to include strategies that foster impartiality and parity (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Abarca Millan, 2020; Edusei, 2022). The current emphasis on tackling prevailing difficulties and enhancing policy adaptability has resulted in an imbalanced focus on access and quality (Ministry of Education Ghana, 2019; Afful-Broni, & Sekyi, 2015). However, the understanding and promotion of equity by teachers, who play a crucial role in educational change, as well as the actual experiences of students, who are the beneficiaries, within the context of classroom interactions, are completely unclear. The purpose of this research was to explore how teachers promote equity in the classroom based on their understandings and how students who are the main beneficiaries are experiencing equity within classroom in Ghana.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was founded on Freire's (1970) idea of critical pedagogy, which opposes toxic pedagogy (Miller, 1989; Cotton et al., 2013), that undermines power and marginalizes individuals. Critical pedagogy argues that education can transform oppressive institutions by imparting a comprehensive understanding of humanity and compelling students to evaluate power dynamics and tendencies towards unfairness (Freire, 1970). It emphasizes the values of empathy, benevolence, and unity (Heinbach et al., 2019; Ilett, 2019. Freire referred to the traditional mode of education as a "deposit" or "banking concept of education," where students passively acquired, remembered, and regurgitate information (Freire et al., 2000). This perspective views education as a means of disempowering students and facilitating the misuse of authority. It suggests that in order to improve classroom processes, it is necessary to challenge the system and eliminate elements that oppress marginalized individuals (Cotton et al., 2013; Tewell, 2015; Matteson & Gersch, 2019. By incorporating Freire's notion of critical consciousness, individuals can enhance their ability to perceive and comprehend inequities in their surroundings. By recognizing the imposition of a dominant group's culture or worldview on others, individuals have the capacity to resist and fight it dialogically. Critical pedagogy uses an asset-based method that recognizes and nurtures students' strengths, allowing them to reduce authoritarianism and enhance opportunities for inquiry and problem-based learning (Cotton et al., 2013; Tewell, 2015). Critical information literacy promotes the idea that students should view themselves as producers of information, rather than just passive recipients. It necessitates educators to expose power relations within the classroom and the broader communities in which their pupils reside, while also contemplating how their own cultural background and prejudices influence their instructional methods. Critical pedagogy encompasses the recognition and examination of the impact of bias on both educators and learners. To recognize bias, one must develop cultural competency and adopt inclusive actions that eradicate bias in the classroom. Teachers should transition from teacher-centered instructional methods to discussion-based classes where students engage in critical thinking and draw their own conclusions (Watts, 2017; Matteson & Gersch, 2019; Tewell, 2015). To foster critical dialogue and encourage autonomous cognition, it is necessary to modify assessment methods. Teachers should abandon conventional examinations that solely prioritize accurate responses and target the development of critical thinking skills and individual capabilities. In critical pedagogy classrooms, teachers employ active learning approaches, where students assume responsibility for their own learning while being guided by the teacher. This can be described as empowerment education (Saunders, 2020). This theory fits into this context in the sense that it gives clarity as to how educational, social, and political systems impact our learners' early experiences and continue to influence what and how they learn within and outside the classroom.

Research approach

The study adopted the qualitative approach. The approach was heuristic – involving data collection methods that offer insight into participants' experiences, memories and explanations (Cohen et al., 2018). The research involved a small number of participants (George, 2022; Cohen et al., 2018). The research was exploratory, focusing on depth (Cohen et al., 2018). The research was context and perspective bound (Silverman, 2022). The nature of the research issue: equity, required the qualitative approach because Creswell and Creswell (2018) related that researchers undertaking social justice issues should find a qualitative approach, although this form of research may also incorporate mixed methods designs. The number of research participants in qualitative research is often relatively small as the research tends to focus more on the exhaustive nature of each case than the number of participants (Cohen et al., 2018). In keeping with the principles of qualitative research approaches, the focus was more on in-depth understanding of how equity is promoted within the classroom. The researchers therefore spent substantial time, on site, in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what was going on (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). prolonged time was spent on-site interviewing, observing activities in the classroom (Denzin, 2009; Yin, 2013). The prolonged contact, observatory depth and prolonged dialogue with participants was intended to provide knowledge on how they subjectively make sense of their contextual experiences (see Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Denzin, 2009). The processes of sustained interaction did not only, reveal the power relations and patterns of experiences but, also, led the researchers to reflect and to question personal assumptions hence mediating the researchers' authorial visibility in the construction of the final textual product. Varying kinds of interviewing techniques was used as the main interactionist methods to collect the accounts of teachers and students.

DATA SOURCE

Qualitative research case studies require thick description of the context in order to pass the tests of trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2018). Because qualitative case study is naturalistic as it privileges data collection in the natural setting of the participants. The study was conducted in the Eastern Region (Akuapem South Municipality) of Ghana. There are 113 kindergartens, 443 Primary Schools, 215 Junior High Schools, 3 Senior High Schools, 1 Senior High Technical School, 1 Teacher Training College and 1 private University within the Akuapem South Municipality (Ministry of Finance, 2015). The cases selected for this research were Senior High/Technical Schools located in the Akuapem South Municipality. Akuapem South Municipality was chosen because it has the various categories of schools: well-endowed, less-endowed, single-gender, coeducational, and faith-based schools. The blend of characteristics is unparalleled in the municipality. The variety of schools in the Municipality supports the analysis of variability, offering the potential to generate knowledge, and to construct a theory of classroom equity. This supports transferability (Cohen et al., 2018). The data was drawn from 24 individual interviews and 8 classroom observations. The sources of data are a maximum variation and critical case sample of 16 students and 8 teachers from the four (4) Senior High/Technical Schools in the Akuapem South Municipality.

Sample size determination.

The selection of participants was based on their life experiences, feelings, and actual perceptions of how equity was promoted and experienced in the classrooms. Teachers and third-year students comprised the participants. Third-year students were considered because of their substantial personal and academic interactions with teachers and classmates.

A sample of twenty-four individuals, comprising both teachers and students, was selected for this research. The research was conducted at four senior high schools. Two classrooms were selected for observation from

each institution. Two students were selected for interviews from each classroom that was observed. To ensure objectivity, the researchers conducted interviews with four male and four female teachers selected from the eight classrooms that were observed.

Sampling technique

Sampling technique refers to the process employed to determine the size of the sample (respondents) that will be included in the study. Due to the qualitative nature of this investigation, a non-probability sample was employed. In a non-probability sample, some units within the population are more likely to be chosen than others (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study used purposeful sampling, which is a widely recognised non-probability sampling method, to select participants based on specific criteria.

Purposeful sampling involves the deliberate choice of individuals and locations by the researchers to obtain specific information about the research problem and key phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Maximum is a purposive sampling approach employed to encompass a diverse array of viewpoints pertaining to the subject matter of interest to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The primary reason for selecting this approach was to allow the researchers to maximise differences at the outset of the study, thereby increasing the likelihood that the results would reflect differences or alternative points of view – an optimal situation in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). All four senior high schools in the Akuapem South Municipality were selected using a total sampling technique. The purpose of selecting these four educational institutions was to enable a comparison of disparities between locations and to facilitate the analysis of variability. Different attributes distinguish the institutions. Two educational institutions are coeducational, while two are single gender. Two of the schools are affiliated with a specific religious body, while the other two are not associated with any particular religious group. While one is a well-endowed institution, the other three are average and or less endowed. There is one school in category 'A', two in category 'B', and one in category 'C'. Furthermore, a convenience sample of four classes (two from each school) was chosen for observation in accordance with their availability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Critical case sampling was used in selecting student participants for the study. The student participants provided the researchers with valuable insights and experiences regarding both instructors and fellow students. With the implementation of purposeful sampling, the researchers assessed data solely from a subgroup, excluding all potential cases or elements.

DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

With the aid of an interview guide, face-to-face key informant interviews were conducted with the chosen participants. Open-ended questions were included in the interview guide. Based on the goals of the research, the guide was created. The students and teachers' perception of equity was covered in the personnel questions, along with how teachers promoted equity vis a vis students experiences were part of the questions covered in the study. The interviews with the participants were conducted in English because all participants understood English and could express themselves better with it. The participants were each interviewed for between 40 and 60 min. With the permission of school heads and the participants, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Students in third year and their teachers were the target participants. They were chosen because they had been in the school for a longer period and had gone through all the levels with different experiences and therefore had a better story to share. For this study, the data were manually analysed, and a thematic analysis was used. According to Clarke & Braun, (2016), thematic analysis is ideal for discovering patterns within and across data about participants' lived experience, ideas and perspectives, and behaviour and practises when the research aims to comprehend what participants think, feel, and do.

Thematic analysis was an appropriate method of analysis because it supported qualitative data analyses that were ideal for informing policy development. Gaining unexpected insight into the situation of how equity is

promoted and experienced was made possible by thematic analysis. The principles for theme development proposed by Vaismoradi et al. (2016) were applied in this study. The interviews were transcribed, read, coded, and highlighted to reveal the meanings behind the accounts. It was also built, with the theme of the analysis established, and it was classified, compared, labelled, translated, defined, and described.

Positionality

Power dynamics between the researcher and the subjects being studied are important considerations in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2018). The qualitative researcher typically maintains an asymmetrical relationship with the subjects being studied. According to Brooks et al. (2014), power dynamics are inherent in all study environments, and researchers may have various social and power roles compared to participants (Cohen et al., 2018). Our own experiences as teachers at various Ghanaian Senior High Schools were essential in our decision to research on equity issues in the classroom. In this research, the presence of our dual identities as insiders and outsiders resulted in intricate positioning challenges. In our roles as teachers and participants whose practices were under examination, we were confronted with the challenge of maintaining an intricate balance. Our privileged position provided us with exclusive access and profound understanding of the subject matter. However, it also brought about potential tensions between our duties as group members and our obligations as researchers. We mitigated this challenge by contributing valuable insights while maintaining ethical standards by avoiding data collection from our school or familiar students and ensuring equal participation and respecting interpersonal conventions, despite the complexities involved.

Ethical considerations

Writers on research ethics asset that qualitative approaches can create and perpetuate unequal relations if ethical issues are not carefully considered (Cohen et al., 2018). Ethical issues were given much attention in this study. The main ethical issues observed were participants' rights to informed consent, anonymity, feedback and withdrawal from the research at any time. The participants were informed of the nature, method, purpose, and usage of the study. Participants filled out a consent form to indicate that they were in no way being forced or coerced to participate. Participants were also assured of the secrecy and anonymity of their responses, and they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time they felt the need to do so. An important aspect of institution-based research is how access is negotiated dialogically through gatekeepers and the participants (Cohen et al., 2018). There was the need to protect the rights of participants and building a trusted relationship with them. The research took place in formal institutions – Senior High Schools. School-based research is governed by rules therefore the researchers secured permission from gatekeepers within the Ghana Education Service and School heads as well as teachers in the classrooms which were observed.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of students regarding the promotion of equity in Ghanaian classrooms?

Students' views on equity literacy were analysed, with students expressing their opinions on whether teachers were equity literate or otherwise. Some students believed that some teachers were equity literate, while others were not. The analysis revealed that students assessed teacher equity literacy from various perspectives, including academic needs, student involvement in class activities, and temper or anger management by teachers. Typical responses include:

Yes, some of them are. Some teachers make sure they attend to our individual needs. It is just that we don't have enough learning materials especially those students who are from poor home. They don't have textbooks and basic materials like calculators and math set so even if the teacher wants to help, they

cannot help.

I think some of the teachers are equity literate but most of them are not. Some teachers do their best to involve all of us when there is class activity. They sometimes make us work in groups.

Yes, some of them appear to understand students somehow and treats students well but most of them have very bad tempers and sometimes insult students and boast of their personal achievements.

Some of the teachers treat us equally and some are not patient with us. So yes! Some are equity literate. Some are not.

The students also analysed teacher equity based on various indices, such as teachers' emotional expressions of frustration or depression, attitudes towards students, and the extent to which teachers include those with perceived learning disabilities. The responses highlighted the need for further analysis of equity issues and the various inequity domains that different learners navigate at different times. The following are comments from other students about teacher equity literacy.

I think some of them understand equity and practice it by encouraging us to contribute in class, just that they seem frustrated sometimes and yell at us all the time when we go wrong. I think sometimes, they just get overwhelmed with the work or may be fed-up with us the students.

Some of them are. They attend to students' needs. Especially those with special needs. But some of the teachers are depressed. You can see it from their actions.

Most teachers are not equity literate because the attitude of most of them clearly depicts that they don't value equity. That is ... the reason why some teachers can tell students that the students are good for nothing and that nothing will become of them. Some teachers even insult parents of students. When our mates call us names, they just look on and sometimes use those names to call us.

When students were asked about some of the name callings and how they or their colleagues felt about it, the following comments came up:

name calling is way common in this school. We joke with some of the names and teachers laugh over some of them but those that are given those names usually become quiet and refuse to take part in classroom activities.

Name callings such as Fato Lala (too fat), Wild Wolf (too dark skinned), North East Eyes (squint eye), Born one, Borla Bird (talkative), HOD (big head) etc.. make those students become either too rowdy and fights back or coil and become timid, never to participate in any activity in class again.

The study found that, name callings are a common issue in the study schools, with students often being labelled as demeaning or self-affirming. Teachers often do not address this issue, leading to students becoming quiet and refusing to participate in class activities.

The study explored equity issues related to the academic programs offered and the academic status assigned to different students. Two common comments are that inexperienced teachers are allocated to certain classes, while experienced teachers are given to science classes. These comments highlight the disparity in education and the need for an equitable allocation of educational opportunities. The students' experiences with equity do not fully encompass the aim of creating an educational system that caters to students of all types and allows each student to receive the help and resources they need to achieve their educational goals. Typical comments by students include:

Inexperienced teaches are allocated to our class whiles the experienced ones are given to the science classes. Science is everything now. Those of us in the business class do not seem to be part of the school any longer. The teachers themselves tell us that business as a program will not take us anywhere.

The analysis also shows a tacit categorization of students into brilliant and slow learners, with lopsided attention given to each group. Teachers often focus on the more brilliant students, possibly due to pressure to pass well on exams. Students also express disappointment when teachers praise brilliant students and criticize those who are academically weak.

The equity related issues are collected in the following comments.

Teachers are comfortable with brilliant student and so they make them answer all their questions in class. Some teachers concentrate more on students who are brilliant and give attention to the students they have ties with. But I think teachers do this unintentionally. They concentrate on the more brilliant ones because the teachers say there is pressure on them to let a percentage of the students in the class pass well in their subject during the WASSCE exam.

Most teachers do not discriminate in asking questions in class. Sometimes they make us work in groups. It is just unfortunate that they look on when our colleagues are shutting us down. … Sometimes when, some of us ask questions in the classroom, and colleagues find it useless, they shout at you and tell you to sit down. It mostly dampens our spirit, and we just coil and not ask questions again. So even when the teacher asks whether we understand or not, we all say yes, we understand. Later when you meet the teacher and ask the teacher what you didn't understand, he or she will tell you that you should have asked in the classroom and now the time has passed.

Some of the teachers always praise the brilliant student when they answer questions in class, and they look down on those who are academically weak. … Sometimes some of the comments from teachers like "you are good for nothing", "if you cannot understand this, then you cannot understand the next topic" makes us feel depressed and unimportant.

Teachers give more attention to those students who are brilliant. They also give attention to those ones that they are close with. Slow learners don't have a say in the classroom. They are just quiet and look on. They keep becoming weak academically because they never catch up and they just give up. I sometimes feel sorry for the students who are not brilliant because even when they are pushing themselves, the teachers fail to see. Sometimes some teachers mark my work correct even when I am wrong because they know I am brilliant. I am not proud of this because I know they are being unfair to the students that don't do well. When I get higher marks where I am supposed to get it wrong, I am unable to show my marks to my mates. Those students are always getting low marks. It even makes them hate we the brilliant ones.

There is unfairness every day in this school. Some of us are from poor homes, when some teachers come to class, they use all their time to be passing derogatory comments and make us feel like we are not ready to pass our exam if our parents don't want to pay for extra classes. They give those students from rich home all the attention because they organise special classes for them and are nice with their parents. those students are always the ones answering questions because they are always ahead of the class because of the extra tuition they get from these teachers.

Because the teachers don't have time for slow learners, they tell them to ask their friends to teach them and if their friends don't teach them, it means they never get to understand that topic.

Most of them say that the teachers are biased, and they choose who they want to give attention to in class

and are selective when it comes to punishment.

The categorisations are problematic as they provide spaces for differentiation between academically incompetent and excellent students. Incompetents are ignored, while excellent students receive attention. The exclusion of some students as 'fails' is falsely justified, leading to a competitive schooling regime that produces resentment towards academic failures. Slow learners suffer silent exclusion, resulting in a lack of fairness and preventing underprivileged students from achieving success in the classroom.

Research Question 2: How do teachers promote equity in the classroom?

Teachers responded as follows when asked how they promoted equity in the classroom based on their understandings of the concept and the roadblocks they encountered in their efforts to do so:

I think most of my colleagues understand equity to be treating all students the same but no, every student is having his or her need and must be treated as such. But some of us understand and we know most teachers have problem when it comes to that, but you cannot go and be teaching your colleague what they should be doing. They will tag you.

Sometimes too the students complain about their fellow colleagues. There are cliques in the classrooms. The cliques I am talking about. How some of them feel they are the most brilliant and shouldn't mingle with others and others also feel they come from a home with a good financial background and so on. Even some of these form 3 students who are prefects now, are doing the same things they complained about same when they were in year one. Now that they are seniors and prefects, they are doing same to their juniors now and to some of their mates too. Why? Because they hold some positions now.

Honestly sometimes some of the teachers are helpless, there is too much pressure to make As. So, you must concentrate on the few students who can make the As. Its not fair. I know but what can we do? Time is not on our side and there is a lot to cover. The class is too large, we find it difficult to control it and give students the needed attention. Things are not that simple. It is a bigger problem. We are all hoping things would change, but for now, we can only manage the situation.

Some of the students think that some teachers even like some students more because those teachers take money from their rich parents, so they like those students more. But these things, you don't get to hear it often unless you are very close to the students. They keep it to themselves and go through the hurt until they leave the school and then when they come back, to the school for their transcript or certificate then they tell you about it.

Students often feel left out in class due to the clique system, which creates a 'we' versus 'them' identity that further creates spaces of exclusion. Some students also distance themselves from their peers due to their perceived superiority.

Sex-based equity issues also arise in the classroom. Some students believe that teachers discriminate punishment based on different sexes, particularly girls who are perceived to be having affairs with teachers. This normalization of unfairness in which girls are treated leniently than boys is not experienced as homogenous to girls. Students have come to accept that they must do something for the teacher, have affairs with them, or put themselves to the service of the teacher to get attention. In the interview, some comments emerged in relation to this sub-theme:

Some of the teachers are having sexual affairs with some of the girls and so they discriminate in punishment and these girls don't respect we their colleagues and even some of the teachers.

Colleagues say unfairness is normal. We have come to accept that life is not fair. So, if you want a teacher

to give you attention, you must do something or become something to the teacher.

In conclusion, students' experiences with classroom equity have consequences beyond the classroom, creating social contours and spaces of exclusion. These issues are not gender neutral and are connected to factors such as gender, sexual orientation, and the perception that students must do something for the teacher or have affairs with them to receive attention.

Both learners and teachers agreed that equity literacy training was essential to enlighten them about inequitable practises and the means by which they could be remedied. On the other hand, concerns arise regarding the degree to which equity literacy is incorporated into the curriculum of teacher education. Furthermore, student feedback reiterated the significance of providing students with equity orientations and emphasised the necessity of equity training in order to create classrooms that are equitable.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of students' experiences of equity in the classroom reveals multiple dimensions. The first dimension involves academic status and program-based equity experiences, exposing discrimination based on the programs students enrolled in. Science programs were favoured, creating an inequitable distribution of educational opportunities. Additionally, students' academic status led to a problematic categorization into brilliant or slow learners, resulting in unequal educational opportunities and silent exclusion for the latter. This approach, according to Freire (2021), disempowers students instead of fostering critical thinking. The second dimension explores resource-based equity, where students from affluent backgrounds, receiving parental support, faced less punishment and received more attention. This highlights the neglect of teachers' moral duties, leading to gender-based discrimination and the creation of social divisions among students. The consequences include the categorization of certain pupils as exceptional, while others experience isolation and exclusion, impacting self-perception and overall achievement.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of data revealed that some teachers actively promoted equity in their classrooms through various strategies. These included the implementation of emancipatory teaching techniques, such as ensuring widespread student participation, establishing interactive classrooms, and discouraging intimidation and labeling. According to Dyches and Sams (2018), these teachers demonstrated a "focus on educational equity," where equity permeated every instructional action. Additionally, certain teachers made considerable efforts to identify students in need of assistance to address feelings of inferiority and other disparities. This finding aligns with Zhou et al.'s (2020) assertion that teachers are more likely to adopt inclusive teaching approaches when equipped with the necessary tools. Students' accounts emphasized that achieving equity in classrooms requires a significant commitment to culturally responsive teaching, as advocated by Gay (2013), forming the fundamental basis for teacher equity literacy (Pivoda & Stickney, 2020). To ensure an inclusive and equitable learning environment, educational institutions should provide specific techniques, and school leadership must prioritize equity by consistently conducting equity audits, as suggested by Gorski and Swalwell (2015) and Gorski & Pothini (2018). However, learners and teachers perceived a lack of clear connection between the concept of equity and the broader objective of fostering an inclusive teaching style that caters to all students, indicating the need for improvement in classroom practices.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study employed a qualitative approach, which involved a relatively small sample size of 24 participants. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is limited, and there is a possibility of bias (Yin, 2018).

Despite these limitations. The study holds significant importance in the context of promoting equity in Ghanaian classrooms.

Implications of the study

This research emphasizes the need for effective monitoring of equity practices by school management. There is the need for teachers to be equity literate. To achieve this, both students and teachers should undergo school-level orientation on equity promotion. The study recommends that the National Teaching Council continue organizing Professional Learning Community sessions to foster a deep understanding and appreciation of equity among teachers. Furthermore, it is crucial for pre-service teacher education programs to incorporate comprehensive equity literacy content into their curriculum. This will ensure that future teachers are well-equipped to address equity-related issues in the classroom. Additionally, there is a need to enhance the counselling units in various schools to provide adequate support to both staff and students who require counselling services. By implementing these recommendations, Ghana can make significant strides towards achieving the agenda 2030 goal 4 and create a more inclusive and equitable education system.

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